

“THERE WILL BE GLORY AFTER THIS:” A POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC GUIDE FOR HEALING IN COGIC CONGREGATIONS

There is a verse from a gospel song that we sing in my church tradition, “When all God’s children get together, we are going to have a good time.¹” This song makes reference to the joyful anticipation that ensues when the people of God gather in the house of God to give praise and adoration to God. At the spiritual level, there is a joyful anticipation of having an encounter with the Holy. In the natural, there is a joyful anticipation of experiencing oneself amongst a host of one’s spiritual brothers and sisters taking delight in each other’s company. In each other’s company social amenities like “It is so good to be here and see you” are exchanged. This appears to satisfy the innate desire to belong to something and someone greater than ourselves—the Church and the people of God.

All of us, the world all over, have been displaced from our normal places and rhythms of worship for over a year and a half. While through the use of technology and social media we may have sought to maintain the emotional connection that face-to-face encounters of Sunday Morning worship and weekday bible study bring, we have not fully captured the human touch that we experience when we are able to gather together in person. For now more than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived us from so much of what we traditionally do in church: greeting one another with a “holy kiss,” hugging each other, embracing each other, shaking each other’s hands, and sharing meaningful concerns and casual conversations. The day that we can regain a sense of normalcy in gathering where we won’t have to practice social distancing, keeping six feet between us and others, wearing masks, and washing our hands frequently will be a day of rejoicing. I am sure to expect that that will be a great time in which we will rejoice in our regained freedom from the oppressive, but necessary, requirements that the coronavirus pandemic has caused us to enforce. I anticipate that the first Sunday that there is a formal receding of the virus restrictions and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) grants us the green light to resume our normal manners of congregating, there will be great jubilation. I imagine when we gather to celebrate our regained freedom, it will be reminiscent of the Hebrews escaping from Egypt², or maybe it will be like the day that the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan River into Canaan.³ Will we, too, sing, “My soul looked back and wondered, how I got over?”⁴ Until that day comes we will continue to care for ourselves and each other getting vaccinated, wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing and washing our hands often.

However, when we regather in our respective houses of worship, where ever our local congregation is located, we will encounter a stark reality. The coronavirus has greatly impacted our global community, and this has impacted our churches around the world. A high percentage of our church members who have died, lived in densely populated communities and worked as essential workers in service industries where they were at greater risk of exposure to the virus. In addition, many who already had pre-existing conditions like diabetes, hypertension, kidney disease, obesity, and asthma—which especially predominate in socioeconomically depressed communities—were predisposed to contracting the virus leading to their being infected and their subsequent deaths. Because of this, there will be church members whom we have worshipped with for years who will be missing. Many may have been the backbone of the church, serving in pivotal leadership positions. Pastors, associate ministers, church mothers, deacons and deaconesses, missionaries, other administrators and auxiliary members, and brothers

¹ Minister Keith Pringle and the Pentecostal Community Choir, When All God’s Children Get Together (accessed 2/10/2021, <https://youtu.be/ICKwhQ5z8O4>).

² See the narrative of the Exodus.

³ See Joshua 3: 15-17.

⁴ Mahalia Jackson, , “How I Got Over,” *Unforgettable: Her Greatest Moments, vol. 1*, Yesterdays Rain, 1970

and sisters will be missing from our pulpits and congregations. Many, but not all, will have succumbed to the pernicious grasp of the coronavirus that has wreaked havoc upon our world and here in the United States.

Yes, I am sorry to share with you that the day of our full and complete re-emersion into our places of worship may not be filled with pure joy as we might anticipate. The truth is this joy of being back in the house of God among one's sisters and brothers, the saints of God, with the relaxation of restrictions will be mixed with pain and sorrow as well. This sadness will be a reminder of all the personal losses we have sustained and our need to attend to the many losses that occurred within our congregations. The trauma of the onslaught of multiple deaths and the volume and rapid succession of them will have remained with us. In other words, in the aftermath of this pandemic there will be a great need to intentionally acknowledge our losses—to do the grief work, both personal and corporate.

Drawing upon the work of psychologist J. William Worden Ph.D., I would like to suggest the following "prescription" to deal with the grief and trauma this pandemic has caused us. The coronavirus pandemic, with its attendant and necessary strict precautions of social distancing and restricted visitation, has deprived many of us of two vital functions in which funerals provide. First, to pay our last respects in honoring those whom we have shared time with and are now gone. Second, to convey our sympathies and love in support of comforting the living. In the Black Churches in the United States and other nationalities around the globe, the dead are honored by services steeped in culture and faith known as a "Home-going celebration," where the body of the deceased lies in state as viewers come to get one last look of the deceased and greet the family members expressing their deepest regrets. After this, the funeral service begins, which is a celebration of the life of the deceased. There is a procession of ministers followed by the family as scripture is recited. This service of celebration encompasses the prayer of consolation, the reading of scripture, gospel songs and hymns, words of comfort by clergy, and an "open-mic" extension to friends and family members to express their condolences. During this time, stories about the deceased are shared that may tug at the heart-strings of family members and all that are gathered. Tears are shed and grief expressed in a variety of ways as raw human emotions—pain, anger, sorrow, etc.—are poured out. There is a suspension of time as all are focused on the life of the deceased and what he or she has meant to us. This experience culminates in the eulogy being delivered reminding all present of the healing powers of Jesus Christ, the Great Consolator.

For the most part, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted this rich and meaningful tradition. The strict precautions of social distancing have caused there to be a limiting number of family members and friends who could gather for funerals to pay their last respects. The need to wear masks and sit in separate pews has stymied our need to embrace and support those who are grieving and attend to our own grief needs. As a result of this, there are thousands, perhaps millions, of people who are struggling to find closure. When this pandemic is over.... and it will be over... it will leave behind in its tracks many who will have been traumatized by the large volume of deaths and left with an aftermath of many open grief wounds.

I contend that before we can get to the rejoicing of being back together in the House of the Lord one more time that there will be a great need to attend to doing grief work due to the many losses we have sustained. Worden outlines a prescription for doing our grief work in what he calls the Four Tasks of Mourning. Worden states, "After one has sustained a loss, there will be certain tasks of mourning that

must be accomplished for equilibrium to be reestablished and for the process of mourning to be completed.”⁵

According to Worden, the first task of mourning is for individuals and churches **to come to terms with the reality of the loss.**⁶ That there are members missing from their congregations, who have either succumbed to the coronavirus or died of other causes of death—both natural and by illness—will be a given. These people were not afforded the usual or traditional sendoff that is well associated with the Black church what we know as a Home-going service. The high volume of deaths and the unknown about the lingering effects of the virus have disrupted the way many congregations have sought to respect the lives of their dearly departed. The first task is to acknowledge and accept the fact that the person is gone and will not be coming back to assemble themselves ever again with the congregation. We will never hear the inspiring sermons of some of our dear bishops and pastors again. The voices of singers who led us in praise of God’s majesty and power have been silenced. Deacons, Deaconesses and Missionaries who we were accustomed to ushering the congregation before the throne of grace will have prayed their last prayer. Because the virus had no respect of person, there will be leaders missing from all levels of the church from pastors to Sunday School teachers. Acknowledging and accepting the losses is to allow oneself to break through the denial that would seek to maintain the emotional bond that one has developed with a highly revered pastor, nurturing church mother, or member of the church who is now deceased. To break through this denial and disbelief, we will need to be intentional in creating opportunities for grieving to take place and be expressed.

After the church acknowledges all the members who have succumbed to death during the coronavirus pandemic, it must allow itself to feel the pain of the losses. The second task of mourning, according to Worden, is **To Experience the Pain of Grief.**⁷ This pain is literal pain that one would feel in one’s body as if one has injured a limb as well as emotional and psychological pain that one feels in one’s heart—sometimes referred to as having a broken heart. In our congregations, people that we have revered, loved, respected, and highly regarded will be missing. We know it well what the scripture states, “... to be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord.”⁸ What a wonderful thought they have graduated or transitioned, but another part of the reality is that these individuals whom we loved are no longer with us. While “the saints have been enriched,” those who remain have been bereft and thus acknowledgement that the emotional bond of attachment has been severed by death and cannot be reversed will need to be given a voice and accepted.

We will miss their presence and feel the psychic, emotional, and physical pain their passing engenders. Often in the church we seek to flee from the pain by euphemisms that seem to reject the reality of the death of an individual. We engage in appropriating terms in reference to our loss that mitigate the pain. Our loved one has “gone to glory,” “transitioned,” “slipped away,” “graduated.” Each of these terms while seeking to diminish the effects of the loss of members in our congregations... the sting of death—can perpetuate the denial. In order to avoid the temptation to escape the pain, might I suggest that we engage in using terms that are more finite like “death,” “died,” and “dead,” when it comes to

⁵ J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 1982, p. 10.

⁶ Worden, pp. 11-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

⁸ II Corinthians 5:8.

referencing those we have lost. Our beloved pastor, church mother, deacon or missionary has died...is dead and will never come back. As harsh and heartless as it may sound, here we must allow ourselves to feel the gravity of the loss. We have need to talk about them saying their names, recalling stories and experiences with them, recognizing that they had flaws and shortcomings, but that they were loved, and we now mourn their death. The sadness, the pain, the sorrow must be let in, owned, felt and expressed.

Once the congregation has allowed itself to acknowledge the death(s) and experience the pain of the loss of members who have died during the pandemic, Worden states the third task is to **Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing**.⁹ For congregations who have lost a pastor, this may mean that a provisional leadership team will need to be set in place that will continue the role that the pastor once had. An assistant pastor may need step up on an interim basis. Down the road, a pastoral candidate committee may need to be formed that will vet candidates for the vacated position of pastor. In congregations with an episcopal structure, new bishops may need to be consecrated or appointed who will assume the overall spiritual and administrative responsibilities of former bishops. There will need to be new appointments made of new church mothers, deaconesses, deacons, auxiliary leaders and even trustees. These individuals, once elected into office to serve, will seek to fill the vacated positions of those who have died. Their ascendancy into their new roles will secure the future of the church. The ministry of God must go on or, if we leave their position vacant, it will begin to decline.


And finally, Worden's fourth task of mourning is to **Withdraw Emotional Energy and Reinvest it in Another Relationship**.¹⁰ It is commonplace that those people whom congregations have formed strong bonds of affection with will be hard to replace. However, if the congregation is to continue providing ministry to its members and the community, its members will have to be willing to let go of the old relationships once had with the deceased and be receptive to the new... a new bishop, pastor, deacon, missionary, chairman of the trustee board. All those positions which were once filled by people highly respected and revered within the life of the congregation must be replaced, and the membership—those who remain—must be open to engaging in new relationships with the new leaders and individuals and accept them for their unique gifts and talents, leadership, and ideas that they may bring not holding them to the way that the now deceased used to do things.

The role of mourning is to adjust to the losses which the congregation has sustained. This will be a new normal. We may want to memorialize all who have served but are now deceased by publishing their names on a plaque to be displayed in a central communal area in the church where a reminder of their service to the congregation will always be remembered. Or during the subsequent year of the church's anniversary, we may want to have a memorial page in the bulletin acknowledging those who have succumbed to and during the virus. Once these four tasks of mourning are accomplished, Our church congregations can expect to resume their usual manner...of providing spiritual sustenance to their members and the communities, both local and global, in which they are located. There will be continuity, but there will also be a newness that comes from having new people in place. Once again, we can resume our usual rhythms of worship, gathering to give adoration to God who has sustained us and never left us and allowed us to come

⁹ Worden, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

together one more time. Yes, there will be glory after this COVID-19 pandemic is over and we shall see it in all its new splendor.

The Tasks of Grief
TEAR 

TO ACCEPT THE REALITY OF THE LOSS
EXPERIENCE THE PAIN OF THE LOSS
ADJUST TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT WITHOUT
YOUR LOVED ONE
REINVEST IN THE NEW REALITY

J. William Worden



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