

A Model for Churches to Address Trauma and Abuse

THE TRAUMA INFORMED CHURCH

There are six guiding principles in setting up a trauma-informed community or organization:

- **Safety**—This may be the most critical role a church community can establish—make church a safe place for survivors to start to heal. It is about more than physical safety. It assures psychological and relational safety. Is there structure in place that allows survivors to feel included and protected in the faith community? Are staff and clergy trained in trauma-informed ministry? Are staff and resources that address trauma and behavioral health available or easily accessible? What are the mechanisms by which a survivor can disclose? Is there a hotline? Is the hotline staffed by someone who will respond quickly and provide the appropriate resources that a survivor needs? Does the staff know what a survivor may need in all phases of healing? Do they know how to get this training, these resources?
- **Trustworthiness and transparency**—Aside from fostering honesty and integrity, we should be unafraid of admitting that we are all broken and wounded and that we all experience trauma in some way. By speaking more openly about abuse and trauma, the stigma and isolation that survivors feel can be lifted. How is this demonstrated to the parish? Are there homilies, sermons, Masses, or prayer services dedicated to addressing the issues of abuse and trauma? Are there listening sessions to discuss abuse and trauma? Who do staff, clergy, and the faithful trust? Which personnel in church leadership are trustworthy?
- **Peer support**—Are there structures for survivors to walk alongside others who are also in recovery and healing? Groups such as Maria Goretti Network, Hopeful Hearts Ministry, Awake Milwaukee, and Celebrate Recovery are excellent peer support ministries. These groups create a safe environment for a survivor to tell their story, not feel judged, and feel accepted and supported by other survivors who understand what it is like to be a survivor.
- **Collaboration and mutuality**—Everyone can play a role in the healing of survivors under the trauma-informed model. Have we allowed survivors to share their gifts with the Church? Survivors have a unique perspective on faith. Have we asked if they would be willing to share their gifts or their testimonies with others?
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice**—Do survivors feel they are fully integrated into the church community? Do survivors have a voice that is equal to other voices in the Church?
- **Cultural, historical, gender issues**—Are we aware of how abuse is treated in different cultures? How has our church changed historically in how it talks about abuse and

trauma? Does our church have a history of abuse and trauma? Have we adequately addressed previous or current stories of trauma?

Trauma isolates survivors, and it divides families and communities. Dr. Judith Herman, psychiatrist, author, and researcher of child abuse and recovery from trauma notes: "All the perpetrator asks is that the community do nothing. He (sic) appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the community to share the burden of the pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering." [18] The Church can be the place of connection and belonging that the survivor lost at the hands of the abuser. The Church can be the place where we finally can engage with one another, with survivors, to acknowledge not just the abuse but to acknowledge that we are together, in Christ, sharing the burden, and bringing healing to the brokenhearted.

(From *Abuse of Trust* by Hebert et al, chapters by Dr. Deborah Rodriguez)