

# **Dealing with Tough Topics in the Family: Helping Families Talk Together about War, Violence, and Terrorism**

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*This workshop is designed for use with a group of parents within a congregation. It may be adapted for use in other groups, such as within an individual family, or handouts may be distributed among the entire congregation.*

**Materials Needed:** modeling clay, pipe cleaners or chenille stems, 8 1/2 x 11 pieces of cardstock, various magazine pictures of families, *Song of Creation* by Kathleen Long Bostrom (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001),

## 1. Gathering Activity

Give participants clay, pipe cleaners, and cardstock. Encourage them to make a sculpture that represents their feelings and attitudes when they think about war and place it on the cardstock. Ask them to name and label their sculpture when they are finished. Create a gallery where each group member can walk by and look at the sculptures.

**15-20 minutes**

## 2. Open with prayer, asking the participants to join after each phrase saying “*Come, Holy Spirit, Come!*”

*In the beginning, the Creative Spirit moved upon the face of the deep, turning chaos into order and replacing darkness with light.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*Make us participants with you in the ongoing work of creation in which there is order and light.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and God said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear what he says to you.”*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*Touch our lives so that we may have the assurance of your mercy and favor, so that we may boldly speak the words we have heard from Jesus.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*After Jesus was crucified and buried, on the third day, the stone was rolled away from the tomb, the earth shook, the soldiers trembled, and his followers rejoiced. Death and the grave could not hold him!*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*Remind us that we are called from death to life, from lethargy to active living, from fear to hope, from sorrow to joy.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*As we gather in this place today, may we feel the presence of the Spirit moving among us, challenging us to think new thoughts and live new lives. Amen.*

Adapted from *Living Waters, Worship Resources for Congregational Life* by Stanley Earhart  
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### 5 minutes

#### 3. Snapshot of a Family

From the pictures that you have gathered, invite participants to choose one that represents something important to family life. This does not have to be a representative picture of “the” family but of an aspect of family life.

Have the group divide into pairs and share the picture they chose and the reason they selected it.

Ask a few people to share with the large group.

Talk together about what a family is.

- big, small, many, few: relationships can sometimes be the most important thing in the midst of tragedy

Stress importance of the life of the family within the life of faith.

“Family life is structured to provide physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual nurture to its members... *Relationships*—their character, quality, and purpose—are absolutely central to the very nature of family. From the standpoint of faith, we have said that the way we relate to one another must be identified as *the* quintessential spiritual discipline of family life.

- From *Family, The Forming Center* by Marjorie J. Thompson, pgs. 58-59.

### 10 minutes

#### 4. Reactions within the Family

Remaining in pairs, talk together about these questions:

- Choose one family member in the picture, how might this person react to a devastating situation such as an act of terrorism in a neighboring state or to the news of impending war?
- If there are other people in the picture, think about how they might respond to that person’s reaction. Share this imagined scenario with your partner.
- If this family was to talk together about what happened, what might you hear or see?

### 10 minutes

#### 5. Looking at Scripture

Read *Song of Creation* by Kathleen Long Bostrom as an interpretation of Genesis 1, God creating good out of chaos.

The family, whether two parents, one parent, foster parent, or group of unrelated friends, with the help of God, can become a place where the chaos is put into new order.

### 10 minutes

#### 6. But How?

Use attached handouts to discuss ways of talking together about these issues in the family, Scripture helps, and books that might be helpful.

- 1) How to talk about tragedy
- 2) Scripture helps
- 3) Activities for families
- 4) Sentence starters
- 5) Book list (bibliotherapy)

### 20 minutes

#### 7. Into Hope

After reviewing the handouts, read the ‘Scriptures of Hope’ from the Scripture handout. Ask the participants to take back their sculpture and try to recreate it into something that shows hope.

Ask them to get into the pairs that were together earlier and share:

- What was your image that represents your feelings and attitudes about war?
- What did it resemble and why?
- How did you recreate it?
- What does the new creation represent?

### 20 minutes

#### 8. Expressing our Hope to God

When the pairs are finished, have the group join together to form one big circle. Give each person a piece of paper and ask him or her to write one word on top that came out of his or her conversation (i.e. hope, creation, transformation). Ask them to pass it to the person on their right and write a two-word description of that word, fold the paper over the one word, and pass it on. The next person writes a three-word description of the two words, and the next a four-word description. The fifth person then writes a single word description of the four words.

Ask the group to bring these “poems” with them as the group engages in a closing prayer.

### 10-15 minutes

#### 9. Closing Prayer

*On the day of Pentecost, when many persons were gathered, the Spirit came and touched them with fire and with power, strengthening their faith, enabling them to give witness to the power of the living Christ.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*Empower us to be your disciples, give us boldness to walk in your ways, and inspire us to spread your gospel to the ends of the earth.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

We lift up to you the prayers that we have created through our time together:

*The Spirit still moves in our world. Each day we walk by God's grace and feel the touch of the heavenly dove upon our shoulders, we are able to move from anxiety to confidence, to live as ones chosen to do God's will.*

***Come, Holy Spirit, Come!***

*Come Holy Spirit, come and be real to us in all that we are and do, that we may be used to undergird our families, to be instruments of your peace. And all God's people said:  
AMEN!*

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## TALKING IN THE WAKE OF TRAGEDY

- ❖ **The Response of Children and Young People** will vary based on age, personality style, and connection to the issue.
- ❖ **Listen** to the questions and comments of children and respond in an appropriate way. Let the children's words guide the direction of the conversation to avoid giving them information they may not be ready for. Pay attention, also, to behavior. Give them opportunities to express what they need.
- ❖ **Talk** about God's love. Reassure children and young people that God continues to love throughout a tragedy but that God loves with a sad heart with them. Keep lines of communication open but do not say things that you might not believe. Providing a pat answer is not always as helpful as talking through it together.
- ❖ **Be Honest** but don't impose your own fears on them. They will eventually hear the truth from others and not getting it right from you can cause mistrust.
- ❖ **Share Feelings** in a supportive and sensitive way. Although the issue may be frightening, it is more frightening to think that no one is willing to talk about it. By sharing the feelings associated with the issue, you can also help children learn to deal with those feelings.
- ❖ **Pray** together. Using simple prayers, simply talking to God, give each family member a chance to share feelings and emotions with God. Children or young people may choose to also talk to God by writing a letter.
- ❖ **Use Creative Outlets** for children and youth to express their feelings. Writing, drawing, using puppets or books might help children open up. Words do not always come easily after a tragedy.
- ❖ **Do Something** for others. Help children and youth find a way to take action. Write a letter about the feelings, send money to aid victims, gather needed supplies for those directly affected. Let the young people determine the course of action they choose to take.

## SOME WORDS OF SCRIPTURE IN TIMES OF TRIAL

### *Words of Comfort:*

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.  
As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you. (Psalm 103:13, Isaiah 66:13)

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:11)

Do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

### *Words of Hope:*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,  
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,  
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.  
God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:1,31a)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38-39)

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
persecuted, but not forsaken;  
struck down, but not destroyed;  
Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,  
so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (II Corinthians 4:8-10)

### *Words of Resurrection:*

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

But he placed his right hand on me saying,

Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one.

I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death . . .

(Revelation 1:17-18)

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,

even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them

to meet the Lord in the air;

And so that we will be with the Lord forever.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 14:17-18)

Adapted from a handout originally created by Kathy Dawson, Union-PSCE, Richmond, VA

## HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES IN TIMES OF TRIAL

### **Terrorism and Trauma**

- Margaret M. Holmes. *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Magination Press, 2000.
- Fern Reiss. *Terrorism and Kids: Comforting your Child*. Peanut Butter and Jelly Press, September 11, 2001.
- Lenore Terr. *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*. HarperCollins, 1992.

### **Children's Questions**

- Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. *Where Does God Live? Questions and Answers for Parents and Children*. Triumph Books, 1987.
- Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. *How Do You Spell God? Answers to the Big Questions from Around the World*. Morrow Junior Books, 1995.

### **Loss, Death, Grieving, Stress (Parents/Caregivers)**

- Avis Brenner. *Helping Children Cope with Stress*. Lexington Books, 1984.
- Earl Grollman. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Beacon, 1990.
- Earl Grollman, ed. *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Beacon, 1995.
- Theresa Huntley. *Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*. Augsburg, 1991.
- John Munday and Frances Wohlenhaus-Munday. *Surviving the Death of a Child*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- Maria Trozzi, Kathy Massimini. *Talking with Children about Loss: Words Strategies and Wisdom to Help Children Cope with Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times*. Perigee, 1999.
- Elaine Ward. *Helping Children Understand Death*. Educational Ministries, 1983.
- William J. Worden. *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. Guilford Press, 1996.

### **Loss, Death, and Grieving (Ages 3-7)**

- Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*. Little, Brown, and Co., 1996.
- Kathy Dawson. *Bye Bye...I Love You*. AfterLoss Inc., 1998.
- Tomie DePaola. *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973.
- Byron Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*. Bantam Books, 1983.
- Fred Rogers. *When a Pet Dies*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1988.
- Judith Viorst. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. Aladdin Books, 1971.

### **Loss, Death, and Grieving (Ages 8-12)**

- Kathy Dawson. *The Losin' Blues*. AfterLoss Inc., 1999.
- Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. *Lost and Found: A Kid's Book for Living Through Loss*. Morrow Junior Books, 1999.
- Sharon, Greenlee. *When Someone Dies*. Peachtree Publishing Co., 1992.
- Virginia Hamilton. *Cousins*. Philomel Books, 1990.
- Katherine Paterson. *Bridge to Terebithia*. Avon, 1978.
- Katherine Paterson. *Flip-Flop Girl*. Puffin Publishers, 1996.
- Barbara Russell. *Last Left Standing*. Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
- Cynthia Rylant. *Missing May*. Orchard, 1992.

### **Loss, Death, and Grieving (Ages 13-18)**

- Carolyn Coman. *Tell Me Everything*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993.
- Barbara Snow Gilbert. *Stone Water*. Bantam Books, 1998.
- Adele Griffin. *The Other Shepherds*. Hyperion Books, 1998.
- Karen Hesse. *Phoenix Rising*. Holt, 1994.
- Sid Hite. *It's Nothing to a Mountain*. Bantam Doubleday, 1994.
- Jim Naughton. *My Brother Stealing Second*. Harper & Row, 1989.
- Colby Rodowsky. *Remembering Mog*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996.
- Virginia Euwer Wolff. *Probably Still Nick Swansen*. Holt, 1998.

### **Divorce**

- Jenni Douglas Duncan. *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. Discipleship Resources, 1999.
- Jeanie Franz Ransom. *I Don't Want To Talk About It*. Magination Press, 2000.
- Mary Lou Redding. *Breaking and Mending: Divorce and God's Grace*. UpperRoom Books, 1998.

### **Faith and Family**

- David B. Batchelder. *All through the Day, All through the Year: Family Prayers and Celebrations*. Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- Elizabeth F. Caldwell. *Making a Home for Faith*. Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- Sue Downing. *Hand in Hand: Growing Spiritually with Our Children*. Discipleship Resources, 1999.
- Ann Reed Held and Sally Stockley Johnson. *We Are the Family of God: Family Conversations About the Catechism*. Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1998.
- Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving. *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families*. United Church Press, 1998.
- Marjorie J. Thompson. *Family, The Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation*. Upper Room Books, 1996.
- Holly W. Whitcomb. *Feasting with God: Adventures in Table Spirituality*. United Church Press, 1996.

## SOME ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES IN THE MIDST OF TOUGH TIMES



### **Become a Support Group for Another Family**

Connect with other families in a similar situation or share your experience with others.



### **Make a Book**

Create a book with multiple pages to describe the situation, either before its occurrence or after. Begin with a book about the events and add feelings as you've had a chance to talk about them.

Family members may be willing to work on different parts.



### **Create a Family Shield**

Make a symbol of the family with one section representing each member. Who are we? What is important to us?



### **Plant living Flowers and Plants**

Beautify God's earth while being able to dig in the dirt and remember that life comes out of death. Join together in caring for what has been planted.

"Children understand the mystery of death through an exploration of nature. While separation is sad and painful, it is an essential part of life and nature." (Earl Grollman in *Talking About Death*)

### **! Light a Candle**

In the event of a death, light a candle and ask each family member to take a moment to silently think about what happened. Ask each family member to think about what that person did and the joy they brought. Invite each person to finish the sentence, "When I think about [person] I feel..."

- Adjust this activity based on the event that has taken place (i.e. divorce, war, terrorism, fire, natural disaster)

### **( Play with a Balloon**

After a death, join as a family, having fun and laughing together while playing with a balloon. Hit it to each other and try to keep it off the ground. After playing for a while, pop the balloon and talk about the outside remains but the life inside, the air, is out and continues to live throughout the room.



## Engage in Prayer

Engage in talking, not only to each other, but also with God. As a family, use some of these prayer suggestions:

- Led Prayer** Offer a prayer while everyone else listens and prays silently.
- Popcorn Prayer** Ask one family member to begin the prayer. Following the opening, allow a time for the other family members to "pop" in with their prayers. Close when it seems that everyone has been able to participate.
- One Word** In a circle, go around offering ONE-word prayers of praise or requests.
- Squeeze Prayer** Pray as a family, moving around the circle. When your hand is squeezed, pray silently or aloud and then squeeze the next person.
- Left/Right** Pray silently or aloud for the person on your left and on your right.
- Bidding Prayer** Leader asks for prayers on specific requests, leaving time for each person to pray in silence.
- Unison Prayer** Read a pre-written prayer together as a family.
- Highlight** Write out or copy a prayer. Highlight different parts for family members to read.
- Song** Sing a well-known song together (i.e. Kum Ba Yah, They'll Know We Are Christians) and offer a prayer between verses.
- Thank You** Offer prayers of thanks around the group.
- Open Eyes** Offer silent prayers for those in your family as you look around at each person.
- Hand Prayer** Use your hand to remind you of those we need to pray for:  
Thumb: Ourselves  
Pointer: Those who point us to God  
Middle: Leaders in our community or world  
Ring: Family, loved ones  
Pinkie: Children

## SENTENCE STARTERS TO KEEP FAMILIES TALKING

"When I see bad things happening, I want to ask God..."

"When I think about [event or person], I feel..."

"When I lay in bed at night, I worry about..."

"When I think about war, I feel..."

"When I talk to God..."

"God is..."

"Prayer is..."

"The Bible helps me..."

"God loves me because..."

"On September 11<sup>th</sup>, I..."

"When people die..."

"I am thankful for..."

"I wish..."

"I wonder if..."

"When I see a fight, I..."

"When I see the news on T.V., I..."

"I love my family because..."

"I wish we could talk about..."

"I've always wanted to know..."

"Heaven is..."

"When I think about Jesus, I..."

"My biggest fear is..."

"I am happiest when I am..."

"My favorite day would be..."

"I feel angry when..."

*"I am embarrassed when..."*

*"I feel jealous when..."*

*"I love it when you..."*

*"If I could, I would..."*