

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

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TRAUMA-INFORMED EVANGELISM: Cultivating Communities of Wounded Healers by Charles Kiser and Elaine A. Heath. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023. 213 pages, index. Paperback; \$19.99. ISBN: 9780802882356.

Trauma-Informed Evangelism is a well-written, thought-provoking, and necessary contribution to the field of evangelism, introducing the recovery principles of trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care, as practiced in the fields of mental health and substance abuse treatment, recognizes that all people have experienced trauma, that many problematic effects and symptoms are a result of these traumatic experiences, and that the key to helping others heal is found in treating them with kindness and respect to assist them in developing personal empowerment. The main goal in the work is to avoid re-traumatizing people. The key shift in conceptualization moves from one of pathology, to the normal, protective response of the body to threat—from “What is wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”

Authors Kiser and Heath encourage trauma-informed spiritual care that can be adapted by lay persons, clergy, and clinicians alike. *Trauma-Informed Evangelism* urges readers to recognize the experiences of spiritual harm, understand that this harm has had a significant impact on the survivor’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding spiritual matters (which arguably leads to holistic complications), and to witness these stories in a manner that creates a place of healing rather than of re-traumatization.

The authors break this work into three categories: (1) Disordered Imagination, (2) Healing Imagination, and (3) Embodied Imagination. Disordered imagination begins with the premise that trauma-informed evangelism requires that we understand our neighbors’ experiences of harm in a spiritual context so that we can minister to them effectively. As in any type of trauma-informed care, the invitation to share stories without expectation or judgment is an imperative first step. This section begins by introducing a handful of oft-relayed themes, including rejection trauma in terminating relationships, injustice toward marginalized individuals and by those who abused their pastoral authority, and secondary wounding, having witnessed harm toward others.

Kiser and Heath acknowledge complex theological and social questions which arise when we are faced with spiritual harm. They briefly examine questions of the nature of God, and of humankind acting in harmful ways or failing to prevent harm. The authors do a nice job throughout the work of covering the natural and obvious questions that will arise for the reader. This involves discussions of the nature of spiritual abuse and

trauma, problematic narratives of supremacy and hierarchy, and healing the historical wounds of exploitation and perpetration within Christendom. They challenge the ever-present presuppositions of those who comprise the in-group and of those who comprise the out-group in the church, who gets to decide, and how these practices have been kept in place.

The authors challenge traditional church norms and beliefs which keep some of these harmful practices in effect. They also introduce alternative, nontraditional theological perspectives that could combat some of these views. However, it is important to note that theological beliefs are simply one piece of the equation. And that, people being people, we are prone to wounding others regardless of the rightness or wrongness of our theological perspectives. Even with the best of intentions, two people can have vastly different perspectives on the best way to problem-solve. And when our deeply held religious convictions are part of the decision-making, we can often be seen doubling down on our positions, inadvertently doing spiritual harm.

Healing imagination tasks the reader to entertain new narratives of the inherent meaning of Jesus as a trauma survivor, to discover and reimagine God in the midst of trauma, and to consider the challenge of producing compassionate, trauma-informed leaders. The authors introduce thought-provoking, alternative interpretations to challenge the traditional meaning we have given the crucifixion story, to God’s purpose and reactions to harm, and to how we as evangelists should understand and respond to trauma.

Embodied imagination proposes several alternative approaches to evangelism. This includes the suggestion that our traditional attempts to minister to and to convert those with problems of spiritual trauma are counterproductive, largely due to the instinctual trauma response. That evangelism is “witness-oriented rather than results-oriented” (p. 118) requires that we embody the Good News and release the outcomes to God. It asks evangelists to consider “radically inclusive hospitality” which further expands the boundaries of who is included in the church, and it tightens the boundaries of acceptable behavior to avoid harm and exclusion (p. 140). Evangelists must finally learn to keep a healthy and well-differentiated self from their neighbors, allowing others their autonomy and not becoming discouraged when their best efforts don’t deliver the expected results.

Trauma-Informed Evangelism will probably be best enjoyed by those with non-traditional views of Christianity as it considers alternative perspectives such as womanist and queer theology. However, those of a more conservative nature, who are open to the simple and practical message of trauma-informed care, may find a great deal of applicable materials within

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the scope of their personal Christian beliefs. *Trauma-Informed Evangelism* is well conceptualized and worthy of a careful read. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter help facilitate reflection and planning for individuals or groups interested in developing this mode of evangelism.

As a clinical trauma specialist and Christian, I found this work especially relevant to my current task, building the mental health department in a residential drug and alcohol treatment center for adult males. The vast majority of these men report trauma, including childhood sexual abuse, violent experiences during incarceration, family of origin abuse, and medical trauma inherent in abusing substances. They have been the victims of trauma, and they have been the perpetrators of trauma. They identify the church as the key component of their healing, but also a key factor of their wounding. The explanations of spiritual wounding and trauma-informed care in this book are sound; they are as applicable to the neighbor who has found moderate offense as to deeply wounded brothers and sisters with complex consequences. I plan to use this material to deepen the focus on the concepts of spiritual wounding and trauma-informed care into my practice.

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DISCIPLES AND FRIENDS: Investigations in Disability, Dementia, and Mental Health by Armand Léon van Ommen and Brian R. Brock, eds. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022. 330 pages. Hardcover; \$59.99. ISBN: 9781481317009.

It has been almost fifty years since I started supporting individuals affected by intellectual and developmental disabilities, and I wish this edited book had been available at that time. While the focus of the different chapters in this book touches on subjects having to do with disability, dementia, and mental health, the real emphasis is on the practical theology of John Swinton, and the ways friendship in and through Jesus informs the “tension between reflection and action, and research and practice” (p. 56).

The book has an introduction and an afterword, and it is divided into four sections: (1) Practical Theology in a Swintonian Key, (2) Vulnerability Subverted, (3) Quests for Faithful Embodiment, and (4) Gently Living in a Violent World. According to the publisher’s description of the book, it is directed toward “students and scholars of practical theology, disability theology, mental health, dementia and cognate fields” (<https://www.baylorpress.com/9781481317009/disciples-and-friends/>). While some of the language is almost inaccessible without a theological background, much of the writing is practical and applicable to those of us who see working for and with

people affected by disability, dementia, and mental health as a vocation rather than as a career.

Readers will each have their favorite authors based on their own interests and passions. As a behavior support practitioner as well as a social work professor, I was most affected by the chapter written by Grant Macaskill, a theologian from the University of Aberdeen who identifies as autistic. He writes movingly about the autistic gain for the church when we radically empower the neurodiversity model to discontinue talking about normalcy as a goal and embrace the differences diversity brings within the rich tapestry of the body of Christ. In a similar way, Bill Gaventa’s chapter, entitled “All God’s Children Got a Place in the Choir” provides another view of the many members of the body whose differences make the body stronger by embracing Paul’s vision of God’s choice to use the “weak” to bring strength and the “foolish” to bring wisdom to the world the church ministers to (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1 & 2). In his chapter, he asks three questions that I wish I had been asking years ago:

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I?
3. Whose am I?

I have spent some hours reflecting on these three questions, trying to move past the role definitions we so easily gravitate to. Finding the “why” of my existence, the purpose I have in life, is an equally deep question, and asking who I belong to within our kingdom relationships will hopefully help me find my place in God’s choir. Reading this book will, I believe, prompt readers to ask the same questions I asked myself. Finding the “why” of our existence and the purpose of our lives are deep questions for all of us. In our Christian lives, finding out who we belong to will help us to find our place in God’s choir with all the other critters. For some of us, the call is to be “disciples and friends” to persons with disabilities, dementia, and neurodiversity, and this book may bring that into focus for some readers.

The body of Christ is far more than the worship center of the Christian faith; it is the place where Jesus interacts with all the people Jesus came to minister to as recorded in Luke 14:13–23 – “the sick, the lame, the blind, the deaf, the prisoners, the poor, the weak.” According to the United Nations, the largest minority group in the world is people affected by various disabilities, accounting for approximately 650 million people out of a population of 7.88 billion people (<https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/toolaction/pwdfs.pdf>). It is with and for these people that John Swinton’s work seeks to create opportunities for friendships to develop amongst people who come together to experience the friendship of Jesus. Within these relationships we come to know the peace of Jesus, and as Medi Ann Volpe writes in one of the chapters, Jesus *is* our peace, Jesus *makes* our peace,