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Trauma-informed Bible Storying through *New Hope* Strengthening the Church to spread the Kingdom Through an Emotionally Healthy Mindset

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I watched my Syrian friend crying on the screen of my cell phone, wishing I could reach out to touch her despite the COVID-19 reality keeping us apart. She was recounting her recent days of trying to get financial help from the city council as she and her husband could no longer make ends meet. Then she said guiltily, “I don’t know why I’m so upset. This is nothing like the chaos we left in Syria.” But the chaos my friend and her family fled follows them wherever they go, even now causing panic attacks, anger, and depression. My friend is not the only one experiencing the negative effects of highly stressful events in their lives, even though others may not have fled from violence and starvation.

Although the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5 2013, 271) has required the definition of trauma to include “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” some mental health professionals broaden that definition because they recognize the lasting effects of stress. Francine Shapiro (2018, 4) states that “small t” events such as childhood humiliations and disappointments can also leave lasting negative effects on emotions, cognition, and physical well-being. With this in mind *New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts*, a trauma healing program that incorporates trauma informed Bible storying, has broadened their audience to include all who have experienced “A stressful situation that causes negative consequences mentally, physically, emotionally, or spiritually.” (New Hope, 2019)

The important thing to remember is that trauma creates barriers between us and God. If we are not believers, it can impede us from understanding God’s salvation. If we are believers, it can create a barrier to our spiritual growth, preventing us from being spiritually healthy enough to grow deeper in our relationship with

God, with others, or share the Good News with our unbelieving friends. Trauma can cause us to persistently focus on our personal problems, and therefore it must be addressed if we are to see the Kingdom expand. Although God can and does often break through the natural order of this broken world, he more often chooses to work through his Word and his people who walk alongside others in their brokenness. Perhaps that is why Diane Langberg says that trauma is “the greatest mission field of the 21st century” (2015, Loc 224).

Trauma-informed Bible storying—why is it important to use narrative/storying in a trauma setting?

Traumatic experiences affect the way our brains work. Our brain’s limbic system and amygdala (“emotional brain”) control the fundamental survival and emotion senses. Our frontal lobes (“rational brain”) attaches meaning to sensory information and helps re-balance our bodies as it decides if the senses coming in pose a threat to our life. In traumatic and highly stressful situations, the sensory input overwhelms the rational brain, taking it “off-line.” We may get stuck in emotional responses as our stress hormones continue to propagate, creating unhealthy and deeply entrenched neural connections. Because the rational brain is what makes sense of our memories and emotions and enables us to understand how the past relates to our present and future, it is vital that our rational brain re-connect to our emotional brain. (Van Der Kolk 2015, 56-60, 247) How do we do this when trauma has effectively destroyed the connections between the two? Recent studies in neuroscience suggest that narrative is important in the healing journey, because narrative engages both the emotional and rational parts of the brain and can lead to new connections in neural pathways.¹

Psychologists and counselors have found that telling personal stories is a significant part of the healing process. Storytelling (one’s own story) is a way of ‘restoring a

¹ See the Siegel and Stephens references below.

sense of efficacy and power” and reverses the “helplessness that constitutes the essential insult of trauma” (Batchelor 2015, 193, comments on Herman 2015, 41). However, “Bad storytelling [personal stories] or unregulated telling replicates trauma” (Langberg 2015, Loc 2545). This is why providing safe, non-judgmental environments in which to tell personal stories is very important.

Telling “third party stories” is also important, because it gives the participant the ability to experience emotions in a safe way.

The simulations that are novels, plays, movies, and so forth can allow people to find out more about the intimate implications of their emotions. They offer a laboratory space that, relative to real life, is safe and can make the relations of emotions to goals and action easier to understand. (Oatley 1999, 112)

It also creates an environment where participants can embody the storyline. As stories are told chronologically, the stories reveal patterns of Bible characters’ reactions to life situations, and God’s character as he responds. The consistent pattern allows the participants to discover these truths for themselves and trust them as they see the consistency of God’s nature through the storyline. Despite the advantages to allowing God’s story to transform our own stories through narrative, it is interesting that although faith-based trauma healing curriculums abound, few include engaging with the biblical meta-narrative as part of the journey of healing.

Narrative Over Time

The healing journey is not a straightforward one—people can feel that they move forward in healing only to lose ground when difficult experiences occur again. Time and patience are key, so *New Hope* takes participants on a narrative journey that weaves together their personal stories with God’s Story. One personal story told, or one Bible story learned will not change the neural connections in the brain—repetition is key to transformation. Over time, participants embody Bible stories to the point that they begin to relate to them at a personal level. These learned processes also show them how to relate deeply to biblical narratives in on-going Bible studies and personal time with God, becoming part of their life-long journey with God. After internalizing the story of Jesus’ death in a trauma healing group, one woman said, “Jesus knew my shame” (Uganda, August 2018). This was the 5th story she had internalized well, and she had traveled through the stories that set up the reason for Jesus’ appearance on earth, his life, and his death. She understood that someone needed to know her shame in order for her to be healed. She understood the depth of Jesus’ understanding of her shame. She might have understood that at an intellectual level in one “lesson,” but she might not have internalized

and embodied that truth in a transformative manner. She needed to journey through the process by interacting deeply with story after story.

Trauma-informed Bible storytelling— What does a New Hope story session look like?

Bible story group facilitators need to be aware of trauma-sensitive issues because trauma appears in almost every population with whom we work. Trauma-informed Bible storytelling *necessitates* certain characteristics in order to effectively address trauma. However, most populations do not have enough counselors to address their mental health needs. Because not everyone can become a counselor, trauma-informed Bible storytelling is structured to organically facilitate emotional health. An easily reproducible format that leads to robust discussion and appropriate community (a community that listens without judging or giving advice) equips participants to reproduce groups.

In trauma-informed Bible storytelling, participants embody the story—in other words, they seek to make the meaning of the story *real* to them by experiencing it to the point that the truths are a part of who they are and how they behave. As patterns are repeated in session after session, participants are able to eventually re-narrate their own stories in light of the biblical stories, finding moments of truth or light in them. Eventually, participants can imagine a new way of responding to trauma triggers, or a new way of thinking, feeling, and reacting, and outward behaviors change. Several characteristics of trauma-informed Bible storytelling in *New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts*, help participants to do this.

People who have experienced trauma need 1) community, 2) faith, and 3) purpose in order to move forward on the healing journey (Langberg 2015, Loc 2552). A story group that follows a 3/3rds paradigm (the session is divided into three parts of *looking back*, *looking up*, and *looking forward*) helps to provide these necessities.

Community-Our Stories

In the first third of a session (*looking back*), participants build community. They hear how each other’s weeks have gone. They celebrate with each other what happened when they shared the Bible stories with others. They sing and pray together. In trauma-informed Bible storytelling, they also spend focused time sharing their own past stories of hurt. However, if a participant is not ready to share that story with others, they are never pushed. Sharing a personal story before being ready can cause more harm than good and cause the storyteller to re-experience the negative emotions of the situation. If people are not ready to share past stories, they may share a story about how they are doing at the moment. The participants

learn to listen to each other using a very simple and reproducible model. Participants listen, ask only three questions of each other and do not press for extra details:

- 1) What happened?
- 2) How did you feel?
- 3) What was the hardest part of that for you?²

In further training, facilitators learn simple techniques for helping participants calm down if they become overwhelmed with emotion while retelling a personal narrative. These simple listening techniques help the participants in the group understand how to listen well, creating a safe environment where everyone feels welcome and loved.

Faith-God's story

In the second third of a session (*looking up*), participants build faith by engaging with a Bible story. These are not just any Bible stories: they are carefully chosen to reflect the storyline of the ultimate healing journey—the journey of redemption—when God walked alongside a broken world and showed that world the pathway to a new beginnings that in which there is no suffering, tears, sin, or death again. It is important for participants to understand how healing in this life reflects that and points to an ultimate hope.

In trauma-informed story crafting, we carefully choose wording and detail to faithfully represent the meaning of Scripture while also including those elements particularly helpful to those who have experienced trauma. When stories are long, the details are chosen carefully, while ensuring that the central meaning of the story remains intact. Each story is accurate, natural, and word choices reflect the context and prevailing understanding of key terms. For example, in most contexts we would explain the word *baptism* rather than use the word because the contexts in which we work would have a wrong understanding of baptism. We might say something like *turn away from your disobedience, turn to God, and be ceremonially washed in water to show that you have done this*. Using a word for *baptism* that could bring up negative connotations, such as being forced to turn away from family when becoming a believer, would do more harm than good in a trauma setting. Certain details are important in the story, such as when Joseph weeps loudly (Genesis 45:2). Participants see that even important people can feel so emotional that they cry. We include that the man and the woman were in the garden, naked and unashamed with God (Genesis 2:25). Then we explicitly say that they

² Harriet Hill, et.al. 2004, 28. These questions have been taken directly from THI's materials, but the third question has been altered to include settings in which it is more appropriate to ask, "What was the best part of that for you?"

became ashamed when they recognized that they were naked after they ate the fruit (Genesis 3:7). Participants recognize the shame of their trauma and can empathize with the first man and woman. We include the fact that Jesus was not wearing any clothes on the cross, so that women who have been sexually abused can understand that Jesus knows their shame. We include John 20:3-10, when Peter and John come to the tomb, saw the empty grave clothes, and left confused, leaving Mary to weep alone. This allows for the audience to see the different reactions to trauma and high stress. The final story in the core *New Hope* story set brings redemption full-circle—the tree of life appears in heaven and is accessible to all, and its leaves heal the nations (Revelation 22:2). Stories need to create a balance that includes enough significant details to touch the heart, but not overwhelm with too many details to remember. Because sharing the stories with others contributes to healing, the participants must want to pass them on and feel competent to do so.

During the *Looking Up* part of each session, participants engage with this carefully crafted Bible story by hearing it, re-telling it, acting it out, discussing it, and doing a healing activity related to it. This process of story internalization is just as important as the way the stories are crafted. First the participants hear the story told twice and re-construct it as a group. This repetition builds confidence.

Secondly, the participants dramatize the story twice, creating the space for participants to embody the story well. In the first drama, participants use words and learn the story through visualizing how the scenes work. The second drama is done without words, enabling the participants to feel the emotions of the characters from a safe, third-party perspective (Oatley 1999, 112).

After the drama, participants discuss the story using the same five questions each time in order to keep the process simple enough to not overwhelm. The questions are open-ended; there are no right or wrong answers:

1. What did you like in this story?
2. What did you find difficult to accept in this story?
3. What does this story show us about God?
4. What does this story show us about people?
5. If this story is true, how does it change your thinking or your life?

The final question is important: we permit participants to 'try on' the truths of the story, even if they do not fully believe them yet. We don't judge participants who are not convinced yet, but we give them the option to see what it would feel like if they acted as if they story were true. One participant in Central Asia responded to this question about the Bleeding Woman story from Mark 5 by saying, "I need this story to be true for me. I want this story to be true." In the past she had avoided conversations about

Jesus, but this question allowed her to discuss Jesus without having to believe in him, so she felt safe to talk. She began walking towards Jesus in a way she had not before.

The last part of the *Looking Up* section is the healing activity. This is yet another circle of repetition around the truths of the story, connecting deeper with the hearts of the participants by kinesthetic activity, drawing, imaginative activity, or skill building. For example, participants learn to lament, a necessary skill in healing from trauma. They also learn to first identify and then give their pain to Jesus. They learn to work together to create new things, building even closer community in the process.

Purpose—God’s Story Shared

In the third part of the session (*looking forward*), participants build purpose. They practice the story with each other, pray for each other, and send each other out to share the story during the week. Practicing the story together is important for building confidence, community, and empowerment. Sharing the story is important to bring healing full-circle as participants find purpose in life—both to encourage their friends and family, and to help build God’s Kingdom by sharing good news.

Trauma-informed Bible Storying: building emotional health in reproducing communities

At the beginning of each session, participants celebrate together what God has been doing. Everything is celebrated—even if participants were only able to share part of a story with someone. They are also encouraged as they see the Holy Spirit work through his Word regardless of their own education or knowledge. Because the same format is used in every session, participants feel more easily able to facilitate sessions themselves and start groups. The more confidence participants gain, the more they continue to want to learn and share more stories. The more stories participants embody, the more they grow to be like Jesus and experience his healing.

In one trauma healing storying group in the US, a participant joined the healing group because she wanted to find healing from past hurts. She had also always wanted to learn to disciple others, but she was afraid and felt incompetent. In each story session she learned the story and was encouraged to share it. One week she shared the Bible story for the first time with a friend. The friend was so interested that he called his family together to hear the story, and this participant ultimately facilitated an entire story session (the story, the questions, and the healing activity) with this friend’s family. She came back to the original group the next week, glowing. She asked, “Was that discipling? I think I just disciplined someone!” Now this participant facilitates several of her own trauma-informed

Bible storying groups. As people are empowered, they have a healthier identity.

Trauma-informed Bible storying: Strengthening the church

A healthier identity leads to fewer interpersonal issues within the church. One group of northern African women were participating in New Hope when they suddenly realized that they had an unforgiveness issue with the elders in their church. That week they went together to the elders, asked forgiveness and told them that they forgave them. The church rift was healed, and the church grew in numbers to the point that they had to build a bigger church.

The church begins to look outward as it grows healthier. One shy young American woman shares her story from COVID-19. As a barista in a coffee shop, she was selling ‘grab-n-go’ coffees, but found that no one was leaving the shop! Instead, people stood around to talk for hours. Elsa shares that she began telling them Bible stories since they were just standing there. When asked why she thought they remained to talk, she said, “You taught me those listening questions, so now all I do is ask them. When I do, people talk. When I hear their real pain, I respond with a Bible story. It’s natural. It just happens.”

The pain and suffering in churches does not disappear just because of trauma-informed storying, but this way of telling stories gives people tools to address burn-out, pain, and crisis. One story group of British women gathered after a death in the church. As they were crying together, one woman said, “Could someone share that Revelation story again?” As the women discussed the story and cried together, several left the session that day saying that they felt “lighter.”

The church learns to listen to each other. Recently, the issue of racial tension came up in a woman’s prayer group in Europe. One member of the group posted something on Facebook that offended several in the group, including one black woman. Another member of the group facilitates trauma-informed story groups, and she met with the black woman to hear her story. Later the woman said, “She knew exactly what questions to ask. She knew how to draw out my story, and it made me feel so good to be able to tell it without being judged.” That first conversation paved the way for further healing conversations, and eventually the entire prayer group took the listening training so they could listen better to each other.

Healthy Church

What is healthy church? What are the characteristics of healthy church, and how do we ensure that churches get there? Church planting strategists develop tools to help church planters assess whether or not churches are doing what the church is intended to *do*; however, they are also intended to *be* healthy. This health should not only be

judged in terms of the members' relationship with God, but it also should consider the health of the members' self-identity as well as their relationships with one another.

Perhaps trauma-informed story groups that begin with specific curricula like *New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts*, can contribute to this discussion. But first let's look at the first community of believers from Acts 2:42-47. This description shows us both what the new believers were doing together *and how* they were doing it.

⁴²All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

⁴³A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. ³

(Acts 2:42-47, NLT)

Sometimes we focus on what healthy churches should *do* without providing the tools needed to do those things in an emotionally healthy way. Curricula like *New Hope* include both some of the characteristics of 'church' while creating an environment in which people can learn how to interact well with each other and form the safe environment needed in churches.

1. *New Hope* groups create a safe environment where participants can share and be listened to without being judged or 'fixed.' Safe environments are important because as people feel free to share, they can be supported in growing spiritually and emotionally. Descriptions in Acts 2 about meeting together, sharing everything they had, and eating together with joy and generosity imply that the first group members felt safe with one another.
2. God's Word is the core of *New Hope* groups. (*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.*) They create an environment where answers are sought from *God's Word* rather than

from an 'expert.' We pray that through the Holy Spirit, participants discover the truths of God's Word for themselves as they are ready and willing to engage with it. This is helpful for people who have experienced oppressive situations in which others told them what they had to think or feel.

3. *New Hope* groups provide real fellowship. (*Those first believers devoted themselves to fellowship.*) Participants work together and rely on the group dynamic to self-correct and support each other. Participants are permitted to question the Bible story (the second discussion question provides that option) and to grapple with the truths over the course of the story set. They do not have to have 'all the right answers'; but rather be willing to continue with the group, allowing the story line of each subsequent story to unveil something new that will help them understand God's redemptive plan. This reliance on the Holy Spirit to reveal himself through his Word creates a healthy group dynamic.
4. *New Hope* groups create an environment where sharing Bible stories with others is encouraged and celebrated so that members of the group *want* to share. (The first believers were full of joy and generosity, and they worshiped together *with one purpose.*) As participants tell the stories to friends, they gain confidence. As participants tell other members of the group what happened when they shared, those members are inspired to try telling their friends too.
5. Many times new groups are started because members of the groups begin telling stories to others, and the others want to hear more about what they do. (*And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*)

New Hope groups tend to be full of joy, and participants often 'live life together,' eating together, contacting each other through the week, and praying together for needs that come up. For example, when one *New Hope* participant in North Africa lost her home, other members of her *New Hope* group provided a place to live and the furnishings for her new kitchen.

New Hope's last story includes this passage from Acts 2, and *New Hope* participants often say things like, "This is what we've been doing!" Trauma-informed Bible story groups already contain many of the elements of the first "church." Perhaps most importantly, they include emotionally healthy aspects of group that can contribute to sustainable growth both in numbers and in emotional and spiritual maturity.

³ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ac 2:42-47). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

For more information about New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts, go to www.multiplyhealing.org.

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About the writer:

Tricia and Stephen Stringer have served with the International Mission Board for 22 years in West Africa and South Asia in Bible translation and storying. They now live in London and serve on a global Scripture Resource Team. Tricia has been storying for 20 years with women all over the world, but became interested in trauma healing about 5 years ago as she realized that most women she worked with had experienced some sort of trauma in their lives. Four years ago, a development team of seven people from the fields of church planting, trauma counseling, and orality came together to design *New Hope: Multiplying Healing to Wounded Hearts*. God expanded the ministry, and Tricia now leads New Hope's ministry globally. New Hope facilitators can now be found on five continents. The recent COVID crisis has expanded the work even more. For more information about the program and how to be trained, please visit www.multiplyhealing.org.

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Coming next issue:

Tara Rye writes about Bible Storying and discipling. Tara is an avid Bible storyer using social media and personal contacts as opportunities to tell the stories. On several occasions Tara joined a tour group in Israel and told the Bible stories in the locations where the stories happened.