



## *Creating Space for Lament in our Congregations*

---

Co-written by Rev. Jill Lind, Director of Congregational Care, Central Conference of the ECC and Rev. Dawn Taloyo, Associate Superintendent, Pacific Northwest Conference of the ECC

### **Introduction**

As we look to upcoming anniversaries of significant events of 2020 and the reopening of churches, it is important to take into consideration the emotional and spiritual effects of the past year. Church goers will return to “in person” worship, changed. The world around them has shifted and quite possibly left some scars. Some people may return to church with emotions that are new: grief, loss, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. Others had racial wounds reopened and are uncertain of how they will be received. Some may be very hesitant and fearful at the prospect of being in a big group setting while others may be more than ready to resume. And, there may be some who look around and wonder where the community that they once knew went. Inevitably, members of your congregation will experience many different emotions simultaneously, as will their pastors. In all of this, we remember that the feelings and experiences of loss and grief are normal; it is what we do with those feelings that is important.

What does it look like to process these changes and emotions as a body of believers? How do we listen well to one another with empathy and without judgement? How do we build each other up as the body of Christ in the midst of these challenges so that we can continue to function as salt and light, bearers of the Good News of Christ in a broken world?

### **Lament**

Lament is a prayer to God for help in the midst of pain and struggle. The Bible is full of these prayers. *Lamentations* is a whole book in the Old Testament dedicated to prayers of lament after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Over one third of the Psalms are prayers of lament. Jesus cried out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Important to healing is the ability to name the grief and pain. While we may feel excitement and joy in coming back together, we must not overlook the impact that this year has had. For if we do not make space to express it and tend to the heartache and losses, there is a very real chance those aches and wounds will find expression or resurface in less healthy and even destructive ways – whether personally or within the community.

In the face of our grief and loss, what does it mean to cry out to God together as a church body?

Below are suggestions and resources for creating space within your community to lament - to share, pray, and hold the variety of experiences of this past year. May this provide a prompt to other creative and thoughtful ideas.

## Ideas and Resources

- **Hold a *Service of Lament*.**
  - Provide space for communal grieving for friends, family members, and church family members who have passed away during the pandemic. Whether or not the death was caused by COVID-19, due to social distancing measures many people have not had adequate space to grieve these significant losses.
  - Allow time to name and recognize other losses experienced during the year.
  - Incorporate ideas listed below to write, share, or create expressions of lament.
  - See the *Covenant Book of Worship "Service of Lament"*, page 342ff.
  - See another sample outline *Service of Lament* specific to 2020-21 at the end of this document.
  
- **Create space to process through sharing.**
  - In small groups, give each individual a set amount of time to share aloud their responses to the questions below.
  - Remind members about helpful listening skills: no interruptions, judgements, or solutions.
    - *What do I grieve personally from this past year? The losses I've experienced...*
    - *What do I grieve for our church this past year?*
  - After listening, take time to pray for each person, if they are open to it.
  
- **Create space to process through writing.**
  - For those who are not able to physically be with dying loved ones, suggest they write a "goodbye" letter as a way to express grief. Give opportunity to read these letters or post them or share them in a safe place.
  - Write a Prayer of Lament. See resource at the end of this document.

## Other important considerations

- Have church leadership be on special look out for those who seem unusually depressed, despondent, angry, or anxious. Make sure these people are intentionally checked in with and that they are resourced with information on professional help if necessary.
- Understand the difference between complicated grief and normal grief. Complicated grief involves extended feelings of grief which may be mixed with extreme anger and/or depression. It could even result in self-destructive behavior and suicide. Complicated grief tends to get worse with time whereas normal grief lessens with time. If you suspect anyone is experiencing complicated grief, help refer them to a mental health specialist and/or a bereavement group.

## *A Sample “Service of Lament for all things 2020-21”*

---

By Rev. Dawn Taloyo

*These are offered as sample components to a Service of Lament. Find what fits best for your community context and rearrange as needed. A helpful introduction and other ideas are found in the Covenant Book of Worship, pages 342-346.*

### **INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME**

State purpose of service, such as *“to provide space for the people of God to share grief and losses experienced this past year, as we faced a global pandemic, a racial reckoning, political divisiveness, personal losses, and time apart from one another.”*

*The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, among other things, invites the believers to “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:15)*

*Furthermore, scripture provides us many examples of the people of God, not to mention Jesus himself, expressing grief and lament to God in prayer. Today, we join together as brothers and sisters in Christ to name the losses and honor the prayers of lament together – without judgment and with great measure of grace and love.*

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

This may include a worship song(s) and a prayer of invocation.

### **SCRIPTURE READING**

Meditatively read one or more Psalms of lament (or portions). Helpful to contextualize and name our enemy – i.e., the virus, fear, division, racism, anxiety, hopelessness, etc. Understand that “nation” might be better understood today as “Church”. Also, we appreciate that it was honest and natural for the Psalmist to ask, *Where are you Lord? Are you angry with us?* We too can bring our very real feelings to God in prayer.

Examples:

Personal laments: Psalm 42, 56, 69, 86, 88, 102

Corporate laments: 44, 79, 80

Could be interspersed with 1 or 2 live or pre-recorded worship songs. Such as “Ukuthula” by Capetown Youth Choir or “Have Your Way” by Elizabeth Hunnicut

### **TIME OF SILENT REFLECTION**

Options:

- Opportunity to meditate on text heard.
- Offer questions for reflection, such as: *What words from the scripture resonate with how I’m feeling? What are the losses I’ve experienced this year? What burden, pain, hurt am I carrying from the last year?*
- Offer paper/instructions to write your own prayer of lament.
- Have an art space available (if time allows) to create an expression of lament.

### **EXPRESSIONS OF LOSS AND LAMENT**

Offer opportunities to name losses/grief, such as:

- open sharing
- spontaneous verbal prayers
- reading of written prayers of lament
- breaking into small groups to share (with instructions for how to do this: i.e., time frame, creating a safe space)
- posting expressions of lament in a community space such as a prayer wall

Some may feel deeply, but do not have words. A lovely prayer is “A Liturgy for Those Who Weep Without Knowing Why” found in *Every Moment Holy, Vol 1*. by Douglas McKelvey

Some losses are personal and some may be corporate. It may be important to name or give space to notice how church life has changed.

### **PRAYER STATIONS**

Offer one or more prayer stations, where individuals or families can come forward to receive prayer and anointing of oil from pastors and/or deacons. (James 5:14)

### **EXPRESSIONS OF HOPE AND TRUST**

Read portions of Isaiah 40 or Isaiah 43.  
Invite verbal prayers of hope and trust.

Songs of worship, such as “O God Will You Restore Us” by Bifrost Arts, or “God, Turn it Around” by John Reddick

### **BENEDICTION**

In most Psalms of lament, there are statements of trust and hope – whether the Psalmist’s felt experience or spoken in faith, it is an act of remembering. God is with us. God hears our prayers. God is *for* us and is committed to His Bride, the Church.

Bless the people of God as they go.



## PART 2

With these thoughts and feelings in mind, write a prayer of lament. The only intent is an honest expression to God of what is real to you right now. Sometimes we have to give ourselves permission to speak plainly and not filter. God can handle it and welcomes our true selves.

Use a Psalm of lament as a template to help you write your prayer.

- Psalms of personal lament include: 6, 22, 38, 39, 42, 43, 69, 70, 88, 130, 142, 143. Psalms 38 and 39 are particularly powerful expressions of what it feels like to have little or no sense of God's presence and help.

- Psalms of community lament include: 74, 80, 83, 90

- Traditionally the psalm of lament has a definite structure with several elements:

- The opening address,
- The complaint,
- The confession of trust,
- The petition for help,
- The vow of praise.

Or, free write your own prayer of lament.