

REFLECTIONS

From Trauma-Informed Homiletics to Combat Homiletics

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Sacred speech¹ has the power to shape a community's character, convictions, and resolve. It can shape a community's identity through a steady trickle of consistent messaging over time. It can also forge or destroy a community in an instant. These moments of vulnerability demonstrate the power of sacred speech particularly in response to tragedy. Religious leaders bear this responsibility as they respond to communities in crisis through their words in collective settings. Kimberly Wagner describes this challenge best in her book *Fractured Ground* when she points out that "these crisis sermons . . . among the very most important that we preach, are also those for which we have the least amount of experience, skill, and preparation time. . . . If that's not hard enough, there is no formula for creating a perfect message on these occasions."² In response to this challenge, trauma-informed homiletics is an emerging field of study that seeks to equip religious leaders as they prepare to deliver trauma-responsive sacred speech. In this essay, I will discuss the importance of the field of trauma-informed homiletics for chaplains while suggesting that further exploration and research is necessary to equip military chaplains for war.

Trauma-Informed Homiletics

Trauma-informed homiletics emerged within the last six years in response to the rise of civil unrest, shootings in places of worship, and the COVID-19 pandemic. There are three main books that fit squarely in this field of study. The first is Joni Sancken's *Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* which was published in 2019.³ This book builds on trauma theory to introduce the field of trauma-informed homiletics. Sancken discusses soul wounds and trauma theory to argue that trauma-informed theology can

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1 Sacred speech refers to all forms of religious discourse to honor the various faith traditions represented in the Army Chaplain Corps. It refers to concepts such as scripture readings, derashas, d'var Torahs, dharma talks, khukbahs, homilies, sermons, etc. It is a narrower concept than sacred communications which involves other forms of communication in addition to speech.

2 Kimberly Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching the Wake of Mass Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 54.

3 Joni Sacken, *Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

be a source of hope for sacred speech. The second book is Sarah Travis's *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* which was published in 2021.⁴ This book dives deeper into the need for trauma-responsive homiletics by speaking to the concern that religious leaders who are not trauma-informed have the potential to retraumatize or even foster moral injuries within their communities through their sacred speech. The book offers various theological lenses and homiletical approaches to speak healing and grace to suffering audiences. The third book is Kimberly Wagner's *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* which was published in 2023.⁵ Her book offers more practical homiletical frameworks and structures to address the trauma-related needs of a collective audience. The simplicity of Wagner's frameworks make it practical and applicable to inform the sacred speech of religious leaders. These three books apply decades of trauma scholarship to the power of words to shape communities. Chaplains and religious leaders would benefit from learning these trauma-informed approaches to sacred speech. They will better understand the risks of retraumatizing those who are vulnerable in their communities. They will also better understand how to use their words in collective settings to facilitate healing.

This field of trauma-informed homiletics builds upon the study of trauma over the last twenty-five years. Psychological accounts of trauma have given us a new lens or hermeneutic to interpret sacred texts and engage in theological reflection. This has been an important step in helping religious leaders and communities understand how to offer spiritual care to those impacted by trauma.⁶ Trauma-informed caregivers no longer regard bodily or emotional impulses as something to judge as non-normative or even as sinful. Instead, they see the signs of embedded trauma and seek to support survivors giving voice to their trauma narrative. They see that these impulses and negative emotions of suffering are not to be avoided but to be understood and tended to. They empathically recognize that trauma is embedded into one's memory in fragments that may not always make sense and that triggers may cause a multiplicity of emotions all at once. They do not try to cancel out one emotion because of the other. Instead, they allow space for multiple emotions to exist together as they each find healing. They do not judge but seek to foster the robust resilience of trauma survivors.⁷ They facilitate safe spaces and communities for trauma narratives to be seen, heard, and understood regardless of how ugly they might come out. They draw those who are isolated in trauma out into authentic community and respond to shame with grace, love, and peace.

⁴ Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

⁵ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*.

⁶ Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

⁷ Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 7.

As beautiful as this sounds, we must also acknowledge the risks of not being trauma-informed. Jennifer Baldwin, in her book, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, points out that “the church, in its ignorance of traumatic processing is too often a place of misunderstanding and re-traumatization . . . A theology that is ignorant of trauma process is more likely to harm than offer good news.”⁸ It is this concern along with the world events mentioned above that led homiletics into the study of trauma-informed homiletics. Sarah Travis starts this conversation in her book, *Unspeakable*, saying that “preaching in the midst of trauma requires preachers to approach the task with humility and vulnerability—fully aware of the power of words to build up or destroy.”⁹

Trauma-informed homiletics is important for religious leaders because it considers the power of words and the absence of words in a communal setting. It builds on existing scholarship from trauma-informed theology to focus our awareness and concern on those who are affected by trauma. It orients our attention to the pain in the pews and our audiences. Matthew Kim assesses that, “the overarching narrative in North America is one of triumphalism and victory” and that “we tend to celebrate individualism, success, and other virtues that support upward mobility, progress, and advancement.”¹⁰ Then he challenges us to recognize that “everyone experiences some form of suffering. Not everyone gets to experience accomplishment.”¹¹

As we grow more aware of the pain in the pews, trauma-informed homiletics draws on a variety of homiletical traditions that empower religious leaders with the power of words in communal settings. Trauma-informed homiletics equips religious leaders for the powerful work of communal lament, solidarity, and meaning-making that is possible through sacred speech when trauma steals our words and our ability to comprehend life. It leverages the power of ritual and liturgy to engage the five senses in embodied worship. It engages the lasting power of images and icons for those whose frontal cortex and high-level processing retreats in trauma. It embraces the power of communal healing offered through the communal celebration of eschatological and transcendent hope. Finally, it draws from the conviction possible through the prophetic voice in sacred speech. Trauma-informed homiletics have identified connections between existing homiletical traditions and the study of trauma.

⁸ Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 3, 12.

⁹ Travis, *Unspeakable*, 14.

¹⁰ Matthew Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and connect with Your Congregation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), xi.

¹¹ Kim, *People in Pain*, xii.

These connections not only validate these rich homiletical traditions, but they also equip religious leaders to appreciate the depth of healing they are facilitating through their words in communal settings. What was once intuitive is now understood through the study of trauma. This means, through trauma-informed homiletics, we can now train and prepare religious leaders to shape communities that are impacted by trauma. Although this is an exciting and empowering new development, when training and developing military chaplains for war, there is still a critical perspective missing.

Combat Homiletics: Future Possibilities

The field of trauma-informed homiletics has yet to consider the distinct challenges faced during war both by soldiers and civilian populations. Establishing safety is one of the most important initial steps toward healing on the other side of trauma. Safety cannot be taken for granted during an ongoing conflict. Another considerable difference are the kinds of moral agency in play in combat. These differences include the differences between civilians and soldiers on a battlefield, between soldiers engaged in lawful and just forms of warfare versus illegal and unjust forms of warfare, and between soldiers who have a sense of mission and purpose and those who do not believe in the cause. These are differences we need to understand better and to account for in the study of combat homiletics.

There are also practical matters of combat that impact how sacred speech for chaplains might look different than for civilian religious leaders. For example, chaplains face different kinds of time constraints, location constraints, hierarchies of authority, and religiously diverse audiences that are mandated to listen to their sacred speech. These distinctions present both challenges and opportunities for military chaplaincy. As we study the field of combat homiletics, we seek to explore these challenges and opportunities to develop resources, training, and education for military chaplains and religious leaders in war-torn parts of the world.

I have begun this exploration with my Chaplain Captain Career Course students here at the United States Army Institute of Religious Leadership (USA-IRL) over the past two years. I have learned alongside my students what I have presented in this article. We continue to partner with scholars, both civilian and military, in the fields of trauma, pastoral care, homiletics, the warrior psyche, and pastoral care to continue this exploration and codification of combat homiletics. Many of these scholars are referenced in this article. Looking forward, the goal of combat homiletics is to combine the expertise of scholars and practitioners to navigate the nuances of combat. This is why, through this article, I have sought to level the bubbles by bringing transparency to the conversation as it progresses across time. The field of trauma-informed homiletics empowers us to train and develop religious leaders to shape communities that are impacted by trauma. I have also highlighted where further exploration is required to specifically prepare

military chaplains for war. My hope is that we might walk together in helping chaplains tend to the spirits and souls of soldiers by building resilient communities through sacred speech.

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