

THIS CITY IS KILLING ME

COMMUNITY TRAUMA AND TOXIC STRESS IN URBAN AMERICA

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St. Paul & the Redeemer | Lent 2020 | Small Group Discussion Guide

Guidelines for Discussion with One Another

- We extend hospitality to welcome one another in words and actions.
- We respect confidentiality. All that we hear and share stays within this room.
- We share and we listen in quiet. Each one may decide to share or not at any moment. But we are present to one another.
- We honor each voice and share from our unique individual story. None of us speaks for a whole group, profession, or way of life.
- Each of us listens with the "ear of our heart." We listen and learn; we do not offer advice.
- We respect differences, reserve judgment, and turn to wonder as we hear the stories of others.
- After we leave, let us lift up one another's lives and stories to God in prayer.

A Guide to Lectio Divina

Lectio divina, or "sacred reading," is an ancient practice of engaging with Scripture through quiet meditation, inviting God to speak a holy word to the reader.

Reading (Lectio)

One person in your group will read the selected Scripture text aloud. Listen attentively to the passage as you read it. Is there a word or phrase that stands out to you in the text? Read the text at your own pace as many times as needed until this word or phrase is revealed to you.

Reflecting (Meditatio)

Begin to let this word or phrase enter your spirit. What made this word or phrase stand out to you? Open yourself up to receive the meaning of these words as presented to you by the Spirit. If your thoughts start to wander – which they often will – simply return to your word or phrase. In all of this, remember to breathe deeply.

Responding (Oratio)

Allow a spontaneous response to well up from within. What is your phrase or word telling you? Perhaps praise for God arises. Perhaps a need emerges, at which time it is appropriate to offer a petition for yourself or someone else. Maybe it is a time to simply be thankful. However you feel led to respond, do so as the Spirit moves you.

Resting (Contemplatio)

Now is a time to simply rest in the presence of God's Word dwelling within you. This is the step in which you attempt to listen, rather than use language to speak to God. It is helpful to focus on your breath or use a simple word to help you avoid distraction. At the time of conclusion, you may choose to share your word with the group.

Closing Blessings

At the end of each session, we will offer blessings to each other. Go around the circle, look your neighbor in the eye, choose a blessing from the list below, and offer him or her this blessing by name.

May your life be centered in the wisdom of God.

May you find comfort and healing in the love of Jesus.

May God empower you to work for change.

May you know that you are loved and known by God.

May the work you are called to do be guided by the Spirit.

May you grow with grace, accepting change as it comes.

May you use your gifts in the service of others.

May God's love shine forth in all you do.

May you rest in the steadfast love of God.

May God bless you with ears to listen to the still small voice.

May God anoint you to comfort all who mourn.

May you have strength to follow Christ's call to be his disciple.¹

When each person has received a blessing, the leader closes by saying

May the blessing of our Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all, be among us and remain with us always. *Amen.*

¹ Adapted from Laura Kelly Fanucci, Marie Theresa Coombs, and Francis Kelly Nemeck, *Called by God: A Theology of Vocation*.

Session 1 (Introduction & Chapter 1: Jacqueline)

Opening Prayer

Jesus, as we meet together in your name,
prepare us in heart and mind to listen to your Word.
Help us, too, to listen to one another,
so that we may help each other discern your will for us.
Deepen our fellowship as members of your body;
inspire us with longing for your truth;
and enable us to grow together in knowledge and love;
for your name's sake.

Amen.²

Introductions

Share your name and how you think about Chicago. Is it your hometown? Are you a transplant? How did you get here? How does the city inhabit your imagination?

Lectio Divina

Reflect on the following passage of Scripture together, using the guide on page 3.

Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate. (*Amos 5:11-12, 14-15a*)

² Adapted from the Presbyterian Church of England, in Frank Colquhoun, *Contemporary Parish Prayers*, p. 212.

Questions for Group Discussion

Read the following passages aloud and discuss the questions. These prompts are simply conversation starters—you do not need to “cover” every passage or question.

“The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a byproduct of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible ... Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 7).

- What does Gutiérrez mean by the phrase “politically neutral”? What does it mean to treat the existence of poverty as politically neutral? How does our response to poverty change if we treat it differently?
- Gutiérrez’s understanding of poverty changed as he witnessed the reality of extreme poverty in his native Peru. Have you had an experience that changed the way you think about poverty?

“Closing mental health clinics, closing schools, rising rates of violence: Each usually gets treated as its own story, but residents of Chicago’s South and West Sides are not allowed that luxury ... It’s hardly a radical thought to suggest that eliminating crucial mental health services while causing patients and schoolchildren to cross gang and community lines in order to see their therapist or simply go to school has further endangered the lives of the city’s poorest residents” (16).

- Foiles highlights the intersections between racism, poverty, mental health, and failed social systems. In your own life, how have you seen these intersections at work?
- How does Jesus respond to systems that cause harm to poor and vulnerable people? How should we respond to those systems in order to model our lives after his?

"When one considers the history of minorities in America since its founding, one can clearly see a system that has adapted with the changing tides but always had as its goal the elevation of whites at the expense of minorities. There is nothing inevitable about this; it's the result of a number of policy decisions and ever-mutating forms of racial panic. Oppression takes many guises and sows the roots of trauma throughout generations" (17).

- Beyond the examples given in the text, what are some recent examples of local or national policy decisions that have been discriminatory or exploitative toward people of color? How have they been justified?
- Racism is particularly insidious because it is "ever-mutating." What proxy words or ideas do we use to talk about race without naming it?

"Given time, Jacqueline might have perceived the gaps in her treatment and looked for a better fit elsewhere, but she was not given that luxury. Her clinic was run by the city, and it happened to be one of the locations quickly shuttered by Mayor Rahm Emanuel. That kicked off another spiral of hospital admissions and near-death experiences. Thankfully, she survived. Many others did not" (28).

- How did you respond to Jacqueline's story on a personal level?
- How might Jacqueline's experience have gone differently? What would have needed to change for it to be a different story?

"75 percent of those diagnosed with BPD [borderline personality disorder] are women, even though the symptoms appear to be equally present regardless of gender. Childhood trauma is experienced by the majority of those diagnosed with BPD, and the more severe the trauma, the more pronounced the symptoms. The symptoms of BPD seem eerily similar to the antiquated notion of hysteria ... The diagnosis combined with the stigma often leads to women being punished for their response to abuse and assaults. It's like inventing a diagnosis of acute gunshot disorder without investigating who fired the weapon" (31).

- What do you think of Foiles' comparison of borderline personality disorder to "acute gunshot disorder"? What point is he making with this analogy?
- Foiles writes of Jacqueline, "She had a series of intense, short-lived relationships. She wasn't quite sure who she was ... She had difficulties controlling her anger" (30). How do these qualities compare to society's expectations for women? How do gendered societal expectations relate to a diagnosis like BPD?

Blessings

Offer closing blessings to one another, using the guide on page 4.

After the Session

Think about what you learned from others in your group. What surprised you about your group's conversation? What new insights emerged?

Reading for Session 2

This City Is Killing Me, Chapter 2: Frida

Session 2 (Chapter 2: Frida)

Opening Prayer

Mother God,
who has longed to gather all her children under her mighty wings,
you are our good Parent and Caregiver.
Rupture, O Giver of Truth,
the status quo of racialized violence that infects your land,
and teach us through your divine Word
to reject the false promises of state peace
in favor of the dangerous justice of Christ.
Amen.³

Introductions

Share your name and someone who has been a good “parent” and caregiver for you—perhaps an actual parent or other family member, friend, mentor, or teacher. Why was their presence so meaningful? How did they nurture and care for you?

Lectio Divina

Reflect on the following passage of Scripture together, using the guide on page 3.

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (*James 1:22-24, 27*)

³ Kenji Kuramitsu, “For an End to Violence at the Hands of the State,” *A Booklet of Uncommon Prayer: Collects for the #BlackLivesMatter Movement—and Beyond*, p. 21.

Questions for Group Discussion

Read the following passages aloud and discuss the questions. These prompts are simply conversation starters—you do not need to “cover” every passage or question.

“From July 1, 2015, to August 31, 2017, Illinois did not have a complete budget. The impasse ruined the state’s credit rating and crippled its social services. DCFS remained funded due to a consent decree, albeit with significant delays in payments, but virtually every other state agency was impacted, including many that provided assistance to parents in need. Agencies were forced to slash programs and fire staff, putting added strain upon an already overburdened social safety net” (47-48).

- What is the responsibility of government to people living in poverty? How should we respond when our governing structures do not do their job?
- Do you remember the budget crisis that Foiles described? How did you experience it? Why did it affect some residents of Illinois more than others?

“Everything seemed to slow down for Frida as the budget impasse stretched on ... She often had to wait for months before a spot opened for her in a mandated group or class ... The Illinois budget crisis is just the latest in a nationwide series of self-imposed disasters that have lodged inequities deep into the heart of public services meant to protect at-risk children” (48).

- How did you respond to Frida’s story on a personal level?
- How might Frida’s experience have gone differently? What would have needed to change for it to be a different story?

“One of the biggest factors predicting whether or not a child will become DCFS-involved is race ... In Illinois ... African American children are 15 percent of the state child population but 34 percent of all DCFS cases” (51-52).

- How do racial disparities in child welfare reflect Foiles' earlier observation that "the systems which we have in place today are still largely the creation of middle- and upper-class whites" (17)? What are some of the difficulties in naming the racism embedded in systems like child protective services?
- Were you surprised by any of the information about the Illinois DCFS in this chapter? What was surprising to you and why?

"Child protective services programs [are] least effective when it [comes] to addressing charges of neglect, which happen to make up 75 percent of all DCFS cases ... Since neglect is often due to socioeconomic issues and current agency interventions do little to address such structural inequities, the system we have built doesn't work ... Most parents simply lack knowledge or means, not compassion or love. We tend to treat the end results as crimes no matter what" (52).

- What are some examples of structural inequities and socioeconomic issues that lead to accusations of child neglect?
- What would child protective services look like if we re-imagined them to partner with parents in combating the effects of intergenerational poverty and trauma?

Blessings

Offer closing blessings to one another, using the guide on page 4.

After the Session

Think about what you learned from others in your group. What surprised you about your group's conversation? What new insights emerged?

Reading for Session 3

This City Is Killing Me, Chapter 3: Robert

Session 3 (Chapter 3: Robert)

Opening Prayer

Look with compassion, O loving God,
upon the people in this land
who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death
as their constant companions.

Have mercy upon us.

Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors.

And grant that every one of us
may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.⁴

Introductions

Share your name and something that makes you feel grounded and safe—it might be a place, a person, or a practice. What makes it meaningful to you?

Lectio Divina

Reflect on the following passage of Scripture together, using the guide on page 3.

My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord." But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in God." (*Lamentations 3:17-18, 21-24*)

⁴ Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer, "For the Oppressed," p. 826.

Questions for Group Discussion

Read the following passages aloud and discuss the questions. These prompts are simply conversation starters—you do not need to “cover” every passage or question.

“I [asked Robert] to write a biographical statement. Robert loved the idea ... After about a month had elapsed, he presented me with a stack of Post-It notes. There was some order to them, but not much. This was how Robert saw his story, as a series of fleeting fragments that he could not unify” (67).

- How did you respond to Robert’s story on a personal level?
- How might Robert’s experience have gone differently? What would have needed to change for it to be a different story?

“The racial tension present in Cabrini-Green reflected the animus that played far too large a role in city politics. Aldermen resisted any efforts to build public housing in majority-white neighborhoods ... Beginning in 1950, no new public housing was erected in majority-white neighborhoods” (69).

- How do racial disparities in housing reflect Foiles’ earlier observation that “the systems which we have in place today are still largely the creation of middle- and upper-class whites” (17)? What are some of the difficulties in naming the racism embedded in systems like public housing?
- Were you surprised by any of the information about the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) in this chapter? What was surprising to you and why?

“Thousands of residents called Cabrini-Green home, and despite its violence and the often-deplorable condition in which the CHA maintained the apartments, it remained home for them. Anyone who has a conflicted relationship with their hometown can surely relate ... Residents were not blind to Cabrini-Green’s problems, but they were committed to staying and trying to fix them. The question was whether or not the city would allow that to happen” (70-71).

- What does “home” mean? Is there a difference between being housed and having a home?
- In your own life, when have you made a decision between staying within a system to try to change it or leaving the system to keep yourself safe?

“I largely chose not to challenge Robert on the complex of beliefs that guided his life. Rather, I focused on helping him to live better within the world he had created” (74-75).

- We all have “complexes of beliefs” that guide our lives, whether or not we experience mental illness. What are some of your foundational beliefs about the world? How do you respond when these beliefs are challenged?
- How did you respond to Robert’s complex of beliefs about African-Americans and his efforts to “cut himself off from his own race” (66)? How do these beliefs fit into his efforts to make sense of the world?

Blessings

Offer closing blessings to one another, using the guide on page 4.

After the Session

Think about what you learned from others in your group. What surprised you about your group’s conversation? What new insights emerged?

Reading for Session 4

This City Is Killing Me, Chapter 4: Luis

Session 4 (Chapter 4: Luis)

Opening Prayer

Loving God, you are in the midst of us.

We are tired. Lead us to rest.

We are filled with doubt. Give us faith.

We need renewal. Fill us with the Holy Spirit's fire.

Help us look beyond ourselves and reach out to those in need, whether they stand next to us or a world away.

In all that we are, all that we do, and all that we say, help us claim the promise of your presence.

Amen.⁵

Introductions

Share your name, the name of a school you have attended (at any age), and a brief memory of that school. How did being a part of that institution affect you?

Lectio Divina

Reflect on the following passage of Scripture together, using the guide on page 3.

While Paul was defending himself to Agrippa, Festus exclaimed, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains." (Acts 26:24-29)

⁵ Elizabeth T. Wade, "Prayer for a Vestry," in *Women's Uncommon Prayers: Our Lives Revealed, Nurtured, Celebrated*, p. 258.

Questions for Discussion

Read the following passages aloud and discuss the questions. These prompts are simply conversation starters—you do not need to “cover” every passage or question.

“Luis’s search for even more trauma ran the risk of diminishing the trauma he remembered all too easily, carrying the implicit message that ‘merely’ being physically abused was not sufficient to explain his current mental health struggles” (86).

- How did you respond to Luis’s story on a personal level?
- How might Luis’s experience have gone differently? What would have needed to change for it to be a different story?

“[Chicago’s selective public] high schools [have] a crucial thing in common: They are very, very white in a majority-minority school district . . . Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that CPS’s selective enrollment high schools are mostly there for the few white and wealthy students who live in the district, rather than the majority black and brown students who struggle to be admitted and often do not benefit from the education they receive there” (87-88).

- How do racial disparities in education reflect Foiles’ earlier observation that “the systems which we have in place today are still largely the creation of middle- and upper-class whites” (17)? What are some of the difficulties in naming the racism embedded in systems like public education?
- Were you surprised by any of the information about the Chicago Public Schools in this chapter? What was surprising to you and why?

“Communities do not automatically become close and supportive just because people are geographically located near one another. They require meeting places, ‘third places’ like schools or clinics that allow people to cross paths and interact. We often hear about food deserts when it comes to urban environments . . . Alongside

food deserts, we need to consider school deserts, community mental health deserts, and job deserts" (94).

- What are some of the patterns of community disinvestment that lead to school deserts, community mental health deserts, and job deserts?
- How can churches serve as the "third places" that Foiles describes as crucial to community health? How can SPR do a good job of being a "third place"?

"Rather than focusing on the often-difficult work of repairing earlier traumas and gaps in care, we would save the world a lot of misery (and, frankly, money) if we worked to stop such problems before they started. We know that healthy communities help produce healthy children who grow into healthy adults. The question is whether we care enough or not to invest in communities like the one Luis calls home" (95).

- How do wealthier people and neighborhoods benefit from systematic disinvestment in poor people and neighborhoods?
- Jesus calls us, over and over, to a life of sacrificial love. How are people with greater privilege called to sacrifice in response to the "demand that we build a different social order" (Gutiérrez, 7)?

Blessings

Offer closing blessings to one another, using the guide on page 4.

After the Session

Think about what you learned from others in your group. What surprised you about your group's conversation? What new insights emerged?

Reading for Session 5

This City Is Killing Me, Chapter 5: Anthony and Conclusion

Session 5 (Chapter 5: Anthony & Conclusion)

Opening Prayer

Come quickly to our help, O God—
help us to realize that the city you have spoken of
through your prophets, your home, is to be our city.
Grant that the shedding of blood by human hands
in this place would cease,
that all would lay down weapons
and pick up gardening tools and paintbrushes
in the realizing of your salvation,
in the Name of Jesus, who heals all wounds.

Amen.⁶

Introductions

Share your name and one thing that is on your mind today. What is most important for you to share with the group during this final meeting?

Lectio Divina

Reflect on the following passage of Scripture together, using the guide on page 3.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. (*Isaiah 61:1, 2b-4*)

⁶ Kenji Kuramitsu, "Against Violence in Urban Centers," *A Booklet of Uncommon Prayer: Collects for the #BlackLivesMatter Movement—and Beyond*, p. 40.

Questions for Discussion

“When a child dies, you mourn not just the life that was lost but all of the life that could have been but now will never be. Anthony loved sports, but every time he sat down to watch a Bears game, he remembered how he and his son used to watch them together” (101).

- How did you respond to Anthony’s story on a personal level?
- How might Anthony’s experience have gone differently? What would have needed to change for it to be a different story?

“Thus far I have been treating Chicago as a single entity, but when it comes to the homicide rate, like so many other things, there are two Chicagos that rarely intersect. Twelve of the city’s twenty-seven defined community areas had no murders in 2016, and five of those same areas on the city’s South and West Sides were responsible for almost a third of the murders” (104).

- How do racial disparities in homicide rates reflect Foiles’ earlier observation that “the systems which we have in place today are still largely the creation of middle- and upper-class whites” (17)? What are some of the difficulties in naming the racism embedded in Chicago’s narrative about gun violence?
- Were you surprised by any of the information about Chicago’s homicide rate in this chapter? What was surprising to you and why?

“For most of my patients, violence is not a temporary aberration but rather a regular occurrence in their communities ... Our mental health diagnoses are inadequate for this level of trauma. The symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder fit what a person experiences when a horrible incident shatters their world; they are less accurate when someone never had a safe and coherent vision of the world in the first place” (105).

- How can the language of mental health and mental illness be useful to us as we think about community trauma? How does it fall short?
- How are Christians called to foster healing for those who have “never had a safe and coherent vision of the world”?

“For those of us who have played a part in creating and sustaining the structures that make [my patients] miserable, we have to do more than simply praise their strength. We need to ask the hard questions about what created and often sustains their misery. Community trauma isn’t something that arrives out of nowhere” (116).

- What does it look like to “ask the hard questions”?
- How can we begin to find and implement answers? How can we as a church mobilize to work for the healing of community trauma in our city?
- As we remember the passion and crucifixion of Jesus this week, where do you see parallels between his life and the lives of the people in this book?

Blessings

Offer closing blessings to one another, using the guide on page 4.

After the Session

Think about what you learned from others in your group. What surprised you about your group’s conversation? What new insights emerged?