As Christians, we are called to meet needs and provide comfort for the suffering. How can we do that in a way that is sensitive to individuals and communities who carry the heaviest burdens—those who have experienced deep and painful trauma?

Trauma is caused by many factors, including violent conflict and domestic violence. It can affect both an individual and a whole society. Unrecognized and untreated trauma perpetuates cycles of abuse in families and communities. In order to break these patterns, the work of relief, development and peacebuilding must include psychosocial support.

In this issue of the Washington Memo, you will read about MCC supported projects in the United States, Nigeria and D.R. Congo that are successfully responding to trauma, and about the importance of prioritizing funding for psychosocial support in U.S. foreign assistance. ★

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

(Matthew 11:28)
Our ministry toward a holistic recovery and healing

by Charles Kwuelum

Human development that considers the well-being of the whole person requires that the root causes and triggers of conflict and violence in communities are addressed. This includes addressing structural and systemic injustices, treating various forms of trauma, building resilience and providing skills to manage the dynamics of traumatic experiences.

A lack of programs to help individuals and communities bounce back or function after serious trauma often perpetuates cycles of violence, preventing peace and stability.

Historically, the emergence and evolution of trauma has informed creative responses. One modern response is Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. This framework grew out of the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States. STAR provides a model for group processing of trauma, psychological first aid, and individual and group healing and recovery. It has been used and adapted in diverse contexts globally after violent conflict, emergencies and other shocks.

Trauma informed and trauma response frameworks are constantly evolving. Responses toward psychosocial well-being are as old as humanity itself. Programs like STAR work to increase resilience, help individuals bounce back and function, and build on one’s innate capacity to manage the psychological burden caused by mental stress and trauma.

Historically, foreign assistance programs that focus on mental health and emotional well-being have received much less attention than those that focus on meeting physical needs. According to the World Health Organization, countries spend on average only 2% of their health budgets on mental health. Also, international development assistance for mental health has never exceeded 1% of all health-related development assistance. Nearly one billion people globally have a mental health disorder and those with severe disorders tend to die 10-20 years earlier than the average life expectancy.

Trauma healing through art

by Katherine Smith, Border/Migration & Communications Coordinator, West Coast MCC

Thousands of asylum seekers have spent months to years living in uncertainty in northern Mexico as they wait to enter the United States to formally begin the asylum process. The Biden administration continues to use COVID-19 as a pretext to prevent asylum seekers from entering the country, in violation of U.S. commitments to international treaties.

While reasons for leaving one’s country vary, many migrants experience stressful and traumatic events. To alleviate the stressors on mobile populations, West Coast MCC has worked alongside the binational migrant arts ministry Artisans Beyond Borders as they offer hope and healing through providing traditional embroidery material to individuals who continue to wait to enter the U.S.

With a “make one, teach one” model, participants themselves are coordinators and teachers. The program offers accompaniment, purpose and hope through the rhythmic act of embroidering manta cloths. As founder Valarie James explains, trauma informed arts therapy presents “the opportunity to directly help these vulnerable families using the healing power of creativity to restore grace and agency through the work of the hands, solidarity among the artisans, and respect for cultural and familial arts across borders.”

Finished Manta cloths from Mexico, hand-washed and dried on the line by Tucson’s all-volunteer Friends of Artisans Beyond Borders. (Artisans Beyond Borders photo/Valarie Lee James)
Healing and rebuilding in Nigeria

In working toward sustainable peace in Nigeria, Mennonite Central Committee supports partners as they respond to various types of trauma caused by poverty, marginalization, grief, the disruption of social networks and other factors.

Trauma-informed models such as Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC) and Psychological First Aid (PFA) aim to increase resilience and re-integration in communities affected by violence by equipping participants with peacebuilding and alternatives-to-violence response skills.

Many years of localized conflicts and violence, mass atrocity crimes, civil war and lethal responses to peaceful protests have caused post-traumatic stress disorder in individuals and planted seeds of generational trauma. These seeds of trauma, when untreated and unaddressed, lead to cycles of reprisal, animosity, bias, unforgiveness and re-traumatization.

Indispensably, the causes and triggers of trauma must also be addressed, including poor governance, corruption, poverty and unemployment, ethnoreligious and other forms of conflict, weak judicial and security structures and media apathy.

Currently in Nigeria, more than two million people are internally displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency and more than 10 million people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. As in the United States, some attitudes and cultural understandings portray mental health as a stigma, which can impede individuals from seeking help and stymie calls for more government funding.

Effective psychosocial support programs respond to disrupted social networks and communal structures, provide specialized mental health interventions and treat mental health disorders with effective, contextualized and accessible screening, diagnosis and treatment. Without such programs, largescale, unresolved trauma in communities has a significant detrimental impact on attempts at conflict reduction, resolution and peace.

Recommendations

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming as part of a holistic peacebuilding strategy enhances stability and security in conflict-affected communities. Currently, MHPSS programs are spread out through various foreign assistance accounts in the U.S. federal budget. The lack of a designated account adversely affects relief, development and peacebuilding efforts.

Congress should create a dedicated foreign assistance account for MHPSS programs by passing the Mental Health in International Development Settings (MINDS) Act (H.R. 3988 and S. 2105). If passed, the MINDS Act would create a new “Title III” account in the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs budget for MHPSS programming administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. State Department.

Furthermore, U.S. foreign assistance for MHPSS programs should be increased, particularly funding directed to local projects for capacity building, resilience and community trust-building.

And, U.S. funded MHPSS programming must be context-sensitive, proactive and flexible, incorporating local knowledge about cultural and traditional sources of resilience.

To prevent mental and psychological breakdown in traumatized communities, funding mechanisms must also incorporate memorialization projects which show respect, honor and remembrance for victims, thereby supporting recovery from grief and pain and breaking the cycle of violence.
Worship resources

Scripture readings
Isaiah 61:1-4
2 Corinthians 1:3-7
Matthew 4:23-25

Songs
VT  #217 Hark! the glad sound!
VT  #613 God, be with us
VT  #644 Healer of our every ill

Opening prayer
(HT #862)
You who open doors and dismantle barriers, open our hearts to praise you, that we might live the full truth of who we are, that we might live as neighbors and friends, no longer strangers and enemies; open our hearts to the transforming power of your love, that we might forgive and reconcile, making peace and learning war no more, that we might be your people, one body in one Spirit, to tell your grace to all the world.
We pray in the name of the One who walked among us as brother and friend. Amen.

Psalm reading
(based on Psalm 46; refrain Psalm 23:6a)

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

Closing prayer
(adapted from HT #978)
Hear our prayer, O God of healing and hope.
We pray for greater understanding, compassion, strength, endurance.
Make your presence known even when fears threaten, when anxieties overwhelm, when thoughts fragment and accuse, and the burden seems too heavy to carry one more step.
Almighty and merciful God, grant one more moment, one more breath, one more foot in front of the other.
Bring healing, Restore peace. Raise up hope.

Sending song
VT  #827 Move in our midst

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

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All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
Facts about psychosocial support

More than 1 in 5 people living in settings affected by conflict have a mental health condition.

Suicide claims the lives of close to 800,000 people every year or 1 person every 40 seconds.

Countries spend on average only 2% of their health budgets on mental health.

Every $1 spent on treatment for common mental health disorders brings a return of $4 in improved health and productivity.

Globally, there is less than 1 mental health professional for every 10,000 people.

In low- and middle-income countries, more than 75% of those with mental health, neurological and substance use disorders receive no treatment for their condition at all.

Sources: World Health Organization, United Nations.
Currently, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programs are spread out through various foreign assistance accounts in the U.S. federal budget. The lack of a designated account adversely affects relief, development, and peacebuilding efforts. Congress should create a dedicated “Title III” foreign assistance account for MHPSS programs in the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs budget, administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. State Department.

U.S. foreign assistance for MHPSS should be increased, particularly funding directed to local projects for capacity building, resilience and community trust-building. Every dollar spent on treatment for common mental health disorders returns four dollars in improved health and productivity. International development assistance for mental health has never exceeded 1% of all health-related development assistance.

U.S.-funded MHPSS programming must be context-sensitive, proactive and flexible, incorporating local knowledge about cultural and traditional sources of resilience. Programs should build the infrastructure for specialized mental health services, community-based resiliency, sustainability and local ownership while strengthening accompaniment and mutual learning in partnership with local organizations.

To prevent mental and psychological breakdown in traumatized communities, funding mechanisms must also incorporate memorialization projects which show respect, honor and remembrance for victims, supporting recovery from grief and pain and breaking the cycle of violence.

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<th>POLICY PRINCIPLES</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Establish a designated account.</td>
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<td>Increase foreign assistance.</td>
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<td>Adapt to local contexts.</td>
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<td>Support memorialization projects.</td>
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Learn more

STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience) training
emu.edu/cjp/star/toolkit

MCC Intersections: Community approaches to trauma
mcc.org/stories/intersections