

## Strategies for Pastors Concerning Children's Messages

### For the Sunday after a Shooting

The first Sunday's children's message should be presented by a stable authority figure. Most likely this will be either the pastor or the Christian Ed Director. This is not a time for the next parent in the rotation to present the message.

This can be a healthy moment for modeling Jesus' welcoming the children to come to him, however they may be feeling. The leader might sit among the children and at their level, whether that is the normal process or not.

Consider opening with a general statement such as "A lot has happened this weekend." If this is a congregation in which the children are likely to be aware of the event, there can be value in saying something like, "Several people have died this weekend, and it has made adults feel very sad. What are some of the things you've seen or heard or felt this weekend?" If it's more likely that, in this given congregation, children are unaware of the specifics of the event, then a more general statement may be more appropriate, such as "One thing that happened this weekend has made some adults feel very sad. Sometimes grown-ups and kids feel sad and afraid, and God reminds us to share how we're feeling with him and with each other. God's love is always here, even when we're sad or afraid. What does it feel like to you when you feel sad or afraid? What does it feel like in your body or in your head?"

After kids have had a chance to share some of what they have seen, heard, or felt, this can be followed by a more structured reading or paraphrase of assurance from Scripture and a prayer, in whatever format the children are accustomed to.

The general goal is two-fold. One is to assure children that the church is a safe place to feel and to talk about their feelings. The second is to model to parents and other adults that it's healthy to engage in conversation with children, in an age-appropriate way, concerning the way they are processing the event.

These suggestions are intended to assist in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. The conversation may not, and most likely will not, be finished for the children for months or years. Adults in the lives of the children should allow space for the children to process the event by being available in months and years to come for children to spontaneously revisit the event, sharing more of their own insights and seeking to hear more from adults. The parents or other responsible adults may want to "put it behind them," but doing so is not consistent with the way children process trauma. Children will continue to incorporate past events into their life stories as they developmentally have new capacities for doing so.

The Rev. John Cheek

Dr. Kate Wiebe

Members of the National Response Team for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance