

A LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS: CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND HEALING AFTER A TRAGEDY

Notes by Sue Vogelmann, Church School Director at Trinity Episcopal Church, Newtown, CT

Information based on the workshop presented at the Kanuga Christian Formation Conference June 2015 called: Hope in the Midst of Crisis. Here are my "notes" in very rough format for anyone who might find our experiences and responses helpful. Prayers to you and your community.

- ❖ When a community is affected by a disaster or tragedy, people flock to their houses of worship for comfort, solace, and healing.
- ❖ Hear what Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown, CT used for Sunday School curriculum, worship, enrichment, support, and long-term ongoing healing after the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.
- ❖ Learn how our "Helping is Healing" outreach and mission activities are working to restore light and love into our children's lives and the lives of others around the world.

About Sue Vogelmann

- Lives in Newtown, CT. Has a husband and two sons – one son just finished first year of college, the other just finished 7th grade.
- Grew up in Newtown. Attended University of Rochester, Rochester, NY. Received a BA in Psychology and a BA in Political Science.
- Returned to Newtown after university to attend a local graduate school for elementary education certification program.
- Placed for student teaching at Sandy Hook Elementary School (one of four elementary schools in Newtown).
- Was hired as a kindergarten and then first grade teacher at Sandy Hook School (SHS) for 11 years or from 1989 through June of 2000.
- Full-time Church School Director at Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown, CT since fall of 2000 where I have worked with children and youth in my very busy parish for the last 15 years.
- Sue has been the piano accompanist for the Sandy Hook School 4th Grade Chorus rehearsals and concerts for last 6 years.
- Volunteered in the new location of Sandy Hook School immediately after the tragedy and continues to work/volunteer there part time.
- While at Trinity:
 - Served on the Diocese of Connecticut's Christian Formation Commission for several years planning diocesan formation events and engaging in diocesan and national conversations.
 - Member of [Forma](#): a grassroots association of over 400 members of The Episcopal Church and kindred individuals and institutions, Forma *supports, networks, advocates for, resources, and celebrates* Christian formation leaders in their Christian formation ministries. Episcoforma.org
 - Was elected to the Forma Board Forma is in 2014 and is currently Secretary.

THE TRAGEDY OF 12/14/12 AT SANDY HOOK SCHOOL, NEWTOWN, CT

- ❖ On December 14, 2012 at 9:35 am, a 20-year-old male resident of Sandy Hook, entered SHS by force and killed 20 first graders and 6 adult educators including the principal, school psychologist, 2 teachers and 2 educational assistants. He also killed his mother and himself. 28 people in about 10 minutes.
- ❖ We in Newtown call it "12/14."
- ❖ Nothing in our lives has been the same since that time.
- ❖ Trinity Church lost Benjamin Wheeler – 7, whose mother and older brother had been (and continue to be) active members for 3 years prior.
- ❖ And Charlotte Bacon - 7, whose family (parents and older brother) had attended for 2 years prior, but recently left Trinity to worship at the Lutheran Church since her grandparents had just moved to town.
- ❖ Our preschool lost 6 alumni with 2 families currently enrolled losing an older child of their preschooler.
- ❖ **Everyone** knew child/sibling/family member/neighbor/coworker/etc. of those who were killed. Many of our families lived in the same neighborhood as the shooter and his mother.
- ❖ The entire town had PTSD - especially the children/adults inside or close to Sandy Hook School.



DAY 1: TRINITY'S IMMEDIATE RESPONSES/ACTIONS

- ❖ Church was opened for prayer 24/7 with volunteers present at all times.
- ❖ Our three Bishops were there by mid-afternoon and fielded phone calls and media.
- ❖ Bishops comforted staff and people coming in since our rector was with the grieving families.
- ❖ Bishops and staff planned and prepped an evening service.
- ❖ I asked Forma list-serve for help. Received responses within seconds.
- ❖ That same Friday night we held a community prayer service in the Taize style. Over 500 people attended (our sanctuary only holds about 350).
- ❖ All Newtown houses of worship held services – all filled or overflowing.
- ❖ Someone donated cases of tissues; best donation for the immediate response.
- ❖ We prayed, we hugged, we cried, we sang, we mourned, we comforted as best we could.



"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

– Fred Rogers

DAY 2: TRINITY'S IMMEDIATE RESPONSES/ACTIONS

- ❖ Saturday morning 12/15, the official list of names came out in the media.
- ❖ We held a second vigil on Saturday night with our Bishops.
- ❖ I spent hours gathering resources to share with my volunteer Church School teachers and all our parents.
- ❖ So busy, so much media, and so many phone calls, interruptions, people coming in, etc. Overwhelming. Prepare now – don't wait until you are in need.

RESOURCES:

Some of the many resources we used include (and there are so many more):

- ❖ Sharon Pearson's website and blog: <http://rowsofsharon.com/> - always a ton of great resources.
- ❖ Leader Resources website's Free Section: http://leaderresources.org/downloads/free_downloads/talking_about_violence.pdf
- ❖ The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut website: <https://www.episcopalct.org/resources/Concerns/Disaster-Response/>
- ❖ Long list of resources and helpful tips from the Forma website (Association of Episcopal Formation Leaders) list of resource websites and information: <http://episcoforma.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Talking-with-Children-about-Tragedy-Resources1.pdf>
- ❖ American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology http://www.aacap.org/galleries/FactsForFamilies/08_children_and_grief.pdf
- ❖ King of Peace website Why Does God Allow Suffering? <http://kingofpeace.org/QYF-suffering.htm>
- ❖ The National Association of School Psychologists: www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Helping_Children_After_A_Disaster_36.aspx
- ❖ **Dr. Kevin Becker**, an international consultant to communities experiencing psychological trauma and crisis. Article: <http://www.courant.com/opinion/op-ed/hc-op-commentary-becker-recovering-after-disaster--20140912-story.html>

DAY 3: TRINITY'S IMMEDIATE RESPONSES/ACTIONS FOR SUNDAY MORNING:

- ❖ On Sunday, only 48 hours after the shooting, it was Advent III.
- ❖ We did what we do best; we met, we worshiped, and we had Church School. Keep the regular routine as much as possible for the children/youth.
- ❖ Brought in extra therapists, extra clergy, counselors, grief specialists, etc. Spread them around the building to help as needed.

- ❖ **Gave the teachers/leaders a simple lesson plan to follow - most of what we did is now in the ERD Lesson Plans called *Ministering to Children/Youth After a Disaster* and I highly recommend this: <http://www.episcopalrelief.org/press-and-resources/resource-library>**



- ❖ During Children’s Liturgy (which had over 35 kids at each service) I told the familiar and comforting story of the Angels proclaiming the Good News to the Shepherds in the field using the Godly Play script and props. You can use any familiar comforting bible story depending on the church season/lectionary or just pick one that works. Here is a website with some suggestions of verses: <http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/20-bible-verses-to-comfort-the-hurting/>
- ❖ The light from the angels shone in the darkness and the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” It was exactly what the children (and their parents) needed to hear.
- ❖ We followed our usual liturgy service and said special prayers for those we lost. One first grade child who had been in the school raised her hand and said, “My friends died.” We prayed for her friends and a therapist sat with her while the kids scratched away at the angel scratch art papers I had on hand while we prayed.
- ❖ The Church School Classes were also packed, and the teachers were nervous about the questions they were going to receive from the kids. The ERD lesson plan style really helped.
- ❖ **Do something with your hands.** We provided each church school class with many colored paper hearts. They also followed the usual routine, teaching their Christmas Story lessons and letting the children write/draw/express their thoughts and prayers onto the paper hearts. We let the children/youth decide what to do with the prayer hearts. Give them to the affected families, hang them up, take them home, etc.

DAYS 4 THROUGH 7 – FUNERALS/MEMORIAL SERVICES – SOMETHING FOR THE CHILDREN

- ❖ At Benny’s funeral held at Trinity on the Thursday following 12/14, there were about 60-70 children present including many of our own choristers, friends of the Wheeler family, and parishioners. Also hundreds of Boy Scouts were outside.
- ❖ I found inexpensive lighthouse ornaments to hand out to all the children present, and Pastor Kathie did a special children’s sermon moment for the kids present on light. Here is [a link to lighthouse keychains](#), but anything that relates to your message would work.
- ❖ We found out later that we probably were the only church to do something specifically for the children at any of the funerals.



LONG-TERM HEALING: WEEK 2 THROUGH 6 MONTHS:

- ❖ Every Sunday we had special prayers and allowed the kids to do art, free expression, creative type activities such as banner making, Praying with Color, doodling, clay, etc.
- ❖ They really found comfort in doing things with their hands while their minds and hearts were working.
- ❖ Adults met in the evenings with a psychiatrist who was also an Episcopal priest.
- ❖ Regular support group time seemed to help the older parishioners most. The ones who were grieving but didn’t know with whom or how to share their feelings.



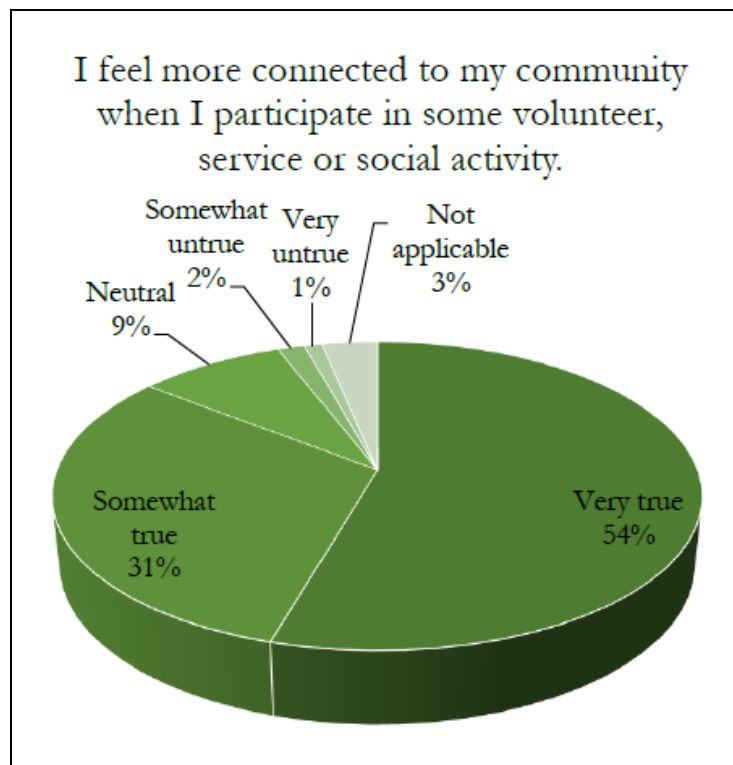
Reactions/Healing Often Associated with the Ripples

Huge variation in the amount, type, timing of grieving and healing.

- Students/Teachers/Others in the school and their families
- First responders including clergy
- Parents of students in the school
- People who know someone in the school
- People who had spent time in the school (former staff, former students, etc.)
- Everyone else nearby or far away (not inclusive and not a hierarchy)

People across “the ripples” found that helping others was healing.

95% of the residents in Newtown/Sandy Hook who took a survey said the Helping others was healing:



LONG TERM: HELPING IS HEALING

Almost immediately and continuing to this day, we started doing things for ourselves and other people who needed some light

- ❖ We had a [Painting Table](#) session thanks to Sharon Pearson and Roger Hutchinson and attended by 80 parishioners.
- ❖ We distributed items donated to us by caring groups/individuals: prayer shawls, lines of love bracelets, books, teddy bears, scarves, pillow cases, etc. to our kids and then shared the extra with other communities in need.

Newtown's Favorite Healing Activities/Organizations – Your community might want to do some of these to help others while healing:

- ❖ **Hearts of Hope:** <http://ourheartsofhope.org/cms/> Beautiful ceramic hearts that volunteers paint with inspiring messages. Sent to communities who need a lift. You can order a kit to do this at your church.



- ❖ **Ben's Bells** <https://bensbells.org/>
The mission of Ben's Bells is to inspire, educate, and motivate people to realize the impact of intentional kindness, and to empower individuals to act according to that awareness, thereby strengthening ourselves, our relationships and our communities.



- ❖ **Stars of Hope** <http://starsofhopeusa.org/>
www.newtownbee.com/news/features/stars-hope-arrive-newtown/
article of explanation



- ❖ **On Sandy Ground: Where Angels Play:**
<http://whereangelsplayfoundation.org/>

- ❖ **Newtown Kindness** <http://www.newtownkindness.org/> Great activities to encourage kindness

- [Charlotte Bacon Act of Kindness Awards](#) [Enter Online for CBAOK](#)
- [Kindness Pledge](#)
- [Charlotte's Litter](#) The program's aim is to advocate for animal assisted activity with Therapy/Comfort Dogs and their roles as supportive friends and trusted companions. We strive to create turnkey programs that make Therapy/Comfort Dogs accessible to every man, woman, and child.
- [Kindness in Teaching Awards](#) To honor the educators and leaders who encourage kindness in our children.
- [Scholarships](#)
- [Kindness Bucket Program](#), [Kindness Bucket Downloads](#), [Kindness Bucket Participants](#), [Kindness Kit](#) – great for schools



- ❖ **Runs, Walks, Marathons...** for every child, educator, cause, etc. people seem to love to run.

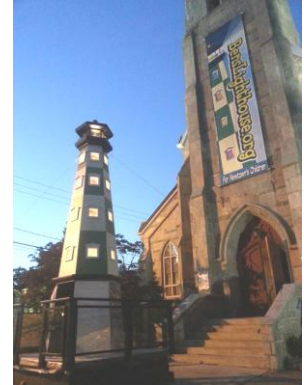


- ❖ **Jewelry for a Cause:** Almost immediately everyone started wearing jewelry in honor of the students and educators or just in solidarity of Newtown/Sandy Hook. Especially comforting when out of town/state.

Ben's Lighthouse: *Helping is Healing* <http://benslighthouse.org/>

A group of Trinity parishioners solicited funds from a private donor and founded Ben's Lighthouse with the blessing of the Wheeler family.

- Volunteers organized free community events such as Lighthouse Festivals, Ice-cream socials, holiday events, 12/14 anniversary support, teen mentors, teen volunteer clubs, mission trips, educational seminars, etc.
- Over two and a half years, the mostly-volunteer organization (its first staff member was hired in September 2014) ...
- Held several joyful community events to remind children and families of the good within the town (4,000+ people attended)
- Launched weekend and after-school programs to promote resiliency skills for teens
- Friendship and mentoring clubs for those kids who needed it most
- Engaged in relief mission trips for high school youth to help them reclaim their inner light through service: #HelpingIsHealing



ANNIVERSARIES, HOLIDAYS, HEALING

- ❖ Simple prayers, lighting of candles, bell ringing, provide artistic outlets, comfort animals, lots of hugging.
- ❖ Keep the media away as much as possible.
- ❖ Stick to the comfortable and routine whenever possible.
- ❖ Just provide a place for people to gather and express themselves.
- ❖ Community is what gets us through it.
- ❖ Prayer, prayer and more prayer!

THINGS TO WATCH FOR AND BE AWARE OF IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

- ❖ Have persistent feelings of guilt
- ❖ Are reluctant to discuss how the tragedy has impacted them
- ❖ Have a lack awareness of services available in the community to assist
- ❖ Noticed a fracturing that has occurred among some individuals and groups
- ❖ Feel a 'hierarchy of impact' has led to a competition for grief and resources
- ❖ Are suffering in silence or guilt because they don't feel as if they should be struggling
- ❖ Feel like they don't have a right to reach out for help because they weren't as directly impacted as someone else

Dr. Kevin Becker, an international consultant to communities experiencing psychological trauma and crisis. Article: <http://www.courant.com/opinion/op-ed/hc-op-commentary-becker-recovering-after-disaster--20140912-story.html>

Kevin Becker is a senior partner at Organizational Resilience International LLC. This an edited excerpt from a talk he gave May 31 for Community Connections' "A Day of Shared Experiences." The event was a collaboration of Newtown/Sandy Hook Community Foundation, The Resiliency Center, Sandy Hook Promise, Walnut Hill Community Church, the town of Newtown and Newtown schools. To hear the entire talk, go online to to <http://vimeo.com/97246759>.

Dr. Becker states, "It's the shared experiences, not the differences, that are the key factors in creating a lasting impact for each and every trauma survivor."

BIBLE VERSES AND QUOTES ABOUT LIGHT:

- 🕯 You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light. - *2 Samuel 22:29*
- 🕯 Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD. - *Psalms 4:6*
- 🕯 You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. - *Psalms 18:28*
- 🕯 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. - *Psalms 119:105*
- 🕯 I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. - *Isaiah 42:16*
- 🕯 . . . for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. - *Isaiah 60:19*
- 🕯 Let your light shine before all, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. - *Matthew 5:16*
- 🕯 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. - *Matthew 5:16 NIV*
- 🕯 God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. - *John 1:5*
- 🕯 God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. - *John 1:5*
- 🕯 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. - *Philippians 4:13*
- 🕯 Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light. - *John 12:36*
- 🕯 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. - *Ephesians 5:8*
- 🕯 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. - *Isaiah 58:8*
- 🕯 Jesus is the Light of the World!
- 🕯 You are the Light of the World!
- 🕯 "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." — *Martin Luther King, Jr.*,
- 🕯 How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world." - *William Shakespeare*
- 🕯 "No one lights a lamp in order to hide it behind the door: the purpose of light is to create more light, to open people's eyes, to reveal the marvels around." — *Paulo Coelho*
- 🕯 "You have to find what sparks a light in you so that you in your own way can illuminate the world." — *Oprah Winfrey*

- ❖ “Grandfather, Great Spirit, fill us with light. Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live.” —*Lakota proverb*
- ❖ There are two ways of spreading light; to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it. ~
Edith Wharton
- ❖ Take your candle, and go light your world! – *from lyrics of song, Go Light Your World, by Chris Rice*

See also Sue’s list for Contemporary Christian Music by theme (including healing and light)
[my playlist in Youtube at this link](#)