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30<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Date

Reclaiming the Practice of Lament:  
Lament as a Modern Pastoral Care Practice in the Face of Grief and Loss in the Bahamas.

By

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Doctor of Ministry

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## **Abstract**

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**By Jacinta Marie Neilly**

Losing someone or something you love hurts. Whether it is the death of a pet, loss of a job, divorce, death of a grandparent, or a stillborn child, bereavement can be devastating. A common coping strategy is to become physically, emotionally, and spiritually detached. This is normal, but to avoid grief indefinitely is unhealthy. If grieving people receive support, a platform to express inner pain and the assurance that someone is listening and care about their story, they tend to be healthier. Historically, lament has been one of the most effective means of expressing grief and it is still necessary today. In this study, I propose that lament be reclaimed as a modern pastoral care practice in the Bahamas.

Reclaiming the Practice of Lament:  
Lament as a Modern Pastoral Care Practice in the Face of Grief and Loss in the Bahamas.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Quest to Reintroduce Lament Practices**

In the Bahamas, our mourning rituals, ceremonies, and customs have long passionately expressed our grief. Our mourning traditions include lighting candles, leaving flowers on the grave, singing at wakes, wailing at funerals, and storytelling. Yet, prompted by the myth that showing emotions are signs of weakness, our culture is changing and so are our expressions of sorrow. The recent trend of suppressing emotions and masking feelings is in my opinion negatively affecting the grieving process. My research is intended to identify and evaluate the costliness of abandoning traditional practices of lament, and to advocate that overt lament be reclaimed as a pastoral approach for dealing with grief in the Bahamas.

Why focus on lament? Because when used as a practice of pastoral care, it allows people to express pain truthfully and wrestle with sorrow publicly without shame. Of course expressions of pain and sorrow vary by culture and individual. Although Scottish practical theologian John Swinton understood lament as “a repeated cry of pain, rage, sorrow, and grief that emerges amidst suffering and alienation”<sup>1</sup> there is in fact no right or wrong way to grieve. What does seem to be true of all people is that we need the means to express our emotions, especially emotions as profound as grief. Lament fittingly allows the grievers to be transparent, acknowledging the grief to oneself and others. Through such transparency one also invites God and others to share the sorrow.

### **Context, Demographics, and Method**

In the absence of lament grief is often suppressed, masked, or left unresolved. In recognition of this situation, my research explores the reclamation of traditional forms of lament for facilitating expressions of grief in the Bahamas today. Drawing on research on grief, loss, and lament, I assess the costliness of abandoning lament and then identify

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<sup>1</sup> John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 104.

subsequent benefits for re-incorporating lamentation. To support my claim, a summary and an interpretative analysis of multiple secondary sources such as relevant books, journals, newspaper reports and contemporary scholarship are embedded in this research paper. These secondary sources are used in conjunction with primary sources to further develop my dissertation.

My qualitative research provides context-specific information on grief and lament practices in the Bahamas. This data was gathered through interviews and questionnaires completed by pastors and members of the Bahamas Conference of the Methodist Churches (BCMC). The BCMC is comprised of thirty-seven churches which are organized into different ministerial regions throughout the thirteen unique islands in the Bahamas. My personal reflection and insights gleaned from serving as an ordained minister in seven of these churches informs this paper.

My first ministerial appointment was to a five-point-charge in the North Eleuthera Methodist Region (NEMR) in 2004 to 2010. These five churches are: Zion Methodist Church, the only church and public facility on sparsely populated Current Island. Zion has a membership of thirty-seven persons of color (i.e. 97 percent of the island's population). The town of Current, inhabited predominantly by white Bahamians, has two churches: the Brethren and Methodist churches. Since there are no clinics, stores, banks, nor schools, in the Current neither Current Island, the church serves an important role for the inhabitants who are mostly senior citizens and young children.

The other three Methodist churches in the NEMR have significantly larger congregations and are more diversified in terms of races, ages, occupations and backgrounds. The congregation of Charles Wesley Methodist Church, in Lower Bogue, consists of 35 percent senior citizens, 40 percent youth, and 35 percent young adults (all of whom are Black

Bahamians). At John Wesley Methodist Church, in the small community called The Bluff, membership consists mainly of Black Bahamians and Haitian immigrant young adults and their children. The congregation of Wesley Methodist Church, on Harbor Island, where I currently live, includes persons with different ethnicities, races, socio-economic status and ages. Most of my members are employed in the tourism and construction industry. Leaders and members from each of these five congregations participated in my survey.

After serving nine years in other ministerial regions in the Bahamas, I returned in 2019 to the NEMR.<sup>2</sup> These Methodist churches, all located in the northern end of the island of Eleuthera (North Eleuthera's population is 3,247)<sup>3</sup>, are deeply rooted in the community and pastoral care is provided to persons who are not affiliated with any church. As part of my research, I made a Zoom presentation on grief and lament to five deacons, four lay preachers, and eighteen members from churches in the NEMR. Sixteen of the twenty-seven persons subsequently completed an online questionnaire. In addition, sixteen other participants, comprising of six ordained ministers and ten members, from churches throughout the BCMC completed my survey in person. The participants, ages ranged between 35 to 88 years, claim to know of practices of lament. The participants are all high school graduates. The deacons and ministers also hold college and university degrees respectively. A report and interpretation of the data collected from the survey and its findings are included throughout this paper in support of my thesis.

### **Research Challenges and Project Goals**

The national lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from conducting in-person interviews. Many persons were reluctant to participate in the survey. Some older ministers not only ignored the online questionnaire, but also refused to respond to

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2- Map of North Eleuthera, Bahamas. Source: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

<sup>3</sup> The Bahamas Department of Statistic. 2010 Census (note it has doubled since then).



its questions when contacted by telephone. Surprisingly, this was a sensitive topic that many persons felt uncomfortable discussing publicly. Some persons said that because of the pandemic all pastoral visits ceased, and that therefore it would be unfair to complete the survey. Yet this low response to the questionnaire along with the impact of COVID-19 in my opinion only magnifies the need for lamentation and exemplifies what can happen in the absence of lament.

The current pandemic is adversely affecting our lives and will be with us for some time to come. What would ordinarily have been the desperate cries of the unemployed, homeless, lonely, sick, and the dying are muted by the strict protocols that governs the attempts to thwart the spread of COVID-19. Recognizing our human need to express our grief vocally, I attempted to give voice to this pain by implementing a three-month series of Pastoral prayer sessions called Prayer & Share which took place online during our regular Sunday worship services. This project has inspired individual and communal lament. It has also proved to be an exceptional pastoral care model for ministering to persons infected and affected by the corona virus. I expect to continue leading these pastoral prayer sessions for the foreseeable future as this activity reveals that lament is necessary, good, and beneficial for both the mourner and the faith community. Moreover, given my ministerial experience and research findings, I propose that lament be reclaimed more broadly as a model for pastoral care in the Bahamas.

### **Pastoral Care Case**

The church has long played a pivotal role in the Bahamian culture in providing pastoral care to persons experiencing grief and loss. Although seldom formally acknowledged, we Bahamian Christians ascribe to a specific practice of lament. Many of our funeral rituals were passed down from African ancestors, such as the loud wailing for the

dead and the long ceremonies. External rituals and symbols, like viewing the dead before burial, wake (a night of tributes and singing), repast (gathering to eat after the funeral) all help the bereaved to voice sorrow, share their grief, and cope with death. However, due to current secular, cultural, and religious changes many of these rituals and care practices are beginning to disappear, all the more so during an ongoing restrictive event like this pandemic.

The death of a beloved member in 2018 brought our congregation face to face with the reality of grief and the necessity of lament. As a pastor, in a rural town, I have journeyed with many persons, both religious and non-religious, during times of crisis. But nothing prepared me for my pastoral journey with Esther (*pseudonym*). I met Esther while pastoring at a three-point-charge in Abaco, Bahamas. Esther and her family played an integral role in both the Methodist church and her quaint community of Cherokee Sound, Abaco. This town with its populace of one hundred and fifty adults has two churches, a grocery store, a primary school and a gas station. It is a close-knit community.

Esther, highly respected and deeply loved by everyone, was so full of life. Within one year of being diagnosed with stomach cancer, she was hospitalized, confined to bed, and intravenously fed liquids for nine months. The entire community suffered in silence as her condition worsened and she agonized in pain. But Esther remained steadfast in her faith in God. She and I talked at length the day before she became comatose. More precisely, I did most of the talking, and she smiled and nodded in affirmation. Finally, as I was about to leave, she interrupted me. Her demeanor was different. She said, “Rev. do you know the tune for the hymn: Jesus hath died and hath risen again?” I began singing and she said: “Yes that’s it, I told them there was another tune for that hymn. Keep it for me.” Later that day, Esther drifted into a coma and remained so until her death.

For months, our Bible study classes ended with reflections on Esther and the corresponding question: “Lord, why?” The common response was the Christian cliché:

“everything works together for the good” or “God’s ways are past finding out.” One night our Bible study class decided to visit Esther’s eighty-five-year-old uncle. We sang, discussed Psalm 23, and at the end exchanged pleasantries.

While I was reciting the benediction, Esther’s uncle Albury suddenly blurted out: “Reverend, why did the good Lord let Esther suffer so much?” His wife whispered, “She’s praying” in an effort to hush him, but he repeated the question. Each member of the group recited our familiar “Christian clichés,” but he kept repeating the exact same question. Finally, I realized he was not so much looking for an answer as wanting someone to hear his story and legitimize his concerns. I answered, “As a church, this has been a hard blow for us too. I can only imagine how difficult it must be for your family.” He nodded and with teary eyes said, “Yeah, we do not understand why this happened to Esther.” Later, he smiled and said, “Thank you for hosting the Bible study at my home. Everything finally made sense.”

It is not clear whether Albury’s accolades were directed at the platform he was given to voice his concerns about Esther’s passing or the Bible study. Nevertheless, I left Albury’s home convinced that to offer faithful and effective pastoral care we must find ways to incorporate lament into our worship and pastoral ministry. While persons who are grieving may find comfort in the proclamation of Scripture, they also want to verbalize their pain and have their religious community join in with similar expressions.

## **TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF LAMENT**

### **Ancient & Biblical Lament**

Culture and belief systems influence how a generation mourns and copes with death. The Talmud, for example, describes a rigid and elongated mourning period coupled with loud

weeping, the wearing of somber clothing and a reclusive lifestyle.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Bahamian funeral ceremonies tend to be very long and accompanied by loud weeping. In ancient times, many cultures deemed weeping as a hired profession for females. Of significance is the females' historic custom of poetic lamentation. Homer's poems, the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" include transcripts of oral lamentations by ancient Greek female chanters.<sup>5</sup> These powerful poetic voices address a pain that resides deep within the soul.

Likewise, Scripture records a mother's bitter lament, "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:16-18). Christian Theologians and authors Kathleen Billman and Daniel L. Migliore asserts, "The figure of Rachel gives voice to the grief of countless Jewish mothers over many centuries and indeed to the inconsolable grief of all humanity in its affliction."<sup>6</sup> Today, this kind of lamentation is known to many Bahamian parents who have lost children to senseless violence. In my mind, both poetic lamentations and Biblical examples of lamentations can help these parents, and other mourners, to articulate and express their sorrows.

Jewish mourning and burial rituals comprise a variety of expressive means of responding to death which can also be helpful for mourners who are experiencing complicated grief. Some common practices include: writing a dirge(s), music, song, and poem (Jeremiah 9:10, 20; Amos 5:1; Luke 7:32 and Matthew 11:17). The wearing of sack clothes and ashes (Genesis 37:34; Isaiah 37:1; 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 21:27) and rending ones' garment

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<sup>2</sup> Google. Alder, Cryrus, Judah David Eisentein. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, MOURNING (אבלות, אבל) <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11191-mourning>, (1901\_1906).

<sup>3</sup> Batya Weinbaum, "Lament Ritual Transformed into Literature: Positing Women's Prayer as Cornerstone in Western Classical Literature" *The Journal of American Folklore* 114, No. 451 (Winter 2001), 20\_39.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen D Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 2.

(Genesis 37:29-30; Job 1:20-21; Joshua 7:1-9). These are symbolic rituals that demonstrate outwardly the mourner's inward pain.

In my opinion the best models and language of lament are found in the Psalms. Theologian Kenneth Overberg claims: "The psalms show us how to speak out against suffering and oppression, even against God."<sup>7</sup> It is within these psalms that grievors find a model to express their innermost thoughts, the words to voice pain, and the courage to ask questions. Jesus Christ, the Christian model of lament, in his darkest hour of suffering used the language of the Psalms to voice his pain. Hanging from the old rugged cross, tortured and about to die, Jesus echoed the lament in Psalm 22:1a: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Just like Jesus and like us, people have been asking why ("why me?" "why now?" and/or "why God?") from the inception.

Esther's illness and imminent death left us with many questions. Members and non-members were constantly asking me, "Why did a kindhearted woman have to endure such horrific pain?" "Why did Esther die when we prayed religiously for a miracle?" While there are no definitive answers to such probing the one who laments benefits from asking questions and having a listening ear to which to vent their frustration.

### **Lament in Bahamian Culture**

Lamentation has played an integral role in Bahamian culture too. Ours is a rich heritage of "oral" and "narrative" communication, singing, praying, and ritualistic ceremonies. For centuries, various forms of lament have given us a platform to express sorrows, share stories, and vent our disappointments. Typically the community sojourned with the lamenter during the mourning period. The support of the community empowered the bereaved to acknowledge the loss and to transition appropriately to a life without the

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth R. Overberg, *The Mystery of God and Suffering: Lament, Trust, and Awe* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 77.

deceased. Long after the funeral the bereaved had a ready community upon which to call for financial, emotional, and spiritual support.

Pastoral care and counseling for the bereaved emanated out of spiritual practices of lament. Those visiting the bereaved participated in such expressions of grief as singing, praying, and Scriptural exhortation, with or without the pastor being present. During my childhood, I recall that when someone died the women lined the porches of the deceased's home and the men sat under the nearest tree. They assembled in this manner to show their support and solidarity for the bereaved. This time was spent engaging in what I term "porch or patio conversation" and "tree talk" that is, prolonged conversation and telling stories about the dead interspersed with crying, laughing, singing, or just sitting in silence.

Pastoral theologian Karen Scheib asserts, "We are story-telling beings, hermeneutical beings. We live within a network of stories, held by our family and community."<sup>8</sup> In the Bahamas, religious ceremonies commemorating the life of the deceased also include storytelling. Under the heading "As I Know Her/Him" the orator reminisces in the present tense about the life of the deceased at his/her funeral. Similar narratives are given at an all-night Wake, a Repast, and numerous times during private visitations with the deceased's family. Often, these grief stories evolved into theological discourses on life after death. In addition to being therapeutic, storytelling gave the bereaved a platform and an audience to voice personal theological struggles with death and the afterlife.

### **Pastoral Care in Worship**

Bahamians are very religious people. Our experiences of grief and loss are incorporated in religious ceremonies. Our liturgy, prayers, sermons, and songs reflect both

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of our Lives* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), chapter 1.

litany of biblical lament as recited by a community of faith that views Scripture as authoritative and as the model of Christian faith. Traditionally, lamenters turned to Scripture as a template for dealing with grief and loss. It is common to hear mourners express Job's sentiments: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD (Job 1: 21, NIV)." Bahamians delight in quoting Scripture especially amidst suffering and loss.

In many respects, a blind trust in God evoked hope and strength to arise and move on from the shadows of death. Amidst grief, the hope that gives credence to our Christian faith is mostly expressed in prayer. When a person dies, it is customary for a pastor to pray to dismiss the spirit of the dead because many Bahamians are superstitious and believe that the deceased spirit leaves the body and lingers in the home. Prayers celebrating the life of the deceased and lament for his/her demise are given during subsequent visits and at church gatherings. Praying amidst suffering, loss, and grief has proven beneficial to both the recipient and giver as it provides a channel to admit pain and wrestle with God.

On many occasions, our prayer echoes the cry of the psalmist. As a child, we were made to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as a prayer, but now it is most commonly prayed when someone is dying or dies. While visiting the terminally ill or relatives of the deceased, the pastor either begins or ends the visit with Psalm 23. Everyone present joins in the recital of the psalm. The first time that I was requested to pray for the deceased and the family as a pastor, I reverted to this familiar and comforting psalm. Presently, our Sunday morning service begins with a call to worship litany that is an abridgment of a psalm identified in the Revised Common Lectionary for that day. The congregants readily identify with this because the psalter gives voice to a variety of situations and circumstances that are common to humanity.

Great comfort, during the mourning period, is also found in music and singing. It is common practice, in our culture, for neighbors and friends to offer comfort in song.

Similarly, pastoral visitations with the sick, dying, or bereaved entail lots of singing. Some of the most popular Methodist hymns sung included: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” (Joseph M. Scriven 1820-86); “Abide With Me” (Henry Francis Lyte 1793-1847); and “And Can It Be” (Charles Wesley 1707-88).<sup>9</sup> It is easy to provide a ministry of care framed by singing because Methodists have a rich heritage of hymn singing. My parents’ generation sang these hymns from memory, recited them as prayers and claimed them as personal testimonies.

I can attest to the assertion of Robert Smith, a lecturer in theology, ethics & music ministry, that “music provides not only an outlet for expressing turmoil or grief but a means of processing sorrow and bewilderment.”<sup>10</sup> Singing has proven very therapeutic in our culture. At “wakes,” attendees sing for hours, stopping only for a brief intermission to feast on johnny cake and pig’s feet or chicken souse. It is common for the choir to sing for half an hour before the funeral begins and during the viewing of the body. The funeral procession to the graveyard is led by a group of singers and a musical ensemble. Singing is a form of lament that soothes the soul and gives voice to sorrow.

## **THE LOST PRACTICE OF LAMENT**

### **Lack of Lament in the Church**

Throughout my pastoral ministry, I have found singing to be very helpful especially during visits where the circumstances were beyond human comprehension. We did a lot of singing with Esther. Her final hymn request had elements of both celebration and lament. Esther rejoiced in the Christian’s hope and in the assurance that Jesus’ death and resurrection afforded her eternal life. The individual lament in verse four of that hymn describes her stance on death best:

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<sup>9</sup> The Methodist Hymn Book, *A Selection of Hymns and Canticles* (London, UK: Published by Methodist Conference Office, 1933).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Smith, “Belting Out the Blues as Believers: The Importance of Singing Lament,” *Themelios*, 42 (1), (2017), 89\_111.



“Sorrow and pain may beset me about, nothing can darken my brow;  
Battling in faith, I can joyfully shout: "Jesus saves me now."

A year after Esther’s death we sang this hymn during our Sunday morning service. There was not a dry eye in the congregation. We were all aware of Esther’s absence, but no one dared to acknowledge it. My decision to sing this hymn was quite intentional, and an acknowledgement of what people needed, even if they didn’t care to admit it.

For all that, I notice that in many Methodist communities, as in mine, though we are singing the songs/hymns, at the same time we are trying our hardest not to express our true emotions. Certainly, the lyrics themselves reflect and voice our human experiences. So why withhold tears and other forms of open lament? Professor Robert Smith claims, “Contemporary church is neither adept nor comfortable with singing lament because many churches have long stopped singing the Psalter and there are very few contemporary congregational songs of lament.”<sup>11</sup> Sadly, without lamentation, the pain of grief and loss remains buried beneath our stoic pretense. In so doing, we refuse to identify, address, or deal with the struggles of life.

Perhaps, as Old Testament scholar Brian Webster and Spiritual Formation professor David Bleach claims, “Some people may not lament because they do not understand what lament is and may confuse it with complaining.”<sup>12</sup> This quandary is implicit in the organist’s response to my survey. The organist, named Sharon, exclaimed, “If lament was always present in my church I would stop coming!” She believes “church is not the place to air grievances and/or personal grief.” Biblical narratives show the opposite is true. In fact, in the absence of lament the sanctity and authenticity of worship is overshadowed or lost.

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, “*Belting Out the Blues as Believers*,” 89–111.

<sup>12</sup> Brian L. Webster and David R. Beach, “The Place of Lament in the Christian Life.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164, (2007), 387\_402.

Surprisingly, several other respondents concurred that lament should have no significant place in worship. Notably, only 38 percent of the participants in the Zoom survey felt lament was necessary. A merely, 31 percent agreed that it was extremely necessary to include lament in worship. The silence of almost half (44 percent) of the other participants, those that remained neutral on the matter of expressing grief freely in church, was also quite intriguing. Based on these findings it seems that including lament in the worship service is not a high priority for most of the participants. Much to our own detriment, many churches, even in the Bahamas, that have such a rich tradition of lament have minimized or neglected such practices. The answers from participants in the survey demonstrate this assertion.

### **The Rise in the “Prosperity Gospel”**

Recently, practices in which mourning occurs, such as through art, music, poems, singing, sermons and/or burial ceremonies are disappearing. Having brought into the myth that a “happy” church is a conduit for numerical, financial, and spiritual growth, many churches are now in a continuous state of celebration, even during sad occasions. The number of persons preaching such a “prosperity gospel” is rapidly increasing and so are their hearers. Pastor Allen, Bahamian preacher and author of the article: “Prosperity Belongs to You,” describes this craze as a “twisted version of Godly prosperity that primarily benefits the religious leaders while the majority of the congregation lives a life of waiting for their breakthrough out of a life of poverty or just barely making it.”<sup>13</sup>

Many prosperity preachers have shifted the trajectory of truthful worship by magnifying philosophical views of “prosperity” and ignoring human struggles. Unexpectedly, the majority of the pastors, 67 percent of the respondents to my survey, disagreed that the “prosperity gospel” hinders us from being honest with God, and self. A mere 33 percent of

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<sup>13</sup> Pastor Allen, “Prosperity Belongs to You.” *The Bahamas Weekly, Religious Column* [www.thebahamasweekly.com](http://www.thebahamasweekly.com) › pastor-allen-bahamas, (September 27<sup>th</sup> 2011).

the participants agreed with this statement. I did not anticipate this large percentage of pastors to disagree especially since most of them uphold to the traditional practices of the Methodist church. While a “feel good message” or motivational speech has its place, in worship that lacks lament we find that truth, repentance, healing, and compassion are buried beneath the shouting and jumping. Therefore no one in pain gets any help at all.

Nevertheless, many of our traditional forms of worship, with their liturgical practices, hymn singing, and biblically based sermons, are gradually being replaced with catchy phrases, irresistible taglines, feel good jingles, and positive inspirational messages. Paul Baglyos, Coordinator for Missional Leadership, warns, “A god who must be addressed only in slogans of praise is irrelevant to people whose shouts arise from destitution, and a church that has forgotten how to attend to the prayers of the destitute cannot bear witness to the God who becomes a guest among sinners.”<sup>14</sup> Worship must be a mix of praise and lament that arise from an assurance that God welcomes us complete with all our joys and sorrows.

The former generations of Bahamian preachers were known to proclaim faith in a God acquainted with human grief and sorrows. During the early 1800s, the first Methodist society in the Bahamas taught natives to read and/or memorize the Bible and hymns. As a result, both uneducated, the slaves, and the disenfranchised had a theological foundation upon which to make sense of death and grief. My grandfather, along with many other preachers, could neither read nor write. But by drawing on the Scripture they had memorized and on the Holy Spirit, these men faithfully preached and taught persons how to cope with and overcome life’s struggles.

Today, our pastors are seminary trained and ascribes to an internationally accredited lectionary for worship and sermon preparation. Yet some of us neglect to preach, teach and/or

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<sup>14</sup> Paul A. Baglyos, ‘Lament in the Liturgy of the Rural Church: An Appeal for Recovery’ *Currents In Theology and Mission* 36, no.4, (August 2009), 253-63.

even reference “difficult texts.” According to author and theologian Lester Meyer this is a growing trend. Meyer claims: “sixty of the 150 psalms in the Bible are omitted from the lectionary for Sundays and principal festivals. Of these sixty, forty-three (or 72 percent) are laments or lament-like.”<sup>15</sup> Although it is uncomfortable to read some biblical texts, to omit biblical voices of lament robs the congregation of an opportunity to identify authentically with Scripture and to voice their own suffering in a likewise authentic, unrestrained manner.

### **Cultural Changes**

Encountering a difficult biblical passage can be unsettling. Yet it speaks to the reality of the world in which we live. Old Testament narratives reveal that Israel did not hide their emotions but truthfully expressed them. God was included in their sorrow: the lamenter questioned, argued with, and/or blamed God. For example, in Psalm 13, the psalmist’s search for meaning led to an inquisition with God: “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Such an authentic faith struggle typically engenders trust in God rather than continued despair, because the mourner finds God to be approachable, relevant, and accessible. Yet precisely such dialogue and wrestling with God is increasingly omitted from our individual and communal worship.

Much to our own disadvantage, we seem determined to omit lamentation just to maintain a happy façade despite the presence of deep sorrows. This misguided perception has significantly influenced our culture and drastically affected the way in which Bahamians cope with grief. These changes are particularly evident during mourning ceremonies. At funerals, the bereaved is told not to show any human emotions, rather to keep calm, and always to be poised. Colorful formal attire, humorous tributes, and joyful singing have largely replaced the somber funeral garments, loud weeping, and muted ceremony.

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<sup>15</sup> Meyer Lester, “A Lack of laments in the Church's Use of the Psalter,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, (Spring 1993), 67\_78.

Similarly, changes in cultural norms have affected communal lament. The generous community support and care once shown to the bereaved has diminished. Time devoted to sitting with, listening to and consoling mourners is now much abbreviated. In one of my church's Bible study sessions, on the psalms of lament, some participants suggested that the rigorous demands of work, family life, and even church make it difficult to visit with the bereaved. Other participants cited instances in which mourners refused to allow persons to enter their space and dismissed conversations about the deceased. As our "patio conversations" and "tree talks" quickly fades away many persons find themselves having to grieve alone.

In addition to the rise in individualistic lament, there is a growing desire to hide or ignore grief. While lament does not intend that we worry, it does push us to acknowledge our concerns and face them. As we acknowledge the pain and our inability to handle it, we become prepared to submit our sorrows to God who can handle our burdens. Unfortunately, the heightened Prosperity Gospel-type emphasis on "celebration" as opposed to lament hinders the bereaved from honestly mourning and showing visible signs of grief.

Increasingly, mourners are attempting to honor myths such as "real men don't cry," "expressing emotions is a sign of weakness," or "a true Christian does not question God." Authors Darcy Harris and Howard Winokuer, using their professional experiences of grief counseling, state that "suppressing strong feelings can backfire when the defenses that function to contain the feelings are overloaded in some way."<sup>16</sup> Bottled-up emotions eventually resurface and if left unresolved can be harmful. Our "patio conversations" and "tree talks" offered the mourner an opportunity to talk, sing, cry in a manner that was liberating and therefore potential "emotional explosions" were thwarted.

### **A Forgotten Language**

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<sup>16</sup> Darcy L. Harris and Howard R. Winokuer, *Principles and Practice of Grief Counseling*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 118.

Our “patio conversations” and “tree talks,” unofficial grief counseling sessions, were helpful for getting to the root of our suffering. However, this as well as many other forms of dialogue about grief has been curtailed. Our ritual of storytelling has been replaced by advances in technology and growing emphasis on social media. Condolences are now disbursed via text messages, tweets, email, or Face-time. The brevity of such communication leaves little room to share stories, to model how one laments, or to express the depths of one’s suffering and grief. Thus, this generation is left to frame its own stories, making grief more difficult to verbalize and express.

Dr. Myles Munroe, Bahamian preacher and author, states “there is a generation in every nation that seems to have lost its sense of purpose. They are out of touch with the values, morals, and convictions that build strong families, secure communities, healthy societies, and prosperous nations.”<sup>17</sup> I believe this “loss in purpose and connection” is interwoven with neglected practices of lament. Failure to teach and provide models, to help the next generation to combat life’s challenges, death, and grief, will result in disconnection.

### **Lamentation and COVID-19**

Our need for pastoral care and for a language and models of lament has only increased recently because of the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Bahamas joined the world in the fight to survive this pandemic. However, as the number of cases, deaths, and loss increased people began asking some serious theodicy questions. Even some Christians are asking: “Where is God amidst such suffering, death, and loss?” A few years ago, it would have sufficed for pastors to tell lamenters that “God takes nothing but God’s own.” Today many persons want to know “Why would God do this?” In

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<sup>17</sup> Myles Munroe, *In Pursuit of Purpose: The Key to Personal Fulfillment* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publisher, 2015), 30.

the absence of lament this questioning and searching after God goes unheard or is misinterpreted as a lack of faith or trust in God.

What if pastors were willing to struggle with lamenters by inviting God to be a part of their suffering? There is an urgent need for a ministry of care, not only but especially during times like this pandemic. However, the inability to be present with sick and/or dying loved ones has created much alarm. Grief is being repressed yet further by our pandemic-related funeral protocols: outdoor graveside services with maximum of ten socially distanced persons in attendance, and very short indoor funeral services if any. The ramification of COVID-19 has left many pastors despondent and uncertain of how to be “present” with grieverers during such stringent isolation and lockdowns.

An article in the Nassau Guardian report the serious pain many grieverers are experiencing. The reporter notes:

“With tears streaming down their faces, Brenda Maria Saunders’ family was forced to peer through the fence at Woodlawn Gardens to try to view her burial. Family members were further horrified that strangers had to be enlisted with pall bearing duties to carry Saunders’ coffin to her final resting place, while they stood outside holding onto the gates.”<sup>18</sup>

Without an intimate community among which to express one’s grief, a lot of grief will remain unresolved because of this pandemic. In response to this circumstance, President of the BCMC, Reverend Carla Culmer, at our country’s 47<sup>th</sup> Independence Church Service called on Bahamians to return to “biblical hope.”<sup>19</sup> She might have added “biblical lament.”

## **THE NECESSITY OF LAMENT**

### **Sharing Grief with God and One’s Faith Community**

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<sup>18</sup> Shavaughne Moss, “A Family’s Ordeal Burying a Loved One in the age of COVID-19” *The Nassau Guardian*, (March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Carla Culmer, “Reverend Carla Culmer Makes Historic Address” (*The Nassau Guardian*, July 16<sup>th</sup> 2020).

When grief disrupts our religious and spiritual stories lament offers a practical means of reviving those stories. Biblical narratives themselves are examples of this. Israel and God converse at length about suffering, both in the form of individual and communal lament, as Theologian Kenneth Overberg claims, “Lament allows us to stay in conversation with God, deepening the relationship, and gradually moving to a new trust.”<sup>20</sup> Expressing sorrow to others and God gives mourners a chance to make sense of the pain and to trust God. Restoration and revival are imminent when, as in the Psalter, mourners boldly communicate fears and concerns to God.

Lamentation is the ideal response for grappling with events and questions that challenge Christians’ faith. Christian author J L Gerhardt contends, “Lament has one primary audience, and that audience is God. When we hurt, God is the one best equipped to receive our complaint.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:7 (ISV) admonishes, “Throw all your worry on him, because he cares for you.” Nevertheless, some religious communities forbid asking God why. Professor Thomas Long, one of the most popular preachers in the United States, urges “pastors not to ignore urgent theodicy-related questions arising from their parishioners.”<sup>22</sup> Lament in the form of theological probing is helpful in such cases as it provides a structure for bringing our insecurities, weaknesses and fears to God and others.

### **Healing and Wholeness**

Lament empowers mourners to grieve honestly and to vent emotions, a process that can be psychologically, spiritually, and physically beneficial. Increasingly, the expectation today is that to show any emotions is a sign of weakness, so people often mask their emotions in order to appear strong. Yet suppressed emotions can lead to psychological issues (i.e.

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<sup>20</sup> Overberg, *The Mystery of God and Suffering*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> J L Gerhardt, “A Grief Received: What to Do When Loss Leaves You Empty-Handed?” *Living with Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), Volume 8.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), Chapter 3.



feelings of bitterness, depression, anger, or resentment). Lamentation, by contrast, creates awareness, acknowledge one's very real emotions and sometimes a problem, and open the door to seeking a resolution to the pain. Pastoral counseling that encourages mourners to verbalize sorrow and to release such feelings offers a more effective means of dealing with grief than suppressing it.

It is healthy to talk about pain and suffering. Authors Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, sharing on the grieving process in their book, concurs that *“speaking about traumatic events improves mental and physical health, helps people understand their own emotions and feel understood by others.”* Sandberg, after sharing her grief experience, states *“The kindness and bravery of those who shared their experiences helped pull me through mine.”*<sup>23</sup>

Lamentation is essential for conversing and communicating grief to others.

### **Lament Interrupts “Numbness”**

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann states, *“Lament is an important practice for mindful grieving which alerts us to the “numbness” about death.”*<sup>24</sup> Mourners may need to move through the time of “numbness” before moving to lament. The book of Job, often viewed as the ideal source for understanding human struggles, explicitly captures the grieving process. Job's story reflects the human experience of suffering that is accompanied by lamentation.

Job's loss is so abstruse that it leaves his friends speechless for seven days (Job 2:13). It is crucial that pastors do not rush mourners through the “silence,” for, like every stage of grief, there is great merit in silence. Poetically, William Shakespeare, English playwright,

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<sup>23</sup> Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2017), 10, Chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 117.

poet, and actor, depicts this as a period of inward lamentation. He proclaims, “My grief lies all within, and these external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells the silence in the tortured soul.”<sup>25</sup> Job’s monologue broke the silence and from the shadows other voices were then heard.

Professor Kenneth Overberg asserts, “The first step to grief and healing is to move from overwhelmed silence to the bold speech of lament.”<sup>26</sup> In many respects, the rambling discourse with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar interrupts Job’s “numbness” and motivates him to speak boldly of his misfortunes. Moreover, the dialogues between Job, his friends and God set a precedent for discussing divine retribution and God’s relationship to suffering. The language used in these discourses can help shape the way in which today’s Christian views suffering. While lament does not provide irrefutable answers to the mourners’ questions it does provide a forum to vent frustrations and to receive feedback from a community of believers.

### **Meaning Making in Suffering**

Robert Neimeyer, one of the leading authorities on bereavement and grief, asserts that “grief can potentially trigger a crisis of meaning by disrupting the stories we live by. “The bereaved may search for meaning at the practical, relational, and spiritual levels.”<sup>27</sup> The varied response to Hurricane Dorian serves as a testament to these multiple levels of meaning-making. Following the massive devastation and loss of life that accompanied Hurricane Dorian’s landfall in the Bahamas on September 1, 2019 nothing made sense to

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<sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, Quote from *Richard II*: Act 4 Scene 1. “My Grief Lies All Within...” Google. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

<sup>26</sup> Overberg, *The Mystery of God and Suffering*, 77

<sup>27</sup> Robert Neimeyer, Darcy L. Harris, Howard R. Winokuer and Gordon F. Thornton, *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 11.

Bahamians. The disorientation that followed the devastation created by Dorian intensified the need for pastoral care and counseling.

The search for meaning led many persons to return to traditional practices of lament. In the absence of “patios” and “trees,” people were forced to congregate in homeless shelters and vacant properties. The stories shared at such locales were endless! For several months, I provided pastoral ministry for members of the three Abaco Methodist churches (St. James, St. Andrews and Epworth Chapel) that had I formerly pastored. Without reservation, I employed the practice of lament as a model for pastoral care. Such lamentations enabled these hurricane victims to express their inability to handle grief and to submit their sorrows to God who can handle all burdens. Lament left their wounds bare, but cleaned and open to healing.

Despite the ravages of Dorian, God remained the source of strength for Bahamians. Yet many of my members bombarded me with questions: “Why did God allow Dorian to happen? How do we rebuild? How do we restore our trust in God?” Bishop Simeon Hall, Bahamian preacher and author, attempted to answer this question in a newspaper article posted three weeks after Dorian. Hall wrote, “Where was God during Hurricane Dorian? He was right where He was when His Son hung on the Cross for you and for me, and we all know the victorious, world-changing end to that story.”<sup>28</sup> Not everyone can accept this statement. But many found it helpful to be reminded that God is aware of and present in our suffering. Moreover, as Jesus’ prayer exemplified when he hung on the cross, we too can address our lament to God.

## **RECLAIMING LAMENT**

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<sup>28</sup> Simeon B. Hall, “Where Was God When Dorian Hit? Theologizing Human Suffering” *The Tribune*. <http://www.tribune242.com/news/2019/sep/20/where-was-god-when-dorian-hit-theologising-human/?lifestyle>, (23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019).

Many religious communities are struggling to stay relevant during this pandemic because of the unprecedented challenges to human life, health, resources, and relationships. People are overwhelmed by situations that leave them struggling to make meaning of their faith and relationship with God. In the absence of lament, this questioning and searching after God goes unheard or is misinterpreted. As author Anne Wimberly notes, “Spaces for lament must exist, which is about expressing the nature of our wounds, questioning why, and seeking answers and responses from God. It may also be the case that permission needs to be given to weep and help given to form and express the language of lament.”<sup>29</sup>

As the need for pastoral care and counseling escalates, I believe it is urgent that we revive practices of lament. Hence, in this section of my research, I identify and recommend four basic components to reclaiming lament as a model for pastoral care in the Bahamas.

### *1. Give Yourself and Others Permission to Lament*

Lament occurs in an environment of honesty and trust, where mourners are free to express feelings without being judged. In the questionnaire to members, for example, 90 percent of the participants agreed that they had moments when they wanted to ask God “Why?” But as Ruth, one of the respondents noted, “The fear of being judged made me uneasy to ask such questions in church.” When Ruth’s father died, she suffered in silence for fear of being criticized by a community whose opinion she valued. To assist the mourners adequately, I recommend that religious communities provide a safe and non-judgmental environment for grieving, one where people feel comfortable and safe enough to talk candidly and/or express emotions.

Our ability to participate in communal lament has been fragmented by the dissonance brought on by changes of modern culture. It seems our sense of community (social support,

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<sup>29</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy and Nathaniel D. West, eds., *From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Wesley's Foundry Books, The United Methodist Church, 2020), 3.

feeling empathy) is gradually being replaced by individualism (self-sufficient and a desire for privacy). Hence, if lament is to be revived, it is important that we rebuild and maintain moral and spiritual systems of trust. This can be achieved when unconditional love, compassion, and respect is evident, which can happen, for example, by the church establishing healthy relationships and safe spaces for dialoguing about hard topics, but also by cooking food for the one suffering, praying, cleaning the house, storytelling, or helping to organize the funeral. Such a presence of a caring community is priceless when one is overwhelmed by grief or suffering. Reestablishing such a sense of community will require the pastor and congregation to share pastoral responsibilities of offering care.

## 2. *Start with Small Groups*

Theologian John Swinton suggests that “small groups within a church be used as starting points for relearning lament because it is easier to establish trust and friendship in them.”<sup>30</sup> Susan, the eldest participant in the survey, concurs with Swinton. Susan is an eighty-eight-year-old female who is still very active in her church and volunteers at the Bahamas Cancer Society. Through small group meetings, she helps patients cope with cancer. Susan said she is comfortable sharing in small groups but terrified of speaking about grief in large gatherings. Susan knows the value of telling stories and recommends lament be revived by creating more small groups where stories of grief and loss can be shared. Learning from her experience, I hope in future to provide more arenas in which persons can share their experiences of grief and/or their accompaniment with mourners, and small groups in which persons can lament and express their grief.

Yet I know it is best if I do not do this alone, but draw instead on a distinctive feature of Methodism, our doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” Among Methodists, the responsibilities of pastoral care are usually shared by members of the prayer ministry,

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<sup>30</sup> Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 121, 125.

outreach boards, and/or women and men's groups. Because the caring support is a shared enterprise the bereaved can draw on a vast resource of support from within their religious community.

Some members of such religious communities are already skilled at offering support and care. Others would benefit from some basic pastoral care training before they tend to their suffering neighbors. Given our Bahamian cultural background, grief researcher William Worden's task-based approach to mourning is well suited to our context because of our tendency to suppress grief. Worden's approach advocates a set of tasks necessary for moving through grief in a healthy manner: "1) accepting the reality of the loss, 2) experiencing the pain of grief, 3) adjusting to the new environment without the person, and 4) reinvesting in the new reality."<sup>31</sup> In the past, these tasks were achieved during our "patio conversations" and "tree talk." Currently, we are trying to revive similar platforms via social media. It is a work-in-progress.

### *3. Provide Platforms for Storytelling and Meaning-Making*

Bahamians have established practices for handling grief, practices not recorded in books but in oral tradition of ours such as storytelling. In a particular situation (whether of a pandemic, a hurricane, or a more regular life), how might we leaders in the church give mourners opportunities to express their grief freely and unreservedly? How can we encourage their lament and hear it too?

In pastoral care and counseling situations, every story is significant and warrants the audience's undivided attention. How can we capitalize on that? Easy: Bahamians love telling stories! Within every religious community there is a potential audience and a platform to share these stories from. Initially I felt the children were too young to participate in practices

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<sup>31</sup> William J. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2018), Chapter 6.

of lament. But their reflections during our pastoral prayer time made me realize that they were the perfect audience to receive and share COVID-19 stories. The children had questions and concerns that mirrored the adults' struggles. However, I learned from this experience that it is probably best if children and adults are in separate groups for further discussions so that each group can contribute without reservation.

Another important lesson I learned from my Prayer & Share sessions is that the church can no longer be afraid to embrace technology and social media. It is imperative that we move with the times, using multiple social media platforms to bring a message of hope that can both unite and empower our community to sojourn with persons who are grieving in the shadows. The pastors' responses to my questionnaire show that many persons are hesitant to communicate via technology. I understand that change can be frightening. I therefore recommend that those who are tech savvy assist and encourage persons who are not to step out of their comfort zone and try new approaches for reaching the world.

#### *4. Include Lament in Worship*

Restoration of traditional practices of lament involves inviting God and others into the grieving process. A church whose primary elements of worship (liturgy, songs, prayers, and sermons) are continuously in celebration mood prevents followers from presenting their grief to God communally. People come to church with an assortment of issues. After church they return to their homes, workplaces, and other communities to confront these same issues. Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to ensure that their worship practices resonate with worshipers' realities and to teach them how to cope with and overcome difficult situations. Through a revival of lament practices pastors can empower mourners to cry out to God with their anguish, doubt, fears, praise, and trust.

Religious communities likewise are in a unique position to provide their members with opportunities to relearn and implement the language of lament. To this end, I propose

they start by using biblical lament as a pattern for verbalizing and expressing emotions. Old Testament narratives reveal that the People of Israel did not hide their emotions but truthfully expressed them. The churches that I currently pastor are very conservative. Nonetheless, I plan to immerse myself in the psalms of lament in order to re-teach my congregations how to address God and give voice to pain. It is pivotal that faith communities be reminded to include God in human struggles and that God is approachable, relevant, and accessible to mourners.

## **PROJECT**

### **“PRAYER & SHARE”**

*A three-month prayer and share series comprised of prayers of lament and celebration and brief reflections on the impact of COVID-19.*

### **Project Overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need to reinstate practices of lament. This pandemic has affected every strata of our nation. People are hurting. There has been a rise in deaths, unemployment, homelessness, crime, abuse and hopelessness. I therefore believe it is crucial to re-teach the language of lament, revive caring communities, and provide models and forums that encourage the liberal expression of sorrows. To this end, I implemented a three-month series called “Prayer & Share,” in which persons offered prayers of lament and celebration and the children gave their brief reflections on the impact of COVID-19 at our Sunday morning worship services.

At the time, our nation was in lockdown due to the pandemic therefore we live-streamed our services using Zoom. Although worship participants were primarily from our churches in the North Eleuthera Methodist Region (NEMR), persons from throughout the Bahamas, and far beyond, attended our online services.



## **Project Implementation: Prayer Time**

The Prayer & Share sessions afforded us the opportunity to lament: to honestly express our pain to self, others and God. Every Sunday we said special prayers for persons infected and affected by the corona virus, essential workers, the families of those suffering and caring, and for religious and civic leaders. A child led the prayer session with a reflection on the question: “How do I cope with COVID-19?” Immediately following this, an adult said a special prayer of lament coupled with thanksgiving. I chose to do the Prayer & Share series for my project because in the Bahamas prayer is one of the most popular and effective means of administering pastoral care. Moreover, as Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller and Preaching and Worship professor Sally Brown asserts, “To recover the voice of lament is to recover the voice of prayer.”<sup>32</sup>

The pattern of lament in the Psalms provides an excellent template for voicing and struggling with grief. Many intercessors, in the Prayer sessions, echoed the Psalmist’s lament, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1, NIV).<sup>33</sup> As I reflected on Deacon Munroe’s prayer, it became more apparent that Psalm 46 serves as a lament that encourages Bahamians to both admit the chaotic state of our world and passionately proclaim God’s faithfulness in the midst of our chaos.

Prior to these Pastoral prayer sessions our liturgy, songs and prayers were all celebratory. Including the Prayer & Share moments in our worship has literally opened a door for persons to voice concerns, share deep sorrow and receive the support of our faith community.

One of the most touching moments in our Prayer & Share sessions was when Lay Minister Kemp shared with the congregation his COVID 19 experience. A few days prior to

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<sup>32</sup> Sally A Brown and Patrick Miller, *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew and Public Square* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix 3- Sample Prayers and Reflections

the launching of this project, three of his children were hospitalized due to the corona virus. Throughout the ensuing week members of the congregation kept in contact with Kemp via our WhatsApp group chat. This forum served as a prototype of our “patio conversations” and “tree talks.” The physical space was different, but the practices and intent of the gathering were the same. When Kemp’s children recovered from the virus, he told us that calls, texts, singing, and prayers helped the whole family survive a very difficult time. As a result of his testimony, others began to request prayer and volunteered to share personal stories of their COVID-19 experiences. This project has been so helpful that I have given it a permanent place in our church’s calendar of events to meet every Tuesday on Zoom to pray and reflect on a variety of pastoral issues.

### **Project Charter: A Time to Share**

"It takes a village to raise a child" is an African proverb that means that an entire community of people must interact with children for those children to experience and grow in a safe and healthy environment. ([Wikipedia](#))

All members of a community, both adults and children, need to be free to share talents, voice concerns and express sorrows. The practice of lament allows persons of all ages to interact with and listen to each other. In my opinion, a community can benefit greatly from the input, honesty and creativity of children. Moreover, since our children are not exempt from this deadly virus, it is necessary to give them space to lament, problem-solve and hope.

To this end, each Sunday, during the Prayer & Share session, a child shared on the question: “How do I cope with COVID-19?” After reflecting upon the presentation, the adult moderating the service reiterated and/or affirmed the child’s message. The children’s lamentation awakened our awareness that things are not OK and demanded that we do something.

The first presentation was done by Kelsey, a twelve-year-old boy. His mom is a teacher and his father a police officer. Kelsey announced: “*Pandemic*”, “*Lockdown*,” “*Boring!*” *I am sure that’s what most young people are thinking. But it does not have to be boring at all.*<sup>34</sup> He went on to offer recommendations to cope with the pandemic. His presentation motivated some of our church’s leaders to begin a virtual Sunday school hour and host other children and youth events on Zoom. There was always a nugget in the children’s presentation that challenged us to be more actively involved in our community.

I was very impressed by the children’s reflections. They spoke freely, truthfully, and boldly about their fears, doubts, and concerns about the pandemic. Markel, a seven-year-old boy, shockingly announced: “Reverend Neilly, if I survive this pandemic then I know God has a purpose for my life!” His struggle to make sense of the pandemic led him to reflect theologically and involve God in his search for meaning. Markel had set his gaze on the future, looking beyond the darkness of COVID-19, to God’s purposes and plans for God’s people.

It is hard to think, “What will we do when COVID-19 ends? How do we pick up the pieces and move forward?” Markel’s statement took me back to God’s message to Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV). Perhaps our prayers and reflections ought to be comprised of both lament and hope for the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **The Way Forward: Lamentation in the Twenty-first Century**

Coming from a small town, I have experienced communal lament and know first-hand the benefits of having a community with which to share our joys and sorrows. I miss the

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix 3- Sample Prayers and Reflection

fellowship and community spirit that we once shared during our “patio conversations” and “tree talk.” The prayers, songs, and stories that accompanied those get-togethers are gathering dust through disuse. Since the current generation was not privy to our stories and mourning rituals back then, they have no models and often struggle (and often refuse) to frame their own stories. What can be done about this? I suggest Bahamian elders teach the art of storytelling and rituals to the younger generations. The church is uniquely positioned to lead the way in reclaiming lament as a modern pastoral practice.

Methodism has a rich heritage that offers guidelines for instituting practices of lament. In the early 1800s, for example, when the British Methodist missionaries and preachers came to the Bahamas they developed small groups called “classes” and “bands” to foster accountability and provide spiritual support. Overtime, these meetings stopped due to demographic, economic, and social changes. Going forward, I will try to reintroduce such care groups along with other small groups such as Sunday school classes, youth groups, and women’s and men’s fellowships. Through them, we can reclaim our heritage.

The current COVID-19 pandemic with its stringent protocols has pushed pastors to employ innovative forums of lamentation and to appeal to mourners’ creative imaginations. Many congregations are not meeting in the physical building. Some are using social media to “meet” and communicate, and others are meeting, masked and appropriately distanced from one another, in the church’s parking lot. The current absence of physical touch, social gatherings, and human interaction requires pastors to exert a greater energy to touch the soul.

In one of our break-out sessions, Paula my Doctor of Ministry classmate shared some of the ways United Methodist Ministers are currently offering pastoral care in relational congregations. Helpful to my setting is her notation of the pastor who took a folding chair, sat in the yard and visited his members as they sat across from him on the patio. This is an excellent means of continuing our “patio conversation” during this pandemic.

People are hurting but there are very few outlets for expressing pain. In the future, I plan to make use of social media platforms, such as Zoom, Face-book, Twitter, Whats' App, and the telephone to encourage individual and communal lament. Since these communication channels are somewhat impersonal, I will have to be more intentional about being present and actively listening to my conversation partners.

I believe religious communities can be trend setters. Once churches reintroduce the practice of lament, lamentation could conceivably extend to homes, places of employment, and the wider community. This research has shown me the importance of providing worship opportunities that reflect our human conditions intertwined with Christian theology and its eschatological hope. Since I began this research, I have become more intentional about incorporating both lament and celebration in the liturgy, songs, sermons, and prayers of our church. When offering pastoral care and counseling, in the future, I am now much more prepared to offer multiple forums for lament.

The responses to my questionnaire and the Prayer & Share sessions made me more determined to pursue the reclaiming of lament as a model for pastoral care. Despite the many changes in our nation, mourners will always need an honest, loving, and compassionate community where their stories can be told, heard, and affirmed. Given my research findings and ministerial experience, I maintain that the practice of lament is the most appropriate model for providing pastoral care to the bereaved in the Bahamas.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1 – Questionnaires and Responses

#### A. Pastors' Questionnaire

Name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Church \_\_\_\_\_

Membership \_\_\_\_\_

1. Which age group are you in?
  - a. 30\_45 years
  - b. 46\_55 years
  - c. 56\_65 years
  - d. 66 years or older
  
2. How long have you been a pastor/minister?
  - a. 1\_10 years
  - b. 11\_20 years
  - c. 21\_30 years
  - d. 31\_40 years
  
3. Would you describe your religious group or the one you identify with as:
  - a. Traditional
  - b. Charismatic
  - c. Conservative
  - d. Contemporary
  
4. How often do you do pastoral counseling?
  - a. Never
  - b. Weekly
  - c. Monthly
  - d. Annually
  
5. Are you familiar with the term "Lament?"
  - a. Not at all
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Moderately familiar
  - d. Very familiar
  
6. Do you use lament as a pastoral practice?
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Seldom
  - d. Often
  
7. To what level, do you consider lament important for pastoral ministry?
  - a. Not important
  - b. Slightly important
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important
  
8. How often do you include lament in worship (i.e. liturgy, prayer and/or songs)?
  - a. Never
  - b. Rarely
  - c. Seldom
  - d. Often
  
9. How comfortable are you with persons expressing their theological challenges?
  - a. Uncomfortable
  - b. Somewhat comfortable
  - c. Comfortable
  - d. Very comfortable
  
10. Please state your level of agreement with the following statements. (Answer option: Completely agree, Some-what agree, Neutral, Somewhat disagree, Completely disagree)
  - a. Growing interest in "Prosperity Gospel" has restricted the power of lament  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. In the absence of lament, it is impossible to be honest with God, self and others  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Pastors need to provide forums for persons to voice their pains \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. There are significant social, emotional, and spiritual benefits from lamenting  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Lament is a pre-requisite for effective pastoral care \_\_\_\_\_

## Pastors' Questionnaire Responses

### *Question 1*

Most of the ministers surveyed are at retirement age.

### *Question 4*

Among the pastors, some 83.5 percent serve in a traditional church.

### *Question 5*

Most of the pastors (67 percent) do pastoral care monthly. Noteworthy, only one pastor does it weekly. One of the pastors asserts he does pastoral care as necessary.

### *Question 6/7*

Most of the pastors (67 percent) are familiar with the term "lament" and 33 percent viewed lament as very important. Of significance is that 33 percent of the pastors are somewhat familiar with the term and 33 percent see it as important.

### *Question 8*

67 percent of the pastors often included lament in their worship service. However, 16.5 percent either seldom included lament or not at all.

### *Question 9*

I was surprised to learn that all the pastors were comfortable expressing their theological challenges related to grief and suffering

### *Question 10*

Of concern was that 67 percent of the pastors disagreed that the "prosperity gospel" hinders us from being honest with God, others, and self. Only 33 percent agree with this statement.

## B. Members' Questionnaire

Name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Church \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you been a member of your church?
2. Would you describe your church as a very supportive community?
3. During times of grief, did the church meet your pastoral expectation?
4. What did the church do that was most meaningful during your loss?
5. Did the pastor provide adequate resources for you to voice your concerns?
6. Was telling your "story" helpful or harmful?
7. Have you ever felt like asking God "why"? Do you feel comfortable asking this question in your religious community?
8. Do you feel the church's liturgy, songs, scriptures, etc. identify with your pain?
9. Have you ever read the book of Lamentations? What was your experience?
10. Is biblical lament necessary today?

## Members In-person Questionnaire Responses

### *Question 1: Membership*

The majority of the respondents were members of the Methodist church for more than ten years, that is, 75 percent of the participants on Zoom and 60 percent of the in-person respondents. These persons would have been at the church long enough to witness the various changes in the practice of lament. The two members who were in their late eighties definitely were privy to the history of pastoral care. Of significance, the oldest person noted that she had recently attended a grief seminar.

### *Question 2: Counseling Services*

It was surprising to discover that only 69 percent of the Zoom participants were aware of the counseling services at the church, especially since they were in leadership positions. The response was different for the members who responded to the questionnaire in person. That is, the majority, or 80 percent of the participants said counseling was available for the bereaved.

### *Question 3: Lament and Worship*

Both groups of respondents (the percentage was almost equal, that is 90 percent and 88 percent) claim that lament was included in their church's liturgy. This was expected because we use the Revised Common Lectionary and the old British Methodist Hymn book that both contain a lot of lament literature.

### *Question 4: Necessity of Lament in Worship*

Surprisingly, only 50 percent of the participants felt lament was extremely needed (and 50 percent said somewhat necessary) in worship. Only 20 percent of the persons surveyed via Zoom, saw a great need for lament (and 38 percent felt it was somewhat necessary) in worship. Noteworthy are the 6 percent on Zoom who did not believe that lament was necessary at all.

### *Question 5: Support of Faith Community*

The responses to question 5 raised some concern. That is, 31 percent of Zoom participants and 40 percent in person participants were neutral on this question. This is due to the impact of the corona virus on pastoral care, as I noted earlier. However, 50 percent of the in-person participants strongly agreed that their faith community was supportive.

### *Question 6: Freedom to Express Grief*

Almost half of the Zoom participants said they felt free to express grief among fellow congregants and leaders. Nevertheless, there were some persons who felt uncomfortable talking about spiritual challenges with death.

### *Question 7: Comfortable Asking God and/or Religious Community: "Why"*

Only one person felt comfortable asking God and her religious community: "Why." Many of the participants did not respond to this question.

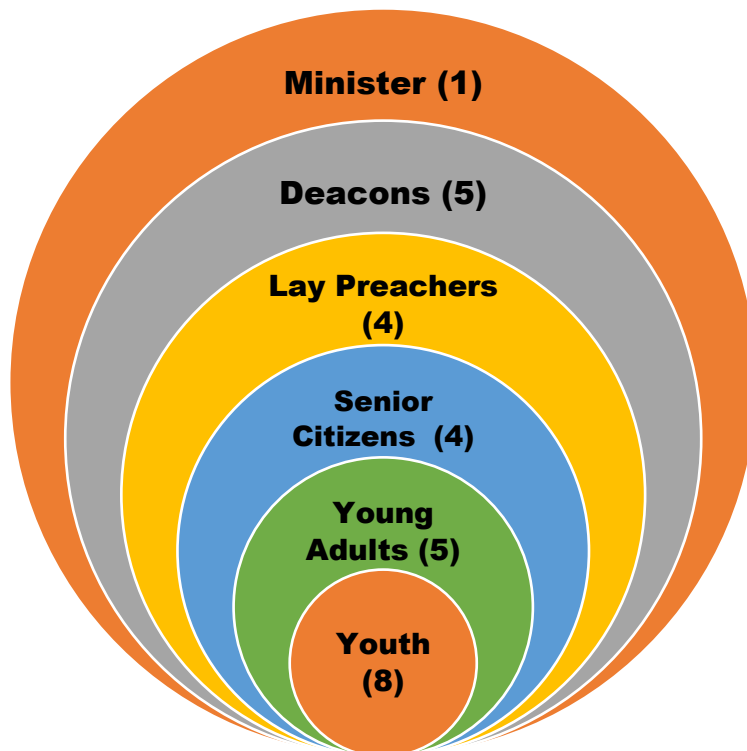
### *Question 8: Church Ministries Identifies with Mourners Pain*

In total, 56 percent of the Zoom participants described the ministry offered by the church as effective, and 12 percent claimed it is very effective. It was good to see that none of the participants opted to describe the ministry as "ineffective." Yet 31 percent of Zoom participants and 20 percent in person participants, state church ministry was merely somewhat effective.



**C. Zoom Questionnaire Responses**

*A total of twenty-seven persons attended my Zoom presentation:*



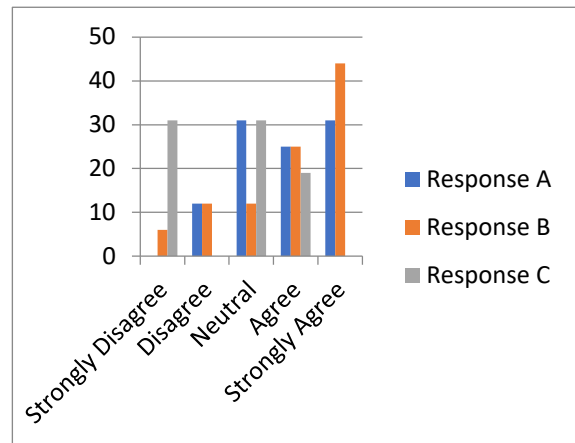
*The responses to the questionnaire were as follows:*

Table 1: Responses to Question 1	Table 2: Responses to Question 2 & 3
	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-bottom: 20px;"> <div style="background-color: #e67e22; padding: 10px; border-radius: 10px; margin-right: 10px;">Church Provides Pastoral Care?</div> <div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: flex-start;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes 69%</li> <li>No 31%</li> </ul> </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="background-color: #95a5a6; padding: 10px; border-radius: 10px; margin-right: 10px;">Church Liturgy includes Lament?</div> <div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: flex-start;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>88%</li> <li>12%</li> </ul> </div> </div> </div>

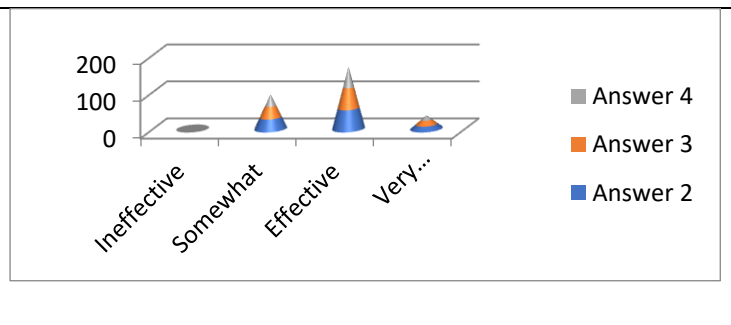
**Table 3: Responses to Question 4**



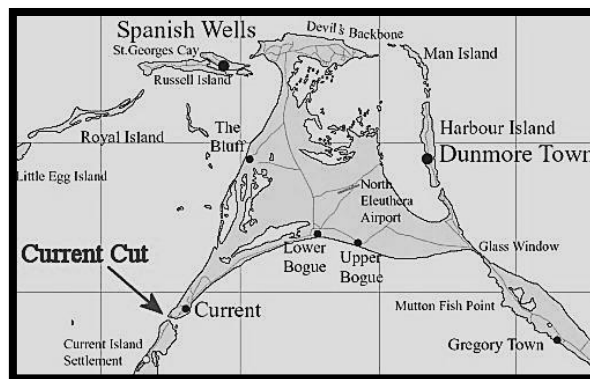
**Table 4: Responses to Question 5, 6, 7**



**Table 5: Responses to Question 8**



**Appendix 2: Map of North Eleuthera, The Bahamas**



This map shows the geographical location of the five churches in our North Eleuthera Methodist Region as identified in the Introduction of my paper.

### Appendix 3: Example of Prayers & Reflection

#### A. Sample Prayers of Lament and Reflection

*Prayer for Families by Earmily Munroe  
Zion Methodist Church, Current Island, Eleuthera, Bahamas*

Lord Jesus I come on behalf of broken families that have been and still are being affected by the coronavirus. I pray you provide financially for unemployed spouses whose house rent is overdue or mortgages are in arrears. Meet the needs of their children. Provide hope and strength for them amidst these dark times. Remind them of the words of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a present help in the time of trouble.” Amidst of the darkness and chaos, shine your light. Let a ray of hope appear in the hearts of those who are depressed, discourage and feel like giving up. Amen

*Prayer for Essential Workers by Derek Gleco  
John Wesley Church, The Bluff, Eleuthera, Bahamas*

As I offer prayers on today for our essential workers, I pray that our God would keep them safe from danger. They have a great and awesome task to perform during this pandemic: Lord protect them as they do their job to ensure that the rest of the nation is safe. We remember and pray for their families’ well-being, keep them safe and in perfect health, in Jesus’ name I pray, amen.

*Prayer for Persons Directly Infected and Affected by COVID-19 by Jennifer Cleare  
Wesley Methodist Church, Harbor Island, Eleuthera, Bahamas*

God, we lay before you our concerns and fears over the spread of the corona virus. We know that you are mightier than all our fears and that the name of Jesus Christ is the name that is above all other names. Lord let your presence be felt by the people who need your loving touch because of COVID-19. May they feel your power of healing and restoration through the care of doctors, nurses, and other caregivers. Comfort and protect their families and associates as they journey with them through this epidemic.

Lord, be with all healthcare workers and persons on the front lines. For it is these workers who have essential roles that keep our communities safe and operational. Grant our national leaders, wisdom to lead and make decisions for the good of all people. May strength and peace fill their lives knowing that you are with them despite our current state of affair. Thank you, God for answering the prayers of your people around the world, for nothing is impossible with you.

#### B. Sample Reflection

##### **How do I cope with COVID-19?**

A Reflection by Kelsey Farquharson Jr. (a twelve-year-old boy)

“Pandemic.” “Lockdown.” “Boring!” I am sure that’s what most young people are thinking. But it does not have to be boring at all. I actually enjoy lockdowns! Here are some tips that may help you to cope with our new normal.

1. You can use this time to learn a new concept or skill. You can learn to write a well-structured essay or play a musical instrument.
  2. You can use your devices wisely. You can travel to the depths of the ocean, into hot steaming volcanoes, up frosty mountains, and even into the unknowns of Outer Space.
  3. Use this time to be healthy. Let's exercise by doing a few jumping jacks each day or even walking on the spot. We can make healthy snacks such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fruit salads, and smoothies. Best of all, make it yourself. Yes! Let's give our parents a break.
  4. During this time, let's be understanding and not so demanding. Our parents are going through a lot. We can help by washing the dishes (*I know my mom will love that!*), sweeping, and taking out the trash. We can also give them some quiet time!
  5. Let's take some time to call family and friends who are near and far (*I call my family in San Salvador almost every day!*).
  6. Most of all, let's remember to pray to God. Pray when you are sad, he will make you glad. God is a friend. You can talk to Him. Although, He may seem far, He is near and will answer your prayer.
- See, I told you: lockdowns can be FUN!

#### Appendix 4: Glossary

**Pastoral care:** providing care and support for persons in need. "The ministry of pastoral care is based theologically on the Christian affirmation that God created humankind for relationship with God and with God's other creatures."<sup>35</sup>

**Grief:** a keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)).

**Repast:** an assembly of people coming together with the intent of consoling the bereaved. This usually takes place the immediately after the funeral. The event is marked by eating, drinking, and fellowshiping.

**Wake:** an assembly of people coming together with the intent of paying tribute to the deceased in song, stories, and reflections. This usually takes place the night before a funeral. Food is served during the intermission.

**Tree Talk:** a social gathering of men that occurs immediately following the death of a loved one or an associate. It takes place under a tree near the home of the bereaved. There is singing, praying, storytelling, crying and laughing.

**Patio Conversations:** a social gathering of women, that occurs immediately following the death of a loved one or an associate. It takes place on the patio of the bereaved. There is singing, praying, storytelling, crying and laughing.

**Prosperity gospel:** a religious belief that faith, godly lifestyle, and positive speech produce a believer's physical well-being, and financial success.

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<sup>35</sup> Patton, John. *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 1.

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