

Communal Lament

There has been a welcome rise in resources that equip Christians to lament individually. However, lamenting as a church family is still relatively unpracticed in the western Christian world. It's one thing for an individual to pour out their pain to the Lord. It's another thing to guide a group of people who will inevitably represent a range of needs and burdens to do the same.

The following resource seeks to help church families discover ways they can lament together as one body. It arises from an evening session of lament at a recent Biblical Counselling UK residential conference on trauma, where roughly 300 people were present. The same considerations and principles that shaped that evening would be applicable to groups that are smaller in number too.

Reasons for Communal Lament¹

Love in action

One of the marks of sincere love in Romans 12 is an ability to enter into and share in the joys and sorrows of life together. Times of communal lament provide an opportunity for church families to 'weep with those who weep' (Romans 12:15) as they gather together to wrestle with the brokenness of life and lift their hurt to the Lord.

Faith is modeled

Suffering in its many forms can often leave believers bewildered, confused and struggling to pray. Communal lament provides an opportunity to model how to lift pain and grief to the Lord and what it looks like to trust him even in midst of difficult circumstances.

Unity is encouraged

Painful situations can occasionally be divisive in church families. Communal lamenting can be a way of giving voice to the range of emotions in the room while still helping the whole church family bring their experiences to the Lord in a way that may foster unity across difference.

¹ While I arrived at these points on my own, I'm grateful for this article from Mark Vroegop that clarified & sharpened my thoughts: [3 Reasons We Ought to Corporately Lament - 9Marks](#)

Considerations for Communal Lament

Times of communal lament ought to take the particular needs of the church family and/or community into account. The following questions may help in the planning.

1. What has prompted the idea of having a time of communal lament?
 - A particular event or situation: if you plan to gather to lament for a specific reason (ie a recent tragedy or crisis), how might that shape what you do? Is it likely that anyone directly affected will be present? If so, might they appreciate playing a role in the meeting, or not? Would it be appropriate to open the event up to the wider community around the local church? What sensitivities might you need to bear in mind as you plan?
 - A variety of factors: you may be considering a time of communal lament because there are multiple things that currently feel difficult. Perhaps some in your church family are scared at the state of the wider world. Maybe others are dealing with serious illnesses or bereavements. Perhaps there has been conflict in the church – some individuals may be deeply sad, others may be very angry. Acknowledging a wide variety of things to lament will be important, as well as refraining from ‘prescribing’ how people ought to be responding.
2. Will the communal lament be part of a wider gathering (ie. a Sunday service or regular prayer meeting) or a stand-alone event?
 - If part of a wider gathering, recognise that not everyone present will be feeling a particular need to lament or have ‘opted in’ to it. This is still a great opportunity for them to ‘weep with those who weep’ but you may wish to avoid any activities that could put people on the spot, such as getting people to share their reasons for lament with the person next to them. You might choose to simply introduce a time of silence, or to lead the group in a song or passage of lament.
 - If communal lament is a stand-alone event, you can have reasonable confidence that people who attend are wanting to engage.
3. Consider whether structure would aid or hinder the gathering.
 - In some circumstances, it may be right to simply open your church building (if you have one) for a window of time and let people gather to pray or sit in silence, without much further structure. You may opt to have a sheet containing sample prayers, song lyrics or passages to prompt people for their own reflection.
 - Other situations would benefit from a more structured approach, where the entire time of communal lament has been carefully planned. Structure is more likely to be needed when the number of attendees is higher or there is a multiplicity of reasons for why people may be lamenting.

4. Do you have a sense of who might attend? If so, how familiar will you be with their stories? If the gathering is likely to be a broad mix of people, keeping the focus of your laments as broad and non-prescriptive as possible is likely better.
5. Consider the flow of your gathering.
 - If you're aiming for a more structured event, you might consider beginning with different elements of lament and then move slowly towards a theme of hope towards the end of the event.
6. Consider having a mix of both communal and individual moments of lament.
 - Communal elements, such as singing a song together, emphasizes the unity amongst those who are gathered. Individual elements, such as a time of silence, allows people to lift up the particular griefs on their heart to the Lord.
7. Consider the time of day of your event.
 - There is a significant difference between ending a time of communal lament during daylight hours when the sun might be shining, versus ending at night when it is likely to be dark and the end of the day for many. If your gathering is likely to be held in an evening, take particular care around how you'll end the time. Helping people connect with the hope of Christ before they leave will be important.
8. Consider how you might advertise a time of communal lament.
 - People will be loved well if they are able to make an informed choice about whether they attend or not. If you plan to have elements where people will be interacting with other attendees, it's best to include that in the advert information.
9. How might you respond to any pastoral needs that arise during or after the event?
 - A time of communal lament for your own church family means you'll likely have a good sense of people's stories and struggles. However, it's good to be prepared in case any strong emotions or memories are stirred for people during or after the event. Do inform people about who to talk to if they need some additional care or prayer both immediately after the event or in the weeks to come. You may wish to flag any resources that may be of help too.

Ideas for Communal Lament

Here are some suggestions for elements you might incorporate into a gathering of lament. No event will be able to have all of the following elements included, and it is not an exhaustive list.

Communal Elements

The following can be done as a whole group together.

Sing songs together – you may wish to scan the BCUK [Loss](#) or [Lament](#) playlists on Spotify for inspiration. Songs that speak of hope in sorrow may be useful to consider especially towards the end of the gathering.

Scripture read aloud – consider one of the many psalms of lament (ie. 13 or 22), Lamentations or passages such as Isaiah 35 that capture the future hope that is coming.

Prayer – consider inviting a pastorally minded individual to offer up prayers to the Lord.

Liturgy – consider writing a liturgy of lament (or hope) inspired by the psalms or other passages in Scripture. Alternatively, *Every Moment Holy* offer a selection of pre-written laments, as does the Book of Common Prayer.

Individual Elements

The following can be done by individuals on their own as part of a whole group time.

Performed songs / pieces – this allows the group to quietly reflect as they listen.

Silence – enables individuals to lift their particular circumstances to the Lord.

Lament worksheet – giving people space to write their own lament with guidance from the front. A sample worksheet is available below.

Spoken word – another performed piece that provides opportunity for silent reflection. A free [spoken word lament by Jonny Parker is available on YouTube](#).

Art & Beauty – creative pursuits are often excellent vehicles for communicating hope in the midst of despair & pain. If there is an artwork (ie. A painting) that touches on this theme, why not share a photo of it (subject to copyright), explain its meaning and then invite people to silently reflect on what has helped them hold on to hope in suffering, be it the natural world, creative pursuits or bringing order to chaos (ie a spreadsheet!). If you have an artist in your church family, why not explore if they'd have something to share.

Interpersonal Elements

The following can be done in smaller groups.

Prayer in smaller groups – as appropriate to the context and purpose of the gathering.

Sharing reflections in smaller groups – as appropriate to the context and purpose of the gathering.

A Sample

The following is the running order for an hour-long session of communal lament at the Biblical Counselling UK's residential conference on trauma. Delegates were informed in advance in the conference session descriptions and notices about what the evening would entail so they could choose to join. There were roughly 300 individuals in attendance.

Est. Time	What
2min / 7.15pm	Welcome & explanation of the hour
1min / 7.17pm	Reading of Psalm 22
4min / 7.18pm	Song - God of justice truth & might (Matt Bennington)
2min / 7.22pm	Liturgy of lament
1min / 7.24pm	Silence
3min / 7.25pm	Prayers
10min 7.28pm	Lament worksheet (delegates provided with pen and worksheet on chairs)
5min 7.38pm	Performed song: Face to Face (Josh Matthews)
10min 7.43pm	Interview with Artist about Rembrandt's <i>Prodigal Son</i> drawing
4min 7.53pm	Spoken word lament by Jonny Parker
2min 7.57pm	Liturgy of hope
4min 7.59pm	Song - It is well
2min / 8.03pm	Isaiah 35 & prayer
8.05pm	FINISH

Movements of Lament**	An Example: Psalm 13	My Lament
Turn to God Speak with the Lord directly – bring before him your griefs and complaints.	Verse 1	
Bring Your Complaint Describe the impact that pain and suffering have had on you. Name your questions and doubts that you want to bring to God.	Verse 2	
Ask Boldly Outline how you want the Lord to work and intervene on your behalf in ways that are in keeping with his character.	Verse 3 & 4	
Choose to Trust Remind yourself of the promises and character of God and commit to trusting him.	Verse 5 & 6	

**The bolded "Movements of Lament" categories and column headings are taken from Mark Vroegop's *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, Appendix 3.

Sample Lament Worksheet Notes

We've come now to a time where you'll have the opportunity to write your own lament, guided by the words of Psalm 13.

On your seats you'll have noticed a worksheet that breaks down the movements of lament into four smaller steps. I'm going to give us space over the next few minutes to fill in the third column titled "My Lament". You'll hopefully have found a pen as well.

The words of Psalm 13 are going to be on the screen. I have divided the psalm into four parts that correspond to the movements of lament on the worksheet. I will read out each part one at a time and then invite you to write your own lament step by step as we go along. If you'd rather reflect or pray in the quiet of your heart and leave the worksheet for another time, that's absolutely fine.

Psalm 13 begins in v 1 by saying: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

As you begin to write your own lament, begin by turning and addressing the Lord directly – bring your griefs and complaints to him. I'll give you a few minutes to write down your own thoughts before moving us on to the next section.

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Psalm 13 continues: "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" As you continue to write your own lament, now bring your complaint to God in more detail. Describe the impact that pain and suffering have had. List the questions you have for him.

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Verse 3+4 of the psalm ask bold things of the Lord: "Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say "I have overcome him, and my foes will rejoice when I fall." Take a few moments now to outline how you want the Lord to work and intervene on your behalf, in ways that are in keeping with his character.

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The end of the psalm sees David the psalmist choosing to trust the Lord. Verse 5 – "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me." For our final section now, remind yourself of the promises and character of God, the bedrock for our trust.

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If you haven't yet, why not take the words you have written and pray them to the Lord. In a moment, we'll move on but before we do, take a moment to lift your lament up to the Lord.

Sample Liturgies

A Liturgy of Lament

Leader: How long, O Lord, will you forget us forever?
People: How long will you hide your face from us?
Leader: How long must we wrestle with our thoughts and sorrow fill our hearts?
People: Look upon us and answer us, O Lord our God
Leader: We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.
People: Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.
Leader: May your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need.
People: Help us, God our Saviour, for the glory of your name.
Leader: Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
People: From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

A Liturgy of Hope

Leader: O Lord, We remember our affliction and wandering, the bitterness and the gall
People: Yet this we call to mind, because of your great Love we are not consumed
Leader: Your compassions never fail
People: They are new every morning, great is your faithfulness
Leader: You Lord are our portion,
People: We will wait for you, our hope is in you.
Leader: You, Lord, reign for ever
People: Your throne endures from generation to generation.

Sample Prayers

Psalm 130

A song of ascents.

*Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.*

Father, we repeat these words of Psalm 130 tonight. We cry out to you, I cry out to you. In the depths of our darkness, whatever that may look like for each of us: darkness from what we have experienced in this broken world, darkness because of what others have done to us, darkness of our own sin, darkness in the lives of those we love, seek to care, the darkness of trauma, we speak to you as the God who hears, who speaks, who is compassionate and full of mercy.

We wrestle in your presence tonight. We say how long O lord? How long will we have sorrow in our souls? How long will you hide your face from us? How long must we fear and experience agony in our bodies and our souls? Questions flood our minds day and night.

And yet, we cry to You LORD as the Father of all comfort. We say we believe, help our unbelief. Forgive our turning away and not turning to you.

We humbly come to the foot of the Cross, to the throne of grace. We ask you for help in our time of need.

In our brokenness grow our trust. In our fear fuel our faith. In our isolation show us the beauty of community. In our despair and sorrow may we turn to our suffering Saviour and know hope. May we search for your words of life and light in our darkness and in the darkness of those we walk alongside.

We pray these words knowing that your ear is attentive to our cry and we ask that our faith, love and hope will grow.

We echo Psalm 130 this evening: We wait for the Lord, our whole being waits, and in his word we put our hope. We say we put our hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

In the most precious name of Jesus,

Amen.