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# Trauma Healing and the U.S. Church

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## Executive Summary

From March 2020 through October 2022, people around the world encountered a global pandemic which halted and altered every sector of society. In the United States alone, over one million people died due to COVID-19. At the same time, U.S. citizens experienced racial uprisings and protests, political unrest, economic instability, and food insecurity. Individually and collectively, people in the U.S. suffered tremendous grief, loss and trauma over the past few years.

During times of grief, loss, and trauma, people often turn to religious communities for help. As a result, pastors and church leaders are more frequently sought out by their congregations and communities. Due to this reality, American Bible Society wanted to understand pastor and church leaders' experience of trauma, and how they respond to their congregations and communities in times of suffering.

In October of 2022 American Bible Society launched a survey to learn about U.S. pastors' and church leaders' experience of trauma and the prevalence of trauma in their congregation. In this survey, American Bible Society also asked about their receptivity towards trauma healing resources and sought to identify barriers that exist for the deployment of new programs within their churches.

American Bible Society sent out this survey to over 13,000 pastors and church leaders across the United States and received over 1,000 responses. Here are just a few of the many significant findings from this survey when looking at trauma in U.S. churches:

**70%** of pastors and church leaders in this survey experienced trauma.

Pastors and church leaders across the U.S. estimate that **40%** of their congregants are experiencing trauma, with the highest estimates in multi-ethnic (44%) and predominantly Black congregations (42%).

When asked about trauma ministries, **4 out of 5** pastors and church leaders (79%) indicated an interest in developing a trauma healing ministry in their church, while only

**17%** currently have some type of trauma ministry offered in their church.

Of the pastors and church leaders, **75%** identified interest in a Bible-centered trauma healing curriculum. Almost all leaders sampled, around 90%, expressed interest in at least one of the resources offered by the Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society (this list is described in the report).

The results from this survey indicate that trauma is a critical issue for U.S. churches and is significantly impacting pastors and church leaders. These results also suggest a clear need and desire for trauma healing resources in churches and communities across the United States. As pastors and church leaders grapple with how to support their congregations impacted by trauma, our hope is that the Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society can equip U.S. churches with easy-to-use ministry tools and resources to help people heal in their own communities.

## Methodology

In October-November 2022, a survey was conducted in partnership between the Church Engagement and Trauma Healing Ministries at American Bible Society. This survey was sent to over 13,000 pastors and church leaders across the United States, identified from contact lists gathered from various enterprises at American Bible Society. Respondents who completed the survey were offered a free Restoring Hope Bible, which contains content from the Trauma Healing curriculum, Bible reading plans, and activities.

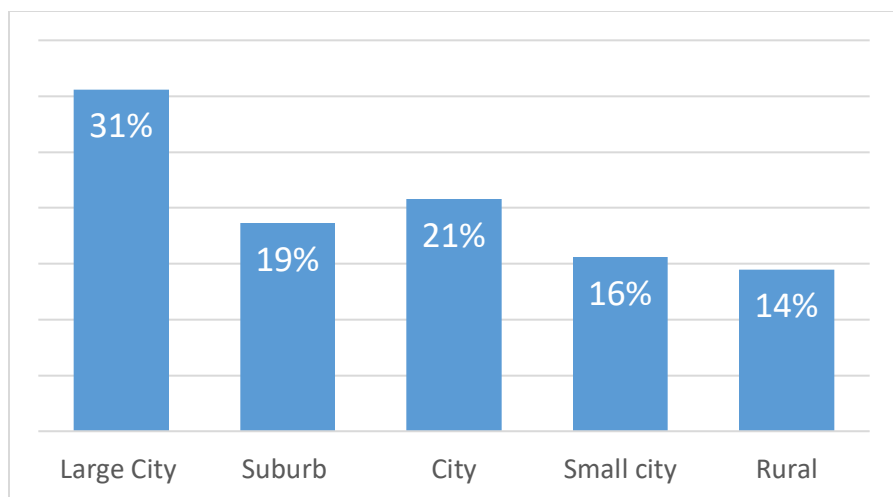
The focus of the survey was to learn about pastors and church leaders' experience of trauma, the prevalence of trauma among their congregation, and their receptivity and barriers towards trauma healing resources. The survey was designed to be completed in less than 10 minutes. At the end of the survey, pastors were invited to provide their name and address to receive a free Restoring Hope Bible. Pastors were also invited to participate in a focus group that would address more specific questions on the topics of trauma and healing. Participants in the focus groups were provided a \$100 Amazon gift card.

## Sample

Responses were received from over 1,000 individuals with data from  $n = 963$ . Of these, 68 reported they were not church leaders and were screened out. Over half of the respondents (56%) were pastors, priests, or members of the pastoral staff of a church. About 1/3 were lay leaders in a church and 5% indicated they were leaders over multiple churches in a network or denomination.

Respondent demographics indicate approximately ¾ male and ¼ female. By race and ethnicity, 66% of the sample were White, 13% Black, and 12% Hispanic. Participant ages ranged from 21 to 89 years with an average age of  $M = 56.5$  and a standard deviation ( $SD$ ) = 12.7, indicating most who responded to this survey were between 44 and 69 years of age.

Most pastors worked with congregations that were mostly White (47%). The second largest race/ethnicity grouping were churches identified as multi-ethnic (30%). Twelve percent (12%) of the pastors worked with congregations that were mostly Black, and 6% worked with congregations that were mostly Hispanic. Most of the churches that were sampled had less than 100 attendees (40%). Approximately 30% of the sampling had 100 – 499 attendees, and approximately 30% had 500 or more attendees. About 1/3 of churches sampled are in large cities, and a smaller proportion of the churches resided in smaller communities/towns. Figure 1 shows the distribution of churches compared to the size of the community.



*Figure 1. Distribution of churches by community size.*

## Findings

### Church Ministries

The beginning of the survey addressed current church ministries and outreach to the community. Almost all churches offer discipleship programs for adults. The most common program offerings are small groups (70%), followed by traditional Sunday classes (68%) and about two-thirds of the churches offer both. The small groups have varying structures and approaches. The most common types of resources used for small groups were the following: curriculum developed in-house (49%), group leader's choice (67%) and resources from external sources (62%), and digital media for their small groups (35%). The types of curricula used vary based on community size. Rural churches are most likely to use denomination provided curriculum (32%). Suburban churches use curriculum developed in-house (57%), external curriculum (70%), and digital curricula with media (40%). Urban churches were most likely to use leader's choice for small group curriculum (63%) and least likely to use digital curricula with media (30%).

### Community Outreach

More than half the churches reported that they engage in outreach to their communities. The most common type of outreaches are support groups (57%). Almost half (49%) of the churches sampled also offered counseling services. Nearly half of the churches were involved with food distribution programs (48%) and food or clothing banks (44%).

Regarding the topics covered in the support groups offered to their communities, the groups focused primarily on grief, loss, and trauma (74%). More than half of the support groups addressed issues related to parenting. Common topics addressed in these support groups are provided in figure 2.

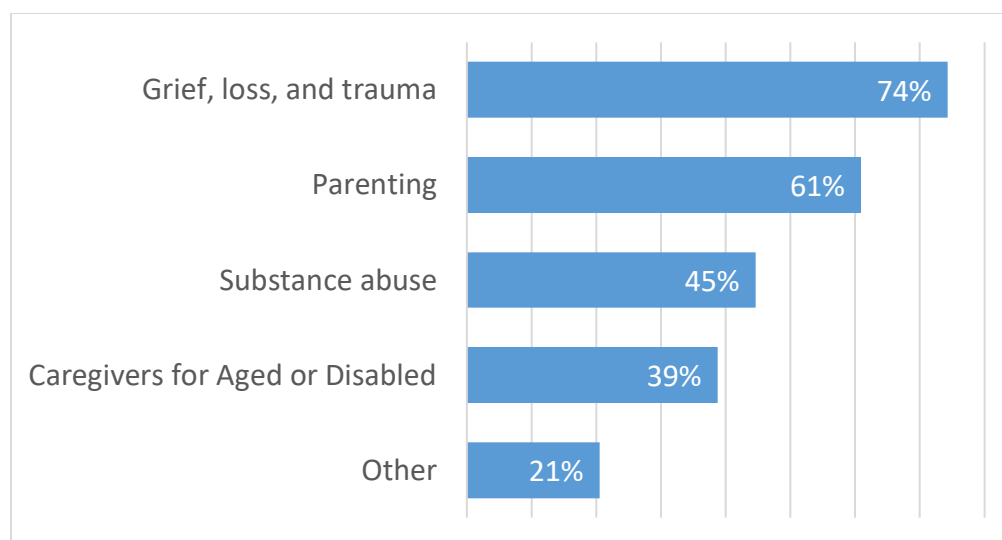


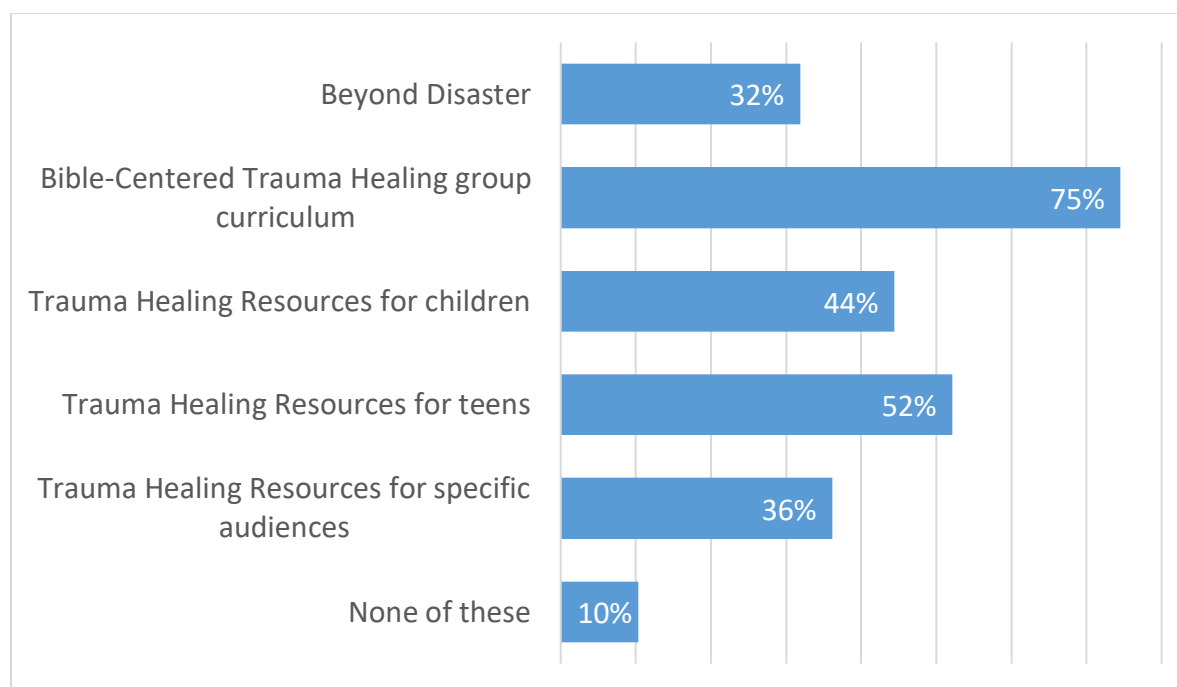
Figure 2. Support group topic proportions.

### Trauma Resources Used

Pastors and church leaders who had small groups that addressed trauma (n =411) were asked about which resources they used. The most used resource was the American Bible Society's Trauma Healing Ministry curriculum, *Healing the Wounds of Trauma* (63%). About one-third of the churches had programs that were primarily focused on prayer or inner healing. A similar proportion (32%) indicated their program used group counseling programs that followed an evidence-based model. A slightly smaller number (29%) report using no curriculum or counseling model.

### Trauma Resource Interest

In the survey, church leaders were provided with a list of possible resources they could use in their support groups. Most of the church leaders (75%) were interested in Bible-centered trauma healing curriculum. About one-third of the church leaders indicated an interest in the Trauma Healing resource *Beyond Disaster*. There was also interest in resources directed toward youth, children, and other specific groups. Almost all of leaders sampled (90%) expressed interest in at least one of the resources offered by the Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society. See figure 3 for the levels of interest in various resource types.



*Figure 3. Proportion of church leaders expressing interest in trauma healing resources.*

### **Trauma in the Church**

A significant portion of the survey focused on the experience of trauma within the church and their efforts in addressing trauma. For initial insight we first asked about the pastors and church leaders' personal exposure to trauma. The data indicated that 70% of pastors and church leaders had experienced trauma either personally or had witnessed a traumatic experience involving a family member or someone else. About 4 in 10 have experience in all three categories; a personal experience of trauma, a close family member experiencing trauma, and the witness of someone else experiencing trauma.

Church leaders report on average, about 2 in 5 members in their congregations have experienced trauma. These proportions vary among churches depending on the race and ethnicity of the congregation, as well as the community size in which the church is located. Congregants in large cities (42%) are most likely to have experienced trauma, and those in the suburbs (35%) are less likely to have experienced trauma. This distribution by community type is provided in figure 4. Congregants from multi-ethnic churches (44%), who are also more likely to be from urban areas, are most likely to have experienced trauma. Churches serving predominantly Black members (42%) are also highly likely to have experienced trauma. Churches ministering primarily to White members (36%) are least likely to have experienced trauma.

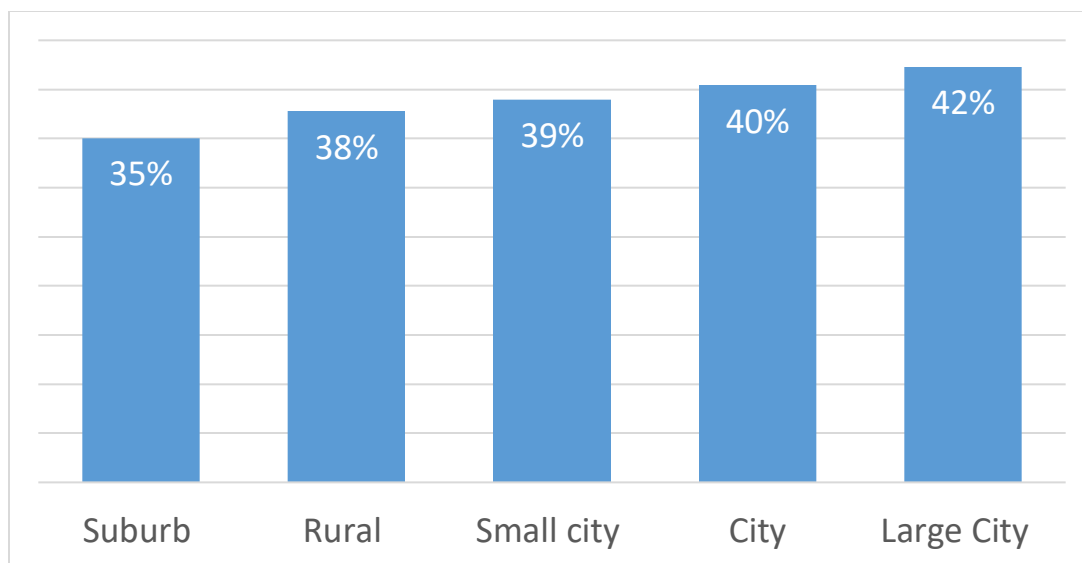


Figure 4. Proportion of congregants who have experienced trauma by community type.

### Ministry to People who have experienced trauma

This study identified significant opportunities for expanding the reach of the Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society. One indicator of the interest in ministries like Trauma Healing is the frequency with which pastors spoke on trauma, which demonstrates an understanding of the role scripture has in relief from pain and suffering from trauma. A significant number (86%) of pastors have addressed trauma or healing of emotions in the past year in their churches. Almost half of the pastors have addressed this topic more than once, and about 1 in 5 have devoted a series of sermons to the topic.

To address interest in trauma more specifically, pastors were asked about their interest in developing a trauma healing ministry. Only 17% of churches offer services to those who have experienced trauma, but approximately 4 out of 5 pastors and church leaders (79%) have an interest in developing a ministry to their church and community. Only 3% indicated they had no interest in a trauma healing ministry. This distribution of responses is reported in figure 5.

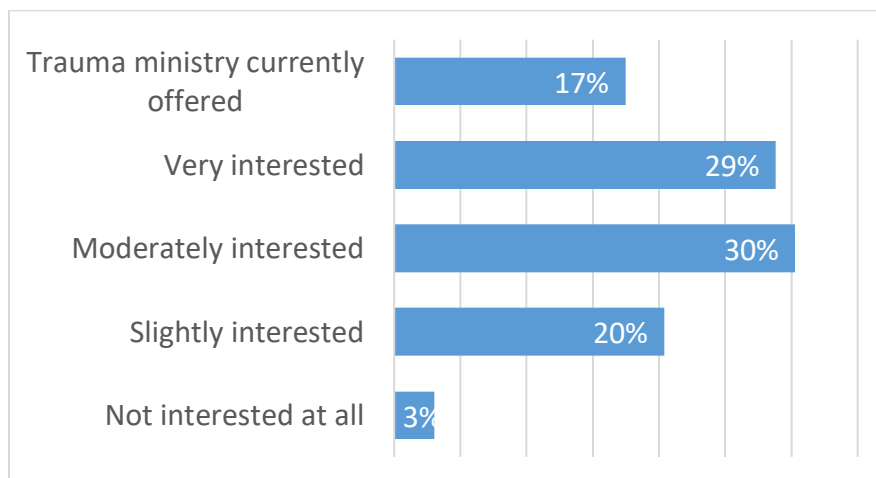


Figure 5. Interest in developing a trauma healing ministry.

## Interest in Trauma Healing Resources

The final issue addressed in the survey was interest in trauma healing resources. This interest was investigated through a series of questions involving small group and counseling ministries that a church may offer. We also investigated curriculum and resources that churches used, and their interest in resources offered through the Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society.

Over half (57%) of the churches surveyed offer support groups or counseling services to families and members of the community. Of those who offer support groups, about 3 in 4 offer groups for people who have experienced grief, loss, or trauma. Of the churches offering support groups, almost 2/3 have no specified curriculum. When American Bible Society's Trauma Healing resources were presented, 90% of the churches surveyed indicated an interest in at least one of the resources listed. The breakdown of specific types of interest is reported in figure 6.

Pastors and church leaders indicated a primary element desired in a trauma healing ministry is that the curriculum be Bible-centered. The second most important element desired in a trauma healing ministry is that it offers resources designed for youth and children. About 1/3 of church leaders indicated an interest in one of the several trauma healing curricula for specific audiences or types of trauma.

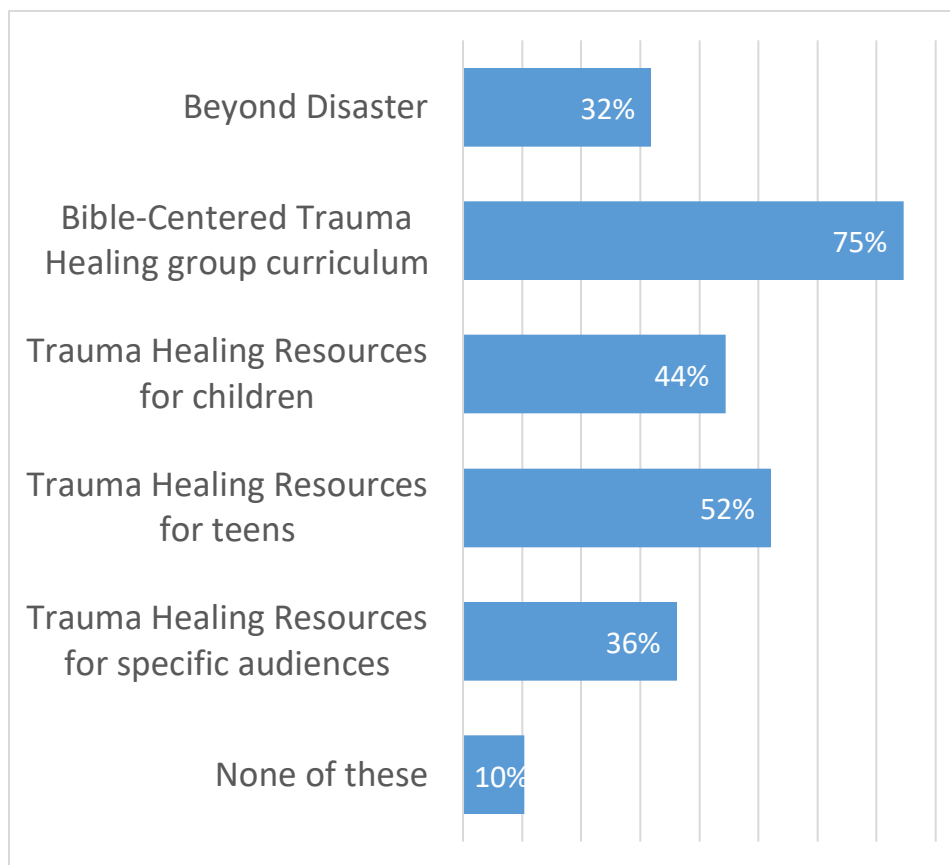


Figure 6. Proportion expressing interest in using specific trauma healing resources.



## Focus Groups

As a follow-up to the survey, focus groups were developed to ask more in-depth questions to over 30 church leaders about trauma and ministry in their churches and communities. Pastors were grouped by size of community, resulting in focus groups of pastors from rural, suburban and medium-sized communities, and pastors in large and urban communities. Each of these groups lasted about an hour. Insights gleaned from these are presented below.

**Rural communities.** In rural communities, there are less frequent events that lead to traumatic experiences. However, these less frequent events tend to impact the entire community for years. These events impact people in churches throughout the community and create a need for trauma healing programs that can be implemented community wide or in collaboration with multiple church bodies. One pastor stated, "People in rural areas don't talk about trauma because they feel like they are the only ones going through it. They end up suffering alone and end up in hopelessness and despair because their trauma feels unrelatable." Rural churches are typically much smaller than those in larger communities, which may create opportunities for collaboration in the training of lay ministers from several different churches who can serve whole communities.

**Suburban and Medium Size cities.** The type of trauma pastors in suburban and medium-sized cities are most likely to encounter is related to abuse. This may be abuse of substances, domestic violence, or spiritual abuse in a church community. Trauma may also be due to significant health challenges, or secondary trauma due to relationships with those who have experienced the traumatic event. These churches tend to be larger, better resourced, and have a desire for more accessible, streamlined resources and training for their leaders and congregants.

A typical pastor in a suburban church feels pressure in knowing how to respond to the sensitivities of trauma. One such pastor shared, "I have haunting thoughts of, *'I'm going to say the wrong thing and deepen their pain'*...The insecurities are overwhelming and deafening at times, and I have a lot of experience as a pastor."

**Urban and Large cities.** Pastors in urban areas carry a lot of stress and can get overwhelmed by the diverse types of suffering and trauma in their communities. Interacting and supporting community members who are experiencing trauma often produces secondary trauma for pastors. The need for trauma healing and support is both acute and chronic. This statement summarizes the sentiment of these church pastors, "It doesn't feel right to make Sundays only about celebration anymore."

**General Insights.** The diverse experience with trauma and specific needs varies from pastor to pastor and by community size. However, there were general themes observed in each of the focus groups. The overall need for trauma healing is palpable. Pastors and church leaders have limited capacity to sufficiently address the trauma needs in their communities. Help is needed to train volunteer leaders and to encourage these leaders to engage in self-care because of the prevalence of secondary trauma.

Another insight observed was out of the various demographics that these pastors and church leaders serve, teens appear to have the greatest need for trauma healing support. Teens experience trauma and often have not developed the cognitive, spiritual, and social resources needed to address it.

Furthermore, when a teen is dealing with trauma issues, pastors recognized that often the rest of their family experiences trauma as a result.

When considering solutions, pastors are reluctant to adopt a new program, no matter how effective it may be. This hesitancy is primarily due to two reasons: cost and capacity. Cost is particularly problematic in rural and urban areas where funds for new or innovative programs are not readily available.

Additionally, new programs require the development and training of current and new volunteers.

Professional staff members often have limited capacity to take on a new ministry, and new volunteers seem to have less margin after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Pastors from the focus groups report that they want a trauma healing program that is Bible-based and informed by best practices in the mental health field. The curriculum should not be rigid in

implementation, but adaptable to people from diverse cultural, educational, and faith backgrounds.

Finally, the pastors report that a trauma healing program needs to be implemented by laity without the requirement of complex or time-intensive training programs and certification processes.

## Summary

The results of this survey and focus groups indicate significant trauma impacting U.S. churches, pastors, and leaders, but the results also suggest a significant opportunity. There is a clear need for trauma healing resources in churches and communities of varying sizes across the United States. The type of programs pastors look for are Bible-based curricula that are adaptable to reach a diverse audience and allows for the training of church leaders and volunteers to be simple and accessible. The barriers indicated by pastors and church leaders for new ministry programs include the financial cost and capacity limitations of church leaders, revealing again both critical challenges and opportunities.

For more than 20 years, people all over the world have been learning how to safely and effectively lead groups for vulnerable people through Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society, so they can grow closer to God. The Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society uses a Bible-based trauma healing curriculum. This program combines the wisdom of scripture, proven mental health best practices, the power of community, and is delivered through accessible technology in a small group setting. The Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society is responding to the clear need for trauma healing resources through the refinement and expansion of our most used and sought after resources. There is critical work being done to address barriers churches have towards these programs through integrating technology in key areas. Our goal is for Trauma Healing Ministry at American Bible Society to offer U.S. churches and organizations easy-to-use ministry tools and resources so they can be equipped to help people heal in their own communities. Our desire is to see God's Word restoring hope among pastors, leaders and U.S. churches.