**Why We Fail the Grieving**

**Comforting bereaved people takes more than good intentions.**

Philip Kenyon

How can a church comfort and support those who grieve? Beyond providing funerals, meals, and flowers, what can the church do to walk alongside those who have suffered a significant loss?

Consider how two churches responded to deaths within their respective congregations:

The first story is mine. It was more than 30 years ago when my father died of cancer. I remember standing in the narthex of the church looking at my friends. They were talking among themselves and every now and then, would glance quickly in my direction. They knew my father had died but they did not approach me. I think they wanted to do something to extend support or comfort, but they did not know what to say or do. So they just stood there. It made me feel like I had a contagious disease. Let’s call it “Grief Pox.” No one ever sent a card or expressed any tangible support through my bereavement. I was left to navigate the waters of grief by myself.

The second story belongs to a friend whose husband died of cancer over a year ago. On the anniversary of his death, the church sent her a card of support and remembrance. She responded to the church with a note that, in part, said, “I thought everyone had forgotten.” A simple card ministered to my friend. It demonstrated to her that the church had not forgotten the death of her husband.

Many churches do not have a plan on how to support those who have suffered a loss. This is not done intentionally. It is more a case of benign neglect. I see three reasons why the bereaved easily drop off the church's radar: feelings of awkwardness, discomfort with our mortality, and unrealistic expectations.

**1. Feelings of awkwardness**

It’s awkward dealing with grieving people. As I found when my father died, my friends wanted to do something but were not comfortable engaging me. We fear we will say the wrong thing or do something insensitive. We worry our efforts may cause further emotional distress. Fortunately, the grieving rarely want us to come up with the perfect thing to say.

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In college I heard author Joseph Bayly speak about the loss of his children. Out of seven children, three had died. After the death of one of his children, many friends and church members came over to comfort him and his family. He appreciated their concern and visits. However, he found little comfort in their attempts to ease his grief. Scriptures about heaven and his child no longer suffering and being in “a better place” were not helpful. What was helpful was a friend who, mostly in silence, just sat with him. His friend did not feel compelled to say the right thing or fill the silence with words. He just sat with him. And that meant the most.

At times, when I’m with the bereaved, I’m eager to say the right thing to salve their wounds. This desire to be useful, to answer the question “why,” and to ease the pain of loss is common among clergy or friends of the bereaved. But Job’s friends were doing the right thing when they sat in silence with him. It was when they started to share their insights and platitudes that they failed him as a friend.

**2. Discomfort with mortality**

The second hindrance to ministering to the bereaved is our reluctance to focus on our own mortality. Acknowledging that our life in this world is finite can be uncomfortable. Working as a chaplain in hospice and as a bereavement coordinator forced me to come to terms with the inevitability of my own death. I’m not talking about wallowing in morbid despair. It was seeing my death as part of an earthly life—not an end to my existence. As a Christian I have hope and faith in my salvation.

I’m not a gnostic; I enjoy creation and my life. I love this life with all its attachments, friends, loved ones, security, and stability. I learned I had to hold the hope of eternal life (the unseen real) and sadness about leaving this life (grief) in tension.

Admitting that tension allowed me to honest. It gave me empathy with my patients. Being anxious or fearful about my own mortality crippled my efforts to reach out to the grieving. As I became more at honest with the contradictions within my soul, I became more effective in supporting others.

**3. Unrealistic expectations**

Having unrealistic expectations when working with the bereaved can cause frustration too. I remember talking with a pastor who was frustrated because a grieving member of his congregation was not following the proper “stages” outlined in the popular 1969 book On Death and Dying by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The pastor was irritated that the man was flip-flopping between the “stages” of grief Kubler-Ross described (which are no longer considered to be a reliable model by most psychologists) and at times seemed not to be in any particular stage at all.

The problem was not with the bereaved; it was with the pastor’s expectations. The man was following his own course while the pastor (with good intentions) expected him to follow the course that Kubler-Ross had laid out. The best expectation is not to have one. Allow the bereaved the freedom to navigate their own bereavement in their own ways and on their own timelines.

**Follow-up**

One of the most essentials tools is a calendar, online or otherwise. When a death occurs, enter the follow-up information into your calendar for the appropriate action date. Your reminders will help you navigate this process. Then follow these steps:

1. As soon as reasonably possible, make a condolence call to the family. (If you are with the family at the time of death—or soon after—this step is already taken care of.)

2. Within three days of death, send a sympathy card, signed by the church staff and/or elders.

3. After 30 days, make a follow-up call to see how the person is doing and if more support is needed.

4. Every three months, send a brochure dealing with grief/bereavement along with a letter of support.

5. On the anniversary of the death, send a letter acknowledging the occasion and offering ongoing support.

**Cautions**

Everyone grieves in their own way. Pastorally, it is important to remember that there is no magic time period in which one needs to grieve. The pain of a death can be lessened by positive actions over time, but the sense of loss never completely disappears.

Those who walk with those who grieve should be careful with their use of Scripture. I met a woman who told me how her son went off to a Bible college and committed suicide. When she arrived for his memorial service, the president of the college told her that, since her son was a Christian, there was no reason to mourn because he was in heaven. For years she bore the burden of not expressing her grief.

Fortunately, a few years after his death, she found support from three women: a Quaker, a Unitarian, and a member of the United Church of Christ. Betty told me they were “way too liberal theologically for me, but I could tell them my story and they allowed me to grieve and cry.” While she knew she had the hope of the resurrection, her heart and soul were still needed to process the loss, the sudden departure, the separation. Jesus wept and so can we.

Ministering to those who grieve can be challenging, frustrating, and rewarding. You don’t need an advanced degree in counseling or psychology to support those who are grieving. Sensitivity, patience, flexibility, and a follow-up plan are the basic requirements. By initiating a compassionate and timely follow-up, your ministry can help serve and bind up the broken-hearted.

**Resources for Helping the Grieving**

**Online**

* One Caring Place: [www.onecaringplace.com](http://www.onecaringplace.com/)
* HOPE FOR BEREAVED: Understanding, Coping and Growing Through Grief (handbook). Order from: [www.hopeforbereaved.com](http://www.hopeforbereaved.com/)
* Grief Digest. Order from Centering Corporation: [www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org/)
* Grief Support Guide, a handbook for pastors and churches by Lou-Ann
* Various resources including a DVD video series. Order from: [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org)
* [www.goodgriefgroups.com](http://www.goodgriefgroups.com/) Support groups designed to help those who are grieving.

**Books**

* Dobson, Dr. James, 1993. When God Doesn’t Make Sense. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers.
* Grollman, Dr. Earl A. 1995. Living When a Loved One Has Died. Boston: Beacon Press.
* Hsu, Dorothy. 1995. Mending. Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade.
* Lewis, C.S. 1980. A Grief Observed. New York: Bantam Books.
* Manning, Doug. 1979. Don’t Take My Grief Away From Me. Springfield, Illinois: Insight Books.
* Manning, Doug. 2004. The Power of Presence. Springfield, Illinois: Insight Books.
* Westburg, Granger. 1971. Good Grief. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
* Ziglar, Zig. 1998. Confessions of a Grieving Christian. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
* Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Susan J. and Robert C. DeVries. 1998. Getting to the Other Side of Grief. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

**Organizations**

* [Journeying through Grief - Stephen Ministries](http://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrBT.Dp_c5UKO0AENBXNyoA;_ylu=X3oDMTEzbGtlMWtsBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwM1BHZ0aWQDVklQNTYwXzEEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1422880361/RO=10/RU=http%3a%2f%2fwww.stephenministries.org%2fgriefresources%2fdefault.cfm%2f774/RK=0/RS=7iuExoYL7X4F9f.dUHlBc5NrnvA-)
* [www.stephenministries.org/griefresources/default.cfm/774](http://www.stephenministries.org/griefresources/default.cfm/774)
* [Hospice Foundation of America](http://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=A0LEV0an_s5U6gwAnb1XNyoA;_ylu=X3oDMTEzNnBzOTdoBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMzBHZ0aWQDVklQNTYwXzEEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1422880552/RO=10/RU=http%3a%2f%2fhospicefoundation.org%2f/RK=0/RS=hra38lbwpRzZGDCMpwgzha3xbdI-)
* [National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization](http://www.nhpco.org/)
* [ADEC Home](http://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=A0LEVzyOFOZU2O0A3bpXNyoA;_ylu=X3oDMTBybGY3bmpvBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMyBHZ0aWQDBHNlYwNzcg--/RV=2/RE=1424393487/RO=10/RU=http%3a%2f%2fwww.adec.org%2fadec%2fdefault.aspx/RK=0/RS=e9CUCgB38PQjIhMJtHrEDFCuG_o-)

The Association for Death Education and Counseling® is an international, professional organization dedicated to promoting excellence and recognizing diversity in death education, care of the dying, grief counseling and research in thanatology.

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