

The Early Days of Caring for Grieving Families

An Introduction for Pastors and Faith Leaders



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When I entered pastoral ministry 30 years ago, I knew there would be times when I would have to deal with death. To be honest, I was fairly comfortable with the fact that death was a “natural” part of life. When I performed the funeral services for an 87 year-old grandmother and a 72 year-old farmer, I didn’t feel I had any difficulties saying and doing the right things. But when a young mother in our church lost her child at birth, an entirely new world of grief care opened to me. I wasn’t prepared for this new world of grief. I wasn’t prepared for the raw emotions. I wasn’t prepared to answer the natural questions that this mother had regarding God’s lack of answer to her prayers. I wasn’t ready. So I did the best I could. Then, in 1988, my 13 year-old daughter died of heart disease. It was then that I realized “my best” was pathetically poor. In a moment I became the dad who had lost a child. My wife became a mom who would never hold her child again. My other two children became siblings without a sister.

I share these insights with you so that you will know that what I am about to share with you comes not just from study, but also from real world experience. In 2007, my wife Judy and I opened Smile Again Ministries, a retreat center just for parents who have lost a child. Much of what I share is based upon working with many, many families who have lost a child. It is my desire that I can help you, as a pastor steer away from shallow care giving and from using dismissive and superficial answers for one of life’s deepest hurts and struggles. Here are some thoughts about how you can provide significant and meaningful pastoral care to grieving parents through the first hours, days and weeks following the child’s death.

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Immediately Upon Hearing of the Child's Death

At some point in your ministry, your phone will ring, and you will hear a frantic voice on the other end of the line telling you that a child has died. What will you do then?

FIRST: If possible, find out what happened. Did the child die as a result of an accident, illness, suicide or murder? You don't need to get details, just an initial idea of the cause of the death.

SECOND: Find out where the family of this child is at that moment. In other words, is the family at a hospital? Or are they at home? Try to find out where the parent(s) are at that moment.

THIRD: Once you know where the family is, go to them. This may not be possible if the family is out of town and something happened while they were away. If the family is some distance away, try to get a phone number where you could reach the parents. You will want to make contact with the family as quickly as possible. If the family is within a one-hour drive, you do not necessarily need to call them. Just go to wherever they are.

During your Initial Meeting with the Family (the First Day)

1. If you have a church hot line or prayer chain you will want to contact those people and begin asking people for prayer. Keep your information to this group as short as possible. If you don't know details, simply ask for prayer based upon what you know. (Note that if you have not yet set up some type of "crisis team" within your church setting, I would encourage you to do so because this type of emergency is inevitable.)

2. Go to the family. If the family is at the hospital, go to the hospital information desk; let the person know you are a pastor, and that you have come to be with the family in need (tell them the family's name). I always carry a Bible when I go into a setting like this – and I have Bible passages already marked for this occasion.

3. When you meet the family, be prepared for a highly emotional reaction and confusion on the part of the family. Just give the family members a hug. Touch is an important part now of your care giving. Say very little. I would suggest something like, "I am so sorry for your loss. Can you tell me what happened? Chances are the family may be confused as to what exactly happened if it was an accident and they were not present. Simply listen. Don't ask any more questions than you need to.

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Don't be surprised if you become an intermediary between the family and the hospital staff. If they are confused see if you can find a nurse or doctor who can explain the situation to the family.

4. It is very probable that the family will want to see their child's body, if they haven't already. Volunteer to go into the room with them. Sometimes hospitals are hesitant to have family members view the body if there has been a horrible accident and their child's body is disfigured. If that is the case, it becomes part of your ministry to ask the family to hold off on viewing their child's body until an appropriate time. I do think it is important for family members to see the body as soon as possible. Go with the family if they want. Don't be at all surprised again by the emotions and/or words that are said when they see their child. This will be particularly true if the child has taken their own life. Some parents want to hold their child. If it is possible, I always encourage it. If there is one-thing parents have told us repeatedly, when coming for counseling, it is that they wish they had held their child one last time. Again, tubes may hamper this and other medical devices connected to their loved one. Simply do everything you can to help the family express their grief. Don't be afraid to reach out and touch the child yourself. I often touch their hand or arm. This is actually a comforting thing for the family to witness. It says to them that you care. I also look around the room to see if there is anyone who seems to be unable to express their emotions. I will usually go and stand beside them and place my hand on their shoulder. Again, you don't need to talk.

5. I find scripture is important during this time. When it appears as though the family has had time to say and experience their time with the child I ask them if it would be all right to read some scripture. If they say no, then do not. When they say yes I am prepared to read a passage. Some of my favorite passages are:

John 14:1-6

Psalm 23

Psalm 121

Keep the reading short. Then offer a brief prayer for the family. I never read Romans 8:28. This is not the appropriate time for that verse!

6. If it seems appropriate, I ask the family if they have thought of what funeral home they would like to use for their child's funeral arrangements. Chances are, they have not. So I leave them with information to help in this area. Since the hospital will be asking the same question, I find it helpful to the family if I do the asking first. Then I can pass along the information to the hospital staff. As you leave stop by the nurse's station to let them know you are available for any needs the family may have. Give them a business card for easy reference. Don't feel like you have to stay with the

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family until they leave the hospital. It may take them hours to say goodbye. Just use your own judgment regarding the length of your stay. But always let the family know when you are leaving.

7. Once you have accurate information regarding the child's death, you can begin to release it. If the child committed suicide, I ask the family ahead of time if they would allow me to let our church family know that detail. If they would rather I not, then I don't. Please note that this is not a "Facebook" kind of notification. Be careful how you use a social network for dissemination of information. The family may use this kind of network, but I would recommend that churches stay away from it. I also find it personally helpful to write a few notes about the facts for my own use and any concerns I might have regarding the family's response to the death.

8. Finally, at this point you should begin connecting with people who may need to know about an impending funeral service. I usually contacted my music director, and other support staff. While you may not know details, it does give them a heads up on the need for their services in the near future.

At the Funeral Home, the Visitation, the Funeral, and the Internment (the First Week)

AT THE FUNERAL HOME

For most families, going to the funeral home is a very traumatic experience. With this in mind, you may offer to be present with the family when they are making arrangements for their child's burial. If I'm asked to participate I always show up a bit early to just connect with the mortician. In all probability, you will have met with these people on other occasions.

Once the family arrives, I will often introduce them more formally to the mortician and then sit back and let the family make decisions. I never offer advice unless asked directly. Remember, this is THEIR child's funeral arrangement, so their choices need to be affirmed. I've never had a mortician strong-arm a family into buying more services than they needed. If that did begin to happen, however, I would feel justified in stepping in to help keep the family from incurring more debt than needed.

One area that families are dealing with more than before is the idea of cremation. The family often investigates this since it is almost always cheaper than a regular burial. Families will sometimes ask me if I think it's okay to cremate someone. Whenever someone asks me that question, I usually dig a bit deeper because there is usually an underlying concern. In particular, does the Bible say it's wrong to cremate

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a body? It will be your job to answer any questions they might have about cremation.

During the funeral arrangements the family will need to have a list of pallbearers, musical requirements, an obituary, and luncheon needs/requests. You will probably be able to help the family with the musical ideas, as well as what the church will provide for a luncheon – if one is planned.

One final note related to the funeral costs. Some churches have benevolent funds or other funding options that would allow the church to underwrite some of the costs of a child's funeral. If your church has such funding available, please let the family know before making arrangements.

THE WAKE / VISITATION

Nearly all families will be given the option to have a time of visitation where friends and family can come to pay their respects to the family. This is most often held the day/night before the funeral service.

As a pastor I would encourage you to let the family know that you will be at the visitation and that if they want anything special done during that time you would be more than willing to help. Families will sometimes ask for a special 30 minute time slot for prayer and remembrances. That is a time you will need to act as the facilitator. You should come prepared to tell people specifically what this time is for and how they can participate in it.

Once again, it will not be necessary for you to be at the visitation for the entire time it is held. I most often come at least 15 minutes prior to the visitation opening to the public so I can spend some alone time with the family members. I always let the family know when I am leaving.

THE FUNERAL

Funeral homes will usually plan to have the body of the loved one at the church or chapel at least one hour before the funeral service begins. I am always present when the body arrives and to greet the family as they arrive.

By now the bulletin or order of service is printed. I often ask the family if there is anything else they would like to add to the service. This is usually a family member reading a memorial or something like that.

Ten minutes before the funeral I gather with the family in a secluded area for a time of prayer and to simply introduce myself to extended family members. I do all I can to help them feel comfortable about what is going to happen.

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In our setting, the pastor always leads the casket and family into the worship center.

INTERMENT

If there is an interment, it will usually take place immediately following the funeral service. This is the moment that can be especially painful to the mom and dad and extended family.

At the graveside I share a brief portion of Scripture. Then I pray, closing with everyone joining me in praying the Lord's Prayer.

When I am done with the prayer I thank everyone for coming and invite them back to the church for the luncheon (if there is one). Then I go to the parents and extended family to share one last time my condolences over their loss.

Most cemeteries wait for everyone to leave before completing the burial process. Let the parents know that they can request to stay and watch, if they wish.

In the Subsequent Weeks and Months

I have found that most families will experience good support for the first week or two following the funeral of their child. But after that, support begins to dwindle, and the cold realities of the child's death settle in. Pastor, this is the time when the family will need your support more than ever.

How do you support them?

- Drop them notes saying you are praying for them.
- Stop by on the one-month anniversary of their child's death to let them know you remember. While there, talk about their child by name. In fact, always talk about their child by name when interacting with the family.
- Check out counseling options for the family. It has been my experience that the death of a child is one moment in life when going in for counseling is an important part of healing from the hurts that accompany a child's death. There are growing resources now for families who have had a child die.
- Encourage the church family to help underwrite the cost of the family's counseling times. Churches are often looking for ways to help grieving families. This is an excellent help to them.
- Remember anniversaries. I wrote down the names of every person I buried and sent families notes of remembrance on the anniversary of their death.
- Don't forget the surviving siblings. If there are other children in the home, don't forget to reach out to them, too. Their pain is often hidden, since they don't want their mom and dad to suffer any more than they already are. So

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instead of expressing their grief, they often “stuff” it. The results can be incredibly painful down the road. Therefore, I encourage you to remember to check in on the surviving siblings to make sure they are grieving in a healthy way.

I’m amazed at the question that families often hear after the death of a child. The question goes like this, “So, are you over it yet?” This is one of the most painful comments a person can make to a grieving mom and dad. As a caregiver you need to realize that a parent NEVER gets over the death of their child. They can learn to live again. They can learn to enjoy life again. But their lives are forever changed by the death of their child. As a pastor, please remember this and continually reach out to families after their child dies. It will mean the world to them.