Walking through the valley
A guide to bereavement support for churches
The last taboo
Bereavement and society

Society’s attitude towards death and bereavement has changed over the past hundred years.

Mortality rates a century ago were higher and families and communities lived much closer together. Death, the rituals surrounding it, and the grief of the bereaved were much more public and communal than they are now.

In today’s society the subject of death is not something that we generally like to think about, despite the fact that it is the one certainty in life for us all. Our culture struggles with public expressions of grief and talking about death has become the last great taboo. Because of this it is sometimes difficult to understand what those suffering the pain and heartache of the loss of a loved one are going through and we can feel ill-equipped to support them. Often we struggle with the awkwardness and embarrassment of not quite knowing what to do or say.

It would be so much more convenient if the impact of bereavement were something we could simply ‘get over’, but the reality is that for anyone suffering a close bereavement, grief is a journey that takes time. It is a path strewn with heartache, pain, complex emotions and difficult practicalities. Where there is silence or a perceived lack of understanding from the community around them, the bereaved person can easily become isolated and confused. This makes it difficult for them to grieve effectively and rebuild their life.

There are over 500,000 deaths every year in the UK\(^1\) – with each one likely to significantly affect two to four close family members.

A close bereavement is one of the most stressful life events, with the potential to have a considerable impact on physical and mental health.\(^2\)

1 Office of National Statistics 2018

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Introduction

This resource is designed to help you support bereaved people in your church family or wider community. It is likely that all of us, at some point in our lives, will have the responsibility of coming alongside and supporting those who have lost loved ones. It is a privileged but sometimes daunting task for both church leaders and lay people. In producing this booklet we have used information from a UK-wide survey of church leaders and our experience of supporting bereaved people over a period of 15 years.

Whether you have many years of working in this area, or are relatively new to it, and whatever your understanding of grief processes, we hope this will be of help as you support those suffering the pain and heartache of loss.

Katharine Hill
Director,
Care for the Family

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Giving comfort
Bereavement and the church

It’s interesting that even when faith has never really played a particularly central role in their lives, many people instinctively turn to the church to help them grieve the passing of loved ones.

Perhaps it is the ceremony, the comfort of faith, or the need for a deeper spirituality, but the church is often felt to be the most appropriate place to turn to in matters of life and death.

Christian services are performed throughout the UK by ministers of all denominations in churches, crematoria and funeral parlours. The Church of England alone performs funeral services for over a third of those who die in England each year and it is likely that well over half of newly-bereaved people are in contact with a church.

With up to two million people suffering a close bereavement each year, the church is in a unique position to be able to connect with and support people on their grief journey.

Moved to compassion
The mission of the church in respect of bereaved people is clear: the community of faith is to come alongside all those who are struggling and in need of support. The scriptures are full of exhortations to care for “widows and orphans”, and they recount two specific occasions when Jesus was “moved to compassion” in the face of family grief (the stories of Lazarus in John 11:1-44 and the Widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-17). The church is challenged to mirror Jesus’ compassionate approach to grief, loss and bereavement.

“...I have found that just sitting quietly with someone, allowing them to be silent, to talk or cry while I do little other than pray silently has been very helpful.”
Church of England Minister, Yorkshire

Understanding the heartache
How a bereaved person might be feeling

For many people facing a close bereavement, the loss is devastating. Grief has no set pattern – it is unique to each individual – yet there are some common experiences that bereaved people face.

In the early days of their bereavement people may feel shock, numbness or a sense of denial. They may find it difficult to function normally and basic tasks may seem overwhelming.

Common emotions that bubble to the surface include anger, guilt, fear and an overwhelming sadness.

Anger
Even if the death was nobody’s fault, it is very common for a grieving person to feel angry. This may be directed towards themselves, towards God, other family members, doctors or even the person who died, for abandoning them.

Guilt
People can often feel guilty about things that they didn’t say or do, or because they feel they should have been able to prevent the death in some way. They may also feel guilty if they experience certain emotions they don’t think they should have – for example, having a sense of relief after the death or being unable to cry. They can also feel guilty when they have a good time or laugh about something. Such feelings often cause distress and self-blame.

Fear
After a significant loss people can become fearful or anxious. They may suffer panic attacks, be afraid of what might happen in the future, or feel anxious about their own or another’s mortality. They may also be fearful of being alone.

Sadness
Profound sadness is the most common response to grief. People can feel overwhelmed by their loss, be unable to stop crying, or be in a very fragile emotional state. Sadness can overshadow many emotions and experiences after bereavement. Similar emotions include despair, emptiness or a deep-seated sense of loneliness.

A range of physical symptoms can also accompany grief such as stomach or chest pains, loss of appetite, nausea, tiredness or insomnia, confusion and an inability to concentrate. The heartache of loss is real and deep, and yet it is also part of the journey from grief to restoration.

“...The days, weeks and months following the death were the most painful of our lives. We were utterly bereft and yet we knew we had to carry on living.”
Paul and Sarah, bereaved parents
Standing together

How the church can support a bereaved person

As so many funerals in the UK have some involvement from the local church, there is a great opportunity for the church to get to know and support an individual or family who has been bereaved.

Ways in which the church can help:

- Visit as soon as possible after the bereavement (and arrange follow up visits).
- Help with practical tasks.
- Liaise with the undertaker or funeral director as appropriate.
- Discuss the funeral arrangements and help to choose hymns and readings.
- Keep in contact with the family after the funeral.
- Pray for the family, or with them if appropriate.

The desire to care and support should, however, be tempered with sensitivity – a well-meaning rush to assist and help can be very stressful and pressurising for someone who has recently been bereaved.

It is important to recognise that not all church leaders have the time or resources to undertake the level of support that a bereaved person may require. Where possible encourage others in the church to help.

Your first visit

The first visit to a bereaved person, whether you already know them or not, is vital. Be aware that at this stage they are likely to be numb and in shock, and will be ‘going through the motions’. The most important things are to show them that you care and to let them set the agenda as much as possible.

“I think the most important thing is to let the bereaved person take the lead. Sometimes they will want to talk about their loved one and other times they will want to talk about other things. And it is alright to laugh with them. Offer to pray with them and don’t be offended if they don’t want to. Offering a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on is the very best thing you can do. No advice, no solutions. It is just hard to lose someone.”

Church of England Minister, Herefordshire

These pointers may help when visiting:

- **Listening is the most important thing you can do.** A simple “I’m sorry for your loss” is better than a thousand words.
- **Periods of silence are OK** – they are part of the grieving process – and your presence with them will, in itself, be comforting.
- **Let them set the agenda for their grief** and know that it’s OK to cry, talk, or remain silent if they need to. There’s no ‘right’ way to respond or express their feelings.
- **Grief is unique to everyone who experiences it**, so try not to say that you understand how they feel, even if you’ve been bereaved yourself.
- **Try to discern how spiritually aware the bereaved person may be** and use appropriate words. This is not the time to quote Bible verses or to start to answer difficult questions – there will be time for that later. Do offer to pray for them though.
- **Be aware of all the practical issues** that have to be undertaken by the bereaved person in the first couple of weeks after a death. Offer to help in any way that you are able and that seems appropriate.
- **Look out for longer-term practical support** that the church can give over the next weeks and months.
- **Make sure that they know that you/the church are available** and want to support them in whatever ways might help, now and in the future. Leave a brief booklet about bereavement if appropriate and your/your church’s contact details.
- **Keep your visit short**, but come back soon.

“A few days after our daughter died I met Judy our local vicar, who is one of the most amazing people I have ever come across. She supported us, loved us and kept us functioning as a family.”

Clare, bereaved parent
The funeral is an essential stepping stone on the journey of grief and helping to plan it is a very practical contribution you can make.

But though people will appreciate help and guidance, remember that it’s important for them to remain practically involved: their participation can help them come to terms with events and also give them something to focus on to carry them through the first few days of grieving.

Talking to the family to discuss their wishes for the funeral can help to make it personal to them, not just a civic duty or a religious necessity. If their loved one is not previously known to the church, gathering information from the family about their life and character can be especially helpful. It’s important to make sure you give the family as positive an experience as possible. If they feel their loved one was remembered accurately and that he or she would have liked the service, it will help them feel that the person has been honoured, and help to give them some comfort while they grieve.

What other church leaders have said:

“Preparation for a funeral has always been a positive experience. When doing ministerial training it was suggested that we use some of the actual words that relatives used when talking about their loved one. I have found this to be greatly appreciated by the family.”
Methodist Minister, Hampshire

“It’s important to spend quality time on the home visit and preparation for the funeral. I like to give a copy of the words used at the service to the next of kin.”
Church of England Minister, Warwickshire

“Often families, regardless of the age of deceased, feel unable to bring children to funeral services. So we have worked at creating short acts of worship after the funeral that children can attend. These can be held either as an independent event or at a burial of ashes which has a much more ‘all age’ feel.”
Church of England minister, Tyne and Wear

“The service itself is of tremendous importance, but its helpfulness depends on ensuring at least two visits to the family to listen and discuss the service so that ‘the person at the front’ is not a stranger and is able to offer the best possible goodbye.”
Baptist Minister, Kent

Saying goodbye

The funeral process

Care for the journey

The days and weeks after the funeral

Often the time after the funeral can be very hard for a bereaved person. At this stage the everyday reality of their loss becomes apparent and the support of friends or family members can begin to decrease.

For those experiencing a close bereavement this can be a very lonely and isolating time. It can appear to them that those around them are now over it and are getting on with life, while they themselves are still in a very dark place.

During the days and weeks following the funeral, a church can support a bereaved person in a number of ways:

- **Keep in touch**, whether through a visit or a phone call. If you are in regular contact you will be in a good place to forge relationships and find out how they are coping.
- **Offer continuing practical support** if possible, such as meals or lifts, but try to ensure you are not disempowering them, as they will find having some practical jobs to do helpful. Taking them shopping or helping them plan their meals can provide a helpful balance.
- **Talk openly with them about the person who died.** They may feel that other friends or family members are reluctant to keep hearing about their loss and so need to be given ‘permission’ to talk about it themselves. Don’t be embarrassed if they get upset; it’s OK if they start to cry while you talk.
- **Help them to deal with any changes.** The bereavement may have brought new caring responsibilities with it, so you may need to chat through these changes with them or help them with making key decisions.

“In my experience, there is no ‘normal’ time-period in the bereavement process. Each person deals with grief in different ways so it is about having patience, understanding and a shoulder to cry on. Most of the time it is also about just being there when they are ready to grieve.”

Independent church leader, Dorset
A sense of community
On-going support

As the weeks turn into months, a bereaved person may still require support.

The grieving process can last a lot longer than people expect. There is no time limit on grief and a church can help to support them at this time by walking together with them on their grief journey. Creating a sense of a caring community can speak volumes.

Ways in which a church can provide on-going support to a bereaved person:

- Let them know that the church is available for them. While it can be difficult to keep visiting regularly, a phone call or occasional visit can make all the difference.
- Look out for signs that the bereaved person isn’t coping. If they continue to seem very depressed, or have cut themselves off from other people, they may need to seek help from a doctor.
- Always remember the anniversary of the death, perhaps by sending a card to let them know that you’re thinking of them.
- Consider putting on a memorial service near Christmas for everyone who has been bereaved in the past year. Christmas is often a difficult time, and it can help to be able to remember the person who has died in a positive way.
- Invite them to church events or out for coffee. It can be helpful for a person who is grieving to have a change of scenery – something to look forward to that will help to break up the day.
- Consider whether you can start a group for bereaved people or set up a bereavement visiting team. These are particularly effective ways of providing support.

"People need time. Time to come to terms with their loss, time to step back until they are ready. They also need encouragement and support to get involved and to know that they are still needed, valued and have lots to offer."
Church of Ireland Minister, Co. Armagh

The loss of a life partner

When a spouse has died

For someone grieving the death of a spouse, it is very likely that the primary emotions they will face will be loneliness and heartache.

Other issues, both emotional and practical, may cause anxiety over the weeks and months as they journey through the grieving process. These can include:

Loss of identity
Whilst they will clearly be grieving for the person who has died, they will also be grieving for the role and relationship they had with them. They are no longer a husband or wife, or part of a couple – often after a lifetime together – and this can be very hard to come to terms with.

Loss of friendships
Social situations can become very difficult. They may now find that they are uncomfortable around friends who they used to spend time with as a couple, or feel alienated from their former social circle.

Loneliness
When you have spent many years being part of a couple there can be a profound sense of loneliness at the thought of having to cope with the rest of life on your own.

New responsibilities
A widow or widower will suddenly find themselves taking responsibility for many new things they may never have faced before. These could be practical things such as cooking meals, DIY or taking primary responsibility for their children. There could be significant financial issues depending on the situation with regard to insurance and a will. There will also be lots of decisions to be made, which can be daunting for someone to do on their own.

Concern for children
If a bereaved person still has children at home it is very probable that they will be worrying about how the children are coping with the death of their parent. They may also worry about how they will cope now they are parenting on their own. They may busy themselves with...
looking after the children and put their own feelings of grief on hold.

Someone who has been widowed is most likely to be feeling as though no one understands what they are going through, and so it is important to give them lots of opportunities to talk. They may also be struggling to understand what life without their husband or wife will look like, and so it can be helpful, at the right time, to encourage them to take a step forward. This doesn’t mean that they are leaving their beloved who has died behind, but that they are, instead, finding a positive way to take their memories of their spouse with them and integrating them into their future.

“My family and friends were wonderful. They did everything they could to help us, but none of them really understood my grief because they hadn’t ‘been there’.”

Chantal, a young widow

Widowed Young Support from Care for the Family

Care for the Family supports those whose partner has died at a young age through its Widowed Young Support project.

Everyone on the team has personally experienced the death of a husband or wife whilst still young, and understands the devastation this brings to individuals and families. They are able to walk alongside those who are grieving to help them through the ups and downs of bereavement and to help give fresh hope and possibilities for the future.

Widowed Young Support is available to those who have lost a partner up to the age of 50, or older if they still have dependent children.

The support available from Care for the Family includes:

- **Telephone befriending** – Peer support from someone who understands.
- **Regular email newsletters** – Helpful insights for the bereavement journey ahead.
- **Support days and weekends** – Space and time for those who are grieving to concentrate on rebuilding and facing the future with hope among people who understand.
- **Resources** – Encouraging articles and real-life stories via the Web and Facebook pages.

To find out more about Widowed Young Support, or to put someone you are supporting in touch with Care for the Family visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk/wys

An unthinkable loss

When a child has died

The death of a child is every parent’s worst nightmare.

It seems to be contrary to nature itself; regardless of the age of the child, it is never part of the expected order of life. Every parent has hopes and dreams for their children, and when these are shattered by an untimely death, it is simply devastating. Bereaved parents will face a number of challenges. These can include:

**Relationship difficulties**
The death of a child can put immense pressure on a couple’s relationship because the parents may well grieve in different ways from each other and this can cause added tension. It can also be hard for a couple to support each other when they both have to deal with their own individual pain.

**Feeling isolated**
Most bereaved parents have never met anyone else who has lost a child, and it can be a very lonely and isolating experience. They may find that other people avoid them because they don’t know what to say or that people treat them very differently than they did before the death.

**Parenting remaining children**
Alongside coping with their own grief, those who still have other children to look after will have to deal with the day-to-day issues of parenting and caring for a child who is grieving a sibling.

**On-going challenges**
The grief a parent will have after the death of a child can last for a lifetime. There will be many occasions over the years where they will be reminded of what ‘should have been’. When they see their child’s peers reach certain
milestones such as starting school, going to university or getting married, it can trigger an unexpected response and the pain can feel just as raw as it did in the early days after the death.

Some bereaved parents have to face particularly challenging circumstances. When an only child has died, the parents have gone from being a family to being childless. They have to deal with the added loss of identity now that they are no longer visibly someone’s parent. If a single parent has been bereaved they are much more likely to feel lonely and in need of someone to talk to.

For parents who have experienced a still birth, the pain of losing a child is just as raw. They have not had the opportunity to get to know their baby, or have happy memories of family life with the child.

The unexpected loss
Sudden and traumatic bereavement

Death under any circumstances will be traumatic for those left behind, however, when a sudden and unexpected death occurs – maybe as a result of a fatal accident or through medical causes – there is an additional impact.

Receiving news of a sudden death will understandably shock someone to the core, as they have not had time to emotionally prepare for the death.

Some of the first emotions that those learning of a traumatic death will feel are shock and numbness, often followed by a sense of disbelief or denial. Shock can cause people to act on autopilot, where they carry out routine things without really focusing on what they’re doing; or, they may even lose their ability to function in regular activities. This is where they may appreciate a practical offer of help with everyday tasks, things that now seem insignificant to them in the light of their present circumstances.

In the event of an accident or unlawful death, a Police Family Liaison Officer may be assigned to support the family during the initial stages of investigation. There may also be interest from the media, which can bring additional pressure to the bereaved family. It may be appropriate to offer to help with tasks such as preparing a written statement or selecting a photo to give to reporters. Always deal with such situations carefully and seek advice where possible.

With sudden death the absence of an opportunity to say goodbye or put things right can be an added complication for those who are grieving. They may feel that they need to replay the circumstances of the death again and again until they are as sure as they can be of what happened. Because of this, they will need many opportunities to talk and be listened to as they go through this process.

“Anniversaries are always hard reminders that life is not what it used to be. Even though we learn to live life again and find a ‘new normal’, anniversaries, and particularly the run-up to them, are very painful.”

Paul, a bereaved father

Bereaved Parent Support from Care for the Family

Care for the Family supports parents who have lost a son or daughter at any age, and in any circumstances through its Bereaved Parent Support project.

Everyone on the team has personally experienced the death of a child, and so they are able to understand the unique challenges that bereaved parents face.

The support available from Care for the Family includes:

- **Telephone befriending** – Peer support from someone who has ‘been there’ and understands.
- **Regular email newsletters** – Helpful insights and on-going support for the bereavement journey ahead.
- **Support days and weekends** – space and time for those who are grieving to concentrate on rebuilding and facing the future with hope among people who understand.
- **Resources** – encouraging articles and real-life stories via the website and Facebook pages.

To find out more about Bereaved Parent Support, or to put someone you are supporting in touch with Care for the Family, please go to www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bps

“Anniversaries are always hard reminders that life is not what it used to be. Even though we learn to live life again and find a ‘new normal’, anniversaries, and particularly the run-up to them, are very painful.”

Paul, a bereaved father

“In one hour my life had turned upside down. One minute I was happily married with two children, the next I was a widow. One minute we were going swimming, the next I was saying ‘Goodbye’. Outside the sun was still shining but to me the sky was black.”

Liz, a young widow
**The long goodbye**

Bereavement after a long-term illness

When someone dies after a long-term illness, people can sometimes assume that it is easier for the family and close friends to cope with.

However, there will be a number of issues that the family will face, and coming to terms with the loss will be just as hard as it would be for any other type of bereavement.

Even though they may have been ‘prepared’ for the death, the person who has been bereaved may still go into shock when the death finally comes. They are also likely to feel guilt, particularly if they find themselves feeling relieved after the death – relief, perhaps, that their loved one is no longer in pain, or simply because the responsibility of many months of intensive care and treatment is now over. They may also feel a loss of identity now that they are no longer a primary ‘carer’ for someone.

It can be helpful for someone in this situation to focus on the memories they have of their loved one before they were ill, rather than on the final tough few months of hospital visits. Encourage them to take small steps towards rebuilding their lives as and when they are ready.

“... The first 18 months were a roller-coaster of emotions. At times I was almost on a high, feeling so proud of Rob, the way he’d bravely faced his illness, and the wonderful things people had said about him in cards and letters. At other times I felt bewildered, sad and, on occasions, overwhelmed by despair.”

Sarah, a widow

**Misunderstood death**

Bereavement through suicide

When someone dies as a result of a decision to end their own life, society often has little sympathy for them.

For family and close friends this can be very difficult as not only are they dealing with the loss of someone close to them, but there is added pressure and shame from society over the way that person has died.

In many ways the painful journey they will be travelling will be similar to others who have been suddenly bereaved and so they will need much of the same support. However, they will also have unique challenges and have to deal with a more complex range of emotions.

If the one who has died had led a troubled life, and even if they had caused pain to those close to them, their family members or friends will still experience genuine grief. There is also likely to be a sense of guilt that they weren’t able to do more to help their loved one or prevent them from taking their own life – “Why didn’t I spot that something was wrong?” If there were no warning signs for the family, they could be left with a greater sense of “Why?” particularly if there was no note.

Often with this type of death there is also the trauma of the involvement of a coroner, and the police; post-mortems and inquests only serve to intensify the distress. These additional pressures can physically take their toll on those who are grieving; they may feel despair, lose sleep and appetite, and the person who found the body may experience traumatic flashbacks or nightmares. This is normal, but if it’s prolonged suggest that they speak to their GP.

“... It is like a bereavement and a divorce combined. The person you loved most in the world has died, but they have also chosen to leave. There is no time for questions or goodbyes.”

Jackie, a young widow
Taking the next step
Where to go for further help

Bereavement and Care for the Family

Care for the Family is committed to supporting family life and helping those going through tough times. That includes caring for those who are struggling with bereavement. Our website features lots of information for bereaved people and for those who are supporting them including a section for churches. You’ll find resources, articles and information about where help can be obtained for a wide range of bereavement situations.

Visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bereavement or call 029 2081 0800.

Training for churches
Care for the Family also offers a one-day course, Bereavement Care Awareness. The course is designed to equip churches to understand the needs of bereaved people in their community and discover how to better support them.

Visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bereavementcare for more information.

Support for church leaders

Supporting those who have been bereaved can be hard work. Planning a funeral, meeting with the family, overseeing a funeral and providing pastoral and practical support can really take its toll on church leaders and lay people. If you have found this to be the case, try to make sure you look after yourself while supporting others. If possible take some time to rest before a funeral and take time out before and after pastoral visits, particularly if they are sensitive ones. Ensure that you have some support around you and people with whom you can speak openly and honestly about this aspect of ministry.

“Listening and pastoral care can be very emotionally draining. In a very busy Parish never ending bereavement work can eventually catch up on you without realising it with overtiredness, or even mild reactive depression. At some point you may have to say ‘no more’ in order to recover.”

Church of England Minister, Norfolk

Other Support Organisations

There are many organisations that can support bereaved people and many who specialise in certain types of bereavement. A comprehensive list can be found at www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bereavement

Cruse Bereavement Care is the largest organisation and can provide support in all bereavement circumstances through a network of local volunteers.

For more information go to www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

This resource was produced in memory of Simon Richmond, whose sudden death in 2008 highlighted to his wife, Rev Canon Yvonne Richmond, the urgent need for greater bereavement support awareness and pastoral care within the church.

Some of the Care for the Family bereavement befriending team

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