

Ministry with the grieving

Twenty of us gathered to talk about having a job that requires us to weep with those who weep.

by [Cornelius Plantinga](#) in the [August 10, 2022](#) issue



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Christian pastors are more than acquainted with grief. They're steeped in it. First responders and emergency room personnel meet grief that accompanies trauma, but they don't usually have to minister to it. Pastors do. Their day job is to weep with those who weep.

And not just when a congregant gets injured or dies. Grief arises from a host of causes. People grieve job loss, with all its anxieties. They lament their poverty. They grieve over the diminishments of aging, over their poor judgment that led to a tragic mistake, over family estrangements. They grieve over the disturbance or loss of their faith—often itself caused by grief. Congregants rejoice when their child graduates or gets married, but they also grieve because while we want our children to grow, when they do grow we ache. Some folks lament a normalcy they never had:

“I so wish I had loved my mother and that she had loved me.” A fair number of congregants feel sad that their lives haven’t turned out as they had hoped. Their lives seem to them flat and insignificant, a wounding rebuke of their youthful dreams.

These are only some of the familiar personal griefs, and they are bad enough. If you add trouble in church, trouble on the job, trouble with neighborhood bigotry, and trouble in a bitterly divided nation, you get a small mountain of grief. And people have trouble getting over it.

For a week in high summer, 20 of us pastors from seven denominations, 12 states, and two Canadian provinces gathered to discuss how pastors deal with grief, including our own. With a couple of exceptions, we had never met one another before. Yet within a day or two we achieved a unity that melted away denominational, geographic, and theological differences. We were united in knowing grief as pastors.

We wanted to know not only what causes grief but also how to help the grieving—what to say, what not to say, what to do, how often to do it, when to stop. We discussed certain days of worship—Christmas, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Thanksgiving—when the wounded are especially vulnerable. We wanted to know how to embrace the grieving in public worship, how to think of Jesus Christ as the ultimate wounded healer, how to minister to ourselves when the congregation’s grief overwhelms and sickens us.

How to help the grieving? Sit with them. Absorb their grief. Weep with them. Remember that close attention is vivifying. It’s a form of love, and love brings life. That’s why we embrace each other at funerals. We can’t bring back the deceased, but we may be able to bring back the bereaved, at least in part.

Encourage a church culture of care for the grieving—let the church organize to bring meals, run errands, do chores. Much of this can be done without saying a lot. Simple loving presence is a staple of grief care. So is a gentle touch. So is thoughtful assistance with the daily responsibilities the grieving may be too numb to tackle.

What to say to the grieving? Again, not much. (One of the pastors observed that before Job’s friends tried to explain his suffering to him, they did him the most good when they sat in silence with him for seven days.) A little can be said. “I’m so sorry.” “How are you doing?” “How are your loved ones?” And, in the case of bereavement,

“Here is what I so treasured in them.” Anything more is a risk. Even “God be with you” is risky. The griever may be angry with God and allergic to closeness with God.

In the seminar, participants told their stories of grieving congregants and of how they attempted to help. One pastor told of being called to a home where a distraught 17-year-old boy had just shot himself through the temple. The house was nearby, and the pastor arrived so quickly that the smell of gun smoke was still in the air. He remarked that too many folks suppose that a pastor’s job is quiet and contemplative, away from the action. But no, in the house he visited that night it was all wailing and gun smoke.

Another pastor told of a person who had taken a loss in her family, and of how a loving congregation wanted to do all the right things—to sit with her, weep with her, share the burden of her loss. But what she really wanted was to be alone for a while, to be apart, to be untended. And the pastor concluded that she was no longer going to assume she knew the best way to help a grieving person and that she would therefore ask things like, “What hurts the most?” and “How may I best help you?”

Occasionally, congregants may ask a pastor for advice in extreme circumstances. They are dying, they are suffering great pain and grieving over it, they have no prospect of recovery, and they have hoarded enough Demerol to put themselves out of their misery. “What do you think?” they ask their pastor. Here, in our discussion, one experienced pastor said that he won’t bite on a question like this. The congregant is trying to pass to the pastor a life-and-death decision that belongs to the congregant, and wise pastors won’t take the bait. They may help the congregant spiritually weigh the options before them, and they may try to slow down the congregant’s movement toward a simple answer to an agonizing question. In any event, they will not accept transfer of the decision.

Has the pastor wisely preserved the congregant’s own moral responsibility or merely withheld pastoral counsel the congregant is hungering for? This, as Boethius said in pondering the mystery of the Holy Trinity, “deserves a moment’s consideration.”

How may we minister to the grieving around Thanksgiving or Christmas? Perhaps by remembering them in sermons or prayers, acknowledging that they are not able to celebrate as they might wish—that our own celebration feels foreign to them. And yet we do celebrate. Joy and grief do not cancel each other out. As Kate Bowler says, “Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”

How about Mother's Day and Father's Day? Pastors sometimes flinch at honoring these Sundays promoted by candy, flower, and greeting card companies but also feel they can't ignore them. Parents need to be acknowledged—but so do the grieving. Perhaps they never knew their father, or they did and he abused them. Maybe they never loved their censorious mother. Or they would like to be a mother but can't conceive, or they are the father of children who ignore them. These may be some of the currents in the congregation, and pastors have to navigate them.

Where is God in all this? Christians vary in response to the question. Some find God a steady comfort. In fact, some find they are never closer to God than in their experience of grief. But some are like C. S. Lewis. A resolute believer, Lewis suffered the loss of his wife, Joy Davidman, and turned to God. "When your need is desperate," he writes in *A Grief Observed*, "when all other help is in vain, what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence." Lewis later came to terms with God, but his idea of God had been rendered forever more complex.

In the seminar, we pastors naturally turned to the cross of Jesus Christ as the Christian's greatest grief and comfort. Our greatest grief because we human beings killed our Savior. Our greatest comfort too, but not because the cross explains our suffering. It's not as if we look at the cross of Christ and say, "Now, at last, I understand my wife's throat cancer." The cross explains very little along these lines. No, we look to the cross of Jesus Christ as a comfort because we see in it that where our suffering is concerned, God is not aloof. God enters into it, absorbs the worst of it without passing it back, and so cuts the otherwise inevitable loop of vengeance.

Finally, in dealing with grief, the pastors at the seminar agreed that caring for ourselves is essential to thriving—even to surviving. Absorbing people's grief takes a toll not only on our spirits but also on our bodies—and on our relationships with loved ones. Pastors dealing with grief need not only healthy prayer, sabbath, and exercise routines but also professional therapeutic support—a counselor, a mentor, a spiritual director, someone on whom to offload some of what threatens to crack us. Pastors need their congregational leaders' support too—perhaps to pay for regular therapy for the pastor and to thwart any congregational suggestion that the need for therapy is a weakness.

It's not. It's a necessity. In a difficult role, pastors need all the help they can get to achieve balance and wholeness in their lives. Only then can they, in turn, bring a

comforting presence to the grieving.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Mountains of grief.”