

HOW PASTORS AND THE CHURCH BODY CAN MINISTER TO GRIEVING PARENTS



*Our Hearts
Are Home*

Dr. Gary & Laura House

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Dear Church Leader,

This booklet has been written to help church leaders better understand the needs of those who have lost children and to help them equip their congregations to minister to those parents. At every event offered through Our Hearts Are Home, grieving parents share their sadness and hurt from experiences at church after the loss of their child. This is not a minor issue, but always a significant one that generates long discussions. Most recognize that the pastoral staff and members of the church probably just don't know what to say and do, but they wish that there was a way to help the church understand and know how to better support them. This booklet is written so that a bereaved parent can simply print it and give it to someone, or send the link to their pastors and friends.

When someone loses a child, they are thrown into the greatest sorrow they have ever known or could ever imagine. Understandably, those around them don't know what to say or do to be helpful. Before we experienced child loss ourselves, we really didn't know how to minister effectively to bereaved parents either, even though we had spent time in pastoral ministry.

For many parents, just entering the church building is too painful, because of memories of their child being at events in the building, or of the memorial service. For others, they leave the church because no one reaches out to them in ways that are helpful. The pastoral staff may assume that other staff, Sunday School teachers, or people in the church are supporting them, but in reality, no one may be reaching out.

Grieving parents often feel isolated. They are desperate for their church family to come alongside them, but too often, this doesn't happen. Friends at church, who formally sought them out each week, avoid them because they are uncomfortable and don't know how to respond to them.

In this booklet, we've included a host of ideas for the Church to come alongside grieving parents as they navigate the most difficult days of their lives. The ideas presented are from our own experience, as well as other bereaved parents who offered their thoughts with the hope that other grieving parents would be helped. Many ideas are simple, cost nothing, and can be implemented by anyone. Others require a bit more planning and allocated funds.

If we can be of assistance in any way, whether by phone, Zoom call, or sharing at your church, please let us know.

Blessings,

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Learning About Child Loss

Here are some ways to learn about child loss in order to more adequately know what a grieving parent experiences and how to support them.

Read Books & Blogs and Listen to Podcasts

There are a host of excellent books and a few podcasts available to help someone better understand the grief of child loss. The following are three suggestions:

- *Until Then: Stories of Loss and Hope* was published by Our Hearts Are Home and includes the stories of thirteen parents. Not only does the book bring comfort and hope to grieving parents, but also provides insights that will help others minister to them.
- Our Hearts Are Home Podcast: Trusting God in Suffering
- While We're Waiting — Hope After Child Loss Podcast
- Blog — thelifeididntchoose.com
Written by Melanie DeSimone, the blog offers a poignant look at child loss, while challenging the reader to trust Jesus through the grief journey.
- Blog — ourheartsarehome.org/blog

Peruse Two Websites and the Our Hearts Are Home YouTube Channel

- Our Hearts Are Home — ourheartsarehome.org
 - Gatherings for Bereaved Parents (in-person and online options)
 - Online Book Studies
 - GriefShare (online, for parents who have lost a child to suicide)
 - Blog/ Podcast
 - YouTube Channel (conferences, stories of bereaved parents, etc.)
 - Support Groups (online)
 - Conferences (online and live) April 12-13, 2024
- Our Hearts Are Home YouTube Channel
youtube.com/@ourheartsarehome5603
- While We're Waiting — whilewerewaiting.org
 - Weekend Retreats for Bereaved Parents
 - In-Person Support Groups
 - Podcast
 - Private Facebook Group for Bereaved Parents



Words Are Powerful – Use Them to Bring Comfort and Encouragement

- Acknowledge loss every week on Sunday morning during prayer time. There are hurting people in every congregation. Whether the loss is a child, spouse, sibling, or another type of loss such as a divorce, simply acknowledging the loss is crucial. Not only is it a comfort to those who are hurting, but it is caring for the body as the Bible instructs us to do. Pray for those who are hurting to feel the Lord's presence; pray for comfort; pray that the congregation will be sensitive to know how to help others.
- On special days such as Mother's Day or Father's Day, invite those who are grieving to stand and ask those around them to gather close to them during the prayer.
- On every holiday (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter,...) acknowledge from the pulpit that the day can be especially difficult, and pray to that end.
- Preach about suffering from the pulpit. It is such a prominent theme in the Bible, and yet, so many churches avoid the topic altogether. Through teaching and preaching, help the congregation develop an accurate theology of suffering so they will be more prepared when it presents itself.



Words Are Powerful – What to Say and Not to Say (when the loss is recent)

As mentioned already, grieving parents need the Church to surround them, not avoid them. Understandably, it's difficult for people to know what to say and not say. Words are powerful and can bring comfort or cause distress; encouragement or anxiety. What words are helpful to a newly bereaved parent? When the loss is fresh, there really aren't many options. The mind is numb, there is disbelief, and dozens of emotions are present and change from moment to moment. Regarding what to say at this time, the old adage "less is more" applies well.

The following comments are some of the most helpful words that people said to us right at the start of this journey and some that other bereaved parents have shared with us. These words let us know that we are loved, that our child is loved, and that this friend wants to be there for us. The Bible says to "mourn with those who mourn" and that is what these heartfelt comments demonstrate.

Do's

"I am so, so, sorry for your incredible loss."

"There are no words. I'm so sorry."

"I can't begin to imagine what you are going through. I am so sorry."

"I am so sorry for your indescribable loss and am praying for your family."

"I don't know what to say, but I am thinking of you, praying for you, and grieving for you."

"I love you and want so much to be here for you. I am so sorry."

"You are on my heart constantly and I am praying for you. I can't imagine how much you must miss Nathan."

"I don't know what to say, but I want to be here for you."



Don'ts

Don't say: "I know how you feel."

You really don't. The reality of grief is that none of us fully knows how someone else feels. If you've lost a child, others can't really relate to your grief if they haven't lost a child. Even if they have lost a child, that child still wasn't yours. "I know how you feel" is never the right thing to say.

Don't say: "At least you have other children."

It's true that if the grieving parents have other children, they are grateful for them. However, the reality of having other children doesn't diminish the pain of losing one. To see the fullness of this, ask yourself this question, "Which one of your children would you want to lose"?

Don't say: "At least you had twenty-five years with him."

Grieving parents are thankful for every moment they had with their children, whether they were not yet born or live on earth for decades. But this fact does not change the deep grief and sorrow of the separation they are experiencing now because of death.

* Nothing that begins with "at least" is ever helpful.

Don't say: "You'll get over it."

They won't. They lost their child, and that will never change. They won't "get over it," but as they walk through grief they will be changed into a new person with a new identity. When we meet together with bereaved parents, they often talk of their family and friends expecting them to "move on." Realize that they will not be the same people they were before the loss. Accept them as they are.

Don't say: "It's going to be okay."

Not helpful. It doesn't feel okay, and your grieving friend needs you to acknowledge that.

Don't say: "You are so strong. I could never do that."

The grieving parent doesn't feel strong. And they didn't have a choice.

Don't say: "At least you got to say goodbye."

No parent expects to say goodbye to their child. It's not the natural order of things. Although bereaved parents who do have this opportunity may be grateful for it, this is not a helpful comment.

Don't say: "At least you have other children."

Would you be okay with any of your children dying? The parents are very thankful for their remaining children, but that does not diminish the loss of the child who died. (Note that this is another "at least" comment.)

Don't say: "He's no longer in pain and is safe with Jesus."

We know where he is and we are thankful he is there without pain, but that doesn't change the fact that we need to mourn.

Don't say: "He wouldn't want you to be sad."

This is said often to grieving parents, but as grieving parents, it doesn't make much sense.



Don't quote Bible verses.

While we know that scripture can bring great comfort and understanding, hearing them spoken to us by others is not usually helpful early on. It would be best to write the scripture verse in a card or letter and let parents look them up on their own.

Don't offer ANY advice.

During the initial stages of shock, numbness, and confusion, advice from others can create anxiety or cause the grieving parent to bristle due to feeling overwhelmed. Job's friends were most helpful when they simply listened.

What to Say Further Down the Road

A bit down the road, grieving parents continue to need and want to talk about their loss. The words described for newly bereaved parents are all still applicable even years down the road, but the following suggestions are particularly useful for starting a much-welcomed conversation when the loss is not fresh. These comments may start a conversation or simply show that you still care and do remember the loss.

"I really want to know how you are doing. I think of you so often and can't imagine how much you must miss ___ every day."

"How are you grieving?"

"I imagine that the holidays (or whatever event) must be really hard when you are missing ___. How are you really doing?"

"Do you have time for a cup of coffee and to chat? I'd love to hear more about ___. Do you have time to get together?"

"I never had the privilege of meeting _____. I'd love to hear about him. What was his personality like?"

"I was thinking about _____ yesterday when we were buying a new computer. He was amazing at computer things. I'm guessing that pretty much everything you do probably reminds you of him. Is that the case?"



"I was thinking about the camping trip all of our families did back when _____ was in grade school. Do you remember when the kids ..." (Memories are precious to bereaved parents.)

"If you knew the child, be intentional about bringing them up in conversation. This means the world to a parent. Do you have a memory, story, photo, etc. of the child to share?"

What the Body of Christ Can Do To Help a Grieving Parent

Newly bereaved parents don't know how to reach out and often don't even know what they need. The following list contains many ways that the Church can surround them.

*Please note that most of these ideas are not only helpful when the loss is recent, but also appropriate, appreciated, and so helpful even down the road. Life moves on for others, as it should. But for the grieving parent, the process of incorporating this new identity into their way of life will take a long time. Please don't forget about them when the crisis seems to be over — when everyone else returns to normal life.

Set up a Meal Train

Grieving people often don't have the energy to prepare healthy meals. A meal train and/or gift cards to a local restaurant that offers take-out is a huge blessing.

- Ask if the grieving parent would prefer to have freezer meals all delivered at once, or separate fresh meals a few times each week.
- Ask if there are any food allergies and list those on the meal train site.
- Instruct participants to use disposable containers that don't need to be returned.
- When delivering to the door, don't expect to go inside. Simply tell them how sorry you are, and that you are constantly praying for them and love them. Drop off the food and leave. There will be parents who want to invite you in, talk, etc. which is fine, but many times it's overwhelming and just not the right timing.

Send Cards (lots of them)

Ask your church members to send cards to the grieving family. This is an excellent ministry opportunity for someone in the church. Ask them to send one card to the grieving family each month for the first year, or even longer. This act of love and kindness will never be forgotten.



Send Text Messages

Sending a text only takes a moment, but will be so appreciated. Let the parents know that you are thinking of them and praying for them.

Phone the Grieving Parents

The conversation may be short, or it may even go to voicemail, which is fine. Simply let them know that you are calling to check in and want them to know that you are constantly thinking of and praying for them.

Send Flowers or a Plant

Send flowers or a potted plant with a note "in loving memory of your sweet Nathan."

Perform Practical Acts of Kindness

Mow their lawn, take their other children to activities, offer to walk the dog, pick up groceries, etc. Instead of asking if they need something from the grocery, call and say "I'm here at the grocery right now. What can I pick up for you?"

Think of the daily tasks that you perform and offer to do those for them.

Simple and Practical Ways to Show Remembrance

One of the greatest fears of a bereaved parent is that people will forget the beautiful human being that their child was when they were here on earth. Just as parents want to talk about their children who still live here, bereaved parents want to talk about and remember their children in Heaven. One of the MOST important and helpful things that someone can do for a bereaved parent is to actively remember their child.

Note that these ideas can be implemented to honor and remember all types of loss within your church body.

Speak the Child's Name

Even though you may be uncomfortable saying the child's name, parents want to say and hear others say his/her child's name! When a church member talks with the parents, it is a gift if they bring up the child by name.

Online Memorial Page

Create an online memorial page on the church website. Invite the parents to send a picture of and a paragraph about the child they lost.

Church Directory

Include an "In Loving Memory" page in the church directory.



Flowers

Invite members to purchase chancel flowers in memory of a loved one. Print the name of who the flowers are in memory of in the bulletin or add it to the PowerPoint announcements.

Quarterly Luncheon

Offer a potluck after church each quarter for anyone who has experienced a loss. When everyone has been through the food line and is seated, give people the opportunity to stand and state their name and who they lost. Nametags are also helpful and can reflect the same, ie., Laura House, Nathan's Mom

Memory Album

Have a small table with a "memory album" in the lobby. Invite parents or others whose loved ones have passed to take a page home to fill with pictures, words, and memories, then place it back in the book.

Memorial Garden

Plant a memorial garden or designate a small space in a flower bed. Place memorial stones in the garden with "In Loving Memory". Invite the grieving person to paint the stone if desired.

Memorial Service

Hold a memorial service once or twice each year. Invite those who have lost someone dear to them to provide a picture for the slideshow. Some verbiage can be added to the slide, such as the loved one's name, birth and Heaven dates, and a few lines about them. This will be a meaningful and appreciated opportunity for anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one.

Open in prayer.

Sing hymns as a congregation.

As the slides are projected, invite people to stand when their loved one's picture is shown.

Add lighted candles to a table if desired.

Close with a hymn and prayer.

At the end of the service, each person who is remembering a loved one can take a rose from a vase in the front of the sanctuary.



Memory Board

Post a bulletin board somewhere in the church. Invite people to bring a 5x7 picture to put on the board. Use a template that looks like a frame and has a place to put the name and a few sentences about the person.



Groups and Ministries That Are Simple to Start in the Church

Start a GriefShare Group

Churches all over the globe host sessions of GriefShare which have been a tremendous blessing to so many hurting people. If your church starts a group, GriefShare will post the information on its website so people in your community discover the opportunity and join the sessions at your church. The sessions are simple to run and use a video format for the instruction. For more information, visit GriefShare.org.

If your church is not able to offer GriefShare, there are online groups available specific to child loss. Our Hearts Are Home offers GriefShare online for parents who have lost a child by suicide. (ourheartsarehome.org/grief-share)

Lay Ministers

Teach and train a group of lay ministers that specifically help meet the needs of grieving people. Include a note in the bulletin each week that states something such as: "If you are grieving the loss of someone dear to you, we hope to come alongside you during this difficult time. Please let us know of your loss by emailing _____ or calling _____. In formatting your lay ministry, Stephen Ministries may be helpful as you plan your ministry. (stephenministries.org)

Support Group

Start a grief support group that meets weekly or bi-weekly for a set period of time. This is just a time to connect and encourage each other. If you are unable to start this at your church, Our Hearts Are Home offers online support groups for bereaved parents. (ourheartsarehome.org/support-groups)

Card or Text Ministry

As mentioned in a previous section, every member of the church body should be encouraged to text and send cards. However, in addition, a church can start an organized ministry with a layperson leading.

- Send texts letting them know you are thinking of and praying for them, especially on the child's birthday, Heaven day, and holidays.
- Send a card on the child's birthday and/or Heaven day.
In our day and age, most people don't send "paper mail" but only rely on emails and texts. Those are great, but grieving parents may not be at their computers or on their phones. A card, expressing your love and an encouraging Scripture verse, can help soothe the soul. Remember, most cards will come within the first few months. Keep sending them after that time, when most people have forgotten and moved on.

Grief Fund

Establish a "grief fund" as part of the budget. These funds will be used to help pay expenses for grieving parents to attend a grief retreat, or to purchase helpful books to give to them.

Send Grief Books Every Quarter

Stephen Ministries has produced a series of books, *Journeying Through Grief*, that effectively meet grieving people exactly where they are. Appoint a layperson to send each successive book every three months to the grieving person. The content will resonate with where they are in their grief journey. These are excellent books and only cost \$10 per set of four books at stephenministries.org.

Connect Grieving Parents

Spending time with other bereaved parents brings comfort and support. We invite those in your church to join us for a variety of opportunities. We have also listed another organization that is close to our hearts that can be a tremendous support. Everything that both ministries offer is free for grieving parents to attend.

OurHeartsAreHome.org (child loss)

- gatherings, online events, support groups, YouTube channel, blog/podcast, Facebook page, written resources

WhileWereWaiting.org (child loss)

- weekend retreats, podcast, Facebook page, support groups

GriefShare.org (all types of loss)



A Few Things That Grieving Parents Wish Their Pastors and Church Body Understood About Child Loss

- Grief takes a long, long, time. Ongoing support is needed. It's easy for people to surround a grieving parent when the loss is fresh, but support is needed for many years down the road. In *Grieving the Loss of a Loved One*, H. Norman Wright explains, "For many who have lost a child, it can take six to ten years to stabilize."
- It is very difficult to go back to church, to sing, to fellowship, to participate, to lead. While the bereaved parent has joy in knowing Jesus, their heart has been shattered and they desperately need the church body to acknowledge the loss and offer support.
- Deep grief is not a sign of a lack of faith or hope. It is simply mourning and grieving the deepest loss that a parent can experience.
- Everyone grieves differently. Every loss is unique. Recognize that if the grieving parent pulls away from the church or is struggling with God, it doesn't mean they are lost.
- Parents who have lost a child will never be the same again. Don't expect them to be.
- If you don't have experience with grief, recommend a grief counselor rather than doing the counseling yourself.
- Grief and joy can coexist.
- Everything that grieving parents do, hear, and feel is impacted by their loss. They see everything through the lens of loss.
- Keep reaching out even if the grieving parents don't accept an invitation. The simple gesture of asking is a blessing, and eventually, there will be a time when they have the energy to accept and participate.
- More than anything, offer your presence and a listening ear to the grieving parents. Just as they want to talk about surviving children, they also want to talk about the child who is in Heaven.
- There is no time-table for grief. The process and pace is different for everyone.

