

LAST THING'S - A PARISH RESOURCE

FORWARD

What follows on these pages does not represent an original effort. We are deeply indebted to the ground-breaking work done by St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, Ohio and to subsequent revisions prepared by many other Episcopal Churches, the last of which was St. Matthias Episcopal Church Waukesha, Wisconsin.

GRIEVING DEFINED

A process moving toward a receding goal, a goal never fully reached; the relative 'normality' of the process is judged by its effectiveness in helping the grieving person to approach that goal as closely as possible. The goals of grieving include these: to enable a person to live a life relatively unencumbered by attachment to the person or thing lost; to remake emotional attachment; to recognize and live with the reality of the loss and the feelings occasioned by it. Moving towards these goals can involve a variety of activities and any activity that moves one in this direction is 'normal.'

INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the few things of which we can be certain. And yet, in spite of its inevitability, the time of death – our own or the death of a loved one – is always a time of crisis. The intensity of the crisis will often vary depending upon the age of the one who has died, the suddenness of that death, the suffering involved, and how close we are to the person. But a critical variable is how prepared we are to face death. Can we come to view it as the last act in the journey of life or the entrance into new life?

Unfortunately, in most aspects of our lives, we avoid the fact of death; therefore, in spite of its inevitability, we tend to come to it not only suffering with grief but also unprepared. Death then forces us to do what we don't want to do and to make important decisions for which we have not carefully planned. As a result, the crisis deepens and becomes even more painful.

This booklet, intended for use by all, begins with certain premises:

- ✦ Grieving is human, and the Church seeks to support mourners through this natural process.
- ✦ The more we consider the issues surrounding death and grief, the better we will be able to deal with the loss of a loved one, and to face death ourselves.
- ✦ Planning for our own death can ease the crisis for our survivors.
- ✦ The Christian faith speaks, directly to us about death and grief.

- ✦ The rites and practices of death and burial ought to be both a comfort to survivors and a reflection of our understanding of death in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- ✦ We bear primary responsibility for ourselves – in both life and death.

This brochure is written to help you reflect on and prepare for your own death and burial from the Episcopal Church. It should also be of value in aiding others with this process. It and the booklet “Planning For Your Final Affairs”, available at the parish office, should be all that you need to assist you in determining all the elements of your death and burial aided by family and clergy.

GRIEF

It is impossible, within the scope of this booklet, to deal in depth with all the psychological, social and spiritual facts of grief. There are many fine books and articles on the subject; if you would like to learn more, the parish library has several which you can check out and read. The purpose of this section is to present reflections based on a review of the printed material and on personal experiences of grief and loss.

Grieving is a natural process that tends to follow a fairly predictable pattern. Knowing about these so-called stages of grief may be quite helpful – particularly in reassuring you that the intense, aching, up-and-down turmoil you are enduring is “normal.” However, it is crucial to remember that, even though grief is a universal human experience, each one of us moves through it in our own way. There is no single, “cookie-cutter” pattern for mourning.

WHEN A LOVED ONE BECOMES TERMINALLY ILL.

In the case of a prolonged terminal illness, the grieving process may begin long before death. In fact, when the family and the dying person are able to share what is happening, they are often able to move through various aspects of grief together. This can lead to a more peaceful death for the dying, greater comfort for the survivors, an enhanced ability to plan for the future and a less complicated bereavement process for those who are left. Often the dying person can minister to others as much as they minister to him or her.

Preparing for death, spiritually and emotionally, reflecting upon one’s life with family or caregivers and managing pain are some of the key elements of HOSPICE programs. When medically and physically possible, people may want to choose home HOSPICE (home may also be places like nursing homes and group homes) or in-patient HOSPICE as the place to die. Hospitals emphasize services where there is a need for acute care and hope for a cure. It is often difficult for the medical team to change the focus to palliative or supportive care for the person and family when little hope remains for survival.

Usually more comfortable and care-oriented, the hospice setting may be more conducive to ministering to and with the dying. HOSPICE care focuses on enhancing the person's comfort and improving that person's quality of life. Hospice affirms life and neither hastens nor postpones the end of life. There have been excellent advances in pain control and hospice staffs are experts in this field. Many people with terminal illnesses endure a great deal of pain and other symptoms that can be relieved or reduced with proper management.

Nonetheless, in our society, many deaths take place in a hospital. In that setting, communicating the needs and wishes of the person and family about death to physicians and hospital staff becomes essential. Discussions beforehand among family members, clarifying these issues, can be very helpful.

Individuals should draft a living will and/or a durable power of attorney for health care to ensure that their wishes are known and carried out. These documents can also take some of the burden off family members. Most family members will carry out your wishes if they are known. This is especially helpful when they are not the wishes of other family members or when family members disagree. Without direction from the patient and family, the hospital staff may be required to initiate or continue treatment that is costly and of no benefit to the dying patient. Trinity clergy are always available to assist with prayerful consideration of these difficult matters.

Beyond the major decisions, patients and families should also express their needs for privacy, exceptions to visiting rules and any other wishes that will aid the person and family as they move through the dying process; living in both the grieving and celebrating of a life shared and lost.

GOALS OF GRIEVING

A process in which the deep feelings aroused by loss are acknowledged and relatively fully expressed.

A process in which our attachments to the lost person or object are not entirely given up, but are sufficiently altered to permit the grieving person to admit the reality of the loss and then to live without constant reference to it.

In successful grieving, the mourner gradually becomes able to make attachments to and investments in other persons and things once again.

Finally, for the person of faith, grieving is a process in which a belief system, significantly challenged or altered by loss, is restored.

THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Whether grieving begins before death or after, it is the normal process of personal adjustment to the loss of a significant person. It is a natural part of one's life.

Grieving helps us (1) deal with the reality of our feelings toward the person who has died and the loss of that person; (2) grow toward acceptance of the death; (3) search for meaning in the death and for our own life; (4) become reintegrated into our communities; and (5) begin to move on with our own life.

When someone around whom our lives found meaning is gone, we typically experience a whole host of feelings: shock, numbness, sadness, depression, guilt, regret, anger, loneliness, anxiety, dread, relief, apathy, physical symptoms of stress, combinations of any of these, and many others. These feelings aren't "good" or "bad" - they just *are*. And they must be faced. Talking and crying, especially in the supportive company of persons who care about us, is a significant way of getting in touch with our feelings and often brings some comfort and release. We may feel like we're on a roller coaster with our feelings. One day or moment may be good, followed by a very low day. This is normal.

After the initial shock, people often tend toward avoidance and denial. What we say or don't say, our preoccupation with details and even our displays of emotion are often designed to buffer us from the painful yet unyielding reality of the death.

All the while, we find ourselves compelled to delve deeper and grapple with questions of ultimate meaning. Human beings are creatures who ponder our purpose in life and our destiny in death. The burial and the rites of the Church can be profoundly helpful in sorting out these significant issues. They are recognition that we are part of a community of faith that assists us in the healing process. Discussion and counseling can also help.

As time passes and we begin to accept the fact of death in the depths of our being, we discover - in spite of the occasional setback - that we are indeed beginning to heal and to move on.

A key transition takes place as we gradually return to our usual rhythms of church, work, education and recreation and become reintegrated into our communities. Often, we will not feel like doing this. We will question whether our old routines are worth the effort. And we will feel like retreating and turning in upon ourselves.

This is perhaps most evident when a spouse dies and we are no longer a "couple" but a "single" and we feel uncomfortable in this unfamiliar role. It is not unusual for widows and widowers to feel unwelcome and awkward,

particularly in social situations. But, more often than not, this is simply a reflection of our own grief and of the discomfort of others who truly *want* to help but just don't know *how*.

Of course, getting on with our lives doesn't mean immersing ourselves in frenzied activities for the sake of "keeping busy," nor does it mean forcing ourselves into making hasty decisions on important matters (e.g., selling a home or changing jobs). In fact, most experts recommend waiting six months to a year before making these types of major decisions if at all possible. But as we gently return to our customary activities and to those associations and relationships that have given our life pleasure and meaning, we find that—although our lives have been changed forever – we are, indeed, able to cope.

To grieve is to feel and to reflect, to hold on and to let go, to remember and to move on. We must do it ourselves. But there are friends, associates, church members, support groups, clergy and professionals who stand ready to help us work through the ache of loss. Above all, there is God, who is with us in the midst of our suffering and struggles. Personal prayer and worship with your parish family can be an enormous source of strength and sustenance. The clergy are available to help those who are grieving to explore what support they need and help them make connections for that support.

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

One of the most difficult problems for families is helping children through the crisis of death. Adults have an understandable, natural desire to shield children from the shock, sadness and pain of grief. When death comes, however, children, like adults, need the opportunity to deal with the hard reality of their loss and their turbulent feelings of grief.

Ideally, adults can help children begin to understand death long before it comes as a family crisis. Even young children see and hear about death on television, in stories, in nature, when a funeral procession passes by, or when a pet dies. In these moments, open and honest communication with someone they trust can help them begin to accept death as a natural part of life and to learn reliable, helpful information.

When someone close dies, children should be told and allowed to participate in the process of grief. This does not mean forcing the child, but allowing them to search, see, hear, question and talk. Children experience the same range of emotions as adults and should be encouraged to express those feelings in words, crying, play, songs, drawing, and questions. Adults should allow children to see them cry and acknowledge their own sadness.

Including even young children in the rituals at the time of death is appropriate. While the decision about how they will participate is a family judgment, it does seem that children often benefit from being integrated in some way.

The child's feeling of exclusion and fantasies about death may be more difficult and frightening than actually seeing, knowing and being a part of the family in saying good-bye. It is very helpful to explain in advance what they can expect to see, hear and do.

Children tend to have very concrete questions about death. They also tend to take our words literally and adults should use language carefully, providing clear, simple explanations. (For example, to speak of the dead people as "asleep" is confusing and may even make a child afraid to fall asleep. To say that God "took" someone because "God needed her or him more" can make a child wonder about the goodness of God and can make them angry because they still need the person who died.) Rather than anticipating what a child might say or ask, listen carefully for what their thoughts, ideas and concerns are. They may need to ask questions again and again.

The most helpful response to the grieving child's needs is warm reassurance from a caring adult. We can convey to them our faith in the loving presence of God, who cares for the departed and will continue to care for us through the hands and hearts of his people.

Adolescents especially need peer support as they struggle with death and dying issues. Be attentive to their relationships and work to see that they have friends who remain faithful through the challenge. There are also support groups that bring together children or adolescents in similar circumstances. Again, the parish clergy are available to assist with identifying and connecting with these types of groups.

HOW TO BE A HELPFUL VISITOR

How can we help care for those who have suffered the loss of a loved one? This is a challenge – sometimes because we are uncomfortable with death itself, sometimes because we don't know the state of mind of the family (and occasionally don't even know the family), and sometimes because we simply don't know what to do or say.

Here are several suggestions. First and foremost, don't be afraid to intrude! Mourners often feel terribly isolated; these feelings are exacerbated if family and friends, feeling awkward and unsure, avoid them. A good rule of thumb is simply this: *Be yourself, be there*. There is not always a need to do or say anything. The fact that you cared enough to be present is itself a precious gift.

However, if the bereaved seem ready and willing to open up and talk about their concerns, be prepared to listen. You don't have to supply any profound answers, just thank God that they trust you enough to share their feelings and needs with you, and know that in your companionship and conversation, God is truly present and bringing his healing Spirit to bear.

If you feel moved to speak, express what you are thinking and feeling about the deceased out of your own experience – if this can be done without laying a greater burden on the family. (Remember: the grieving family doesn't need to minister to *you* as well as to themselves!) One caveat: it is not wise to say. "I know how you feel." - you may not. Dear Abby says to say "They will be missed."

Take the initiative and ask about the needs of the bereaved. What you learn from them and from your own observations can guide you into meaningful and practical assistance for the family.

Finally, call on the bereaved one month, three months, even a year after the death. Holidays, anniversaries and other special occasions can be especially difficult times for those who mourn. It is often well after the crowds have melted away that our friends are in the greatest need.

DO'S TO BEING A COMFORTER

- ✦ Be present. Mourners often feel terribly isolated. There is not always a need to do or say anything. The fact you cared enough to be present is itself a precious gift.
- ✦ Be an active listener. Focus on the grieving person's feelings. Avoid focusing on your own feelings and having the bereaved comfort you.
- ✦ Make every effort to offer specific support. Statements such as "May I bring dinner over on Friday?" or "May we have the children over to play on Thursday?" are more helpful than saying "Is there anything I can do for you." In all likelihood, the bereaved doesn't know how you can help.
- ✦ While you may have been through something similar, it is never the same. Some may experience great grief immediately, others a feeling of Numbness, still others may be relieved that the person is no longer suffering. There may be a time much later to share and support our mutuality in loss and grief, but this is not the time.
- ✦ Remember to stay in contact in the weeks or months after the funeral. It gets very lonely after the crowds fade away.
- ✦ Encourage the sharing of stories that involved the one who has died. There are times it may seem as if the person who has died didn't exist or has been forgotten. You can help keep the memory alive by encouraging these stories.
- ✦ As uncomfortable as it may feel, be willing to be with the bereaved in their tears. You don't need to fix the pain or stop the tears, just sit with them as they grieve.
- ✦ Pray for the family and pray with them if they are comfortable with that. Know that in your companionship and conversation, God is truly present and bringing his healing Spirit to support and surround you with His love.

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH

Christians experience what every human being feels and needs when confronting death. The faith does not deny the hard reality of death, nor does it shield us from the pain of grief. But our faith can make a significant difference in how we view death and cope with loss.

For Christians, the decisive event of human history is Easter: the death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ. This is *God's* story but it is *our* story too. We are "Easter people" because we believe that "when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death," God, in his infinite love for us, sent Jesus, his only Son, "to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to himself, the God and Father of all" (BCP, 362)

Yes. Like Jesus, we shall die, but, also like Him, we shall be raised to newness of life! "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended" (BCP, 382). Therefore, our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:3-5, 8:38-39; Corinthians 15).

As Christians, then, we can talk about death openly and plan for it with both confidence and care. As Christians, our liturgies should be a celebration of that life, as well as a source of comfort and healing for the living.

PLANNING FOR DEATH

The crisis of death in a family forces sudden, complicated and far-reaching decisions on those who are not responsible for arrangements. We are faced with a bewildering array of options at time when we may be least capable of making appropriate decisions. Sometimes, differences of opinion arise within the family that, although understandable, adds an extra burden to the already difficult situation. Because of these possibilities, most decisions concerning our death and burial should not wait until the time of death. The more planning we are able to accomplish *beforehand*, the sounder will be the decisions and the more sparing and considerate we will be to those we leave behind.

The rights and desires we wish to exercise in death that express our beliefs and values should be clearly articulated not only to our next of kin but to all who may be affected by the choices we make.

Many other important issues such as burial of the body, the rites of the Church you wish to use in your service, stewardship in death etc. can be found in "Planning Your Final Affairs", a copy of which may be purchased from the parish office. It can serve as a guide for consideration, discussion and planning. Remember, that the parish clergy always stand ready to assist in any way that you may desire.

Ideally, we would recommend to you the following steps:

- ✦ Begin the process of planning now. Examine the contents of this booklet along with "Planning for Your Final Affairs." Discuss your desires with your family and if you wish, discuss any questions/concerns with the clergy.
- ✦ Complete the burial instructions in "Planning for Your Final Affairs." Ask your spouse and other family members to complete their own.
- ✦ Keep a copy in a conspicuous place in your household. Give a copy to the parish office, your next of kin, your family lawyer etc. Ask for their reactions; they may have important concerns and perspectives to share. Amend the forms as necessary.
- ✦ If you wish, make pre-funeral arrangements with a funeral home and cemetery.
- ✦ When death nears for you or a loved one, notify your parish family so that the Sacraments and other ministries of the Church may be provided.
- ✦ When the death of a loved one has occurred, notify the clergy and the funeral director.

The church is a supportive and healing community, ready at all times to support those closest to the departed. We have been made one in Christ; it is our privilege to share one another's burden.