

*Collegeville Ministry Series*

# GRIEF MINISTRY

Revised Edition

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In loving memory of my older brother  
*Edmund C. Curley,*  
“my first editor”



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## Preface

*Grief Ministry* is an updated and revised version of *The Ministry of Consolers*. Psychological theories about grief have changed. Most notable is the change in understanding about the bonds we have with loved ones. Rather than disengaging (“letting go”), now becoming prevalent is the understanding about our relationship in psychological terms of having a continual or enduring bond (“connecting”) with those who have died. This is not new to Catholic belief as we have always maintained our belief in the communion of saints and praying for those who have gone before us in faith. The new psychology is far more compatible with Catholic belief. It assists us to communicate deep meaning and comfort while we minister to the bereaved.

*Grief Ministry* focuses us on certain descriptions for ministering to the bereaved. It intends to assist us in finding our place in the ministry of consolation. This book is for those who are ministering and also for the bereaved, families, hospitals, and hospice care. Insights are provided along with each chapter highlighting a “ministry toolbox” as an aid.

May the peace of the Lord be with you as you give of yourselves and your hopes to those who are grieving.



# 1

## Grief Ministry and Those Who Minister

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, . . .  
to comfort all who mourn; . . .  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning. (Isa 61:1-3)*

All ministry requires formation. It must never be taken for granted or done in a cursory way. Ministry is the very life of the church. In, with, and through Christ, we minister to one another. Our words and actions bear fruit in the way we minister in Christ's name and the name of the church. We continually ask our loving God to bring to fruition in our ministries the good work begun in our baptism.

As Christians we are familiar with St. Paul's emphasis on many ministries. When we consider the ministry of consolation we turn to Paul and his communal observation: "If one member [of the Body of Christ, which is the church,] suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor 12:26). When we explore grief ministry and its many aspects being lived out in community, we really experience what it means to console one another.

## **Ministry and Community**

We are members of the believing community and are responsible for mission and ministry. Our ministry and participation is rooted in the “hope that comes from faith in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> In imitation of Jesus we need to seek formation for the community to effectively minister. We must recall that Jesus surrounded himself with disciples and sent them forth two by two to bring the Good News of salvation. When we minister in the ministry of consolation it is best to keep in mind that what we do is done as a representative of the believing community. A collaborative approach to ministry is essential for the ministry to be lasting. It is also essential for one who ministers to be in collaboration with others not only for support but for ongoing formation.

When grief ministry is collaborative and community based, it can very rewarding. This may seem like a different kind of remark to make especially about the ministry that intervenes with those who are deeply suffering the loss of a loved one. After three decades of ministering to the bereaved, I am still amazed at this ministry. The encounter with the infinite is immediate and pervasive. As such, these are graced moments in abundance for all involved. When the bereaved receive support and consolation transformations are almost instantly apparent. This is not always clear in other ministries.

Our rewards are immediate when we witness acceptance and relief by the bereaved as they trust us and relate their story of loss. In every parish there are those who are suffering the loss of a loved one. We need to reach out to them and gently help them realize that eventually their loving God will turn their darkness into light. In this ministry we have an important role to play in the way people go through the process of grieving.

Within the ministry of consolation there are a number of ways that focus on particular aspects of grieving. One could minister as a home visitor, liturgical helper, family support person, support group facilitator, funeral follow-up visitor, hospice care provider, and more. Some of these consoling ministries require

more formation than others. All require ongoing ways to come together with other grief ministers and join in prayer, reflection, and discussion (in accordance with confidences that must be kept).<sup>2</sup> It is necessary for the minister not only to identify for the bereaved a support network but also to choose ways to minister. This requires knowledge about how ministry is practiced.

## **Finding Your Place in Ministry**

The grief minister enters into a covenant for caring with the parish. A covenant means that there is a bond between the parties. There are important considerations as we accept the call to minister. Some of the following may help in discerning how to find your place in this ministry.

1. *Prayer/reflection*: Prepare through prayer what you believe God is asking. Are you willing to pray in response to what you feel God is asking you to do?
2. *Establish relationships inside the bereavement ministry*: Are you ready and able to find your voice in bereavement ministry?
3. *Personal history issues addressed*: Have you examined your personal “loss history” and how it will impact what you do?
4. *Discernment with pastoral staff*: Are you ready to ask the pastoral staff for approval and support for the ministry?
5. *Formation and support*: Have you identified how you will be supported and grow in this ministry?
6. *Availability and dedication*: Are there situations where you would feel it difficult to minister?
7. *New approaches*: Are you aware of new approaches and new psychology for loss?
8. *Role in ministry*: Do you understand your role in ministry as helping the bereaved to reconstruct meaning and hope in their lives, not to sever all bonds or ties?
9. *Language of loss*: Do you understand how the language of loss has changed?

To clarify the last point, certain words are not used, such as “letting go,” “moving on,” “reinvesting in someone else,” and even the much-used “closure.” This is a word recently coined that implies there is a time limit and ending for grief. This is not in keeping with our ongoing enduring bond with loved ones. “Continual bonds” are far more in keeping with our belief in the communion of saints. Death is not the end of a relationship. Through prayerful remembrance we maintain a relationship with loved ones. Older psychological theories thought that ties had to be severed. Not to do so was considered abnormal or, worse, pathological. This is not held by new psychological “meaning centered” theories.

### **Attending to Your Loss History**

We bring to our ministry the uniqueness of our own journey through grief. The more familiar we become with our own reactions and responses, the better we can console others. It is essential to keep in mind that our journey through grief colors the way we relate to others. If we have unresolved grief issues, our ministry will reflect it. It is also important not to become a grief minister who is working with the bereaved in order to resolve personal issues from the past. Resolving our loss problems will not happen that way, and it is not a healthy way to manage our own grief. In ministry there is always the important phrase that we have to keep in mind: “Whose needs am I serving?” In the process of discerning we must ask what is best for the other person, the community, and the church.

#### *Loss Inventory for Grief Ministers*

In reflecting on our own life’s journey it is important that we identify our experiences that we bring to ministry. As you go through the inventory reflect on how your attitudes have or have not changed. Complete the following phrases:

1. I first learned about death and how it happens when . . .
2. At home we talked about death . . .
3. My belief in God affected my attitude toward death in the following ways . . .

4. When I first encountered death I felt . . .
5. Seeing others grieve makes me feel . . .
6. As an adult I want to console others because . . .
7. I think some of the difficulties in this ministry will be . . .
8. I believe I can console others in this ministry because . . .
9. Today for me death means . . .

## **Planning Grief Ministry**

It is very helpful to carefully plan how grief ministry will occur. Ministerial moments clearly illustrate the many ministries that comprise the total ministry of consolation. Members of the believing community are called to certain aspects of this multifaceted ministry. The following will help those who want to minister in their discernment of what their role should be.

### *1. At the Time of Death (First-Response Ministry)*

Who represents the parish at the deceased relative's home? Is there anyone who is prepared to help with basic activities such as phone calls and transportation to airports and railway stations? What about bringing by prepared food? Are you able to be quiet and be there helping with the nuts and bolts of notifications and first issues?

The ritual accompanying this time is called "Gathering Together in the Presence of the Body." Is there a pastoral minister or other member of the parish staff ready to be there at this time? During discernment it is helpful to revisit the ritual itself for gathering together with the family. Here a minister takes a role in nudging toward the spiritual.

### *2. Arranging the Funeral*

Does the parish provide a booklet for effective planning? Does this booklet explain the liturgy and those who will participate and minister at the time of the funeral journey? Is there a parish staff person or member of the bereavement team who can assist

families with options and ideas for the celebration of the funeral? Has this person been trained according to the church's funeral ritual *Order of Christian Funerals*? Do you feel comfortable with contacting the family and offering to assist with this?

### 3. *The Vigil (formerly called the wake)*

This is the first liturgical moment in the death of a Christian. According to the ritual this may be celebrated at the funeral home, the deceased's home, or the parish church. It should be explained to those who are mourning how the church celebration differs from the others. This liturgy needs to be carefully planned. Here ministries at the request of the family may take on a variety of roles from helping plan remembrances to offering prayers while the vigil takes place.

### 4. *The Funeral and Afterwards (Liturgical Ministry)*

The minister as ritual planner has already met with family members for planning the funeral Mass. There are specific options available in the ritual for lectors and family participation. Explaining the purpose and consolation of the signs and symbols surrounding the liturgy is very healing.<sup>3</sup> The consoling grief minister may act as facilitator in arranging for different roles. He or she may identify for the family how to consider filling such positions as pallbearers, lectors, offertory presenters. It is helpful to have a guide to work with in planning; my book *Planning the Catholic Funeral*<sup>4</sup> outlines significant ministries and participation for families. It is very helpful in accurately doing liturgical planning.

Ministers who want to help with the gathering after the funeral play an important role as healing ministers of hospitality. They may help prepare food for the occasion. The parish hall may be offered for this gathering.

### 5. *Spiritual Guides (Guidance Ministry)*

Parishes are willing to train individuals sensitive to the needs of the bereaved to be mentors. They act as spiritual guides to be there for the bereaved who need to have a one-to-one relation-

ship. This ties in with the minister as “compassionate listener.” Follow-up visits should occur two weeks to one month after the death, along with an invitation to support groups.

#### *6. Parish Support Group (Invitational Ministry)*

The “support group” is often called by other names in parishes. These are the more sophisticated groups led by a person with professional credentials. In grief ministry the ideal is for parishes to utilize professionals or trained facilitators from the parish to lead a parish group. The group develops a covenant among its members to participate and help each other in the grieving process. A variety of topics for discussion ranging from the descriptions of grief to coping with holy days, holidays, and anniversaries may be explored. There are many good books and articles on support groups. This is not meant to be a therapy group.

#### *7. Bereavement Committee (Administrative Ministry)*

The parish bereavement committee works as a subcommittee of the parish pastoral council. It helps to facilitate the entire ministry of consolation in the parish. It is a vital committee for initiating and supporting the bereaved in parish events ranging from anointing of the sick to special liturgies (November, Advent, and Lent) and with special focus on groups often overlooked such as children and youth.<sup>5</sup> They help set the parish calendar and coordinate ministries.

#### *8. Professional Referrals (Healing Ministry)*

It is important for a support group to be led by a professional since it is dealing with intense issues. When there are mental health issues that become paramount in response to grief, that grief is characterized by the term “complicated.” This means that the bereaved need professional assistance in coping with loss. There may well be an underlying depression or trauma, which are difficulties in need of professional referral. Grief in itself as a norm is not an illness. It is the response to what may be a stress-filled loss. Other losses may be expected and are not

always as stressful. Parishes are more than capable in assisting people who are suffering from normal characteristics. There has to be a professional referral when it is evident that there is depression or other ways that demonstrate an inability to cope. Good referrals to professionals familiar with treatment for those suffering from complicated grief ought to be made. It is always best if the bereaved person with pastoral support makes the call her/himself for professional help. For the most part there are not large statistics associated with the need for referrals. It has been stated that only 15 percent need the referrals and that percentage is even disputed to be lower.

We cannot attend to the ministry of consolation without attending at the same time to ministers. Ministry and ministers define with God's help how consolation will take place for the bereaved.

### **Ministry Toolbox**

1. All ministry requires ongoing support and formation.
2. There are choices as to how and where to minister in grief ministry.
3. Grief ministers have to be aware of their own experiences of loss.
4. Through praying for guidance and discerning with others we are better ministers. You may want your own loving listener for your ministry.
5. Always inquire as to what the institution (parish, college, hospital, etc.) will provide for ongoing formation in grief ministry.
6. Be aware that there is a major shift in models from "letting go" to "continual bonds."