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### Living With Dying – A Pastoral and Congregational Guide

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LIVING WITH DYING – A PASTORAL AND CONGREGATIONAL GUIDE

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A Major Applied Project Presented to the Faculty of  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

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By  
Kristian Kincaid  
May 2005

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LIVING WITH DYING: A PASTORAL AND CONGREGATIONAL GUIDE

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE CONCORDIA SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTORATE OF MINISTRY

BY  
REVEREND KRISTIAN KINCAID

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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## ABSTRACT

The death of a loved one impacts the grieving emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually. Interviews were conducted with members of the congregation experiencing loss to ascertain insights into the grieving process as well as pastoral and congregational acts deemed significantly helpful. Findings reveal both pastor and congregation have much to offer the grieving. A pastoral and congregational guide will help focus these offerings.

## INTRODUCTION

As a parish pastor for seventeen years, I have repeatedly grappled with how I can most effectively minister to grieving members of the parish. I am keenly aware of the bereaved members in my congregation, and continue to wrestle with questions. Do people grieve in the same way? What is a grieving person really going through? How long should a time of sorrow last? When and how often should I call on them? Is it permissible to bring up the topic of death in the course of a conversation? How do I comfort them? How can I make a difference? Is care of the bereaved my responsibility alone, or is the congregation to be equipped in serving as well?

I had served as a pastor for only sixty days when I faced my first challenge with the grieving. Those early days following ordination were filled with routine pastoral duties, such as preparing sermons, visiting the sick, and making introductory calls on members of the parish. One morning the routine was broken. The husband of one of my members had died of a massive heart attack in a store parking lot. Brimming with tears, the blue eyes of his widow, Esther, now looked at me. Death had interrupted a day, a marriage, and a life. “Pastor, how can I go on?” she asked as I held her trembling hands. How was I to respond?

On another occasion an emergency technician called to notify me that one of my members, a young mother in her thirties, had been transported by ambulance to the hospital following a traffic accident. I was told she had “expired ” by the nurse in charge. I was led to a private room in the trauma unit and, nearing the door, heard repeated sobs. Upon

entering, I saw her husband leaning over the lifeless body, gently stroking her blonde hair, now spotted with dried blood. What would be my best course of action?

I stood in the hospital on another call and waited for the daughter of a middle-aged man to arrive. Her father, a patient in the cardiac care unit, died while she was en route. The family asked me to inform her of the death. The challenge of caring for the grieving was before me again. How was I to proceed?

During my years as a parish pastor there have been many other difficult moments. I remember the faces of the dying and the tears of the sorrowing. I am not alone. Care of the grieving challenges each pastor and congregation.

In my duties as Circuit Counselor, I visited a young pastor who was placed in his congregation from the seminary only months earlier. I wanted to encourage him in the early stages of his ministry. He had conducted his first funeral service only days before. He commented confidently, “The elderly fellow died. He had been battling cancer for a while. His wife seems to be doing fine. I might call on her in a few days, but as far as I’m concerned it’s a wrap.”

Is pastoral care of the bereaved so simple? Can each pastor, upon speaking the benediction, breathe easily and confidently comment, “It’s a wrap?” Does the strategic course of action for the pastor focus solely toward the completion of the funeral service, or does he have more to offer in terms of pastoral care?

The project, “Living With Dying – A Pastoral and Congregational Guide” is written as a requirement for the doctor of ministry project at Concordia Seminary and hopefully for pastors and congregational leaders of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in order to facilitate effective ministry to the grieving. Utilizing interviews with the grieving

themselves, the nature and impact of grief was explored, as well as pastoral and congregational acts identified by the bereaved as significant in bringing comfort. Past and current theories concerning the nature of the grieving process are addressed. A history of changing funerary practices is provided and the impact upon the grieving by these changes is discussed. A pastoral and congregational guide in ministering to the grieving is offered. The project provides forms for pastors and congregational leaders to aid in care of the bereaved. A sermon series for the congregation at large centers on educating members in managing their own grief experiences and equipping them to be caregivers of the grieving. A citation of the sources consulted in developing the project completes the work. Pastors and congregational leaders are afforded insights into the grieving process, and actions they can implement in caring for the grieving members of the parish are outlined.

The project originated for professional and personal reasons. My mother died suddenly of a heart attack. My father died ten years later of lingering colon cancer. My sister died in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. These personal recollections are addressed in chapter seven. I am aware of the impact of grief and the subsequent struggle to embrace life again. My prayer is that other pastors and congregational leaders gain understanding from this project so that the grieving in their midst are embraced and comforted.



## CHAPTER ONE THE PROJECT BACKGROUND

How does a grieving individual gain strength to face life again? What impact does grief have in physical, emotional, social and spiritual terms? What do the bereaved value in terms of pastoral care? What are the roles of the pastor and the congregation in ministering to those who grieve? The project, “Living With Dying - A Pastoral and Congregational Guide,” provides answers to these questions. A resource guide for pastors and congregational leaders emerges from the findings of the project that develops principles, ideas, and responses concerning ministry to the grieving.

The project addresses the “how” of ministering to the sorrowing by exploring the nature and impact of the grieving process. Members of the congregation who had experienced the death of a loved one were identified and asked personally to participate in an interview process. The initial questions set before the assembled group were: how did grief impact you physically? How did grief impact you emotionally? How did grief impact you socially? How did grief impact you spiritually?

Group participants would be asked a final question in devising a care plan for the bereaved, “Which congregational acts brought you comfort during your time of grief?” The results of the interviews provided for a deepened understanding into the impact of grief and also highlighted acts on the part of the pastor and congregation valued by the bereaved. The tabulated results of these “best practices” can potentially be utilized by pastors and congregations in ministering to the grieving.

The congregation participated in the project through a four-week sermon series that sought to assist the members in managing their own grief experiences and to equip them to be caregivers of the grieving. The sermon series also served to formulate a grief support group within the congregation.

The support group met twice a month for three months. Announcements in the bulletin, newsletter, and at the close of worship services were used to notify the congregation of the support group. Guidance, encouragement, and offering a place to belong were key components of the group. The effectiveness of the group was measured after the last session through exit interviews with all participants present, who were asked to describe the strengths and weakness of the support group.

Limitations existed within the project. Variables such as circumstances surrounding the loss, expected or unexpected death, gender, age, and the impact of previous losses were not addressed. Personality traits, family structure, health and lifestyle issues, and cultural factors were not used in the equation of the project. The interview sample is limited to the members of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Dubuque, Iowa.

How does a grieving individual gain strength to face life again? This is a pertinent question for the parish pastors and congregational leaders. The project affords insights to enhance pastoral and congregational ministry to grieving souls.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION IN RELATION TO DEATH AND GRIEF

Death became the constant companion of mankind from the day of the fall into sin. The ramifications of God's command to our first parents still stand, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."<sup>1</sup> Commenting on this, Martin Luther writes, "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church, his altar, his pulpit. Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, to give recognition to the word and will of God, and to call upon God for aid against temptation."<sup>2</sup>

God's solemn pronouncement to Adam and Eve after their fall applies to all humanity, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."<sup>3</sup> St. Paul writes, "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men."<sup>4</sup> The intermediate causes of death are accidents, disease, fires and the like; the ultimate cause of death is sin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), Genesis 2:17.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Ulrich S. Leopold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 95.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3:19.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, Romans 5:12.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, Romans 6:23, James 1:15.

Is the eradication of death a possibility in our technological age? Perhaps something can be unlocked in the genetic code or the constitution of our bodies can be changed.

Physician David L. Schiedemayer contends, "The dominant paradigm is that physicians are to struggle against death."<sup>6</sup>

Death is the archenemy of doctors.<sup>7</sup> The confession of a psychiatrist upon the death of one of his patients reveals what is like to wage a losing battle:

I will mention the ungrateful effrontery of one who dies despite our most skillful ministrations, the narcissistic damage to a vaulted intellect proved ignorant, the deep wounds to omnipotence when we are shown to be quite impotent.<sup>8</sup>

Is death simply an inevitable biological occurrence? Must the elements comprising the human body disintegrate due to physiological laws? Lutheran dogmatician Francis Pieper asserts: "To bolster their notion that death would have been man's lot even without sin, men resort chiefly to the argument that the human body, being matter, must disintegrate, or that such heterogeneous elements as the immaterial soul and the material body cannot possibly live endlessly in harmonious union ...they are mouthing unscientific bombast."<sup>9</sup>

Edward W.A. Koehler in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* writes, "No sane person denies the fact of death. It is a tragic situation. Man who has the will to live, and does all he can to avoid death, must finally die; no charm, no medicine, no science, no power can stay the fatal

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<sup>6</sup> David L. Schiedemayer, *Dignity and Dying*, ed. Arlene B. Miller John F. Kilner, Edmund D. Pellegrino (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1996), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Neale, *The Art of Dying* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 11.

<sup>8</sup> August M. Kasper, "The Doctor and Death," in *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), 266.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, volume 3, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 509.

blow. Man, who was created to live, is now born to die; his way through life leads but to the grave.”<sup>10</sup>

Physical death is defined in Holy Scripture as the separation of the soul from the body. The death of the rich farmer in Luke 12 is described as “this night your soul will be required of you.”<sup>11</sup> The prophet Elijah, asking God to raise a boy from the dead, prays, “O Lord, my God, let this child’s soul come into him again.”<sup>12</sup> When Christ died upon the cross He “gave up His spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Francis Pieper states, “Bodily death is nothing less than a tearing asunder of man, the separation of the soul from the body, the unnatural disruption of the union of soul and body which have been created by God as one.”<sup>14</sup>

Physical death is one of three types of death distinguished in Holy Scripture, the others being spiritual death and eternal death.<sup>15</sup> St. Paul writes concerning spiritual death, “You...were dead in your trespasses and sins.”<sup>16</sup> From conception on, each human being is spiritually dead and powerless to believe in Jesus Christ. St. Paul continues, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He has loved us, even when we were

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<sup>10</sup> Edward W.A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), 292.

<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Luke 12:20.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, I Kings 17:21.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, Matthew 27:50.

<sup>14</sup> Pieper, 536.

<sup>15</sup> John R. Stephenson, *Eschatology*, in *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, ed. Robert Preus (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 1993), 37.

<sup>16</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Ephesians 2:1.

dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”<sup>17</sup>

The Lord gives the gift of faith and spiritual life through Word and Sacrament. As Luther states in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”<sup>18</sup>

Eternal death is God’s righteous judgment of those who have no faith in Christ. Upon temporal death, the soul of the unbeliever is immediately in hell, a place of unending torment and anguish. Pieper writes, “Of the souls of unbelievers Scripture declares they are kept in prison, a place of punishment.”<sup>19</sup> John the Baptist testified, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”<sup>20</sup> St. John writes, “Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”<sup>21</sup> John Stephensen states, “The principal torment of the soul endured by the damned will consist in their awareness of exclusion from the joy-giving presence of the Lord. Everlasting conscious severance from the Source of life and love will be the misery of an

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<sup>17</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Ephesians 2:4,5.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, ed. Edward W. A. Koehler (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1981), 161.

<sup>19</sup> Pieper, 511.

<sup>20</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 3:36.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, Revelation 20:14,15.

undying death.”<sup>22</sup> The purpose of God revealing this doctrine in the Word is that “we flee from the wrath to come.”<sup>23</sup>

In the Good Shepherd discourse of John 10, Christ says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”<sup>24</sup> R.C.H. Lenski comments: “ ‘I came,’ means from heaven into this world. Others keep coming to destroy; the purpose of Jesus is to bestow life. Note the durative present tense of “have” and its emphatic repetition: have as an enduring possession.”<sup>25</sup>

Eternal life is the present possession of every believer. Upon temporal death, the believer is immediately in heaven with the Lord. Jesus said to the penitent thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”<sup>26</sup> St. Paul confesses, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”<sup>27</sup> St. John writes, “Blessed are they that die in the Lord.”<sup>28</sup> Stephen at the moment of his death prayed, “Lord, receive my spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Jesus, speaking of the God of Abraham, Isaac,

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<sup>22</sup> Stephensen, 122.

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 3:7-12.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, John 10:10.

<sup>25</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1943), 720.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, Luke 23:43.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, Philippians 1:23-24.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, Revelation 14:13.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, Acts 7:59.

and Jacob tells the Sadducees, “For He is not a God of the dead, but of the living, for all live unto him.”<sup>30</sup> Upon their death, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not cease to have life.

The Old Testament witness concerning the state of the soul after death also proclaims life to the believer: “You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.”<sup>31</sup> And in Psalm 48, “He will be our guide, even unto death.”<sup>32</sup> In Psalm 73, Asaph writes, “My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”<sup>33</sup> David echoes this with “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”<sup>34</sup> And from the sons of Korah in Psalm 49, “God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me.”<sup>35</sup> In Ecclesiastes we read: “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”<sup>36</sup>

When asked, “What do the Scriptures teach concerning eternal life?” we confess: “That all believers when they die are, according to the soul, at once present with Christ, and after the last day, shall be with Christ, body and soul, and live with him in eternal joy and glory.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, Luke 20:38.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, Psalm 16:11.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, Psalm 48:14.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, Psalm 73:26.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, Psalm 23:6.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, Psalm 49:15.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, Ecclesiastes 12:7.

<sup>37</sup> *A Short Exposition of Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1912), 106.



Martin Chemnitz, a seventeenth century dogmatician states:

With regard to the souls of the dead, Scripture declares that when the souls of the righteous are separated from the bodies at death, they are gathered to their people, bound in the bundle of the living, in the bosom in Abraham. Thus they depart to the Lord and are with Christ in paradise. There they enjoy rest; they rest from their labors. They await the last day with joy, when they will finally be perfected. But the Holy Scriptures testify regarding the souls of the wicked set free from their bodies by the intervention of death, that they come to a place of torments, where they are in anguish.<sup>38</sup>

Christ's death and bodily resurrection allows for the proclamation of eternal life

for all who believe. Luther writes:

Know ye, then - sin, death, and the devil, and everything that assails me - that you are missing the mark. I am not one of those who are afraid of you. For Christ, my dear Lord, has presented to me that triumph and victory of His by which you were laid low. And from this very gift of His I am called a Christian. There is no other reason. My sin and death hung around his neck on Good Friday, but on the day of Easter they had completely disappeared. This victory He has bestowed on me.<sup>39</sup>

Christ laid down his life on the cross, died in our stead, and rose again. The bodily resurrection of Christ is of critical importance for, as St. Paul writes, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins."<sup>40</sup> Koehler writes, "The resurrection of Christ proves that there is such a thing as a resurrection of the dead, and that for the believers there is a resurrection unto life. Christ, who raised himself from death, has power to raise us also from death, and to give us eternal life."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacrament*, trans. Luther Peollot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1981), 151.

<sup>39</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1959), 1218.

<sup>40</sup> *The Holy Bible*, I Corinthians 15:17.

<sup>41</sup> Koehler, 105.

An examination of Scriptural texts in which Christ encounters death foreshadows his own resurrection, showing also his compassion and power.<sup>42</sup> In these accounts, the action shifts from human anguish to God's promise of help.<sup>43</sup> In the Lukan account of the raising of the widow's son, Christ states, "Young man I say to you, arise."<sup>44</sup>

Arthur Just summarizes the miracle:

Already now at the beginning of his ministry we see Jesus' power over death, which he will proclaim once and for all in his own resurrection. The hearer may infer that since Jesus has the power to raise the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, and himself, then he has the power to raise also the hearer from the dead.<sup>45</sup>

The death of Lazarus is described in John 11. Before journeying to Bethany, Christ states to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."<sup>46</sup>

Lenski comments:

"Our friend," but not, "Let us go and awake him." "Our friend...but I am going that I may wake him..." Someone has written a little book on the striking manner in which Jesus manifested his deity by his use of personal pronouns. In Bethany, all is still dark - the shadow lies heavy on the sister's hearts, doubts, questions, disappointment wrestle in the gloom with faith that strives to find and hold the hope in the words of Jesus sent by the messenger. But beyond the Jordan the sun is already shining. "I go to wake him out of sleep."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robert G. Hughes, *A Trumpet in the Darkness: Preaching to Mourners* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 88.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1996), 307.

<sup>44</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Luke 7:14.

<sup>45</sup> Just, 309.

<sup>46</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 11:11.

<sup>47</sup> Lenski, 789.

Jesus, standing before the tomb commands, “Lazarus, come out,”<sup>48</sup> and then “he who had died came out, bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth.”<sup>49</sup> Christ embodies life, and when He is present resurrection and life manifest themselves also. Lutheran commentator Paul Kretzman writes:

Death is only the gateway to the full and perfect life; it has no terrors for the Christian, since it has been swallowed up in victory by the resurrection of Jesus. Whatever experience believers have of death is all on this side of the grave; here the fear of death and the terrors of hell sometimes assail them very keenly. But they conquer all these horrors through faith in the words of Christ, and in the very moment of dying, death is overcome; they fall sleep in the wounds of Jesus and in the next moment they awake in heaven.<sup>50</sup>

The raising of Jairus’ daughter is contained in the Synoptic Gospels. Christ states the dead child is merely sleeping, and commands her, “Little girl, arise.”<sup>51</sup> Her soul immediately returns to her body and she lives. Arthur Just comments on the miracles of Christ:

Jesus has shown his power over nature, demon possession, and sickness. These three miracles lead up to the final miracle: the resurrection from the dead. This is the ultimate miracle, and it foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection where he frees once and for all the bondage of creation to sin, which manifests itself in storms, demon possession, disease and death. Death, therefore, is called sleep by Jesus, since He now makes death something from which humans may be awakened.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 11:39.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, John 11:44.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the New Testament, Volume 2* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1921), 473.

<sup>51</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Luke 8:54.

<sup>52</sup> Just, 372.

The resurrection of Christ, states Charles A. Gieschen, “is not only of God’s plan of redemption, in Christ’s life and work, but it also sets before the church the culmination of her life in Christ: the victory over death, eternal life, resurrected flesh, and restored creation.”<sup>53</sup>

St. John writes of victory in his inspired words, “ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the Word of God.”<sup>54</sup>

Siegbert W. Becker comments on the verse:

When St. John says he saw the souls of those who had been beheaded, it was just as though he was saying to a sorrowing church, “The government of the empire has beheaded our brothers and sisters in Christ. It seems the enemies of the church have triumphed and the church is going down to defeat. Our friends are dead. But the government has only killed their bodies. And that is all we, too, see with mortal eyes. But God granted me a vision in which I saw their souls. These souls were not lying there on the bloody sand. They were not dead. They were living and reigning with Christ.” What a message of encouragement and hope.<sup>55</sup>

On the basis of Scripture the Christian confesses, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead.” The Augsburg Confession teaches, “It is taught among us also that our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the last day for judgment and raise up all the dead, to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect but to condemn ungodly men and the devil to hell and eternal punishment.”<sup>56</sup> This is an act of God’s omnipotence, not a natural

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Gieschen, *Preaching Through the Seasons of the Church Year*, in *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2001), 100.

<sup>54</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Revelation 20:4.

<sup>55</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Press, 1985), 308.

<sup>56</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 38.

occurrence.<sup>57</sup> Christ's believers rise with a glorified body, immortal and incorruptible, no longer subject to physical laws and conditions.

Luther comments:

We don't have to think of ourselves as dead and decaying, but rather as planted. We must learn a new way of speaking of death and the grave. When we die, it doesn't mean we are dead, but instead we are seeds planted for the coming summer. The cemetery is not a mound for the dead, but a field full of little seeds, which are called God's seeds. They will one day blossom again and become more beautiful than anyone can imagine.<sup>58</sup>

Concerning the resurrection of the dead, Christ states: "All in graves will hear His voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to life, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."<sup>59</sup> Daniel says, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life; others to shame and everlasting contempt."<sup>60</sup> St. Paul writes, "Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body."<sup>61</sup> Job testifies, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He shall stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in flesh I shall see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes--I, and not another; how my heart yearns within me!"<sup>62</sup>

Martin Chemnitz summarizes, "Of the resurrection of the flesh and life eternal the Holy Scriptures testify that the same substance of our flesh but glorified, will also be raised

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<sup>57</sup> Koehler, 303.

<sup>58</sup> Plass, 378.

<sup>59</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 5:28.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, Daniel 12:2.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, Philippians 3:21.

<sup>62</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Job 19:27.

but without sin. And in eternal life we shall have this same soul, but likewise glorified and without sin.”<sup>63</sup>

Earthly life is well characterized by Job: “Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.”<sup>64</sup> Grief, one of the “troubles” we face, is addressed in various contexts in Holy Scripture. The Lord grieves over the wickedness of mankind.<sup>65</sup> The Holy Spirit grieves,<sup>66</sup> a father grieves over his son’s foolishness,<sup>67</sup> and Paul grieves for those with no faith in Christ.<sup>68</sup>

Grief following death is spoken of by St. Paul as he writes, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep.”<sup>69</sup> William Barclay, in his commentary on Thessalonians, states that in the face of death the pagan world stood in despair. He writes:

They met it with grim resignation and bleak hopelessness. Aeschylus wrote, “Once a man dies there is no resurrection.” Theocritus wrote, “There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.” Catullus wrote, “When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Luther Peollot, trans., *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*, by Martin Chemnitz (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1981), 61.

<sup>64</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Job 14:1.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, Genesis 6:6.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, Ephesians 4:30.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, Proverbs 17:21.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, Romans 9:2.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, I Thessalonians 4:13,14.

<sup>70</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 203.

Against this bleak train of thought concerning death, St. Paul writes of hope. Paul's guidance for the Thessalonians does not prohibit grieving for those who have died. He writes, "We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fallen asleep or to *grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.*"<sup>71</sup> "The rest" are pagans, devoid of hope. In distinction, Christian grieving is tempered with hope. David Kuske, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary states:

Paul is not prohibiting Christians from grieving. He simply says they do not grieve "like the rest of men." Of course there is sorrow at death - one cannot part even for a short time from a loved one without some sad feelings. But because Paul did not want the Thessalonians to grieve without hope like most people, he presented them the facts about the death of Christians and the Lord's coming. At each funeral they could comfort one another with these truths. He begins with the most basic fact: Jesus died but then rose again, showing his complete power over death. Paul said if they believe this - and he knew they did - then a second point to believe goes hand in hand with it. Jesus promised that His resurrection means we will also rise from death.<sup>72</sup>

The parish pastor proclaims to his grieving members the same hope and comfort that St. Paul brought to the Thessalonians, saying at death "these are the things we believe."<sup>73</sup>

The importance of ministering to the sorrowing is reflected in the questions that pastors are asked during a time of loss. In my own pastoral experience, grieving congregational members have inquired about the nature of heaven and hell, the state of the soul at death, reincarnation, and communicating with the deceased, among other things. One member of my parish was comforted following the death of her nephew by the bathroom light in her room mysteriously flickering during the night. She concluded that her nephew was reaching

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<sup>71</sup> *The Holy Bible*, I Thessalonians 4:13.

<sup>72</sup> David P. Kuske, *Thessalonians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 47.

<sup>73</sup> William H. Willimon, *Liturgy and Life's Crises: The Funeral, Worship and Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 102.

from beyond the grave. Another individual said that an owl had hooted during the night following his father-in law's death several years ago. The evening of his father's death, only months ago, an owl hooted in the evergreen tree outside his family room. He decided that this occurrence was a sign from God.

At the ordination service for a pastoral candidate, the presiding minister prays, "Fill him, Your undershepherd, with Your love that in Your name he will seek the straying and bear up the weak. Give him the heart to never grow weary in the service of your flock."<sup>74</sup> In *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls*, Kurt Brink writes: "While nothing endears parishioners to their shepherd more than faithful visitation while they are hospitalized, shut-in or bereaved, it is also true that nothing disgusts them more than pastoral indifference and neglect in this area of ministry."<sup>75</sup> In *Pastoral Theology*, John Fritz states, "What should persuade a pastor to make pastoral calls and thus minister to the individual in his congregation is his love for Christ and his passion for souls."<sup>76</sup>

Ministering to the bereaved is done "for the purpose of bringing comfort to the survivors by the confessing the hope that we have concerning the dead."<sup>77</sup> The importance of bringing pastoral care to the bereaved is summarized by Donald Deffner:

There is the ultimate question: "What happens at death - and beyond?" Here the preacher is called to proclaim with conviction: "Our death is certain. But our

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<sup>74</sup> Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, ed., *Lutheran Worship Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 213.

<sup>75</sup> Kurt Brink, *Overcoming Pastoral Pitfalls* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 45.

<sup>76</sup> John Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), 85.

<sup>77</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1974), 299.



resurrection is also certain. For God has made us His own in Baptism. He has promised: "I will never leave you or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) "Because I live, you shall live also." (John 14:19)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Donal L. Deffner, "The Funeral Sermon," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, January, 1994, 16.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHANGES IN THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

In *The Message of the Church to the World Today*, T. A. Kantonen writes:

In ancient Greek philosophy, there was a character by the name of Cratylus. Now the master of Cratylus was Heraclitus; and he philosophized that you could not step into the same river twice; for in the process of constant flowing its substance would have changed. Now Cratylus went one step further, and said that you couldn't even step into the same river once, since by the time you had stepped into it, it would not be the same river into which you had decided to step. And if we carried this still further, we would have to conclude that you couldn't even say anything about stepping into a river, for by the time you had finished the statement, the river which you had in mind wouldn't even be there. And the final conclusion we would have to draw from such a philosophy would be that you simply have to scurry around as fast as possible and rapidly point to things before they had changed into something else.<sup>79</sup>

The world is filled with change. The pastor aware of such changes knows that they impact the members of his congregation. Rapid technological changes have taken place.

Change has impacted and continues to impact the funeral industry at the same pace.

According to historians Robert Hubenstein and William Lamers, funeral customs have changed in dramatic fashion in the past century.<sup>80</sup> Among the changes they cite: in the 1800's death predominately took place in the home, family members tended to the sick and dying, with these same family members washing and dressing the corpse for viewing in the parlor, black badges covered the knocker on the front door, and drapes were pulled in the windows of the house to indicate a death had transpired in the

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<sup>79</sup> T.A. Kantonen, *The Message of the Church to the World Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Habenstein and William Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Practice* (Milwaukee: Buffin Printers, 1955), 444.

family.<sup>81</sup>

The family notified the community at large about a death. Cards were printed with the name of the deceased and the time and date of the funeral service. These were hand-delivered by family members to neighbors. Upon receipt of the card, acquaintances would visit the home of the deceased, often bringing flowers for the practical purpose of masking the odor of decomposition.<sup>82</sup>

Family members of the deceased wore mourning garb. Women dressed in dull black clothes for a one-year period, switching to lighter tones during the second year. Men and children were to follow a similar regimen.<sup>83</sup>

During this era, the best room in a home was called the “parlor.”<sup>84</sup> Important family events took place in the room: weddings, reunions, and the funeral vigil. With the rise of embalming, largely stemming from shipping bodies home from the Civil War,<sup>85</sup> the “funeral parlor” was established. The responsibility of tending to the needs of the dead, such as washing and dressing the corpse, moved from the immediate family to the undertaker, so named because he “undertook” to do those things necessary for burial.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Habenstein and Lamers, 26.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, 389.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, 273.

<sup>84</sup> James Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1980), 172.

<sup>85</sup> James W. Lowry, *Embalming Surgeons of the Civil War* (Frederick: The National Museum of the Civil War, 2001), 6.

<sup>86</sup> H.C. Raether and R.C. Slater, "Facing Death as an Experience of Life," National Funeral Director Association., (1974), 15.

Prior to the Civil war, embalming was not widely used, and the corpse was interred shortly after death.<sup>87</sup> Heavy casualties in the battles of the Civil War necessitated embalming for the shipment of bodies home for burial. Embalming by definition is the replacement of normal body fluids with preserving chemicals.<sup>88</sup> Ephraim Ellsworth was the first Union officer to die in battle.<sup>89</sup> His embalmed remains lay in state at the White House for several days before being shipped to New York State for burial.

According to Civil War historian James Lowry, the majority of embalmers tending to the Civil War dead used a mixture of zinc oxide and alcohol as a preservative. A soldier contracted with an embalmer so that, if he died in battle, his body would be located, embalmed, and shipped home. Embalmers required payment in advance with no refund if the soldier survived the war.<sup>90</sup>

Restoration of the body came to be a valued skill in the funeral industry as giving the appearance of sleep to the deceased was thought to ease the sorrow of the bereaved.<sup>91</sup> Cosmetic procedures were used to restore normal color to the face and hands. Creams, liquids, or sprays were utilized to bring normal tones to the corpse. One 1920's-era Boston

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<sup>87</sup> Lowry, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Michael R. Leming and George E. Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), 312.

<sup>89</sup> *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1968 ed., s.v. "Ephraim Ellsworth."

<sup>90</sup> Lowry, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Quincy Dowd, *Funeral Management and Costs: A Worldwide Survey of Burial and Cremation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), 53.

undertaker advertised that for five dollars he would give the deceased “facial features of Christian hope and contentment.”<sup>92</sup>

In the mid 1800’s the corpse was typically placed in a simple six-sided wooden coffin often constructed by a cabinetmaker. Change would soon come, with the casket replacing the coffin. A.C. Barstow, who applied for a casket patent in 1849, explained the change:

The burial cases formerly used were adapted in shape nearly to the form of the human body, that is, they tapered from the shoulders to the feet. Presently, in order to obviate in some degree the disagreeable sensations produced by a coffin on many minds, the casket or square form has been adapted.<sup>93</sup>

The word “casket” originally referred to a container holding something precious, such as jewels.<sup>94</sup> Caskets currently range from simple pine to deluxe cherry or mahogany. Steel gauge caskets are also available, as are copper, fiberglass, and plastic. Top of the line models can cost ten thousand dollars.<sup>95</sup>

The first public cemetery was designed in Boston in 1832 where, for sanitary reasons, it was placed on the outskirts of the city.<sup>96</sup> The cemetery, Mt. Auburn, was designed with trees, shrubs, open spaces, and meandering paths, in distinction of burial sites that had

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<sup>92</sup> Dowd, 53.

<sup>93</sup> Habenstein and Lamers, 270.

<sup>94</sup> William Morris, "casket," in *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969 ed.

<sup>95</sup> Personal Interview with Steve Corson of Kaiser-Corson Funeral Home, Waverly, IA, June 8, 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Leming and Dickinson, 278.

become overcrowded and unkempt. The success of this cemetery stimulated the spread of cemeteries like it all over the country.<sup>97</sup>

By 1900, the average cemetery exhibited these park-like traits, as aesthetic qualities “buried death with the dead.”<sup>98</sup> Mourners were diverted from their grief by stately trees, reflecting pools, colorful flowers, and rolling landscapes. The Association of Cemetery Superintendents advocated this atmosphere as one of their own, Superintendent O.C. Simonds, wrote, “A cemetery should be a beautiful park.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Superintendent Sidney J. Hare stated, “Today cemetery making is an art and gradually all things that suggest death, sorrow, or pain are being eliminated.”<sup>100</sup>

A stroll through a cemetery today reveals how tombstones have changed over the past century. Early in the history of our nation, a grave was often marked by a simple pile of stones.<sup>101</sup> More permanent markers such as wood and stone were used due to their durability.<sup>102</sup> Inverted torches, broken columns, clasped hands, angels and additional symbols were etched in the stone. Images such as these are still evident in the older sections of Harlington Cemetery in Waverly, IA. Working there for several years, I had the

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Farrell, 123.

<sup>99</sup> O.C. Simonds, *Review of Progress in Cemetery Design and Development with Suggestions for the Future* (1919), 41.

<sup>100</sup> Sidney J. Hare, *The Cemetery Beautiful*, ed. American Association of Cemetery Superintendents, (1910), 41.

<sup>101</sup> “Tomb Views” America Online, <http://www.members.aol.com/tombview/symbol2html>, accessed February 6, 2004.

<sup>102</sup> *Tomb Views.*

opportunity to take note of the various symbols on the gravestones. On one young man's grave is a tree that has been cut down, possibly symbolic of a life that ended suddenly. Children's markers include a lamb that bears facial features of fear, its mouth agape. An empty crib is used on another child's grave stone. As one walks to the newer section of Harlington Cemetery, the gravestones are predominantly flat with little more than the name, birth and death dates of the deceased. The difference among these stones is a microcosm of change in the funeral industry. Howard Weed, author of the magazine *Modern Park Cemeteries*, argued in 1912 that, "with headstones showing above the surface we have the old graveyard scene, but buried in the ground they do not appear in the landscape picture and we then have a park-like effect."<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, what has changed in funeral practices is the institutionalization of death.<sup>104</sup> In a small community one hundred years ago, when someone was dying, the community knew about it. The dying man was at home, with family and friends present. They would often hear his last words and see him die. They observed the cessation of breathing and the loss of skin color. Family members tended to the corpse. Author Robert E. Neale explains the changes in the funeral industry in the last century:

The news of the day is death. A newspaper is an obituary column writ large, containing reports of death by automobile accident, heart attack, cancer, suicide, murder, famine, flood, fire, and war. Death surrounds us, yet we are not so intimate with it as before. The dying are now found in hospitals, not visited at all by casual acquaintances and only occasionally by friends. The final moments of life are rarely observed by even the family. The body disappears, not to a church for the whole community, but to a funeral home...<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Howard Evarts Weed, *Modern Park Cemeteries* (1912), 94.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Neale, *The Art of Dying* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1.

<sup>105</sup> Neale, 2.

Death takes place primarily in institutional settings.<sup>106</sup> Family members no longer wash and dress the corpse and carry out the details of burial, but the funeral director does. The corpse is no longer displayed in the parlor, but in the funeral home. The family plot has given way to the cemetery, which has given way to the memorial garden. We remark that someone has “expired” or “passed on” instead of that they have died.

This review of changing funeral practices shows that death has become an industry. According to Steve Corson of Kaiser Corson Funeral Homes in Waverly, Iowa, the average cost of a funeral is now ten thousand dollars.<sup>107</sup>

Pastors should be aware of the myriad of choices that individuals are required to make in arranging funeral details for a loved one. Decision making during a time of grief can be difficult. One member of my parish was overwhelmed by the range of choices he faced after the death of his wife. He feared being disrespectful to her memory if he did not make the most expensive selections. Inquiries from the funeral director can include, “Steel, wood, or fiberglass casket?” “Cement, mid-grade, or premium vault?” “Traditional visitation or cremation?” “Dove or butterfly release at the cemetery?”

Such a myriad of choices translates into increased costs. An example of this is evidenced in the following potential charges, which may include:

Director Services	\$1195.00
Transfer of Remains	195.00
Embalming	445.00

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Corson Interview, June 8, 2003.



Cosmetic Preparation	185.00
Visitation	448.00
Funeral Service	415.00
Vehicle Charge	136.00
Memorial Cards	59.00
Register Cards	33.00
Crematory Fee	195.00
Renting of Casket	195.00-1295.00
Casket	1500.00-10,000.00
Urns	83.00-914.00
Urn Vaults	130.00-405.00
Balloon Release	175.00
Flag Case	195.00
White Dove Release	173.00
Butterfly Release	188.00
Grave Opening/Closing	500.00
Plot	750.00
Vault	100.00-5000.00 <sup>108</sup>

Steve Corson<sup>109</sup> concurs with the analysis that change is impacting the funeral industry. Indeed, there are more choices concerning caskets and vaults, cremation or traditional disposal. In nearly twenty years as a funeral director, he has evidenced above all a more “individualized” approach from grieving families. Personal requests are becoming the norm. He states that one family requested that stuffed animals be placed in the arms of their

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<sup>108</sup> <http://www.funeralplan.com>, “*Funeral Plans*”, accessed May 26, 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Corson Personal Interview, June 8, 2003.

deceased mother, while another requested that a twelve pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon be displayed in dad's casket. One family opted to hold their father's funeral service at a local bar. Friends could toast his memory with the provided wine or beer throughout the service while being serenaded by a county western band. The casket was kept open until the last toast. A community pastor consented to conduct the "service," and the plans went on at the bar as requested by the family. Funeral practices will likely continue to change. In my own pastoral practice, poems, tributes, videotape of the deceased, personally written songs and additional requests are frequently solicited.

An examination of the substance of local obituary columns reveals changes in the past century. No longer a notice of death containing name of the deceased and family information, the obituary column is filled with personalized tidbits. Card playing, golfing, collecting beer cans, mention of favorites sports teams, and playing jokes on others are some of the items contained in contemporary obituaries. The Dubuque Telegraph Herald obituaries for August 21, 2004 contained the following:

"Arlynn loved reading, sewing, and being with her dog, Shayla. She especially loved swinging on her swing." "Lily loved Disney movies, peanut butter cups, swimming and dandelions." "Bernice will be remembered for, "taking care of her pets and being a Green Bay packer fan."<sup>110</sup>

The changes in the funeral industry are summarized by one individual who, in planning their own "celebration of life service" stated, "Allow us in our last days to live smart, to embrace the life we have left and to make our deaths our own."

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<sup>110</sup> *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, "Obituaries" (August 21, 2004).

CHAPTER FOUR  
CHANGES IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF GRIEF

The understanding of grief in the psychological field of study has changed in recent decades. Most psychiatrists in the 1960's defined grief as "a normal and natural reaction to loss."<sup>111</sup> In 1988, Theresa Rando, PhD, redefined grief as, "a process of psychological, social, and somatic reactions to the perception of loss."<sup>112</sup> In 1991, the Grief Resource Foundation defined grief as "the total response of the organism to the process of change"<sup>113</sup>, leaving loss out of its definition entirely. In 1996, the Counseling Center for Loss and Life Changes defined grief as the equation, "Change+loss=grief."<sup>114</sup>

Earlier trends of thought understood the grieving process as a set of unalterable, linear steps that impact a grieving person. Understood in this manner, the grieving process had stages that must be endured in a sequential manner. The work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross somewhat typifies this theory of grieving and of the process of dying.

Kubler-Ross was a staff psychiatrist at the University of Chicago's Billings Hospital. Her work with the terminally ill would revolutionize the understanding of grief in the academic and medical fields. In 1969 she published her landmark work, *On Death and*

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<sup>111</sup> Theresa Rando, *How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 11.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

*Dying*. Through information gleaned in interviews with the dying, she identified in her book five stages that terminally ill people worked through in dealing with their illness: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>115</sup>

The denial stage is typified by an “Are you sure? There must be a mistake,” response. Denial can be viewed as a cushion to soften the blow that either the terminally ill or the bereaved has suffered. The patient may seek additional medical advice in the hope that the terminal diagnosis is in error, or cite an erroneous pathology report or a mixed-up X-ray to assuage the shocking news. This is a temporary defense.<sup>116</sup>

The anger stage predominantly follows denial and contains the “Why me?” and “This is so unfair!” trains of thought. Anger can be displaced onto medical staff, clergy, family members and others.<sup>117</sup> The bargaining stage entails an “I do this, you do that,” line of reasoning, often with God. This stage begins when the individual has incorporated the terminal label into his or her self by accepting the inevitable, meaning a bargaining for more time may begin. There may be promises made to God in exchange for a few more days or weeks of life.<sup>118</sup>

The fourth stage is one of depression. The knowledge of impending death can no longer be denied, and a sense of loss ensues. With death certainly approaching, the meaningful things in life--family, friends, personal accomplishments, and perhaps self-

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<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 38.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid*, 38.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, 50.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid*, 82.

dignity--will be lost.<sup>119</sup> Acceptance, the final stage, leads one to process the facts at hand. The sure outcome is death. The patient is able to say goodbye, tie up loose ends, and discuss death with dignity and equanimity.<sup>120</sup>

*On Death and Dying* was received as a seminal work. Reviews of the book stated: “The Chicago seminar has vanquished the conspiracy of silence that once shrouded the hospital’s terminal wards. It has brought death out of the darkness. In doing so, it has shown how, and with what quiet grace, the human spirit composes itself for extinction.”<sup>121</sup> Another comment read, “An excellent book on the management of the terminally ill ... offers hope for the understanding of human strengths and weaknesses experienced during a very difficult time.”<sup>122</sup>

I conclude that the stage model may oversimplify the grieving process, viewing the “goal” of grief as moving from one linear stage to the next.<sup>123</sup> Additionally it places all people, regardless of circumstance, in a sequence of the same five stages. The five stages could be imposed upon the dying by doctors and family members. In this case, the perspective of the patient may not be validated, and the grief stages could be more arbitrary than as outlined by Kubler-Ross. The multi-dimensional and intensely personal nature of the

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<sup>119</sup> Kubler-Ross, 85.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*, 112.

<sup>121</sup> review of *On Death and Dying*, by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *Time*

<sup>122</sup> review of *On Death and Dying*, by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *American Journal of Psychiatry*

<sup>123</sup> Richard Dayringer, *Life Cycle* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), 26.

grieving process is not fully acknowledged. As people differ physically, they do psychologically. Simply put, we grieve in various ways.

A task model has been identified as an integral aspect of grief work. These tasks can be understood as a compass for the bereaved, providing direction on a journey of hope. The task model of grief work acknowledges individuality and begins where the stage model ends, with acceptance. J. William Worden advocates the task model, saying, “There is always some sense of sadness when you think about someone you loved and lost, but it is a different kind of sadness, it lacks the wrenching quality it previously had. One can think of the deceased without physical manifestations such as intense crying or tightness in the chest. Also, mourning is fulfilled when a person can reinvest his or her emotions back into life and in the living.”<sup>124</sup>

One of the earliest psychodynamic models acknowledging pain and loss of the bereaved was Sigmund Freud’s, *Mourning and Melancholia*, published in 1917. Freud noted that a person has emotional attachments in life; for example, father to son, or spouse to spouse. These attachments he labeled “cathexis.” Grief work is then a letting go of the once-established bonds, a process Freud entitled “decathexis.”<sup>125</sup>

The bereaved person faces the difficulty of accepting the loss on emotional and intellectual levels, something naturally resisted. Failure to “let go” or to complete the grief work results in dysfunction, according to Freud. One truism existent in Freud’s line of

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<sup>124</sup> William J. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Practitioner* (New York: Springer, 1982), 118.

<sup>125</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Alix Stracheg and James Stracheg, *On Attitude Toward Death* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 237.

reasoning is “time heals all wounds.” The basic goal of “letting go” takes place over time, with repeated confrontations with the loss.

John Bowlby<sup>126</sup> built on Freud’s work, focusing on how grief influences our interpersonal relationships; however, not on intrapsychic dynamics. Bowlby contended that, as a baby cries and throws a tantrum due to separation from his mother, he is attempting to re-establish the broken bond. Grief ensues when the object of affection no longer exists. For Bowlby, grief work entails becoming free of the clinging attachment to what is now a broken bond through engaging in the reality of the loss. In this sense, grief is an active process and takes place over time.

Bereavement specialist Theresa Rando identifies six interacting processes in her task model of grief, often entitled the 6-R process: recognizing the actuality of the loss, reacting to the loss, recollecting the deceased, relinquishing attachment to the deceased, readjusting to a new world without the deceased, and reinvesting in a new identity.<sup>127</sup> According to Rando, these tasks lead to resolution of grief in terms of adjustment and accommodation, allowing one to reinvest in life. The goal is learning to live with loss and reinvesting in life once again. Rando acknowledges that pain from the past will always exist, but one will not always be acutely bereaved. The past is integrated into the present as one learns to function again.

Rando states:

And, in the end, this moving forward with that scar is the very best we could hope for. You would not want to forget your loved one, as if she had never existed or not been an important part of your life. Those things that are important to you in your life are remembered and kept in the very special places of your heart and mind. Keep this loss,

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<sup>126</sup> John Bowlby, *Loss, Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>127</sup> Theresa Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* (Champaign: Research Press, 1993).



treasure what you have learned from it, take the memories that you learned from the person and the relationship and, in a healthy fashion, remember what should be retained, and let go of that which should be relinquished.<sup>128</sup>

Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka have identified the instrumental and intuitive styles of grieving within the task model. Instrumental grievers are cognitively- oriented; intuitive grievers are feeling-oriented. Concerning these styles they write:

There are many different styles of coping with loss. Each has distinct strengths and limitations. There are advantages in expressing affect and seeking support. But there are also complementary strengths in stoically continuing in the face of loss and in seeking amelioration of pain in cognitive and active approaches.<sup>129</sup>

Martin and Doka also developed a “Grief Pattern Inventory” consisting of twenty-five questions enabling a counselor to determine primary and secondary grieving patterns, which is administered two to three weeks after the initial evaluation, as dissonant responses often prove temporary in duration. Scores from the inventory are interpreted along a range from profoundly intuitive to balanced and from profoundly instrumental to balanced. Martin and Doka claim that such knowledge of grieving styles allows appropriate tasks to be utilized which align with the dominant grieving pattern.<sup>130</sup>

Additional changes in the understanding of grief have arisen with the emergence of family systems theory.<sup>131</sup> The family is a system, and what affects one individual in the family impacts each other member. George W. Bowman, a retired hospital chaplain, states

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<sup>128</sup> Theresa Rando, *How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* (New York: Bantour, 1988), 287.

<sup>129</sup> Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka, *Men Don't Cry ... Women Do: Transcending Gender Stereotypes of Grief* (Brunner/Mazel, 2000), 7.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Dorothy Stroh Becvar and Raphael J. Becvar, *Family Therapy* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 10.

that leadership roles and dependency roles fluctuate within the family upon the impact of death as homeostasis is lost. For example, if the primary breadwinner dies, the role needs to be assumed. If the primary caregiver dies, the role will also need to be filled. Interaction patterns within the family system are also impacted by death.<sup>132</sup> The pastor does well to acknowledge that an entire family system as well as its component parts are impacted and influenced by grief.

Doug Smith, from the American Academy of Bereavement, in the seminar “Different Ways of Grieving, Different Ways of Healing,” notes that birth order, gender, culture, and available resources have a bearing on grief.<sup>133</sup> He states that an assessment to determine the dominant style of grieving should be conducted, employing a tool such as the Grief Inventory Pattern. For Smith, the bottom line is that people grieve in an idiosyncratic manner. Consequently, the counselor seeks to assess each individual’s primary style of grief. According to either an instrumental or intuitive pattern, appropriate tools are implemented in order to assist the grieving.

Three areas need to be assessed, according to Smith, in order to facilitate the grieving process. Initially, the Grief Pattern Inventory analysis is implemented to determine the primary style of grief. For verification, the inventory can be repeated after two-to-three weeks. Secondly, the strengths of the grieving individual should be identified. These could entail faith, family resources, and personality, among others. Smith advocates not “problem”

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<sup>132</sup> George W. Bowman, *Dying, Grieving, Faith and Family* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998 ), 47.

<sup>133</sup> Doug Smith, "Different Ways of Grieving, Different Ways of Healing," December 6, 2003, day-long workshop, personal notes. American Academy of Bereavement, Davenport, IA.

focused grief work, but “strength” focused work, and contends that grief work is often problem-focused, failing to capitalize on individual strengths.

The final area of assessment is expectation, where the grieving person is asked to outline goals, providing options and direction for the future. Smith contends that negotiation between counselor and client centers on the question, “Given our relationship, for you, what is the best thing that can come from that relationship?” Needs, concerns, expectations, and priorities merge to form an individualized care plan.

Insights have been gained into the grieving process. The stage model viewing grief as somewhat passive in nature has largely given way to the task model, which understands grief as an active process. Heightened awareness of the idiosyncratic nature of grief leads to care plans respecting each individual style of grief, building on personal strengths. The grieving process is truly unique, and people do not grieve in the same manner or time frame. There are no absolutes in the grieving process. The pastor who is aware of all the changes in the field of study is equipped to be an effective caregiver of the sorrowing.

This review of the understanding of grief leads to an acknowledgment of its complex and idiosyncratic nature. We have learned that different people grieve differently. The project now turns to the grieving members of my congregation, so that we may learn from their experiences and understand those pastoral and congregational actions that helped them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE RESEARCH PROJECT DESIGN

What is a grieving member of the congregation really going through? Which pastoral and congregational acts do the grieving value? How do the pastor and the leadership of the congregation best minister to the grieving souls in their care? In an attempt to answer these questions, the project turned to the grieving themselves - to look into their eyes and listen to their voices of experience, viewing them as valuable resources.

The criteria for inclusion in the project were those current members who had experienced the death of a loved one. In August of 2003, I reviewed the records of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church to identify such members. Twenty-seven members met this criteria, and were personally asked to participate in the interview sample conducted in September, 2003. Time since the death of a loved one was not the inclusive factor, but experiencing the loss of a loved one was.

Information was gleaned from the group by an interview method. The content and order of the questions was considered. Probing, open-ended questions with exploratory verbs were used to facilitate group responses. Binary questions, limiting the scope of a response, were not used. The open-ended questions were constructed to be clear and understandable. Unstructured responses afforded insights into the perspectives and experiences of the grieving. No mention was made to the interview sample of the literature or grief theory. Member checking was used to validate the accuracy of the project's qualitative findings.

Information gleaned from the interview was coded and classified into various headings and subheadings.

The assembled twenty-seven participants, seven men and twenty women, met in a classroom at Our Redeemer on a Saturday afternoon for a three-hour duration. The questions were read verbally and were also displayed on a screen. We sat facing each other to aid hearing, and one person spoke at a time.

The order and content of the questions were: “How would you describe the emotional impact of grief in your experience?” “How would you describe the physical impact of grief in your experience?” “How would you describe the social impact of grief in your experience?” “How would you describe the spiritual impact of grief in your experience?” “Which variables influenced your experience of grief?”

The assembled group was also asked: “Which pastoral acts do you view as helpful to you during your time of grief?” Followed by, “Which congregational acts do you view as significantly helpful to you during your time of grief?”

Responses of participants were written on a blackboard and my personal observations and theoretical notes that were used in my analysis I recorded in a notebook.

A four part sermon series was utilized in the congregation in October 2003, with the purpose of comforting God’s people, helping them in managing their own grief experiences and equipping them to be caregivers of the bereaved. The series consisted of the following themes and texts: “A Time of Trial” (Job 14:1), “A Time of Good News,” (1 Corinthians 15:12-20), “A Time of Homecoming,” (John 19:28), and “A Time of Caring,” (Galatians 6:2). (See Appendix)

The sermon series also served to usher in the formation of a grief support group at Our Redeemer, which met twice monthly from November 2003 to January 2004. Sunday afternoon was chosen to allow older members to drive in daylight. Notice of the support group was made following worship services and also through the Sunday bulletin and monthly newsletter. The structure of the support group was simple by design: a prayer and devotion, Bible study, and a time of speaking and listening. The meetings lasted for two hours and closed with prayer. Meetings were held in the solarium at Our Redeemer.

In January, 2004, after the sixth and final session, participants were asked, "How did the support group benefit you?" Responses from the six attendees were written on a blackboard. Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of my conclusions.

The interview protocol method utilized by the project provided insights in the experiences of the grieving. Reviewing the data yielded dominant themes and sub-themes concerning pastoral and congregational care of the bereaved. Data gleaned from the project and classified into categories comprise a blueprint for pastors and congregational leaders in ministering to the bereaved.

CHAPTER SIX  
PROJECT RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

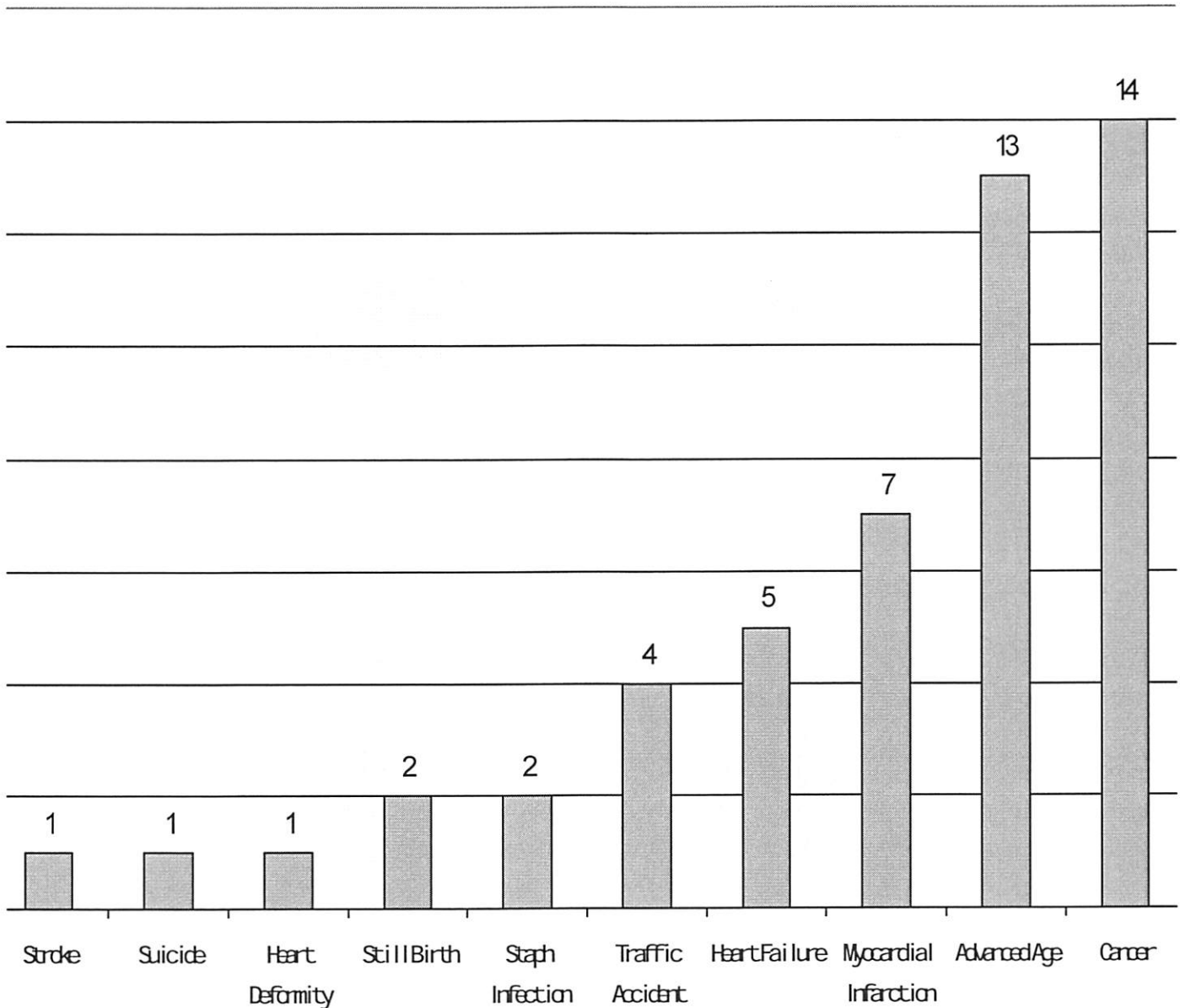
A review of the records of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in the fall of 2003 revealed fifty deaths within the forty-three year history of the congregation. Twenty-seven members impacted by these deaths remain on the rolls, and have experienced differing types of loss, with most deaths due to cancer or advanced age (see Table 1). Further analysis revealed that those surviving the loss of a loved one in terms of relationship dynamics include spouses, parents, siblings, and children (see Table 2). The age of the deceased spanned from still birth to the advanced elderly. Members of the interview group experienced both sudden and expected deaths of loved ones. The time lapse since the death occurred ranged from only weeks to over forty years.

The following is an analysis of responses to questions that were asked of participants in the study.

QUESTION ONE: "HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF GRIEF IN YOUR EXPERIENCE?" Group participants used the following descriptive words:

Denial	Shock	Numbness	Anxiety
Mood swings	Restlessness	Depression	Fear
Loss of concern	Guilt	Anger	Disorganization
Disbelief	Distress	Resignation	Grief "attacks"
Searching	Ambivalence	Yearning	Idealization
Loneliness	Resentment	Confusion	Difficulty with memory
Difficulty making decisions		Emotional oversensitivity	
Living with "if only" and "why?" questions		Depression	

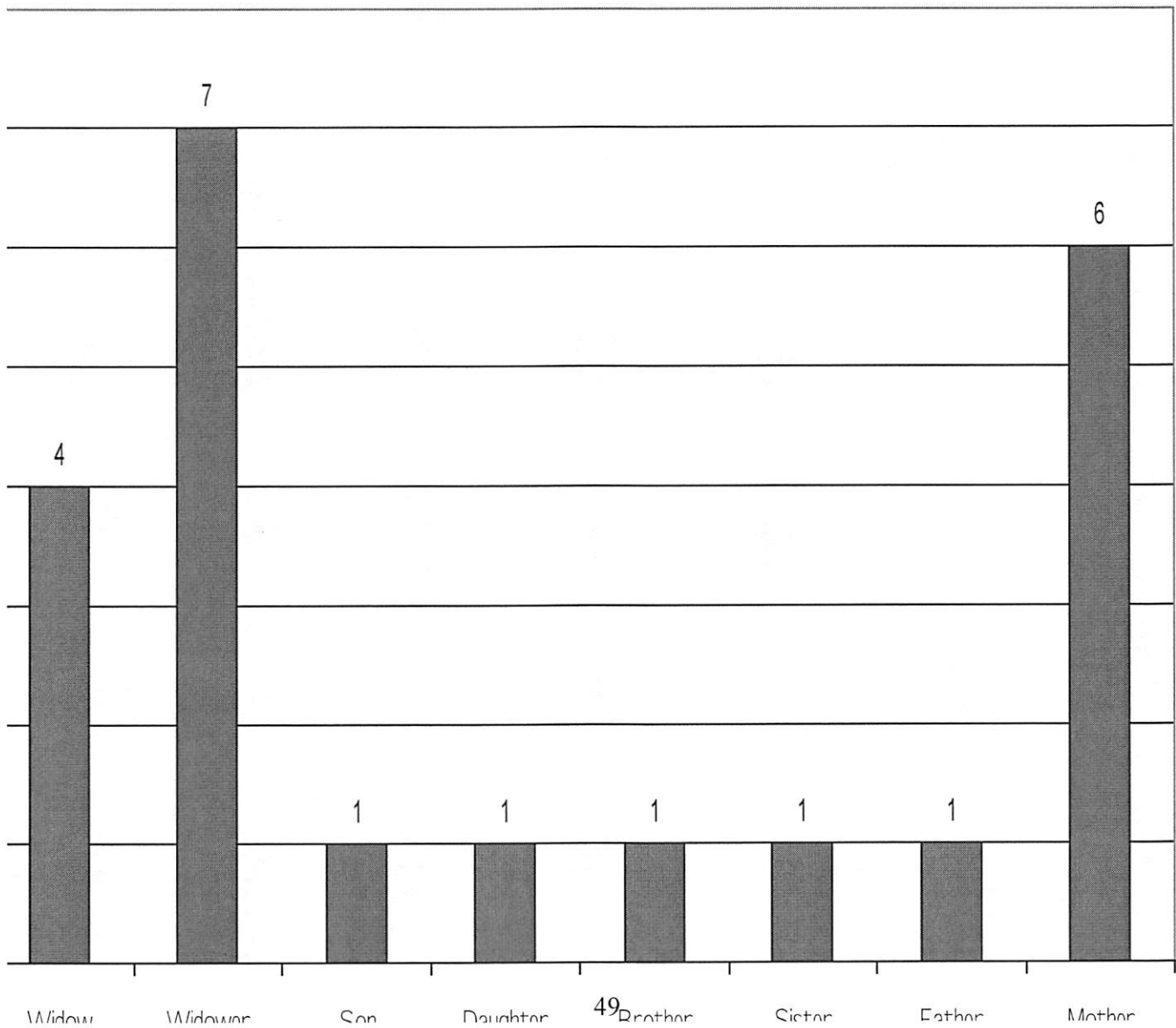
# Our Redeemer Lutheran Member Deaths by Type Years 1962 - 2004





BLE TWO:

Our Redeemer Lutheran Survivors of the Deceased  
Primary Relationship Categories  
Years 1962 - 2004



### *DATA ANALYSIS OF QUESTION ONE:*

Respondents indicate a wide range of emotions surface during a time of grief. One member of the group stated, "It appears to me that each of us here grieved differently and it wasn't the same for any of us." Responses demonstrate the diverse impact of grief in emotive terms, and its highly idiosyncratic nature. Discussion by group participants revealed that the emotional impact of grief is cyclical. One woman, whose daughter died while in high school over thirty-five years ago commented, "When I hear a song on the radio from those days, my mind goes right back to when my daughter was alive. I see her face, her prom dress, her smile. All those feelings well up inside me. I grieve all over again." Another participant stated, "The holidays are supposed to be a joyful time. These are the longest and the loneliest days for me, and I am angry at those times that life has dealt me such a blow." One man commented, "You never are over it. When I get my box of pictures out of my wife and remember all the times we had together, I have a good cry. You learn to deal with the death." Another woman stated, "I didn't feel anything at all. I was numb - that was my emotion."

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY:*

The pastor and others caring for the grieving can be alerted to the wide range of emotions brought by death, understanding that no two people grieve in exactly the same way. People should be allowed to grieve in their own way. Grief is cyclical, with emotions arising anew and rapidly changing due to the anniversary of the death or the holidays. The pastor can be aware of certain dates, such as the holidays, which can exacerbate wounds. He may want to send a note, phone, or visit the grieving during this period.

QUESTION TWO: “ HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE PHYSICAL IMPACT OF GRIEF IN YOUR EXPERIENCE?” Participants used the following descriptive words:

Dizziness	Exhaustion	Insomnia	Dry mouth
Nausea	Tightness in chest	Loss of appetite	Increase of appetite
Difficulty breathing	Tendency to sigh	Crying spells	Weight gain/loss
Increased alcohol/drug use		Gastro-intestinal difficulties	
Decreased sexual desire			

*DATA ANALYSIS OF QUESTION TWO:*

The diverse somatic impact of grief is clearly established by the respondents. A wide range of physical effects manifested themselves among group members. One man stated, “I felt so tired after my wife’s death. I could hardly get out of bed.” In contrast, a woman said, “After my husband died, I felt relieved. Please don’t misunderstand. He had been dying for months, struggling with cancer. I fed him and bathed him, and it was a labor of love. When he died, I had more energy than before.” One group participant, a middle-aged man, was very candid when he stated, “I couldn’t eat or sleep. My heart raced and I went from place to place, just driving in my car, going nowhere in particular. I hurt physically. To sleep, I started drinking. To cope, I started drinking. To ease the pain, I drank. It started to become a problem. The effect of drinking was temporary. The loss was still there in the morning.”

*IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY:*

Caregivers can be alert to the varying physical effects brought about by grief. “Broken hearted,” may not be just simple figurative language. Difficulties in sleeping, eating, and changes in energy levels are not uncommon. The grieving may attempt to soothe their pain through the use of alcohol or other drugs.

QUESTION THREE: “HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF GRIEF?” Group participants used the following words to describe the social impact of grief:

Isolation	Withdrawal
Change in status (husband to widower)	Change in interpersonal relationships
Stigma (seen as the “hurt one”)	Change in role

*DATA ANALYSIS OF QUESTION THREE:*

Respondents indicate that one’s social circle is directly impacted and changed following a death. A husband is instantly a widower, members of the couples club are now reduced to one, and others view a man as the “one who lost his wife.” One participant, a widower, said, “ I feel like a bicycle with one wheel. How can I go to family events at church?” An older woman commented, “ Everything has changed for me. I now drive to the store, to the bank, the post office. I have had to learn how to do some things that my husband always did. It hasn’t been easy.” Another woman, who experienced the loss of her child through stillbirth, commented on the loss of the role of motherhood. “I died inside when I heard a birth announcement at church or saw a woman in the pew holding a baby.”

*IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY:*

The pastor and other caregivers of the grieving should be sensitive to the changes in roles and social circles brought by death. Perhaps labels used by the congregation such as “Couples Club,” or the “Two by Twos” could be rephrased. A goal of assimilating and integrating the grieving into new social circles within the congregation is to be noted as well.

QUESTION FOUR: “HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF GRIEF?” Participants used the following words to describe the spiritual impact of grief:

“Why, God?” Confusion Questions such as: “Why, God?” and “How could you, God?”	“Where is my loved one?” Bargaining Withdrawal from church activities	Anger Acceptance
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*DATA ANALYSIS:*

The respondents clearly indicate a spiritual impact brought about by death. One member of the group stated, “I questioned the Lord and his ways after my mother’s death.” Another commented, “ After my wife died, I didn’t go to church for quite a while. I wrestled with my faith. I was loved back into the church. Without concern from this congregation, you would have one less person here today.” One man said, “My wife’s body was decimated in the car accident. I wondered if the Lord could raise her on the last day. I needed to hear a solid ‘yes’.”

Group responses establish that spiritual vulnerability is raised during a time of grief. Souls are discouraged and in need of comfort. However, other members of the group stated that they did not wrestle with their faith, but did have a number of questions about what heaven is like, about what their loved one are doing in the presence of God, and what will transpire on the last day concerning the resurrection of the body.

*IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY:*

The pastor and others in positions of care in the congregation can be aware of the spiritual vulnerability of the grieving. A time of sorrow can bring a plethora of questions concerning God’s will, what heaven is like, and many others. Awareness of such a critical time can lead to pastoral and congregational action, such as visiting, listening, and reassuring the grieving with God’s Word.

QUESTION FIVE: “WHICH VARIABLES INFLUENCED YOUR EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF?” Participants used these words to describe what they felt were important variables influencing the grieving process:

Circumstances surrounding the loss	Nature of the loss
Expected vs. unexpected death	Dynamics of relationship
Extent and nature of prior losses	Personality of the bereaved
Health/Lifestyle of the bereaved	Gender of bereaved
Cultural influences	External support
Internal support	

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

Participants asked one another about the nature of each respective loss, and they realized their situations were different. Some deaths, such as those from a lingering illness were expected. Other deaths, brought perhaps by a car accident, were unexpected. One man stated, “We all grieved, but there are differing circumstances for all of us. Some of us were preparing for a loved one to die; others were suddenly broken the news. We all are different and come from different families. We have our own story to tell.” The discussion also touched upon other variables, such as gender, cultural influences, and extent of prior losses.

*IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY:*

Variables for each grieving person can be considered by the pastor and congregational leadership. For example, one could take note of prior losses, circumstances surrounding the loss, and network of family support for the bereaved.

The research clearly reveals the diverse emotional, physical, social, and spiritual impact of grief. Insight is gained into the perspectives of the grieving through these probing

questions, and an insider's view aids pastors and others in the congregation as they care for the bereaved.

One might contend that pastoral and congregational care of the bereaved is not of critical importance. This point of contention is addressed by a twenty-seven year old single woman whose mother died suddenly of a heart attack who told me:

At 8:45 PM, my phone rang. I heard my dad's voice say, "Mom died." That was it, and with those few words my world crashed. Mom died. I kept saying it over and over. Mom died. Mom died. I screamed, "No, no, no!" A ton of bricks were dropped on me. My heart was ripped apart. I shook and tears flowed from eyes as if they would never stop. Where was God? How could He let this happen? Mom died - alone in the hospital. Oh God, why?

She continues:

I remember that cold, January evening walking up the snowy sidewalk of the funeral home. My childhood home was a block away. I used to run past this place to see my dad at his store, and to buy candy from the drugstore in the carefree days of childhood. I fell on the sidewalk that night and screamed, "No, no, no!" My brother picked me up. "I can't go in there," I yelled. Tears were freezing on my cheeks. "You can, you have to," he said. We approached the casket. My mother. Oh, Mom. Here she was, dead. Her face thin. Her hands, the hands that held me, that reached out to me, motionless; black and blue from all the IV's. I kissed her face and held her hands. I knew a part of me died too.

Another member of the group said, "My wounded soul is a summons for ministry."

QUESTION SIX: "WHICH PASTORAL ACTS DO YOU VIEW AS SIGNIFICANTLY HELPFUL TO YOU DURING YOUR TIME OF GRIEF?"

Responses were recorded, and not ranked by the group by most to least significant, as what one member of the group valued and viewed as significant may not be esteemed by another member. Each pastoral act listed was deemed significant in its own right. The twenty-seven members of the group tallied seventy-five significant pastoral acts in their

response. I categorized these with group consent into three major headings: *Pastoral Attitude, Pastoral Action, and Pastoral Articulation.*

### ***PASTORAL ATTITUDE***

A caring attitude by the pastor is significant according to the group responses.

Pastoral attitude can be subcategorized into an attitude of:

Compassion, Understanding, and Reassurance.

### ***AN ATTITUDE OF COMPASSION***

Statements verbalized by members of the interview group heighten the importance of compassion on the part of the pastor, which can be conveyed by words and actions.

Statements from the interview group include:

- “He allowed me to cry”
- “He let me express myself and didn’t try to patch things up.”
- “He acknowledged my loss and pain.”
- “He was patient with me when I was angry at God and at him.”
- “He consoled me and lovingly directed me in our counseling sessions.”
- “He didn’t put me off, even when I know he was busy.”
- “When I told him I was okay and that he could go, he said, ‘ I want to be here,’ and he stayed.
- “I saw tears in his eyes.”
- “When the pastor prayed with me, he asked me what my concerns and needs were. That shows compassion.”



### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

The above words and actions denote compassion on the part of the pastor. Grieving members are aware of their pastor's attitude. Significantly helpful to them is a pastor who shepherds the flock in a compassionate manner. A pastor can visit his members because he has to, or because he wants to. One interview participant stated that her pastor visited her, but his attitude was revealed in his mannerisms. She states, "As I confessed the deep pain in my soul, he continued to glance at his wristwatch, not ever at me. This said to me that he really didn't want to be with me. Perhaps a ball game was on television." An additional comment concerning pastoral attitude in the group setting was, "My pastor came to the house. I was glad to see him. Not long into our visit, however, he began to yawn, tap his fingers on the table, and bounce his knee nervously. I think he wanted to get the visit over with."

Group participants stated that a word from their pastor, such as "I care," or "I am here for you," are among the most important they heard during their time of grief. They stated also that nonverbal communication, such as posture, eye contact, and facial expressions are important aspects in bringing an attitude of compassion.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

Convey compassion to your grieving members with words and actions. Call on them with the attitude that you get to, not that you have to. Please note that nonverbal communication is also important. Glancing at your watch or continually looking away from the bereaved sends a message of indifference.

### *AN ATTITUDE OF UNDERSTANDING*

Participants view as significantly helpful an attitude of understanding on the part of the pastor. Statements included:

- “The Pastor let me pour my heart out in sorrow and anger alike. I think he understood I needed to.”
- “The pastor acknowledged my hurts and pain.”
- “I didn’t hear from Pastor that I should be doing this or shouldn’t be doing that. Where I was in terms of grieving he accepted.”
- “The pastor said to me when my wife died, “I’m sorry.” He didn’t go off on some elaborate discourse. I think that shows understanding.”
- “I didn’t know what was happening to me. Hearing of my wife’s death shocked me, angered me, and depressed me. Those days are a blur and I didn’t understand myself. My pastor understood that I didn’t understand what I was going through.”
- “I needed to be left alone for a few weeks. I didn’t want anyone to visit me at all. I asked pastor not to come until I told him I was ready. He said he understood and respected my wishes.”
- “I was angry at what had happened in my life. My husband was suddenly dead. The pastor took the brunt of my anger. He had to understand this, or he would have locked his office door when ever he saw me coming.”

### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Statements of group members indicate as significantly helpful a pastor's understanding of the grieving process, which manifests itself in not trying to "fix" a bereaved member or to quickly remedy a situation. The pastor can seek to understand, for example, why a grieving member is angry.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

The pastor can seek to understand his grieving member and refrain from trying to fix them. He can also seek to gain knowledge into the grieving process and acknowledge the unique ways in which people grieve.

### *PASTORAL REASSURANCE*

Group respondents voiced the importance of the pastor reassuring them with the Word of God. Statements include:

- "I needed to hear that God still loved me as I grieved."
- "The pastor brought me the Scriptural truth, not his personal opinions to boost my sagging spirit."
- "The pastor told me many times that God had not forsaken me."
- "The pastor reassured me of Christ's resurrection and everlasting life. I desperately needed it."
- "I went through a time of questioning God. I was on my knees praying that my mother would live, and she suddenly died. I truly felt abandoned by an uncaring God. I was one who needed to be reassured about a lot of things."

- “The pastor always brought the Word with him.”
- “I wouldn’t say that I needed reassurance from my pastor as if it is over and done. I would say, even after these three years, I still need it.”

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

Responses indicate that vulnerability is heightened during a time of grief. Wounds of the heart call for reassurance with the balm of the Word. Concerning reassurance, members of the interview group often stated that, “I desperately need it.”

*IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

The pastor can remember that his visits with the bereaved are of a spiritual nature, and thus are distinguished from a mere social call. The grieving value the reassurance a pastor brings through the Word of God. The grieving value continued reassurance even months and years after the death.

**PASTORAL ACTIONS**

The group stated in discussion that various pastoral actions were significantly helpful to them during their time of loss. These are categorized as visitation, initiative, listening, touch, referral, and follow up care.

*PASTORAL VISITATION*

Concerning pastoral visitation, the following comments were made:

- “He came to the hospital right away.”

- “He took time to call on me a number of times.”
- “The first person I saw after my husbands death was my pastor when he came to see me.”
- “He sat with me in the hospital until my daughter arrived.”
- “He came to visit me, even though most of the time I just sat and cried.”
- “He came to the funeral home to meet the rest of the family.”
- “I appreciated his presence.”
- “His calls I will always remember. I don’t always remember what he said, but I do remember he was with me.”
- “The finality of it all hit me like a ton of bricks after the funeral. Everyone left me that day - returning to his or her own lives and routines. What a dark and lonely day. It was so still in my empty home. My pastor visited and my routine was broken with hope. I was so thankful”
- “When the pastor was in my home, I was able to open up to him. I couldn’t have done that at the church.”
- “The pastor called on me several times. To me, that meant he was interested in how I was doing.”
- “He came to the meeting with the funeral director when I asked him to.”

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

According to group responses, the physical presence of the pastor is valued. Repeated visits over time are valued. Calling on the bereaved sends a message of concern, offers a time of caring, and strengthens the pastor-member relationship.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

A priority for each pastor as he ministers to the bereaved is to be with them. Repeated visits over time are important. A pastoral presence conveys a message of care and offers an opportunity for tending to the wounded soul.

### *PASTORAL INITIATIVE*

Group participants deemed initiative on the part of the pastor significant. Responses include:

- “I was paralyzed during the days after my daughter’s death. I simply couldn’t reach out.”
- “The pastor phoned to see how I was doing.”
- “I didn’t have to ask the pastor to come and see me. He just did.”
- “He remembered the anniversary of my husband’s death and sent a letter.”
- “My pastor invited me to have a cup of coffee and to talk.”
- “The pastor stopped me in the hall and said he was concerned about me.”

### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Responses indicate that initiative on the part of the pastor is seen as significant in the experiences of the bereaved. This can manifest in various ways, such as the pastor phoning, writing a letter of encouragement, or making a visit. Whatever the action is, the impetus lies with the pastor. He calls or writes, he visits, he inquires. Grief can immobilize a person, hampering initiative on their part.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

Action on the part of the pastor is a key component in ministering to the bereaved. A pastor can take the initiative in many areas, such as writing, phoning, and visiting.

### *PASTORAL LISTENING*

Active listening is a sound component of pastoral care of the bereaved. Participant responses include:

- “I felt refreshed after talking about my loss and having someone just listen to me. That someone was pastor.”
- “During my time of loss, everyone was giving suggestions and telling me to do. Sell the car, I was told. Move and sell the house. I needed to be heard.”
- “I listened to the funeral director. I listened to my family. I listened to the pastor. I wanted someone to listen to me about my feelings and what I was going through. I wanted to be acknowledged”
- “The pastor asked how I was doing, and actually looked at me, stopped talking, and listened.”
- “After my sister died, the pastor came to visit. He spoke the entire time. I just wanted him to leave. He was shoving words, his words, down my throat. He never asked how I was doing. I was never given the opportunity to speak.”
- “The pastor said, ‘You should go through your wife’s clothes. You should move into a new house.’ That was all I heard.”
- “The pastor and I sat in silence for a while.”
- “The pastor didn’t rush into a reading and a prayer. He listened to me first.”

### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Listening on the part of the pastor or other caregiver is significant in the experiences of the bereaved. Their feelings and thoughts are acknowledged and validated as one listens to them.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

The pastor who listens to his grieving member offers them an opportunity to be heard, and their feelings to be acknowledged. Instead of filling every moment with words and being concerned about what to say, pastors can listen. A time of silence is permissible. An attentive presence marked with active listening is a valuable tool in ministering to the bereaved.

### *PASTORAL TOUCH*

Participants of the interview group, both men and women, valued appropriate touch by the pastor. Comments included:

- “He held my hand.”
- “He hugged me.”
- “As I stood sobbing in the funeral home, my pastor put his arms around me.”
- “He extended his hand to me when ever I saw him.”
- “He patted me on the back.”
- “He wasn’t distant to me as if I had some dreaded disease. He reached out to me through his gestures.”



- “He let me hug him and hold on to him.”

#### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

The grieving value touch by the pastor. For some, this raises eyebrows. Isn't a pastor supposed to stay behind his desk while in his office? Isn't he to refrain from touching his members in any circumstance? Not according to the research. Appropriate touch is valued by the grieving, and these gestures bring a message of care that words often fail to capture. Group participants did not forget over the span of years that a hug was given or their hand was held.

Dean Orrish, author of *Love and Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy*, writes concerning touch deprivation: “Children who are not lovingly embraced or lack warm touches fail to thrive.”<sup>134</sup> Based on the group responses, we do not outgrow this need. An important component of the group discussion was that touch was most valued on the initial call of the pastor and was spontaneous in nature. Repeated touches or forcing the issue in an artificial way on the pastor's part are inappropriate. Conversely, the pastor should be aware of these behaviors on the part of the grieving members.

#### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

Appropriate touch has a place in pastoral care of the bereaved. These gestures are spontaneous, not forced. Repeated use of touch is not always needed or fitting. Emotional

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<sup>134</sup> Dean Orrish, *Love and Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 62.

and spiritual support is conveyed through touch, which is a potent form of nonverbal communication

### *PASTORAL REFERRAL*

Several members of the interview sample stated being referred by the pastor was significant in their experience of grief, and viewed this as a part of sound pastoral care.

Members commented:

- “My grief led to a deep depression. My pastor gave me the name of a Christian counselor to go and see. I was helped by doing this.”
- “The pastor advised me to have a physical and visit with my doctor. I was losing weight and had no appetite.”
- “The pastor was honest with me and told me that my problems were more than he could handle. He would pray with me and visit with me, but he said I needed professional help to deal with my anger. He was honest with me.”
- “The pastor didn’t just tell me, ‘Go and see someone about this.’ He gave me a sheet with names, addresses, and phone numbers of people he felt comfortable with. He even said he would make the call to set up my first appointment.”

### *DATA ANALYSIS*

Grief can become prolonged and complicated. Referral is important when such an event occurs. The pastor can access needed assistance for his member from an expert in the field. Group participants voiced their appreciation for pastors wise enough to make a referral. The pastor is not shying away from his duties by making such a decision.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

Referral of a grieving member to the proper mental or physical experts is an important aspect of pastoral care. Making a specific recommendation is important, and not a general, "You should see a doctor about this." Having a prepared sheet that a grieving member can take along with names, addresses, and phone numbers is important. The pastor should also be aware of the resources in the community.

### *PASTORAL FOLLOW UP CARE*

Group responses indicate the value of continuing pastoral care after the funeral service. Comments include:

- "I thought the pastor had done everything he was supposed to do when the funeral was over. He visited with me many times after that."
- "Pastor called on the anniversary of my daughter's death."
- "He called from time to time and asked how things were going for me. I appreciated it."
- "A note came in the mail from the pastor saying he was thinking about me and praying for me. This happened every few months."

### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Group responses reflect the value of continuing pastoral care of the bereaved over time. For many pastors, the focus can easily become the funeral service and the sermon, and these are certainly important. What of the days following the service? These are days of adjustment and difficulty for the grieving and the need for pastoral care remains.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY*

The pastor who remembers his grieving member in the days, months, and years after the actual death is providing care and comfort. The remembering can take various forms: a phone call, a letter, a visit. The day of a loss is an indelible mark for many who grieve. Pastoral care of the bereaved is never finished and, as the need remains, so the importance of care remains.

### *PRACTICAL MATTERS FOR THE PASTOR*

The discussion among participants covered practical matters on the part of the pastor.

Comments include:

- “The pastor provided a copy of his funeral sermon.”
- “I received a video tape of the funeral service. I am glad that I can watch it during quiet moments in my home.”
- “I appreciated using a printed bulletin during the funeral service. It was easier to follow along.”
- “We appreciated having a private family prayer service before the funeral.”
- “The pastor gave us a devotional book and a resource about grief that we could use.”
- “An audio tape of the service was given to us. On the tape, after the actual funeral, the pastor had several devotions that we could listen to as well.”

### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Practical matters were appreciated by the interview group. Making available an audio or video tape of the service, supplying a copy of the funeral sermon, or having a prayer service with the immediate family are practical ways of demonstrating care for the bereaved.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY*

The pastor should review his current practices with the above data to survey if he provides his grieving members with these items. These practical matters, such as a copy of the funeral sermon or a tape of the service are another way he can care for the bereaved. Though these may appear to be small matters by the pastor, they are valued by the grieving.

### **PASTORAL ARTICULATION**

Group participants discussed what the pastor said as he ministered to them, which can be labeled as *Pastoral Articulation*. The category consists of two sub-categories: *Inquiry* and *Declaration*.

### *PASTORAL INQUIRY*

Comments from the assembled group centered on the pastor inquiring about them and how they were coping with their loss. Responses include:

- “He asked how I was doing.”
- “He asked what I remembered about my husband.”
- “He asked how I was feeling.”
- “ He asked how my children were coping with the death.”

- “He asked if I needed help in any way. When I told him, he followed up on it. He really meant what he said.”
- “He asked, ‘How can I help you?’”

#### *DATA ANALYSIS:*

Responses indicate the importance of utilizing inquiry in conversations with the bereaved. The use of probing questions opens the channels of communication, allowing the bereaved to speak and share their feelings and needs. One member of the group stated, “To be asked, ‘How are you doing?’ was refreshing to me.”

#### *IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

The pastor can inquire into the experiences of the grieving under his care. To do so is appropriate and offers an opportunity for the bereaved to speak of their experiences and feelings. Questions originating from the pastor such as, “Tell me what you are going through” or “How can I best help you?” are to be utilized. The pastor who inquires should also be prepared to follow up on what he said. A group member stated, “I simply said I needed him to stop and see me. That was said in answer to his question of how he could help me. I was honest in answering. He never did visit.”

#### *PASTORAL DECLARATION*

A chief duty of the pastoral office is to declare the truth of God’s Holy Word. In ministering to the bereaved, this declarative aspect is of crucial importance. The group participants commented:

- “He brought the Word to me.”
- “He said that I would certainly see my husband again, and that death hadn’t won.”
- ”He spoke of Christ’s resurrection and of our resurrection.”
- “He reminded myself and my family that nothing could separate us from the love of God.”
- “He told me God’s promises are certain.”

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

The responses are significant in that they remind the pastor to declare the Word to God’s grieving people. We can proclaim the truths of Holy Scripture with certainty. Group members did not speak of the pastor’s oral skills or preaching style. They simply appreciated a pastor who proclaimed the Word to them, whether in the pulpit or in their home. Group discussion also related to the use of pious platitudes by people in general and how these are detrimental to the bereaved. Examples given included people saying, “You’ll get over this soon”, “I know how you feel,” “You’ll marry again,” “She’s better off,” and saying of the deceased, “Doesn’t he look nice.”

*IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

To declare the truths of God’s Word is of critical importance in bringing hope to the grieving. Pastors can embrace this, knowing that the grieving appreciate and value the balm of the Word. We are to bring the Word, which does not return void. Platitudes are to be avoided.

## **SUMMARY: PASTORAL ATTITUDE, ACTION AND ARTICULATION**

The pastor, through his attitude, action, and articulation, is of critical importance in assisting the bereaved. The pastor can make a difference, and one can speak of pastoral skill in ministering to the sorrowing. The bereaved themselves have declared this in the interview. The pastoral office is valued by the grieving, and he is seen as a steady hand of guidance and a voice of hope.

The question, “Which pastoral acts do you view as significantly helpful to you during your times of grief?” has been answered. The results serve to form a suggested pattern of pastoral care. The answers of the interview sample do not validate the importance of pastoral care; the Lord has done that in His Word. “Feed my lambs,” Christ states.<sup>135</sup> The project constructs a paradigm of content and conduct for the pastor concerning ministry to the grieving.

## **CONGREGATIONAL SUPPORT OF THE GRIEVING**

The congregation is a community of support that the pastor can mobilize to assist in the care of the grieving. The assembled twenty-seven participants in the interview group were asked, “Which congregational acts would you describe as significantly helpful to you during your time of grief?” Responses include:

- “The congregational meal was important for our family”
- “The meal served by the congregation after the service was a time for us to remember and visit with friends.”

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<sup>135</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 21:15.



- “The meal was a time to reminisce with friends and relatives about my wife. I cried, I laughed, I smiled, and I wept. Such a time was so important to me. I would call it a time of remembrance and healing.”
- “I appreciated prayer for my family in the worship service.”
- “The prayer chain was important. I knew people cared and were praying for me.”
- “One Bible study group made a meal for my family and delivered it to the house.”
- “I received cards from members of the congregation.”
- “Some of the elders stopped by the house to visit. I appreciated this.”
- “Members of the church came to the visitation at the funeral home and to the worship service.”

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

Responses clearly demonstrate the value of congregational members assisting the pastor in caring for the grieving. This team approach provides a network of support. A congregational meal before or after the funeral service is appreciated, not so much for the food, but for the benefits that friendship and fellowship offer.

Corporate and personal prayer spoken for the bereaved is helpful to them. Visits from the elders or other concerned members of the parish are valued. All of these offer a sense of community.

*IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY:*

The congregation can be mobilized to embrace the grieving. Knowing that the bereaved appreciate various endeavors on the part of the congregation is a first step in educating

members to take action. The members can organize a meal to be served, can visit the bereaved, and offer their support in many other ways. The pastor can assist these efforts by speaking of these opportunities and training his members to embrace them. In this manner, a wide base of support is formed.

According to bereavement Coordinator James Surkamp one of the important resources offered by a congregation is a support group.<sup>136</sup> I wanted to test this hypothesis. A support group formed at Our Redeemer in November, 2003 and met twice a month for three months. Invitations to the group were placed in the bulletin, newsletter, and were also verbalized following the worship services.

Six members of the congregation, two men and four women, comprised the support group. Meetings were held twice a month on Sunday afternoons from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. beginning in November and concluding in January. The format consisted of a prayer and opening devotion, a time of discussion moderated by the pastor, and a closing prayer. Refreshments were served. The group met in the solarium at Our Redeemer. Participants were asked at the final session, "How did the support group benefit you?"

Responses include:

- "I realize that I am not alone in my sorrows. I was comforted by letting things out I had been holding inside."
- "I felt it helpful to listen to others in the group as well. In helping others, I helped myself."

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<sup>136</sup>Grief Support Network, <http://wyx.net/-kbilton/patrons> (Accessed October 14, 2003).

- “I was glad to listen to others about their sorrows. I have been too self-focused for a long while.”
- “Other supports groups I went to in town really offered no hope. The times consisted of other people rehashing their loss. This group is important because it is based on Scripture.”
- “I now understand that I am normal. We grieve differently. I have gained insight.”
- “This was not a pity party, but a time of real comfort.”

*DATA ANALYSIS:*

Responses reveal the benefit and importance of a support group within the congregation. Isolation has proven to be detrimental to mental and physical health across all age ranges. Belonging is important in all phases of life. Poet laureate John Berryman, who leaped to his death from a bridge, wrote, “We are sick as we are secret.”<sup>137</sup> He alone knew the dark secrets that drove him to his death. His words serve notice of the importance of belonging and communicating.

In Sweden, the medical histories of more than seventeen thousand men between the ages of twenty-nine and seventy-four were followed and studied for a six-year period. The most isolated of these men had *four times* the risk of dying prematurely.<sup>138</sup>

Sheldon Cohen of Carnegie-Mellon University in Pennsylvania recruited two hundred seventy six healthy volunteers ranging in age from eighteen to fifty five, each of whom was

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<sup>137</sup> John Powell, *Happiness is an Inside Job* (Abilene: Tabor Publishing, 1989), 110.

<sup>138</sup> Orrish, 48.

given nasal drops containing rhinovirus. Though the virus infected all subjects, not all exhibited symptoms of the common cold. Results of the study indicate that those subjects with rich social interaction and relationships proved healthier than those in isolated settings.<sup>139</sup> One could conclude that community fosters healing.

#### *IMPLICATIONS FOR CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY:*

A place to belong and to identify with others is of value to the grieving. Some participants of the support group had experienced the loss of a loved one recently (six months), others long ago (thirty years). A congregational support group offers a time of speaking and listening, of helping and being helped. The pastor should exercise caution to ensure confidentiality and that the group focus is not repeatedly problem focused. Lending focus and direction are important tasks of the moderator.

What I learned from the grieving members of my congregation through both sample groups is summarized as follows:

- Grief impacts people in diverse ways along divergent time spans.
- Grief is cyclical in nature.
- There is an emotional, physical, social, and spiritual impact of grief.
- The pastoral role is of importance to the grieving.
- The attitude, action, and articulation of the pastor have a bearing on the bereaved.
- Initiative on the pastor's part denotes care.
- Listening is an active component of care.

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<sup>139</sup> Orrish, 48.

- The pastor should not attempt to fix the bereaved.
- A continuing pastoral presence over time is important.
- Referral is a sound part of pastoral care
- Silence is permissible during a conversation with the bereaved.
- Probing questions open the door of communication.
- A pastoral call differs from a social call.
- Appropriate touch conveys a message of care.
- The congregation can be equipped and educated to care for the bereaved.
- A sense of community is important to the grieving.
- Pastor and congregation can work together to care for the bereaved.
- A support group is beneficial to the bereaved
- The congregation is important as it offers a sense of community and continuity to the bereaved

## **SIGNIFICANT PASTORAL ACTS: AN OUTLINE OF PASTORAL CARE**

### ***PASTORAL ATTITUDE***

- Compassion
- Understanding
- Reassurance

### ***PASTORAL ACTIONS***

- Visitation
- Initiative
- Listening
- Touch
- Referral
- Follow-up Care
- Practical Matters

### ***PASTORAL ARTICULATION***

- Inquiry
- Declaration

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### PASTOR AND CONGREGATION PLAN

The phone rang in the parsonage interrupting the supper hour. A member of the congregation had just died. The call to care had been issued. How should the pastor proceed? The grieving family had turned to him. Was there a blueprint for him to consult? What should his plan of action entail?

Though grief is a unique experience, the pastor does have a plan to follow that embraces grieving souls and tends to their wounds. He should bear in mind the impact of grief, the importance of his compassionate presence, and the necessity of ongoing care. He can also mobilize the members of the parish to lend support to the grieving family.

Where does this pastoral plan of action originate? From the bereaved themselves. Acting upon the data gained by listening to those who have walked the valley of sorrow certainly has benefited the ministry at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church. A support group is offered monthly now, at the request of the participants. Previously, no support group was offered.

Classes on the topic of grief are held periodically. The congregation discusses the impact of grief in spiritual, social, physical, and emotional terms. The goal is the continued education of the congregation to manage their own grief experiences. Members of the community are also welcome to attend.

In January, 2004, the congregation offered a community wide health fair. A wholistic approach allowed for a range of topics to be covered, including diet, exercise, aging, and

managing loss. Physicians, dietitians, funeral directors, and local agencies provided speakers for the event. The various sessions allowed those attending to choose topics of special interest to them. The community at large was invited to attend.

The project heightened awareness of hurting souls in the congregation. Still in the developmental stage is the W.A.T.CH program, an acronym for “We Are The Church.” Participants in this group will be educated and equipped to visit those in the parish who are hurting, and training will be required. The proposal to form this group originated from within the congregation, demonstrating a concern for the grieving. Various avenues of care are offered to the sorrowing in our midst.

The study could have implications for the church at large. How are we training our pastors in terms of understanding grief? Are pastoral skills such as listening and embodying the compassion of Christ emphasized? Are we losing the importance of pastoral visitation and rubbing shoulders with our flock? Do we seek to “fix” the bereaved or to care for them?

In one of our recent circuit meetings we discussed pastoral action in light of a death in the parish. The brother pastors focused on the funeral service as the optimum setting for conveying care and offering hope through the Word of God. One younger pastor stated that he was still scared and unsure of how to handle the death of a member. Perhaps this uncertainty points to the need for educating our pastors on the subject of grief and tending to the broken hearted.

A pastor who had served over thirty-five years in the same parish told me, “I believe it is more difficult to serve in one parish for such a long time. There are more heartaches and deeper hurts. You feel the sorrows more deeply. When death comes to a member of the



congregation, you mourn a personal loss.” What does this say about the length of a pastorate, developing relationships and of loving the flock?

Important also and offering a contribution to the church at large is the necessity of pastoral care. Accessibility, initiative, calling, and reaching out beyond the four walls of the office need to be emphasized to all pastors. We have become far too comfortable sitting in front of a computer screen. We do well to turn it off and to look into the eyes of our people. We do well to leave our office daily and enter the homes of our members. Our presence sends a strong message of loving pastoral concern.

The pastor who equips his flock to care for others enhances overall ministry to the sorrowing. In this sense, a “we” approach of care is preferable to the pastor acting in isolation, or a “me” mentality. Some things the pastor alone is called to do. Other aspects of care can be assumed by God’s people as they are encouraged and equipped by the pastor.

Previous studies centering on grief have verified its cyclical nature and the diversity of its impact. Other studies have illustrated the importance of relationships in regard to physical and mental health. The project at hand acknowledges these studies, while focusing on the unique role of pastor and congregation in ministering to the grieving.

The study brought increased knowledge to me as a pastor. I now understand more completely the diverse impact of grief. I did not expect those who had experienced the death of a loved one years ago to still be wrestling with grief as they were. The Lord continually comforts His people. The necessity and benefit of ongoing pastoral care of the grieving was highlighted for me. Through this study, I pray that I become a more compassionate and knowledgeable pastor in ministering to the sorrowing. I, too, need to rub shoulders with my people and step away from my desk and computer screen. I pray that I may cultivate

relationships with my members and do not simply see a name on a membership list. I want to take the extra measure and know the person behind the name. I pray that I acknowledge the wounded souls as well as the summons and challenge of ministering to them.

Overall, the project was exhausting for me. Listening takes effort and is work. The subject matter brought tears to the eyes of many in the focus group. Caring for others is not easy. We pastors need boundaries, too. We need to understand our role and its limitations.

The project has been of benefit to me both professionally and personally. In my own life, I have traversed the deep valleys of grief upon the deaths of my mother, father, and sister. My mother died in the hospital of a sudden massive heart attack. My father died in a nursing home of lingering colon cancer. My sister died in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the plane she was aboard was crashed into the Pentagon.

Through the years grief has been my companion, at times lightly tapping on my shoulder; at other times, a burden heavily pressing upon my heart. There have been long days and longer nights. I could certainly relate to the expressions of grief made by the sorrowing as I met with them. We have traversed similar terrain.

Certain dates will always remind me of the losses in my life. January 25th reminds me of my mother's death. I see the wires and IV's running from machines to her black and blue arms. I hear her saying in weak tones, "I am not afraid to die. I don't want to leave my family, but I pray that Jesus will take me and hold me in His arms." Her prayer was answered later that evening.

My father was diagnosed with colon cancer in the fall of 1998. He was told at the time of his initial examination that he had nine months to live. Fatigue and weakness were devastating his body. He could no longer live in the home he and my mother had purchased

as newlyweds some thirty-five years earlier. His familiar surroundings were replaced with a bed, dresser, and chair in a small room of the local nursing home.

We reminisced during my visits about the times we threw the Frisbee together, only to have our dog fetch it and run through the yard with it. We shared other memories of unique times that ended all too quickly. On one of my last visits with him, my dad raised his trembling hand and said softly, "Son, let's pray. That's all I have left now." His bony hand rested in mine, and his now deeply set eyes welled with tears.

I replied, "Dad, you have all you need. Jesus is with you." We prayed as his thin hand squeezed mine. Our merciful Lord summoned my father from this vale of tears on October 23, 1998. He died alone in that small room. Still, tears of joy are mine. With Christ he had all he needed.

On September 11, 2001 I was driving to a meeting of Circuit Counselors for our Iowa District East. The music I was listening to was suddenly interrupted by a special news bulletin. Planes had been crashed into buildings in New York City and the Pentagon. As the account unfolded, my thoughts turned to my sister Karen who was a lawyer in private practice in Washington, DC. Had she heard about this? Was she all right? Her office is on K Street, I reasoned, which is a good distance from the crash site. Surely she was fine.

I was summoned to the telephone as our meeting began. "Your sister in Waverly needs you to call her immediately," said the camp director. I punched in her phone number. Busy. The number again, busy. Multiple attempts to reach her failed. Finally I was able to get through. "Is Karen all right?" I asked. Silence. "Is Karen all right?" I asked more frantically. "Is Karen dead?" I asked.

My sister sobbed, "Oh Kris..."

Karen Ann Kincaid died at the hands of terrorists as flight 77 was commandeered into the Pentagon on a bright, blue-skied morning. Her husband, also an attorney, had dropped her off at Dulles Airport only hours earlier. "I love you," he said, giving her a parting hug and kiss. "I will see you Thursday," he added as he walked away from the gate, waving goodbye. "Pick something out for me in LA," he joked. She would never have the opportunity.

The FBI told us Karen sat in row 15. Several school children sat nearby, as did a family of four headed for vacation. People were going about their business as ordinary citizens. Tragically, all the passengers were herded to the back of the plane to be told by the terrorists to call their loved ones and say their final good byes, for they "were going to die."

At 9:37 AM, Karen's life ended in a fireball of horrific proportions. She was instantly gone. DNA analysis led to minute portions of her body being identified. Each time a body part was found, her husband received a visit from the FBI, which took place on numerous occasions. A portion of her right femur, skull and clavicle were found. Each visit was a wound in itself. The death certificate issued by the state of Virginia lists her cause of death as, "Blunt force injuries--Terrorist attack on the United States of America, Sept. 11, 2001, 9:37 AM, the Pentagon, Homicide."

Days after the attack I stood before the charred hole in the Pentagon where the plane hit. I listened to the President of our nation, who stood only feet away from me. I saw the machine guns and anti aircraft batteries on the streets of our nation's capital. Once again I remembered a blonde little girl playing with Barbies in carefree days of childhood. I remembered how we played Gunsmoke. I was Matt Dillon, she was Kitty. I remembered that she was my sister, my friend.

What was she was thinking huddled in the back of the plane? Was she paralyzed with fear? Did she think of her husband, her siblings? Did she hold a frightened child? I shall never know. What I do know I treasure: a woman of faith in Christ is home. The circumstance of Karen's death does not change the truth of our Savior's love or the reality of His victory for her. The circumstance of her death does not change the truth of the Savior's love for me or the reality of His victory for me.

I cannot deny the pain and loss in my life. I pray that my own wounds assist me in tending to others who sorrow. The Lord Jesus Christ lives and, through Word and Sacrament, balm for the broken heart is freely given. I cannot deny the comfort given to me by Christ. I pray that my experiences heighten my awareness and deepen my insight in ministering to the sorrowing. I want to tread the holy ground the bereaved stand upon, even if I do so feebly.

I pray that this project lends insight into the grieving process and affords the pastor a blue print of understanding and subsequent action. I pray that pastors and people step beside the hurting, to offer a ray of hope to the weak, a steady hand to the stumbling. The past for every human being contains chapters of sorrow, as death is a part of life. The present contains moments of trials and heartaches. The future remains to be penned. The journey of life, however, is not one we make alone. From cradle to grave, the Savior is with us, and His victory is our victory. A distant triumph song awaits us, and we hear echoes of it even now. "Glory and honor be to our God and to the Lamb who was slain but who lives forever and ever. Amen!" Not a dirge but a hymn is what God's redeemed people sing. It is a hymn we sing even now, until our voices join the crescendo in heaven. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## APPENDIX A

### CARING FOR THE GRIEVING: A GUIDE

God's people are called upon to "bear one another's burdens," (Galatians 6:2). The pastor and the congregation form a community of the concerned that can be mobilized to embrace and comfort the sorrowing. A guide to facilitate such care is comprised of the following points:

#### **For the Pastor**

- Your office places you next to the bereaved. You belong with them. You have a call to serve.
- You are not alone. The Risen Lord is with you, and His Word you lovingly proclaim. He is the curegiver; you are a caregiver.
- Take the initiative. Visit the sorrowing as soon as possible. Offer a sensitive, compassionate presence.
- Understand the idiosyncratic and cyclical nature of grief. Your parishioner could be angry, relieved, verbose, sullen, or any other number of emotions, which may wax and wane.
- You are on a pastoral call, not a mere social call. Bring Christ to the sorrowing through Word, prayer and your presence.
- Avoid the use of platitudes.
- Listen. Afford a time of silence.

- Be available to answer questions about funeral date, time or matters concerning casket selection, clothing for the deceased, etc.
- Be observant for the impact of grief in physical, spiritual, emotional and social realms.
- Understand the funeral worship service as proclamatory, but not as the completion of pastoral duties in ministering to the bereaved.
- Offer and act upon follow up care: visit the bereaved, continuing to offer a compassionate pastoral presence. Ask open-ended questions and listen actively to the responses. Write letters and make phone calls occasionally.
- Remember the bereaved will need ongoing care. Be prepared for challenges and offer referrals as needed.

**For the Congregation**

- Activate a prayer chain on behalf of the grieving family.
- Visit the bereaved (the elders or a calling team).
- Offer a congregational meal following the funeral worship service.
- Respond as a community of the concerned – send cards, visit the mortuary, offer a shoulder to cry on.
- Tape the funeral service and deliver it to the family.
- Deliver a meal to the bereaved family.
- Offer a support group, Christian-based and focused. Topics may include the impact of grief, adjusting to loss, prayer, and ways to take care of one's self.

- Implement a program such as the W.A.T.C.H. group (We are the Church) or Stephen Ministry, training members to visit others and to offer prayer and hope.



APPENDIX B  
SAMPLE FORMS

**PASTORAL CONTACT RECORD SHEET**

<b><i>NAME:</i></b>		
<b><i>ADDRESS:</i></b>		
<b><i>PHONE:</i></b>		
<b><i>FUNERAL SERVICE:</i></b>	<b><i>SERMON TEXT:</i></b>	<b><i>HYMNS:</i></b>
<b><i>NATURE OF BEREAVEMENT:</i></b> <i>(e.g. wife, son)</i>		
<b><i>DATE OF DEATH:</i></b>		
<b><i>SPECIAL DATES:</i></b> <i>(anniversary, etc.)</i>		
<b><i>TYPE OF CONTACT</i></b>	<b><i>Date:</i></b>	<b><i>Notes:</i></b>

**FOR THE BEREAVED**

The members of (church name) care about you, and are here to help you.

Please fill out the following at your convenience and return to the pastor or the church office.

Our prayers remain with you and your loved ones during this time of sorrow. We will contact you promptly upon receipt of this form.

<i>NAME:</i>	
<i>ADDRESS:</i>	
<i>PHONE:</i>	
<i>I would like:</i>	
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Someone to talk with regularly</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Meals</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Transportation to church</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Other</i> _____
<i>Information on:</i>	
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>the grieving process</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>support groups</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>sleep problems</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>diet and exercise</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>volunteer opportunities</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>other concerns</i> _____
<i>I desire to speak with:</i>	
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Pastor</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Elder</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Nurse</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Other</i> _____

**BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY REQUEST FORM**

We seek to care for those among us who have experienced the death of a loved one. Practical ways to help are needed. Please fill out the following form. Thank you.

*Name:* \_\_\_\_\_

*I can help care for the bereaved by:*

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- praying for the family*
- preparing a meal and delivering it to the home*
- helping with the congregational meal following the funeral service*
- providing transportation (to church, errands, etc.)*
- providing child care*
- visitation*
- doing house and yard maintenance work*
- preparing coffee and treats for the grief support group*
- going to the home to clean, help with laundry, etc.*
- other:* \_\_\_\_\_

## Our Redeemer Grief Support Group

### Session One:

Scripture Reading – Psalm 116:8-9

Prayer

### Exercise / Discussion:

Complete the following:

1. The greatest challenge I face now is ...
2. The loss has brought the following changes for me...
3. I get angry when...
4. I am glad that...
5. The hardest thing for me now is...

Closing Prayer

## **Our Redeemer Grief Support Group**

### Session Two:

Scripture Reading – Romans 8:26

Prayer

### For Reflection:

1. Late at night, I'm awake thinking about ...

2. I am comforted by...

Closing Prayer

## Our Redeemer Grief Support Group

### Session Three:

Scripture Reading – John 16:33

Prayer

### Exercise / Discussion:

Complete the following:

1. What I wish I would have done was ...
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What I wish I had not done was...
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What I wish I would have said was...

Closing Prayer

## Our Redeemer Grief Support Group

### Session Four:

Scripture Reading – John 14:1-6

Prayer

### Exercise / Discussion:

Complete the following:

1. Death has changed me by ...
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What I miss most is...
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. I find comfort in...

Closing Prayer

Sample Letter: Following the Loss of a Loved One

April 2, 2005

Mr. Joe Doe  
1234 Anywhere Lane  
Anytown, IA 12345

Dear Joe,

My prayers, along with the prayers of God's people at Our Redeemer, are with you at this time. There is sorrow when a loved one is called from our midst. We remember the moments our loved one was with us, and the memories that a family made together. As Christians, our sorrow is eased with the certain truth of life everlasting. Your mother is with her Lord Jesus. The crown of life has been given to her indeed, by God's grace.

The Lord will watch over you and gently dry your tears, for He has promised. May our Lord keep you in His tender care. May He grant you comfort and strength for the days ahead. This is my heartfelt prayer for you and your family. God keep you.

In Christ,

Pastor Kincaid



Sample Letter: Following the Loss of a Loved One

April 2, 2005

Mr. Joe Doe  
1234 Anywhere Lane  
Anytown, IA 12345

Dear Joe,

Greetings in Jesus' name. I received a phone call concerning your brother. You have my prayers and deepest sympathy. May our Lord Jesus Christ surround you and your family with His love and care. We remember His words, "*I am the resurrection and the life. I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.*" Jesus is our hope, our comfort. Joe, I will be praying for you. Please accept my deepest sympathy.

In Christ,

Pastor Kincaid

## APPENDIX C

### SERMONS

Sermon One: “A Time of Trial”

Text: Job 14:1 *“Man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.”*

In the journey entitled “life,” there are peaks and valleys for all of us. There are times of sorrow and times of joy, times of laughter and times of moans. One woman was cleaning her pet parakeet’s cage with the vacuum cleaner. The phone rang, and as she turned to answer it, the bird was sucked into the vacuum cleaner. She frantically hung up the phone and began the process of dismantling the bag from the vacuum cleaner. Cutting the bag open, she found the parakeet, dazed but alive. She now says of the parakeet, “He sits on his perch, but doesn’t sing like he used to. It is as if he has been robbed of his song.”

How are things going in your life, my dear Christian friend? Have you been robbed of your song? You lost your job. “Downsizing,” you were told, even after all those years you put in with the company. Your song is silenced. The doctor looked at you after those tests were conducted and commented with a heavy sigh and a furled brow, “This is serious. You had better get your affairs in order.” Your song is silenced. The school office called the other afternoon. Your son is in trouble again, even after he promised you otherwise. Your song is silenced as you traverse the steep peaks of trial and deep valleys of trouble.

You are not alone. Meet Job, who knew all about having his song silenced. One afternoon he is relaxing when a messenger suddenly arrives. Frantically the message is relayed, “Job, oh Job, all of your oxen have been slaughtered.” While this messenger gasps

for breath, another arrives, crying, “Job, oh, Job, the Chaldeans have stolen all your camels.” Still another messenger comes, crying out, “Job, oh Job, a great and mighty wind blew off the roof under which your children were sitting. They’re all dead, Job.”

Such news silences a person’s song. There would be more to come for Job: boils that would break out upon his skin from head to toe. So intense was the pain that Job took pieces of shattered pottery to scratch his flesh. Job sat in ashes and cried out, “Why was I even born? My days are few and full of trouble.”

As our text states, “Man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.” Job is speaking. What are we going to do when our days are full of trouble? The Lord never promised that the journey of life would be as easy as a walk in the park. There are steep climbs with thorns and thistles to contend with. What are we to do? I pray that we grow. We could pack up, fold up, or give up. Some of Job’s friends directed him to do that; to curse God and die for the lot that had fallen upon him.

Job, however, grew through his difficult times. He learned to lean on the Lord. He questioned God at first, but then he listened. God declared that He, the Lord, was in charge. He strung the stars like pearls in the night sky; He set the earth on its axis. God declared that He would speak, and speak He did. The Almighty God knew the trials and suffering of Job. The Lord who is merciful and compassionate would tend to Job’s wounds.

During our times of trial, I pray we grow in our understanding that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Our Heavenly Father has given us His only Son, Jesus Christ. Will He not give us all things with Him?

We have a song to sing--even in the midst of trials. Our song: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” The early Christians sang these words as they

marched to their death. As we look into God's Holy Word we see people in many forms of trial. Paul is shipwrecked. David battles Goliath. Daniel is thrown into a den of lions. Stephen is stoned. Joseph sentenced to prison. The song remains, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen."

That song is ours to sing because of Jesus Christ our loving Savior. He faced the greatest trial of all--the cross. There He hung, taking our place. The innocent One pays the price in full for us, the guilty. Willingly He laid His life down for us. All the wrath of the Heavenly Father poured out on Christ! All of our sins cover Him! Speak of trials! Speak of woe! Speak of suffering! None like this! "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!"

Jesus, who paid the price in full for the forgiveness of your sins, lives. He rose bodily and has defeated sin, death, and hell for you. The cross and empty tomb bespeak His love for you. He will never leave you nor will He forsake you. He knows your fears, your struggles, and your heartaches.

A man who was struggling with problems went to a counselor for help. The counselor, upon hearing of the challenges in the man's life said, "You need to get out and have a good time. There is a circus in town now. My family went the other day and a clown entertained us. He is wonderful. Go and see his show."

"I don't think I can do that," came the reply.

"Why not? Do as I tell you, man!" said the counselor. "Go and see that clown."

"I am that clown," said the man.

Are you the man, the woman, with pain? Are you the one facing trials in your

marriage? Are you the one who weeps in the dark night? At times, we all are. The Lord loves you. He is there for you and me. “Come to me you who are weary,” says the Lord.

Our merciful Savior is the One who heals, restores, and uplifts. Look to Him. He put a new song on Job’s lips, who declared, “ I know my Redeemer lives.” You, fellow child of God, have a song to sing as well. “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

## Sermon Two

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:20 *"Christ is risen from the dead."*

Theme: "A Time of Good News"

We spend enormous amounts of time, money, and effort in order to postpone death. We attempt to deny its existence and to conceal its terrors. Billions of dollars are spent yearly on chin lifts, facial creams, Grecian formula, and tummy tucks, thinking if we prolong and preserve our youth we'll put off the one way trip to the cemetery.

We have removed death from our language. Relatives "pass away." A neighbor "departs from this life." A fellow worker "checks out." One entertainer stated to another that a mutual friend had "put his cue back in the rack." We speak of memorial parks and resting places instead of cemeteries.

We seem dreadfully afraid of death. Clarence Darrow, a skeptical attorney, made fun of the fact that even Christians do not look forward to death. He commented, "Men and women who profess Christianity die by the thousands every day. No matter how fatal the disease, how great the agony, how sure they are of heaven, they will travel the world over and be cut to pieces by inches so that they can stay in this vale of tears a few days longer when, according to their faith, they might be singing hosannas and enjoying all the pleasures of the blest."

Indeed, for us Christians, death remains a dreadful thing. God did not design us to die. So we, too, run our laps, take our vitamins, submit to surgery, and wash the gray away. We too, desire to stay out of the cemetery!

Yet, the best news we could ever receive came from a cemetery! Jesus died but rose again! His resurrection proves that he is God! His resurrection assures us that our sins are

forgiven and that we by God's grace are heirs of heaven! The resurrection of Christ is the Heavenly Father's stamp of approval on all Jesus did and said. It is the Father saying to his Son, "Mission accomplished," and to us, "All is forgiven." Christ's bodily resurrection proclaims our body and soul's independence from bondage to death and the grave. The good news from the cemetery is the angelic proclamation, "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said."

What if Jesus never left the tomb? What if there was no good news two days after Good Friday? Have you ever stopped to consider the consequences? St. Paul did. With him, we can say that Christianity stands or falls with one doctrine: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there is no resurrection, and if Christ did not rise, then He is still in the grave and hope has died as well. All Jesus' claims would only be empty words! No resurrection of Christ means there is no forgiveness, no Savior, no heaven. If Christ has not been raised, death and the grave have triumphed. We had better go to the store and hoard vitamins and energy boosters so we can live our lives as robustly as possible before the grave swallows us and it is all over.

"But," St. Paul states, "Christ has been raised from the dead." The cemetery is a place of celebration. Sorrow bows to joy. Despair gives way to hope. Loss gives way to certain victory. He lives, and sin, death, and hell are absolutely routed!

He lives, and we too, shall rise to everlasting life. Good news from the cemetery! Because of His resurrection, we depart this life and are home by grace alone in heaven. Jesus says, calming our fears, "I am the resurrection and the Life; he that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Because our dear Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, our bodies too shall rise at His command on

the Last Day. Then, according to both body and soul, we shall be with the Lord and sing His praises for all eternity.

Who would want to give up such a hope as this? Never fear, for our faith is not based on “ifs” but on certainty--the certainty of God’s Holy Word. The Scriptures assure us of His bodily resurrection and all that awaits us. Our preaching is not in vain. Our faith is not in vain. Our hope is not in vain. We can go about our daily life with our head held high and a song in our heart. Why? Because there is good news from the cemetery!

My friend, do you believe this? Is this your personal faith? Do you believe heaven is your true and abiding home? Do you believe in the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting?” You can be sure--for this is the Christian faith! The Heavenly Father earnestly desires this for you. The Son has earned this for you. The Holy Spirit comforts and reassures you through Word and Sacrament of these truths. Indeed, He did rise, and our faith is not in vain. That is good news from the cemetery--the best possible news! Amen.



### Sermon Three

Text: John 6:40 *"I will raise him up at the last day."*

Theme: "A Time of Homecoming"

I remember seeing a video tape in which a little boy, the son of one of Jesus' disciples, comes home from Mt. Calvary late on a Friday afternoon. He throws his arms around his father's neck and cries, "I saw Him die!" A moment later he states, "Father, when He died He looked glad, like you do when the nets are full of fish on the lake and it's time to go home."

Jesus' death was a joyous homecoming. So it will be for every believer who departs this life. By God's grace we will be home. When I am traveling, I am always anxious to go home. As you near that last mile of road before home, your heart beats a little faster. As the plane is taxiing into the terminal, your heart races. To see the faces of my wife and children waiting for me is a sight to behold. I'm home, and joy fills my heart.

A wonderful homecoming awaits every believer in Christ. In the Creeds we confess, "I believe in the life everlasting. Amen". Amen, that is, it shall be so! Each step we take, each ticking of the clock puts us closer to our true and abiding home. Our appointed time of arrival will come when we will leave this vale of tears and enter the glorious mansions of heaven. We will see the faces of those believers in Jesus who have gone before us. We will see the face of the One who died so that we could live; we will hear His words of welcome. A time of homecoming awaits us!

This is the exact opposite of what we deserve. We have nothing to be proud of in terms of our spiritual achievements and efforts. We must rather confess: “God be merciful to me, a poor sinful being.” And again: “All our righteousness is as filthy rags.” “Who shall deliver me?” we cry out with St. Paul. So too, with him we exclaim, “Thanks be to God who gives the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” What a wondrous truth!

Our God has done it all. His Son, Jesus Christ, won the victory for us. It was He that lived the perfect life, sinless and holy. It was He who offered himself for us on the lowly cross to suffer and die as our substitute. It was He who rose bodily from the dead, thus portraying the resurrection we shall experience and assuring us of eternal life. It was He who descended into hell to proclaim His victory over sin, death, and hell. It was He who triumphantly ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us. It was He who sent the Holy Spirit to work faith in your heart and mine, promising that whoever believes in Christ shall not perish but have everlasting life. Through what He has done, heaven is now and forever our home. Thanks be to God!

In heaven, we will be free from those things that trouble and perplex us in this life. Free from sin, heartaches, trials, and tears of pain. Free from guilt and anxiety. As Isaiah reminds us, “The ransomed of the Lord shall return with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Our Risen Savior says in the book of Revelation, “Behold, I make all things new.” It is not easy to see things change and decay. It is not easy to see those we love, such as our parents or grandparents, grow old. They die, leaving a hole in our heart and life. Memories of our first date or the senior prom pass away and seem so long ago. Buildings age and are torn down. The marquee in my hometown theater has a “For sale” sign on it now. Things

change and decay. Oh that we could wave a magic wand and make all things new. Yet, we cannot.

God can and does! He restores our soul. "Behold," says the One sitting on the throne, "I make all things new." He calls us from death to life. He uplifts and renews our weary souls. What joy to know our loving Lord has done this for us. What a joy to know that the gift of eternal life is just that; a gift. That heaven is our home does not depend on our goodness or merit. No, it is a gift from our Lord.

We can confess clearly, boldly, and meaningfully, "I believe in the life everlasting." It is a life that was earned for us and is freely offered to us by the Savior Jesus Christ and is received through faith. It is ours already and is the sure and certain promise of the Lord. We say with St. Paul, "I desire to depart and be with Christ." With St. John, "Blessed are those who die in the Lord." With the Psalmist, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." A glorious homecoming awaits! Amen.

## Sermon Four

Text: Galatians 6:2 “*Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*”

Theme: “A Time to Bear Burdens”

Little Tim, five years old, brought a friend with him to Sunday School one morning. The teacher warmly welcomed the boy who was visiting and all went well during the hour of instruction. At the close of Sunday School, the teacher had the children join hands to say the Lord’s Prayer. Today would be no different. “Class, let’s get in a circle, hold hands and say the prayer Jesus taught us together.” The children got up from their seats and were extending hands to one another when the teacher saw something that horrified her. The visitor had only one arm. What had she done in embarrassing this child? Would he ever want to come back to Sunday School after being put on the spot?

The teacher was still regretting her remarks as the children began extending hands to one another. “Teacher,” said Tim, “My friend Austin doesn’t have a hand or an arm. I’ll just be his.” There the class prayed together hands clenched, Tim serving as Austin’s arm.

“Bear one another’s burdens,” states our text. In our midst are the lonely, the suffering, the sorrowing, and the hurting. A young man sits alone at a desk in his bedroom, head in hands. He failed to make the basketball team. He feels like a failure and is burdened. A young man woman walks down the hall at her high school and sees evidence of whispers among her “friends.” Her boyfriend has spread rumors about her. She firmly told him, “No” as he made advances toward her on their last date. She ended the relationship. Now, she is suffering the consequences and is burdened, even though she did the right thing.

A man stands over the fresh grave of his dear wife. Tears trickle down his cheeks and his heart aches. He is burdened.

Who has any concern for these people? Who has any word of hope for the burdened? I pray we do! A middle-aged man climbed up to the tree house he had built years earlier for now grown sons. The wood was faded and cracked. He was going to tear it down, feeling it had long since served its purpose. Slowly he entered the house, the floors squeaking and groaning under his weight.

He saw something written on the wall in white paint that intrigued him. It was a list of the tree house officers. The first line read, "Mike-President." The second line, "Dennis-Vice President." The third, "Steve-Treasurer." The final line read, "John-Just a person." The last line struck him. John, the neighbor boy. "Just a person." No title. No prestige. Just a person.

I remind you, my dear friends in Christ, that you are not, "Just a person." You are one for whom Jesus bled, died, and rose again. You are a called and washed child of God. You are one whose sins have been washed away in the perfect life and death of Jesus Christ. You are a citizen of heaven. You are loved and cherished by your Savior.

No one fits the title, "Just a person." As we live this earthly life we are going to face burdens of various sorts. Times of sorrow, guilt, and shame. Times of fear and uncertainty. Never are we just a person who has to go it alone. Never are we just a person with no hope. The Living Savior is with us to uplift us and comfort us through Word and Sacrament.

We are not alone in the church! Thankfully, others are with us. We are God's redeemed people in this place. We, too, can tend to the wounds of those around us. We can, with the strength God gives, be the arms and legs of the hurting. We can help shoulder the

burdens of those around us. We can comfort the sorrowing, befriend the lonely, bring hope to the discouraged, and extend a hand to the stumbling.

The Lord Jesus Christ carried all the burden of our sin in His body to the lowly cross. Your every sin and my every sin. Never were we “just a person” of insignificance to Him. He willingly took our place, paying the price in full for our forgiveness. He set His holy face like flint to the cross for us. Thanks be to our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

We Christians are not immune from heartaches and sorrows, troubles and toils. On this side of eternity they will certainly come our way many times. How thankful we can be that Jesus is with us to comfort us with His Word and refresh us with His Sacraments. Our merciful Lord points us to this confused and broken world. With our eyes, we see the lonely and despairing. With our ears we hear the cries of pain stemming from a broken heart. Will we lend our arm? Our legs? Our hearts? May it be so, to God’s glory. Amen!

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