

Funerals

When news of a bereavement is received, it is important, whenever possible, to prepare your own heart in prayer before visiting those who are grieving. As you meet with the bereaved, be sensitive to their emotions and responses. Every situation is different. Some may be overwhelmed by deep sorrow and shock, while others may experience a measure of relief, particularly after a long illness or prolonged suffering.

Avoid being 'super-spiritual' or offering superficial answers. Instead, be a compassionate and caring presence, remembering that you come as a representative of God, bringing His love, comfort, and hope to those in their time of need.

When visible grief is expressed giving a hug to a person of the opposite sex may seem innocent enough but be careful of possible inappropriate emotional bonding which in time could lead to an unhealthy relationship.

Be *culturally sensitive* to different patterns of grieving. Some races for example, like to have the body of the deceased present in the home, while others prefer to have the body cared for at the funeral parlour until the time of the service. Each culture must be respected.

Be careful *not to pass judgement* upon the eternal destination of the person who has just passed away. Only the Lord really knows what their genuine response was at the last moment. Many can give personal testimony to a situation, when as disaster was about to strike, their whole life flashed before them in an instant of time enabling them to make a commitment of their life to Jesus Christ. Be wise however and do not mislead.

'Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Genesis 18:25

It is good to offer to pray with those grieving and to have a reading of comfort from Scripture. Most people, even pre- Christians will appreciate the offer.

Suicide

This can certainly be even more of a challenge in giving pastoral support as the emotional responses of those grieving are often stronger and more complex. Most of those who grieve will have a sense of *guilt*. They will often blame themselves for having failed the one who died and they should be encouraged to verbalise these feelings. Others will have feelings of *shame*. They may feel embarrassed as to what their friends and neighbours will think and so may try to disguise the fact the death was suicidal. Still others, will experience feelings of *anger*, at the doctor, police or even the deceased for causing them to go through this trial. These are natural feelings and again must be allowed to be expressed even if they are incorrect. Encourage those grieving to understand that every person is ultimately responsible for the decisions they make. Furthermore, nowhere in Scripture does it say that those who take their life, will not enter the Kingdom of God. Sometimes 'it's not necessarily that people want to take their life, but that they found the pain of living more than what they could bear.'

The Service

Work closely with the Funeral Director and the bereaved family in planning the funeral service and deciding how it will proceed. Occasionally, tensions may arise between family members regarding the content and order of the service or who should participate. In most cases, however, a wise, gracious, and low-key approach by the pastor will help resolve these differences and maintain a spirit of peace and unity.

Many prayer books and orders of service are available in planning the service. Use them as necessary and take the opportunity to bring comfort and share the Gospel.

At the conclusion of the burial or cremation service a 'Burial Certificate' must be signed depending on the country the deceased died in. This comes from the Department of Justice (if in New Zealand), and it is to signify that you have witnessed the burial or creation of the body. If a pastor does not sign this, then two other witnesses must do so. Although the pastor does not always view the body, he signs it nevertheless on the honesty of the Funeral Director.

Follow up

During the time of the bereavement and the funeral service, the activity of the occasion normally keeps the bereaved busy. However, 3 weeks later, the pain of loneliness can become almost unbearable. It is important therefore, that the pastor visits the bereaved during this stage.

Some people, after a period find it embarrassing to talk about the deceased, which is unfortunate, as this is the time the bereaved need to do just that. Others will want to talk about their memories. Let them air their feelings and any guilt that they might have and again pray with them and share appropriate Scripture. Apart from a regular visit it is particularly useful to visit them 12 months later. This is usually a difficult time for them, and many will have mixed emotions. Some may not want to discuss their loved one's death however as the pain is still too great. Bear with that. Life may take two years or longer to settle into a new normal, though it won't be like before.

In the aftermath of a bereavement, people should generally be encouraged to avoid making major life decisions, such as moving house or leaving the area, until they have had time to process their grief. The emotions associated with the loss can cloud judgement and lead to decisions that may later be regretted.

As grief gradually eases, although not completely, people are usually able to think more clearly and adjust more effectively to their new circumstances. This is especially true for those whose lives are anchored in a vibrant Christian faith, as they draw strength, comfort, and hope from the Lord and the local Fellowship throughout the grieving process.