

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY
Bereavement Literature

WHY DON'T THEY KNOW WHAT TO SAY?

At the end of a seminar, a couple whose son had been killed in a recent car wreck said, ""Why is it our friends don't know what to say to us? And, even more upsetting, why doesn't our church know? Our pastor came when our son died, and all he knew how to say was that he was not a grief counselor and did not know what to say. Then he began talking about children who were born crippled or with other problems as if our knowing that was going to make us feel better. Why don't they know?"

There was a time when I made excuses for people not knowing, and particularly for churches and pastors not knowing. Seminaries do not teach this to the clergy so they are not educated in this area. I no longer make excuses for them. With all of the books, articles, videos and seminars available in the world, ignorance on the part of the church or the clergy is no longer defensible. They should know what to say. As a matter of fact, I think they must know what to say.

On a trip last summer, my wife and I visited several old friends and some family members. In the course of the trip, it dawned on us that we do not have very many friends who still go to church. Each family we visited was once active in church and now never bothers at all., As we thought this through and listened to their stories, a pattern developed. Every one of them had gone through some great upheaval and trauma in their lives, and the church did not know what to say or do. In time, the church became irrelevant to them and they dropped out.

One man said, "When my son died, I was an elder in my church. You should hear the stuff they said to me at that time. I haven't been back since."

I was speaking in a church a few months ago and a man pulled me aside to say, "My son was murdered four years ago. When that happened, I became the invisible man in this church. No one wants to talk to me. They run from me like I am a leper."

At a Compassionate Friends conference, a couple told me their child died in a church van on the way to summer camp. The wife said, "No one from our church has been in our home or spoken about our daughter since the funeral."

All of these experiences break my heart. When I started my new life's work, I assumed the church would be my best source for seminars and book sales. I discovered quite quickly that if I depended on the church, I would starve. I had to go to a secular market to survive. I did go to a secular market, and I did survive, but it has always been my dream that one day the church would discover this area of need and respond. The church is in my mind and heart every time I write a book or produce a video. I always think of ways they could be used within the church.

The last few years, we have sensed a change and a breakthrough in many churches. Many churches now use our "Special Care Series" to walk with their families through the first year of grief. I am speaking to an increasing number of clergy groups and finding there is great interest. I am more encouraged now than ever that the church will learn how to meet this need and begin to teach their people what to say and how to help.

There are still some barriers to be broken. Some churches seem to think that to grieve is to deny faith. They seem to think if we really believe in Heaven, then we should rejoice when someone goes

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there. They seem to struggle with having great faith and still having great pain. This will take time to overcome, but it is coming.

Other groups seem to think just quoting scripture makes the pain go away. I love the Bible, and I find great help and comfort in the teachings there, but I also hear people say that in the depths of their grief, the scriptures that folks quoted were a turn-off to them. The Bible was not at fault; it was the choices of text. The text that sounds wonderful to people who have never been in grief, can sound trivializing to someone who is suffering a loss.

The church will ultimately be the key to helping people with their grieving. They alone have the organization and position to give help on a wide enough scale to reach the people who need to be reached. But if you are reading this article in the middle of your pain and you are faced with having a church who does not know what to say, what can you do now? May I suggest a few things?

Hang in there. The death of a loved one almost always creates the need to rethink and restructure our faith. Before the loss, we somewhat blithely believed our faith would sustain us as we sailed through rough waters. No one told us the pain and grief might fill us with doubt, fear and even wondering whether or not God is real. One person put it in great terms. She said, "When my son died, I lost all of the magic in my religion. I have rebuilt my faith, and I like where I am, but my new faith doesn't have any magic in it."

Having a faith does not mean you won't go through doubt and fear. Having a faith does not mean you won't get angry at God and at God's people. My hope is that sooner or later, you will find comfort and strength and a sense of presence. You may not know how you know, but someone will just seem to be there.

Feel free to find help wherever it is. You need safe people and safe places. I wish that help were at your church, but if it isn't, then find it wherever it is and don't feel any guilt about doing so.

Make your own choice about church attendance. Sometimes people find it too difficult or maddening to attend. In those case, a break may be in order. You need to be in safe places and with safe people. If the church can be that, wonderful. If it cannot be that, then you may need to stay away for a time. If your faith has meaning to you, you will come back in time.

Maybe the couple whose story started this article have the right idea. The wife said, "I shall spend the rest of my life trying to get churches to see this need and move to meet it. Doing that will give at least a little bit of significance to my son's death." Maybe if enough of us did that, they could learn what to say and how to be safe people and safe places. That is my dream.

-Doug Manning, in Grief Digest