

Bereavement and Loss Support Group: Handbook



Diocese of Portsmouth
Bereavement and Loss Support Group

2011

Introduction

This handbook provides information and ideas for

- any parish thinking of setting up a Bereavement Support Group *and*
- any new or established Bereavement Support Groups within the Diocese.

The information was gathered together by the Diocesan Bereavement Support Group from sources of good practice within the Diocese and elsewhere.

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The Bereavement Support Group

The Bereavement Support Group is a parish-based ministry responding to the needs of the recently bereaved by offering emotional, and sometimes practical, support as they learn to cope with their loss. Bereavement Support Groups are sometimes known as 'Bethany' Groups, which recalls the visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha on the death of their brother Lazarus.



Although grieving is a natural process which can be helped by the sympathy and understanding of family and friends, sometimes a person may need support to work through it in a positive way. Family and friends don't always know how to help - they may be embarrassed by a person's grief, and may even avoid meeting a bereaved person in the mistaken belief that a meeting may increase distress.

It is quite normal for someone who has been bereaved to feel anger, guilt, fear and depression as well as the pain of loss. These feelings need to be expressed rather than repressed, to be talked out, cried over and put in some sort of perspective.

Common to all Bereavement Support groups is that they offer a 'listening ear' to those who have been bereaved. Many Bereavement Support Group members have themselves been bereaved of someone close to them. They aim to listen with understanding, to accept those suffering loss as they are, and support them through the grieving process.

It is important to recognise from the outset that listening is not the same as counselling. The Bereavement Support Group is not a counselling group.

The ideas which follow draw on the results of a Bereavement Questionnaire sent out to parishes by the Department for Pastoral Formation. They are examples of good practice which is going on throughout the Diocese at present, but they do not all exist together in any one Bereavement group. Each group will differ according to the resources of people, time etc. available to it.

The phrase 'the bereaved' in the notes below could apply to an individual or to a family.

Starting a Bereavement Support Group

A Bereavement Support Group can only operate with the full support, cooperation and encouragement of the priest. It is vital that the group works closely with the priest from the outset to determine its role and ways of operating. The group, or representatives of the group, should meet regularly with the priest to consider how they are exercising this ministry, suggestions for further action etc.

- ❖ An individual or group wanting to start a Bereavement Support Group in the parish will meet with the parish priest to outline the possible role of the group and ask for his support. From this meeting, a volunteer role description is drawn up for members of the Bereavement Support Group, which includes details of what is involved, desirable gifts / skills, possible time commitment, suggested frequency of group meetings.¹ All members of the group who will be in direct contact with people who are 'vulnerable' by virtue of their bereavement will need to have a CRB check. Please contact your Parish Safeguarding Rep for more details, or Angela McGrory, Diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator, on 023 9281 6396 e: amcgrory@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk
- ❖ The priest is asked to suggest people who might be invited to participate in this ministry. Names of possible group members might also be suggested to him for his approval. Members of the Group should be people who have resolved their own personal grief and losses. They must not bring personal sorrow to others.²
- ❖ Within the Group there may be a variety of roles: some people may be more gifted in direct contact with the bereaved person, others in more administrative roles e.g. preparing an order of service for the funeral. Members of the Bereavement Support Group must be willing to work with others in the parish who can offer different forms of support around the time of bereavement e.g. those with skills in catering, flower-arranging, musicians.
- ❖ Individuals suggested are contacted personally, given an outline of the work of the group, and invited to a meeting to explore the work of the Bereavement Support Group in more detail. At this initial stage, it is important to emphasise that much of the work of the Group will be confidential, and that anyone who is part of the Group must respect this.
- ❖ After the initial meeting, individuals are asked to take some time to discern whether or not they want to be involved in this ministry.
- ❖ Group members should have access to initial and ongoing training appropriate to their ministry. This should include training in listening skills³, stages of grief, awareness of procedures around death and funerals etc.
- ❖ With the priest, the Group develops procedures for their work in their particular parish. These should include the process by which information about a bereavement is communicated to and between the priest, the parish office and the Bereavement Support Group coordinator, how members of the Group might support the bereaved between the death and the funeral, and what support is offered after the funeral.

¹ A template for a role description is available from the Department for Pastoral Formation.

² CRUSE, one of the largest providers of bereavement support training in the UK, will not allow someone to train if they have had a personal bereavement in the last year.

³ Further details of Listening Courses may be obtained from the Department for Pastoral Formation. One locally-based organisation offering training in Listening Skills is the Acorn Christian Healing Foundation (details at the back of this Guide).

- ❖ Ideally the group meets monthly to pray for the bereaved and the work of the group, support one another, and to share what went well and discuss any concerns.
- ❖ Members of the group should prepare and distribute / display publicity which explains the work of the Bereavement Support Group and invites members of the community to pray for the Group. They might also speak at Mass about the work of the Group, so that members of the parish community know the group exists and have an understanding of what it does.
- ❖ Members of the group will need to have an understanding of the basic structure of funeral liturgies. Paul Inwood, the diocesan Director of Liturgy, can provide suitable resources and help with training in leadership of liturgies. Tel: 01329 835521
e: pinwood@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk

The Work of the Group

a) Between the death and the funeral

- ❖ One member of the Bereavement Support Group sends a card of condolence to the bereaved on behalf of the parishioners. They might book a date for a Mass to be said for the deceased.
- ❖ One of the group members may accompany the priest when he visits the bereaved to arrange the funeral, so that the group member can be introduced. The group member can leave a card with contact details for the bereaved in case they want any practical help with the funeral (e.g. readings, liaising with church musicians, flower arrangers, etc.). The Group member could also take an information pack of services available which the Bereavement Support Group members have compiled, e.g. florists, caterers, etc. The Group member will follow up the visit with a phone call after a few days to see how the bereaved is coping and to offer a listening ear, if appropriate. The Group member may mention that members of the Bereavement Support Group would be happy to visit the bereaved in their home.
- ❖ The Bereavement Support Group offering a listening service, not a counselling service. Members of the Group remain non-judgemental. If any member has concerns about a bereaved person these must be shared with the parish priest, who will advise whether to refer the person for counselling or not.
- ❖ The details of funeral are put in the parish newsletter and on the noticeboard and website. A photograph of the deceased and the date and time of funeral might be posted in a prominent place such as the Church door or noticeboard.
- ❖ Ensuring the safety of the bereaved and of Bereavement Support group members:

If the bereaved requests a visit from the Bereavement Support group, this must be done by two people, and never by one person alone, and only after an appointment has been made. Any person who has been bereaved is a 'vulnerable adult' around the time of the death and immediately afterwards, by virtue of their bereavement.

A log book must be kept in the parish office detailing the name of the deceased and their next of kin, the date of any visits made by members of the Bereavement Support Group, the names of the Group members who visited, and any other relevant notes. Because this logbook contains sensitive information, it should be kept securely (i.e. locked away) and available only to the priest and members of the Bereavement Support Group.

- ❖ If the family would like the body to remain in Church the night before the funeral and the priest is not available, he might ask a member of the Group to lead a short service to receive the body into the Church and to pray with the family.
- ❖ On the day of the funeral, members of the Bereavement Support Group might help with welcoming, giving out service sheets and hymn books, as well as representing the parish community at the funeral service.
- ❖ The funeral service allows for a few words to be spoken in remembrance of the deceased. If the bereaved family feels unable to do this, they may ask a Group member to read it on their behalf.

b) After the funeral

- ❖ If members of the Group visit the bereaved, the visits must be for a set time span and not go on indefinitely. The time span can be set by the Group.
- ❖ The deceased should be entered in the Parish Book of Remembrance.
- ❖ Two or three months after the funeral a member of the group might phone the bereaved to ask how they are and to offer a visit.
- ❖ The Group may wish to have a monthly coffee morning for all the bereaved in the parish (perhaps after a Mass, for those whose anniversaries occur in that month).⁴
- ❖ The Group invites the bereaved to an annual Mass of Remembrance, the blessing of the graves in November, a Blue Christmas service, and other events as appropriate. Members of Bereavement Support group should be present at all these events.
- ❖ On the first anniversary of the death, the Group might send the bereaved a 'Thinking of you' / Remembrance card.

⁴ For information on how this operates in the Cathedral parish, contact Peter Aspin (The Bethany Group) via the Parish Office 02392 826170

USEFUL READING

A. Bereavement and Grief: Fr Neil McNicholas

Grief is a very personal and complex emotion in response to a loss that is absolute, unalterable, irreversible, and forever. It is not only essential, but also, quite literally, *vital* ("life giving") to the process of healing that people who have been bereaved are allowed to work through, and to express, their grief.

Unfortunately in our society we are not comfortable with people being "out of control". In their own homes, or even in ours, they ought to be able to express their feelings to sympathetic friends. We are similarly uncomfortable with people crying in public – especially men. There is a pressure to suppress the emotion of grief, even a reward system for doing so- "*Wasn't it wonderful how strong he/she was?*" "*You must be strong for the children*" - implying that expressing emotion is a sign of weakness, which it isn't.

Secondly, and this is very important, grief will be worked out somewhere, sometime, somehow, and discouraging or repressing it when it needs to be expressed is like plugging a boiling kettle when the pressure finally releases itself, as it undoubtedly will, who knows the damage that can result.

People need to know that it is OK to cry, they also need to know it's OK to be angry even with God (he is big enough to take it and most surely understands). An enlightened hospital will have a room where family members can go to be on their own and where, if necessary, they can express their grief without disturbing other patients.

In her book *The Bereaved Parent*, Harriet Sarnoff Schiff says:

*Immediately following our son's death, I recall a strange feeling of acquiescence. If someone told me to sit, I sat. If I was told to eat, I ate. Normally a strong minded person, my behaviour was certainly not atypical. I appreciated, in fact, being told what to do. It was too much to wish to think for myself. I was afraid the numbness would leave and make way for grieving.*⁵

In the days that follow a death, and in the time immediately following the funeral, typically there will be a constant stream of visitors and friends offering help, cooking meals, and so on. But then it's as if someone dammed the stream and, as everyone gets on with their own lives, from there being almost too many people around, suddenly there may now be almost no one. These can be lonely days when reality finally begins to sink in and it is precisely now that the bereaved needs visitors and support the most – not to shield them from what has happened, but to accompany them as they begin the process of recovery.

⁵ This is a wonderful book (first published in 1977 and still in print) but may not be suitable for someone to read until they feel able to deal with the emotional issues it raises.

It can be very difficult for visitors, not knowing what to say, being sensitive to the feelings of the bereaved, trying to avoid any mention of death or of the person who has died. We can't suddenly pretend that the person never existed and, certainly in the emotional sense, to the bereaved they don't cease to exist just because they are no longer physically around. Often they need and want to talk about them, but visitors are carefully trying to avoid doing so because, perhaps, they don't realise and are not picking up on the clues. The best approach in such a situation is to carefully test the waters, to listen for what the person's needs might be, listen to what they are saying, simply listen if they need to do the talking. And if they don't want to talk, then sit quietly with them, simply supporting them by being there.

It's very important for a person who is grieving to be able to talk to a trusted friend as and when they need to, someone who will understand and be sympathetic to what they are going through. They need to know that the extreme emotions they are experiencing, possibly even imagining they sometimes see the person who died, are quite normal they are not losing their minds.

Sarnoff Schiff again:

Worst of all, far worse than lying awake all night, were the mornings. There seemed to be daily a brief period shortly after I opened my eyes when I had forgotten. But then, like a tidal wave, remembrance would come and engulf me and make me feel as if I were drowning.

How long will the grief last? There's no answer to that. It will come and go – birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and other holidays, will be particularly difficult times – much will depend on *grief work* (how much and how appropriately someone is dealing with their grief). The bereaved may feel that they will never get over how they feel just at the moment, but they will no matter how badly they feel. It's the old (and not to sound trite) saying that time is a great healer. It will take time, but they will begin to feel better. It's certainly not fair for others to say: *"It's been [such and such a length of time], you should be getting over it by now."*

The loss of a spouse, for example, may be an experience from which someone may never fully recover – and understandably so when you are talking about someone's life partner.

The main concern for family and friends should perhaps be whether there is general positive progress in the direction of healing, coping, and normal functioning.

And "general positive progress" is a good phrase because the experience of grief will come and go in waves, some days and weeks will be good and then the person may find themselves plunged back into their grief again – a little like the unpredictable ups and downs of snakes & ladders. It should be fairly obvious if grief is becoming pathological and when it might therefore be necessary to think in terms of the need for professional help. (It's also worth bearing in mind the risk of physical ailments developing as a result of the emotional upset and stress of bereavement.)

The methods people use (Sarnoff Schiff says) in coping with grief are as highly personal as the people themselves. It is important to take some positive steps [but] do it slowly, trying to be gentle with yourself. It is important that no one neglect taking that first small step – and it should be a small one. Begin with essential everyday tasks. Begin to avail yourself of life's small niceties.

Surviving all the grief you felt seemed impossible. Those days and nights of crying, exhaustion, and pain were almost beyond endurance. You were certain, at times, you would never get past that time in your life.

But you did.

Depending on the situation, guilt may be another emotion that has to be dealt with.

“Could I have done something?”

“Could I have done more?”

“Why am I alive and they are not?”

Suddenly having time to yourself again after caring full-time for the person who has died can also bring on feelings of guilt. Seek the guidance and advice of a trusted friend to help provide a little perspective on things.

There are also the needs of the “forgotten grievers” to consider – those not as immediately involved as, for example, a spouse or a parent, a son or a daughter, might be. This might typically include siblings and grandparents.

The focus of everyone’s concern and support is understandably on the person closest to the one who has died, and others who may feel the loss almost as acutely can be inadvertently excluded from that effort. As a result they have to handle their grief largely on their own and possibly without others realizing their needs.

In this regard it is perhaps worth mentioning specifically the problems that can arise in family relationships, and especially marriages, when individuals either don’t share equally, or as deeply, in a situation of bereavement, or that they work through their resulting grief at a different rate or in a different way.

I know this from my own experience as a Jesuit novice in America working with families from all over the States attending a bone marrow treatment hospital in Seattle. In many cases mothers would be there with their children all day, every day, for weeks on end, whereas fathers often had to stay at home, hundreds of miles distant, to earn money to pay the family’s expenses, and to care for brothers and sisters, and could only afford to travel to Seattle occasionally or at the very end if the treatment didn’t work. Sadly many of those marriages later failed as a result not only of the extreme circumstances surrounding the family’s loss, but also the very different experience and degree of involvement of the parents. This may be another area where close friends can watch and help.

Again from *The Bereaved Parent*:

The atmosphere around us was one of comfort for me and "certain things must be faced" for my husband. Along with all the affairs of dying, he was also required, after a while, to earn a living. Instead of coming out of his state of grief, he sank deeper and deeper into sorrow. He walked around wondering when it would be his turn to grieve. Finally he reached a point where we both knew he needed counselling.

As I hope you would expect me to say as a priest, the role of personal faith cannot be underestimated in the way someone faces and deals with bereavement and the process of grieving and healing. If we look, for example, at St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (4:13-18), he points to the difference between the situation of the pagans who had no faith and for whom, therefore, death was the end of everything and theirs was a deep and dark grief, and that of the Christians for whom, while they rightly grieved over the loss of loved ones, there was the hope of life after death through the fruits of Our Lord's death and resurrection – the very basis of our faith.

It is difficult to understand how someone can deal with some of things that life brings our way without the firm foundation of faith and prayer to work from. The experience of death and of being bereaved is never going to be an easy one to deal with. What we have to bear in mind as far as we are able is that suffering and death are not God's will. As I said earlier, it's OK to be angry with God – as we may well be until we regain some perspective on what has happened. He understands how we feel and, far from being the cause of our sufferings, he is there to support us and help us survive them – as we surely will. How much worse would our experience be if that were not the case?

Other scripture passages (among many) that might be of help in this particular area are:
Psalm 12(13) (*How long, O Lord, will you forget me...*)

Wisdom 3:19

Revelation 22:45

& John 11:25-26

Reproduced by kind permission of Fr Neil McNicholas, St Hilda's Catholic Church, Whitby, Yorkshire. Fr Neil has published many more pastoral reflections on his parish website www.sthildaswhitby.org.uk

B. General Issues of Understanding Grief and Loss: Sarah Tollast

Few people will go through life without experiencing the loss of someone important in their lives. Death is a part of life, it is inevitable and sooner or later we all have to face up to the reality of it. Through grieving we learn how to continue to function in spite of our loss. How well we accomplish this seems to affect our quality of life and how we relate to others.

Death is almost a taboo subject replacing sex as the forbidden topic. With today's health care we all expect to live to old age.

Facing reality

Initially the bereaved person is in a state of shock and numbness, even when the death has been anticipated.

The bereaved person can feel faint, cry uncontrollably, become hysterical or collapse.

Or this person may display no emotion at all, appearing to be very controlled, calm and detached. This may last for several days and is a form of emotional protection.

It is very important that the bereaved person gradually accepts the death of this significant person and that they will never return.

Some people may not be able to acknowledge this and may cope by refusing to talk about it.

Being able to see the dead person and being involved as much as possible in the preparations for the funeral may assist people to face reality.

Experiencing the pain of grief

After the initial numbness the bereaved person may have intensely painful feelings which may last for weeks or months.

The grief is overwhelming and the bereaved cannot think about anything or anybody else but themselves and how they feel. They may also over-react to other people's comments and appear irritable.

To feel extreme sadness, guilt, anger and resentment are normal. Usually most people struggle with guilt. Talking through this can help.

Anger can be very powerful too as it is the loss of control that the death brings. This may be anger directed at the medical team, at God or at a family member who they feel in some way contributed to the death.

Grief is not a mental illness although sleeplessness, anxiety, fear and a preoccupation with oneself can all add up to a feeling of 'going mad'. These feelings become less frequent and begin to fade over time.

Adjusting to the new reality

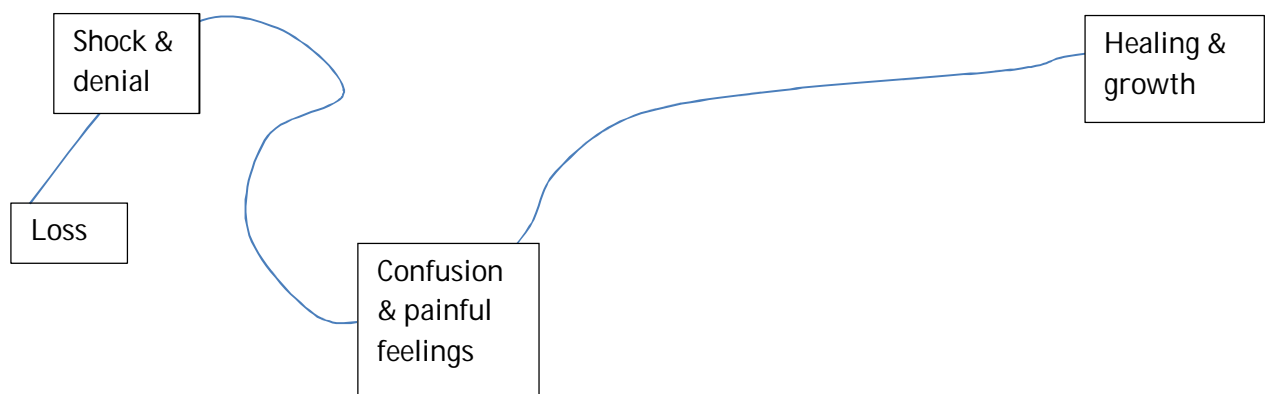
Facing life without someone you love is a difficult and painful process. No one can fill the void. It may take a tremendous effort to get through the day. It may take many months before the bereaved person is able to start functioning as they did before the loss.

Investing in the future

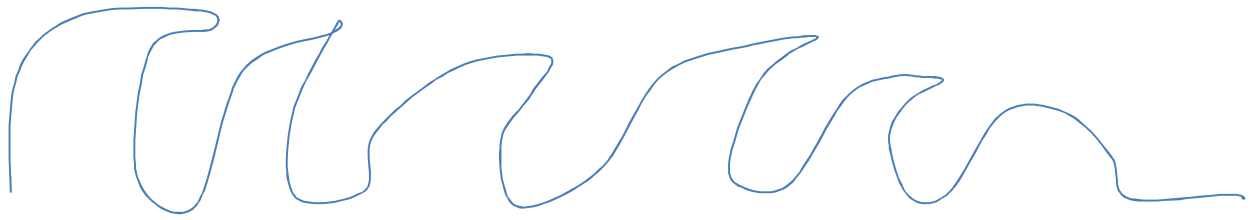
Considering the future involves moving on to a new way of life without the person who has died. It is a way of life again, alongside the knowledge that the deceased will not be forgotten. This can feel like betrayal but putting sadness aside, looking to the future and recalling happy times can create comfort and pleasure in those memories. It is also a way of making life more meaningful and winning back control. It is normal at anniversaries for feelings of grief to be aroused again and to be as vivid as at the time the death occurred.

Change creates loss

The pain from loss is called grief.



Grief comes and goes like waves in the ocean.



There will be stormy times and calm times.

These are some of the emotions you may experience when suffering from loss or bereavement (SHOCK):

- Numbness
- Denial & disbelief
- Emotions- unaffected, hysterical, euphoric
- Thinking- unaffected, slowed, chaotic, efficient
- Activity- unaffected, slowed, 'superdrive'
- Suicidal thoughts

These are some of the emotions you may experience when suffering from loss or bereavement (DISORIENTATION):

- Confusion
- Apathy and aimlessness
- Loss of interest
- Restlessness
- Loss of confidence
- Low self-esteem
- Anguish
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Concentration and memory difficulties
- Sadness

- Loss of meaning
- Loss of faith
- Hopelessness
- Decreased resistance to illness

Awareness of mourning

- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Experiencing the pain or emotional aspects of the loss
- Adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing
- Relocating the dead person within one's life and finding ways of remembering that person.

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C. Funeral Planning – Some Considerations: Fr Neil McNicholas

The pastoral problems that can arise with funeral planning all too often result from current Church practice having not been explained to people as well as it should have been, or as frequently in case some missed it the first time. There is then a risk of ill feeling being created and even greater upset caused when, upon being called following a death, or meeting with the family later to plan the funeral, the priest is faced with having to explain why things are done the way they are, or why the Church doesn't do what the family may be asking. In the case of families who regularly practise their faith, there is always the hope that they are aware of these things and therefore the priest won't be put on the spot.

However, it can be extremely difficult if family members are unfamiliar with what the Church does and make requests influenced by what they may have seen elsewhere rather than accepting the guidance of the priest.

Requiem Mass or Funeral Service?

What do we believe about what happens after we die? Our belief, surely, is that we will be found worthy to enter heaven. While that is our ultimate hope, we are also only too well aware of the faults and failings for which we may still be held to account by God, and (in addition to the Church's teaching on the possible experience and cleansing process we call "purgatory") this is why the Church encourages prayer for those who have died in case such spiritual assistance may yet benefit them. Inevitably, it is a subject and a concept we struggle with even in terms of the language at our disposal as we strive to understand and express in temporal terms something that is obviously theological and other worldly.

I say all of this as a preliminary to repeating something I have mentioned on a number of occasions in the past to do with funerals. The basic reality, which has not been explained well over the years, and therefore people continue to struggle with it, is that the funeral is for the living. The prayers offered during the funeral are for the dead, but the funeral itself is for the living. Let me explain.

Every funeral, no matter the culture or faith (or lack of faith), serves a basic social purpose: to express our farewells to the deceased and to reverently dispose of their body according to local custom. That's basically what the funeral is all about from a sociological point of view. In the case of perhaps the majority of people in our own country, there is then also a religious (faith) dimension to the funeral. What I think it helps to bear in mind is that, in light of our hope for the person who has died⁶, they are already with God. They may still need our prayer support and help, we don't know, and

⁶ (and especially if they were absolved of their sins before they died)

therefore we are encouraged to pray for them – initially through the spiritual rites accompanying the funeral, but also through our ongoing prayers and in Masses offered for their intentions. But the funeral itself, and the choice of rites (whether a funeral service or a requiem Mass) is very specifically for the needs of the mourners.

This is why I keep offering the pastoral advice that people shouldn't make specific requests in their Wills for what *they* want at their funeral (at least not without discussing things with family members first) because the reality is that it won't matter to them – they will be with God. What does matter is how well the choice of funeral rite assists the needs of the mourners in terms of consoling them in their grief and helping the process of healing.

If the deceased was a practising Catholic, so too the immediate family, then the celebration of a Requiem Mass should be the obvious choice. *The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.*⁷ In saying this, the rite assumes the best possible situation that the majority of people at the funeral will be practising their faith and will all, therefore, potentially be receiving holy communion, the central action of the Mass.

If the immediate family is not Catholic, or, for whatever reason, they have fallen away from the practice of their faith, then it makes no sense at all to make them sit through Mass, a rite they are either not, or no longer, familiar with and which (whether we like it or not) hasn't been a part of their everyday lives.

It would be far more appropriate to celebrate a service with them that contains exactly the same components in terms of hymns, readings and prayers, but without the eucharist which they wouldn't be able to receive anyway. They should feel a part of the ceremony, not excluded from a central part of it as they would be if a Requiem was being celebrated. Mass for the deceased can be celebrated later with their faith community, but meanwhile a simple funeral service may be much more consoling and personal to the family than a more involved rite that has become foreign to them.

Having said that, there is always the hope that the situation might cause family members to want to put things right with God and the Church in confession and a Requiem Mass might be their choice after all, and it is the Church's hope for a Mass *if* it is appropriate. But I think that needs to be decided in light of the circumstances at the time and in discussion with the priest rather than being requested, regardless, in a person's Will for example.⁸ You might want a Mass, but hopefully you won't *need* a Mass because, we believe, you will already be with God. The question (and the Church's pastoral concern) is, therefore, what is your family's immediate need, what would be most helpful, consoling and healing for them?

⁷ *Order of Christian Funerals* para 5

⁸ "The *Order of Christian Funerals* makes provision for the minister, in consultation with the family, to choose those rites and texts that are most suitable to the situation: those that most closely apply to the needs of the mourners." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, para 43)

Music

One of the most problematic elements of the funeral can be the choice of music, or rather of hymns. The rite is very clear on the subject: *The texts of the songs chosen...should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.*⁹

Subsequent guidelines from our Bishops' Conference make it clear that, because it quite specifically doesn't "express the paschal mystery" or "relate to the readings from Scripture", secular music is not to be used with the possible exception of suitably reflective pieces of classical instrumental music and even then these would be better played by the organist than from a recorded source.

Every parish has hymn books and these provide a more than adequate choice of appropriate hymns, and everyone joining in and singing to the praise of God is infinitely more desirable than sitting listening even to classical music.

Despite explaining all of this, families (especially those who are not churchgoing) often adamantly refuse and insist on their choice of secular music. The bottom line is that such music is not allowed. A time of bereavement isn't the occasion to get into a discussion on the subject and it would be far better if people would respect what the priest is saying about the Church's teaching. And, really, that's the bottom line: what we are doing is *of* the Church, and what we do *in* church should be appropriate *to* church and to the reality of the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. If people can't accept this and insist on things that are not of the Church, then perhaps they need to celebrate their funeral elsewhere. It's a sad thing to have to say, but it may be the only option if the family creates an impasse like that.

The Scripture Reading

The practice has grown up over time of inviting a family member or a friend to read because it seems a nice thing to do. The problem is that not everyone is used to speaking in public in the way that is required in proclaiming the word of God clearly and audibly. And this is important because of the specific message of the reading and the homily that will follow. In recent years the Church has begun to train and commission people to be ministers of the word in order to better ensure that the word of God is proclaimed properly and well and now says, therefore, that only commissioned ministers should be asked to read. That is their ministry. If a member of the family, or a friend, *is* a commissioned reader then they may be asked, but they need to study and prepare the reading ahead of time.

⁹ *Order of Christian Funerals*, para 30

"A Few Words"

The instruction in the rite on the subject of what is often called the eulogy is a little confusing. On the one hand it says there shouldn't be one but then it also says that a family member or friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased– which would be a eulogy. What certainly is recommended is that if such a reflection in celebration of the person's life is included, it should be brief. Some things are appropriately included, whereas certain other stories and anecdotes may not be, or are personal only to the family. Also, how many eulogies have we heard that painted such a picture of sainthood that some in the congregation may have wondered if they had come to the right funeral!

Those who are in the best position to speak about the deceased – those who were closest to them – may be the least able on the day. One possibility is for the family to write down what they would like said and for the priest to read it for them (getting a copy to him well in advance). On the other hand the family may prefer that nothing be said and to just leave everyone with their own thoughts and memories.

The time immediately following a death is the worst possible time for making many of the practical decisions that have to be made or to be hearing things from the priest that you perhaps weren't aware of before. What I hope this article will do is provide current pastoral information and guidance for you to read and reflect on in quieter and far less emotionally charged times. I hope also that it will encourage you to talk together with other family members so that choices will be known and decisions made in advance.

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PARISH PRACTICE

BERNARD COTTER

Consolation at a time of loss

For many, the Church has its most poignant role at the end of life, although a priest can often be overstretched in dealing with the bereaved. One way parishioners can assist him is in an official role in the funeral liturgy, following special formation

Every family in the world shares at least one thing in common: they will find themselves at some time having to organise a funeral for one they love dearly. It will never be easy. While each nation will deal in its unique way with death and funeral rituals, the parting will always bring pain to those involved.

The Catholic Church provides meaningful rituals for each step of the way from death to grave or pyre, but each culture adapts these according to its own values. We Irish sometimes have the reputation of dealing with death in a wholesome and inclusive way, but the loss marked by the funeral brings deep sorrow here too. And the role of the Church, here as elsewhere, is vital.

Our diocese in Cork recently took some steps to involve parishioners in an official accompanying role in the funeral liturgies. This was presented as a continuation of the “ministry of consolation”, to which all the baptised are called, but in terms suitable to this time and place. Those chosen for this ministry were to undergo a course in formation provided centrally by the diocese, with a commissioning service in the parish following.

I took some time in choosing those who would take part. All those who agreed to be part of it had themselves experienced the loss of someone close to them – but that was

not the only characteristic sought. Sympathy for the grieving seemed an obvious characteristic, but so equally was an appreciation of the importance of confidentiality and the ability to work with others as part of a team.

Nine people from our parish agreed to be trained by the diocese for “funeral ministry” or, as the diocese styles them, “members of the parish funeral team”. In other parishes, these people once trained immediately took on a presiding role, substituting for the priest at the various stational liturgies apart from Mass. This role seems particularly relevant in urban parishes with large populations of older people and often just one priest. The availability of lay people to share in the

ministry of leading prayer at these rites is a great support.

In our small rural parish, members didn’t see the need to be involved at this level – not yet, anyway. Rather, they see themselves as lay parishioners trained to understand the funeral rites, who can then accompany parishioners in the organisation and carrying out of a funeral for a loved one. The process they follow is simple. After a death occurs in the parish, a funeral director finalises funeral arrangements with the parish secretary. The secretary then contacts two members of the funeral team, passing to them the name of the deceased, details of the funeral and the names and contact details of close relatives. These funeral team members then make contact with the bereaved relatives and arrange a time to meet and plan. Usually team members travel two by two, in line with the Scriptures.

To this meeting, funeral team members will bring a booklet supplied by the diocese with all the possible readings suitable for a funeral, which includes a reading unique to this diocese, one very popular with mourners (from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8): beginning: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die ...”

The funeral book also explains the symbols the Church uses at funeral times, including water, candle and pall, and gives suggestions of how family members might be involved (for example, by sprinkling the body during the wake service, or by placing the pall on the coffin after its arrival in the church). The book also contains sample intercessions for the Prayer of the Faithful (13 to choose from) as well as a checklist the family can use.

This first meeting with mourners has a large element of sympathising, but funeral team members know they are not bereavement counsellors and move attention to the funeral to be planned. They produce the book and help family members navigate their way round it. They outline the ways in which

family members can participate in the liturgies and present the checklist families may find helpful. Team members answer questions and try to put the minds of the bereaved at ease regarding the priest who will preside at the liturgies. Before leaving, team members leave contact numbers, in case other questions arise and further help is needed.

In theory, funeral team members can then be at hand to help family members through the funeral services themselves, but in practice this is not necessary, as families arrange the services themselves. For the priest presider who leads the funeral Mass, a full list of who is doing what is presented before the Mass, making it easy for him to include what the family proposes in his celebration.

The team was introduced at the start of this year, with team members being commissioned at parish Masses on the First Sunday of February. Since then, the team has been involved in each parish funeral, though to different degrees, depending on the personalities and needs of mourners. Initially, many parishioners feared a massive intrusion on their grief, but in fact, when team members simply made themselves available, with no pressure, the bereaved mostly welcomed the resources the parish put at their disposal through the team.

One other unexpected by-product of this development is the strength of the team and support they have for each other. Having been through the formation together and often even hiring a minibus to travel together to the venue, a bond was forged between the nine, who hail from different parts of the parish and attend different churches in it. The team now meets on a monthly basis to encourage each other and share tips and ideas, while maintaining a strict confidentiality within the group.

I would expect that in years to come, with declining numbers of priests, the funeral team members will be a much appreciated resource in the parish, advancing the ministry of consolation and even perhaps sharing the presiding ministry at the funeral rites.

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Resources

Liturgical

Order of Christian Funerals, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Burns and Oates Continuum

Order of Christian Funerals: Guidelines, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Liturgy Office. Download from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/OCFGuidelines.pdf

Order of Christian Funerals: Some Music Suggestions, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Liturgy Office. Download from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/OCFMusicChoices.pdf

In Sure and Certain Hope: Rites and Prayers from the Order of Christian Funerals for the Use of Lay Leaders, Burns and Oates Continuum

Into Your hands: planning a Catholic funeral, readings and prayers, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Decani Books

A Catholic Approach to Dying, Fr Neil McNicholas, Catholic Truth Society

A Catholic Funeral: a Guide for the Family, Fr Tim Buckley, Redemptorist

Catholic Funerals: a guide, Bishops' Conference Liturgy Office. Download from <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/FuneralsGuide.pdf>

Burial of Ashes: guidance note, Bishops' Conference Department for Christian Life and Worship. Download from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/Ashes.pdf

Cremation and the Church, Archdiocese of Westminster. Download from www.rcdow.org.uk/fileupload/upload/Diocesaninformation2762008251953.pdf

Music at Funerals: A Parish Musicians' Guide, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Liturgy Office. Download from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/OCFMusic.pdf

Other

Last Orders: The Essential Guide to Your Letter of Wishes, Patricia C Byron, Stellar Books (Guide to help people set out their wishes for the assistance of their executors and family)

When Dad Died / When Mum Died / When Somebody Dies, Shelia Hollins & others, Books Beyond Words (written to help people with learning disabilities)

Information about the legalities connected with death:

www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Death/index.htm

When Someone Dies: a step-by-step guide to what to do

Bereavement

Going Solo

Booklets available from Age UK. Can be downloaded from www.ageuk.org.uk

Portsmouth Diocese Guide to Organisations Supporting Family Life and Marriage 2011

www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/userfiles/file/2011-Guide-to-Orgs-Supporting-Family-Life-Marriage.pdf

Organisations offering advice / support

Acorn Christian Healing Foundation - Provides training in listening skills.

Whitehill Chase, High Street, Bordon, Hampshire, GU35 0AP, tel: 01420 478121,

www.acornchristian.org

Association of Separated & divorced Catholics (ASDC) National Enquiry Line Tel: 0113 264 0638

Beginning Experience - Support for those who have lost a spouse through death, separation or divorce www.beginningexperience.org

BRAKE- Road safety charity running a helpline for anyone bereaved as a result of a road crash. Helpline: 0845 603 8570 Email: helpline@brake.org.uk www.brake.org.uk

Care for the Family - Promotes healthy family life and helps those hurting because of family breakdown. Tel: 029 2081 0800 Email: mail@cff.org.uk www.careforthefamily.org.uk

Child Bereavement Charity - Provides support to families and professionals when a child dies or when a child is bereaved. Tel: 01494 568 900 Email : enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk www.childbereavement.org.uk

Child Death Helpline - For anyone affected by the death of a child of any age, from prebirth to adult, under any circumstances, however recently or long ago. Tel: 0800 282 986 Freephone number for all mobiles: 0808 800 6019 www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

Compassionate Friends Helpline - For bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents. Tel: 0845 123 2304 Email: helpline@tcf.org.uk www.tcf.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care - Helpline Tel: 0844 477 9400 Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Grief Net - An Internet community of persons dealing with grief, death and major loss
www.griefnet.org

Rainbows - for children affected by loss. Tel: National Office 01302 359 017
www.rainbowsgb.org

SAMM-Support after Murder and Manslaughter - Supports those who have been bereaved as a result of murder or manslaughter, through a telephone helpline, on-line forum and local contacts. Helpline : 0845 872 3440 www.samm.org.uk

Sandrose Provides free breaks for the bereaved, with particular emphasis on young families. Tel: 0845 607 6357 (Mon and Wed: 9.00-15.00) Email : info@sandrose.org.uk
www.sandrose.org.uk

SANDS- Still Birth and Neonatal Death Society - Tel: 020 7436 5881 Email: helpline@uk-sands.org
www.uk-sands.org

SOBS - Helpline for those bereaved by suicide. Tel: 0870 241 3337
Email: sobs.admin@care4free.net www.uk-sobs.org.uk

TAMBA BSG – Twin and Multiple Births Association – Bereavement Support Group
Supporting parents who have lost a baby or babies during a multiple pregnancy or at any stage after birth. Tel: 01483 306 762 www.tamba.org.uk/bsg

WAY (Widowed and Young) Foundation - Charity offering support, advice and friendship to those who have been bereaved of a partner under the age of 50. Tel: 0300 012 4929
Email: info@wayfoundation.org.uk www.wayfoundation.org.uk

Winston's Wish - A charity for bereaved children. Tel: 0845 203 0405
Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk www.winstonswish.org.uk

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