

Learning from the experiences of Bereaved People in Church

When someone has been bereaved, going to church can be quite a difficult experience. We have a precious opportunity to come alongside and support those who are grieving in our congregations. We can be much better equipped to support people in our own churches when we learn from the experiences of those who have been there.

Here are some ways in which churches have been a fantastic support, and some advice from those who found that their churches didn't seem to know how to help.

- “People tell us they’re still praying for us 3 years after my bereavement. That is so comforting because it confirms that they recognize we are still suffering from the tragedy that has happened, even though we appear to be getting on with our lives.”
- “The church was open and honest about my bereavement. They sought to deal with it in a way that would help everyone come to terms with it and grow through the experience. It wasn’t hushed up or the difficult emotional tensions or theological struggles denied.”
- “People made meals for us and someone filled our freezer with home-cooked food. People asked us to their homes for meals.”
- “I had three very good friends who met me, listened, shared my tears, drank tea with me and loved me. They didn’t have answers but were (and continue to be) faithful to me.”
- “I would love to go to a house group occasionally as I used to before my bereavement. If I could I would feel more supported and build stronger relationships. It would be great if people occasionally offered to baby sit or even held meetings in my home.”
- “Church should be a place of acceptance. If bereaved people are having a bad day and cry in the meeting it does not mean that we have any less faith. It just means that we miss our partners so much. We miss being held, loved and accepted. The church is the place that we should be able to receive these things.”
- “Worship styles can tend to be upbeat and positive. When you have been bereaved this can be the last thing you feel like. It can be very difficult for the bereaved to “engage” with some styles of worship.”
- “Don’t tell us you know how we feel unless you have truly lost a partner. Losing a grandparent, a dog or going through a divorce is not the same.”

- “Finance and DIY are big issues for me as my husband did most of that. It would help if the church could perhaps draw up a list of people with various skills who would be willing to help (not just the bereaved, but the elderly and lone parents also).”
- “Offer support through just a cup of tea, a chat and a hug. Don’t ignore us or walk on the other side of the road because you don’t know what to say – that hurts and makes us feel not accepted.”
- “Don’t put your expectations of “moving on” on me. I hope that healing will come, over time – but it will be my timescale and not yours – and it may take several years. Losing the one I loved most in the whole world has had a devastating impact – and it will be part of my life for ever.”
- “Bereavement can shake the very basis of our faith. Make sure we get spiritual support, but don’t quote bible verses at us. We may come to understand and accept what Romans 8.28 says in time – but just now it doesn’t feel as though “everything works for good”.”
- “It was particularly difficult for my daughter, who found the youth culture within the church alienating because it was so upbeat and triumphalistic.”
- “I’m not sure that some churches have a theology about suffering, loss and healing that stands up in the face of illness and bereavement at a young age. My bereavement seemed to challenge and confuse many people’s expectations and understanding.”
- “People seem to think that you get over your partner dying relatively quickly, and they could not understand me crying about it after a year.”
- “Try not to spiritualise the situation. Accepting that some answers we won’t get this side of heaven will help us move on, and I guess when we get there it won’t matter any more.”
- “Lower your expectations. As the months passed I thought I was ready to get involved with church activities again, but it wasn’t long before I realized I wasn’t. Try not to put pressure on people. Allow them to decide how and when.”
- “Coming into church and sitting through a service is now one of the most difficult things I do. Everyone else seems to be in family groups – like I used to be. Now my status has changed. I don’t like it and I feel so lonely. Please sit with me, hold me, let me cry; don’t expect me to worship like everybody else. Show me you love and accept me as I am now.”
- “Don’t say “what can we do to help” – there is so much. We sometimes have problems making decisions and frequently don’t like asking. Be proactive. Say: “Can I come round and...” Don’t assume that we only need help short term – keep the help coming for as long as it takes.”

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