

## When a Group Member (or Spouse) Passes Away

*What a group leader should do, and not do, in a tragic situation.*

by Rick Howerton

I was driving home after a day's work when my cell phone rang. A woman's shaky voice spoke on the other end of the line: "Pastor, I'm on my way home from work and I just got a call from my daughter. She came home from school and found her dad—she thinks he's dead." Her broken tones evolved into uncontrollable wailing.

"I'll be right there," I told her. Immediately, I called her small-group leader. He and his wife beat me to the house. Sure enough, the woman's husband was gone, with no hope for resuscitation. It was a tragedy, certainly. But astoundingly effective small-group leadership carried the day to help her and her family through that day, and is still doing so months later.

Serving as the primary caregiver to someone who has experienced a tragedy is a daunting task for any small-group leader, especially when someone has passed away. But such situations become a reality every day, and they can strike quickly. What a small-group leader does over the next few hours, days, weeks, and months will be vital to the emotional and spiritual health of everyone involved.

### **Respond Quickly**

Whether it's a group member that has passed away or a group member's spouse, the first few hours are critical. In those moments, the surviving family members are overcome by waves of varied emotions and disbelief; they find themselves in a sea of disturbing numbness and confusion.

In many instances, waves of people will begin to flow onto the family's front porch once the death becomes public knowledge. Some will truly be the deepest friends of the grieving family, while others will drop by out of a sense of urgency to do something or a desire to follow some kind of etiquette—which is probably the most insensitive thing they could choose to do. And that's after the phone begins to ring off the wall. In addition, family members will need to be contacted and the church made aware of the situation. If the deceased's body is at the home, the police and a coroner will soon be on the scene.

In the midst of this chaos, a small-group leader has an amazing opportunity for ministry.

### **The Ministry of Presence**

Upon arriving, the small-group leader needs to embrace the grieving spouse both physically and emotionally. There has been great loss—a trauma of indescribable proportions. If you are the first to arrive, stay physically close to the individual for as

long as he or she chooses. When others begin to arrive, assure the spouse that you are not leaving, and that you and the rest of the group will be with them as long as they need you to be. Don't leave the room without letting him or her know that you'll be back in just a few minutes.

Sometimes it can be tricky for a group leader to know when to leave. Honest communication is the best way to solve this puzzle. If you feel like the grieving person is ready for some space and would like you to leave, ask him or her if they would like to be alone. As family members and close friends begin to arrive, your presence may no longer be necessary. Still, be sure to ask the grieving spouse if they are okay with you leaving, and communicate that you can return if needed again.

Here are some other things to keep in mind as you carry out the ministry of presence:

- **Use wise silence.** When people don't know what to say in a tragic situation, they often resort to trite clichés. This is almost always harmful. Phrases like "He's in heaven now," "She's better off," or "We'll see him again someday" may need to be spoken eventually—but not in the early days (and maybe weeks) of the loss.
- **Assist in communicating the news.** There are multiple groups of people that will need to be made aware of the situation: The church leadership, family members, the workplace of the deceased (and the spouse), the school the children attend, close friends of the family, and the rest of your small group. Ask the spouse if you or someone in the group can assist with those phone calls.
- **Offer protection.** Every person responds differently to a loss of this nature. Some people want to be surrounded by a house full of people; others would rather not speak to anyone other than a few of their closest friends and family members. Someone may need to serve as protector, greeter, card collector, and food organizer so that the grieving spouse can have space.

## **The Ministry of Organization**

There are many tasks that will need to be completed during the first 24 hours after the death. Your small group will be the best team to help with these responsibilities.

1. **Conclude what is best for the children in the first few hours.** If necessary and agreed upon by the spouse of the deceased, help find someone to be with the kids. The youth pastor is a good option, or another group member if he or she has a strong relationship with the children of the deceased. Also, the children may choose to be someplace other than their home. If so, you may need to arrange for someone to drive them to and from the friend's home where they are most comfortable.
2. **Clean the house.** In a few hours, family and friends will probably be arriving from out of town. Assembling a team to clean the house prior to their arrival is very helpful.

3. **Get someone to do the laundry.** The entire family will need clothes to wear and the guests that will be arriving will need clean towels and washcloths.
4. **Organize meals.** Find someone in your group with the ability to organize meals for the family and have that person work with the church to arrange every meal up to the funeral. If possible, continue feeding the grieving spouse and children for another three days following the funeral.
5. **Find lodging for family members, if necessary.** It is possible that there are more family members coming to town than there is lodging at the deceased's home. If this is true, the church can prove her Christlikeness by housing family members as they come to town for a few days.
6. **Look for what is overlooked.** Back to the story at the beginning of this article—After the small group and our church had completed a massive number of tasks for the family, our Missions Pastor came to the home carrying at least 15 rolls of toilet paper. I wept. Her love was so deep and her sensitivity so authentic that she had gone through the house to see what we might have missed. She knew the family should not have to think about anything except one another.

## Moving Forward

There will continue to be needs in the weeks and months following the funeral. These may include:

1. Help with financial decisions, including teaching the remaining spouse how to take care of the family's finances;
2. Wading through insurance situations with the family;
3. Fixing things around the house, changing the oil in the car, and so on;
4. Getting the kids to and from ballgames and school events;
5. Offering childcare so the newly single person can have a social life; and
6. Whatever other needs the group can meet.

You may be thinking, *This all sounds so pragmatic*. No doubt about it, but remember Jesus' words: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

The weeks and months following the funeral will be difficult for the family, as well as for your small group. All will be grieving, yet all will be unified by their love for the deceased and one another. The group will need you to lead through grieving in a healthy fashion. Remind them of the biblical fact expressed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: "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."

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