

COMFORTING THE GRIEVING THROUGH WORSHIP

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A THESIS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF WORSHIP STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most challenging aspects of the human experience is dealing with the loss of a loved one. Although death marks the end of human life, it can affect the life of the ones closest to the deceased. Often, the griever is left in a sea of pain, which can produce doubts, isolation, and emotional conflict. Although the grieving believer may turn to the church for support in his/her time of grief, the church body may find itself unsure of how to respond best and support the needs of the bereaved. This qualitative historical study examines the literature pertaining to the grieving process and the worship ministries of the church directed toward the bereaved. While the research is narrowly focused on those who have experienced the loss of a loved one to death, it is realized that grief may be experienced as the result of other stressful life losses. Such situations might include relational breakup, job loss, divorce, loss of a loved one to addiction, loss of health, or loss of mental faculties). The findings of this study may prove applicable to those facing such situations. Collection of data from interviewees provided accounts from those dealing with loss to identify the challenges they face or faced when striving to worship and how they find or found comfort in the corporate worship setting. Data gathered throughout the interview process was analyzed to determine common emergent themes. From these themes, guiding principles were synthesized and offered to church worship leaders, their teams, and those preparing for the worship ministry as a means of equipping the body to more effectively meet the needs of fellow worshipers who experience the pain brought on by the death of a loved one.

*Keywords:* mourning, lament, bereavement, edification, worship as comfort, grief

## **DEDICATION**

In loving memory of my mother, Lorene M. Doss  
and my brother-in-law, David L. Marston  
both are worshiping our Lord in the glory of heaven.

One day we will join them in never-ending praise.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To my family, thanks for standing with me throughout this chapter of the journey. Joyce, more than anyone else in my life, you have sacrificed so that I could achieve this goal. I am blessed beyond words to have you as my wife and best friend. Jonathan and Phillip, I am excited in the days ahead to see what God does in your lives. Above this academic milestone, the title “dad” will always mean more to me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	3
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	8
Background .....	10
Statement of the Problem .....	10
Purpose of the Study .....	11
Significance of the Study .....	12
Theoretical Framework .....	14
Statement of the Research Questions .....	15
Core Concepts .....	16
Hypotheses .....	18
Research Methods .....	18
Research Plan .....	19
Definition of Terms.....	20
Assumptions .....	21
Limitations .....	28
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	30
Understanding Grief.....	30
Understanding the Effects of Grief on the Christian.....	37
The Community of Faith and Its Ministry to the Grieving .....	42
Lament in Worship.....	50
Practitioners of Worship Address Grief.....	54
Summary of the Literature .....	58
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....	59
Research Questions .....	59
Hypotheses .....	60
Research Design.....	60
Background, Beliefs and Biases of the Researcher.....	61
Research Population and Participants .....	63
Data Collection and Procedures .....	65
Procedures .....	66
Analysis of Data .....	68
Ethical Assurances .....	69
CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	71
The Pathways of Grief.....	71

The People of God.....	77
The Practices of Worship Offering Hope and Comfort .....	79
Memorial Services as Worship .....	80
Music in Worship.....	82
Message of God’s Word in Worship .....	89
The Pastoring Work of the Worship Leader to the Bereaved .....	91
Summary of the Research .....	95
CHAPTER FIVE – THE RESEARCH APPLIED .....	97
Summary .....	97
Summary of the Problem .....	98
Summary of the Literature Review .....	98
Summary of Methodology .....	101
Summary of Findings.....	102
Summary of Research Conclusions .....	105
Application .....	108
Worship Ministry That Prioritizes Relationships .....	108
Worship Ministry That Is Receptive to the Needs of Those in Grief.....	109
Worship Ministry That Responds to the Needs of Those In Grief .....	111
Worship Ministry As a Resource to the Bereaved.....	113
Worship Ministry That Reflects the Character of God.....	115
Worship Ministry That Rehearses the Gospel and Celebrates Christ’s Victory Over Death .....	117
Worship Ministry That Anticipates Reunion.....	119
Recommendations for Future Study.....	120
Conclusion.....	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	124
APPENDIX A.....	128
APPENDIX B.....	129
APPENDIX C.....	136

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Death is a topic of conversation that is often avoided.<sup>1</sup> While it is an inevitable part of every man's journey, many go about their lives, giving only occasional consideration to the subject.

According to Scripture, death is a consequence of sin. Adam's disobedience brought death into the human experience. Although "Adam lived a total of 930 years," Scripture quickly states, "and then he died."<sup>2</sup> Because of the impartation of the sin nature from Adam, death was also imparted to all his descendants. Apart from Christ's return from Heaven, "death is an appointment scheduled by God" and is on the calendar of every human being.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, one becomes intimately acquainted with death when they experience the loss of someone near to their heart. The Psalmist David referred to this as the "valley of the shadow of death" through which he walked on several occasions during his life.<sup>4</sup> Losing a loved one often casts shadows upon the soul of the grieving relative.

Though one may wonder how long the shadows will linger, the duration of the journey is uncertain on the dimly lit path. Considering the grieving process, Doka concluded, "We each have to find our own personal pathway as we deal with loss."<sup>5</sup>

While grief is a journey down a shadowed path, it is not a journey one must travel alone. This is especially true within the body of Christ. The prophet Isaiah foretold that Messiah was a

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<sup>1</sup> Atalanta Beaumont, "We Need to Talk about Death: Addressing the Grieving Process," *Psychology Today*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/handy-hints-humans/201703/we-need-talk-about-death>.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 5:5, NIV.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 9:27, NIV.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23:4, KJV.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Doka, *Grief is a Journey; Finding Your Path through Loss*, (New York, NY: Atria, 2016), 8.



“man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.”<sup>6</sup> The Savior demonstrated His compassion toward Mary and Martha as they mourned the loss of their brother, Lazarus. He identified with the pain experienced by the two sisters to the point that He wept with them.<sup>7</sup>

Today God offers comfort to the hurting through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Termed the *Parakletos* in Greek New Testament writings, the Spirit is the One sent by God the Father to console or aid the believer in times of need.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to sending the Holy Spirit, God instituted the church as a means of continuing His work on earth in the days following the ascension of His Son, Jesus Christ. In the early church, concerns arose over the care of widows within the fellowship. As a result, the office of the deacon was established to minister to the widows of the church.<sup>9</sup> In the writings of Paul, the church was commanded to extend the comfort of God’s Holy Spirit to hurting members of the congregation.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, in the writing of Paul to the church of Thessalonica, he spoke of a day of glorious hope when all believers would be united in heaven, no longer separated by death. Paul then added this statement, “Comfort one another with these words.”<sup>11</sup> From these examples, it is clear the church was intended to be a source of strength and encouragement during times of grief.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 53:3, NIV.

<sup>7</sup> John 11:35, NIV.

<sup>8</sup> Piku Pekka Tuppurainen, “The Roles of the Spirit-Paraclete in John 16:4b-15: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation,” ThD diss. University of South Africa, 2006. <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1717/thesis.pdf?sequence=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 6:1, NIV.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:4, NIV.

<sup>11</sup> I Thessalonians 4:13-18, NIV.

## Background

Church history provided some insights into its ministry to grieving families. However, much of this ministry was relegated to the season immediately following the loss of the loved one. Masses, funerals, and memorial services have long been seen as the responsibility of the church or clergy.<sup>12</sup>

History is unclear as to how the church responded to the ongoing needs of the bereaved. More recently, some churches have developed counseling and care ministries to address the needs of grieving families.<sup>13</sup> In these churches, pastoral or professional counselors may be available to meet with individuals or families for sessions. Targeted support group ministries, such as Grief Share, may be available as a resource to those walking the dark path of loss.

While focused departments provide resources to the grieving believer, the church as a whole has a responsibility to minister to the parts of the body that are hurting. For many, this can be challenging.

## Statement of the Problem

Although the grieving believer may turn to the church for support in his/her time of grief, the church body may find itself unsure of how to respond best and support the needs of the bereaved.<sup>14</sup> Because death is an uncomfortable topic, many in the church avoid the discomfort that may arise in ministry to the grieving.

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Hartley “Equipping Member of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief,” D.Min. thesis, Union University. 2018. ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis Global.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Kenyon, “Why We Fail the Grieving” *ChristianityToday.com*, April 2015. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/april-online-only/why-we-fail-grieving.html>.

According to Fowler, the body of Christ is poised to be a great agent of healing and comfort to those grieving. He wrote, “Participation in the community of faith facilitates the ongoing development of this relationship to the divine in whatever ways are needed during bereavement.”<sup>15</sup> If the church is to offer comfort and encourage healing, it must have a comprehensive strategy for providing care to the bereaved. Otherwise, it may fail its God-given directive, and the hurting may seek other means to find solace for their pain. Furthermore, “People in grief are at their most vulnerable, and we must be able to engage with and respond to them in informed, sensitive, and compassionate ways.”<sup>16</sup>

Care and counseling ministries may meet some of the needs of the hurting, but they often represent a subset of the congregation. They likely do not include the entirety of the church body in surrounding the grief-stricken and offering edification. There is a need for greater involvement in ministering to the bereaved that extends to worship leaders and team members. However, equipping worship leaders and teams to serve the bereaved is a lesser emphasized, possibly neglected, part of their ministry training. Understanding how corporate worship may positively impact the grieving process would benefit the congregation. To this point, little has been written on the subject.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To address the gap previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is to provide a useful resource to the body of Christ, to Worship Leadership, and to the Academy that will clarify

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<sup>15</sup> Gene Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament Caring for the Bereaved*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), viii.

challenges facing worshipers in the wake of losing a loved one. It also will convey how grieving worshipers find encouragement and healing as they assemble with fellow believers. By identifying what practices of liturgy are meaningful to a child of God experiencing the loss of a loved one, the study will suggest strategies for those who plan and lead in congregational worship.

Worship is central to the spiritual formation of the community of believers.<sup>17</sup> During corporate worship, the body of Christ not only offers praise to God but also edifies one another. Leaders and congregants should encourage one another along the journey of life. Whether the path is fully illuminated or shadowy, brothers and sisters in Christ should never have to travel alone.

The findings obtained through a study of the literature and original research are offered to inform church leaders and congregants of the perceived needs of the bereaved and suggest ways those involved in the planning of corporate liturgy can do so in ways that are meaningful to the bereaved.

### **Significance of the Study**

Ministry to those who grieve the loss of a close family member is one way the body of Christ follows the example of Christ, extends His hope and healing to those in need, and fulfills the Great Commandment to “love one’s neighbor.”<sup>18</sup> This is only second in priority to the worshipers’ love for God. Demonstrating compassion toward others in times of need is an act of worship, the church must not ignore.

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<sup>17</sup> Wilson Teo, “Christian Spiritual Formation,” *Emerging Leadership Journeys* (2017), Vol. 10, Iss. 1; 138-150, <https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/elj/vol10iss1/7ELJ-Teo.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 22:39, NIV.

Ministry to those in grief can be demanding and complicated, especially when it takes into account that, “The loss of a loved one is the total disruption of the life they knew; in a sense, they have now been forced to start over.”<sup>19</sup> To best meet the needs of the bereaved, the church must possess an awareness of these “life disruptions” and how they touch their brothers or sisters.

Raising awareness is, however, only the first step in ministry. When the unique needs of the grieving are brought to the forefront, and the church understands how the worship of fellow members of the body may be overshadowed by grief, it must be prepared to respond. Unlike any other activity of the church, corporate worship is poised as an agent that allows the entire body of gathered believers to unite in one voice to offer hope and encouragement at what may be the lowest point in the life of their hurting brothers and sisters. “Through the sharing of mutually meaningful symbols, hymns, prayers, and liturgies, a congregation experiences a drawn-togetherness which helps to overcome the shadow of loneliness which haunts sensitive people in our society.”<sup>20</sup>

By hearing the stories of those who have traveled the shadowed path, church leaders are better qualified to prepare corporate worship that addresses the needs of the grieving.

Seeking the perspectives of those who are in various places along the journey of grief may be beneficial to their healing. Giving voice to their experiences communicates that the body of Christ cares about their needs and desires to walk beside them. As church leaders shape worship that creates space for lament and offers times of spiritual edification through a variety of

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<sup>19</sup> H. Norman Wright, *Helping Those in Grief: A Guide to Help You Care for Others*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2011), 68.

<sup>20</sup> Howard J. Clinebell, Jr. “The Mental Health Ministry of the Local Church,” Religion Online, <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-3-the-worship-service-and-mental-health/>.

means, the grieving worshiper may engage to a greater extent with the body of Christ, experience God's presence and power, and find hope and healing.

Not only does this study benefit church leaders, congregants, and members of the body who have experienced the loss of a loved one, it can also aid the Academy. Those preparing to enter into vocational or bi-vocational worship ministry will likely face the challenge of providing counsel or care to someone within their congregation who has encountered a loss. If not, there will undoubtedly be worshipers within the assembly of believers who are, to some degree, grieving.<sup>21</sup> To adequately minister to those needs, the aspiring worship leader must be familiar with the topic of study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When considering the subject of death and dying, the most widely known framework is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's "Stages of Grief."<sup>22</sup> She posited that those facing death passed through five sequential stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Years later, with the assistance of David Kessler, Kubler-Ross's study was expanded and maintained that in grief, the five steps identified by Kubler-Ross were unlikely to be experienced sequentially. Instead, the grieving process was seen as unique to each individual.<sup>23</sup>

Since then, other researchers have developed models somewhat metaphoric in nature. For example, Doka refers to the grieving process as a journey.<sup>24</sup> Kelley's model compares grief to a

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<sup>21</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, vii.

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, & Their Own Families*, (New York, NY: Scribner, 1969), Kindle.

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning Through the Five Stages of Loss*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2005), 203.

<sup>24</sup> Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 1.

mosaic where no two experiences are the same. A person's past forms the experiences, relationships, ways of making meaning, perspective toward the Divine, history of losses, sense of community, cultural aspects, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

Kelley's mosaic framework aligns well with a biblical worldview and parallels the scope of this study, most notably the "experience of the Divine" and "sense of community." Both can be applied to corporate worship. The church gathers to exalt the Lord and to edify the believer. As the body meets to worship, it not only "speaks to one another" but also "makes music unto the Lord."<sup>26</sup>

### **Statement of the Research Questions**

Because the body of Christ is called to be an agent of comfort for those who have lost loved ones, the research will seek to answer the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways does the loss of a loved one affect the worship life of the believer?

Research Question 1 is pertinent to the study in terms of empathy. A congregation must learn to understand the hurts, emotions, and thoughts experienced by the grieving to better offer comfort.

**Research Question 2:** In what ways can corporate worship encourage healing in the life of the believer grieving the loss of a loved one?

Research Question 2 is pertinent to the study in terms of application. At some point, every church congregant will come face to face with grief resulting from the loss of a loved one.

Worship that includes addressing death and bereavement prepares worshipers for a time when

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<sup>25</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ephesians 5:19, NIV.

they encounter loss. As practices of liturgy are identified as meaningful by those who have experienced loss, worship leaders and pastors gain much-needed insight that can guide the planning of corporate worship in ways that promote wholeness and healing in the life of the grieving believer.

A Qualitative Historical methodology will be used to provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of the grieving believer and to guide approaches for ministry to the grieving through worship.

### **Core Concepts**

When the loss of a loved one occurs, those left behind enter a “grief process,” that according to Kelley, includes coping with loss and continuity of relationship with the deceased.<sup>27</sup> In earlier studies conducted by Kubler-Ross, the grieving process was considered to occur in progressive stages over some time. More recent research indicates that the stage approach may cause “unrealistic expectations of what grief is supposed to be like” and suggests the process is more fluid and unique to each individual.<sup>28</sup>

As the church considers how it can best meet the unique needs of the bereaved, a viable means of ministry can be extended through counseling and support groups.<sup>29</sup> These ministries are often referred to as “care ministries.” Those who participate in these ministries find comfort, according to Shelton, because they, “(1) Worship with others who experience the dynamics of grief and/or are in the process of mourning, (2) express ongoing emotions of grief and reflect

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<sup>27</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Frances T. Shelton, “Blessed are Those Who Mourn: Offering Comfort through Worship and Theological Reflection.” D. Min. thesis, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. 2007. DOI # 10.2986/tren.075.075-0088.



with others (not family members) who are in the process of mourning in a safe, non-judgmental setting, and (3) have personal grief validated without regard to the months/years since experiencing the death of a loved one.”<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the care ministries of the church, the worship ministries may offer comfort and healing to those who have experienced loss. As the church gathers weekly for a prescribed timeframe, its practice is dedicated to “corporate worship.” While the expressions and components of worship likely vary between churches, commonalities may include prayer, the proclamation of God’s Word, music, drama, video, and observance of the Lord’s Table.<sup>31</sup> While the primary purpose of corporate worship is to exalt the Lord, there is a secondary purpose of worship; it edifies those who participate.<sup>32</sup>

“Lament” may serve as a way to address the pain experienced by those who grieve. One way in which the worship community can minister is by including lament as a part of its liturgical practice. Throughout church history, lament has found a place in worship liturgy. However, over time, the inclusion of lament in congregational worship has diminished. Examples of lament are scattered throughout the Psalms and apply to a broad range of painful experiences. In support of the practice of lament in worship, as demonstrated in the Psalms, Fowler noted, “They [the Psalms] speak profoundly to bereavement.”<sup>33</sup> By addressing complaint to God, confessing trust in God, petitioning God, speaking words of assurance in God, and

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Ligon Duncan, “Traditional Evangelical Worship,” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 105-109.

<sup>32</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *The Pastor’s Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 32.

<sup>33</sup> Gene Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament*, 40-43.

offering thanksgiving to God in advance of healing, biblical lament provides express to the grieving.

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses to the research questions are:

**Hypothesis 1:** The loss of a loved one can affect the worship life of the believer in terms of doubt, isolation, and emotional conflict.

**Hypothesis 2:** Corporate worship can encourage healing in the life of the grieving believer in terms of theological reinforcement, the human need to lament, and fellowship.

### **Research Methods**

A qualitative historical approach to the research was employed to identify ways the body of Christ and, more specifically, worship ministry leaders can adequately care for the needs of the grieving believer through corporate worship. A qualitative approach of research was selected for this study because it seeks to establish the meaning from a participant's perspective.<sup>34</sup> A historical approach to the research methodology best suited the study because it "examined events of the past to understand the present and anticipated potential future effects."<sup>35</sup>

The study sought to address the challenges facing church congregants as they strive to serve as agents of comfort and encouragement to those among them who are traveling through the dark valley of grief and loss. Drawing from the experiences of those who have lost loved ones, the findings were used to offer strategies for worship ministry to the bereaved and to

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<sup>34</sup> John W. and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 16.

<sup>35</sup> "Qualitative Research Designs," *University of Missouri, St. Louis*, <http://www.umsl.edu/~lindquists/qualdsgn.html>.

promote the design of worship services that remind participants of God's faithfulness, goodness, sovereignty, and healing.

The study sample consisted of those who have experienced the loss of a loved one (i.e., spouse, child, parent, sibling, or close friend). After following all protocols, a sample set of 20 individuals from four church congregations were interviewed. The sample was composed of voluntary adult participants who were involved to some degree in the worship of a local community of believers.

### **Research Plan**

To address the previously mentioned research questions, existing literature of long-held and more recent theories of grief, support group and care ministries within the church, and the effect of the arts upon the bereaved were examined.

To provide a resource to help fill a gap in the literature and prescribe worship ministry approaches targeted toward the bereaved, original research consisted of interviews with adults who have experienced the loss of a loved one (spouse, child, parent, sibling, or close friend). Before conducting interviews, application was made to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon obtaining approval, recruitment of the sample group commenced, and necessary informed consent forms were obtained.

Participants were asked a series of interview questions related but not limited to: (1) Circumstances surrounding the interviewee's loss, (2) level of involvement/engagement in worship before their loss, (3) level of involvement/engagement in worship since their loss, (4) where they have found comfort through worship, (5) what components of the worship service have brought support and encouragement to them in times of grief, and (6) what advice they would offer to worship leaders who desire to encourage those in the congregation who grieve the

loss of a loved one. Answers to these questions assisted in identifying a “picture of the problem.”<sup>36</sup> Information relayed during interviews was recorded and transcribed. Per protocols, all documentation was stored in a secure location, and the identity of respondents is anonymous. Following the interviews, data was analyzed by a thorough review of transcripts.

Upon completion of the data gathering phase, information was processed according to the sequential steps offered by Creswell, including preparation, analysis, coding, and identification of themes.<sup>37</sup> From this study, strategies are offered for implementation in worship ministry that can assist the congregation in providing hope and comfort to the bereaved. A comprehensive account of research methodology is presented in Chapter Three of this thesis.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined to assist the reader in comprehending meaning and context as it pertains to this study.

**Bereavement:** The state of loss when someone close to an individual has died<sup>38</sup>

**Corporate Worship:** Also called public worship, it is the activity of worship as carried out by an assembly of God’s people and is an activity of particular response to the proclamation of God’s Lordship<sup>39</sup>

**Grief:** One’s response to a substantial loss, may be prolonged and severe<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 183

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-198.

<sup>38</sup> “Bereavement,” *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/bereavement>.

<sup>39</sup> E. Bennet Robinson, “How Shall We Worship? Applying the Regulative Principle,” *WRS Journal*, 7/1 (February 2000), 24-35, [http://www.wrs.edu/Materials\\_for\\_Web\\_Site/Journals/7-1%20Feb-2000/Robinson%20-%20Regulative%20Principle.pdf](http://www.wrs.edu/Materials_for_Web_Site/Journals/7-1%20Feb-2000/Robinson%20-%20Regulative%20Principle.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Kelly, *Grief*, 8.

Lament: A bold, profoundly and intensely felt expression of grief, the kind that may extend to weeping and wailing<sup>41</sup>

Liturgy: The vehicle by which the public worship of God is performed, communal ritual response to the sacred through activity reflecting praise, thanksgiving, supplication, or repentance<sup>42</sup>

Mourning: Largely synonymous with grief, “the societal expression of post bereavement behavior and practices.”<sup>43</sup>

Worship Leadership: Those who “skillfully combine biblical truth with music to magnify the redemptive works of Jesus Christ thereby motivating the gathered church to join him in proclaiming and cherishing the truth about God and seeking to live all of life for the glory of God.”<sup>44</sup>

Worship Community: Described in Acts 2, the worship community is committed to (1) apostolic teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) breaking of bread (the Lord’s Table), and (4) prayer.<sup>45</sup>

### **Assumptions**

The research and findings presented in this study are based on several assumptions. First to the research is the conviction that the Bible is the principal metric for the assessment of that

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<sup>41</sup> Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Introduction to Christian Liturgy*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin J. Sadock, Virginia A. Sadock, and Pedro Ruiz, *Kaplan and Sadock’s Synopsis of Psychiatry*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., (Philadelphia, PA: Wolters Kluwer, 2015), 1354.

<sup>44</sup> Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 51.

<sup>45</sup> Acts 2:47, NIV.

which is true. It is the belief of the author that God's Word is His revelation and is impeccable, infallible, and enduring throughout all time.

Because God's Word is reliable, it is understood that He is the creator of all things living, including humankind. "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."<sup>46</sup> Humanity was created to enjoy intimacy with God through worship. Adam chose to disobey God's command when he partook of the forbidden fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. The disobedient actions of Adam introduced sin into God's perfect creation and created a spiritual separation between the Holy Creator and His fallen creation. Man's worship of God was obstructed. Not only did Adam's sin bring separation, or spiritual death, it resulted in physical death that was passed to every person in Adam's race.<sup>47</sup>

God, in His great mercy, longed to restore the severed relationship with humanity. Therefore, He made a way in the Old Testament for His children to worship through the offering of blood sacrifices as atonement for sin. God also designated the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, as the locations of worship and instituted a system of priests to facilitate worship on behalf of God's people.

The Old Testament also speaks of God's plan to redeem man from the curse of physical death and His promise of eternal life in Heaven. Williamson noted that there are nearly 420 references to Heaven in the Old Testament writings. Of those references, about 25% refers to a "transcendent or heavenly realm."<sup>48</sup> One such example is David's Psalm 16:8-11, where we read:

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<sup>46</sup> Genesis 2:17, NIV.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 5:12, NIV.

<sup>48</sup> Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018). Chapter 6, Kindle.

I keep my eyes always on the LORD.  
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;  
my body also will rest secure,  
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,  
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.  
You make known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

The Old Testament prophets address Heaven as well and speak of it as the place God is preparing for those who follow Him. In Isaiah 65-66, the prophet speaks of the coming kingdom of God. “It appears not as a heavenly scenario set in the wild blue yonder, but as an extraordinary earthly scenario, in which sadness and frustration, loss and misfortune, animosity and conflict have all been eradicated, and people live truly satisfying lives.”<sup>49</sup> Such a glorious future is not promised to all humanity. Isaiah was careful to note that those who reject God will ultimately stand in judgment and not be a part of God’s eternal kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

Not only did the Old Testament prophets speak of Heaven, but they also foretold of Messiah who would suffer death (Isaiah 53), serve as the ultimate atonement for man’s sin for all time, and replace the Old Testament pattern of worship by giving believers direct access to God. Elsewhere throughout the Old Testament, Christ’s glorious resurrection and victory over death are foreshadowed (Genesis 3:15, Job 19:25, Hosea 6:2).

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God’s plan for redemption and serves as the ultimate sacrificial “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>51</sup> God sent

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Isaiah 65:13-16, NIV.

<sup>51</sup> John 1:29, NIV.

His Son, Jesus, to earth, fully God, yet fully man. Jesus lived on earth and pointed humankind to the Father. Throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke of His mission that included his death, burial, and resurrection. Each was part of the Father's redemptive plan, making eternal life possible. The Gospel of Matthew recorded, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."<sup>52</sup>

Jesus also prepared his followers for his impending death by offering comfort through the promise of a life to come where all would live forever in a home God was preparing. In John's Gospel are the Savior's words of comfort, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."<sup>53</sup>

As Old Testament prophets foretold, Jesus' message of salvation was rejected, and He was executed on the cross of Calvary. His sacrificial death ushered in a new way of worship. Law was replaced by grace. "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds... Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary."<sup>54</sup>

Though Jesus suffered an excruciating death and gave His life as the ultimate sacrifice for sin, the story did not end there. The Savior's bleeding body was placed within a borrowed

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<sup>52</sup> Matthew 16:21, NIV.

<sup>53</sup> John 14:2-3, NIV.

<sup>54</sup> Hebrews 10:16-17, NIV.



tomb. Three days later, Christ arose, conquering death, hell, and the grave. His resurrection gives the promise of life eternal for those who place their saving faith in His work.<sup>55</sup>

God's gift of eternal life was a recurring theme in the writings of Paul. In his letter to the church of Rome, he indicated sin brought death, but the gift of eternal life was made possible "through Jesus Christ, our Lord."<sup>56</sup> In his treatise to the Corinthian church, he defended the validity of Christ's resurrection and its connection with a future day in which those in Christ would be raised from the dead. "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'"<sup>57</sup> In a follow-up letter to the church of Corinth, Paul spoke of an eternal home in heaven "not made by human hands."<sup>58</sup>

Paul struggled with the tension of living in the present life but longing for the one to come. In his letter to the Philippians, he stated, "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."<sup>59</sup>

The Apostle Peter spoke of eternal life as a hope for all who believe in Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,<sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in

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<sup>55</sup> John 3:16, NIV.

<sup>56</sup> Romans 6:23, NIV.

<sup>57</sup> I Corinthians 15:54-55, NIV.

<sup>58</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:1, NIV.

<sup>59</sup> Philippians 1:23-24, NIV.

heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.<sup>60</sup>

Based on the Old Testament and New Testament teachings, salvation and eternal life are made possible through the work of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. His completed work secures a home in Heaven for all who place their saving faith in the truth of the gospel.

It is of importance to note there are those, such as children, whose capacity to grasp spiritual matters have not fully developed. There seems to be biblical support that offers hope of life in heaven for such persons.

In the Old Testament, King David mourned the loss of his infant son. Yet, after David pleads with God to heal his son, the child passed. Though saddened by the loss, David declared his belief that he will one day be reunited with his son. "But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."<sup>61</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus often welcomed little children into His presence (Mark 10) and indicated child-like faith was an essential heart attitude for salvation.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."<sup>62</sup>

A final theological assumption is that there is a coming day when death will be replaced by never-ending life in the presence of God. It was the Apostle John, who was given a glimpse by God of what is yet to come. The vision included "new heaven and a new earth," where "He

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<sup>60</sup> I Peter 1:3-5, NIV.

<sup>61</sup> 2 Samuel 12:23, NIV.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 18:1-5, NIV.

[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”<sup>63</sup>

This hope of future things is what the church has been called to declare. By making God’s truths concerning death’s inability to separate man from God’s love, comfort can be extended to believers who have lost loved ones. James indicated the way the church ministers to widows and orphans has much to say about the authenticity of its worship.<sup>64</sup> One of the first ministries established by the New Testament church, in Acts 6, was the assigning of deacons to provide for the needs of widows in the congregation.

In addition to the aforementioned theological assumptions, it is assumed that those participating in the research are both believers in Christ and are connected to a community of believers that practice Christian worship, as demonstrated by the New Testament church. It is further assumed that the church is called to be the hands and feet of Christ and minister comfort to those in the body who have lost loved ones, and includes the worship ministry.

The final assumption is that the church does not operate in its power to minister comfort. Rather, worship that effectively ministers in times of grief is spirit-led worship. The Holy Spirit is synonymous with comfort.<sup>65</sup> Apart from the Spirit, there is no true worship.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Revelation 21:1, 4, NIV.

<sup>64</sup> James 1:27-28, NIV.

<sup>65</sup> John 14:16, NIV.

<sup>66</sup> John 4:24, NIV.

## **Limitations**

Several constraints limit this study pertaining to worship and its impact upon the grieving believer. A believer is one who professes faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The non-believer and their experiences with loss have not been included in this study.

Field research has been limited to churches in the geographic region closest to the ministry context of the researcher. Churches in this area typically have smaller congregations and are somewhat insulated from more contemporary ministry models. Some congregations may not possess a full understanding of biblical foundations for worship and be resistant to newer practices of worship.

The decision to work with groups in proximity to the researcher was also in part due to time constraints. The demands of full-time employment and part-time church staff responsibilities while conducting research translated into the selection of sites that would allow the best management of time resources.

Not all churches who participated in this study were acquainted with the researcher before focus group interviews. In settings where there was unfamiliarity between churches and the researcher, there was a reliance upon connections between the researcher's senior pastor and pastors of those churches.

The age of the participants in this study was also limited. Though open to anyone above age 18, most involved in focus group meetings ranged from age 50-80.

Despite the limitations, in the pages that follow the research presented focuses on a study of literature documenting pertinent research related to theories grief and ministry to those who grieve. It also reveals gaps in the research. A research plan to address such gaps is described that seeks to answer the questions raised earlier in this chapter. Following the discussion of

methodology, Chapter Four divulges the findings of field research. The final chapter suggests applications that may prove beneficial to the church wishing to better minister comfort through worship to those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Understanding Grief

Much has been written on the subject of grief and the grieving process. One of the most widely recognized models of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's "stages of grief" theory established in her work, *On Death and Dying*. The impetus for her research was to provide medical caregivers a means to assist terminally ill patients to process the sensitive subject of impending death. According to Kubler-Ross, those with an awareness that they are in their final stages of life manifest a progression of characteristics. Initially, when the patient receives word of their terminal condition, the typical reaction is denial.<sup>67</sup> The patient may dismiss the diagnosis as erroneous or display optimism, believing there is a cure for their condition. However, once the dying person comes to terms with the reality of their situation, a period of anger often follows.<sup>68</sup> Such outbursts in patients are produced by the realization they are not able to control their unfavorable circumstances.

At some point, according to Kubler-Ross, anger gives way to "bargaining." The patient seeks to broker a deal with God or their doctors in hopes of extending their life long enough to take care of unfinished business.<sup>69</sup> When their attempts at negotiations do not go as the patient had once hoped, depression manifests itself.<sup>70</sup> When the terminally ill come to terms with their

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<sup>67</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors Nurses, Clergy, & Their Own Families*, (New York, NY: Scribner, 1969), 51, Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

mortality and accept their condition, it is then that the progression through the various stages is complete.<sup>71</sup>

Though the model introduced by Kubler-Ross is best categorized as a work of the emotions and psyche, in her interviews with dying patients, there are themes of faith in a higher power. In some instances, patients who expressed faith in God demonstrated an enhanced capacity to cope throughout the stages of grief.<sup>72</sup>

Later, Kubler-Ross's "stages" framework was extended beyond the internal feelings of an individual aware of impending death to include the families who experienced the loss of loved ones. Along with her colleague, David Kessler, the two sought to reframe Kubler-Ross's original treatise and recast it as a fluid process rather than a rigid progression from stage to stage. In their collaboration, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, they wrote, "People often think of the stages as lasting weeks or months. They forget that the stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes or hours as we flip in and out of one and then another. We do not enter and leave each stage in a linear fashion. We may feel one, then another, and back again to the first one."<sup>73</sup> Denial is seen as a means of protecting the psyche and serves to help pace what can be overwhelming grief. In essence, denial is reframed, heroically defending the grief-stricken while they work through their sadness. The amount of denial is proportionate to the degree of healing. Over time, as the individual works through their loss and adjusts to their reality, the level of denial decreases.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, (New York, NY: Scribner, 2005), 18,

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

Anger, too, may have value in overcoming grief. Anger may be directed toward the departed, self, circumstances, or God. The authors maintain the power of anger dissipates when it is acknowledged and dealt with emotionally.<sup>75</sup> Bargaining or rehearsing the “what-if” scenarios of a loss may be a part of the grief process. Over time, regardless of the attempted negotiations, the mind “inevitably comes to the same conclusion...the tragic reality is that our loved one is truly gone.”<sup>76</sup>

In the wake of such loss, dark valleys and shadows of depression often plague the bereaved. Those seeking to provide care may wish to shield the hurting from a depressed state. However, this is not always in the best interest of the mourner. Kubler-Ross and Kessler advise, “A mourner must be allowed to experience his sorrow, and he will be grateful for those who can sit with him without telling him not to be sad.”<sup>77</sup>

When the grief-stricken are given time to process their pain on their terms and pathways, many arrive at a point where they accept the reality of their circumstances. While they can never replace what was lost, they can develop new “connections, relationships, and dependencies.”<sup>78</sup>

The expansion of Kubler-Ross’s original framework, along with Kessler’s insight, provides a reference for the grieving in terms of internal and external manifestations of grief. They conclude, “those who grieve well, live well,” and “grief is the healing process of the heart, soul, and mind.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.



Some contemporary grief theorists, such as Kenneth Doka, have challenged the stage theory construct of Kubler-Ross and Kessler. He wrote, “To try to fit your reactions to your loss into five stages disenfranchises your reactions, creating confusion and more pain. Grief does not follow a predictable set of stages.”<sup>80</sup>

As a psychologist and hospice chaplain, Doka observed that while patterns may emerge among the grieving, grief is very individualized and involves a wide range of emotions that can be experienced simultaneously or one at a time, depending on the person. Also, the grieving process should not be restricted to a predetermined amount of time. Some grieve for long periods, while others seem to move quickly through their pain. In Doka’s book, *Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path through Loss*, he contends that grief, “is not an illness from which we recover or an event on the way to a destination. Rather, grief involves a lifelong journey, and no single act or even a combination of actions changes that.”<sup>81</sup> Hence, the idea of closure can never be achieved.

Rather than following a sequential progression through grief, Doka’s theoretical framework consists of “tasks” associated with grief that can occur at any point along the path of the bereaved. There is only one prescribed task that serves as a starting point for processing an individual’s grief. Acknowledgment is the first task along the journey. One must initially admit they have experienced a loss. After the confirmation, a person is released to take on any of the “tasks” of grief they choose. No matter the timing, those who grieve well learn to cope with the pain of loss by identifying their feelings, owning their emotional actions, and exploring those

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<sup>80</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 11.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

emotions.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, those who have experienced the loss of a loved one soon discover there are large and small adjustments, affecting many facets of life, to be made.

Another task of grief involves “deciding how you will live and honor your memories of and associations with [the] person.”<sup>83</sup> Though there may be a physical separation, symbolic attachments likely remain after a loss. Photos, favorite songs, and belongings of the deceased are reminders of loss for those left behind.

Ensuring the stability of faith during a crisis is essential but challenging. Grief can challenge the Christian with the questions, “What do I believe now...How does my faith or philosophy speak to me in my grief?”<sup>84</sup> According to Doka, one’s philosophy, beliefs, and rituals can be a system of support in times of grief and loss.

The tasks of grief provide a possible theoretical framework for those who agree that stage theory does not provide flexibility and that a “one size fits all” approach may not be best when addressing the needs of those who mourn loved ones who have passed away.

Doka’s departure from the Kubler-Ross’s stage theory model does not diminish the impression that it left upon the study of death, grief, and bereavement. Melissa Kelley reiterated the significance of Kubler-Ross when she wrote, “It is no exaggeration to say that Kubler-Ross’s stage paradigm of death has taken on a life of its own and has become deeply embedded not only in the field of thanatology<sup>85</sup> but in culture more broadly.”<sup>86</sup> However ingrained, Kelley noted

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>85</sup> Thanatology is the scientific study of death.

<sup>86</sup> Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief*, 46.

(along with more recent observers of grief stage theory) that Kubler-Ross's study was limited to a narrow demographic and did not take into consideration the nuances of other cultures.<sup>87</sup>

In her book, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Kelley unpacked a more contemporary model of grief when she compared it to a mosaic that is unique to every person. Individual pain is a composite of a range of factors that include, "one's history of losses, one's relationships, one's ways of making meaning, one's experience of the Divine, one's religious resources, one's sense of community, and one's culture."<sup>88</sup>

Kelley laid a foundation for her "mosaic theory" by observing the way an individual shapes relationships has an impact on the way they experience grief.<sup>89</sup> These are also known as "attachment relationships," a concept that is rooted in the "attachment theory" of British psychoanalyst, John Bowlby. Derived from a study of children who were separated from their parents, Bowlby's theory identified three phases that children exhibited: protest, despair, and detachment. He further postulated, when one experiences separation, they will demonstrate the same behaviors seen in the children that he studied, regardless of age.<sup>90</sup> In later studies conducted by Bowlby and his colleague, Mary Ainsworth, they determined that secure (positive) attachments were developed when the child sensed a parent was available, accessible, and responsive to their needs.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, when these characteristics were not present in the parental figure, children became more withdrawn and exhibited a range of insecurities.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

A few decades later, theologians applied Bowlby's theory when they described a relationship with God as the ultimate secure attachment. Kelley brought attention to this concept by noting pastoral psychologist, Phillip Bennett, who wrote, "The secure base of God's love will not take away our losses, but it can help us discover an abiding Presence that sustains us even in the midst of things that are passing away. In letting ourselves be loved by God, we form an attachment to the only One who cannot leave us."<sup>92</sup>

Among other concepts outlined in Kelley's work, consideration is given to the topic of meaning and its role in the grieving process. Meaning is described in this context as seeking order, sense, and purpose in one's experiences. At times this takes the shape of personal narrative. "Our meaning system—both the meaning we learn and the meaning we create—is embedded through our stories."<sup>93</sup>

When there is an interruption of one's story, such as those caused by the death of a loved one, the grief-stricken are saddled with stress. It is during such times of duress that the grieving may turn to "religious coping" by clinging to their Christian belief systems, engaging in religious practices, and connecting to their faith community for support.<sup>94</sup>

Though Kelley's contemporary theory of grief only briefly mentions the practice of corporate worship and demonstrates minimal connections to its impact on the grieving believer, the theory provides a strong foundation for study as it emphasizes attachment to the unshakable

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<sup>92</sup> Phillip Bennett, *Let Yourself be Loved*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1997), 59.

<sup>93</sup> Melissa Kelley, *Grief*, 80.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-111.

Foundation.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the core tenets of this theory provide a suitable and applicable framework for the research that is to follow.

### **Understanding the Effects of Grief on the Christian**

Whether it is a parent, child, sibling, spouse, or a close friend, all people will likely experience the loss of a loved one during the span of one's lifetime. Such loss may produce mourning and grieving for those close to the deceased. There are instances where loss is unexpected and sudden, while others are anticipated. Either way, loss produces pain.

There is a significant amount of narrative literature providing insight into the world of the grieving. C.S. Lewis experienced the loss of his wife after being married only a few years. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, he bears witness to his sadness and great pain stemming from the passing of his wife. So much so that he wrote, "I not only live each day in grief but live each day thinking about living each day in grief."<sup>96</sup>

Similar to the Old Testament patriarch, Job, Lewis respectfully challenged God and sought to reconcile the love and sovereignty of God with human loss. He raised questions about how long his lament would continue and asked, "Does grief finally subside into boredom tinged by faint nausea?"<sup>97</sup>

The struggle described by Lewis is one that challenges the faith of those who find themselves secure and is not fully understood until it is experienced on a personal level.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the ongoing pain of loss was compared to an amputee's loss of a limb. While one

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<sup>95</sup> I Corinthians 3:11-13, NIV.

<sup>96</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), 10.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

might recuperate, “getting over the loss” is not as likely. As the author aptly noted, “He will always be a one-legged man.”<sup>99</sup> Later Lewis returned to his metaphor and lamented, “I was wrong to say the stump was recovering from the pain of the amputation. I was deceived because it has so many ways to hurt me that I discover them only one by one.”<sup>100</sup>

Any resolution experienced by the author in this book did not come through God providing answers to the questions that were raised. Instead, Lewis pointed to the coming day when, “Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think, by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there was never any problem.”<sup>101</sup>

The questions and struggles articulated by Lewis are not unique to his situation. Others who have lost loved ones relate to the tumultuous seas of pain, sadness, and doubt brought on by loss. In *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, Jerry Sittser articulated his journey through the dark shadows of death in the aftermath of a tragic car accident that claimed the life of his wife, daughter, and mother. In the wake, Sittser told about how he and his three remaining children, all of whom were in the accident, were forced to face a new reality and deal with their multiple losses. According to Sittser, it is the response to loss, not the loss itself that stands as a defining moment. He wrote, “It’s not what happens *to* us that matters as much as what happens *in* us.”<sup>102</sup> In subsequent pages, the author transparently shared his own experiences of dealing with ongoing questions, anger, and pain. Though not easy, he maintained, “Sorrow is

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>102</sup> Gerald L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 44.

good for the soul... It enlarges the soul until the soul is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world's pain and hoping for the world's healing at the same time.<sup>103</sup>

Rather than offering a prescription for moving beyond pain and finding healing, the author reiterated that the only healthy option available to an individual processing loss is to move forward into a future that includes the pain of the past. Furthermore, "Loss provides an opportunity to take inventory of our lives, to reconsider priorities, and to determine new directions."<sup>104</sup>

Another outcome of loss is it removes the opportunity for false security and places those who grieve in a crisis position that potentially causes them to acknowledge their need for God. When one reaches this point, they can agree with the author, who stated, "My life is full of bounty, even as I continue to feel the pain of loss. Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful. I have slowly learned where God belongs and have allowed him to assume that place—at the center of life rather than at the periphery."<sup>105</sup>

Though much of Sittser's book relies upon his personal experiences to draw implications and offer help to those mourning the loss of a loved one, he discusses the benefit of a community of believers when going through the challenging waters of loss. Based upon his experience, he concluded there is a benefit to all who engage in ministry to those who grieve. Those who enter into the ministry of offering comfort find themselves transformed by loss. "Comforters must be

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 76,

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

prepared to let the pain of another become their own and so let it transform them.”<sup>106</sup> Sittser’s experience demonstrates when a family experiences loss; in this case, through a catastrophic death, the surviving family is forever changed. It is the individual’s response to loss that will determine whether that change is positive or not.

Merton and Irene Strommen provide substantive insight into the grieving process and lessons they learned through the passing of a son. Their journey through the valley of the shadow of death is chronicled in their book, *The Five Cries of Grief*.

The Strommens were a devout Christian family committed to ministry. The father (Merton), a Christian counselor, pastor, and educator, and mother (Irene), involved in the ministries of the church, had five sons who were either serving in or preparing for ministry. The youngest son, David, was spending a summer as a counselor at a Christian camp. While out running, he was struck by lightning. Despite the efforts of first responders and hospital staff, David could not be revived and slipped into eternity.

Much of the authors’ insights recounted the challenges and struggles they and David’s siblings encountered as they processed their grief. They described their journey as a series of cries. The initial cry of pain resulted from the realization of their profound loss. In reflection, the author noted, “Pain is the price we pay for being alive. Vulnerability to death is one of the conditions of life.”<sup>107</sup> In this case, losing their son also meant missing a part of themselves.

A follow up to the cry of pain is the cry of longing. While the deceased is no longer present, there is a longing to keep some part of the departed alive. Often longing produces

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>107</sup> Merton P. and A. Irene Strommen, *The Five Cries of Grief: One Family’s Journey to Healing after the Tragic Death of a Son*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1996), chapter 1, Kindle.



loneliness. Strommen (Irene) indicated that Worship and Music became a source of comfort to her in times of loneliness. It was in times of worship that she found communion with memories of her son participating in various aspects of church worship as a child and young man. For her, worship also causes a “divine longing for a reality beyond the life that I now know.”<sup>108</sup>

There is also a cry for supportive love that flows from a family’s need to be figuratively held by brothers and sisters of the faith community during the early days of loss. In times like these, the church can minister and uplift the grieving by helping with everyday tasks, sending cards, and encouraging conversation about the deceased.<sup>109</sup>

The cries of understanding and significance involve wrestling with the question of “why?” and coming to terms with the loss, emerging from the struggle of faith with a desire to see something of value emerge from loss.<sup>110</sup> In the instance of the Stommen’s loss, they used it as an opportunity to invest their lives in causes that aligned with the goals of their son. By doing so, they perpetuated the training of future youth ministry leaders.

The authors are careful to note that it is unlikely ever to reach a point where grief has been erased. “Our experiences resemble that of a friend who spoke of grief as a minor chord that throughout one’s life will interpenetrate the jubilant major chords of life, giving greater depth to one’s love and appreciation of family and friends.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 2, Kindle.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 3, Kindle.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 4, Kindle.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 5, Kindle.

## The Community of Faith and Its Ministry to the Grieving

In many instances, the funeral or memorial service of the departed involves professional clergy. Whether the service takes place in a funeral home or a local church setting, families turn to a respected pastor to lead the time of remembrance. In his book, *Caring through the Funeral*, Gene Fowler noted, “Those in pastoral ministry are on the front lines dealing with funerals.”<sup>112</sup> Church leaders have a unique opportunity to minister comfort and care to the bereaved during a critical point of their journey through grief. To be better equipped to meet the needs of those who mourn, Fowler expanded his discussion beyond the single matter of the funeral to provide insights pertinent to providing ongoing care to those who grieve. After giving a clear definition of terms related to bereavement, the author moved into matters of relevant ministry to the earliest moments of grieving (when death is made known to family and loved ones) and continued to describe the pastor’s role in the days leading up to the funeral. Recommendations about the planning of the funeral were also outlined with deference to a variety of denominational traditions.

Through this discussion, Fowler reiterated that the clergy provides pastoral care. He inextricably draws a connection between care and the funeral when he wrote, “The funeral rite (or rites) of passage provides the primary means of caring for the bereaved during the first phase of grief because caring in this instance involves facilitating the very mourning that occurs through funerals.”<sup>113</sup> Beyond mourning, the ministry of care is extended when hope and comfort are also present in a memorial service.

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<sup>112</sup> Gene Fowler, *Caring through the Funeral: A Pastor’s Guide*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

In final thoughts presented by Fowler, he reminded his audience that care does not end after a funeral. Here the work of the minister in providing aftercare extends beyond his ministry as the worshipping community joins in caring for the bereaved.<sup>114</sup>

By comparison, Thomas Long's book, *Accompany Them with Singing – The Christian Funeral* shares some common themes with Fowler. However, Long takes a more theological approach in his discussion. For the departed believer, death is described as the shedding of an earthly shell and embracing of a resurrected body that is made possible by Christ's triumph over death. It is in the funeral service that two stories of death can be brought into parallel, the passing of the loved one and the vicarious sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. To this point Long wrote, "This body of the saint is a sign of remembrance and thanksgiving for all that we have received in and through the person's life and also a sign of hope that death has done its worst and lost because the God who defeated death in the raising of Jesus Christ has also raised this child of God in an imperishable and glorified body."<sup>115</sup>

As Long continued to develop this theme of "dual stories," he connected the funeral service of a believer to worship by asserting the story of the gospel is a retelling of the divine drama. It is essential for the making of a proper funeral:

At its deepest, this kind of funeral finally raises the white flag of surrender to death. If the biography of the deceased is the only sacred story we know how to tell, then death, who has brought this story to a sad end, wins again, and no measure of our remembrance and comforting each other can push back that grim truth. Only the resurrection story unmasks death's fraud. Only the story of the resurrection stakes out a victory over death, and this holy script needs to be told and performed again and again at funerals.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

Both Fowler and Long emphasize the importance of ministry to the bereaved through the means of the memorial service. However, as Fowler noted, there is a need to extend ongoing care to the grieving. Further review of the literature addresses this need.

Over the past several decades, the rise of faith-based counseling has found a place of ministry in the church. Pastoral counseling and support group ministries of the church provide “soul care” to those who find themselves in difficult times. A significant amount of literature exists that encourages the extending of care to those in the church who have experienced the loss of loved ones.

The relationship between the faith of a believer and their resiliency during times of loss is examined in the research of Mia-Tiara Hall. Her thesis, “The Effects of Christianity on Adult Resiliency when Overcoming Grief,” studied this correlation. Through the process of interviewing six individuals and analyzing the data from these conversations, Hall identified themes of strong emotions, denial, regrets, questioning God, and need for family support. In the interviews conducted, some indicated activities of the church contributed to their resiliency.<sup>117</sup> She concluded, “Christianity’s effect on resiliency served as a foundation in which Christians were able to stand on in the time of adversity. Being a Christian does not eliminate the impact of grief. It still will hurt and be painful to lose a loved one; however, there is hope that Christians can obtain while enduring the struggles of grief.”<sup>118</sup>

Christian counselor H. Norman Wright provided an accessible resource for the church desiring to minister to the grieving. *Helping Those in Grief* was written to serve the lay

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<sup>117</sup> Mia-Tiara S. Hall, “The Effects of Christianity on Adult Resiliency when Overcoming Grief.” M.S. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2018. <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/etd/109/>, 34.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

community within the church and offer guidance in knowing what is and is not proper to say to grievers. Using personal experiences in counseling as a basis for discussion, Wright challenged readers through several case studies designed to shape responses and actions of those who offer help to those coping with grief.

Wright also overviewed several approaches to understanding the world of grief, and he identified diverse types of grief, including complexities such as mourning multiple losses. For each unique instance, the path to wholeness is also unique.<sup>119</sup> In response to the varied challenges, the author suggested questions and approaches tailored to the nuances of the experiences of the bereaved. Wright included in his work, discussion regarding “grief coaches” and submitted the coaching approach in grief ministry may be advantageous and preferred because, “Coaching is less threatening, less concerned about problem-solving and more inclined to help people reach their potential.”<sup>120</sup>

The care ministry of the church extends beyond the one on one approaches of Pastoral Counseling or Grief Coaching. In a growing number of churches, congregants are trained and empowered to engage directly with those who are dealing with matters of grief and loss of loved ones. Support group ministries are also formed to address the needs of the bereaved.

One example is the congregation of Sierra Presbyterian Church of Nevada County, California. Their story is chronicled in a case study presented by one of the church’s pastors, Michael Griffin. The research suggests, “For churches and individuals to move forward in fulfilling God’s mission, they must learn what barriers exist to people growing through grief and

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<sup>119</sup> H. Norman Wright, *Helping Those in Grief*, 83.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

what the central qualities of those that experience such growth are.”<sup>121</sup> According to Griffin, grief has the potential to cultivate growth in three domains of church life: (1) communication with God, (2) community with others, and (3) comforting others.<sup>122</sup>

From these three domains, the author outlines a spiritual growth strategy that includes teaching congregants how to pray and journal the Psalms, providing grief workshops to congregants, forming support groups, and offering to counsel to those within the congregation who may be struggling with the end goal of equipping members to become agents of healing.<sup>123</sup>

Growth, according to Griffin, comes “only when one views their present life, including hardship and pain, from [a] heavenly perspective...Hope is sustained when the grieving stay in communication with God, find a community of support that surrounds them in love, and they become a comfort to others in grief.”<sup>124</sup> This is a practical outworking of the biblical directive found in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

While the church is called to offer comfort, how comfort is provided takes a variety of shapes. Research conducted by Mark Hartley sought to examine the extent of congregational care extended to the bereaved in a church community located in Seward, Nebraska. The problem addressed in the research was the congregation’s (or any congregation’s) hesitancy in approaching fellow parishioners who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Hartley posited

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<sup>121</sup> Griffin, Michael. “Growing Through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church.” D. Min. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary. 2015. DOI:10.2986/tren.125-0171, 107.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

that some who deal with grief do not wish to do so in the environment of a support group and “would rather talk one on one.”<sup>125</sup>

To adequately equip church members to serve as resources to the bereaved in a one-on-one environment, the author researched literature pertinent to the topic of grief. Along with an in-depth explanation of the narrative of Job in the Old Testament and the account of Jesus comforting Mary and Martha in the New Testament, the author identified salient insights for offering comfort to those who have experienced the loss of a loved one. Hartley summarized,

Grieving people do not necessarily need someone to walk through the door quoting Scripture or talking about the weather. They need what Job’s friends initially presented, being visibly present and ready to listen, allowing the grieving person to talk when they are ready. The grieving need a sympathetic person as Jesus provided for Martha and Mary in the midst of their pain. They need a listening ear without passing judgment as they process their pain.<sup>126</sup>

From the research, Hartley developed a workshop presented at Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska, to train congregants for ministry to the grieving. To measure the effectiveness of the curriculum, he administered pre and post-workshop assessments. The resulting analysis proved, “Attendees came into the workshop feeling unprepared at worst to being neutral at best to minister to grieving individuals. After attending the workshop, however, they had moved to being neutral at worst to feeling very prepared at best.”<sup>127</sup>

A final perspective of the church’s role in ministry to the grieving is found in an article by Bruce Vaughn. In “Recovering Grief in the Age of Grief Recovery,” Vaughn suggested there

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<sup>125</sup> Hartley, Mark. “Equipping Members of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief,” D.Min. thesis, Union University. 2018. ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis Global, 94.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

is value in grief, which can enrich the human experience. He noted, “Mourning constitutes the soil from which the enjoyment of life springs.”<sup>128</sup>

He further challenged the term “grief recovery,” questioning whether or not one can “get over” the loss of a significant relationship. To this point, Vaughn wrote, “Grief is a process in which we learn how to go on loving someone who is no longer there. Grief is essentially love under the condition of absence.”<sup>129</sup> He later connected grief with the “birth pangs of faith” and concluded, “Grief, if we allow it to appropriately devastate us, breaks the hold that the mesmerizing everydayness of our world has upon our souls... This hopeful faith, this faithful hope, enables us to enjoy the beauty of this life, despite the knowledge that the objects of our joy will fade and pass away.”<sup>130</sup> In Vaughn’s eyes, recovering grief is preferred over grief recovery.

Convergent themes of care ministries and worship that bring comfort to the grieving are explored in Francis Shelton’s research, “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Offering Comfort through Worship and Theological Reflection.” In this study, the author established a “theology of comfort” that began with a gospel narrative of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection.

The reflection of the disciples and other Christ-followers in the days following His death exemplifies what the believer may do when experiencing the loss of a loved one. To this point, Shelton reflected, “Recognizing the importance of hearing and telling the triduum over and over again opens my understanding of need for persons to tell and retell the story of the surprising or

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<sup>128</sup> S. Bruce Vaughn, “Recovering Grief in the Age of Grief Recovery.” *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 13:1, (2003): 36-45, DOI: 10.1179/jpt.2003.13.1.005, 38.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



expected death of a loved one, the preparations made for the body's burial, the time at the grave, and the thoughts and questions regarding the resurrection."<sup>131</sup>

Beyond the correlation of the gospel to grief and mourning, the theology of comfort is further revealed through many other scripture passages, including those that speak of a future day when death is overcome forever. Until then, the scriptures reflect two means of ministering comfort: (1) the Holy Spirit and (2) the community of believers. It is noted by Shelton, "Comfort is never in isolation. It is present in the community, *koinonia*."<sup>132</sup>

After establishing a biblical foundation and theology of comfort, Shelton wanted to determine the efficacy of monthly worship services as part of a grief support group ministry. Group participants were surveyed, and a number agreed to be interviewed.

The resulting data revealed worship provided some comfort to group members. According to Shelton, "43% of project participants listed they received comfort through worship...28% reported receiving comfort from bible study, 57% from prayer and none of them reported that they received comfort from scripture or meditation."<sup>133</sup>

Shelton's research may serve as a means to advance the study, which extends beyond support group ministries to encompass the worship of the corporate body of the church to provide comfort, encouragement, and hope to those who have lost loved ones.

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<sup>131</sup> Frances T. Shelton, "Blessed are Those Who Mourn: Offering Comfort through Worship and Theological Reflection," D. Min. thesis, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2007. DOI # 10.2986/tren.075.075-0088., 34.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

In review, literature relevant to the role of the church in providing care to the bereaved is readily available. It addresses topics that include: pastoral counseling, support groups, and equipping congregants for ministry to the bereaved.

### **Lament in Worship**

In addition to the counseling and care ministries provided by church leadership and congregations, other ministries may be able to come alongside the grieving and minister to them in ways that provide comfort and encouragement. One means of doing so is through the practice of incorporating biblical lament into times of worship.

When a Christian experiences the loss of a close family member or friend, a valid response may be crying out to God. Such expressions of pain in worship are demonstrated in numerous Old Testament Psalms. Christ quoted from Psalm 22 when he cried on the cross in anguish, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>134</sup>

Though some worship practitioners rely heavily upon upbeat music, motivational messages, and prayers of provision, John Witvliet suggested balanced worship consists of both praise and lament. He wrote, “The life of faith involves movement from lament to praise and back again, that evidences the magnetic pull of tenacious faith on the one hand and a candid grappling with the problems of the world on another.”<sup>135</sup> For this reason, he urged leaders to consider a blend of both as they develop services of worship.

Witvliet went on to write that crisis moments in the life of the believer can be highly formative and referred to the Psalms of lament as a model for response in those difficult times.

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<sup>134</sup> Matthew 27:46, NIV.

<sup>135</sup> John D. Witvliet, “A Time to Weep: Liturgical Lament in times of crisis. *ReformedWorship.org*, June 1997. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-1997/time-weep-liturgical-lament-times-crisis>.

Biblical lament follows a pattern of invocation, adoration, bold lament, petition, and affirmations of faith in God. The model is demonstrated in a number of the Psalms, and the church is urged to apply the pattern in the context of corporate worship. Witvliet reminded, “We are ministering in a broken world. Even in North America suburbia, all is not well. And whether you are a baby boomer or buster, there is nothing as relevant as showing up at church on Sunday morning and joining a congregation that is willing to name precisely and intercede passionately for the very problems that drove you there in the first place.”<sup>136</sup>

In *The Ministry of Lament: Caring for the Bereaved*, Fowler suggests biblical lament, as presented in the Psalms, has the potential for providing care to the grief-stricken when it is incorporated into the life of a worship community. “In the ministry of lament, pastoral care and counseling conversation exist as a relatively modest part of a much larger caring ministry involving the entire communal life of the congregation.”<sup>137</sup>

In this text, lament, as a means of ministry, builds upon theories of grief psychology and biblical exposition of the Psalms. Fowler drew from the six processes of grief identified by bereavement psychologist, Therese Rando: recognition, reaction, recollection and re-experience, relinquishment, readjustment, and reinvestment, and demonstrated how it paralleled with components of biblical lament, address to God, complaint, confession, petition, affirmation, and praise and thanksgiving.

By integrating the disciplines of psychology and theology, Fowler framed a model for ministry that extends beyond church leadership and formal care group ministry teams and challenges the church body to care through lament. By joining in the journey with those who

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>137</sup> Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament*, 19.

lament, the church comes to understand who God is in the midst of human pain and loss. Fowler concluded, “Ultimately, we all share in this witness, because we all become psalmists of lament during the course of living as part of God’s creation.”<sup>138</sup>

Applying biblical models of lament to modern worship is the focus of Glenn Packiam’s essay, “The Place of Sadness in Contemporary Praise and Worship.” Based on a personal experience with a young congregant who lost his wife in a car accident after two years of marriage, Packiam came to understand, “Grief changed the way he [the young congregant] experienced praise and worship music, and how little room our church had for sadness in our services.”<sup>139</sup> Much of his analysis of biblical lament was in agreement with Witvliet and Fowler. Drawing from the scholarship of Walter Bruggeman and his thematic classification of the Psalms (“secure orientation, disorientation, and new orientation”), Packiam associated lament with disorientation because it is indicative of “seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death.”<sup>140</sup>

The biblical precedent of including lament in Psalms, amid various types of Psalms (Hallel, ascent, messianic, and others) suggests that space can be made for lament in modern worship. However, as Packiam noted, “Of the 104 songs that have appeared in the US Top 25 lists in the past twenty-five years, none are in a minor key.”<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, the author cites the work of Lester Ruth, who noted in research that of the same 104 songs, lyrics reflecting positive

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>139</sup> Glen Packiam, “The Place of Sadness in Contemporary Praise and Worship,” (paper presented at Durham University, Durham England, April, 2014).

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

activity (praise, sing, and see) far outweighed lyrical content related to negative emotion (cry, fear, die, mourn).<sup>142</sup>

The challenge delivered in Packiam's essay is for worship leaders to develop worship services that reflect the broad range of human experience by including lament. This may be accomplished through the selection of songs that include cries of grief, Psalm-readings, or sermons that address issues of pain and loss. For churches that utilize the liturgical calendar, particular seasons lend themselves more to lament than others.

Packiam's observation regarding the seeming absence of lament in modern worship is supported in other literature as well. The dilemma is articulated in the article by Nathaniel Carlson, "Lament: The Biblical Language of Trauma." It is observed by the author, "Trauma routinely invades human experience. Yet strangely and tragically, the Sunday morning worship hour has functionally denied trauma's existence, muzzling the God-ward expression that trauma victims so deeply need."<sup>143</sup>

The author substantiates this point by noting in the Christian music database, Song Select, themes of "grace," "joy," "praise," and "thanksgiving" are prevalent and yield significant search results. However, of nearly 950 thematic categories, there are none for "lament," "pain," or "suffering." Further study showed there is an absence of such "negative" themes in hymnals of mainline denominations.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-18.

<sup>143</sup> Nathaniel A. Carlson, "Lament: The Biblical Language of Trauma," *A Journal for the Theology of Culture*, vol. 11, no.1, (2015), [https://www.academia.edu/25374709/LAMENT\\_THE\\_BIBLICAL\\_LANGUAGE\\_OF\\_TRAUMA](https://www.academia.edu/25374709/LAMENT_THE_BIBLICAL_LANGUAGE_OF_TRAUMA).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

After analysis of biblical laments contained in the Old Testament Psalms and the book of Lamentations, Carlson noted that there are therapeutic and spiritual benefits found in lament that can minister to those who have experienced trauma. Therefore, church leaders and those developing worship services would be wise to consider such elements in their liturgy. “By including lament...victims of trauma will be given opportunity to express their pain, anger, isolation, and sense of divine abandonment within a chorus of voices that provide support, the safety of validation, and the hope of the gospel.”<sup>145</sup>

Lament in modern worship may not only encourage the grieving believer to bear their soul to God; it is a return to a practice of liturgy that originated in tabernacle worship. Examples of such liturgical lament are evidenced in Psalm 42 and 43 where the sons of Korah, gatekeepers in the tabernacle, composed lyrics for musical worship that not only gave voice to a “downcast soul,” but also reminded worshipers to “place hope in God” amid the pain.<sup>146</sup>

### **Practitioners of Worship Address Grief**

The existing body of literature addressing the topic of worship and grief is considerably smaller than the preceding categories of this review. However, a compilation of articles originally published in *Worship Leader Magazine*, *Worshipping through Grief*, offers insights to ministers and worship leaders as it explores matters of pain, loss, grief, and the transitions that result from such experiences and their relationship to worship.

Prominent worship leaders and artists share their encounters with loss (most typically loss of loved ones) and remind those responsible for leading congregations in worship of the onus to minister in such a way as to bless people and encourage them along their journey of grief

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>146</sup> Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5, NIV.

pointing them toward the reality of God’s redemptive nature during the darkest moments of the soul.<sup>147</sup>

The collection of writings focuses on topics of personal grief. It demonstrates not only how the believer’s private worship is affected by grief but also how worship becomes a source of strength during seasons of pain.

Painfully acquainted with loss, Stephen Curtis Chapman wrote of the family tragedy that claimed the life of his daughter. The family’s grief was magnified and complicated because Chapman’s son was driving the vehicle that caused the death of his little sister. Their overwhelming pain drove them to a place of brokenness that, over time, brought them closer to God than they could ever imagine. Chapman wrote, “I didn’t have nearly the grasp of what worship was until I walked through, and am still walking through, this valley of the shadow of death.”<sup>148</sup>

Contemporary Christian musician, Keith Green was a faithful minister of the gospel in song and was a prolific songwriter. In 1982 he died in a plane crash along with two of his children, leaving his wife, Melody, a widow, single parent of a one-year-old, and six weeks pregnant. Despite the profound grief, she acknowledged that being a follower of Christ does not guarantee a pain-free existence. What worship does for the Christian, according to Melody Green, is to remind the hurting of “holy hope that is going to overtake the sorrow.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Chuck Smith, *Worshipping through Grief*, (San Juan Capistrano, CA: Worship Leader Partnership, 2013), preface, Kindle.

<sup>148</sup> Stephen Curtis Chapman, “The Desperate Hope,” in Smith, chap. 1, Kindle.

<sup>149</sup> Melody Green, “Immeasurable Loss...And Love,” in Smith, chap. 3, Kindle.

Another facet of loss associated with death is when a person discovers they have a terminal illness. Tim Timmons wrote about his journey through cancer and what it has taught him about worship. Timmons is a husband, father, worship leader, musician, and songwriter. As he shared his experience of coming face to face with what appeared to be an incurable disease, he connected worship to brokenness. “I believe that worship is responding to all that God is with all that we are...It is going to include our sadness, brokenness, and suffering. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be honest. But if we believe that God is who he says he is, then he is trustworthy regardless of what we are going through, and there are always reasons to praise him.”<sup>150</sup>

The miscarriage of a baby brings deep sorrow to the parents. Darlene Zschech told of her experience and shared how severe the loss was for her and her husband. Though their hearts were broken and not filled with song, it was ultimately through song, that God’s Word in melodic form began to minister and gave strength to the Zschechs. Though their loss could not be reversed, “faith rose above my anger,” wrote Darlene. “The atmosphere was charged with hope, and the worshiper grew deeper in love with the only one who is worthy of our praise.”<sup>151</sup>

The effect of grief is not only experienced by individuals or families, but communities experience loss as well. Worship Leader, Richie Fike, gave an account of his church in Colorado Springs that lost a member of their core leadership team during a trip to Haiti. Having lost a colleague and being responsible for helping the church family process their emotions and hurts, Fike advised fellow worship leaders, “Look for new meaning in the songs you already sing. Interpreted anew through the lens of the situation, these songs can become quite powerful and meaningful... [It is] the job of the worship leader to lift the eyes of a people to the face of their

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<sup>150</sup> Tim Timmons, “Celebration and Lament,” in Smith, chap. 5, Kindle.

<sup>151</sup> Darlene Zschech, “Worship Through the Storm,” in Smith, chap. 6, Kindle.



God.”<sup>152</sup> Fike also cautioned worship leaders against falling into the trap of offering platitudes. Instead, he encouraged them to wrestle through the difficult questions and always point worshipers to a God who is “never safe, but always loving.”<sup>153</sup>

The persecuted church is no stranger to loss, nor are those who face oppression and poverty throughout the world. Yet, it is in such places the worship of God is intense. As Carla Brewington wrote, “In the midst of rubble, people stand up and begin to worship, calling out to Jesus and longing for him to rescue them.”<sup>154</sup> She went on to assert that true worship is acted out by the community through actions that speak louder than the songs that are sung by the church and concluded, “Without active participation in laboring for justice our worship is thin, and our faith is worthless.”<sup>155</sup>

In times of tragedy, the community may look to the local church for perspective. Such was the case in the aftermath of a shooting on the campus of Northern Illinois University in 2008. Many in the community were affected by fateful events. The challenge for worship leader Warren Anderson was to know how best to lead his congregation in the weeks following the event. As he observed, “By the time many suffering souls come to the end of their crisis, turmoil, or struggle, they will have, somewhere along the way, found the capacity for worship. But it’s definitely not – or shouldn’t be – a knee-jerk reaction; worship is not the obvious and immediate offspring of suffering.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Richie Fike, “Aftershocks,” in Smith, chap. 7, Kindle.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Carla Brewington, “Worshiping in the Ruins,” in Smith, chap. 8, Kindle.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Warren Anderson, “God of Sorrow,” in Smith, chap. 9, Kindle.

Through the various perspectives of those who have experienced loss, several connections emerge that demonstrate the relationship between worship and grief. These insights are primarily the observations of worship leaders and artists that represent those who serve in ministry and potentially have a more robust theological foundation than those in the worshipping congregation. Their perspectives can be of resource to worship leaders, as they have experienced deep personal grief. However, there remains a gap in the literature that has to this point not yet explored the experiences of grieving congregants or sought to identify what they find meaningful and beneficial in their journeys through the valley of grief.

### **Summary of the Literature**

As it pertains to the study of *Comforting the Grieving through Worship*, the preponderance of literature centered on grief theories, personal stories of grief, the church's response to grief through care and counseling ministries, lament in worship, and grief as a means of refining worship as stated by worship practitioners. A gap remained when considering the efficacy of worship as a resource to help those who have lost loved ones. Attention was dedicated to a research plan that focused upon the experiences and insights of church congregants and drew upon these insights to suggest how worship ministries may best support the needs of bereaving congregants.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Because the body of Christ is instructed to offer comfort to those within their community who have lost loved ones,<sup>157</sup> it behooves those in worship leadership to understand better the intricacies of grief and the challenges facing the bereaved. Awareness of theories and counseling approaches provide an infrastructure for ministry. In the preceding chapter, it was demonstrated that the literature offers more than ample resources for developing such frameworks. The literature focuses on how the living process grief in times of loss, how church counseling and care ministries can serve as an agent of comfort and encouragement, and how loss may affect the worship life of the Christian. Little in the literature discusses, in specific terms, whether or not worship has an impact on the believer during times of grief.

A qualitative study employing a historical/narrative approach is developed in this methodology chapter that encompasses research questions and hypothesis, research design, the background of the researcher, population and participants in the study, procedures, analysis of data, and ethical assurances.

### Research Questions

The study sought to historically and narratively answer the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways does the loss of a loved one affect the worship life of the believer?

**Research Question 2:** In what ways can corporate worship encourage healing in the life of the believer grieving the loss of a loved one?

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<sup>157</sup> I Thessalonians 4:18, NIV.

## Hypotheses

The research questions are designed with the intent of testing the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** The loss of a loved one can affect the worship life of the believer in terms of doubt, isolation, and emotional conflict.

**Hypothesis 2:** Corporate worship can encourage healing in the life of the grieving believer in terms of theological reinforcement, the human need to lament, and fellowship.

## Research Design

A qualitative research study design utilizing historical and narrative approaches to the research was employed to identify ways the body of Christ, and more specifically, worship ministry leaders can effectively address the needs of the grieving believer through corporate worship. Because of the highly individualized experiences of those who have traveled the journey of grief, qualitative research is appropriate for this study. Rather than relying on impersonal statistical data, the study sought to establish the meaning from a participant's perspective.<sup>158</sup> As noted by Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell, "Qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world."<sup>159</sup>

A historical approach to the research methodology undergirds this study because it "examines events of the past to understand the present and anticipate potential future effects."<sup>160</sup> As the review of the literature revealed, a great deal has been written on the subject of grief and

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<sup>158</sup> Creswell, *Research Design*, 16.

<sup>159</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

<sup>160</sup> "Qualitative Research Designs," *University of Missouri, St. Louis*, accessed August 1, 2019, <http://www.umsl.edu/~lindquists/qualdsgn.html>.

how it is processed. The resources pertinent to ministry directed toward the grieving is also significant. The historical data provided by these resources provide a basis for broader application into the worship of the church. Furthermore, the more recent renewal of interest in the inclusion of lament in the liturgy has prompted much study that serves as a guide for worship leadership in the church today. Historical information contained in the literature was pertinent in addressing “Research Question One.”

However, to research the matter raised by “Research Question Two,” a narrative approach to research was warranted. This was validated by Richard Wilson when he wrote, “Narrative is a tool of the researcher for gathering the stories and for the subsequent representation of the stories to the reader. The transcriptions, or narrative texts, of these told stories may be interpreted as evidentiary documents of real life experiences.”<sup>161</sup> Drawing from the experiences of those who have lost loved ones, the findings were used to offer strategies for worship ministry to the bereaved and to promote the design of worship services that remind participants of God’s faithfulness, goodness, sovereignty, and healing.

### **Background, Beliefs, and Biases of the Researcher**

The researcher has served in church ministries since 1985 and holds a Bachelor of Science in Music Education, a Master of Arts in Religion, and a Master of Arts in Music and Worship. Over the past 35 years of church music ministry, the researcher has come in contact with many families and individuals who have suffered the loss of a loved one and has ministered to them in their times of grief. In some instances, ministry has included serving the family or

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<sup>161</sup> Richard A. Wilson, “Combining Historical Research and Narrative Inquiry to Create Chronicles and Narratives.” in *The Qualitative Report*, Volume 12 Number 1, March 2007, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/51087035.pdf>. 27.

individual as a participant in the memorial service. In other situations, the researcher has walked alongside congregants as they have made their way through the journey of grief.

In each of these situations, the belief system of the researcher has served as the fountainhead of ministry to those in mourning. In particular, it is the belief of life after death and the promise of an eternity spent with Christ in heaven for all who have placed saving faith in His work on the cross that gives hope in the darkest of circumstances. Beyond the atoning death of Christ, His triumphant resurrection conquered the sting of death and assures the Christian of eternal life.<sup>162</sup> The belief that Christ rose again and promised resurrection for those who trust in Him was stated when Paul wrote, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”<sup>163</sup>

While objectivity is valued in research, it has been noted, “the research process is never neutral.”<sup>164</sup> Though one strives for non-biased research, it cannot be “value-free.”<sup>165</sup> In the context of this study, the researcher is more than familiar with biblical principles of worship, the value of the arts in worship, and the applications of these principles to the worship of the church. If not careful, the researcher’s own experiences of worship and the comfort that it has brought in his times of adversity, pain, and loss may have been presumed upon the participants of the study. Instead, this study intended to approach the subject matter with a mindset of inquiry to determine the extent the believer is impacted by corporate worship when they have experienced loss.

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<sup>162</sup> I Corinthians 15:55, NIV.

<sup>163</sup> Romans 6:4, NIV.

<sup>164</sup> Erlinda Palagnas et al. “Reflexivity in Qualitative Research: A Journey of Learning,” *The Qualitative Report 2017*, Volume 22, Number 2, <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2552&context=tqr>. 426-438, 433.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

Another potential bias of the researcher who serves in the local church and ministers through worship is that he, like others, wants his ministry to have significance and produce positive results. In this particular instance, the desired outcome is that corporate worship would minister comfort and encouragement to the bereaved. However, the possibility exists that the research exposes situations where this is not the case.

To minimize potential bias, research was conducted primarily in settings where the researcher did not have a direct relationship with study participants. In the section to follow, attention is given to places and persons involved in the study.

### **Research Population and Participants**

Focus group sites were recruited from churches in Amherst County, Virginia. Amherst is located centrally in the state and is home to both agriculture and industry. According to the area Chamber of Commerce, the region is a blending of “rural and suburban living.”<sup>166</sup> The population is culturally and socio-economically diverse. Educationally, data indicates that high school graduation rates are above, and two-year degrees are comparable to national statistics. However, four-year and graduate degrees are below national percentages.<sup>167</sup> This locale was selected because the researcher serves a church in this area and has connections to pastors of other local churches.

Churches contacted were recommended to the researcher by his Senior Pastor. Research sites selected reflect denominational and ethnic diversity as Baptist, United Methodist, and African American congregations were included in the study.

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<sup>166</sup> Amherst County Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.amherstvachamber.com>.

<sup>167</sup> “Census Data/Demographics, Amherst County, <https://www.countyofamherst.com/departments/division.php?structureid=97>.

The study sample was drawn from a population of adults above the age of 18 who participate in a church community and have experienced the loss of a loved one (i.e., spouse, child, parent, sibling, or close friend). Those recruited voluntarily agreed to be a part of focus group interviews and did not receive compensation for their involvement in the research project.

The first focus group was conducted in a church comprised predominantly of African Americans but encourages all within the community to attend. The Pastor of the church is well-respected in the community and is known by many as a strong leader. Presently the congregation is in an interim period of worship leadership. However, when they gather together each week, their services include spirited music, testimony, and the spoken Word of God. The group that was interviewed at this site consisted of three men, most likely from the boomer generation, all of whom held positions of leadership within the church and have experienced the pain of losing loved ones.

A second focus group was conducted with a group of four ladies, most of whom were in their late 60s and 70s. All attend a historical Southern Baptist Church in the area that dates back a century. This congregation assembles each week in their original sanctuary. When one walks into their church, they are reminded by ornate stained-glass windows and Edwardian-style architecture of the history and tradition. The congregation that now gathers is small (approximately 40 in worship) and has very few young people in attendance. Though small in size, one can imagine that those who are a part of this congregation have gone through much of life together and have been a source of encouragement to one another. The ladies interviewed indicated they were actively involved in ministries at their church and served as Sunday School teachers, musicians, or committee members.



The third group consisted of members of a United Methodist congregation in the area. Their church was located in a rural setting as well. Still, it was more representative of a diverse worship community comprised of persons who relocated from various parts of the Eastern US as retirees. The pastor participated in the interview process along with church members who were active in the music and teaching ministries of their church.

A final group was conducted with a church congregation that was much larger than the others. Though the church has little ethnic diversity, the congregation is well represented in all age demographics. The sample group in this interview consisted of seven participants ranging in age from 19 to some nearing 70. Only a few of the participants had a leadership role in the worship ministry. The others were active members of the congregation and involved, to varying degrees, in some facet of ministry.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, it was decided a focus group format would best serve the purposes sought and provide useful data. There were several reasons for this decision. Due to the time constraints of the study, the researcher wished to maximize what time and access had been granted by the churches involved by including as many qualified respondents as were willing to participate in the focus group session. Furthermore, the focus group approach was thought to provide a level of familiarity among participants that would encourage one another in discussion and alleviate any apprehension of sharing insights with someone, the researcher, whom they had not met before the time of the group meeting.

The researcher and the interview questions served as the sole means of generating data. At the time of the interview, participants were assembled in a private area within their church building. After a brief acknowledgment of appreciation for their attendance, instruction and

prayer, focus group interviews began by asking participants to share their own experiences of losing a loved one. What followed were questions and discussions that probed levels of involvement in worship before their time of loss, after their time of loss, and the extent to which worship helped to provide comfort, encouragement, and healing throughout their journey of grief. Further questions sought to determine what components of worship were especially meaningful to the bereaved and what insights participants could provide to worship leaders to help them better support and provide ministry to the grieving. (See Appendix A)

During the interview, an audio recording app on the researcher's iPhone served to capture the content of discussions as participants responded to questions. Participants in the focus group signed approved consent forms detailing how data would be collected and handled. The consent form also required participants to ensure the confidentiality of any details shared during the group meetings.

### **Procedures**

Application for the study was made to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. Upon obtaining preliminary approval, the researcher was able to reach out to area pastors, asking their permission to conduct focus group research with congregants at their churches. Pastors who gave their verbal consent were emailed documents about the study and were then asked to document their granted approval by replying to the initial email. The documented permission letters from each church were forwarded on to the IRB. Upon receipt, the IRB issued a notification of approval.

After receiving IRB notification, church leaders were notified that the research proposal had been accepted and the study was moving forward. The next step toward research was the recruiting of focus group participants. Bulletin announcement verbiage was sent to participating

churches asking them to post the announcement in their church bulletins, email communications, or announcement slides. After allowing time for congregants to respond, follow up calls were made to pastors to schedule optimal times for focus group meetings. Additionally, consent letters were sent to those who consented to participate in the focus group meetings and were asked to verify (1) they were age 18 or older, (2) had experienced the loss of a close loved one, and (3) were an active church attendee.

As scheduled, focus groups met at their respective church campuses in locations where conversations could not be easily overheard. Before the commencement of the focus group session, participants signed statements of informed consent, where they not only confirmed their understanding of the pertinent details of the study but also agreed they would keep all conversation taking place during the group session in confidence.

During the focus group meeting, six guiding questions (See Appendix A) were presented to participants. When warranted, follow up with questions were asked. Because qualitative research is sometimes emergent,<sup>168</sup> findings and themes observed in the group meetings influenced questions to elaborate on the emerging themes from discussions.

An audio recording of the meeting, via computer software, captured the proceedings of the focus group. Additionally, a transcription app, Otter.ai, was utilized to provide a base written documentation of the group meeting. Following each session, the audio file was reviewed internally and compared to the automated transcription. Corrections to the transcriptions were made to conform to the recorded proceedings by the researcher.

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<sup>168</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 198.

As each focus group was conducted and then transcribed, the next step was to make sense of the data. Also called “data analysis” by Merriam and Tisdell, “The practical goal of data analysis is to find answers to your research questions.”<sup>169</sup>

### **Analysis of Data**

Analysis began by reviewing transcripts. Hand jotting of comments, observations, reflections, and questions were made in margins. Jottings, sometimes referred to as codings, were then examined to ascertain broad categories, themes, or patterns that appeared to answer the research questions.<sup>170</sup>

A more detailed analysis, or axial coding, entailed the dissection of transcriptions and organization of sub-themes based on reflection and determination of meaning.<sup>171</sup> Though the axial coding was conducted without the assistance of a qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), after data was sorted, it was archived digitally using Excel.

As data from each site was transcribed, coded, and manipulated, there were findings unique to each context. However, to accurately interpret the data and find meaning that was beneficial in answering the stated research questions, it was essential to establish connections between the groups interviewed. In searching for connections, Merriam and Tisdell encouraged comparing the data points and identifying the core categories and wrote, “Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated... the methodology is called *grounded theory*.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

## **Ethical Assurances**

Per protocols established by the IRB at Liberty University, documents of informed consent were made available to pastors or ministry leaders upon their agreement to permit a focus group session at their church. The informed consent letters were also provided to participants in the study before conducting the focus groups: Disclosure of minimal risks related to the study was provided to all participants in advance of focus group proceedings. In addition to providing background information, procedures, notification of minimal risks, and benefits pertinent to the study, the letter addressed ethical considerations related to confidentiality, voluntary nature, and withdrawal from the study.

The privacy of the participants was assured by the researcher. Records (audio files of interviews and transcripts) related to the study have been kept private. At no point have participants been identified by their actual names. Pseudonyms were assigned to each group participant and employed as identity safeguards in the presentation of the research findings in Chapter Four. To further protect the privacy of participants, focus groups met at times, and in areas of the church that provided maximum privacy and as part of the signed consent, participants provided written confirmation that they would not disclose any information shared during the group session. Records of all research have been securely stored on a password-protected computer. A backup copy of data on an external storage device has also been placed in a secure location. This data will be kept for three years as required by federal regulations. After three years, data will be removed from the researcher's computer, files stored on the external device will be deleted, and the device will be reformatted. Audio files recorded during focus groups were uploaded to automated transcription software. Following the transcription, the researcher alone accessed the data to make the necessary corrections to conform more accurately

to the audio. Access to the password-protected audio files has been provided to no one, except for the researcher.

Participation in this study was voluntary. Those who considered participation but decided not to take part in no way jeopardized current or future relationships with Liberty University. Persons who took place in the study were also advised that if they wished to withdraw from the research, they would be permitted to do so with the understanding that information on recordings would not be removed from audio files. Participants affirmed in writing their understanding of the above information before focus group interviews.

After obtaining permission, focus group discussions commenced. In the chapter that follows, experiences with grief and the grieving process are discussed. The first-hand accounts of group members shed light on how worship might be a tool for ministry in times of mourning.

## CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH FINDINGS

After a comprehensive review of the literature and a detailed description of processes and protocols pertinent to the study, research was conducted through a series of focus group interviews designed to answer the overarching questions of the thesis: (1) In what ways does the loss of a loved one affect the worship life of the believer? (2) In what ways can corporate worship encourage healing in the life of the believer grieving the loss of a loved one?

The focus of this chapter is to convey the results of the research, compare research findings to the existing body of literature, and connect the study to the practice and leadership of biblical worship in the church.

As focus groups were conducted, care was taken to document and transcribe the conversations that took place. As previously stated, transcripts were then carefully reviewed and coded by the researcher. Based on the input provided by participants of the focus groups, four overarching themes emerged: (1) pathways of grief, (2) the people of God in community and comfort, (3) practices of music and worship that offer hope and comfort, and (4) the pastoring work of the worship leader to the bereaved.

### **The Pathways of Grief**

Because of the unique nature of every person, a case can be made that grief will be as individual as strands of human DNA. Doka supports this construct when writing, “While there are some patterns to how grief unfolds, each of us responds to a different loss in a different way.”<sup>173</sup> The varied paths of loss and the resulting grief were articulated in the accounts of research participants at each of the study locations. In some instances, there were shared

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<sup>173</sup> Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 10.

experiences, such as the loss of parents. The bereaved had a prolonged season to prepare for their impending loss. When one man was preparing for the passing of his elderly mother, he indicated, “I just wanted mom to be comfortable while going through this process because I cared about her. I knew God was working, but I didn't want her to suffer.”<sup>174</sup> A number of interviewees recounted instances where they took their aging parents into their homes to provide care and support during their loved one’s final years. When speaking about these experiences, some group participants described this period as more than a time of preparation for imminent loss. Laura was a caregiver for both mother and father and indicated, “Grief started early because [my parents] began to lose their capabilities.”<sup>175</sup> The physical decline of her mom and dad brought on sadness she described as grief.

Others lost loved ones at much younger ages in tragic situations. One lady told of losing her son after a heart-wrenching sequence of events that began when he developed a drug addiction and continued in a downward spiral. She detailed the painful event that took place nearly 20 years earlier, as though only a few days had passed. She recalled with great detail the meal she prepared for her son the night before he was admitted to the hospital, where he passed into eternity the following day.<sup>176</sup>

An associate pastor talked about the sudden void left in his own life at age 20 when his brother died unexpectedly in a tragic car accident. As he described, “It was the most traumatic

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<sup>174</sup> Interview with a church deacon, November 12, 2019.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Laura, February 8, 2020.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with a mother, November 24, 2019.



experience I've ever had in my life. When I saw [my brother's] body, I almost passed out, but I had some family around me who supported me.”<sup>177</sup>

Bethany, nearly 20, spoke of the traumatic loss of her mother in an automobile accident where their car was struck by an oncoming truck. The truck hit the passenger side of their car, where her mother was seated. Bethany was in the driver's seat and sustained a few injuries. Her mother laid in the hospital bed as the family had little hope of her recovery from the accident. In Bethany's words, they sat “waiting for the day that mom would pass.”<sup>178</sup> Ultimately, her body could no longer function on its own, and she passed away.

As group members reflected and talked about their loved ones, they displayed a broad range of emotions. There were moments of laughter mingled with seasons of tears.

While time does not permit sharing experiences of each research participant, each articulated their experiences in a manner that underscores the gravity of loss. Many spoke about the impact of loss on their lives as it related to matters of faith and worship. Their responses were as varied as the losses themselves. In instances where loved ones had prolonged illness before their passing, they saw their loved one's death as an end to earthly suffering. In Laura's case, she had provided care to both parents for nearly a decade and viewed their passing as a release. It wasn't that she was released from her caring role. Knowing that her mother could hear again and that her dad had been released from the confinement of Parkinson's disease gave her great comfort in her time of loss.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with a pastor, November 12, 2019.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Bethany, February 8, 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Laura, February 8, 2020.

Such was not the experience of Doris. She had experienced the loss of both parents and a brother when her husband was then diagnosed with cancer. Despite the efforts of doctors and their treatments, Doris' husband made no improvements. She was able to persuade the doctors to allow him to return home for his final days. As his condition worsened, she knew he was in great pain. She indicated, "I was in the hallway adjacent to the bedroom when I heard him say, 'Lord, please help me, please help me.' I trusted God, but I said, 'God, where are You?'"<sup>180</sup> In the days that followed her husband's passing, Doris grieved tremendously. She confided in her pastor that she wanted to join her husband in heaven. She also described a period where participating in the worship service was difficult for her. As a means of coping, she decided:

I'll go to worship service, but I won't go in until after they finish singing. I'm not going in there and listen to those songs. I was in the choir then, but I didn't want to go. I didn't want to sing, and I didn't want to hear them sing. I only wanted to hear the Word from the pastor. I would come. I'd sit there and listen, and I got a good message every Sunday morning. The minute the last hymn was announced, I got up. I stayed pretty close to the back door because I didn't want to make a scene. As soon as they announced that last hymn, out of the door I went, and I cried all the way home.<sup>181</sup>

Other participants indicated similar responses when asked how the death of a loved one affected their worship. In some instances, worship had been a primary family activity, and the deceased left a legacy of faith, impacting the lives of those remaining. The absence of loved ones in worship was a visible reminder of the permanency of loss and, in some instances, evoked sadness for family members who wanted to stay connected to the support of the church family. Another participant, Carla, described her conflict in these terms, "It took me a while to get back to church. I would just cry too much even to get dressed. But when I first started coming back, I

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with Doris, November 24, 2019.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

sat upstairs. I guess I was hiding so no one could see me. Then, I started coming back downstairs, where we [our family] used to sit.”<sup>182</sup>

Whitney McDermott, a Contemporary Christian music artist, echoed similar themes to those expressed by participants when she stated, “I believe the hardest part of the same place you were when your loved one was here is that there is a memory around every corner, you can’t escape it. Sometimes it brings a smile to your face, but sometimes they just bring pain.”<sup>183</sup>

Writing of personal loss in his life, C.S. Lewis wrote, “Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow of reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.”<sup>184</sup>

Also supporting the research are the narratives of Scripture. After the death of her husband, Ruth pledged her faith in God by embracing the worship practices of her husband’s heritage, though she was a Moabite.<sup>185</sup> In the aftermath of intense fasting before God and pleading for the life of his infant son, David’s yearnings did not result in the sparing of the child. Yet once he knew God had taken the baby’s life, he proceeded to the house of the Lord to worship.<sup>186</sup>

The research bears evidence that loss produces a range of responses for the believer who grieves. While losses may show similarities, the nuances of each experience are unique to

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<sup>182</sup> Interview with Carla, February 8, 2020.

<sup>183</sup> Whitney McDermott, *Beauty for My Ashes*, Alicia Whitney Publishing, Branson, MO. 2015, chap. 2, Kindle.

<sup>184</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 10.

<sup>185</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

<sup>186</sup> 2 Samuel 12:16-23

individual circumstances, and those left to process grief do so in their own ways. Understanding how loss touches the life of the grieving worshiper can be an essential first step in ministry to the bereaved.

It is not uncommon for the grieving believer to turn to the worship community to find support during times of loss. When they do, the church often mobilizes to care for immediate needs by providing food, sending cards, and offering their condolences at the visitation or funeral itself. The ongoing aspects of ministry to the bereaved may be more challenging to congregations. However, when the body of Christ has an action plan of continuing care to individuals and families in grief, there is benefit. As Helen Harris observed:

We know from the literature that the entire first year after a death is one loss after another... Continuing to be present and supportive through these difficult days is a real ministry to those adjusting to life without the deceased. Congregational family members are in a particularly strong position to help survivors accomplish what William Worden identified as the four tasks of mourning. (1) Congregations help survivors acknowledge the reality of the loss with the funeral and memorial opportunities. (2) Being present without judgment allows the bereaved to experience the pain of the loss. (3) Church services and ceremonies help mourners begin to adjust to an environment without the deceased. And (4) the work of the church helps survivors begin to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in others.<sup>187</sup>

The four tasks identified have correlations to the ministry of worship in the church.

Themes that emerged during group interviews confirmed how the church might minister to the bereaved by fostering a compassionate worship community, serving the bereaved through acts of worship, and providing pastoral care to those in grief.

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<sup>187</sup> Helen W. Harris, "What is a Congregation to Do? Grief in Family and Congregational Life," in *Family Ministry*, Vol. 17, Number 2, Summer 2003.

## The People of God

During several group interviews, respondents agreed the care they found in their local worship communities brought comfort to them after their loss. For many who participated in the study, they indicated a high level of engagement in their church. Some served as deacons, Sunday School teachers, or choir members, and others participated with regularity in weekly worship.

In the New Testament, the book of Acts indicated that in the early church, the widows of the church required care. God instructed the church to call a group of men (deacons) to minister and serve the widows.<sup>188</sup> When the church follows the example of the first church, it also fulfills the biblical command found in 2 Corinthians 1, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”<sup>189</sup>

Carrie experienced this ministry of comfort from her church community not only in the aftermath of her parents’ home going but also in the days leading up to their passing. Caring individuals from her church reached out to offer care to her mom and dad, giving Carrie a few hours of relief from the demands of being a full-time caregiver. This same congregation was a source of comfort to her after her parents’ passing. She recounted her experience this way, “I think it's the extension outside the four walls of the church in this church family that means so much to me... But it’s the love and the extension of the church family here that church goes with you. ... But, it's just all that happens in this building even if it's just the meals that are cooked

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<sup>188</sup> Acts 6:1-6.

<sup>189</sup> II Corinthians 1:3-4, NIV.

you know and stuff, to the outside the love that goes with it.”<sup>190</sup> In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for service is “abad” and can also be translated as worship. The ministry of the church body in Carrie’s situation demonstrated care through acts of service, large or small. It could be said that her church’s worship, expressed tangibly during her time of need, offered comfort.

The value of ongoing support provided by the worship community was further illustrated in the instance of Doris. Her loss left her widowed. Though she had children, often, they were not around throughout the week when she encountered grief. Her comfort was found in meeting together with several other ladies in her congregation. According to Doris, “I would call Leslie and say, ‘I’m not gonna make it today.’ And [Leslie] would say, ‘Oh yes, you are!’ There was a little café near where I lived, and she said, ‘Meet me out there.’ I would go, and I would sit with her, and we’d talk.”<sup>191</sup> The regular and ongoing care she received from those in her church helped to process the pain she felt from losing her husband.

Not only is the worship community able to provide comfort through actions, but it can also be supportive of the grief-stricken in other ways. In Brad’s case, “Knowing the love I experienced from my old home church and this church through that process was unbelievable. It helped me through the grieving process. Just to know that love never dies. And everyone, you know, showed love the whole time, and still are. It gave me peace to deal with the whole process because people were showing their love.”<sup>192</sup> Later during the interview, Brad noted that the worship community’s ongoing concern for his well-being was appreciated as well. While the

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2020.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Doris, November 21, 2019.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Brad, November 12, 2019.

expressions of care were sometimes verbal, Brad also indicated that sometimes words were not necessary when offering comfort. “Sometimes, it didn't have to take words. It was just someone just being there.”<sup>193</sup> In Hartley’s research on grief ministries in the church, it was similarly noted, “Those writing from their experience believe that the most important need they had was for a person to sit and listen or just provide a comforting presence.”<sup>194</sup> Carrie spoke of this as well, “The people who helped me the most came and were able to sit and be quiet, and just to be still and put their arm around you. Then, when you wanted to share you could because you felt you weren't competing. The people who helped me the most were able to take the time to listen.”<sup>195</sup>

In short, the church, as a worshipping community, can be a place of great comfort to the bereaved not only during immediate loss but through providing ongoing care. Such care can be offered through acts of service, ministry of words, and the ministry of presence (being there to listen). The weekly worship gathering provides one such opportunity for these activities. It is during this time that God’s people assemble to engage with God and encourage fellow believers.

### **The Practices of Worship Offering Hope and Comfort**

As the church gathers for worship, there is often a prescribed format or structure that guides the organization and flow of the service. Several components of worship were identified by the study participants as helpful to them in processing grief; memorial services, music, and the message of God’s Word.

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<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Mark Hartley, “Equipping Member of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief,” D.Min. thesis, Union University. 2018. ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis Global.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2020.

### *Memorial Services as Worship*

Describing the function and importance of the funeral or memorial service, Long wrote, “Performing these rituals is... a matter of telling the gospel truth, of giving testimony of faith, of acting out in the face of grief and loss our deepest convictions about the promises of God, in the risen Christ, and enabling us and our children to discover meaning and hope amid the ravages of death.”<sup>196</sup>

Though no questions about funeral services were planned, the subject arose during focus group sessions. When the topic surfaced, participants were asked to elaborate. Earl, the Senior Pastor of his church, spoke of the importance of the funeral and noted, “For so many people, the only worship that they will ever attend is a funeral.”<sup>197</sup> From his perspective, a memorial service was a means for connecting the life and legacy of the deceased to the message of the gospel.

The memorial service for Brad’s mother was meaningful and comforting to him for several reasons. The testimonies that were shared brought back fond memories of his mom and reminded him that her life had meaning and impact on those she touched. Musical selections offered during the service were indicative of the type of life she lived. “A couple of songs [reminded me of] some of the things my mother would always say. [For example,] ‘I Won’t Complain,’ no matter what the situation was, she talked about how blessed she was. She wouldn’t complain.”<sup>198</sup> Hearing others share their memories of his mother at her funeral brought comfort to Brad when it was needed.

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<sup>196</sup> Thomas Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Introduction, Kindle.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with a senior pastor, January 21, 2020.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Brad, November 12, 2019.



During that same conversation, Dan shared his perspective. He said, “What I look for in a funeral is the worship. It can be in the song, in prayer, or the Word. [It should be] God-glorifying and Christ-exalting.”<sup>199</sup> Dan also recalled the first time he attended a funeral where participants were invited to respond to the message of the gospel. This impacted him to the extent that he wants an invitation as part of his funeral service.

Similarly, Jeffrey spoke about his mother’s funeral service, where there also was a gospel invitation. According to Jeffrey, “At my mom's service, [the preacher] gave an invitation to come to the Lord... He didn't invite them to come forward to confess sins. The invitation was for those willing to give yourself to Christ and make Him your Savior. That was the first time in a funeral service [I have attended] where the minister made the eulogy about coming to Jesus and that we don't know how long we have. That struck me that day.”<sup>200</sup> Both Dan and Jeffrey found great solace in knowing that the message of the gospel was shared and that others were invited to embrace new life in Christ.

Though more attention will be given later to the impact of musical worship on grief, specific mention of music in the context of the funeral was also discussed by participants. One instance of this was brought forward by Carrie. When she lost her parents, the selection of music for their memorial was vital to her. As she indicated:

When [we chose] the songs that we wanted sung at my parent’s funerals, a lot of thought went into that, you know because it was kind of giving them one last chance to share how they felt. My dad always used to say that he wanted to be able to spring up out of his coffin and give the message of salvation one last time. I did not let him do that (said in humor). But, one of the songs that we did was "Victory in Jesus." I'm sorry, I can't remember what the other song was. But at the time, it was one that my parents had been listening to. And so you know, that was like giving them one last chance to be able to

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<sup>199</sup> Interview with Dan, November 12, 2019.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Jeffrey, November 12, 2019.

share their faith with anybody that was there and had come to show their love to my folks.<sup>201</sup>

When Beverly lost her father, she and her sister coordinated details of the memorial service on behalf of their mom. Their mother had previously indicated that the service would only have a handful of mourners, and there would be no music. While the daughters obliged their mother regarding attendees, they decided that there would be music at the grave-side service. Beverly's sister had arranged for a bagpiper to play "Amazing Grace." As she recalled the events of that day, Beverly said, "The hymn resounding across the mountains was absolutely gorgeous. Mama was so pleased and so thankful to my sister for having gotten music."<sup>202</sup> For this family, the uniqueness of a musical presentation, combined with the occasion and location made for a lasting memory that, when speaking of it years later, appeared to bring peace to Beverly's heart.

In summary, the funeral as a practice of worship brings a body together in a way that memorializes the deceased by honoring their lives, allowing them to vicariously have "final words" and share the gift of eternal life with non-believing attenders.

### *Music in Worship*

In research conducted by DiMaio and Economos exploring the role of music and grief, 94% of respondents in their study indicated that they used music as a means of finding comfort during their journey of grief.<sup>203</sup> Their research also yielded three broad categories, which demonstrated how their study group used music to confront their pain, adjust to their loss, or continue bonds with the deceased.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2019.

<sup>202</sup> Interview with Beverly, November 21, 2019.

<sup>203</sup> DiMaio and Economos, "Exploring the Role of Music in Grief," 2017.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

The themes of DeMaio and Economos resonate with the experiences of those who participated in this study. When speaking of using music as a means for confronting pain, the previously mentioned account provided by Doris demonstrates how music may bring sorrow in some instances of loss. Not only did she find the musical part of Sunday worship difficult, but particular songs that reminded her of her departed husband were also painful to experience in public worship. In her own words, “My husband’s favorite song was ‘Because He Lives, I Can Face Tomorrow.’ I can’t sing that song now without tears... It’s a beautiful song, and I want it sung at my funeral, but to this day, I can’t sing it, no, no, no.”<sup>205</sup> Though the message of the song has a definite meaning for her, the associated memory confronts her with emotion and pain.

During another focus group interview, Janet, a church worship leader, shared how music stirred up painful emotions in her life and how she has seen congregants experience similar feelings.

Sometimes when I'm singing, the emotions will well up, and I think, “Am I gonna get through this song and not cry here?” But I'll look out sometimes, when I'm singing, and I see people crying. And I don't think it's because I'm doing a really terrible job. And then later, they'll say, “Oh, that was my mom's favorite song, and every time I hear it, [the song] brings them back to me.” So yeah, I think that we all have that in us. Certain songs will bring people to mind.<sup>206</sup>

In these instances, there is support for DiMaio and Economos’ belief that music “could be a trigger for intense grief experiences.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Interview with Doris. November 24, 2019.

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Janet, January 21, 2020.

<sup>207</sup> DiMaio and Economos, “Exploring the Role of Music in Grief.”

In other cases, music was found to assist the bereaved in adapting to their loss. In the case of Jessica, who at the time was caring for her terminally ill husband, spoke of a season where she intensely pleaded with God for her husband's healing.

We were about six months into his tumor, and I was pleading every day. I felt like it was up to me to plead for his healing. I was obsessed with it. And a friend sent me a song, "Beautiful Emmanuel" that was written by, I think, a Liberty student, Travis Doucette. She sent me a link to it. That evening, after he had already gone to bed, I played it. There was a line in the song that says, "In His name, we will be healed, and in His name, we'll be restored." And for the first time, I realized my husband would be healed. I don't know why it took me so long to realize, even if he goes on, he's going to be healed.<sup>208</sup>

Through the message of a song, Jessica began to find comfort and to adjust her way of thinking as it related to her husband's healing.

Paul, a Gulf War Veteran, also shared how music brought comfort during loss. He watched as fellow soldiers fell as casualties of war. As he recalled, "I remember to this day the vision of the chaplain coming in a Humvee to give us communion, then we sang "Amazing Grace." It sure fit the occasion that day... It seemed like after we sang that song, some of the hurt went away that we had seen. So, it was good to start healing you."<sup>209</sup>

A different participant shared how she went through a season of grief during the birthdays of her deceased parents and over the Christmas holidays. She questioned, "What is missing in my life? Why am I not joyful?" She went on to say, "My husband had a day where he went downstairs, and he was working on his tractor out in the garage all day. So, I just cranked up the music and had praise tapes going on all day, and boy did the Lord touch my heart. You know, so that's why I say music has just been such a blessing."<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with Jessica, February 8, 2020.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Paul, January 21, 2020.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2020.

According to Jessica, “Musical worship helps those of us who are grieving. As long as you don't mind the tears, because I usually just cry the whole time. Yet, I don't want it to end. There is a real release of some sort to be able to just stand there with the body of believers and worship like that.”<sup>211</sup> For Jessica and others, music plays a role in helping those who have experienced loss to adjust and adapt to a new way of life.

For some participants, music seemed to serve as a way to remain connected with their deceased loved ones. In each of the group interviews, some indicated ties to their loved ones that were anchored to musical experiences and memories.

Thinking back to her childhood days and musical experiences with her family, one participant recalled, “We would sing four-part harmony. Daddy would sing tenor; Mother would sing bass. My sister was singing soprano at the time, and I would sing alto. It meant so much. We remembered favorite songs, and so forth. ‘Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine’ was one of [daddy’s] favorites, and I could hear him singing the tenor. They requested that song at his church all the time.”<sup>212</sup>

Similarly, Beverly’s love for music was instilled in her by her family. She shared, “I’ve always had music also. Daddy played guitar. He taught me the guitar and how to sing... The first time I ever remember being in church, hearing music, and looking up at the stained-glass window. The song was ‘Jesus Loves Me.’ I remember that. And I had tears coming down. And so anytime that I am focusing on the music, I will have tears.”<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Interview with Jessica, February 8, 2020.

<sup>212</sup> Interview with a church choir director, November 24, 2019.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Beverly, November 24, 2019.

In Laura's instance, various parts of the worship service served to connect her with memories of her mom and dad.

I think the Lord would surprise me during the services. I also think music was a lot of it. It may not have been the whole song; sometimes, it was a phrase that spoke or reminded me that they are released, so tears would come. But they would be joyful tears at the weirdest times. My daughter would look at me going, "Why are you crying?" Because my parents were so involved in church, the different parts of the worship, where I knew they would have participated, reminded me of them. And just knowing that this is still going on, and they are still worshiping.<sup>214</sup>

These accounts and others like them seem to reinforce what DiMaio and Economos identified as "connections between music experiences and the bonds the participants had with the deceased."<sup>215</sup>

In some instances, group members shared how they used music at the bedside of their dying loved ones to usher them from this life into the glory of heaven. During the final hours of Carrie's mother's life, Carrie and her husband sang through the hymnal. In her words, "As she was passing that last night...we sang her into God's arms."<sup>216</sup>

Leslie sat with her father in the hospital room the week leading up to his passing and recalled, "In fact, I was singing with him. I was singing and crying at the same time and was singing 'Abide with Me' and when I got to the line 'in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me,' daddy just went to heaven."<sup>217</sup>

When considering singing to loved ones during their final earthly moments, one pastor added these thoughts, "[Singing] can be so meaningful towards the end. You know, they think

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<sup>214</sup> Interview with Laura, February 8, 2020.

<sup>215</sup> DiMaio and Economos, "Exploring the Role of Music in Grief."

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2020.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Leslie, November 24, 2019.

hearing is one of the last things to go when somebody's passing on, and you might be helping them make that transition.”<sup>218</sup>

In addition to themes which paralleled the research of DiMaio and Economos making a case for the benefit of music in processing grief, several points emerged addressing music as (1) an act of worship that comforts the believer in times of sadness by providing theological reinforcement and (2) a tool used by the Holy Spirit to bring comfort amid suffering.

One pastor interviewed indicated that music sometimes parallels biblical themes and “can reflect the different stages of life and the different emotions that come with those phases... Music and Scripture in worship help us to rehearse what is theologically real and what is theologically important. The music itself may not affect me like it does a lot of people. The words do. It’s the theological concepts conveyed that mean a lot to me.”<sup>219</sup>

Will found his faith reinforced through the lyrical content of worship music as well. At one point in the interview, he shared how, during his college days, his spiritual formation was impacted by music that transformed his worship from something he did out of habit, to an act of the heart. Bringing his thoughts more toward worship in times of grief, he stated, “This whole process of loss and the subsequent hearing songs and Scripture different now than I used to, has truly opened my eyes...It’s bigger than I understood. It’s been powerful for me.”<sup>220</sup>

The benefit of theological reinforcement expressed through lyric as a way to provide comfort to those in lament is not a new concept. One example from history is the music of hymn writer, Charles Wesley. Noted scholar, Lester Ruth wrote, “Some of Wesley’s best-loved pieces

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<sup>218</sup> Interview with a senior pastor, January 21, 2020.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Will, February 8, 2020.

used [a] poetic device of singing a biblical story from the inside out to give worshipers the words for prayer which were deeply personal and intense and yet common to Christians. By placing worshipers in the shoes of biblical characters, he could provide the Bible as the source of language for songs which prayed the agony and ecstasy of what it means to be saved and encounter God.”<sup>221</sup> Often, those who are mourning find comfort in hearing the lyrics of songs that remind worshipers of God’s character and attributes.

As we consider the theological reinforcement found in songs of Christian worship, Jesus spoke of the work of the Holy Spirit when He said, “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”<sup>222</sup> It is the work of the Holy Spirit to minister comfort to the grieving. Jesus indicated in John 4:24; there can be no true worship apart from the Holy Spirit.

The final theme that emerged from the discussions centered upon musical worship and its ability to minister comfort in times of loss was the efficacy of music when it is filled with the Spirit of God. During one of the focus group interviews, a participant cited the reference in John 4 and indicated, “At our church, we invite the Holy Spirit to be in control and be a vital part of everything that's done on Sunday morning and in everything we do... I think there [are scriptures] that talk about inviting the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you in the process of worship.”<sup>223</sup> In a different setting, one interviewee interjected that the Holy Spirit used music as a tool to touch her heart and bring comfort. “I don’t know. It seems like God’s just singing and

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<sup>221</sup> Lester Ruth, “The Example of Charles Wesley” in Smith, chap. 15, Kindle.

<sup>222</sup> John 14:26, NIV.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with a church attendee, November 12, 2019.



dancing and worshipping with us, and it's through His Holy Spirit."<sup>224</sup> Her comment seemed to echo the Old Testament writing, "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."<sup>225</sup>

Jeffrey spoke of a time in his ministry when he was called upon by his family to minister at the home going service of his aunt and told about a young lady who ministered during that service in music.

As she began to sing a solo, her voice was absolutely amazing. She just blew it up. I can't remember the song, but I remember her expression as she sang. It was coming from way down, from her heart. When I got up to read the Scripture, I said to the young lady, "I understand why the devil was trying to stop you from getting here, because you had a blessing for everyone that was here." That moved me. I can't remember the song. All I can remember is how strong she was singing from her heart. You know when the Spirit moves you. You know what I am talking about. I can't sing, but you know I've been able to stand in the pulpit and be able to do things I never thought I could do or raise things from my voice. It's only God and the Holy Spirit.<sup>226</sup>

To summarize, participants in the study indicated that music, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, provides comfort to the bereaved by allowing them to confront their pain, adjust to their loss, continue bonds with the deceased, and reinforce their faith theologically.

### *Message of God's Word in Worship*

Not only did group members find comfort through music. They also expressed how Scripture and its teaching is an act of worship which speaks to them in times of grief. One man commented, "During the challenging times or bad times of life, hearing a certain Scripture or

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<sup>224</sup> Interview with a congregant, November 24, 2019.

<sup>225</sup> Zephaniah 3:17, NIV.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Jeffrey, November 8, 2019.

passage and hearing the pastor describe that Scripture reminds me of something I should have thought about when I was going through those bad times.”<sup>227</sup>

The challenge of loss extends beyond the immediate. Four years after her parents passed, Carrie continued to experience pain. She turned to God’s Word for solace and hope. “I have this little box at home, and it says, ‘Let your faith be stronger than your fears.’ And it is stashed with Scripture. And when I find one little scripture that I got from Pastor Earl on Sunday, or I find from reading my own Bible, it gets written on small pieces of paper and stuck in there. And then when I’m down, or I feel, you know, beaten down by life, I can go in there and find reassurance.”<sup>228</sup> The promises found in God’s Word were like a treasure that Carrie collected and placed in a box. She returned to her box whenever she needed to be reminded of God’s truth.

The practice of Scripture reading during corporate worship was something that Janet found to be uplifting. “Scripture is very important to me during worship, and sometimes we have other people [other than the Pastor] read scriptures. I really like that because there’s just something about [hearing] your brothers and sisters.”<sup>229</sup> While Janet expected the pastor to preach and teach from the Bible, having congregants lead worship through Scripture reading positively disrupted the routine and added to her worship experience.

Another group member spoke of the power of the Word when she said, “I think the Scripture speaks, and it’s a living Word. You can hear the same verse three times, but you’re

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with a church deacon, November 8, 2019.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Carrie, January 21, 2020.

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Janet, January 21, 2020.

going to get something else out of it because the Lord uses it in different ways. So, you find comfort through the reassurance that God is in control.”<sup>230</sup>

Participants also mentioned other facets of the spoken word, such as testimony and public prayer that bring comfort in times of distress and loss. Referring to times of pastoral ministry outside of the sermon, one gentleman shared, “When one of the pastors says something during the service that brings reassurance, and you can apply it to your [experience of loss], and you know your parents are with God, it absolutely helps. This happens almost every Sunday for me.”<sup>231</sup>

When speaking about the value of worship in ministering to the needs of the bereaved, one Associate Pastor commented, “Healing is a progressive thing that comes in installments. It doesn’t happen all at once. We have to keep applying medicine if we are going to get [better]. For me, worship is that medicine.”<sup>232</sup>

While a plethora of practices exist among worship traditions, participants of this study, identified memorialization of their loved ones, music, and the message of the spoken Word to be meaningful components of worship that minister comfort during times of grief.

### **The Pastoring Work of the Worship Leader to the Bereaved**

God’s plan for leadership in the New Testament church was assigned the role of “pastor.” Ephesians 4:11 indicates the work of the pastor is much like a shepherd who cares for his sheep. As noted in Holliman, “The goal of the pastor is the welfare of the sheep, providing for their

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<sup>230</sup> Interview with Laura, a Sunday School teacher, February 8, 2020.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with a church attendee, February 8, 2020.

<sup>232</sup> Interview an associate pastor, February 8, 2020.

needs. The pastor sees that the overflow of the worship experience restores the soul, rather than produces agitation... He clears away those things from a service that impede the flow of the Spirit.”<sup>233</sup> The accounts of those in this study demonstrate how life can be interrupted by loss. Those in pastoral ministry can walk ahead of their congregants to clear the path ahead.

Writing to the worship leader, Steve Berger said, “Every single week in the congregation there are hurting, heartbroken, suffering people. Many of them try to put their best smile on while they are dying inside. I strongly encourage you to set the table for these precious hurting saints so they can feast on God’s goodness.”<sup>234</sup> Berger, himself a worship leader, is familiar with losing a close loved one. His son was killed in a car accident at the age of 19. From this experience, Berger wrote of four emphases for ministry, (1) truth, (2) hope, (3) comfort, and (4) peace.<sup>235</sup>

In conversations with the focus groups of this study, participants told of their experiences where they provided or received care in ways that reflected Berger’s emphases, as mentioned earlier. Others suggested ways a worship leader might best serve congregants during times of mourning.

One associate pastor spoke about how he was summoned to minister to a family who was awaiting the imminent death of their matriarch. To complicate matters, one of the daughters of the near-death lady expressed intense anger toward God. Immediately, the associate pastor began to pray for godly wisdom. His response to the hurting daughter offered hope:

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<sup>233</sup> Roger Holliman, “The Role of the Pastor as the Primary Worship Leader in the Local Church, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://scholar.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1719&context=doctoral>, 55.

<sup>234</sup> Steve Berger, “Worship Leader Have Heart,” in *Worshipping Through Grief*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

The only thing I could think of was if I was in that position, what would I want someone to say to me? I would want it to come from the Lord. So my words to her in comfort were God has blessed you. He brought you to this hospital. And I asked her, “Did mom love the Lord?” She said, “Yes, of course. She loved the Lord. She was at church all the time. She was always doing everything she could for God.” I said, “See, He shows just how much He loves her because He could have took [sic] her 10 minutes ago. He allowed the doctor to go in and see her and make a diagnosis. He allowed the doctor to come out and tell you that she’ll be leaving. He allowed you the chance to go in there and tell your mom that you love her. God is being good to you in this moment. It’s only Him. So, you are being blessed.”<sup>236</sup>

In this instance, the pastor was ministering to the family at the hospital as they were anticipating the passing of their loved one. This is an essential part of the pastoring work of ministry. In this case, this associate pastor was able to bring perspective to a questioning family member, remind her of God’s wisdom and love, and offer comfort.

In another instance, Doris recalled the faithfulness of her pastor, who visited her regularly in the days and months following the loss of her husband. “My pastor also came by to see me every Wednesday. He would sit at the end of the table. He listened to me and encouraged me, but he knew how I felt. It was good to have him come see me each week.”<sup>237</sup> During his visits, he would not only bring comfort, but he would also encourage her to prayerfully consider the day where she would return to her position of ministry in the church and teach her Sunday School class.

Jessica spoke more directly to the worship leader and his ministry when she offered this advice, “Don’t mind the tears. I cry every Sunday, especially during the music. They aren’t tears

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<sup>236</sup> Interview with an associate pastor, November 12, 2019.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Doris, November 24, 2019.

of sadness; they are tears of praise. I am thankful for what God has brought me through and how He upholds me. But it took a while to get there.”<sup>238</sup>

Some group members emphasized the connection between ministry and relationships. A church deacon put it this way, “To begin to minister to someone, you have to get to know them. We need to take the time as a church leader, myself, or any ministers, to be open with everyone. It's hard. You need to get to know people and start a conversation... Let them know that you're there for them as a leader.”<sup>239</sup>

Along similar lines, one lady spoke of the importance of not only being approachable but also of being a good listener.

I've been around people who are so busy telling me everything and I am thinking, “You could have stayed home, and I would have been really glad.” I know that sounds ugly, but that's not the type of minister that I would call to say, “I need you. Can you come to be with me?” It doesn't help when someone is too busy telling me how important they are. I don't really want to hear about you when I'm grieving about somebody else... Listening is important.<sup>240</sup>

An associate pastor who participated in the study spoke of the importance of spiritual preparation. He noted that the leader must check his motivation and that all ministry must bring glory to God. He cautioned, “Don't stand in front of anyone unless you're willing to give everything you have to the Lord... If you have any ego at all, think about what you're doing before you do it. If you're involved in the equation in what you're doing for the Lord in ministry, you need to take a step back. It's got to be God first. Anything that you do for God is for His glory.”<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Jessica, February 8, 2020.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with a church deacon, November 12, 2019.

<sup>240</sup> Interview with a church choir director, January 21, 2020

<sup>241</sup> Interview with Jeffrey, November 12, 2019.

According to those involved in this study, the grieving souls within a congregation value a worship leader who cultivates healthy relationships and listens, seeks God's wisdom, assists in memorial services, shows sensitivity toward the hurts of the bereaved, allows for the expression of emotion in worship, and is available for ongoing support.

### **Summary of the Research**

In review, the experiences of those who contributed during the focus group interviews provided perspectives that were relevant to the questions of the research; (1) In what ways does the loss of a loved one affect the worship life of the believer? (2) In what ways can corporate worship encourage healing in the life of the believer grieving the loss of a loved one?

The stories of group members confirmed there are varied pathways of grief, and people process their losses differently. For most, their faith was not challenged by their loss. In other words, they did not question God's love or doubt the promises of His Word. They held steadfast confidence in God's plan. Many recalled the hope they have in Christ and spoke of the day they will be reunited with their loved ones. However, their faith did not exempt them from hurts and sadness and the reality of earthly separation from those they love. Their stories were poignant reminders that grief is not only experienced in the immediate. For many, it continues.

As the study findings indicate, a worshipping church has the potential for a positive impact upon the grieving believer in several ways. First, the worship community can minister when it communicates care by providing for the real needs of the bereaved, offering condolences, or demonstrating compassion through being a supportive and quiet presence.

Second, a number of the practices of worship were cited as tools for ministering to the grief-stricken both in the immediate and long-term seasons of grief. The importance of memorializing their loved ones in a way that honored their life and legacy, allowed the deceased

to declare a final message vicariously and provided a telling of the gospel message seemed to be a common element in many situations. Music was also identified as a practice of worship that impacted the grieving believer as a means for adjusting to loss, continuing bonds with the deceased, offering theological reinforcement, and encountering the Holy Spirit (the ultimate “Comforter”).

The message of the spoken Word was also established as a significant component of worship that ministers in times of loss. Whether through the proclamation of God’s Word in the sermon, the use of scriptures in the liturgy, Bible study, or the practice of personal meditation on biblical passages, the truth contained in God’s Word was demonstrated to bring peace in times of turmoil.

A final overarching theme of the research findings was the meaningful pastoral ministry of the Worship Leader to those in grief. Here it was suggested by study participants that healthy relationships, godly wisdom, participation in memorial services, sensitivity to the hurts of those in despair, allowing for the expression of emotion in worship, and being available for ongoing support were keys to effective pastoral care.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the scope of the study will be recapitulated, and the outcomes of the research investigation will be applied to the praxis of church worship. Suggestions for ongoing research will be also be provided.



## CHAPTER FIVE – THE RESEARCH APPLIED

### Summary

#### *Summary of the Problem*

Based on the New Testament narrative, the early church provided ongoing support to widows by assigning deacons to minister care to them. Other writings of the Apostle Paul instruct the church to encourage others through “Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” In his first letter to the church of Thessalonica, he spoke directly to the matter of loss and assured those who placed their saving faith in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. There will come a day when:

The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever.<sup>242</sup>

After reminding the church of this great day, Paul directed this congregation to “comfort one another with these words.”<sup>243</sup> God sanctioned the New Testament church to serve as agents of comfort and encouragement to the bereaved.

It is not uncommon for a grieving believer to turn to the church for spiritual, emotional, and physical support when they have lost a loved one. When this happens, there are instances where the church finds itself in an awkward position, unsure of what to say or do. Kenyon affirmed this when he wrote, “Ministering to those who grieve can be challenging, frustrating, and rewarding. You don’t need a degree in counseling or psychology to support those who are grieving. Sensitivity, patience, flexibility, and a follow-up plan are the basic requirements.”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> I Thessalonians 4:16-17, NIV.

<sup>243</sup> I Thessalonians 4:18, KJV.

<sup>244</sup> Phillip Kenyon, “Why We Fail the Grieving,” *ChristianityToday.com*.

### *Summary of the Research Questions and Hypotheses*

Offering “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” as a means of encouragement is an activity often associated with the worship community. As the community assembles regularly, it may be a viable means of offering ongoing comfort to those who encounter grief. To better understand and guide the church in providing support, the following questions were raised:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways does the loss of a loved one affect the worship life of the believer?

**Research Question 2:** In what ways can corporate worship encourage healing in the life of the believer grieving the loss of a loved one?

In response to the research questions, the following hypotheses were stated:

**Hypothesis 1:** The loss of a loved one can affect the worship life of the believer in terms of doubt, isolation, and emotional conflict.

**Hypothesis 2:** Corporate worship can encourage healing in the life of the grieving believer in terms of theological reinforcement, the human need to lament, and fellowship.

While much has been written on the topic of grief, there is a limited amount of literature pertaining to the relationship between grief and worship.

### *Summary of the Literature Review*

In a comprehensive review of the literature (Chapter Two) relevant to the research, scholarly writings were arranged categorically. Beginning with literature pertinent to the understanding of grief, the seminal studies of Kubler-Ross and her “stages of grief” was compared and contrasted with more recent models of grief theory provided through the research of Kenneth Doka and Melissa Kelly. Though Doka’s approach viewed grief as a unique journey

for all who encounter loss, Kelly’s attachment theory seemed most applicable for this study. Her framework was predicated upon an attachment to what she termed an “unshakeable Foundation.”<sup>245</sup>

To better understand experiences of grief and their effects upon the Christian, the literature focused upon individuals who wrote concerning their experiences with loss and told of its impact. Speaking of the significance of loss, C.S. Lewis wrote, “You will never discover how serious it was until the stakes are raised horribly high... Nothing less will shake a man – or at any rate a man like me – out of his merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs.”<sup>246</sup>

The writings of other Christian leaders (Sittser, Strommen, and Wolterstorff) speak in a more contemporary voice of the struggles associated with loss. “It’s the neverness that is so painful,” wrote Wolterstorff, “Never again to be here with us – never to sit with us at the table, never to travel with us, never to laugh with us, never to cry with us, never to embrace us as he leaves for school, never to see his brothers.”<sup>247</sup>

A second literary category of review pertained to the community of faith and its ministry to the grieving. The funeral serves as one means of providing comfort to those mourning the loss of a loved one. Most often, the memorial service is led by those serving in pastoral roles. The writings of Fowler and Long address the value of lament in worship and indicate that though part of the funeral rite is memorial in nature, there is also an opportunity to extend the gospel

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<sup>245</sup> Melissa Kelly, *Grief*, 80.

<sup>246</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 38.

<sup>247</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, chap. 1, Kindle.

message to those in need. According to Long, the funeral is “a profound witness for the good news in Christ about life and death.”<sup>248</sup>

Literature from the field of Christian counseling also guides the practices of the church concerning professional pastoral aftercare for those struggling with the sting of loss. H. Norman Wright’s work, *Helping Those in Grief*, provides a field guide for professional counselors and lay counselors by not only helping caregivers know what to say but also what not to say.

The review of relevant literature to the care ministries of the church that target the bereaved surveyed several case studies. One example was Michael Griffin’s dissertation, where he outlined a ministry strategy he developed for his congregation that focuses on providing ongoing care for the grieving. By meeting the needs of the lamenting congregant, Griffin indicated, “A church can find deeper communion with God when they find God suffers with them.”<sup>249</sup>

One practice of worship found in the literature was the use of lament in the liturgy. Lament is modeled in the Old Testament in the Psalms, and there is an instance in the New Testament where the Savior is heard quoting from the Psalms as he laments his death on the cross. The benefit of lament in worship was hailed by Witvliet when he wrote, “These moments are more critical for pastoral spiritual formation than a full-docket of educational programs. And how we handle them may say more about the gospel we proclaim than a year’s worth of sermons.”<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing – The Christian Funeral*, chap. 5, Kindle.

<sup>249</sup> Michael Griffin, “Growing Through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church,” 30.

<sup>250</sup> John D. Witvliet, “A Time to Weep: Liturgical Lament in times of crisis,” *ReformedWorship.org*.

A final category of the literature review was a single volume of literature comprised of a collection of articles published by Chuck Smith in *Worship Leader* magazine. The book featured prominent worship leaders and worship artists. Many shared their own experiences with loss and spoke of how they worshiped amidst the turbulent waves of grief. In an article by Warren Anderson, he spoke of the paradox of suffering, “Thus, in spite of what would seem logical, worship frequently is the offspring of suffering, although the gestation period seems to vary from believer to believer.”<sup>251</sup>

Despite the broad range of literature associated with grief, ministry to those grieving, and the practices of lament, the subject of “worship and grief” remains relatively new to research. There is an identifiable gap in the literature when evaluating the effectiveness of the practices of worship as a support to the bereaved.

### *Summary of Methodology*

Qualitative historical research was conducted by enlisting four churches in Amherst County, Virginia. Upon obtaining IRB approval to conduct focus group interviews in the four churches, group members were recruited to meet with the researcher. Criteria for participation in the study required those involved to verify (1) they were age 18 or older, (2) had experienced the loss of a close loved one, and (3) were an active church attendee. Following ethical research practices, participants signed statements of informed consent in advance of the focus group meetings.

Meetings were conducted at each of four church sites and were limited to 90 minutes in length. Using a list of six guiding questions (see Appendix A), participants were asked to share their experiences of loss and in what ways worship offered comfort and encouragement in their

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<sup>251</sup> Warren Anderson, “God of Sorrow,” in Smith, chap. 9, Kindle.

times of grief. Data gained from focus group interviews were then transcribed, reviewed, coded, and then interpreted to see what themes emerged from the experiences of participants.

### *Summary of Findings*

The preceding chapter presented findings based on the experiences of focus group participants. Their narratives revealed several themes relevant to the research, as mentioned earlier.

First, Grief is experienced and processed uniquely. No two people handle loss in the same way. The stories of those who participated in the research supported Doka's belief in the "individuality of grief."<sup>252</sup> Regardless of the particulars related to each loss, many of those questioned indicated that their faith remained strong, even though internally they were affected by their loss. God's goodness and faithfulness sustained them.

Because of the uniqueness of each loss and its impact on the worshiper, it is vital to recognize that there is no "one size fits all" approach to ministry in times of grief. For many, the journey of grief is full of twists, turns, and shadowed paths. The grieving believer needs someone willing to walk with them on their journey. When a worship leader is a trusted member of the pastoral team, they may be called upon as a sojourner on the road of sorrow. To best serve the hurting as a traveling companion, the worship leader must understand the world of grief, be patient throughout the journey, give ear to the voice of the bereaved, acknowledge the intricacies of their situation, respond with compassion, give space where space is needed, be comfortable with tears, and remind those who mourn that God walks with them more closely than anyone here on earth.

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<sup>252</sup> Doka, *Grief is a Journey*, 51.

Next, respondents identified the worship community as a potential source of comfort and encouragement. Every part of the church family can be a minister to the grieving. When a congregation provides physical, spiritual, or emotional support to its members who are mourning the loss of a loved one, it is meaningful to the person experiencing grief. Often, the church is organized and efficient in providing meals and ministering in the time of immediate loss. However, the more significant impact was demonstrated in the accounts of those who spoke of edifying words from fellow worshipers in the weeks and months following their loss.

This level of care within the church body does not happen accidentally. Often it must be modeled and taught by those in leadership roles. It would benefit worship leaders to creatively find opportunities within a worship service for the body to serve the hurting. This might include calling the church into a time of prayer where congregants can “lay hands” on the grieving family. Special services of worship planned periodically can be dedicated to remembering those within the congregation who have passed away and provide comfort to hurting families. Similar types of services are held by hospice organizations and may serve as a resource to worship leaders. Research conducted by Vale-Taylor indicated, “The support and commitment of others in the same situation meeting publicly together was valued by participants and hospices should continue to offer such services and events for bereaved people.”<sup>253</sup> A similar approach in the church community may provide an opportunity for the body to continue in ministry and service to those who experience ongoing grief. It may also be fitting to offer tribute to a deceased congregant, especially when the individual may have exhibited an aspect of Christian character that impacted the worship community. Such tributes may be done through word of testimony or

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<sup>253</sup> P. Vale-Taylor, “We will remember them: A mixed-method study to explore which post-funeral remembrance activities are most significant and important to bereaved people living with loss, and why those particular activities are chosen,” *Palliative Medicine* 2009, 23: 537-544.

media presentation. Poetry, song, sound bites, or video clips of the departed may be well suited to pair with other elements of the worship service and serve as a means of continuing the legacy of one who has passed away.

Just as it is helpful for the entire church body to edify, ongoing ministry to the grieving should also take place on a smaller scale and should be resourced by leaders of the worship community. The church staff should set an example by providing aftercare to its congregants who have suffered a loss. However, it may not be possible, in all instances, for a church pastor or staff member to serve as a caregiver to the bereaved. The laity of the church should also be involved in providing ongoing comfort to those who mourn. Church leaders should equip and train teams who serve on the frontlines of aftercare ministries. It should also stand ready to provide teams with guiding principles and protocols for attending to the grieving.

Additionally, the practices of worship that include memorializing their loved ones while declaring the message of the gospel were shown to minister comfort as well. As it relates to the methods of the worship community, music was an often-mentioned activity of the congregation that proved valuable by confronting grief, maintaining a connection with loved ones, and reinforcing God's character and work. Those interviewed indicated the declaration of Scripture, whether through sermon or public reading during worship, was beneficial and healing. Because much of the research focused upon the practices of worship, greater elaboration will be offered in the applications section of this chapter.

A final theme of the research was directed to those who lead congregations in worship. From the vantage point of the bereaved, a worship leader who is connected relationally, seeks God's wisdom, is sensitive to hurts, empathetic to their pain, and is available in the long-term proved to be most effective in meeting the needs of the grieving believer.



Worship leaders wishing to meet the needs of those in their congregations who grieve should ensure that their skill sets extend beyond musical excellence. The findings of the research reiterate this point. While talent and platform charisma has its place, the need for Christ-like compassion and care for their aching heart is what is greatly valued by those in mourning. The leader must be prepared to support the needs of the grieving. For aspiring worship leaders, such preparation should be the responsibility of higher education. Just as the curriculum includes training in areas of musicianship and leadership, the academy should equip students who will serve in the local church with skills needed to offer spiritual and emotional support. It should include guidance in making hospital or in-home visits to the sick and in encouraging family members who provide care to their loved ones. Ministry to families in the final moments of their loved one's life may be needed, and worship pastors should be prepared for such moments. In the days immediately following the loss of a loved one, the worship leader should be equipped to offer assistance to grieving families in the planning of a funeral or memorial services and be prepared to minister during such functions.

#### *Summary of Research Conclusions*

Research conducted among focus groups confirmed several points relative to the previously stated hypotheses. However, areas of disagreement also emerged from the interviews. From the study, it can be concluded that grief impacts the worship life of a believer. The experiences of respondents validated that loss affects the worshiper in terms of isolation. While the grieving believer may be heavily supported in the days immediately following a loss, some found it challenging to participate in corporate worship in their usual congregational settings and, for a season, opted to visit other churches where no one was aware of their circumstance and did not approach them to inquire about their loss. Similarly, the research presented instances where

those active in the worship community curtailed their involvement as leaders for a season, but in time returned to their normal levels of activity within church life.

Others in the study confirmed that grief manifested itself in terms of emotional conflict during times of worship. There were instances where songs sung during worship caused participants to reminisce about their loved ones in ways that brought them to tears. This echoes research of DeMaio and Economos, suggesting that music causes the grieving to “confront loss.”<sup>254</sup> Some found themselves saddened. Worship was an activity they could no longer share with their mate, parent, or child.

The proposition that grief affects the worshiper by producing doubt may hold validity in some instances. However, no interviewee in the study indicated losing a loved one caused them to question their faith. Though participants found themselves emotionally affected, and some withdrew from worshipping with their fellow believers for a season, their fundamental beliefs in God and His faithfulness remained strong. There were a few instances where God’s timing came into question, but His love was not doubted.

In determining the impact of worship upon the grieving believer, research supported some, but not all, facets of the hypothesis, and yielded unanticipated salient results. As the church gathers for worship, fellowship was identified as a means of encouragement. Some group participants appreciated the offering of condolences from congregants, especially in the months that followed loss. In the accounts of those interviewed, the care they received from fellow worshipers was described as meaningful.

Worship was also shown to provide theological reinforcement to the grieving believer. Both music and the spoken Word of God were identified as vehicles that fortified faith and

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<sup>254</sup> DiMaio and Economos, “Exploring the Role of Music in Grief,” *Bereavement Care*, 55.

reminded the worshiper of God's sovereignty and character. Participants also indicated that music and Scripture reinforce what is "theologically real and theologically important."<sup>255</sup>

Though lament, as a practice of worship, has a biblical foundation and was demonstrated in the life of King David and the life of Christ, it is not practiced in the worship of the churches represented in this study. Therefore, research findings did not confirm what was presented in the literature or hypothesized by the researcher.

Beyond stated hypotheses, an unconsidered area of impact emerged from the research. Participants identified the importance of honoring the faith legacy of their loved ones through memorial services. When a funeral service is treated more like a "home going" service, and when the gospel of Jesus Christ is emphasized, the event is more focused on the promise of eternal life brought about by the finished work of Christ on Calvary.

To summarize, the research conducted in the churches that participated in this study indicated the following: (1) Loss of a loved one can affect the worship life of the believer in terms of isolation and emotional conflict but did not cause participants to doubt their faith in God. (2) Corporate worship can encourage healing in the life of the grieving believer in terms of theological reinforcement and fellowship. The human need to lament was not identified as a theme in research. However, data indicated that funerals or memorial services were significant in helping the bereaved to find comfort in their times of pain. These conclusions provide a formative basis for the development of worship leadership strategies that potentially minister support and encouragement during times of loss.

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<sup>255</sup> Interview with a senior pastor, January 21, 2020.

## Application

The research measured the perceptions of congregants on matters related to worship and grief and provided a better understanding of the varied pathways of grief, the response of the people of God to those in grief, the practices of worship that minister in times of grief, and the pastoring work of the worship leader toward those in grief. With this groundwork in place, the following applications are offered.

### *Worship Ministry That Prioritizes Relationships*

Relationships are a foundational component of ministry. There is ample support in the literature underscoring the value of investing in the lives of the people one leads. Leadership expert John Maxwell noted, “When you respect people, and you spend enough time with them to develop shared experiences, you are in a position to develop trust. Trust is essential to all good relationships... Without trust, you cannot sustain any kind of relationship.”<sup>256</sup> Research data confirmed the bereaved seek support from established relationships. They look to their pastors and to fellow members of the worship community to find comfort. While the grieving ones appreciate condolences and acts of kindness from the church, there is also a more profound need for people who will walk alongside them in their journey. For some, this journey begins in weeks and months before a loss. In some situations, those participating in this study went through a long process of caring for their loved ones with a terminal illness. In many respects, their grief begins before their loss. As they care for their loved ones, the support they receive from pastors, lay leaders, and fellow congregants is essential. Hospital and in-home visits with these families are valuable and meaningful. Knowing that God’s people support them physically, emotionally, and spiritually is comforting. During these times, worship leaders may be asked to share

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<sup>256</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Relationships 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 5.

scripture, sing, or pray for the sick. Relating to congregants on this level can meet the needs of those facing death and show regard for a family during a time where support is much needed. The grieving ones are not looking for a person with all the answers. What they seek is someone who will take the time to listen, acknowledge their hurts, and enter into their grief. Developing connections of this kind requires an investment of time.

The ministry of worship touches the grieving when leaders step off of the platform at church and into a more casual setting. Taking the time to meet for a cup of coffee or spending time in the home of a grieving family can mean a great deal to the hurting heart of a worshiper. The time may be spent listening to stories about the deceased or singing and playing a favorite worship song around the living room piano. The availability of the worship leader is often more meaningful to the hurting than the leader's talent. Being accessible to congregants, initiating visits or opportunities to serve, and being prepared to offer comfort through silence, supporting words, or song tangibly demonstrates a leader is committed to serving the grieving believer through relational ministry and care.

#### *Worship Ministry That Is Receptive to the Needs of Those in Grief*

As a worship leader looks out into the congregation, it would be wise to remember Berger's words, "Every single week in the congregation there are hurting, heartbroken, suffering people. Many of them try to put their best smile on while they are dying inside. I strongly encourage you to set the table for these precious hurting saints so they can feast on God's goodness."<sup>257</sup> By design, this study sought to enter into the world of the bereaved and to gain a better perspective of the unique challenges encountered. Increasing understanding of these needs calls the worship leader to venture outside of the box of programming, arts, and media toward a

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<sup>257</sup> Steve Berger, "Worship Leader Have Heart" in Smith, chap 13. Kindle.

more holistic understanding of ministry. What the study revealed is there is no “one size fits all” approach when ministering during times of loss. Needs vary based on personalities and where they are along their grief journey. Once such needs are understood, a worship leader may be better prepared to design worship that encourages the bereaved. It was discovered through this study that a worshiper’s grief is genuine, specific, and long-lasting. The experiences of some respondents took place years ago, yet they were able to share with a clarity seemingly equal to those whose losses were more recent. As their stories were unpacked, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impact of grief associated with their loss was evident. Focus group interviews and the subsequent processing of the data proved challenging at times. In many of the conversations, the researcher found himself drawn into the stories of the bereaved, brought to tears in some instances, and rejoicing over God’s goodness in others. In the end, the research process required the author to immerse himself in the world of grief. As a result, there is an increased sensitivity toward the bereaved and a stronger desire to minister through worship in ways that respond to their needs.

The research proved that the need to understand better the world of grief is a key to improving pastoral and congregational ministry to those affected by a loss. As supported by the literature, practical strategies for equipping vocational and lay leadership have proven beneficial in enhancing the church’s ability to care for grieving congregants. Modeled in Hartley’s case study of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church, workshop training sessions focused on the ministries of (1) comfort, (2) worship, (3) presence, (4) encouragement, (5) understanding, and (6) prayer. Those who participated indicated a much stronger sense of preparedness and ease in approaching grieving individuals and ministering to them.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Mark Hartley, “Equipping the Member of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Other in Times of Grief.” 113-114.

While leadership may facilitate equipping of the saints to provide care to the grieving, the need for laity to extend care and comfort to the bereaved is significant. When congregations engage in this level of ministry, the church casts a broad reach and communicates it is receptive to the hurts and heartbreaks stemming from loss. Lay-led support group ministries, like Grief Share, extend the love of Christ during a difficult time and can be an effective means of outreach. This is especially true when such ministries are resourced, guided, and endorsed by senior pastors and other church staffers, including worship leaders.

*Worship Ministry That Responds to the Needs of Those In Grief*

When the worship leader's eyes are opened to the sadness of those who mourn the loss of loved ones, there may also be a sense of urgency on the part of the leader to serve the one who is hurting. One worship leader expressed it this way, "I've always believed that the job of a worship leader is to lift the eyes of a people to the face of their God. I believe that no matter what is present in the heart of a man, in the presence of God, the only response is worship... If you are a worship leader who is leading through tragic circumstances, look for new meaning in the songs you already sing. These songs, interpreted anew through the lens of the situation, can become quite powerful and meaningful."<sup>259</sup>

Ministering encouragement and comfort through worship by no means negates the needs of others gathered for corporate worship. However, worship leaders should have their fingers on the pulse of the congregation to know when it may be appropriate to lead in lament or in songs that reinforce the nature and character of God or to call the church to pray for the needs of those who have suffered the loss of a close loved one. Some leaders may hesitate to allocate time

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<sup>259</sup> Richie Fike, "Aftershocks: Worship in the Midst of a Tragedy," in Smith, chap. 7, Kindle.

during worship to focus on “heavy matters” for fear it may make the worship less celebratory or dynamic. Witvliet maintained that tension between the weighty and upbeat can be healthy for the worship community when he stated, “The occasional structures of lament and praise in times of crisis, and the cyclic structures which shape our yearly and weekly worship are the primary means by which the prayers of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation are expressed. At their best, these structures at once enrich, correct, and balance the corporate prayer life of the church.”<sup>260</sup>

As some participants in the study indicated, there were times during worship where songs prompted an emotional response. In such instances, the worship leader may need to respond in an empathetic way that gives the grieving worshiper the latitude to express their emotions.

Another aspect of ministry to those who have experienced loss is the degree of spiritual care extended by the worship leader. This presents a potential challenge. Worship leaders are often strong in their musical skills. When it comes to manners of pastoral ministry, a broader skillset is needed. In addition to being a proficient musician, it is of some benefit to be equipped in providing soul care, not only to those on worship leadership teams but also to the congregation at large.

The need to include topics of care ministry in the academic preparation of future worship leaders was mentioned earlier. In matters of equipping existing worship leaders who may not have been adequately prepared to provide spiritual and emotional support to those who grieve, mentoring may serve as a viable means of remediation. When seasoned pastors invest their time with those less experienced, a protege has the opportunity to participate alongside a mentor and

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<sup>260</sup> John D. Witvliet, “What About Liturgical Lament,” *Academia.edu*, accessed October 2, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/20220148/Reflections\\_on\\_Lament\\_in\\_Christian\\_Worship](https://www.academia.edu/20220148/Reflections_on_Lament_in_Christian_Worship), 15.



observe what appropriate and inappropriate words and actions in ministry to the grieving are. Mentoring relationships foster opportunities to seek advice and guidance in the planning of the funeral or remembrance services and times of congregational worship that minister to congregants faced with ongoing bereavement.

As the worship leader becomes a more effective minister in times of grief, the opportunity to lengthen the mentoring chain by equipping worship team members to understand better and serve the needs of the worship community. Leadership is influence, and John Maxwell has said, “We teach what we know, but we reproduce what we are.”<sup>261</sup> A caring and compassionate heart toward God’s people is the outworking of having a proper relationship of worship toward God. The leader sets the tone for those who serve as members on the worship team. The actions and instruction imparted to team members extend and multiply the potential for ministry to the grieving by responding to as many needs as possible.

#### *Worship Ministry as a Resource to the Bereaved*

When members of the worship community find themselves at the beginning of their grief journey, the worship pastor may be called upon to assist with preparations or to participate in the memorial service. Findings in the research suggest that when approaching worship in a memorial service, the worship leader should work with the bereaving family to select music and elements of worship that were meaningful to or typified the life of the departed loved one. Participants in the research found this to be particularly important in terms of providing the deceased a final opportunity to address those gathered in memorial vicariously. Another significant insight related to the funeral service suggested it offers an opportunity for the sharing of the gospel, especially to those who would typically never attend a church event at any other time.

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<sup>261</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Be a People Person: Effective Leadership Through Effective Relationships*, (Grand Rapids, MI: David C. Cook, 2013), 161.

Just as support and care are ongoing, the idea of resourcing grieving congregants extends beyond the funeral services to comfort and encourage the grieving in the days and months following their initial loss. Several focus group participants shared how their pastors reached out to them consistently to see how they were doing. In the instance of one lady who became widowed, she found solace in a weekly visit from her pastor, which continued for some time after her husband's passing.<sup>262</sup>

In addition to visits with bereaved members of a worship community, the worship leader may be a resource in ways specific to his position. A previous mention was made regarding discernment when selecting components of worship that will be part of a given church service. As the worship leader plans an "order of worship," it could be beneficial to consider where a well-placed word of comfort or encouragement could be placed within the liturgy. This may be delivered through a song lyric, prayer, transition moment, or through Scripture.

Through much of the research related to corporate worship, some data indicated worship leaders provided resources to the mourning that ministered in times of personal devotion. There was an instance where a Sunday School teacher was overwhelmed with sadness during a holiday season. The memories of her departed mother and father, combined with a few other family stresses, exacerbated her emotional well-being. Her church's worship leader had passed on several CDs containing worship music. The recordings became a means of comfort and encouragement in a difficult time. Worship leaders can extend their influence beyond congregational worship and touch individual lives by being a resource to congregants wrestling with grief. Sample resources are provided in Appendix B.

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<sup>262</sup> Interview with a widow, November 24, 2019.

## *Worship Ministry That Reflects the Character of God*

In the Old Testament, Job experienced the loss of his children and possessions. His physical health was weakened by leprosy, and he was judged by his friends. The grief he endured caused him to question God. For some time, God did not respond. However, when He did, the Divine Almighty reminded Job of His all-powerful and all-wise character.<sup>263</sup>

The worship leader who focuses on the character and nature of God and communicates sound theology through the parts of corporate worship offers hope and reminds the grieving believer of God's love, mercy, and sovereignty. While it may be assumed this would be a natural theme of corporate worship, it is conceivable there are imbalances within some congregations. The possibility exists that churches focus on the love of God and veer off into worship that is heart-focused and sentimental to the exclusion of worship that engages the mind with doctrinal truth. As John Piper wrote:

Worship must be vital and real in the heart, and worship must rest on a true perception of God. There must be spirit and there must be truth. . . Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a church full (or half-full) of artificial admirers . . . On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the discipline of rigorous thought. But true worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.<sup>264</sup>

Designing a service that seeks to include these biblical qualities in a way that encourages those who grieve the loss of a loved one might look like this way:

### **Opening Worship in Song:** *10,000 Reasons* (Redman/Myrin) / *Doxology* (Old 100<sup>th</sup>)

This song speaks of the character of God with phrases taken directly from Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," and from Psalm 145, "You're rich in love and slow to anger." It encourages worship that is a balance of truth and emotion in ways that respond

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<sup>263</sup> Job 38:1-18, NIV.

<sup>264</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2003), 81-82.

to God's nature, "Sing like never before, O my soul. I'll worship Your holy name." In the final verse, it talks about worship that is offered during one's last hours on earth and celebrates the glory of "praise unending" in Heaven. The singing of the *Doxology* is a suitable pairing, too, as it continues the theme of praise and connects the timeless to the contemporary.

**Prayer:**

Many evangelical churches practice extemporaneous prayer invoking God's presence upon the gathering of the community in worship. However, written prayers are a practiced part of other worship traditions and useful in the worship setting, especially in moments where words may be challenging to find on one's own. One example is located in the Book of Common Prayer:

*Lord, thou hast been our refuge, from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting to everlasting, and world without end... For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday that is past as a watch in the night... So, teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

**Ministry in Song:** *Psalm 23* (Shane & Shane)

This choral anthem is based upon one of the most familiar passages of Old Testament scriptures. It reminds listeners of the loving protection and provision of Christ as a "Good Shepherd" in earthly life and in the life that is to come for those who have placed saving faith in Him as their Shepherd. The lyrics, "I will dwell in Your house forever and bless Your holy name," reprises the theme of giving praise to the name of the Lord addressed in the opening song, *10,000 Reasons*. But like the scriptural passage, it also speaks of the times when one must walk through the shadows of death. But reminds the worshiper that they are not alone during those times, the Lord walks with them.

**Hymn:** *It Is Well* (Spafford/Bliss)

This traditional hymn of worship (as well as the story behind its lyrics, penned by H.G. Spafford) is familiar to many congregants in the evangelical church. It contains several theological implications including the doctrines of sin, the atonement of Christ, salvation, and the second coming. It also encourages the believer to declare by faith that God brings peace in times of trouble.

**Scripture:** John 14: 1-3 - Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled

*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.*

*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*

*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.*

**Worship in Song:** *Never Once* (Ingram/Redman)

A more contemporary expression of worship, this song is reflective and can cause the worshiper to recall times in their lives where they have experienced the faithfulness of God. Such examples of God's provision in times past can give hope for the future as the worshiper declares, "You are faithful, God You are faithful."

**Sermon:** Exposition of John 14:1-3

**Songs of Response:** *Great is Thy Faithfulness/ Great Are You, Lord* (Leonard/Ingram)

This concluding part of the worship service calls for the congregation to respond, publicly or privately, to the working of God's Spirit in the lives during the time of worship. The hymn *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* allows the worshiper to sing of the unchanging character and faithfulness of God using the language of Lamentations 3:23. This is followed by a worshipful declaration through the worship chorus, *Great Are You, Lord*, which reminds the worshiper that it is by God's grace there is life and breath and that man's "chief end" is to bring glory to God. By doing so, worship is brought full circle.

*Worship Ministry That Rehearses the Gospel and Celebrates Christ's Victory Over Death*

The central promise of the Christian faith is, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."<sup>265</sup> The message of the gospel, in its most succinct form, is the account of the birth, life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The gospel is not void of the experiences of grief. In the narrative of John 11, Mary and Martha called for Jesus after their brother Lazarus passed away. Jesus came and ministered to the sisters in their grief. He, too, was saddened by the loss. Scripture recorded, "he was deeply

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<sup>265</sup> John 3:16, NIV.

moved in spirit and trouble.”<sup>266</sup> Earlier in conversation with Martha, Jesus was asked why He did not save Lazarus from death. The Savior replied, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”<sup>267</sup> From this dialogue, it can be suggested that Lazarus was permitted by the Savior to experience death and for his sisters to go through the grieving process for a season. The question raised by Martha is repeated, in the contemporary, by those grieving loss. Jesus used this experience to teach Mary, Martha, and others about His mission. Referring to Himself as the “Resurrection and Life,” Jesus was declaring that the sting of death was powerless against the purpose and plan of God, who gave His son authority over the grave. Standing with Mary and Martha at the graveside of their brother, Jesus cried, “Lazarus, come forth.” The Savior’s words brought life and breath back into Lazarus’ body, and he was resurrected. The miracle performed that day validated Jesus’ power over death, confirmed His teaching, and gave comfort to His followers.

Jesus’ reference as the “Resurrection and Life” was also a foreshadowing of what would transpire in the days to come. He was speaking about His impending death as being part of God’s plan. Jesus Christ would die on the cross of Calvary. It was foreshadowed in Genesis at the cursing of the serpent and by the patriarch, Abraham, when offering his son, Isaac, on the altar of Mount Moriah. The Old Testament worship in the tabernacle and the temple included the blood sacrifice of a spotless lamb as atonement for sin. The prophet Isaiah foretold a Messiah that would be “like a lamb led to the slaughter.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> John 11:33, NIV.

<sup>267</sup> John 11:25, NIV.

<sup>268</sup> Isaiah 53:7, NIV.

The fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy came to pass as Jesus hung on the cross. His dying words, “It is finished,” brought an end to the practices of Old Testament worship, and Jesus Christ became the ultimate atonement for the sins of man. However, his death also brought mourning to those who loved Him. It was Mary Magdalene who mourned at the graveside of Jesus. Along with the disciples, she loved him and followed him. In the days following crucifixion, she grieved her loss. Then, at His grave, she was weeping because the body of her Lord had been taken from the grave. As she cried, the Savior approached her, saying her name. She immediately knew that Jesus had risen from the grave in triumph over death.

The gospel gives hope for those in Christ. For those who mourn their losses, there is the confidence that if their loved one was a believer in Christ, the ceasing of life on earth is the commencement of life eternal in heaven. When worship takes the time to rehearse these events, the grieving believer finds hope in the glorious gospel of Christ.

#### *Worship Ministry That Anticipates Reunion*

Because Christ overcame death and made it possible for all those who place saving faith in Him to inherit eternal life, there is an anticipated reunion with loved ones who have departed this world. The thread of I Thessalonians 4 has been woven throughout this study and referenced as a passage of Scripture that instructs the church to comfort the bereaved and to worship with an eye on eternity.

Just as worship looks back to rehearse the message of the gospel, there is also an anticipatory looking ahead to what Paul called the “blessed hope.”<sup>269</sup> The promise of a heavenly home gives great encouragement to those suffering. Most participants in this study had the assurance they would again see their loved ones in Heaven. Their confidence brought comfort. It

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<sup>269</sup> Titus 2:11, NIV.

did not remove the pain of loss, nor did it prevent them from tears as each shared their story. Yet, there was a reminder from God’s Word that their hurts are only temporary. There will be a new day in Christ Jesus:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”<sup>270</sup>

Celebrating the “trustworthy words” of God’s faithfulness in worship here on earth can offer comfort to the grieving, remind them of their future, and prepare the church for what God has revealed will be the activity of His saints for eternity. On that day, all the inhabitants of heaven will engage in perfect worship centered around the throne of God.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

From the gap in the literature and the somewhat unexplored relationships between worship and grief, there are several ways that additional research would be beneficial to the church and the academy. The research was conducted among churches in Amherst County, Virginia. Though Amherst is located between two larger cities with prominent universities, the culture is more relaxed. The research insights gained from the congregants of the churches participating in this study are reflective of the rural culture. One recommendation for additional study is to replicate the study in a metropolitan area with churches having more than 500 attendees and led by a pastoral staff that includes a paid worship leader or minister of music.

Another unexplored aspect of the research is the relationship between grief and worship during times of loss for the non-believer. Reminded of one study member’s statement where he

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<sup>270</sup> Revelation 21:3-4, NIV.



noted the funeral service may be the only worship service many will ever attend, it may benefit worship leaders and those preparing to lead worship to know how to better minister in these contexts.

A final opportunity for additional research pertains to acts of worship offered during the final moments of a person's earthly life. This concept emerged from focus group interviews and was referenced in the findings section but extended beyond the research questions of this study. Such a study would seek to determine feasibility for the worship of earth to usher a soul into the worship of the heavenly.

### **Conclusion**

The world of grief is complex, and the impact that it leaves upon those who face the death of a loved one is unique to every person. The stories and experiences referenced by the literature and original research confirm this to be true. It can also be said that these experiences leave a lasting impression. As one psychologist noted, "The notion that one mourns a loss and then 'gets over it' to the extent that emotions about the loss are no longer triggered, is a myth."<sup>271</sup>

For those struggling with such strong emotions, many turn to the church for support. There is strong biblical evidence that the church is called to minister to the bereaved. Meaningful worship ministry to congregants in times of grief requires effort but is worthwhile. Consider Del Zoppo's words:

How important is the task of the religious leadership in times of loss? How vital is the function? Let us borrow from a description often quoted by Rabbi Jacob Goldberg, an elder in bereavement caregiving in the US. He asked me if I, as a psychologist, would give at least one hour to hearing the story of those who mourn. "Why an hour?" I asked. Rabbi Goldberg replied: "To leave enough time to help them to praise the Lord, for he is

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<sup>271</sup> Mary C. Lamia, "Grief Isn't Something to Get Over," *PsychologyToday.com*, May 1, 2011, accessed Feb 28, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/intense-emotions-and-strong-feelings/201105/grief-isnt-something-get-over>.

good; to sing praise to our God for he is gracious; to help them to rebuild Jerusalem in the midst of their dying and living.”<sup>272</sup>

The research presented in the preceding has heeded Goldberg’s advice and heard “the story of those who mourn.” After a comprehensive review of the literature pertinent to the study, the research turned attention toward stories of grief. Initially, the researcher devised research questions, hypotheses, and interview questions. He then gained IRB approval and scheduled focus group meetings with those who volunteered their time to share their stories of grief.

Moments into the first group meeting, it became apparent that more was going on than inquiry into the topic and soliciting responses from participants. The stories that unfolded were touching. Speaker and listeners were laughing at times, crying at times, and offering support to one another. In the groups to follow, there were similar outcomes.

Not only was research conducted, but the discussions that centered on grief and worship resulted in times of ministry for most who were involved in the study. These groups represented cross-sections of the worship communities they represented. The stories testified of God’s grace and mercy in times of need. Song lyrics that were quoted and referenced in these conversations reminded that the musical heritage of church worship stands as a resource in times of loss.

Based on this study, it is recommended that churches foster ongoing conversations between the grieving, those who lead worship, and the worship community at large. Such interactions benefit all involved. The grieving ones are given a voice and find solace in knowing that others have taken the time to enter into their experiences, and fellow grievers realize they are not alone in their pain.

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<sup>272</sup> Patrick M. Del Zappo, “The Religious Community in Times of Loss: Strong, Loving, and Wise,” in *Living With Grief: At Work, At School, At Worship*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 183.

It is further recommended that times of ministry to the grieving be incorporated into the corporate worship of the church. Such times of worship may be through music that reminds the worshiper of God's sovereignty, purpose, or of His tender-loving mercies. Scriptures can reinforce similar themes or give voice to the lamenting. Intercessory prayer may be offered by the worship community on behalf of the grieving in ways that edify and bring comfort to brothers and sisters during a great time of need. Remembering instances where the deceased said or did something formative in the building of the worship community or modeled Christian values that brought glory to God is also worthy of incorporating into a worship service.

In the final assessment, the value of such research should serve to raise the awareness of the needs of the grieving and beckon those leading worship to serve their congregations well. Until that great and glorious day when we shall forever be with the Lord, may it be the goal of worship leaders everywhere to "comfort one another with these words."<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> I Thessalonians 4:18, NIV.

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## APPENDIX A

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

*The Impact of Worship on the Grieving Believer*

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1. Would you please briefly describe the circumstances of your loss?
2. Before your loss, did you participate in the worship of a local church community?
3. Did your level of participation in worship change following your loss?
4. Has worship played a role in processing your grief?
5. If worship has played a role in how you have processed your grief, would you please describe those experiences? Were there any particular parts of worship that provided solace?
6. What advice would you offer to worship leaders who desire to support those in their congregations who grieve the loss of a loved one?



## APPENDIX B

### Suggested Resources for Worship Leaders Ministering to Those in Grief

#### Music Playlists for Older Congregants:

- It Is Well with My Soul (Spafford/ Bliss)
- Beulah Land (Parsons)
- In the Sweet By and By (Bennett/Webster)
- He Giveth More Grace (Johnson-Flint/Mitchell)
- No More Night (Gaither)
- What A Day That Will Be (Hill)
- What a Friend We Have In Jesus (Scriven/Converse)
- God Will Take Care of You (Martin/Martin)
- Rock of Ages (Toplady/Hastings)
- O That Will Be Glory (Gabriel)

#### Music Playlists for Younger Congregants:

- I Can Only Imagine (Mercy Me)
- Beautiful Things (Gungor)
- Psalm 23 (Shane & Shane)
- Blessings (Laura Story)
- I Will Rise (Chris Tomlin)
- Even If (Mercy Me)
- See (Stephen Curtis Chapman)
- I Will Trust in You (Lauren Daigle)
- Not For a Moment (Meredith Andrews)
- Sovereign Over Us (Aaron Keyes)

#### Scriptures that Encourage:

- I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you.  
Jeremiah 31:3
- God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Psalm 46:1
- And call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.  
Psalm 50:15
- Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.  
Psalm 55:22
- You have collected all my tears and preserved them in your bottle! You have recorded every one in your book. Psalm 56:8

- I am the Resurrection and the Life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.  
John 11:25, 26
- Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.  
John 14:1-3
- For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
Romans 8:38,39
- Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.  
2 Corinthians 1:3,4
- Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose great mercy gave us new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! The inheritance to which we are born is one that nothing can destroy or spoil or wither.  
1Peter 1:3-4
- Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."  
Revelation 21:1-5

Prayers:

### **A Prayer of St. Francis**

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow charity;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light; and Where there is sadness, joy.  
O, Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled, as to console;*

*To be understood as to understand; To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying to ourselves that we are  
born to eternal life.*

### **A Prayer of St. Augustine**

*Blessed are all thy saints, O God and King, who have traveled over the  
tempestuous sea of this life, and have made the harbor of peace and felicity.  
Watch over us who are still on dangerous voyage.*

*Frail is our vessel and the ocean is wide; but as in thy mercy thou hast set our  
course, so pilot the vessel of our life towards the everlasting shore of peace, and  
bring us at last to the quiet haven of our heart's desire, where thou, O our God,  
are blessed and livest and reignest forever and ever. Amen.*

### **A Prayer of Thomas á Kempis**

*O most sweet Jesus, my one hope of salvation, write, I beseech Thee, Thy Name  
upon my heart, not in the letter but in the spirit; and grant that by Thy Grace it  
may be so strongly there impressed, and may there remain, that neither prosperity  
nor adversity may ever dim my love for Thee. Be Thou to me a strong tower from  
the face of the enemy, my comforter in tribulation, my counselor when I am in  
doubt, my refuge in distress, my lifter-up when I fall, the model of my life, my  
restorer when I go astray, and my ever-faithful guide through all the dangers and  
temptations of this mortal life to my home which is above.*

### **Prayer of Martin Luther**

*O my heavenly Father,  
God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
God of all comfort,  
I thank you for revealing to me  
your dear Son, Jesus Christ,  
in whom I believe,  
whom I have preached and confessed,  
whom I have loved and praised.*

*I pray, my Lord Jesus Christ,  
take my soul into your hands.*

*Heavenly Father,  
I know that  
although I will live this body*

*and be taken from this life,  
I will live with you forever,  
and that no one can pluck me  
out of your hands.*

*God so loved the world  
that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish,  
but have eternal life.*

*Our God is the God of salvation,  
and the Lord delivers from death.*

*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.  
You have redeemed me, O Lord, the God of truth.*

**Nick Fawcett**

*2000 Prayers for Public Worship.* Stowmarket, Suffolk, UK: Kevin Mayhew Limited, 2008.

*Loving God,  
you tell us to look forward to a day  
when your kingdom shall come  
and your will be done  
a new age when there will be no more suffering,  
sorrow or death;  
a place where there will be no more mourning and weeping,  
every tear wiped away from our eyes.  
help us to find comfort in your love.  
We thank you for that promise,  
and we look forward to that time,  
but we pray also for your help now,  
for today our grief is all too painful,  
and the fact of death an all too stark reality.  
help us to find comfort in your love.  
so we ask you to reach out to us  
and to all whose lives have been enriched  
by A's presence –  
family,  
friends,  
neighbors,  
colleagues –  
each so much poorer for A's passing.  
Help us to find comfort in your love.*

*Loving God,  
reach out now into the darkness of this moment,  
the blackness of our sorrow,  
and grant your hope which defies understanding,  
and your hope which will never be extinguished.  
Help us to find comfort in your love,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

**Dena Johnson Martin**

*A Prayer for Joy After Morning,*

<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/prayers-for-the-loss-of-a-loved-one-find-comfort-and-peace-in-the-grief.html>

*Dear Lord, help me accept the difficult circumstances in my life. Thank You for staying by my side, even when the hardships of life seem to have come between us. I hand You my heartache today, and I trust You to use my pain for a greater purpose in others' lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

*The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him. Psalm 28:7*

*Lord, you are my strength and my shield. You are my protector, my warrior, who goes before me and behind me. I know I must learn to release my fears, my doubts, and trust you, trust you to fight the battles only you can fight. It's only by trusting you, by turning my heart toward you and believing the promises of your Word, that I can find joy again.*

*Show me your faithfulness again. Show me your goodness and grace. Show me your unmatched and unconditional love for me. Wrap me in your arms and smother me with your peace so I can experience your joy so that I can praise you with song.*

*You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, Psalm 30:11*

*I know you will turn my mourning into dancing, that you will again clothe me with joy. I don't know how. I don't know when. But I choose to believe, to trust your word, to believe your truth.*

*Help me to refocus my heart and mind, to think on those things that are lovely and noble and true and right and excellent and praiseworthy. Help me to bring my cares to you, casting them on you because you care for me. Teach me to cast out worry and anxiety and fear and instead bring my concerns to you with thanksgiving. Help me be transformed by the renewing of my mind. Give us joy, true joy that only comes from you. Amen*

**Robert M. Hamma,**

*In Times of Grieving: Prayers of Comfort and Consolation*, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004).

*Lord, I know  
whatever comfort I experience,  
whatever hope I discover,  
whatever peace I possess,  
is a gift from you.  
On my own  
I could never accept this loss  
or find the strength to go on.  
But I recognize that within me  
something stirs, a strength is emerging,  
and I know it so not of my own making,  
but it is yours.  
I know that you are with me,  
and that with you  
all things are possible.*

**Thomas McPherson**

*When It Feels Impossible to Pray: Prayers for the Grieving*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2018).

*O Lord, whose ways are beyond understanding  
listen to the prayers of your faithful people:  
that those weighed down by grief  
may find reassurance in your infinite goodness...*

*Lord Jesus Christ  
by your own three days in the tomb,  
you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you  
and so you made the grave a sign of hope that promises resurrection  
even as it claims our mortal bodies.*

*Grant that our  
brother/sister/daughter/son/husband/wife, N,  
may sleep here in peace  
until you awaken him/her to glory,  
for you are the resurrection and the life.*

*Then he/she will see you face-to-face  
and in your light will see light and know the splendor of God,  
for you live and reign forever and ever.*

Print Resources:

Hodges, Samuel J. IV, and Kathy Leonard. *Grieving with Hope: Finding Comfort as You Journey through Loss*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.

MacArthur, John F. *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth from Heaven about the Death of a Child*. Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Rogers, Joyce. *Grace for the Widow: A Journey Through the Fog of Loss Recovering from Losses in Life*. Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009.

Vroegop, Mark. *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

*NIV Hope in the Mourning Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Videos:

- Lauren Daigle: Trusting God in the Midst of Grief - <https://youtu.be/3t2Tf1Dqf7w>
- Glorifying God in Unshakeable Grief – John Piper - <https://youtu.be/rThMTUJzV-8>
- How to Deal with Dark Times – Tim Keller - <https://youtu.be/ulmaUtbayGY>
- Don't Get Over It. Grow Into It – Gerald Sittser Tells His Story of Grief and Growth - <https://youtu.be/NPNWTq7IISo>
- Finding Strength While Grieving the Loss of Your Spouse – Kate Cantelon - <https://youtu.be/euTS6mzIBC4>
- Pastor Davey Blackburn: Working Through Unthinkable Grief & Loss - <https://youtu.be/XjYlwiUA9Qw>

Support Ministry Websites for the Grieving:

- GriefShare – [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org)
- iCare Aftercare – [www.icaregriefsupport.com](http://www.icaregriefsupport.com)
- Grief in Common – [www.griefincommon.com](http://www.griefincommon.com)
- Biblical Counseling Coalition - <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org>

## APPENDIX C

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 29, 2019

Thomas W. Doss  
IRB Exemption 3978.102919: The Impact of Worship on the Grieving Believer

Dear Thomas W. Doss,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

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