

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

A Study of Support for the Bereaved in the Local Congregation

A Thesis Project Submitted to
the Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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The bereaved often face the ongoing challenges of grief with little support from the Church. This study aimed to resource the Church with practical methodologies to help congregants cope with grief. The study examined the troubling issues the bereaved experience after the death of a loved one. Survey data was collected from ten United Methodist members and had lost an immediate family member within the past five years. The measure consisted of interviews and questionnaires. An email and a verbal announcement during church worship service built the sample. Findings reveal that approximately 90% of participants experienced grief and emotional effects after losing a significant person in their lives. Initially, participants reported that they were encouraged and supported by the Church's efforts to provide pastoral care and meaningful worship experiences during the funeral of loved ones. However, once the funeral was over, they were left alone to face the reality of death and grief. A small percentage (10%) of the participants reported never receiving support from the Church. Thus, it has been hard for many to attend worship on Sunday morning and church activities. This study underlines *presence* as an effective ministry to help the bereaved cope with grief. The researcher used the qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires to outline practical methodologies to provide meaningful and effective grief care ministry to congregants suffering from grief. Pastors and congregations interested in increasing service to those suffering from grief to take advantage of the provided practical methodologies to help congregants with grief.

Keywords: grief, support, resource, and ministry of presence.

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Abbreviations

DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
LUSOD	<i>Liberty University School of Divinity</i>
FUMC	<i>First United Methodist Church</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction

Experiencing grief after the death of a loved one is a natural part of life. Though death is one of the topics many tend to avoid, it is an inevitable part of the life of every human being.¹ In the event of a death, the Church initially offers support and compassion to grieving families. Such sources of support include providing food, sympathy cards, and attending the funeral service. However, many of these support ministries that the local Church engages in are without concrete plans to offer ongoing assistance to congregation members suffering from grief. Some church members tell the bereaved to reach out to them if they need anything. Such a statement has become familiar and almost a cliché in the local church. Christians possess this theological mindset that *everything will be fine*. Congregation members tell the bereaved to be strong and reach out if they need anything. However, those messages are often perfunctory. The bereaved receives the message and then remains alone to deal with pain and grief. Thus, instead of expressing grief in public, the bereaved persons suppress their emotions. Moreover, most often, those who grieve do not call others to express their grief or needs.

Direct observation confirms that even spiritual leaders do all they can to avoid expressing grief in public. They suppress emotions and feelings and do not want parishioners to know about it or notice their feelings. Moreover, when the pastor is in great pain due to the loss of a loved one, the unrealistic expectation is that pastors should be strong enough to handle their grief because of their spiritual status. Although the Church comforts its members when death strikes, it

¹ Atalanta Beaumont, "We Need to Talk about Death: Addressing the Grieving Process," *Psychology Today*, (March 9, 2017): 1211. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/handy-hints-humans/201703/we-need-talkabout-death>. Accessed on December 10, 2020.

has limited resources to provide coordinated grief support beyond the memorial, cremation, or graveside service.

In addition, the church is unclear about how to respond to the ongoing needs of those suffering from grief. In other words, the Church is ill-equipped to support congregation members' deep, ongoing care needs. As a result, grieving individuals are left with no adequate source of guidance as they learn to live with grief. A lack of coordinated response to individuals' ongoing grief signals the absence and need for clear and practical grief ministry support. The local church should expand and deepen its grief ministry resources to become an integral part of the broad range of other pastoral activities.

This introductory chapter presents the problem and purpose statements that describe the focus of the project. It also includes the researcher's underlying assumptions about the problem and the research process, definitions of terms, delimitations, and limitations of the research project. Finally, the chapter ends with a thesis statement that reflects the principal argument of the project.

Ministry Context

The ministry context of this research project is located in the local churches of St. Luke United Methodist in El Paso, Texas, and First United Methodist in Haskell, Texas. Both churches are part of the United Methodist denomination that was created in 1968. The Methodist movement was established originally by John Wesley and his brother, Charles Wesley, both Anglicans, while students at Oxford University in England in the 1700s. During that time, the co-founders of the United Brethren in Christ, Philip Otterbein, and Martin Boehm, were leading similar movements that helped people grow in faith. Later, Otterbein and Boehm joined

Wesley's movement to form The United Methodist Church, a worldwide Christian denomination found on every continent of the world today.

John and Charles started the Methodism movement as a means of spreading scriptural holiness. They understood the need for a local church to have an organized system of communication and accountability. Thus, they developed *connectionism*, a formal structure of classes, societies, and annual conferences. Today, the United Methodist denomination continues the connectional system, enabling the people called Methodists to carry out the Great Commission:² *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:16-20, ESV).*

The Great Commissioning occurred in Galilee, not in Jerusalem though Jerusalem was the center of Christ's historical-redemptive actions. The New Testament records how the church grew from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). However, the church's growth was not a result of the disciples being in Jerusalem but a result of Jesus's command to make disciples of all nations.

Members of St. Luke UMC and First United Methodist Church obey Christ's command to make disciples of all nations (John 14:21). To fulfill this command, the two churches consistently preach the Good News beyond the church walls and provide comfort to those who are grieving. Additionally, church members seek opportunities to partner with missionaries worldwide and strive to evangelize to the surrounding communities and places where Christ is not known (Romans 15:20). For this reason, the two congregations unite with Christians who labor in other countries, developing relationships with them, sharing their lives, and journeys of faith.

² United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶ 701

Moreover, St. Luke UMC and FUMC are part of an interconnected network of United Methodist churches and organizations that unite in proclaiming the gospel. The process allows each congregation to accomplish more than what it can accomplish by standing independently. Within the United Methodist connectional structure, conferences are the main bodies that provide discernment and decision-making. The two brothers, John and Charles Wesley, saw Methodist conferences as gathering places where God's grace may be revealed. At every level of connection, within a Methodist conference, bishops, district superintendents, pastors, and lay members come together to discuss essential issues of the church while discovering God's will for the body of Christ – the United Methodist Church.

The United Methodist Church articulates a shared mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."³ Each congregation lives out that mission on its own, depending on its community's needs. Members of these two congregations envision transformation taking place through a phase of discipleship training.⁴ With God's help, they reach out and welcome people into Christ's body. They also help people to see Christ through their unique talents and gifts. They reach out, nurture, and send disciples into the world not only to lead and transform lives but also to care and to be the hands and feet of Christ and to provide *comfort* to those in the church who have lost loved ones.

Detailed Project Setting

St. Luke United Methodist Church was founded on February 11, 1935, in El Paso, Texas. The first service was held on July 2nd, 1935, in one of the parishioners' homes. In April 1952, St. Luke moved from meeting in a home to its current location at 9915 Montwood Drive, El Paso,

³ United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶120.

⁴ Ibid., ¶ 122.

Texas. The church location falls under the jurisdiction of the United Methodist New Mexico Conference. The conference vision is “to create relevant, passionate, and life-changing Churches.”⁵ The local church values and supports church ministries that are Christ-centered, outward-focused, and risk-taking - taking the gospel to unfamiliar places.

As part of the connectional church, St. Luke United Methodist Church holds a rich and vibrant history that speaks of God's grace and faithfulness. As the story of God's love continues to be proclaimed in this community, local church members are being strengthened to announce and proclaim God's goodness for all creation. Upon entering the church premises, one is overcome with a sense of love and beauty of God's creative work. The stained glass and wooden doors present a picturesque scene in many ways.

Lay members are humble and gentlefolk who serve God with gladness. Within the church are multiple generations of families who love God and are also hardworking, middle-class people. There is a healthy segment of members who are retired or nearing retirement. The average Sunday morning attendance is sixty, while Sunday school attendance is twenty-five. Weekly Bible Studies and Saturday worship draw thirty people into the local church, while morning prayer meetings average twelve members.

In the past ten years, the church has enjoyed numerical and spiritual growth. Last year (2019), for example, the church had a 0.5% growth in membership. Most of the new members belong to the baby-boomer generation. Older members are more traditional and values-oriented than the younger generation. In addition, older members are intensely patriotic and family-oriented.

⁵ Information retrieved on the United Methodist New Mexico Conference website: [Our Vision, Mission, Values & Goals | New Mexico Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church \(nmconfum.com\)](https://www.nmconfum.com) Accessed on November 4, 2020.

The church has progressed but not without challenges and pain. For example, when the older generation wanted to sing traditional hymns, the younger generation preferred contemporary songs. The tension led senior members to request the church leadership to consider two different services: a traditional and contemporary service. However, when the administrative council met in April 2017, they voted to have blended worship. As a result, those who preferred one type of worship over the other left the church. After pastoral leadership followed up with those who left, it was discovered that some joined other denominations while others simply chose not to affiliate themselves with any local church.

One vision unites St. Luke's ministries: Grow with God, Grow others, and Grow in service into the world. St. Luke's administrative council has a responsibility for overseeing all the ministries. The council meets every month to oversee the administration and ministry of the congregation. The council also determines God's call to the congregation for ministry that is transformative. Members of the administrative council initiate plans, establish goals, implement action plans, and evaluate the effectiveness of congregational ministries to nurture, engage in outreach, witness, and provide administration.⁶ The council also recommends the pastor's compensation, housing needs, and other benefits for the pastor(s) and other staff members.

Chairpersons of different committees constitute members of the administrative council. Each committee has a leadership team, target constituency, and mission, all working with a shared vision. Members understand the overall mission and vision of the church and work to

⁶ United Methodist Book of Discipline, ¶ 252.

fulfilling the church's vision. They accomplish this by providing a job description for all staff members.

The church lay leader leads the laity ministry in the local church, district, and annual conference. A new lay leader is elected every three years, and he or she serves on all church committees. An effective lay leader models the Christian discipleship and faith in his/her personal life and the church's life. The church lay leader's role and responsibilities include working with the pastor to fulfill the local congregation's mission and vision. He or she works with other church leaders to build and strengthen the local church ministries. One of the significant roles a lay leader contributes to the church is advising the church administrative council about opportunities for an effective lay ministry.

Men, Women and Children Ministries

The ministry groups in a local church include the Men's ministry that meets quarterly for prayers, fellowship, and Bible study, while the United Methodist Women group meets monthly to promote mission projects. The children's ministry is ongoing and stable. They typically meet every Sunday for bible and fun activities. The youth ministry, primarily teenagers, meets on Mondays for fellowship, study, social activities, and engagement in camp or summer retreats in Sacramento, New Mexico. Every aspect of youth ministry is rooted in Scripture. The regular, intentional exposure to God's word provides a developing knowledge of God's love and grace. All the ministries include membership vows that United Methodists profess before becoming members of a local United Methodist church. These vows include supporting a local church with prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. The church believes that who a person is, how they relate, and what they do make all the difference.

The church staff at St. Luke comprises one full-time pastor and five part-time positions - the Minister of Youth and Children, Music Director, Pianist, Church Secretary, and Christian Education Director. The ministries led by these staff members help direct and guide the church to a healthy sense of worship to almighty God and service to humankind.

Tremendous Echo of Loss

St. Luke United Methodist Church and its surrounding community have gone through a tremendous echo of loss in recent years. Old age is one of the factors that take lives. As the community ages, funerals become more frequent events than baptisms, confirmations, and weddings. Since the church has more senior members than young adults, there will be a flood of grief in the coming years. When this research was conducted, half of the congregation's senior members became widowed and widowers between 2015-2020. Therefore, half of the senior members are grieving the loss of their spouses.

Death changed the church leadership style and brought the church-wide Bible study program to an end. In January 2017, the church custodian became sick and died a few days later. Two months after the custodian's death, his wife (Sunday School teacher) suddenly died. At the end of 2017, the church provided some lay care to a youth whose parents died in a car accident. In 2018, about six church members lost immediate family members. However, the most shocking death was the loss of a twenty-one-year-old woman and her mother, who were both shot right in their living room by the girl's ex-boyfriend. These losses have brought a stalemate in the lives of church members.

Furthermore, the Walmart shooting in July 2019 in El Paso, Texas, took the lives of friends and family of St. Luke church members. The shooting happened on August 3, 2019, at

the Walmart near the Cielo Vista Mall. The Walmart was full of shoppers buying back-to-school supplies when a gunman randomly shot and killed twenty-three and injured twenty-three others.

Experiencing grief following the death of a loved one is intense within the community of faith. When a loved one is gone, there is a feeling of emotions that come with grief. Though faith that a loved one is in a better place can be a comfort, this does not ease the distress that a loved one is gone. The process of grief indicates a need for continual care and comfort. Regrettably, the Church frequently fails to provide a ministry to grieving persons continually. Although the Church is a vital support group, it often fails to provide adequate care and support when grieving persons have needed such support the most.

Whenever the church administrative council meets, the topic that seems to be more discussed than any other topic is the wellbeing of those who have lost loved ones. The lack of bereaved persons' involvement and participation in church events and activities is noticeable. However, congregation members do not know how to help the bereaved handle grief weeks after the funeral.

Congregation members and leaders attend memorial services and sometimes bring food to the deceased family. Unquestionably, Christian love from church members before the committal is generally an outpouring of compassion. However, after the funeral, congregation members tell the grieving person or family that they will provide support if anything is needed. When the whirlwind of the funeral activity is over, however, the bereaved are left alone. Often, those who mourn do not feel comfortable expressing their grief or asking for help when loneliness embraces them.⁷ Failure to openly express grief means the bereaved would remain bound with sorrow throughout their lives.

⁷ Brenda Mallon. "When Death Happens." In *Dying, Death and Grief: Working with Adult Bereavement* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2008), 17-30.

The presence of grief among church members presents a unique but vital ministry to the local church. The challenge is to provide a clear and practical methodology to equip church members with knowledge on helping grieving members cope with grief. There seems to be a theology that says God will provide a way through difficult times. However, church members must relate to God, making a way through difficult times by helping others cope with grief.

The Church is unclear as to how it should respond to the ongoing grief of the bereaved. Undoubtedly, the Church has developed a care ministry to respond to the needs of individuals and families who have lost loved ones.⁸ Moreover, it has made sure a pastor or church lay leader is available to address the needs of church members. A memorial committee was formed to comfort those who mourn their loved ones. While a memorial committee responds to the needs, the church fails to offer ongoing compassion to those suffering from their loss. Though the church supports those who grieve, specific practices for assisting people in grief work have not been formally established.

To date, the church lacks a clear and practical path for church members to help individuals who struggle to cope with the experience of loss after the burial. The absence of such practices pushes and pulls church members in unhealthy directions and may unknowingly prohibit effective ministry to the griever. Subsequently, grieving families find themselves unable to attend worship and other church events. Some find it challenging to celebrate certain church holidays and cannot live a spiritually free life without the deceased's presence.

⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25.

Problem Presented

Grief does not end after the cremation or burial of a loved one. So often, in bereavement, believers attempt to find emotional and spiritual support from the church. However, as Philip Kenyon notes, “the church is unsure of how to support those who are grieving.”⁹ Since humans tend to avoid talking about death, congregation members are uncomfortable ministering to those who grieve due to the discomfort that may arise in the process. According to Gene Fowler, the church stands as a means of comfort and healing to grieving families. He writes, “Belonging to a faith community fosters the relationship with God which in turn encourages healing during bereavement.”¹⁰

Grief care after the burial is a neglected church ministry. Pastoral care and congregational care ministry may provide comfort for those who are hurting. However, they do not show ongoing support for a grieving church member. Besides, the church does not encourage the entire congregation to help the grief-stricken. There is a need to foster a grief care ministry within the church.

The problem is that the church lacks a clear and practical methodology to help church members cope with grief issues. When a death is announced, the church tradition is to provide meals and sympathy cards to the bereaved. However, once the funeral concludes, the weight of grief is left on the bereaved person or family to handle alone. Understanding how to respond to the needs of the bereaved may positively impact those who grieve the death of their loved ones.

⁹ Philip Kenyon, "Why We Fail the Grieving" ChristianityToday.com, April 2015. Accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/april-online-only/why-we-fail-grieving.html>.

¹⁰ Gene Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament Caring for the Bereaved*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010), 23.

Purpose Statement

While pastors are responsible for making pastoral visits, every baptized Christian is called to show compassion and support to those experiencing grief. Jesus Christ calls all who love God to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). Therefore, the church must expand and strengthen grief care ministry. According to Shelley Kim Pond, the church needs to remember that the quality of grief care does not happen overnight or by accident; it is the purposeful result of a divine calling, coupled with a compassionate heart, practical training, and skillful execution.¹¹ Unfortunately, the church has little room for effective grief care ministry. Such a reality does not help grieving persons, as they may feel isolated and pushed away from their faith community instead of drawing them closer. As death occurs in the church regularly, having a clear and practical methodology to help members cope with grief can develop a holy atmosphere in the church's life for grieving individuals.

Bereavement research has broadened and deepened in the last few years. However, little attention has focused on helping and illuminating bereaved individuals' ongoing experiences of grief. The purpose for this DMIN research thesis is to create a practical methodology that will guide the Church in its effort of providing ongoing comfort, encouragement, and support to those who grieve during and after the funeral. The hope is that pastors, congregants, and those preparing to join pastoral ministry will utilize this information to become more effective in an ongoing grief care ministry, thus helping mourners to experience comfort and encouragement.

¹¹ Shelley Kim Pond, "Childhood Grief and the Church's Response." *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 22, no. 2 (2013): 113-138.

Basic Assumptions

The following assumptions guide this research: (1) Grieving families need spiritual, material, and emotional support to help them cope with grief. (2) Having a clear and practical path to help grieving families cope with grief can positively affect the church's numerical and spiritual growth. (3) Organizing heartfelt worship, offering continuous support, and maintaining good communication with grieving families may help the bereaved cope with grief.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to help facilitate understanding the terms presented in this doctoral dissertation.

- *Death*, the end of physical life here on earth.¹²
- *Bereavement*, the period following a loss in a person's life.¹³ Girlinghouse and Muse define bereavement as a period of grief and mourning after a significant loss.¹⁴
- *Grief*, the range of emotional and physical responses that a person may experience following the loss of a loved one.¹⁵ It is experienced psychologically and cognitively through painful feelings, thoughts, and attitudes, socially through behavior with others, and physiologically through health and symptoms.¹⁶ When a person grieves, it is part of

¹² Margaret Gibson. "Death and Mourning in Technologically Mediated Culture." *Health Sociology Review* 16, no. 5 (12, 2007): 415-24.

¹³ Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, and Wolfgang Stroebe. "Health Outcomes of Bereavement." *The Lancet (British Edition)* 370, no. 9603 (2007): 1960-1973.

¹⁴ Michael K. Girlinghouse and Project Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past: A Conversation about Loss, Grief, and Nostalgia in Congregational Life* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 16.

¹⁵ Grover and Fowler. *Helping Those Experiencing Loss* (2011), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

the normal process of responding or reacting to a loss.¹⁷ So often, grieving individuals may experience grief as an emotional, social, or physical reaction.

- *Loss*: the process of losing a loved one through death. It means the state of grief when deprived of someone or something important.¹⁸ Loss in life can take many forms, including losing a relationship, employment, material loss, including a political or social role. The type of loss discussed in this research project is the death of someone significant in a person's life. It can be a spouse, parent, sibling, relative, or friend.
- *Mourning*: refers to the externally visible sign of grief. The culturally patterned expression accompanies loss and allows others to recognize that one has become bereaved.¹⁹ It can also refer to the period during which one attempts to adjust to the loss of a loved one.
- *Grievers/Bereaved*: individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one.²⁰
- *Unresolved grief* is a syndrome of prolonged and intense grief associated with substantial impairment of functioning according to the norms defining a healthy life.²¹
- *Grief work* is the cognitive process of confronting a loss's reality through death, focusing on memories, and adjusting to detachment from the deceased.²²

¹⁷ Robert Grover and Susan G. Fowler, . *Helping Those Experiencing Loss: A Guide to Grieving Resources* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 10. Accessed August 28, 2020.

¹⁸ Shimshon Rubin Simon, Ruth Malkinson, and Eliezer Witzt. *Working With the Bereaved: Multiple Lenses on Loss and Mourning* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Group, 2012), 3.

¹⁹ Grover and Fowler, *Helping Those Experiencing Loss*, 2011, 10.

²⁰ Alan D. Wolfelt. *Reframing PTSD as Traumatic Grief: How Caregivers Can Companion Traumatized Grievers Through Catch-Up Mourning* (Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2014), 2.

²¹ Judy Heath. *No Time for Tears: Coping with Grief in a Busy World* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2015), 39. Accessed September 4, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

²² Richard Gross. *The Psychology of Grief* (London: Routledge, 2018), 33. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315110127>. Accessed on November 28, 2020.

- *Disenfranchised grief*, the term used to describe the grief that has been minimized or misunderstood. It is the feeling of sadness and sorrow that come when grief is internalized.²³
- *Complicated grief* is a clinically significant deviation from the culturally expected norm in the persistence of the symptoms of grief.²⁴
- *Caregiver* is a person who provides paid or unpaid assistance to someone in grief. The assistance can be physical, psychological, social, and spiritual.²⁵
- *The Church*: A group of protestant Christians.²⁶

Limitations

The main limitation that the author sees is the self-report survey, which is used to collect data. Self-report surveys depend on the information provided directly by the participant. Some participants (individuals and local churches) may respond with answers to please the researcher. In some cases, survey questions will ask participants about the information that occurred in the past, which can result in misrepresented or distorted data.

The second limitation is the nature of the topic. Participants who at times become emotional and refuse to disclose accurate information may affect the results. Some church members might feel uncomfortable disclosing information regarding how the church has been

²³ Joel Curtis Graves. *Leadership Paradigms in Chaplaincy* (Boca Raton, FL: Dissertation.com, 2007), 6.

²⁴ R. S. Weiss. "Grief, bond, and relationships," in M. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, W. Stroebe, and H. Schut (Eds.). *Handbook of bereavement research: Consequences, coping and care* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association (2008): 47-62.

²⁵ Lauren G. Collins, MD and Kristine Swartz MD. "Caregiver Care," *American Family Physician*, 83, no. 11 (2011): 1309-1317.

²⁶ Jacob Karl Rinderknecht. "CHURCH, Category, and Speciation." *Open Theology* 4, no. 1 (January 2018): 46–59.

helping its members cope with grief. Besides, certain information states that a person has the right to withhold information due to confidentiality.

The third limitation is the sample to be used in collecting data. Participants may not represent all grieving members of the local church. Besides, though data or information sought may not be influenced by factors including gender, race, economic status, and exposure to death and grief, the limits of technology might influence the data. Due to the pandemic, some potential participants may prefer to participate in the study by phone or zoom meeting, which can influence data if the network gets interrupted.

Fourth, field research is limited to participants in the geographic region close to the researcher's ministry context. Church members may think they possess a complete understanding of grief ministry and thus, may be resistant to learning an effective way of providing ongoing care ministry to those suffering.

Fifth, the age of the participants in this study is limited. The age of the participants was also limited to adults above eighteen years of age. Individuals younger than eighteen years were not eligible to participate in this research project. Though open to anyone above age 18, most of the participants range from age 30 and above. Therefore, working with people in this age range will also create time constraints. Some of the potential participants are full-time workers. Thus, the demands of participants' full-time employment and the researcher's full-time church responsibilities can lead to selecting a site that allows time management for both the participants and the researcher.

Sixth, not all participants are acquainted with the researcher before participating in the interview other than the pastor and church members relationship.

Seventh, a constraint in this research pertains to how a local church can help grieving church members cope with their grief. A church member professes faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The unchurched people and their experiences with grief have not been included in this research.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study include:

- The study will be confined to two local churches: St Luke United Methodist and First United Methodist. The study is based on a specific conference, making it difficult to replicate precisely in another conference.
- Participants' responses will reflect and confine their personal experiences about grief, pastoral, and church care ministry. The self-assessment component will play a significant role.
- Due to the time factor and working as a full-time pastor, the researcher may not locate all church members who have experienced grief in life. Thus, it may skew or misrepresent traits and characteristics analysis results in the qualitative phase of the study.

Thesis Statement

Church members seek the church for comfort and support in times of loss. Melissa Kelley states that people in grief are the most vulnerable, and “the church needs to connect with them and respond to their needs in an informed, sensitive, and compassionate ways.”²⁷ Unfortunately, not every faith community can bring this support. Some Christians bring judgment and criticism when the bereaved display emotions of grief. Some congregation members do not know how to

²⁷ Melissa M. Kelley. *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), viii.

help grievers handle their grief beyond providing food and attending funeral service. Many church members often misunderstand the path of comforting grieving persons. The church lacks a clear and practical methodology that church members can use as a guide to address the turmoil of grief among the people. The lack of knowledge directly impacts the ministry of the church and that of the mourners. As a result, grieving individuals are left tied down with grief throughout their lifetime. **If the local church seeks to make disciples of Jesus Christ, it must have a clear and practical methodology for responding to the bereaved's ongoing needs; otherwise, the church may fail to fulfill its God's calling to minister to those who are mourning.** When the church fails to provide ongoing support, the grieving individuals may walk away from the church to seek other alternatives or ways to find comfort for their pain and struggle.

Summary

Chapter 1 presents the problem that necessitates the study on how to help people cope with grief following the death of loved ones. The background to the study explains why it is crucial to assist people who experience the loss of loved ones. Empirical studies have revealed the need to help people who experience grief. However, the church does not have a plan to support *those* who have suffered a loss.

The purpose of this study is to help the church deal more effectively with affected people in the event of grief, especially grief resulting from the death of a loved one. The study is intended to empower the church in grief ministry, which many still consider as a place for comfort in times of sorrow. Definitions for key terms, limitations, and delimitations are also presented to help the reader understand the material and research presented in this project.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

Grief is a range of emotional and physical responses that a person may experience following a loved one's loss. However, the way people respond to grief varies from one person to another. Some people do well, and some do not; it is a process. Much has been written about how individuals process their sorrow. Many grief writers have agreed that grief is a trauma that can affect anyone, regardless of age. Therefore, the Church must be familiar with how people process grief to help them cope. This chapter provides a review that expands this study. Themes are explained to form a synthesis of thought about the impact of grief and the necessity of a local church to help the bereaved cope. Also, this chapter expands the theological and theoretical foundations of grief.

Literature Review

This research aims to study the role of the Church in helping grieving families cope after the burial of a loved one. Grief is a trauma that can affect anyone. Since research on how believers process grief does not exist, the literature on how an individual processes grief is presented in this study. This literature review is a roadmap to begin research on helping grieving church families cope, providing a foundation for researching the impact of grief among Church members and the church's responsibility to offer care and encourage healing.

Grief is a trauma that no one wishes to experience. This trauma can start with laughter, anger, pain, denial, numbness, depression, and acceptance.²⁸ In the research conducted by H. N. Wright, it is acknowledged that grief does not choose whom to strike. In other words, no one

²⁸ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. *On death and Dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 98.

knows when or how they will experience grief. Thus, it is essential to have safe places, safe people, and safe situations when grief strikes.²⁹ In some situations, grief can be complicated and may require appropriate interventions. Uncomplicated grief does not require appropriate interventions, but grieving individuals all need support.³⁰ Some individuals experience prolonged grief; some do not. Grieving church members may be particularly at risk for adverse outcomes following a loss because their primary support networks are generally unavailable following the burial. As a result, many suffer from a lack of preparedness for emotional, social, and spiritual sources of support.

According to Katherine Shear, there are about 2.5 million deaths in the United States every year.³¹ Jolene Metcalf found that in 2011, over one million deaths were related to terminal illnesses, and most of the people who died received hospice care.³² The deceased often leaves behind at least one to five close family members, which implies that 2.5-12.5 million persons grieve the loss of a loved one every year in the United States of America. Zisook and Shear pointed out that 90% of people experience uncomplicated grief from the loss of a loved one, while 10% experience complicated grief, which often leads to impaired functioning and psychiatric disorders that are marks of complicated grief.³³

29 H. N. Wright. *The Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling: What to do and say when it matters most!* (Revised ed.). Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2012), 614.

30 Sidney Zisook, S., & Katherine Shear, K., "Grief and bereavement: What psychiatrists need to know." *World Psychiatry*, 8 no. 2 (2013), 67-74.

31 Katherine M. Shear. "Grief and Mourning Gone Awry: Pathway and Course of Complicated Grief." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 14, no. 2 (2012): 119-128.

32 Jolene J. Metcalf, "Hospice social work methods and interventions for terminally ill patients experiencing anticipatory grief" (Master of Social Work Research Paper, St. Catherine University, 2013), 5.

33 Zisook & Shear. Grief and bereavement, 2013, 67-74.

A person cannot choose to escape from grief.³⁴ There is much literature on grief due to expected and unexpected death. There is also literature on grief among children and individuals with mental disabilities. Grief over a terminally ill parent, child, or spouse has been studied, and parental grief after a miscarriage or stillborn baby has sparked research interest. Grief experiences of veterans have also been studied.³⁵

Persons with a history of multiple disorders such as schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors are likely to experience complicated grief.³⁶ Suicidal or homicide losses and death resulting from a family member's hostility also contribute to complicated grief.³⁷ Hence, bereaved individuals presented with these risks may need professional interventions. Prevalence literature has agreed that the Church must consider assisting members to cope with their grief. It is vital, especially with the incidences of suicide, mass shootings, and unexpected or sudden death.³⁸

Understanding Grief

There is much literature written about the process of grief. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is widely known for developing grief stages in her research entitled, *On Death and Dying*. The purpose of her research was to provide a resource for medical caregivers with practical ways to help terminally ill patients prepare for their death. Kubler-Ross believes that individuals who

34 Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*, 2012, 614.

35 Anne M. Ober, Darcy Haag Granello, and Joe E. Wheaton, "Grief Counseling: An Investigation of Counselors' Training, Experience, and Competencies." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 90, no. 2 (2012): 150-159.

36 Shear, "Grief and Mourning Gone Awry," 2012, 119.

37 Ibid., 119.

38 Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*, 2012, 614.

understand that they or their loved ones have a few more days to live can more easily cope with grief than those who are not prepared. She notes that denial is the first reaction when a patient initially receives information about their final stage of life.³⁹ The patient may ignore the diagnosis. They may remain optimistic, believing there should be a solution or a cure to overturn their situation. However, once they realize that life has come to an end and there is nothing they can do, they display *anger*.⁴⁰ Such reactions come after the patients realize that the situation is hopeless and that they can do nothing to overturn the unfavorable situation.

Once the dying person displays anger, a period of *bargaining* follows typically. They often attempt to negotiate with doctors or even God in the hope of finding a solution.⁴¹ When the plan to negotiate with doctors or God does not work in their favor, the typical reaction is *depression*. When the dying patient realizes their mortality and accepts their ailment, the grief stages come to their completion, *acceptance*.⁴²

Kubler-Ross's grief stages are not recognized only for helping dying patients heal emotionally but also containing powerful faith themes. According to her, those who trust and have faith in Almighty God go through grief stages without any problem. Grief stages serve as tools for helping the hurting frame and identify what they may be feeling. Also, the stages have the potential to transform lives for the better.

Further, these stages of grief were extended to include families of the dying patient. Kubler-Ross and her colleague, David Kessler, worked together to reframe the sequence of Kubler-Ross' stages of grief. In their thesis, Kessler and Kubler-Ross wrote that people think it

39 Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 2009, 51.

40 Ibid., 63.

41 Ibid., 94.

42 Ibid., 98.

takes weeks or months to complete grief stages. However, people forget is that these stages are intertwined. One stage can last for a minute or hours or days, and then comes another stage. Stages of grief do not come in order. A patient or their family may go through one stage, then another, and then back to the first stage.⁴³ Denial is the stage that seems to protect the soul of the dying patient, and it serves to control overwhelming grief. Thus, denial is reframed to protect the grief-stricken person while they work through their misery. Kubler-Ross and Kessler found that people who display denial are more likely to be comforted than those who do not.⁴⁴ Individuals who accept reality and learn to move on with life without their loved ones are often likely to decrease their denial level.⁴⁵

Anger is also a decisive stage that decreases grief. The dying person or their family may express anger toward God, doctors, self, or the situation. Kubler-Ross and Kessler assert that anger decreases when the dying person or their family begins to accept their circumstances.⁴⁶ The 'what if' questions supplement the process of bargaining. What if God would change the unfavorable circumstance to a favorable one? What if the doctor would find the cure to help the dying patient live? So often, regardless of the attempt to bargain, the unfortunate reality remains – a loved one has passed away.

Once the grieving person accepts his/her loss, depression plagues them. Caregivers may try to protect grieving individuals from displaying depression. However, it may impact the

43 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.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

mourner negatively. According to Kubler-Ross and her colleague, Kessler, "a mourner must be allowed to express their sadness and sorrow, and they can appreciate those who acknowledge and understand their situation."⁴⁷ When a grieving person is given time to express his/her sadness and pain, they would often reach the point where they can accept reality. It is undeniable that they can never replace the deceased's life; however, they can learn to accept and embrace new relationships, connections, and dependencies.⁴⁸

Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, along with Kessler's contribution, give insight as to how grieving individuals manifest their grief. The two colleagues conclude that individuals who grieve appropriately live well in the future. They further stated that grief is the healing process of the heart, soul, and mind.⁴⁹ Living in grief is the most challenging experience of life. However, grief heals the soul and drives people to God, bringing peace and comforting the brokenhearted.

Kenneth Doka, a contemporary grief theorist, psychologist, and hospice chaplain, has challenged Kubler-Ross and Kessler's grief theory. He asserts that reacting to grief by going through Kubler-Ross' stages of grief diminishes a person's reaction and creates confusion, pain, and sorrow.⁵⁰ According to him, grief is unpredictable; it does not follow a predictable set of stages.⁵¹ His analysis corresponds to what Kubler-Ross and Kessler acknowledged that the stages

47 Kubler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, 2005, 24.

48 Ibid., 28.

49 Ibid., 229.

50 Kenneth J. Doka, *Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path through Loss* (New York, NY: Atria, 2016), 11.

51 Ibid., 11.

of grief are intertwined. One may go from the first stage to the next and then back to the first stage.⁵²

Doka noted that while grieving individuals may manifest similar grief patterns, grief is highly individualized. Grief has various emotions that can be manifested simultaneously and depend on the person. Besides, there is no predetermined time for grieving. Some grieve for hours, weeks, months, or years, while others move through grief quickly. In his study, Doka argued that grief is not an illness that people recover from; instead, grief is a process; a life journey, and nothing can change that.⁵³ Complete healing can never be attained. Therefore, instead of going through sequential stages of grief, Doka's theory contends that grief is present in the life of a bereaved. To start processing grief, the bereaved must go through the first task, which is acknowledgment. According to Doka, acknowledgment is the initial task along the journey. A grieving person must first accept his/her loss. After acknowledging the loss, persons can then go through any task of grief. Regardless of the timing, Doka believes that individuals who process grief can learn to deal with the agony of loss as they identify feelings, their own emotions and explore those emotions.⁵⁴ Also, the bereaved soon learn to adjust to the many facets of life.

Grief is a Process

Kelly points out that people never finish grieving, although grieving people learn to live with their loss and sadness. Gross added to the concept of learning to live with the loss by

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Doka, *Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path through Loss*, 2016, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

arguing that grieving persons would adapt well to the loss over several months. Gross further articulated that counseling is not necessarily crucial during the grief process.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Michael believes it impossible to get beyond grief without counseling and encouragement from pastors, family, and friends. Michael considered the process of getting beyond grief without help as a way of running from reality. He stated that people in the twenty-first-century world want to achieve or get to their destination as quickly as possible. In other words, people seem to run away from grief. Besides, people do all they can to act like grief never exists.⁵⁶ Girlinghouse and Muse found the truth in Michael's statement. They have observed that in American mainstream culture, the expression of grief is often limited, dampened, avoided, or ignored. Even in the face of a significant death, individuals are culturally expected to embrace reality by returning to normal activities and functioning within a week after a funeral or memorial service.⁵⁷

Kelly employed a powerful statement as she articulated, “grieving persons learn to integrate grief in their lives, but they never entirely let go of their pain.”⁵⁸ She calls out to pastors and caregivers to reject the myth that grieving people will quickly recover because there is no way grieving persons will go back to everyday life without experiencing the deceased person's love and care.⁵⁹ Like it or not, “losing a loved one means learning to start living a new life.”⁶⁰

55 Gross, *The Psychology of Grief*, 2018, 86.

56 Michael, *A Necessary Grief*, 2015, 15.

57 Girlinghouse and Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past*, 2019, 18.

58 Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1177. Kindle.

59 Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1198.

60 Ibid., 1120.

The new life can be proactive or less rewarding depending on the relationship with the deceased person.

Another critical task of grief is the ability to live and honor the memory of the deceased.⁶¹ Though physical separation will be inevitable, the deceased will symbolically remain attached to the bereaved. Pictures, favorite stories and songs, and personal belongings of the deceased served as a reminder of a loss. In addition, these things help keep the deceased alive in the life of the bereaved. Memories offer a chance to celebrate the uniqueness of the deceased.

Staying positive and engaging faith during a crisis is crucial but challenging. Grief can lead a Christian to question faith and belief. Doka found that a person's worldview, coupled with rituals, can be a source of support in times of grief. However, Doka does not believe that addressing the needs of grieving individuals is done in the same way. In bereavement care, what works for one may not work for another. It is, therefore, important to learn how to provide care according to the needs of the bereaved.

Doka's criticism of Kubler-Ross's grief stages does not diminish the importance of studying the grief process. His concern is that a person cannot process grief by relying on a predicted set of stages. Grief is individualized. Each person is unique in coping with grief because each person has a unique personal history with the deceased person. With that said, not everyone will experience all five stages of grief. Also, not everyone will go through them in a predictable or linear order.

All in all, grief is real, and grief is suffered. It should be noted that grieving the loss of a loved one does not imply a loss of faith. It means expressing love to someone sincerely.

61 Doka, *Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path through Loss*, 2016, 74.

Melissa Kelly supports Kubler-Ross' theory when she asserts that Kubler-Ross's stages of grief are rooted in the field of thanatology and culture.⁶² However, Kelly argues that Kubler-Ross's study was demographically limited and did not consider other cultures' input.⁶³ According to Kelly, culture plays a role in helping those individuals who have experienced grief to cope. A person's culture can have a great effect on their attitude towards grief and loss. A person in a supportive environment is likely to exhibit quite different stages of grief than a person in an unsupportive environment.

Both Kelly and Doka agree that grief is individualized. In the book, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Kelly talks about mosaic grief, a metaphor explaining that grief is unique to every person. Mosaic grief is much like works of art, and by definition, "mosaics emerge from brokenness."⁶⁴ An individual pain can be impacted by a person's worldview, including relationships, ways of making meaning, history of losses, religion, community, and culture.⁶⁵

According to Kelley's mosaic grief theory, relationships significantly impact the way people experience grief.⁶⁶ She referred to these relationships as 'attachment relationships,' a concept coined by a British psychoanalyst, John Bowlby. In his study conducted among children separated from their parents, Bowlby found that children showed signs of protest, despair, and detachment amid grief. Further, Bowlby argued that any person affected by separation exhibits

⁶² Melissa Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, Kindle, 46.

⁶³ Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, 2010, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

the same behaviors found in the children he studied.⁶⁷ Later, Bowlby and his colleague, Mary Ainsworth, found that children who felt their parents were accessible and responded to their needs exhibited positive attachments.⁶⁸ Subsequently, children who did not see these qualities in their parents became reserved and displayed an array of insecurities and uncertainties.

Later, researchers applied Bowlby's theory to describe a relationship with God as the most significant attachment. Kelley raised this concept by mentioning Phillip Bennett, who wrote, "The sovereign God will not take away human's suffering and pain, but God can help humanity abide in God's presence so to remain healthy during hard times. By abiding in God's presence, humanity forms an attachment with the Creator and Sustainer of life, the one who can never forsake His people."⁶⁹

Among the concepts, Kelley discussed in her study is that of making meaning. She argued that making meaning plays an essential role during the grieving process. In her view, "making meaning is the process of creating sense, seeking order and purpose."⁷⁰ Further, she says that making meaning can be impacted by personal stories.⁷¹ Making meaning from grief may not always be a straightforward path. However, it can open a door toward healing. Like Kelly, Robert Neimeyer believes making meaning is like relearning the world, which assumes that whether a grieving person likes it or not, their life will somehow be different following the

⁶⁷ Kelley, *Grief*, 2010, 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁹ Michael K. Girlinghouse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past: A Conversation about Loss, Grief, and Nostalgia in Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 59.

⁷⁰ Kelley, *grief*, 2010, 80.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

death of a loved one. Therefore, Neimeyer asserted that making meaning from grief and loss can help transform lives.⁷²

Stress will overshadow the grieving individual if one's story is cut short by a loved one's death. During a time of vulnerability, the bereaved may seek spiritual support and connection from their faith community.⁷³ Kelly's theory provides a solid foundation for study because it stresses the importance of attachment to the Creator.⁷⁴ Additionally, Kelly's theory provides a suitable and appropriate framework for the study that follows.

The Effects of Grief on Believers

Being righteous and religious does not exempt a person from experiencing grief and loss following the loss of a loved one. With this said, every believer will likely experience grief and loss at some point in life. Some losses may be unexpected, while others are expected. Whether death is expected or not, the result produces nothing other than pain. C. S. Lewis experienced such pain after the dramatic and unexpected death of his dear wife. In his book, *A Grief Observed*, he wrote that his life was surrounded by sadness and great pain following his wife's death. He said that a day never passed without him experiencing grief.⁷⁵ Lewis also confessed that he got to the point of blaming God and had trouble understanding the message that God's love seeks to reconcile with human loss. Lewis wandered and asked himself questions

⁷² Robert R. Neimeyer. *Lessons of loss: A guide to Coping* (Memphis, TN: Center for the Study of Loss and Transition, 2006), 92.

⁷³ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 102.

⁷⁴ I Corinthians 3:11-13.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Berman. *Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C. S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion, and Calvin Trillin* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 2.

about when and how his lament might come to an end. He finally asked, "Is grief like nausea that will eventually subside?"⁷⁶ No, it is a trauma one learns to live with for life.

Many believers think they have all they need until they experience grief on a personal level.⁷⁷ The ongoing pain is unbearable; it is like losing a part of the body to amputation. While one might overcome the pain, forgetting the deceased is not likely. Lewis loudly said the death of his wife made him feel like a one-legged man for life.⁷⁸ Later, Lewis lamented and blamed himself for thinking he was recovering from the pain of grief. He aptly shared that he was deceived because grief comes with so much hurt that he discovered it each day.⁷⁹ Lewis wrote his book not because he wanted answers and solutions to his questions and lamentations from God. Instead, he penned the book to point to the coming day when "God will carry the burden of humans on His shoulders; the day of celebration where loss and grief would be turned into joy; the day when everything, including problems, will be made new."⁸⁰

Lewis's trauma, lamentations, and struggles following his wife's death are not unique to his situation. Some believers have shared chaotic stories of pain, doubt, and lament following their loved one's death. In the dissertation entitled, *Phenomenological Study of Adult Lived Experience after the loss of a parent and its effects on the perception of those adults*, Victor Khaula shared his own grief experience following his mother's death. He was at camp when he received the saddest news about his mother's death. He felt like he had butterflies in his stomach when he received the news of his mother's death. Khaula whispered to himself, "It cannot be

⁷⁶ Berman, *Companionship in Grief*, 2010, 36.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

true!" He narrated that he was dumbfounded and found himself in the denial stage again. He blamed himself for being at the camp when his mother took her last breath.⁸¹

In *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, Jerry Sittser shared his grief journey following a car accident that left his wife, daughter, and mother dead. Sittser articulated how he was forced to face a new reality and deal with his multiple losses in the wake of such a tragedy. According to him, the response to loss stands as a defining moment. He articulated, "It is what happens inside the bereaved that matters."⁸² Later, Sittser transparently shared his experiences of wrestling with endless questions, anger, and pain. Though it was not an easy process, he argued that sorrow is good for the soul -- it enlarges the soul until the soul is capable of mourning and rejoicing at the same time. In other words, sorrow embraces pain and healing concurrently,⁸³ Rather than relying on medicines to help a grieving person move beyond grief and find healing, Sittser maintained that the only healthy option available to a person processing grief and loss is to embrace a future that includes the pain of the past. Further, he argued that loss provides humans with an opportunity to make life inventory, reconsider priorities, and determine new directions.⁸⁴ Also, loss places the grieving persons in a crisis position that makes them realize the importance of having God in their lives. When grieving people reach this point, they can find that life is full of bounty, despite the pain of loss. Sittser affirms that God's grace transformed him, and it was beautiful. Regardless of his pain, he always placed God at the center

81 Victor Khaula, "Phenomenological Study of Adult Lived Experience after the loss of a parent and its effects on adults' perception." M.A., Diss., Andrews University, 2017), 3.

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

83 Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 2011, 72.

84 Ibid., 76.

of his life rather than at the periphery.⁸⁵ Though Sittser shared his personal loss experience to help those processing the pain of grief and loss, he also pinpointed that a community of faith is beneficial to people going through the valley of shadow and death. Believers who engage in ministry to those who grieve can find themselves transformed by loss. Sittser wrote, “Those who provide comfort to others must be prepared to own the pain of another and then let it transform them.”⁸⁶ Sittser’s experience clearly shows that when a person faces grief following a loved one’s loss, their life will be changed forever. The change can either be positive or negative. It is only the person’s reaction to loss that will determine the impact of the change.

Elaine Storkey provides substantive insight into the grieving process as well. In her book, *Losing a Child: Finding a Path through the pain*, she explained what it feels like following a loved one’s death. Storkey was a devout Christian. She was committed to serving God and God’s people. She shared the conversation she had with a Christian mother who tragically lost her son. Despite the efforts of the paramedics trying to revive the son, it was too late. The son slept eternally. Much of Storkey’s work recounts the struggles and challenges parents encounter as they process their grief. The journey is not an easy one, as it involves a series of cries and laments. She noted that pain is the price a grieving person pays for being alive.⁸⁷ While a loved one is dead, there is a desire to keep them alive. Often yearning leads to loneliness. Storkey indicates that help from others could be a source of comfort in times of loneliness. According to her, a community of believers can help grieving individuals find empathy and understanding, which they need the most.⁸⁸ Further, she asserts that when a community comes together to offer

85 Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 2011, 129.

86 Ibid., 175.

87 Elaine Storkey., *Losing a Child: Finding a Path through the Pain* (Oxford, England: Lion, 2012), 12.

88 Storkey, *Losing a Child: Finding a Path through the Pain*, 2012, 16.

comfort, supportive love flows. In moments like these, she argued, the Church should provide an uplifting message and help with everyday tasks, including cleaning the house, laundry, sending groceries, and encouraging conversation about the deceased.

The Impact of Death in the Church

It is estimated that a local church will conduct at least twelve funeral services a year.⁸⁹ The process implies that every local church member knows at least one member who has mourned and grieved their loved one's death. However, while everyone experiences grief, unexpected death often pushes the surviving family into isolation.⁹⁰ A parent who unexpectedly loses a child is likely to wrestle with questions for more years than a grieving parent who anticipated their child's death.

In *Perspectives on the Experience of Sudden, Unexpected Child Death: The Very Worst Thing*, Denise Turner shares how she unexpectedly lost one of her twin boys, Joe, who was born with complicated health issues but miraculously made it through his first birthday. The family was at peace as they watched Joe grow. They nicknamed him 'miracle boy.' Unfortunately, one morning, Joe was found in his room lying face down and motionless. His four years old sister thought he was still asleep. However, Denise's instinct told her that Joe was dead. She sorrowfully shared that she anticipated Joe's death moments after his birth due to complications. However, Joe made it through his first birthday. When everything looked fine, Joe was found

⁸⁹ Greg F. Jackson. *Pastor's Guide to Conducting a Funeral* (Blooming, IN Cross Books, 2010), 232. Kindle

⁹⁰ William Worden. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, a Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Springer Pub. Co. Print, 2008), 44.

"frozen like alabaster amidst the muted colors and soft toys of his bedroom."⁹¹ When Denise saw Joe motionless, she was in denial until the ambulance arrived to pick up Joe's body. From that moment, she knew Joe's death became a reality and that their life story would change forever. Denise sorrowfully shared how she would no longer be the mother of twins, and Joe would no longer be the miracle boy who triumphed over everything.⁹² Denise was trying hard to process Joe's unexpected death but could not put that into words. In the words of Jo Cundy, "unexpected death leaves survivors breathless, trying to catch up with the new landscape and the new horizons around them."⁹³

An unexpected death is more likely to be subject to disenfranchised grief, meaning the survivor is reluctant to talk about the nature of death.⁹⁴ Disenfranchised grief can be challenging to process because it is less understood or validated by the survivors. Pauline Boss notes the lack of support and validation promote disenfranchised grief,⁹⁵ which can, of course, occur in situations where the loss is sudden and unexpected or shameful, but less has been written about it. However, one of the written examples of disenfranchised grief was that of a child whose parents died in custody which, as an abrupt and unexpected circumstance, was experienced by the child as grief that goes unacknowledged as such by friends and community.⁹⁶

91 Denise Turner. *Perspectives on the Experience of Sudden, Unexpected Child Death: The Very Worst Thing?* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 14.

92 Ibid., 15.

93 Jo Cundy, *Letting Go of Ian: A Faith Journey Through Grief* (Chicago: Lion Hudson LTD, 2014), 13. Accessed December 31, 2020.

94 Kelly, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, 2010, 141.

95 Pauline Boss. *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 26.

96 Bert Hayslip and Rebecca J. Glover. "Custodial Grandparenting: Perceptions of Loss by Non-Custodial Grandparent Peers." *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 58, no. 3 (May 2009): 163 – 75. <https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.58.3.a>.

In his study of people who had experienced grief, Richard Gross found that unexpected death threatens survivors as it diminishes their ontological security, undermines their stability, and evokes feelings of personal meaninglessness.⁹⁷ Such experience can disrupt even the bereaved person's eating and sleeping habits and other achievements in life.⁹⁸ Moreover, the shock of receiving the news about a sudden death causes the survivor to isolate and lose his/her social network. Kelly argued that people show less care yet offer comfort when death occurs because of the survivor's negligence.⁹⁹ When a parent sees a child playing with dangerous substances and does not stop him, and consequently, the child dies in the process, that parent is likely to face disenfranchised grief for his/her negligence. Worden added that when the community gives way to disenfranchised grief, it significantly affects the bereaved.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, Michael J. Larry's study found that most griever learn to cope with their unexpected losses.¹⁰¹ When it comes to unexpected grief, believers are placed on a weak periphery because they believe everything happens according to God's plan.¹⁰² A hospice chaplain, Pamela Williams, observed that while patterns may emerge among grieving Christians, grief is very individualized, and God's plan for each person is unique.¹⁰³

97 Gross, *The Psychology of Grief*, 2018, 90.

98 Heath, *No Time for Tears: Coping with Grief in a Busy*, 2015, 9.

99 Melissa Kelly. *Grief*, 2010, 1189. Kindle

100 Worden. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, a Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 2008, 48.

101 Larry J. Michael. *A Necessary Grief: Essential Tools for Leadership in Bereavement Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2015), 94.

102 David Savage and Taylor and Francis. *Non-Religious Pastoral Care: A Practical Guide*. First ed. (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018), 61. doi:10.4324/9781351264488.

103 Margaret Nutting Ralph. *A Parent's Death: A Biblical and Spiritual Companion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 99.

Stressing the impact of grief among adolescents, Balk, Zaengle, and Coor found that a structured group can help teens grapple with complex issues underlying unexpected death.¹⁰⁴ The Church must allow grieving individuals to appropriately express the myriad of emotions that come after a loss. Young people may have trouble deciding what emotions are tied to the loss event. Therefore, the Church needs to know that grief care is probably fueling everything in a grieving person's life, even if they do not recognize the connection.¹⁰⁵

Ministry to the Grieving

In most death situations, a pastor is expected to lead the funeral or memorial service. The service can occur in a funeral home, a local church, a cemetery, or the grieving family may choose a suitable and convenient location. Gene Fowler asserts that pastors should be on the front lines from the moment death occurs through the following days, after the funeral.¹⁰⁶ During this period, pastors have unique opportunities to offer care and comfort to those who grieve their loved ones. To effectively respond to a grieving family's needs, Fowler provided insights into how the Church can respond to the ongoing needs of the bereaved. He also provided recommendations about funeral planning according to different denominations.

Throughout his work, Fowler constantly maintained that pastors are called to provide pastoral care to congregation members. He connected pastoral care and funeral arrangements when he wrote, "A funeral is a rite of passage that allows a pastor to exercise first and foremost

¹⁰⁴ D. Balk & C. Corr. *Adolescent encounters with death, bereavement, and coping* (New York: Springer Pub. Co, 2009), 158.

¹⁰⁵ Victor Khaula. *Phenomenological Study of Adult Lived Experience after the loss of a parent and its effects on the perception of those adults*, 2017, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Gene Fowler. *Caring Through the Funeral: A Pastor's Guide* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 2.

the means of caring for the grieving family."¹⁰⁷ The ministry of care goes beyond funerals when hope begins to be present. In his final thoughts, Fowler maintained that caring for a grieving person does not stop after the funeral service. Therefore, a pastor needs to provide pastoral care beyond leading Worship on Sunday mornings.¹⁰⁸

Thomas Long also shared common themes with Fowler. However, Long's work took a more theological approach. According to Long, any person who died in Christ is freed from the suffering of this world to embrace a new body made possible by Christ's victory over death. Often during the funeral, the death of a loved one is paralleled with Christ's resurrection. Thus, Long wrote, "A believer's body is a sign of remembrance and thanksgiving for everything received from Christ and a sign of hope that death has no final word, God does."¹⁰⁹

Further, Long connects a believer's funeral service to worship. He argued that when people relate stories during the funeral, they are retelling the divine drama stories. It is essential to plan and conduct a funeral effectively. However, a well-planned funeral can never overcome the sadness and pain of death. Even if people know how to tell and share stories of the deceased, the process of sharing and remembrance can never bring eternal joy and laughter. Only Christ's resurrection story can defeat death. In other words, only Christ's resurrection stories can proclaim victory over death, and this gospel truth needs to be proclaimed again and again at funerals.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Fowler. *Caring Through the Funeral: A Pastor's Guide*, 2004, 132.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 41.

¹¹⁰ Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, 2009, 137.

Both Long and Fowler agree that grief care should be extended beyond the funeral service. However, Fowler maintains that responding to the bereaved's ongoing needs is central to carrying out a care ministry. Some churches have developed pastoral counseling and ministries such as the 'Stephen Ministry' to extend care and comfort to people who find themselves in challenging times.

Mia-Tiara Hall discussed the relationship between a believer's faith and their resiliency during difficult times. In her thesis, *The Effects of Christianity on Adult Resiliency when Overcoming Grief*, Hall interviewed six participants and found that grieving individuals shared common themes including denial, regret, guilt, lament, the questioning of God, and the need for social support. Some participants indicated that church activities contributed to their resiliency.¹¹¹ Finally, Hall concluded that the Church promotes resiliency and serves as a foundation for a grieving person to lean during difficult times. Being a believer does not free a person from the effect of grief. It hurts, and it is miserable to lose a family member. However, believers lean on the hope found in Christ to sustain them during the struggles of grief.¹¹²

Norman H. Wright, a Christian counselor, created a plan to equip the Church to minister to grieving families. He created the plan to guide the Church on what to say to people in their moments of grief. He also explained the impact of grief, the types of grief, including mourning multiple losses. Wright clearly articulated that the path to wholeness is unique.¹¹³ He recommended questions and approaches to help those facing grief. Wright also discussed 'grief coaches.' According to him, grief coaching might be advantageous because "Coaching is less

¹¹¹ 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.

¹¹² Ibid., 38.

¹¹³ Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*, 2012, 83.

threatening, less concerned about problem-solving, and more inclined to help people reach their potential."¹¹⁴

It is essential to understand that church care ministries extend beyond the one-time methodology of grief coaching or pastoral counseling. In some churches, members are prepared to respond to the needs of the grieving individuals directly. Memorial and Support Group Ministries are also being developed to respond to the needs of the bereaved. Wright provides an example of how congregants of Sierra Presbyterian Church were trained to help grieving families directly. According to Michael Griffin, the Church must learn and understand present barriers among people experiencing grief. He believes that grief can promote growth in three church life areas: communication with God, community with others, and comforting others.¹¹⁵

Griffin develops a spiritual growth plan that incorporates teaching church members how to offer prayers, create journals, conduct grief workshops, and create spiritual support groups, and equip church members to become agents of healing.¹¹⁶ Griffin further articulated that growth comes by embracing hardship and pain from a heavenly perspective. In his view, hope is sustained when the bereaved always communion with God, seek support from faith communities and eventually become a comfort to others in times of grief.¹¹⁷ The Apostle Paul affirmed the following in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 as he wrote,

¹¹⁴ Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*, 2012, 218.

¹¹⁵ Michael Griffin. "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.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁷ Michael Griffin. "Growing Through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church," 2015, 175.

Praise be to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ^{four} who comforts humans during troubles so that humans can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort received from God.¹¹⁸

Though the Church is called to comfort the grieving, it should understand that providing comfort is multifunctional. Mark Hartley's research supported the idea of responding to the bereaved's ongoing needs in a local church located in Seward, Nebraska. His research articulated that congregation members were reluctant to approach families who had lost loved ones. Hartley stated that some grieving individuals prefer being comforted by talking to them one-on-one instead of having a large group of church members around.¹¹⁹ Thus, he thought it was necessary to prepare church members to minister to the bereaved in a one-on-one capacity.

Thus, Hartley decided to research further the field of grief. From the story of Job in the Old Testament and the account of Jesus offering comfort to Mary and Martha following the death of their brother, Lazarus, Hartley developed a plan to help individuals who had experienced grief due to the loss of a loved one. He asserted that grieving individuals do not need someone to come and start quoting scriptures. They need people to be around them, just like Job's friends were present during his chaotic moments. Grieving individuals need people who would listen to them and let them express themselves when they feel a need to do so. A grieving person needs a compassionate person as Jesus was to Mary and Martha. They need someone who will listen to them without judging how they process their loss and pain.¹²⁰

118 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

119 Mark Hartley. "Equipping Members of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief," (D. Min. Thesis, Union University, 2018), 94.

120 Hartley. "Equipping Members of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief," 2018, 93.

Hartley developed a workshop that would train and equip the congregants of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska, with the necessary tools to minister to grieving families effectively. Hartley measured the success of the workshop by assessing what was going on before and after the workshop. He stated that participants came to the workshop without knowledge about how to help a grieving person. Some participants were neutral on how it should be done. The Church naturally wants to comfort families that have experienced the death of a loved one. Yet, they often do not know what to do or say. So often, they feel inadequate to respond to death and loss. However, after the workshop, participants went from being neutral or lacking in preparation to being able to help grieving individuals.¹²¹

Providing Comfort to the Grieving

Shep J. Jeffreys expanded and deepened Kelly's concept of 'mosaic grief.' In his writing, he provided seven principles to understand grief reactions.¹²² Although grief is a common reaction to any loss, its reaction depends on each person's situation. Michael A. Griffin added to the concept of mosaic grief by stating that the pain humans experience during grief could produce fruits. However, the kind of fruit it produces depends on how each person responds.¹²³ Further, Griffin popularized the idea that through loss, God fills people with the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).¹²⁴

¹²¹ Hartley. "Equipping Members of Hillcrest Evangelical Free Church of Seward, Nebraska to Help Others in Times of Grief," 2018, 112.

¹²² Shep J. Jeffreys. *Helping Grieving People: When Tears Are Not Enough: A Handbook for Care Providers*. Seconded. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 46.

¹²³ Michael Griffin, "Growing through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church" (2015), 10.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 10.

Further, Kelly observed that if humans limit their understanding of grief, the mosaic would be incomplete.¹²⁵ Thompson noted that broadening human understanding of grief enhances humans' ability to hear emotions, gestures, physical postures, and facial expressions beyond spoken words.¹²⁶ The deceased will always be missed. However, despite those missing pieces, expanding human understanding of grief is still beautiful, meaningful, and valuable.

In his book, *Recovering Grief in the Age of Grief Recovery*, Bruce Vaughn posits that grief could enrich the human experience. He penned that mourning is the bedrock where enjoyment of life blooms.¹²⁷ Vaughn further questioned whether one could overcome grief. With this said, he wrote, grief is a process in which grieving individuals learn to love the deceased for the rest of their lives. Grief is what helps survivors to express or show love for their loved ones who died.¹²⁸ Further, Vaughn connected grief to faith. He argued that grief could only devastate a person if given a chance. However, grieving in faith allows individuals to enjoy and appreciate God's creation, regardless of the pain and loss they face.¹²⁹ It is important to understand that faith does not eliminate grief; it helps people face grief, cope with it, and work their way through it.¹³⁰

125 Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1126. Kindle.

126 Thompson, *The Gift of Encouragement*, 2013, 8. Kindle.

127 Bruce S. 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.

128 Ibid., 40.

129 Vaughn, "Recovering Grief in the Age of Grief Recovery." *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 13:1, (2003): 42. DOI: 10.1179/jpt.2003.13.1.005, 38.

130 Michael K. Girlinghouse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past: A Conversation about Loss, Grief, and Nostalgia in Congregational Life*, 2019, 19.

Francis Shelton also discussed how the Church could bring comfort to grieving individuals. He developed a 'theology of comfort' that focused on Christ's death and resurrection.¹³¹ Christ's followers' reaction following His death exemplifies what believers today experience when a loved one is dead. Thus, Shelton confessed that hearing and telling gospel stories helped him see the importance of grieving individuals to share stories about a loved one's death.¹³² Shelton found that gospel stories reflect two means of ministering care and comfort, including the Holy Spirit and the believers' community. Shelton pointed out that comfort can never be done in isolation. It should be present in the community of believers, *koinonia*.¹³³ In his research, Shelton studied how worship services could bring comfort to grieving members. According to Shelton, "43% of participants agreed that they received comfort through worship, 28% said they received comfort from bible study, and 57% reported receiving comfort from prayer. None of the participants reported that they received comfort from meditation or reading Scripture."¹³⁴ These statistics do not imply that scripture reading does not bring comfort to those who experience grief. What brings comfort to a grieving soul depends on one person to another. One may find comfort through praise songs, while another can find comfort through prayer or Scripture reading.

¹³¹ 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. Accessed on January 4, 2021.

¹³² Ibid., 34.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Shelton, "Blessed Are Those Who Mourn: Offering Comfort through Worship and Theological Reflection," 2007, 89.

Grief as a Relational Loss

Kelly is a strong advocate of grief experience as a relational loss. The severity of a person's grief depends on the connection he or she had with the deceased. In his book, *Comfort The Grieving: Ministering God's Grace in Times of Loss*, Paul Tautges expanded the concept of grief as relational within the Church. He demonstrated that the death of any church member is a challenging experience for any local church.¹³⁵ Further, Tautges explained that grief has relational functions like a human body. Each part of the body is essential, so is each church member. The reality of this interdependence is especially noted since when a fellow church member is suffering, the whole Church suffers.¹³⁶ Kelly advised that since grief is a relational loss, "it is crucial to manage and heal grief from a relational perspective."¹³⁷

Death is a part of human life. Whether anticipated or unanticipated, death affects all humanity, and the Church plays an essential role in helping grieving families cope with grief during and after the burial of a loved one. Being present and supportive through difficult times is a real ministry to those adjusting to life without the deceased. The Church is in a firm position to help grieving families accomplish what William Worden labeled as the four tasks of mourning:

1. The Church helps grieving families understand and acknowledge the reality of the loss with the funeral and memorial opportunities.
2. The Church needs to be nonjudgmental and allow the bereaved to experience the pain of the loss.

¹³⁵ Paul Tautges, *Comfort The Grieving*, 2014, 33.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹³⁷ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1178. Kindle.

3. The Church should organize services to help mourners begin to adapt to life without the deceased.
4. The Church should assist grieving families as they learn to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in others.¹³⁸

As the Church carries out the ministry of comfort to those hurting, it is crucial to understand that experiencing grief does not indicate a lack of faith. Instead, it is a shadow season that people pass through, and the Church is there to offer comfort. Scott Sullender points out that grieving people need the Church's support more than just being supportive and empathetic.¹³⁹ Marjorie J. Thompson also observed that encouragement and reassurance are what a bereaved person or family needs.¹⁴⁰ Griffin added that a grieving person needs the compassion, understanding, and comfort of fellow church members. Besides, they need empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.¹⁴¹

Rituals as Bereavement Care

There are different kinds of rituals that one can do to help others cope with grief. Savage and Tylor argued that bereavement rituals differ from pastor to pastor, from family to family, from Church to Church, and from context to context.¹⁴² Guthrie also pointed out that rituals can be performed intentionally and spontaneously to maintain the holistic church community.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ William J. Worden. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, Fourth Edition (Springer, N.Y., 2009), 22.

¹³⁹ Scott R. Sullender, *Resources, and Strategies of Ministry* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 41.

¹⁴⁰ Thompson, *The Gift of Encouragement*, 2013, 9. Kindle.

¹⁴¹ Griffin, *Growing through Grief*, 2015, 90.

¹⁴² Savage and Taylor and Francis, *Non-Religious Pastoral Care*, 2018, 59.

¹⁴³ Nancy Guthrie. *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps and What Really Hurts*, 2016.

Church rituals often go as far as singing as a rite to celebrate the life of the deceased. Christopher Southgate et al. wrote, "Christians sing and hold joyful conversations to minimize their grief. Singing is the process of expressing their emotions for the sake of healing and transformation."¹⁴⁴ Stressing the importance of rituals, Savage and Tylor maintain that prayer and worship bring comfort and hope.¹⁴⁵ Sullender also saw that public rituals benefit a supportive community, while personal daily prayers, readings, and self-care activities provide structure, familiarity, and stability.¹⁴⁶

Although many people practice funeral rituals because they are part of the heritage of their culture, family, or religion, Thompson believed that it is only by God's grace that people receive healing and comfort. Rituals can enhance the grace of God to operate more freely¹⁴⁷ and give grieving individuals a feeling of security because church members' presence reminds the divine power that watches over people in any situation they face.

Nevertheless, according to Girlinghouse, traditional rituals following a funeral are no longer common in the twenty-first century.¹⁴⁸ He stated that even the traditional practices such as bringing food to the bereaved family for weeks have diminished.¹⁴⁹ Rituals become meaningless when people start making rituals more critical than caring for the bereaved family.¹⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, tradition is important, but placing them above the grievers makes rituals pointless.

144 Christopher Southgate, et al. *Tragedies and Christian Congregations* (London: Routledge, 2020), 203.

145 Savage and Taylor and Francis. *Non-Religious Pastoral Care*, 2018, 9.

146 Sullender et al. *Tragedies and Christian Congregations*, 2020, 52.

147 Thompson. *The Gift of Encouragement*, 2013), 13. Kindle.

148 Girlinghouse and Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past*, 2019, 18.

149 Ibid., 19.

150 Heath, *No Time for Tears*, 2015, 34.

Heath stressed that when people fail to realize that funeral rituals were initially conceived of as a comfort to the mourning family, the purpose of rituals is meaningless.¹⁵¹ It is one of the reasons funeral rituals have received criticism in the 21st-century world.¹⁵²

In their research, Judith L. M. McCoyd. et al. commented that some mourners avoid the painful reactions that seeing the body can engender, probably due to funeral rituals criticism.¹⁵³ Despite the criticism, Worden asserts that funeral rituals are necessary after the death of a loved one for the passing of that person must be recognized, and the surviving family and friends must be supported as they start a new life without the now deceased.¹⁵⁴ Hence, Worden believes that if rituals are well done, they can enhance healthy resolutions of grief.¹⁵⁵ Rituals can also help grieving families cope with grief and loss.

Jeffreys contends that people share stories about the deceased with a twist of humor. Sharing stories helps to alleviate the pain due to the death of a loved one. However, it has been noted that people often share stories to soften, cover up, and avoid facing the full impact of their pain. If the whole purpose of sharing stories about the deceased is about covering up the pain, Jeffreys suggested that it is better to avoid sharing stories.¹⁵⁶ However, he supports the idea of sharing memories since it enhances healing and transformation. The sharing will make no sense if it is about covering up the pain. Stories need to encourage comfort and renewal. Kelly wrote

¹⁵¹ Heath, *No Time for Tears*, 2015, 34.

¹⁵² Worden, *Grief, Counseling, and Grief Therapy*, 2008, 118.

¹⁵³ Judith L. M. McCoyd. et al. *Grief and Loss Across the Lifespan: a Biopsychosocial Perspective*. Second edition (New York, New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2017), 121.

¹⁵⁴ Worden, *Grief, Counseling, and Grief Therapy*, 2008, 120.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵⁶ Jeffreys. *Helping Grieving People*, 2011, 11.

that making meaning of stories can lead to transformation and renewal. She believes that when people add meaning to their stories, “stuck stories can get unstuck -- shrunken stories can be expanded, and sad stories can become hopeful stories.”¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, she acknowledges that the ultimate source of comfort is God.

Mourning as a Ritual to Vent Grief

Prevalent studies agree that people mourn to express their grief. They can either mourn privately or publicly, depending on each person, family, or cultural prescription. However, as depicted by Thomas Radice, mourning tends to be a shared communal experience.¹⁵⁸ Often, it is so because, amid mourning, there is a collective observation of religious rituals. By so doing, grieving people tend to find relief, and the significance of their loss is recognized. Radice added, "mourning serves as a channel of extending comfort to each other."¹⁵⁹ The process of outpouring communal mourning can be a powerful source of compassion and comfort to the grieving persons because it communicates the messages that the deceased person's life mattered to the family and others in the community.¹⁶⁰ A period of mourning varies from one person to another, but it facilitates the grief process. Kelly said that grief could become disenfranchised and chronic if the public does not acknowledge the impact of mourning and grief.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1284. Kindle.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Radice. "Method Mourning: Xunzi on Ritual Performance." *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2 (04, 2017): 466-93.

¹⁵⁹ Radice. "Method Mourning: Xunzi on Ritual Performance." *Philosophy East and West*, 2017, 466-93.

¹⁶⁰ Erika Doss. "Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America." *Material Religion* 2, no. 3 (2015; 2006): 294-318.

¹⁶¹ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 181. Kindle.

Kelly understood mourning as the psychoanalytic term for grieving. Larry J. Michael added a typical response to mourning by demonstrating that grieving persons often mourn to find comfort and healing. He articulated that the tears and crying, the sharing of memories are ways to let go of grief and work towards recovery.¹⁶² Kelly went as far as to criticize the old cultural ways of caring for grieving individuals by pointing out the absurdity of saying that there is a standard way to mourn.¹⁶³ Moreover, she challenged the notion that grief has strict universal features. Kelly consistently maintained that two people could never mourn the same way. She considered it pastoral malpractice for pastors or caregivers to understand or respond to the mourning process in a general way. Pastors need to understand that grief is a very personal process. Therefore, it should be handled in a variety of ways.

Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counselling

Historically, pastoral counseling within the Church has been understood as an expression of pastoral care. However, the two are different. In pastoral care, "it is the pastor who makes the first step, responding to people's needs as part of an ongoing pastoral ministry, while in counseling, church members take the initiative."¹⁶⁴ Besides, pastoral counseling is more structured than pastoral care regarding both the place and the time. It means that pastoral counseling is associated with individuals or family therapy, while pastoral care is the purview of a clergy generalist.¹⁶⁵ When it comes to helping church members cope with their grief, pastoral

¹⁶² Michael, *A Necessary Grief*, 2015, 94.

¹⁶³ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 36. Kindle.

¹⁶⁴ Kim L. Stansbury, Debra A. Harley, Lois King, Nancy Nelson, and Gillian Speight. "African American Clergy: What are their Perceptions of Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counseling?" *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 961-969.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 961-969.

care would be needed at first. When the grieving persons find it challenging to cope, pastoral care can shift to pastoral counseling. What may have begun as pastoral care may become pastoral counseling.¹⁶⁶ Pastors and ministers must be aware of the changing dynamics of the relationship.

Given the pastors' schedules and the deaths happening in local churches, pastors are compelled to provide pastoral care concurrently. So often, congregations may engage in unhealthy pastoral care, which is why some grieving individuals leave their local congregations to other churches.¹⁶⁷ Often, grieving individuals left a local church because they felt not supported enough during their ordeal. They do not only leave the Church, but they also question the entire church message. As a result, grieving individuals often find it difficult to re-enter the place of worship following the death of a loved one. Grieving families may feel abandoned by their church community and by God when they hear biblical stories of miraculous healing and answers to prayers. The bereaved persons are often left wondering where God is and why God answered other people's prayers but not theirs. Quite often, they feel God deserted them. In this regard, pastors need to be careful when ministering to grieving families. Pastor's words and deeds need to be gospel-centered. Pastors have ample opportunities to love, comfort, show compassion, and help those grieving a loved one's death. Thus, pastors must help the grieving person or family experience God's love and the promise of new life found in Christ.

Kim Pond noted that pastoral leadership is an undeniable place to make a positive difference for a grieving person.¹⁶⁸ However, Tautges remarked that pastors often are unskilled

¹⁶⁶ Kim L. Stansbury, Debra A. Harley, Lois King, Nancy Nelson, and Gillian Speight. "African American Clergy: What are their Perceptions of Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counseling?" *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 961-969.

¹⁶⁷ Griffin, "Growing through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church," 2015, 48.

¹⁶⁸ Kim Pond. "A Study of Childhood Grief and the Church's Response." *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 1 (May 2012): 43-64. doi:10.1177/073989131200900104.

and untrained when helping church members cope with their grief. Michael confirmed the stance by Tautges when he talked about pastors being unskilled in ministering effectively to grieving persons. In his book, *A Necessary Grief: Essential Tools for Leadership in Bereavement Ministry*, Michael condemned seminaries and theological education for not training or preparing seminarians to handle practical issues in ministry, including coping in the grief.¹⁶⁹

Pastoral Role and Responsibilities

The death of any church member is a significant event, one for which a local church will need shepherding and guidance.¹⁷⁰ Amid death, Croft and Newton write, "pastors must be pastors."¹⁷¹ It means pastors must apply the gospel and its promises to help a grieving family through a rough time.¹⁷² As pastors minister to a grieving family, they must take seriously the norms that emanate from Scripture and the theological tradition. Pastors should also encourage other church members to provide care and compassion to a family in distress. At this point, pastors often find themselves in a dilemma when faced with the practicalities of death. How shall one respond to apparent grief with biblical or theological wisdom? Tautges described a pastor as someone who seeks to convey love amid pain and suffering.¹⁷³ When individuals or church members are devastated by depression due to grief, they all share a common need -- compassion and care. H. B. Charles illuminated a pastor's role as providing a broad range of guidance to

¹⁶⁹ Michael. *A Necessary Grief*, 2015, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Brian Croft and Phil A. Newton. *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at the Unique Challenges of Death*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 17.

¹⁷¹ Brian Croft and Phil A. Newton. *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at the Unique Challenges of Death*, 2014, 18.

¹⁷² Ibid., 17.

¹⁷³ Tautges, *Comfort the Grieving*, 2018, 33.

bereavement among individuals, families, and faith communities.¹⁷⁴ In many instances, he exemplified pastoral responsibilities, including preaching, administering religious and funeral rituals, celebrations, and crisis care.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, he added that pastors are better positioned to offer care and compassion and help grieving people understand grief within the meaningful context of Christian language and imagery.

According to Worden, a pastor must help a bereaved person find solutions to unresolved issues such as accepting death.¹⁷⁶ Supporters of 'stages of grief' understand the role of a pastor as one who facilitates the completion of each stage so that complicated grief does not occur. Therefore, the role of a pastor is to help the bereaved understand that there is a change in connection with the deceased and help them understand the meaning of loss from time to time, in general. In other words, a pastor's role is to help the bereaved work on their grief resolution.

The resolution, according to Kubler Rose, is achieved when the bereaved begins to express their feelings.¹⁷⁷ Khaula warned that expressing emotions can be dangerous, so it is important to have a balance between eliciting and alleviating painful emotions.¹⁷⁸ Heath argued that when a grieving individual expresses his/her emotions to a pastor or counselor, it does not mean their grief is resolved, for the bereaved needs to make sense of themselves and others.¹⁷⁹

174 H. B. Charles, Jr, *On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Living, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016.

175 Ibid., 258.

176 Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, a Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 2008, 86.

177 Kübler-Ross, E. *On death and Dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families*, 2009, 99.

178 Khaula, *Phenomenological Study of Adult Lived Experience after the loss of a parent and its effects on the perception of those adults*. 2017.

179 Judy Heath, *No Time for Tears: Coping with Grief in a Busy World*, 2015, 77.

According to Heath, sharing stories of the deceased is a way to achieve grief resolution.¹⁸⁰ Grief resolution for Stroebe and Schut begins by confronting the loss.¹⁸¹

The role of a pastor in any congregation has always been seen from Christ's perspective. Isaiah portrays Christ as a servant. He describes Christ as someone acquainted with grief:

He was despised and rejected by others; A man of suffering and acquainted with grief.
All we like sheep have gone astray; We have all turned to our own way, And the Lord
has laid on him the iniquity of us all.¹⁸²

In bereavement, a pastor is acquainted with grief. Pastors function from the faith that there is power beyond human finitude, which is God's power. A pastor's role in the time of grief should not be limited to an institutional environment but should call forth a variety of religious responses. This researcher agrees with Tautges when he sees, amongst other pastoral roles, the pastor as a ritualistic leader because at the time of grief, he needs to perform various rituals aiming to bring comfort to the bereaved family. A ritualistic leader should not be like our Middle Ages ancestors, who thought they had the keys to salvation. Pastors should administer, carefully, the relationships between liturgical practice and life experience.

According to Savage and Tylor, trying to cheer up bereaved individuals to help them handle their grief is not enough to bring transformation and healing.¹⁸³ Thus, they think it is essential for pastors to develop a relationship with the person or family. Further, Savage and Tylor pinpointed that the bereavement person or family's relationship includes practicing the

180 Judy Heath, *No Time for Tears: Coping with Grief in a Busy World*, 2015, 77.

181 Stroebe and Schut. "To Continue or Relinquish Bonds: A review of Consequences for the bereaved," 2005, 477-494.

182 Isaiah 53:3, 6.

183 Savage and Taylor and Francis. *Non-Religious Pastoral Care*, 2018, 67.

ministry presence. Being present rather than cheering up is key to understanding a pastor's role and responsibility. Michael agreed with Savage and Tylor regarding the pastoral ministry of presence. He argues that pastoral leadership should not stay away from grief-stricken individuals and families.¹⁸⁴ Further, Michael wrote that a relationship is established as a pastor practices the ministry of presence to the hurting and grieving family.

Besides support provided by church leadership, other ministries may be essential in providing comfort and encouragement to grieving families. One of the ways of doing this is to encourage lamentation into funeral worship. When a believer loses a loved one, they cry out to God. The Old Testament records numerous expressions of lament. In anguish, Christ quoted Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"¹⁸⁵ Though funeral services focus on inspirational messages, uplifting hymns, songs, and prayers, John Witvliet posits that funeral worship could bring comfort and healing if it balances praise and lament. He argued that walking in faith involves moving from lament to praise.¹⁸⁶ For this reason, he called upon church leaders to consider incorporating lament and praise as they plan funeral services. Lamentation and praise may help the bereaved feel loss, sorrow, or regret, often physically. An example of lament is to feel sad at a funeral worship service.

Crisis and challenging moments in the life of any Christian can be a time to grow in faith. Witvliet urges the Church to utilize the Psalms of lament to bring comfort and encouragement to people in difficult times. Biblical lamentation patterns include an invocation, adoration, weeping,

¹⁸⁴ Michael, *A Necessary Grief*, 2015, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Matthew 27:46.

¹⁸⁶ John D. Witvliet, "A Time to Weep: Liturgical Lament in times of crisis. ReformedWorship.org June 2007. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2007/time-weep-liturgical-lament-times-crisis>. Accessed on February 12, 2021.

petition, and affirmations of faith in God. The Church can use the patterns of lament to adapt to the context of the funeral service. The Church is called to minister in a broken world. Nothing brings more joy than witnessing fellow believers interceding for the pain and problems people face regardless of what a person is.¹⁸⁷

Fowler agrees with Witvliet that incorporating lament into funeral services can bring healing and comfort to grieving individuals. In his book, *The Ministry of Lament: Caring for the Bereaved*, Fowler writes that lament ministry is essential as pastoral care and counseling.¹⁸⁸ Fowler parallels Therese Rando's six grief processes: recognition, reaction, recollection and re-experience, relinquishment, readjustment, and reinvestment with a pattern of biblical lament. By doing so, Fowler urges the Church to offer encouragement and comfort to grieving individuals through lament. When the Church starts to walk with those who lament, it may help the grieving individual and the Church understand God's power amidst human pain and loss. Fowler concludes that lament is part of God's creation.¹⁸⁹

Stressing the importance of Biblical lament in funeral worship, Glenn Packiam shared the story of a congregant whose wife of two years suddenly died in a car accident. As he mourned his wife, Packiam discovered that grief affected the way the congregant worshipped. The Church's failure to make room for lament during worship contributed to this congregant's spiritual fall.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, Packiam urges church leaders to plan funeral worship services that

¹⁸⁷ John D. Witvliet, "A Time to Weep: Liturgical Lament in times of crisis. ReformedWorship.org June 2007. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2007/time-weep-liturgical-lament-times-crisis>. Accessed on February 12, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Witvliet, "A Time to Weep: Liturgical Lament in times of crisis. ReformedWorship.org June 2007.

¹⁸⁹ Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament*, 140.

¹⁹⁰ Glen Packiam, "The Place of Sadness in Contemporary Praise and Worship," (paper presented at Durham University, Durham England, April 2014).

comprise a range of human experiences, including lament. Pastors or Church leaders should ensure that selected songs, hymns, music, or sermons address pain and loss issues.

Packiam's analysis of the absence of lament in funeral worship services is supported in other literature. In *Lament: The Biblical Language of Trauma*, Nathaniel Carlson observes that trauma routinely invades human experience. However, worship services functionally have denied trauma's existence.¹⁹¹ Carlson demonstrated that many songs and hymns contain themes of joy, grace, praise, and thanksgiving. Very few songs contain themes of lament, pain, and suffering.¹⁹²

After Carlson observes the absence of lament in worship, he argues that lament has spiritual benefits. The Church should consider assimilating lament in worship to minister to those who have experienced grief. By including lament, grieving individuals would be allowed to vent their pain and anger within a community of believers that provide support and encouragement.¹⁹³ Lament gives voice to a suffering soul and invites worshippers to hope in God amid pain and suffering.¹⁹⁴

Kelly's attachment theory is intriguing because by understanding the core attachment needs of the bereaved, in general, while, at the same time, attending to the attachment needs, pastors and caregivers can intensify their pastoral awareness and deepen their pastoral skills. Kelly saw no wrong for pastors to connect human responses to loss back to the earliest moments

191 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. Accessed on February 12, 2021.

192 Ibid., 53.

193 Ibid., 68.

194 Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5.

of life. She reminded pastors and ministers that early internalization could sometimes influence later years of life.¹⁹⁵

Further, Kelly points out that pastors and ministers who integrate the attachment theory in their ministry can help the grieving persons in three different ways: understanding, acceptance, and hope. All three create a foundation of consistency, care, and message.¹⁹⁶ Consistency of care and message brings healing to those who have never experienced it in their childhood. One can never get too much consistency of care and message.

Norman Wright, Richard Gross, and Nancy Guthrie expand Kelly's attachment theory to include love. Wright noted that continuous support and love are a priority when ministering to people in their grief.¹⁹⁷ Guthrie also saw love as a great gift to the grieving and hurting.¹⁹⁸ Gross added to the discussion by describing love as the most profound pleasure in people's lives. Thus, when that love is lost, people experience the most profound sense of pain. Love and loss are two sides of the same coin. To have one is to risk the other.¹⁹⁹ Death leaves the bereavement family with the pain and struggle of detaching from the dead. The pain that people feel is what makes attachment theory strong. Loss is by far the most painful emotion humans experience. Grief is exhausting. It is important to care for the body during periods of mourning. Those suffering from grief should consider drinking enough water, eating healthy, and carving out time for naps.

¹⁹⁵ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1211. Kindle.

¹⁹⁶ Kelly, *Grief*, 2010, 1225.

¹⁹⁷ Wright. *Helping Those in Grief*. Minneapolis, 2011, 65.

¹⁹⁸ Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts)*, 2016.

¹⁹⁹ Gross, *The Psychology of Grief*, 2018, 28.

Conducting Worship in Times of Grief

These are records of several believers sharing their loss and grief experience. They invite the Church to walk with people in their dark moments by pointing them toward God's redemption.²⁰⁰ Most writers agree that a believer's spiritual life is affected by grief, but the Church and its care ministries are a source of strength during dark moments. Painfully acquainted with loss, Stephen Curtis Chapman shared about a tragedy that took his daughter's life, who was killed while driving a family car. Every time the family drove the car that led his daughter to death, it worsened grief. The whole family was broken whenever they drove the same car. Hence, they decided to give the car away and commit themselves to God. Their pain of losing a daughter brought the whole family closer to God than they had been. Chapman asserts that he did not understand the importance of church worship until he "walked through the valley of the shadow of death."²⁰¹

Also, Melody Green painfully shared how she lost her husband and two children in a plane crash. She became a widow and single parent of a one-year-old. It was not easy for her, but she could move on by attaching herself to the deceased. In her profound grief, Green acknowledged that being a believer does not guarantee a pain-free life. According to Green, church worship reminded her that God has the final say, that God will overtake any human sorrow.²⁰²

When Tim Timmons knew that he was dying from cancer, he also shared his grief experience and what he learned about worshipping with a community of believers. As he shared

²⁰⁰ Chuck Smith, *Worshipping through Grief*, (San Juan Capistrano, CA: Worship Leader Partnership, 2013). Kindle.

²⁰¹ Stephen Curtis Chapman, "The Desperate Hope," in Smith, chap. 1, Kindle.

²⁰² Melody Green, "Immeasurable Loss...And Love," in Smith, chap. 3, Kindle.

about his terminal illness, he linked worship to brokenness. He wrote, “Worship is using all that we are to praise all that God is.”²⁰³ According to him, worship includes human brokenness, sadness, and suffering. Without these, there is no worship. However, if Christians believe in God the Creator, then God is worthy, regardless of human suffering, and therefore, there are always reasons to thank Him.²⁰⁴

Stillbirth and miscarriage also bring deep sorrow to any parent. Darlene Zschech and her husband shared how their lives were made miserable due to constant miscarriages. They confessed that though their hearts were broken, they could find strength and healing through songs. Though their predicament could not be changed, Darlene wrote, “faith rose above my anger.”²⁰⁵ They were filled with hope, and their desire to worship God grew.

Grief affects not only families but for communities as well. Pastor Richie Fike shared how his Church lost a core leader during a mission trip to Haiti. Losing a church member and being responsible for bringing comfort and encouragement to a hurting community, Fike urged church leaders to look for new meaning in the songs and hymns being sung. In bereavement, songs are powerful and meaningful. It is the worship leader's responsibility to lead people's hearts and minds to the face of their God.²⁰⁶ Fike also warned worship leaders against falling into the trap of offering platitudes. Instead, he advised them to wrestle with difficult questions and always help the hurting to see that God always loves them, regardless of their loss and pain.²⁰⁷

203 Tim Timmons, “Celebration and Lament,” in Smith, chap. 5, Kindle.

204 Ibid.,

205 Darlene Zschech, “Worship Through the Storm,” in Smith, chap. 6, Kindle.

206 Richie Fike, “Aftershocks,” in Smith, chap. 7, Kindle.

207 Ibid.,

Experiencing grief after the death of a loved one is common among church members. However, grief may be lessened in the Church, where the worship of God is intense. Carla Brewington stated, "Amid pain and suffering, people come together to worship, crying and calling upon Christ to rescue them."²⁰⁸ Further, Brewington noted that true worship occurs in believers' communities through actions that speak louder than the songs. She then concluded, "Without making worship relevant to the hurting, then human faith is worthless."²⁰⁹ In times of misfortune, believers look to the local Church for perspective. Such was the case after a mass shooting at one of the Walmart Centers in El Paso, Texas, in 2019. The whole community was affected by the fateful event. The church leaders' challenge was to know how best to lead their congregations in the weeks following the event. Warren Anderson, whose church community was affected by a mass shooting, observed that many find worship to be intense when the grieving individuals come to the end of their crisis.²¹⁰ It is crucial to note that worship is not something that helps people forget their circumstances. Instead, worship can help foster grief care.

Grieving persons experiencing anger, shock, and denial are commendable, as outlined by Guthrie, Worden, and many others. The impact and means of coping with grief as it pertains to the psychological world are very complex. Grief writers know the need to help grieving families cope with their grief, yet few have been written on the practical methodology to help a sorrowful person cope with grief. Besides, grieving congregants' experiences or attempts to identify what they find meaningful and beneficial in their journeys through the valley of grief have not yet

²⁰⁸ Carla Brewington, "Worshiping in the Ruins," in Smith, chap. 8, Kindle.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.,

²¹⁰ Warren Anderson, "God of Sorrow," in Smith, chap. 9, Kindle.

been explored. Therefore, this study will present the theological foundations of grief and will point how characters in the Biblical community came together to help grieving individuals cope with their grief.

Theological Foundations

The Christian faith is based on a foundation and belief of living eternally with God. After all, Christ promised His followers that He is going to heaven to prepare a place so that believers may also be where He is.²¹¹ Believers are hoping and longing that heaven will be their new home when this life comes to an end. When a loved one dies, believers hope that the deceased is in heaven with God and Jesus Christ. Though the Christian faith's theological foundation is to be with Jesus Christ and the heavenly Father in heaven, there seem to be cracks in that theology when a loved one dies. Although survivors believe the deceased person is in heaven, there is always a gaping hole in the heart when a loved one dies. Grief following the loss of a loved one presents a more profound thought than just missing the deceased. It often leads to questioning the theological foundation of Christianity. If heaven is the desire and preferred home for Christians, why does humanity experience grief, pain, anger, and denial when someone dies? If the deceased is in heaven, which is a better place than earth, why is there so much grieving?

God is love.²¹² Throughout the Bible, God's love toward humanity is undeniable. God loves everyone, and God's love is demonstrated in what He does for the redemption and salvation of everyone. The Bible reveals that God has a constant enemy, the devil, who makes humanity fall victim to death, pain, discouragement, and suffering. However, God's love goes to great lengths to protect humanity. God's love fosters comfort and encourages humanity to stay

²¹¹ John 14:3.

²¹² 1 John 4:8.

strong amid grief. The following study will show how some biblical figures expressed their grief. It will also explain how God comforts humanity amid grief and His call to Christians to comfort others.

Walking the Path of Grief

Aaron and his sons are forbidden to mourn for Nadab and Abihu: "*Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes.*"²¹³ The Biblical quote narrates a tragedy that strikes the family of the newly appointed high priest, Aaron, at an unexpected moment. The two previous chapters of Leviticus 8 and 9 narrate how Aaron and his sons are anointed and installed to begin their new function as priests. Chapter 9 of Leviticus ends with a celebration:

Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after offering the sin, burnt, and peace offerings. Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Lord's presence appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the altar's fat parts. Furthermore, all the people saw, shouted, and fell on their faces.²¹⁴

However, this celebration is cut off tragically after the Lord's fire came forth and consumed Aaron's sons, and they died instantly.²¹⁵ Thus, in an instant, the collective celebration and joy gave way to grief and mourning. The people's pleasure was replaced by deep grief and shock. Moses reacted by seeking to attach meaning to his nephews' tragic deaths. He told Aaron that though Nadab and Abihu were punished by death, their death sanctified the divine name. Did

213 Leviticus 10:6.

214 Leviticus 9:22–24.

215 Leviticus 10:2.

Moses' words provide some comfort to the bereaved father? According to the text, Aaron was silent.

In Jewish tradition, Aaron's silence meant that he was at peace and did not mourn because he believed what happened to his sons was due to divine judgment, and thus, he was comforted by Moses's words. Some argue that Aaron was silent, meaning he was rendered mute by shock and deep grief.²¹⁶ The verse supports Exodus 15:16, which reads, "Terror and dread descend upon them; through the might of Your arm, they are still as stone." The muted reaction to bereavement is well known in Scripture. Moreover, it was believed that silence was a common mourning tradition in Biblical times, citing Job's friends, who sat silently with Job for a week, contemplating his misfortune. It is reasonable to say that silence was a common mourning tradition in the first century and that when grieving individuals replaced mourning with silence, it was a natural reaction of shock and disbelief.

Biblical grief practices include weeping, lamentation, wearing sackcloth, removing one's shoes, refraining from bathing, lying on the ground or in ashes, and sometimes rolling in dirt or ashes. Fasting was also a sign of mourning. For instance, King David's grief customs during his son's illness were fasting and lying on the ground.²¹⁷

The Bible is silent when it comes to abstaining from sexual relations during grief and bereavement. However, it seems sexual abstinence was also a part of mourning practices, especially for widows.²¹⁸ Widows marked themselves so they could be recognized. During the

²¹⁶ K. A. Mathews and R. Kent Hughes. *Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People*. ESV ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 86.

²¹⁷ Genesis 23:2; 2 Sam. 1:17; 3:33; Jer. 9:20; Ezek. 32:2; 2 Chron. 35:25; 1 Kings 13:30; Jer. 22:18; Gen. 37:34; 2; Ezek. 24:17, 23; 2 Sam. 12:20; Jer. 6:26; Ezek. 27:30; Job 16:15; Job. 2:8; Jer. 6:26; Ezek. 27:30; Job 16:15; 2 Sam. 12:16. "

²¹⁸ Genesis 38.

mourning period, friends and relatives visited the home of the bereaved not only to comfort them but also to adhere to mourning practices. They participated in the mourners' grief and pain by expressing sorrow and providing meals. These mourning practices played a primary psychological function; they helped grieving individuals to retain stability. Also, these practices helped survivors redefine their relationship with the deceased and embrace their new status as widows or widowers, orphans, or bereaved mothers or fathers—moreover, grievors publicly express their grief to unburden the pain and sorrow. Beyond the psychological benefits of mourning, Scripture communicates that the living has certain obligations toward the deceased. As found in the Bible, most obligations were common and applied to every deceased person, such as a committal service. Unfortunately, Aaron could not fulfill his responsibility of mourning his dead sons. Consequently, he could not vent his emotions in a way that could have allowed him to ease his pain.

Of all bereavements, losing a child is the worst. In patriarchal societies in the biblical time, sons were important because of their role in continuing or carrying on the family name and extending their father's lineage. It is the very reason King David blessed his son, Solomon. David prayed for Solomon and blessed him by saying, “May God make the renown of Solomon even greater than yours, and may He exalt his throne even higher than yours!”²¹⁹ What is more, in the biblical era, sons served a practical function. They were to strengthen and reinforce the family's name and support their parents in their old age.²²⁰

Aaron's sons, struck by fire, were his oldest sons. They often escorted their father and Moses as they climbed Mount Sinai to make sacrifices. Undoubtedly, Aaron saw them as his

219 1 Kings 1:47

220 Isa. 51:18; Ruth 4:14–15.

heirs and successors. As a father, Aaron was traumatized by the sudden and unexpected death of his sons. However, he was prohibited from mourning them, touching their corpse, or even accompanying them as they would be buried. Aarons' cousins, instead, were ordered by Moses to undertake all the mourning responsibilities.

Nevertheless, despite Aaron being forbidden to mourn his sons, he could express his grief by abstaining from the gift offering's ritual consumption. He allowed the offering to burn to ashes. When Moses commanded Aaron and his other sons to eat the offering as the tradition demanded, the offering was burnt. Moses was understandably upset because Aaron broke God's command to priests to use part of the offering as their food. When Moses reproached him, Aaron connected his action with the tragedy that had befallen him.²²¹ His action articulates his intense pain and grief. Diane Sharon commented on Aaron's action. She argued that Aaron refused to share a meal with God whose fire had consumed his two sons by letting the ritual gift burn to ashes.²²² According to her, as narrated in Leviticus 10, the sin offering is eaten by both the priests and the deity. Aaron expressed his grief and anger toward God by burning it to ashes and refusing to participate in this feast.

Biblical Foundation of Grief

The writer of Matthew's gospel writes: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."²²³ This verse is part of Jesus's famous teachings known as the *Sermon on the Mount*. The meaning behind the verse is that believers should be blessed because they are mourners. The two concepts -- blessing and mourning, are oxymoronic in that they pull in opposite directions.

²²¹ Mathews and Hughes. *Leviticus*, 2019, 148.

²²² Archie Chi Chung Lee, Athalya Brenner, and Project Muse. *Leviticus and Numbers* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2013), 38.

²²³ Matthew 5:4.

How can one be comforted while mourning? There are usually support elements within the local church that attempt to provide care and comfort amidst mourning. This effort is familiar from the moment death has been announced. In most cases, the statement 'for they shall be comforted' sets a solid theological foundation for a local church to provide care and comfort to grieving individuals.

The project of equipping local churches with a clear and practical methodology to help grieving individuals handle their grief was inspired and birthed through pastoral experience and observation that the local church should have a clear and practical methodology to help grieving persons. The absence of a grieving ministry after burial is noticeable in most local churches. There are church members who grieve, but their grief goes unnoticed. As a result, people do not receive needed spiritual support from their faith community. For example, a church member could not celebrate Thanksgiving after the death of his only daughter. A faithful member suffered disenfranchised grief after her lesbian daughter died, and the death was not recognized in the local church. A female church member lost her husband, who was not a churchgoer, and she stopped coming to church because she felt unsupported by her church family. There are many other people in the pews every Sunday who silently grieve their loss. With time, grieving individuals may open themselves to their deepest wounds, but the church needs to help them hear and understand and find their spiritual freedom until that happens. The best way the church can provide care and comfort is through a theological foundation.

After losing a loved one, the reality of grief can change a person from having a happy life to having lasting emotional grief. There are emotional swings that happen when death strikes. So often, it impacts the mental and spiritual state of being. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross listed five stages of grief, and Worden created the Task Grief Theory, which is the experiences individuals

go through when death strikes a loved one. So often, people struggle to embrace the reality of death. Subsequently, they find themselves secluded and longing for fellowship with the deceased person. The belief in Christ can sometimes confuse and irritate people of faith. There are many biblical stories whereby Christ physically healed people, but they do not adequately help grieving individuals today. Sometimes believers express their feelings like Aaron, who went mute and dumb after his sons' sudden death. Sometimes believers question why the Lord allowed their loved ones to die. Though Ecclesiastes 3 clarifies that there is a time for every season in life, a time to be born and a time to die, Christians, like most people, struggle emotionally after a loss, which places them in a dark, secluded place.

After a loss, there can be an emotional drain between grieving and knowing that Almighty God is in control. Living in isolation can make Christians' spiritual walk dreadful. Also, grief can stun the theological and spiritual foundation of believers. The feeling of loneliness and hopelessness can render believers into spiritual seclusion, even though they attend church events and activities. Spiritual seclusion has become prevalent in the lives of congregants.

The United Methodist Church believes the Bible is the primary authority for Christian faith and practice. This project uses biblical principles to develop and support the church's need to equip its members with a clear and practical methodology to help grieving individuals handle their grief. This research project uses the term 'grief' to convey a loved one's death, but the Bible uses grief in a general sense to mean grieved hearts. In Genesis 6:6, God grieved; although it was not due to death, God grieved because of men's evil hearts. As a result, God allowed the flood to destroy humanity, except Noah and his family. God grieved, but then He provided grace and comfort to humanity.

Theologically, Christians assume that grieving is natural because humans were created in the same image of a God who grieved. The fact that God grieves should not devalue His majestic and sovereign nature. God is God, and no one can be compared to Him. When things are not right, humanity grieves so is God. Therefore, God experiences grief, and humans, being made in His image, naturally will experience grief at some point in life.

Mourn With Those Who mourns

The book of Job helps bring out the elements of grief. Job lost everything, including his children. His friends came to offer him comfort, and their reaction is like how many react after finding out about the death of a loved one. Job 2:7-13 narrates that Job had sores all over his body. His condition was unpleasable that his wife advised him to curse God and die. Then Job's friends came to his house to mourn and comfort him in a time of need. They sat on the ground for seven days and seven nights and said nothing to Job, for they saw that his grief was very great.

The ministry of presence was evident during Job's moment of great grief. The same ministry of the presence or spiritual outreach is evident in most local churches today. Pastoral leadership and the memorial committee often visit the hospital when someone is in the hospital, and if death is announced, many church members will call or visit the family.

Moreover, the ministry of presence is evident in that the congregation provides meals to the bereaved family. Some church members call the grieving family to help bring comfort and let them know there is support in a difficult time. However, after committal at the graveside, there is a void because church members feel they have helped the bereaved family through their difficult time, and therefore church members continue with their everyday life.

Humans will always experience grief after the death of a loved one. However, there must be a way to help people handle their grief. There are many stories in the Hebrew Bible whereby people grieved over sudden death and found ways of embracing everyday life. There must be a way for people to continue grieving after a loss, and there should be a theological foundation whereby church members can find comfort and strength from biblical stories. In Genesis 24:67, when Isaac's mother died, his wife, Rebekah, comforted him. This story's theological foundation demonstrates the need for compassion from immediate family and closest friends to the person in bereavement.

These Old Testament grief stories show the importance of recognizing and accepting grief moments in a person's life and practicing the ministry of presence amidst grief. The church needs to have a ministry of presence ready to help congregants cope and understand the theological foundation of grief.

Christians strive to be like Christ. Thus, church members can find strength in grief if they have Christ to help them through struggles. The theology of incarnation that Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God is supportive in that Jesus can experience grief. The human nature of Jesus experienced grief while dealing with the death of his dear friend, Lazarus. It demonstrates that Jesus had emotions, just like every human. The grief of losing Lazarus, coupled with the thought of death, made Jesus weep.

The theological foundation in the New Testament about Jesus experiencing grief is a vital step toward grief healing. Understanding that provides truths and speaks volumes into people's lives as they grieve for their loved ones. Though grief comes with pain and numbness, in most instances, it will pass. Just like Christ overcame His great grief, Christians quite likely will overcome these feelings as well.

The Normality of Grieving

It is often a struggle to understand the process of grieving. Any painful emotion can be evident during grief. Even the strongest and most faithful disciple of Christ can cry out with an utterance of pain and disappointment, as Martha and Mary cried out when their brother died, as narrated in John 11. The activity of comforting and offering condolences for Martha and Mary started upon the initial notification of Lazarus's death. In their time of grief, the Jewish community came to provide comfort. This theological foundation of providing comfort soon after announcing someone has passed away further justifies the Church's practice in the event of death.

Providing comfort during grief has a significant meaning throughout the Bible. People came to visit grieving families. The Jewish community's presence at Mary and Martha's house signified the entire community's pain when a community member died. When Jesus came to mourn with them, there was hope that Jesus would restore their happiness. Martha met Jesus and said, "Lord, Lazarus would not have died if you had been here."²²⁴ There are significant aspects of grief in Martha's statement. Anger and blame seemed evident. Martha and Mary felt that Jesus could have saved their brother from dying but did not. There is an indication that if Jesus had been present, the story would have been different. The feeling of profound spiritual loss often conveys anger. Martha expressed her anger toward Jesus because she felt Lazarus' death could have been prevented if Christ had been present. Grief can take the form of anger directed at a divine. Martha and Mary witnessed the healing powers of Christ, but in grief, they expressed feelings of anger toward Jesus. The expression of anger at Jesus happens to many Christians

224 John 11:21

today. Though Christians do not often speak out as Martha did, these emotions are sometimes present and often suppressed, allowing anger to slow the healing process.

People experiencing grief can express anger through actions and conversations. Although the Church reaches out to the bereaved family, there should be a spiritual and biblical understanding of why it is essential to have a ministry of presence that offers comfort to the grieving family. Many biblical stories articulate the importance of the ministry of presence for the grieving, but the story in Luke, chapter seven, articulates the story well and can be emulated by congregations whenever there is a death within the Christian family. An entire community walks along with a widow who just lost a son. There is the presence of an abundance of people that showed up to support this widow. Chapter 7 of Luke sets the theological foundation that churches need to have a ministry that provides comfort and support to grieving members. Undoubtedly, the church supports grieving members, but it is crucial to have a systematic and coordinated approach to help grieving families cope. Congregants need to show empathy just as Jesus expressed his sympathy when He saw the widow in deep grief, "he had compassion on her and asked her not to weep any longer."²²⁵

The second point the Church could emulate Jesus is maximizing compassion ministry. Jesus provided comfort to the widow, and although the church cannot bring the dead back to life, the church can offer comfort and support to those who grieve. The church has a spiritual obligation to be present and walk with people through their grief. Many bereaved persons today do not worship freely because they still grieve the loss of their loved ones. Death and grief are not common discussion topics in most churches today. The Church would rather discuss the

225 Luke 7:13

theology of life and grace, but people keep silent when the theology of death is brought into the picture. Though the Bible consistently discusses death and life, the Church articulates its theological foundation based on life rather than death. The fact that every human will die makes the theology of death an essential topic to be discussed in the Church.

The theology of death implies that death is not the end of the story but the beginning of eternal life. When the church embraces eternal life's reality, grief's vulnerability will be open, and people will feel free to discuss death. The openness will help the grieving individuals accept reality while talking about the impact of grief. When people struggle with grief, it is crucial to help them reconstruct positive aspects of the deceased person. The Church needs to make the ministry of presence available 24/7 to church members during the period of grief. That ministry should be based on the compassion that Christ demonstrated during His earthly ministry. Jesus felt so much compassion that He mourned with those who mourned. Therefore, the Church should follow Christ's steps in supporting and comforting church members who grieve.

People who have experienced grief throughout the Bible express certain characteristics. They stayed in communication with God even though it hurt. They connected with the community in their time of trouble and suffering and connected with others. It is all about communicating with God and the community and forming relationships with people in their time of grief. David Augsburger coins the term *tripolar spirituality* to help people handle their grief. According to the *tripolar spirituality theory*, people need to be inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed to growing through grief.²²⁶ Personal transformation, experience with the divine, and relationship with a neighbor are interdependent.²²⁷ Reflecting on

²²⁶ David Augsburger. *Dissident Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006),13

²²⁷ Ibid.,13.

tripolar spirituality, increased communication with Almighty God, community shared experiences, and comfort provided to grieving individuals can enable grieving individuals to handle grief or grow through grief.

In Scripture, there are three dimensions in the journey of grief. Each dimension is necessary for a person to handle grief and grow spiritually. This methodology focuses on being contemplative, communal, and missional-minded. Brian McLaren illustrates the three dimensions: the contemplative dimension (upward) when people acknowledge their vulnerability and then rise upward toward the Almighty God; the communal dimension (Inward) is the journey individuals make with other people, and the missional dimension (outward) occurs when people express their inner transformation by serving others.²²⁸

One could say that all three dimensions are adventures into a deepened relationship with God. However, all three dimensions, upward, inward, and outward, seek God in seclusion, community, and service. This theology keeps people focused on God rather than on themselves and helped to connect people's inward experience with outward relationships. The tripolar spirituality approach demonstrates that people can still communicate with God during grief, remain connected in the community, and receive support and comfort from others during their time of grief. Seeking God in times of grief provides healing and helps people participate in service or events without diminishing God's power in their life. In bereavement, seeking God means relying totally on Him. "Seeking God," as Sheela Pawar puts it, means "total reliance

228 Brian McLaren, *Find Our Way Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 99.

under grief and loss.”²²⁹ Can God heal? Yes. He is the Lord, the Great Physician.²³⁰ When humanity encounters grief, they can view it as an opportunity to see how God heals.

Offering God’s Compassion in Times of Grief

One of God’s attributes is compassion.²³¹ The Bible narrates Moses’ request to see God’s face in Exodus 33:18-34:7. God showed Himself to Moses by describing His nature – compassion. Oleg Shukalovich refers to compassion as *châmal*, an act of expressing compassion to another.²³² The first time *châmal* is mentioned in the Bible occurred when Pharaoh's daughter saw Moses lying in a basket floating down the river Nile. The Scripture reads, "When Pharaoh's daughter opened the basket and saw the child, behold, the baby cried. Moreover, she had compassion on him."²³³ Compassion in this verse can be translated as pity. Genesis 37:35 used the same word when Jacob's sons lied that his beloved son, Joseph, was dead. Jacob's sons sought to comfort him, but he refused. Another instance is in Psalm 23:4 when David states that only God's rod and staff comfort him.

Another word for compassion is *râchum*, which means to love deeply or have tender affection.²³⁴ *Râchum* is often used to refer to God’s compassion towards humans. The word *râchum* is used forty-seven times in the Bible, and it has been translated as mercy, compassion, pity, merciful, and love. For instance, Lamentation 3:32 states, "But though he brings grief, yet

229 Sheela Pawar. *Trusting Others, Trusting God: Concepts of Belief, Faith, and Rationality*. 1st ed. (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2016), 24.

230 John 5:1-9.

231 Psalms 86:15.

232 Oleg Shukalovich. Bible Concordance and Strong’s Concordance [Mobile application software] [iPad application edition 1.1], 2016. Retrieved from <http://itunes.apple.com>

233 Exodus 22:6

234 Oleg Shukalovich. Bible concordance and Strong’s concordance, 2016.

he will have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies." God expresses His compassion to humanity through pity and love. *Châmal* describes that humanity can show compassion to one another. It is because of compassion that humans express kindness to one another.

The gospels also show Christ's compassion toward humanity. The Greek word for compassion is *splanchnizomai*, which means to feel sympathy.²³⁵ Christ performed many miracles because He was moved with compassion. Out of compassion, Christ fed five thousand, healed the sick, cast out demons, and restored people's sight. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 18 about a king who showed compassion on a man who was in debt. However, that man refused to show compassion toward the person who owed him money. Jesus teaches that God expects humans to show compassion to one another as God shows compassion to everyone. God cares about humanity's condition and helps the afflicted, including widows and fatherless children.²³⁶ Throughout the Bible, one observes a repeated theme that God provides comfort to humanity out of compassion. Then God calls humanity to provide comfort to others.

God is the God of all comfort.²³⁷ He comforts humanity in their sorrow to sustain them and comfort others in their times of grief. In 2 Corinthians 1:4, the Apostle Paul explains that the knowledge to minister to others is motivated by people's experience from being comforted by God. God sympathizes with His children. There are so many examples in Scripture where God cares for the vulnerable. He cares for those who mourn and those in distress.²³⁸

235 Oleg Shukalovich. Bible concordance and Strong's concordance, 2016.

236 Exodus 22:22-27

237 2 Cor 1:3-4.

238 Matthew 5:4; John 11:35.

God loves to comfort humanity because of His nature, which is love, compassion, mercy, and grace. God demonstrates these qualities through His love for humanity (John 3:16). When one understands or knows the attributes of God, it fosters trust in God. Besides, it helps humanity understand that God cares. God's caring attitude inspires those who are hurting to know that God will tenderly handle their situations.²³⁹

God also comforts His people through His presence (Ps 46:1). In Psalm 139, King David states that no matter where he is, God is there. God's presence is not limited to earth or heaven.²⁴⁰ God is close to His people in difficult times (Ps 34:18). In the New Testament, Christ assured His followers that He would send a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to abide with God's people forever (John 14:16). The presence of the Holy Spirit is a sign that God continues to be present among His people. He promises never to abandon His people (Heb 13:5). God's presence reassures those who grieve that they are not alone. God promises to shield and protect His people (Ps 91; Isa 51: 12; 61:2). He protects those who are vulnerable due to loss. God's protection embodies a tangible expression of love for those who are hurting and suffering.

In grief, God has the power to restore humanity. As Ken Ham states, "God works to restore what was stolen or taken from His people."²⁴¹ However, he argues that one needs faith to know that God can restore what was lost. For instance, when Job lost his children, God gave him more children and restored what was lost because of his faith. Knowing that God provides peace and comfort amid grief strengthens and encourages His followers. This hope encourages God's people to understand that their current grief is temporary. God is gracious to all, and His

239 Ken Ham. *How Could a Loving God?* (Green Forest: New Leaf Publishing Group, 2007), 31.

240 Ibid., 31.

241 Ham. *How Could a Loving God?* 2007, 46.

compassion is essential to restore humanity in difficult times. Moreover, God uses His people through the power of the Holy Spirit to comfort others. He promised to judge those who fail to provide comfort to those in crisis (Matt 25:31-46).

Christ's Salvation Amid Grief

The nature of salvation was for humanity to reconcile with God through Christ's death on the cross. Due to human's sin, only Christ's sacrifice could save them. Through Christ's death and resurrection, humans are reconciled to God through repentance, faith, and obedience. Christians have the assurance of hope because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The Bible reveals that God never abandons people who are experiencing grief. The gospel gives hope, even in grief.

The nature of salvation is the primary reason why humanity exists. Due to human disobedience in Genesis, sin has entered the world and separated God from humans. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote,

However, because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life, but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.²⁴²

Individuals who do not know the gospel suffer because they have to go through grief without knowing that Christ provides hope that sustains, nurture, and strengthen in times of grief. God seeks to have a relationship with all people through Christ. This relationship is motivated by His love and mercy as the Apostle Paul wrote:

²⁴² Romans 2:5-8.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²⁴³ Justus H. Hunter writes that all people receive God's righteousness by faith, and there is nothing one can do to gain this favor. Both Jews and Gentiles have sinned and have received God's righteousness as an underserved gift.²⁴⁴ God seeks to have a personal relationship with humanity, and humanity must deny themselves to follow Him. Some people think they do not need God in their moments of grief. It is wrong to have this mindset as it is written:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together, they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.²⁴⁵

Salvation is not based on what a person does because one would never reach the standards of God. In the biblical verse above, Paul puts Jews and Gentiles on the same level as creatures created by God to mean humanity can do nothing without God.²⁴⁶

Faithfulness in Christ enables humans to be saved from pain and loss. It is essential to understand that believing in Christ is different from having faith in Christ. Faith in Christ changes a person. It guides them in Spirit and enables them to walk by faith instead of sight.²⁴⁷ Believing in Christ means affirming that Christ was a good and faithful servant of God. It is hypocrisy to believe in Christ without having faith in Him. In other words, people who believe in Christ without having faith in Him are Christians by name alone. For faith in Christ implies one

243 Romans 3:23.

244 Justus H. Hunter. *If Adam Had Not Sinned: The Reason for the Incarnation from Anselm to Scotus* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 221.

245 Romans 3:9-12.

246 James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8*, vol. 38A, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 180.

247 2 Corinthians 2:7.

gives all they are to Christ. Saul persecuted early Christians. He was present when Stephen was killed, yet, he encountered God on his way to Damascus.²⁴⁸ Saul's encounter with Christ instilled within him deep faith. Saul became a proclaimer of the gospel. His name was changed from Saul to Paul, and he had a strong faith in Christ. Paul later became a martyr for his faith in Christ. Faith in Christ implies denying oneself and following God's will without fear of being martyred.

The church's ministry needs to be Christ-centered when ministering to those who have experienced grief. Families need to have faith in Christ, so they face grief in faith. When a person of deep faith loses a loved one, they will likely cope with grief easily. The Church may approach these families in prayer, knowing that their presence will help them at their moments of grief. The Church should be a place of comfort in times of grief and loss. However, many fail to bring this support after the burial. Some congregants judge or criticize the way others express their emotions. Some do not show support because they feel that grief and faith cannot co-exist. Hence, grieving individuals may feel their grief has been ignored. When this happens, the visible presence of grief and loss tends to disappear from the faith community. This type of response is careless as it makes the mourners feel inhibited about grieving the loss publicly.

Ham stated that the church must apply the gospel in times of grief and loss. He stated that "During difficult trials, the gospel produces joy and hope."²⁴⁹ The gospel produces hope-filled perseverance, hope-filled confidence, hope-filled faith and love, hope-filled stability, and hope-filled enthusiasm.²⁵⁰ Grieving families must have a relationship with God and the gospel to ensure hope during trials. Congregants interested in helping others need the biblical foundation

248 Acts 9:1-9.

249 Ham, *How Could a Loving God*, 2007, 67.

250 *Ibid.*, 68.

of the gospel; without it, just as Proverbs 10:28 states, the wicked of this world will perish. Thus, biblical foundations must be employed to provide a core from which the congregation may help grieving families cope with their grief.

Theoretical Foundations

When considering grief work, the most widely known study is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's *Stages of Grief*. She theorized that those experiencing grief due to losing a loved one generally pass through five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Later, Kubler-Ross' study was expanded and maintained that the five 'stages of grief' were not experienced sequentially. Instead, grief is individualized. However, these stages enlighten how one processes grief. Thus, knowing and understanding how a bereaved person processes grief may help minister to those experiencing grief effectively.

Grief Process

Kubler-Ross's stages of grief are crucial and pose a challenge as to how grief can be handled. Bereaved persons are confused as to how they should express faith when faced with grief.²⁵¹ So often, they look at the reactions of other members and find it hard to express their grief. Some bereaved congregants tend to deny going through stages of grief. By so doing, they deny accepting the realities of death and grief. Moreover, most grief writers recognize that stages of grief, as coined by Kubler-Ross, should be introduced to people seeking to help others work on their grief process.

Kubler Ross's work has been expanded by William Worden, an expert in grief counseling. Worden provided many tasks for grieving persons to handle their grief and adjust to

251 Carleen M. Ratcliffe. "The Classical And The Christian: Tennyson's Grief And Spiritual Shift From "The Lotos-Eaters" To "Ulysses." (Master's Thesis), University of South Carolina, 2006. Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3472>

life without the deceased. Congregants tend to suppress these stages by minimizing them and rushing through to acceptance. Some have quickly taken refuge in seclusion, thus suppressing the depression stage. People who suppress the process of grief do so by either overlooking one or two stages of grief, pretending they have accepted the loss.²⁵² They want to fix things quickly to go back to work and pretend grief does not hurt or exist. Bereaved individuals who rush through stages of grief so often struggle to survive the aftermath of trauma.

Denial is a typical response to the grief associated with tragedy. It comes in various forms and is experienced in different ways. Besides, everyone reacts to it differently. Denial is when a person refuses to accept what has happened. Shock, helplessness, seclusion, and crying may be experienced at this stage. Sometimes people who have hypertension issues may faint or lose consciousness. Some react by pretending to minimize what has happened; this is generally experienced among church members. Denial provides time to understand and accept difficult realities before grasping what took place.²⁵³ It diminishes all awareness before experiencing relief from the second stage. At this point, stress does not diminish because denial is evident. If individuals process denial after learning about a loved one's death, they move into the second stage, anger.

The researcher has observed church members expressing their emotions by asking 'why' questions. Some of the bereaved acknowledged how the deceased's health was promising, but then they died. Why? They ask God! A faithful man, whose wife and daughter was fatally shot, shouted during a memorial service, saying, "Why, have you allowed this to happen!" Anger, when it is not controlled, can be dangerous. In anger, people can accuse others wrongly. Kubler

²⁵² Thompson, *The Gift of Encouragement*, 2013, 17.

²⁵³ Heath, *No Time for Tears*, 2015, 37.

Ross clarified that expressing anger is a positive way to react to grief. It is not a sin to express anger. If anger is well-processed, it contributes to handling one's grief. However, if anger remains unprocessed, it may lead individuals into trouble or even sin. The Bible narrates that when Jesus expressed anger toward the money changers, He drove them out.²⁵⁴ If anger dominates a person, he or she can do anything. If anger makes a person think about another way of living, it leads to the third stage of grieving, bargaining.

According to Gross, bargaining relates to denial. People who try to bargain the situation so often find it difficult to accept their absolute reality. This reality is evident in those who believe that having a relationship with God makes them free from life tragedies. At this stage, people crumble in the face of adversity, which leads to the fourth stage of depression, which is undoubtedly the most challenging stage in the journey of grief.

After the bereaved person processes the first three stages, denial, anger, and bargaining, they become depressed. As a result, they may feel disappointed and betrayed by God, other people, or even life. The bereaved exhibit painful reactions such as sadness, frustration, confusion, and shame at this stage. The bereaved may become disinterested in life. They may be sleeping more, avoiding social connections, and it is, at this time, that they may stop attending church worship and events, which leads to a spiritual crisis. The bereaved may subsequently lack self-esteem, and self-reproach shadows his/her mind. Though this stage is the most difficult, it helps the bereaved start embracing or reorganizing life, leading to the final stage of acceptance.

When the bereaved reach the final stage, acceptance means she or he has started to prepare to face the future without the deceased. One begins to understand that life has changed,

²⁵⁴ John 2:13-16.

and there is no way the deceased will come back to life, but life continues. The strength is redirected from grieving and mourning to the pursuit of living. According to Gross and Kubler-Ross, the bereaved will come to the point of letting go and reinvesting the strengths into another relationship or learning to cope alone, thus leading to healing. However, a close look at the grief stages shows that anger and depression can delay healing due to cultural or religious expectations.

Critiques of Grief Process

Sharon May considered grief work to be a process that starts with acceptance and then moves the bereaved through a series of tasks toward a goal of reorganization, healing, or reinvestment in life without a loved one.²⁵⁵ Stressing the importance of family relationships, May adapted attachment theory to create a comprehensive bereavement care model. She accepted theories proposed by secular theorists such as John Bowlby and Kubler-Ross. However, she pointed out that Kubler-Ross's grief stages are not considered in a linear format but instead as a roller-coaster.²⁵⁶ She recommended that any congregation needing to assist grieving individuals to cope with grief should consult secular bereavement theories as there are many guides about individual bereavement care.

Though May recognized that grief impacts the soul and connects a human soul to God, she did not provide enough information to help congregation members assist the beaved in understanding why God did not prevent a loved one's death.²⁵⁷ While talking about interventions,

²⁵⁵ Sharon Hart May, "Loss and Grief Work," in *Caring for People God's Way: Personal and Emotional Issues, Addictions, Grief, and Trauma*, ed. Timothy E. Clinton, Archibald D. Hart, and George W. Ohlschlager (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 384.

²⁵⁶ May, "Loss and Grief Work," 361.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 374.

May points out the importance of having a relationship with God and relying on God's word for comfort; however, she failed to demonstrate how one's relationship with God and dependence on His word would bring comfort and healing.

Wright describes grief as a journey of letting go. He linked grief to a person's emotional thoughts about the deceased person but remained silent about grief's theological approaches. According to Wright, recovering from grief is a matter of choice.²⁵⁸ Therefore, a bereaved person needs to try to let go and reinvest his/her emotional energy into new things. Wright relied on secular theories to explain the process of grief. In bereavement, Wright described the need for a shift in asking a question. He noted that instead of asking why the loss has occurred, the bereaved should begin to ask how they can learn from their loss.²⁵⁹ According to Wright, having faith in Christ and a solid biblical foundation help with recovery and healing in grief and loss. He then talks about death as a transition. However, his theories of grief do not provide overall bereavement care.

VanDuiwendyk called upon church leaders to journey with the bereaved by being willing to listen to them, assist, support, and walk with them through their grief.²⁶⁰ He understood grief as an unwanted gift from God that can create emotional and spiritual growth when the bereaved is willing to work through the emotional pain.²⁶¹ The goal of caring for a bereaved person, according to VanDuiwendyk, is healing, which includes acceptance and adaptation (factors that most secular grief theories support). VanDuiwendyk asserted that healing occurs when the grieving persons begin to see their pain of grief as expressions of their love toward the deceased

²⁵⁸ Wright, *Recovering from the Losses of Life*, 37, 86–98.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ VanDuiwendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 5.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

person.²⁶² While VanDuiwendyk's study tries to connect transformative healing and God, his theory speaks of God in a general sense. The terms he used, such as sojourner and wilderness of grief, are equally universal. It could make sense that he used these terms because of his role as a hospital chaplain, who is called to engage with people of different faiths. His approach to grief, therefore, is not Christ-centered.

William Hoy ponders Kubler-Ross's grief stages and concludes that they are virtually useless for people trying to help. In her view, Kubler-Ross's stages of grief are lacking because they do not consider the complexities of grief. Additionally, the stages do not model an active role that a caregiver can take in bringing comfort to the bereaved. Hoy agreed that Kubler Ross's grief stages might be valuable to mental health disciplines; however, in the Church, he believes that Scripture is integral in bringing about comfort and healing to the bereaved. According to Hoy, a troubled soul can be healed by God, acute teaching in the context of nurturing individuals, and the presence of a community of believers. Hoy, therefore, developed four points to assist the bereaved in their grieving process. He referred to the four points as "remember, reaffirm, realize, and release."²⁶³ According to him, memories and storytelling start with the remembrance phase. It enables the bereaved to navigate the spiritual questions aroused by their grief. The Church in the midst can then reaffirm the presence of God.

While Hoy provides a positive approach in his study; however, his theory does not guide one on how one can use Scripture and reaffirm God's presence. Hoy acknowledges the necessity of assisting grieving individuals with theological questions that they may arise. However, he recommends helping an individual understand the theological crisis questions to be part of the

²⁶² VanDuiwendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 126.

²⁶³ William G. Hoy, *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved* (Crawford, TX: Compass Press, 2008), 51.

church's ongoing ministry.²⁶⁴ Functionally, according to Hoy, the purpose of caring for the bereaved is to assist them as they learn to live without the deceased person.²⁶⁵ There are many things the Church can do to help a grieving person. Encouraging and comforting words can make a bereaved person feel better about their loss. Otherwise, the Church will fail the grieving families if it fails to provide care and make the Word of God and comfort found in God the primary goal of bereavement care.

Trapped between culture and religious conviction

Culture and religious convictions influence the way people respond to grief and loss. According to Pond, the intensity of grief depends on a socially constructed framework rather than innate feelings.²⁶⁶ In some cultures, individuals can express their grief in public, while grieving in public is a sign of weakness in other cultures. Cultural and religious beliefs shape the expression of grief. For example, in Western culture, Christians are expected to control their grief reaction, be confident about their world, and exhibit courage even when hurting.²⁶⁷ In other words, they are expected to suppress their emotions in public. Though they may feel like crying, culture, and religion force them to be numb in public. Bereaved persons often refrain from expressing sorrow and grief. With this said, congregants tend to express grief with caution. It

²⁶⁴ William G. Hoy, *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved* (Crawford, TX: Compass Press, 2008), 34.

²⁶⁵ Hoy, *Guiding People through Grief*, 16.

²⁶⁶ Pond, "A Study of Childhood Grief and the Church's Response." *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 1 (May 2012): 43–64.

²⁶⁷ Girlinghouse and Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past: A Conversation about Loss, Grief, and Nostalgia in Congregational Life*, 2019, 18.

implies that to be a Christian is to suffer in silence. In discussion with fellow pastors, the Rev. Johnson once said that Christians suppress grief to remain Christians.²⁶⁸

Christians are encouraged to control their grief. Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, "You have no reason to have sorrow as those who have no hope." This statement makes it difficult for many to shed tears or express emotions in public. Though one may feel like crying, the words rang in their ears to be strong because Christians do not cry like those who have no hope.

According to Girlinghouse, expressing grief beyond the memorial service in American culture has increasingly become taboo.²⁶⁹ Christians are aware of their need for grief but think it is appropriate to suppress their emotions. Many do not want their emotions to be exposed in public. The danger is that if the emotions are suppressed for a long time, stress, sorrow, and depression can be overcome, and suppression may be unhealthy. Since all the stages of grief have been explained, the Church community can modify them to replace hypocrisy with genuine emotions.

Foundations of Grief

Grief theories focus on understanding grief, and the process people go through to cope with grief. God is sometimes left out of the process. Since everyone can experience grief at some point in life, grief has been portrayed as a normal emotional reaction to loss but a painful process. During grief, people express high levels of emotion, but those emotions help the

²⁶⁸ The Rev. Johnson Gilbert. Ministerial Alliance Meeting held in Madison, New Jersey, on December 15, 2015.

²⁶⁹ Girlinghouse and Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past*, 2019, 18. Kindle

bereaved accept their loss and embrace the new reality of living without the deceased person.²⁷⁰

Grief resolutions occur in stages. Though people's experience with stages is individualized, commonalities exist. Generally, the first phase is regarded as acute grief, which includes numbness and denial of the reality of loss. Though grief theorists do not provide a grief timeframe, the acute phase can last for weeks.²⁷¹ When the bereaved begins to understand the reality of loss, they move to a period of despair that can last for several months. Finally, as emotions subside, the bereaved enter a phase of reformation in which they learn to live without the deceased. The reformation stage still has a high level of emotions. However, the yearning and crying would begin to diminish. Most grief theorists agree that normal grieving can last between one and two years.²⁷²

Stroebe and Shut proposed a dualistic model of bereavement, which indicates that grieving is a process that combines the reality of loss and the fight against that reality. The two authors suggest that a bereaved person tends to move between confronting and avoiding loss at every stage. Thus, people engage in loss orientation and restoration orientation. According to the two authors, loss-orientation refers to "the bereaved person's concentration on, appraising and processing of some aspect of the loss experience itself and, as such, incorporates grief work. It involves a painful dwelling on, even searching for the lost person, a phenomenon that lies at the heart of grieving."²⁷³ On the other hand, they argue that restoration orientation focuses on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement, reflecting a struggle to reorient

²⁷⁰ Svend Brinkmann and Ester Holte Kofod. "Grief as an Extended Emotion." *Culture & Psychology* 24, no. 2 (June 2018): 160–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17723328>

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁷² Brinkmann and Kofod. "Grief as an Extended Emotion," 2018, 170.

²⁷³ M. S. Stroebe and H. A. W. Schut. "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. A Decade on." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 61, no. 4 (2010): 273-289.

oneself in a changing world without the deceased person.²⁷⁴ Stroebe and Schut do not mention that loss orientation is better than restoration orientation or vice versa. Instead, they suggest that both orientations are normal and needed during the process of bereavement.

These theories of grief suggest that individuals experiencing grief must face loss and work through their reactions to loss. The notion of processing grief can be traced to Freud, who defines grieving as a process of recollecting memories of the deceased and then letting go of those memories.²⁷⁵ Likewise, Stroebe et al. described grief work as a cognitive process of confronting a loss, recollecting memories, and working towards disconnecting from the deceased.²⁷⁶ Most theorists have supported these definitions. They all agree that grieving individuals must express their emotions to heal or resolve their grief. Besides, expressing high-level emotions will help the bereaved detach themselves from the deceased and attain grief resolution. These assumptions have guided many grief interventionists. The goal of any grief interventionist is to help the bereaved work through the process of grief by expressing their emotions which can be either negative or positive. Besides, these emotions can be directed toward themselves, other people, the deceased, or even God. If an individual fails to express these emotions, they may experience complicated grief. Thus, grief interventionists need to confront grief emotions to achieve grief resolution.

Congregations needing to provide bereavement care to individuals experiencing grief are encouraged to allow the bereaved to express their emotions. The bereaved can express negative

274 M. S. Stroebe and H. A. W. Schut. "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. A Decade on." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 61, no. 4 (2010): 273-289.

275 Leeat Granek. "Grief as Pathology: The Evaluation of Grief Theory in Psychology from Freud to the Present" (2010);46-73

276 Stroebe et al., *Journal of Death and Dying* (2010):273-289.

and positive feelings toward themselves, the deceased, and others. Expressing such feelings may promote grief resolution. Further, guided by the phases of grief, the Church is advised to help individuals who had experienced death in the family express numbness and yearning so healing can occur. Although these phases are not meant to be linear, one cannot move to the reorganization stage without expressing emotions found in the first stages of grief.

Summary

Grief is an emotional response to the loss of a loved one. It affects anyone, and so often, persons experiencing grief express denial, depression, and numbness. Grief is a journey no one wishes to experience, but individuals who trust in God and have faith in Christ are likely to go through the stages of grief without significant difficulty. It may take weeks, months, or even years to get beyond their grief, but eventually, healing will be achieved. Grief is individualized; two persons will never express their grief in the same way. How a bereaved person chooses to express grief depends on many factors, including the relationship with the deceased person. As one grieves, it is essential to give them time to express their anger and sorrow. By so doing, the bereaved would come to understand and accept the reality of the death of a loved one.

Much has been written about how grief has a significant impact on believers. For many, it was a complicated journey filled with pain, doubt, and lament. Most of them could not help but find comfort in worship and in knowing that God was with them as they walked through the valley of shadows.

In bereavement, a pastor is expected to comfort the hurting and the grieving. The Church can do so by conducting a funeral service. A pastor can do so many things, but conducting a funeral service helps the bereaved family see that their grief is not disenfranchised. Agreeing to conduct a funeral service enables the pastor to exercise care and offer encouragement. Besides,

helping the bereaved family organize the funeral provides a lasting impression of care and support. However, the pastor should not limit his/her care to the funeral service but should respond to the ongoing needs of the bereaved.

Rituals remind people that their pain of loss is shared and acknowledged by others. Sharing stories, memorial services, and other funeral rites have social meaning beyond burying the dead. They are a reminder that when someone dies, the community needs to come together to show their unwavering support for each other and that the deceased is worth remembering. Though funeral rituals are no longer common in the 21st century, literature has shown that they are necessary to enhance grief resolutions.

Pastoral care and counseling also play an important role in bereavement. Psalm 23 reminds believers that no one walks through the valley alone. When helping individuals cope with grief, one should not claim the bereaved is healed; it is the work of the Holy Spirit. The role of pastoral care is to help create an environment that will allow the Spirit to do His work. The pastor has much to offer for his ministry that is helpful and meaningful in facilitating the process of grieving. Conducting worship is said to be one of the most important roles a pastor can play in assisting families who have experienced the death of a loved one to cope with grief and loss.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The methodology used to carry out this research is presented in this chapter. It includes the implementation, design, site and participant sampling, recruitment methods and approach, and ethical considerations. Further, chapter three presents the data collection and implementation of the research design. A description of how participants were invited to participate in this project is included. This chapter also presents the limitations of the study.

God's church is called to provide care and compassion to members who have lost loved ones.²⁷⁷ Both pastors and congregants need to understand the complexities of grief and the bereaved's ongoing needs. Being aware of grief theories provides a framework for ministry. There is much information on how a grieving person processes grief and how the church can be an agent of compassion and comfort. However, very little literature offers ample resources for responding to the ongoing needs of the bereaved.

This study aims to study the Church's role in helping grieving families cope after the loss and burial of a loved one. The research questions guiding this study follows:

- How do Christians understand, interpret, and apply the concepts of grief in their lives?
- How can the Church effectively help grieving families cope with grief?
- Beyond providing meals, sympathy cards, and flowers, in what ways can the Church respond to grieving individuals' ongoing needs?

The study questions are designed with the intent to test the following hypotheses:

²⁷⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:18

- Losing a loved one can affect the spiritual life of a believer.
- The Church's continual care and compassion can encourage healing in the life of grieving families.

Intervention Design

The Church's mission is to carry out the Great Commission, and individuals facing grief are among the vulnerable who need to be empowered by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Scripture invites all Christians to care for and comfort the vulnerable and the needy, especially those who mourn and grieve. Any person who grieves a loved one's death should not feel forsaken by the community of saints. As the body of Christ, the Church should embody the love of Christ to the vulnerable (Acts 1:18). Grieving families need the promises of their Father and Creator to stabilize and comfort them in their grief and loss.

This study's theological rationale is to study what bereaved individuals experience in their moments of sorrow and then use the findings to suggest practical methodologies that the Church can use any time there is death within the congregation to provide compassion and care to those who experience grief. Like any church member, grieving individuals need comfort and reassurance from the Church. Though the bereaved desires to let go of their grief; however, they struggle to do so. They squash and silence their deepest desires. Subsequently, it leads them to deprivation, seclusion, or emptiness. Tedd and Margy Tripp state that God created the human soul so to enjoy the eternal joy.²⁷⁸ One finds joy in having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ clearly stated that all authority on earth and in heaven had been given to Him. Therefore, no one will know the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.²⁷⁹ It is a

²⁷⁸ Tedd Tripp and Margy Tripp. *Instructing a Child's Heart* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2008), 118.

²⁷⁹ Matthew 11:27.

theological imperative that those who experience grief be comforted because it is God's plan for all humanity to experience God's healing.

This research has employed a qualitative research study to develop a concrete plan that would equip the church with a practical methodology to respond to grieving families' ongoing needs. There are many quantitative studies on grief. While these studies illuminate grief processes, they do not always describe the lived experience of the bereaved. This study seeks out stories from people who agree to share their stories to make meaning or make sense of the epiphany moments in their lives.

A qualitative study was appropriate for this research because of the individualized experiences facing grieving persons and establishing the meaning from a participant's perspective.²⁸⁰ In other words, as Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell note, a qualitative study seeks to find the meaning people construct for themselves and how they make sense of the world around them.²⁸¹ Also, qualitative research is valuable in revealing how people move toward a more profound and particular understanding of grief rather than a general one. So often, people reflect on themselves and their worlds and continually give accounts of themselves. People have dreams, hopes, fears, visions, reasons, intentions, and values. Sometimes they can feel satisfied, confused, or demoralized. The goal of qualitative research is to 'understand' – that is, to interpret – the meanings that people ascribe to events and actions, how they make these meanings their

²⁸⁰ John W. and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 16.

²⁸¹ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell. *Qualitative Research: A Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 15.

own, and how they negotiate them while interacting with other people.”²⁸² Besides, the stories people live and tell are a rich source of knowledge and meaning-making.²⁸³

A narrative approach to the research methodology supports this study not only for the importance placed on gathering stories respectfully but also for its emphasis on reflexivity,²⁸⁴ which helps clarify how participants construct and connect their stories to enable participants and the research to engage in the sensemaking process. Richard Wilson explains the narrative approach as, "A tool a researcher uses to gather stories and represent the reader's stories. Stories may be explained and re-interpreted as evidentiary documents and evidence of real-life experiences."²⁸⁵ The researcher held interviews with one participant at a time to get detail-rich narratives of their lived experiences. Participants' narratives were essential for obtaining their thoughts and feelings and the meanings of the loss.

Answers to the research questions were collected through interviews. According to Jaber Gubrium, interviews provide insights into the participants' cultural logic that are taken for granted and justified to make sense of shocking or traumatic events.²⁸⁶ The researcher collected data through prepared questions but with the flexibility to shift from one question to another when needed. The researcher used this approach to collect in-depth stories from different angles.

²⁸² Magnusson, Eva, and Jeanne Marecek. *Doing Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Learner's Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

²⁸³ Rachael Dwyer, Ian D. Davis, and Elke Emerald. *Narrative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*, Singapore: Springer, 2017;2016, 1.

²⁸⁴ Trahar, Sheila. *Contextualizing Narrative Inquiry: Developing Methodological Approaches for Local Contexts*. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 200.

²⁸⁵ Richard A. Wilson, "Combining Historical Research and Narrative Inquiry to Create Chronicles and Narratives." in *The Qualitative Report*, Volume 12 Number 1, published March 2007, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/51087035.pdf>. 27 Accessed March 2, 2021.

²⁸⁶ Jaber F. Gubrium. *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*. Second ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2012), 4.

Mainly, the researcher sought to understand grief experienced from the participants' perspective. The first research question, which sought experiences of grief from the participants, required an in-depth explanation of how life has been following the death of a loved one.

Also, the researcher considered pre-prepared interview questions relevant to have direct contact with the participants. Responses to interview questions allowed the researcher to analyze what was said and what was left out thoroughly. The second research question sought to get information on how the Church ministers to the bereaved. Response to this question was obtained from each participant as each shared how the Church ministered to them.

As in the case of the first two questions, question three sought information about how the Church ministered to the ongoing needs of the bereaved. The aim was to assess what the Church does to communicate to the bereaved individuals when providing comfort and consolation. In other words, the aim was to examine how the Church reaches out through spoken words such as preaching, counseling, or written words such as sympathy cards, letters of encouragement, or action service such as cleaning, food preparation, or assisting with grocery shopping. Questionnaires and surveys complemented interviews.

The reason behind conducting an empirical study was to get specific examples. The researcher thought it would be beneficial to conduct this study because not much has been written on the topic from a Christian perspective. The study aimed to gather firsthand information from participants' grief experiences. The researcher believes this study will contribute to the broad subject of handling grief in Christian congregations.

This study can be categorized as a retrospective study, requiring participants to recall their lived experiences. It could be identified that Kvale and Brinkmann refer to instrumental

case study research, a study that seeks to obtain information from a specific case to gain a general understanding of the problem statement.²⁸⁷ However, the study affirms that grief is a journey that has no definite terminal point. Taking this into consideration, participants responded as if they were still grieving. Comparing participants' lived grief experiences also would make this study even relevant to faith communities. To help readers understand and evaluate the authenticity of the research, the researcher provided a transparent description of the research design and implementation. The hope was that the research's findings might serve as indicators of grief development. The findings will help the researcher draw general conclusions about grief and its effect on people of faith.

Based on the participants' experiences of grief and loss, the findings have been used to offer strategies for grief care ministry to the bereaved. The study sample consists of those who have lost a loved one in the past five years. A sample set of ten individuals from two church congregations were interviewed. The sample was composed of voluntary adult church members who were involved in the Church's life.

Grief is a complex topic; as such, it has some limitations. One of the challenges to consider when dealing with grief is the Church's role in assisting or helping the bereaved cope with grief. There are so many hindrances that make it difficult to assess the intervention outcomes of grief, in general. Nevertheless, the goal of this study is not necessary to examine the outcome of the service the Church renders to the bereaved but to provide pastors and church members with practical approaches to effectively help those who are grieving cope.

²⁸⁷ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann. *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju* [The Qualitative Research Interview] 2nd edition. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS, 2010, 265.

Recruitment Methods

After IRB approval was obtained, participants were recruited by email and verbal announcement at each Church during Sunday worship. A recruitment letter (see appendix A) was emailed to St. Luke United Methodist and First United Methodist Church members. The email highlighted the study's purpose: to provide a helpful resource to a local Church to help bereaved individuals cope with grief following their loved one's death. In other words, the study aimed at developing strategies that the Church can utilize to provide care and compassion to grieving members following the burial. Those interested in participating in this study were required to complete the screening survey attached to the email (see appendix E).

The researcher sent a follow-up recruitment letter to potential participants who did not respond to the first recruitment email (see appendix B). This follow-up letter reminded church members to complete the screening survey if they were willing to participate in the study. Some participants were recruited by making an additional announcement during Sunday worship (see appendix C).

Interested participants were required to complete and return the screening survey form to the researcher by email or in-person. The researcher reviewed all the returned forms to see who met the research criteria. Those who met the research criteria were emailed the consent form and asked to sign it (see appendix D) and return it to the researcher by email or in person. Upon receiving the consent form, the researcher contacted the participants by phone to schedule the interviews.

Site and Participant Sample

The target population for this study consisted of members of St. Luke United Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church of Haskell, Texas. These two churches were chosen

because the researcher has served as the Senior Pastor of both congregations. While pastoring at these two churches, the researcher observed the pain and grief congregation members faced following the death of loved ones. Some members had trouble engaging in church activities after their loved one passed away. Others stopped coming to church because the Church reminded them of the deceased person. Even those who could continue worshiping after the burial of a loved one could not get enough support from the Church or faith community. Grief has affected the spiritual lives of grieving church members because of the pain they feel when trying to cope with loss.

Those who met the research criteria consisted of ten adults of various ages and both sexes. They were all members of either St. Luke United Methodist Church or First United Methodist Church. St. Luke United Methodist Church has approximately 250 members and First United Methodist Church has 455 church members. Though the researcher emailed the recruitment letter to all church members, only ten members who met the research criteria were selected. The ten participants were selected because their grief experiences enabled the researcher to answer the research questions.²⁸⁸

According to Saunders, a qualitative study can have three to fifteen participants. However, the researcher limited participants to ten because of not getting enough participants due to the pandemic. Participants were adults aged eighteen years and above. There were no limitations on education, occupation, or the number of years participants have been members of the Church. Diverse ages and ethnicity represented the sample. The researcher sought a broad

²⁸⁸ Saunders, "Choosing research participants." In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges*, (2012): 36.

sample to allow her to examine factors related to grief days or months following the burial of a loved one.

The researcher did not predetermine who should participate in the study. The email invitation was sent to all church members so whoever was willing could participate. The goal was that any person who met the research criteria could participate in this study. In other words, the intent was not for who should participate in this study; instead, what the researcher needed was to gain informative knowledge that would contribute to the core of the study. The goal was to study each participant's grief experience following the burial of a loved one. As mentioned previously, this study had ten participants, pseudonymously named as follows: Pamela, Patrick, Leonard, Amanda, Paul, Sarah, Destiny, Laureano, Sophia, and Claudette. They ranged in age from nineteen to eighty at the time of the interviews in 2021. Five participants were members of St. Luke UMC, and five others were First UMC members.

Ross and Rallis have argued that the site and the participants are essential tools for collecting data. For this study, participants took precedence over the site in which the interviews took place. Thus, to make each participant feel comfortable and secure, participants collaborated with the researcher to choose the place and time for the interview. In other words, the researcher and the participants agreed on where and when the interview should take place. Based on the participants' preferences, some interviews took place in a zoom interview while others took place on the phone, one took place at a nursing home, and a few occurred in the pastor's office. Interviews were arranged so that both the participant and the researcher were not disturbed by the process. Since the researcher focused on grieving church members' experiences, collected data were not influenced by gender, age, or race.

Ethical Issues

The researcher adhered to many ethical responsibilities, including:

- Safeguarding the concerns, rights, and sensitivities of all participants.
- Communicating all objectives or changes to all participants.
- Protecting and respecting the wishes of all participants.
- Avoiding exploiting participants.
- Making the research results or reports available and accessible to all participants.

Every participant was given a research package containing an invitation letter, consent documents, and a questionnaire. Participants were required to read and sign the consent document before scheduling the face-to-face interview with the researcher. On the interview day, the researcher verbally asked each participant if they consented to continue the interviews. The researcher believed asking for verbal consent before the interviews were beneficial to ensure that the participants were not coerced in any way to participate but willingly agreed to participate in this study.

Participants were respected, and their opinions were valued. Mark Saunders warned never to take participants for granted.²⁸⁹ The researcher respected the participants' opinions by not judging or correcting their feelings. If the participants went off the topic, the researcher did not interrupt them; instead, she repeated the questions to guide them back on track. Another ethical element that was put into consideration was building trust with participants. The researcher needed to be honest from the beginning to the end of the research. Holt points out that honesty in research is demonstrated when the researcher discloses the purpose and objectives of the

²⁸⁹ Mark N. K. Saunders. "Choosing research participants." In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (2012):38.

research to participants.²⁹⁰ Therefore, the researcher made sure participants understood the purpose of doing this research before consenting. Furthermore, the researcher enhanced trustworthiness by protecting participants' identities using pseudonyms instead of the participants' legal names. Any document that could identify a participant was safely kept in a locked drawer that nobody else has access to, except the principal investigator and her mentor.

The researcher was aware that participants might express intense feelings during interviews. Hence, she was prepared to postpone the interview should the situation arise where a participant could not carry on or continue with the interview. However, such a thing did not happen. The researcher had also done some research about where those struggling with grief could go for free counseling. At the end of each interview, the researcher happily informed the participants that they should feel free to reach out to her for help if they wished to talk further to a pastor or a grief counselor.

Another ethical factor that was considered in this research was carefully writing down what was spoken by participants. In some instances, the researcher wrote direct quotes, and in other situations, she rephrased what was spoken. She made sure to avoid twisting the participants' comments. The collected data or findings were analyzed before sharing them with the participants to affirm if the written information illustrated what they intended to communicate and did not contain any harm. While writing, the researcher ensured that the writing process was transparent and respected the feelings of others as the target was to help the bereaved cope with loss and explore the role of the local church in carrying out the bereavement

²⁹⁰ Robin Holt. "Ethical research practice." In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (2012):104.

ministry. In other words, the interviews focused on finding information that would help the church in its process of ministering to those who grieve.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

Themes emerged from the data through interpretation. Since the research topic focuses on how a local Church can respond to the bereaved's ongoing needs, grief theories were consulted. Reported behaviors in response to grief and resulting themes were analyzed and used to develop a concrete plan to equip the Church with a methodology of ministering or helping grieving families cope with grief.

The researcher utilized a sequence of data collection to allow for a natural progression throughout the project. The data collection sequence began with initial interviews, a questionnaire, and a survey, which helped the researcher gather information about the participants' loss and grief in the past five years.

As the researcher has been in pastoral ministry for more than six years, she asked participants to share their stories through a narrative approach; she sought to understand from an emic viewpoint as one *within* the culture. While the researcher and participants' commonality can be particular and can lead to greater understanding, bias and shortcomings can also emerge. The researcher worked to sustain and preserve her biases.

Moreover, the researcher holds a Bachelor of Arts in Education and a Master of Divinity. Over the past seven years of pastoral ministry, the researcher has conducted more funerals than baptisms and confirmations. In addition, she has been in contact with many grieving families following the loss of a loved one. The researcher has ministered to both St. Luke UMC and First UMC in their times of grief and loss. On some occasions, pastoral ministry engagements

included serving the grieving family as participants in the memorial or celebration of life service. In other situations, the researcher walked alongside the grieving family as they have made their way through the journey of loss and grief. All these situations are some of the foundational ministries to those in grieving and mourning. Christ promised life after death to every believer. Whoever believed and placed his faith in Christ has been promised hope even in the darkest moments of life. Christ's life, death, and resurrection conquered death and reassured eternal life to every believer.²⁹¹ Besides, Christians believe that Christ's resurrection is the door to eternal life. The Apostle Paul affirmed this when he told the Romans that Christians were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, Christians too may live a new life.²⁹²

The Questionnaire, Survey, and Interview

Interviews (appendix F), questionnaires (Appendix G), and survey questions (appendix H) helped the researcher gather data from participants based on their grief experience, post-grief effects, and the types of support they sought. Questions were raised about grief, which this thesis defined as the range of emotional and physical responses that a person may experience following a loved one's loss. Participants were asked if they had experienced grief and then asked detailed questions about their loved ones' death. If participants had lost more than one relative, they were required to answer questions about the most difficult grief. Since bereaved individuals are affected by grief differently, some questions included six dimensions of grief (emotionally, physically, cognitively, behaviorally, world assumptions, and interpersonally), as presented in

²⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:55

²⁹² Romans 6:4

the Holistic Impact of bereavement.²⁹³ Participants were asked to select all dimensions that apply to them. Participants will also be asked to share the effects of grief not outlined in the six dimensions. Lastly, some questions include a checklist of grief support offered by the Church, are included. Participants were asked to select all the types of support they received from the Church and had an option to name missing support services.

Interviews were another essential instrument for collecting data from participants. Interviews helped the researcher collect relevant information and narratives. Magnusson and Marecek argue that the researcher needs to focus on collecting information, narratives, and reflections during this part of the interview and smooth the interview conversation.²⁹⁴ Chauncey Wilson indicated that interviews enable the researcher to learn from the participants' experiences.²⁹⁵ The researcher utilized interviews to collect data about the participants' perceptions of grief and the method of helping grieving individuals handle their grief.

During the interviews, the researcher was an active participant as well. She asked questions to learn more about grief and how the church has helped others handle grief, relying on a predetermined set of structured questions. Some questions arose during the conversation depending on what was being said or not. Though the researcher asked specific questions, she relied on participants to ensure the interview process went smoothly. In other words, if needed,

²⁹³ D. E. Balk, Walker, A. C., & Baker, A. "Prevalence and severity of college student bereavement examined in a randomly selected sample." *Death Studies*, 34, (2010): 459-468.

²⁹⁴ Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek. "Doing the Interview." Chapter. In *Doing Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Learner's Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 60.

²⁹⁵ Chauncey Wilson. *Interview Techniques for UX Practitioners, a User-Centered Design Method* (Waltham, MA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2014), 19.

the researcher re-constructed or reframed structured questions as the conversation continued. The researcher believes this type of interview allowed for flexibility.

Also, during the interview, the researcher interacted with participants in a relaxed but formal manner. The researcher had the opportunity to learn more about the in-depth experiences of grief through the structured interviews. This formal space made it easy for the researcher to develop a rapport with the participants. The researcher believes interviews will be helpful in this study because she asked or changed questions based on how they responded to previous questions. The questions were structured but adjustable to allow the researcher to study a more personal approach with each participant during the interview.

According to Carter McNamara, the benefit of conducting interviews enables the researcher to collect the same general information from each participant.²⁹⁶ Though the process focuses on a conversational approach, it promotes freedom and adaptability in collecting information from the participants. With this type of interview, the researcher was the driver and participants, the passengers. However, flexibility took precedence based on perceived responses from the participants. For example, the researcher asked, "How has life been after your loss?" Personal experiences guided participants to answer this question. The participant's response to this question influenced how the researcher carried on with the interview. Thus, it enabled the researcher to get information from different backgrounds. Each participant was asked the same kind of questions. Though questions were planned of time, they were worded to allow openness

²⁹⁶ Carter McNamara, C. (n.d.). *General Guidelines for Conducting Research Interviews*. Accessed October 7, 2020, from <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm>

of responses. It also allowed the researcher to answer probing questions, which made following up easy if needed.

The interview gave each participant the freedom to express his/her grief experience. The individual interview allowed each participant to be honest and open to expressing their feelings without fears or concerns, especially if they indicated that they believe their grief experiences may be troubling compared to other participants. One-on-one interviews with the researcher fostered openness and flexibility in sharing grief experiences. Moreover, it will add vibrance to the study in that it will be centered on the same problem but with different experiences.

The researcher and participants agreed on the date, place, and time convenient for conducting the interview. The interviews were conducted within thirty minutes. The researcher believed thirty minutes was enough to cover the subjects of interest. At the meeting, participants were reminded about the purpose of the study, the participant's responsibility and rights, the terms of the interview, possible risks of the study, and were asked if they had any questions regarding the consent form. Confidentiality about participants' responses was thoroughly explained, and that no monetary compensation was given for participating in the study.

During interviews, participants were asked questions related but not limited to:

- Circumstances surrounding the death of their loved one.
- Engagement in church worship and activity before and after their loss.
- What was their source of comfort in times of grief?
- What advice they would offer to church leaders or members desiring to encourage those who grieve the loss of a loved one.

²⁹⁷ Collected information was transcribed. After the interviews, all documentation was stored in a secure drawer, and the identity of the respondents will remain anonymous. Following the interviews, data was analyzed by a thorough review of the transcripts.

The researcher allowed participants to ask any questions or make comments at the end of each interview. She then offered a prayer and thanked each participant for participating in the study. Before adjourning the meeting, the researcher reiterated the consent and confidentiality agreement and ensured the security of the transcriptions. Upon completing each interview and dismissing each participant, the researcher took about 30 minutes to make notes about impressions, observations, and other crucial information.

Data Collection Procedures

Once the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University and permission to access email addresses was also obtained from St. Luke United Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church, the researcher emailed the recruitment letter to all members of St. Luke and First United Methodist Church (see Appendix A). The email introduced the study, including the purpose of the study and the time commitment required from each volunteer participant. The email also explained the motivation associated with the study. The email asked interested participants to complete a screening survey (see Appendix E) attached to the recruitment email. Those interested were required to return a completed screening survey form by email or in-person. Also, the recruitment email included contact information for the principal investigator so she could be reachable any time a need arose.

²⁹⁷ “Qualitative Research Designs,” University of Missouri, St. Louis, <http://www.umsl.edu/~lindquists/qualdsqn.html>. It was accessed on April 2, 2021.

After participants returned the completed screening survey form to the researcher, she analyzed the answers. If a participant met all the criteria, the researcher then emailed them the consent form. They were required to read and sign the consent form before participating in an interview. The research mentor's contact information and Liberty University Institutional Review Board information were included in the consent form. Participants were notified that proceeding with the study implies they had agreed to the study's consent.

The interviews were conducted in the researcher's office, Maundy Nursing Home Manager's office, Zoom, and the telephone. When the researcher conducted the Zoom and telephone meetings, she was in her office. Each interview started and ended with prayer. The researcher began the interviews by explaining and clarifying the objectives of conducting this research. The research procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality were explained. The interviews lasted for approximately thirty minutes. No digital audio or video recorder was used to record the conversations for all the interviews.

Though the interview questions were predetermined, they were structured so to foster conversation. In other words, the questions were designed to gain knowledge of participants' lived experiences after the death and burial of loved ones. The flow of the conversation influenced the change from one question to another. The aim was to obtain detailed information on how participants coped with grief and loss. Also, the church responded or ministered to them during and after the burial of their loved ones.

After prayer, the interview began by asking the participant to indicate their name and relationship with the deceased person. Participants also shared a brief statement about how the deceased died. This initial question opened up the conversation. In the end, the researcher asked

the participants if they had any recommendations or advice for the Church to consider. Participants were allowed to share any thought they felt was necessary to be voiced.

Collected data were collected transcribed safely and kept in a locked drawer. Only the researcher has access to the locked drawer. In agreement with Liberty University's Institutional Review Board, hard copies containing survey data will be stored for the study duration; for at least three years after that, all information will be destroyed.

Data Analysis Procedures

After the interviews, the researcher spent about three days transcribing what was spoken. The transcriptions were then taken to participants for review or corrections - to make sure the transcriptions were accurate. All ten participants indicated that the transcriptions were precise and captured what they wanted to convey. In other words, the transcriptions communicated the participants' lived experiences; nothing about the transcriptions troubled or made them uncomfortable. After receiving this confirmation from participants, the researcher read the transcriptions a few times more before writing chapter four. Each account was articulated and analyzed to help identify themes that could be used to organize information. These themes emerged from the participants' stories and were generated by adapting existing ideas from the literature.

Moreover, the researcher tried to look for common themes and contradictions for what was being said or not. In other words, she searched for information that stood out from among the different accounts from participants. The whole process took ten days to complete.

The study drew heavily upon the five stages of grief identified by Kubler Rose, “denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – concepts rooted in psychic and near-death

studies. Relying on these stages of grief, the researcher organized the data related to grief lived experience and presented the findings in chapter four. Nonetheless, as the researcher reviewed the collected data, it became clear that the interview process focused more on getting the participants to share the Church's role during and after the burial of their loved one than sharing rituals that assisted them in finding meaning after loss. Worship was, in fact, one of the tools most participants used for sensemaking purposes. Hence, this study utilized themes analysis accompanied by the narrative method because each participant had a different story to tell. When analyzing the data, it was so clear that focusing on participants' stories about how they coped and how the church assisted them as they walked through their grief journey could help the reader understand the meaning of the participants' lived experiences.

The narrative method was beneficial to this study because the participants' stories played a significant part in how they go about making meaning after experiencing a loss. It was critical to investigate how participants structured their stories. The researcher only relied on what was communicated to come up with themes. Narratives were analyzed as individual units and in connection with one another. All in all, they constituted the participants' accounts of their lived experiences.

Reflection on the Challenges Encountered

The participants were familiar with the topic because they had experienced grief both personally and collectively. Among the participants was a retired United Methodist Pastor who has been faithful to the Church even in his retirement. Conducting interviews and talking with people about their grief experiences without being acquainted with them previously was unfamiliar to the researcher. As a result, the researcher was concerned about how participants would comport themselves and their reaction to the lived grief experience being shared. The

revision of literature and the time spent talking to fellow pastors and mentors helped the researcher to have the courage to conduct the interviews.

One of the challenges of this study was finding participants. Though the recruitment email was sent to all St. Luke UMC and First UMC members, none responded to the email for two days after the email was originally sent. The researcher had to announce at the Sunday worship service in each church about her research and that she needed volunteers to participate. The next day after making the announcement, the researcher received six phone calls from church members interested in participating. After speaking with one of them, he decided not to take part because of the nature of the subject matter. He believed it would be difficult for him to share his lived grief experience. The researcher was surprised by his objection because the announcement and recruitment letter were clear about the subject matter. After reading the recruitment letter and hearing the announcement made during Sunday service about the research, the researcher assumed that potential participants would have been naturally prepared to talk about their grief, but that seemed not to be the case for some.

While speaking to another member who expressed interest in participating in the study, the researcher was thankful for his willingness to participate, but he was left out because he had not lost a loved one in the past five years, therefore, did not meet the research criteria. The other three potential participants called to express their willingness to participate because they heard the announcement made in the Church. They did not receive the initial recruitment letter due to not checking their emails regularly. Another member called the researcher to learn more about the study. She was pleased and willing to participate and even offered to contact other members whom she believed had stories that would benefit the study due to the nature of grief they had to endure. She called the researcher back to give her the names of two other members who were

willing to participate. The researcher immediately contacted these two members and asked them to complete and return the survey form to the researcher.

After recruiting six potential participants, the researcher had to send a follow-up recruitment email to all church members again. This time around, a few members called to show a willingness to participate. Among those interested were a couple and faithful members of St. Luke UMC, Amanda and Paul. The two lived with a niece who gladly offered to participate as well. However, she was only fifteen at the time, so she was left out because of age limitations. The researcher was a bit disappointed that voices from people who had lost a brother, sister, cousin, or niece would not be heard.

Though more than enough church members showed a willingness to participate, some did not meet the researcher's requirements. The issues that prevented them from participating included technical difficulties, failure to sign and return the consent form, and job-related obligations.

The researcher hoped to have a sample of participants that she did not connect with personally. Fortunately, none of the participants had a personal connection with the researcher other than being their pastor. The researcher saw some of the participants on Sundays during worship but did not bond with them. Some of the participants were new faces. Though they were church members, the researcher did not meet them until the day of the interview.

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher was concerned that the church's level of loyalty and connection could hinder participants from providing honest responses. Moreover, the researcher wondered if she would obtain honest responses from the participants, given her spiritual status, the pastor. Participants could have said things to please the pastor. Romuald

Polczyk explains that the status of an interviewer, such as race, class, age, position, and personality, can have a significant impact on the interviewee's willingness to share their story.²⁹⁸ Taking that into consideration, the researcher was mindful of her relationship with the participants. Since the interview process is a “co-production of the interviewer and the interviewee.”²⁹⁹

For this reason, the researcher made sure the participants understood the purpose of this study and the objectives of the interviews, questionnaire, and survey. Clear instructions were given to encourage all participants to give accurate information to benefit the entire Church. After getting in touch with participants, the researcher was relieved to discover that all participants were excited to be a part of this study so their experiences could bring comfort to those experiencing grief. Participants' willingness to raise their voices regarding their experiences was evident, as they freely narrated how the church intervened in their time of grieving. The use of pseudonymous names also gave the participants freedom to express their minds without fear or restraint.

Due to the nature of the topic, the research clearly explained to participants that this study was qualitative, not quantitative. During the interviews, there were times where the researcher had to provide comfort and consolation. By doing so, the researcher wrestled with whether to carry on with the interviews—the process of recalling lived experiences transported participants to a dark place emotionally. Of course, this made the researcher concerned. Fortunately, participants were aware of the emotions that could have arisen during the interviews. The

²⁹⁸ Romuald Polczyk. “Age and Interviewer Behavior as Predictors of Interrogative Suggestibility.” *Journals of Gerontology*. 69, no. 3 (2014): 348–355.

²⁹⁹ Stringer, Ernest. *Action Research*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 38.

researcher believed this knowledge deterred many from participating in this study because only a few responded when the invitation email was sent to more than five hundred church members.

Nevertheless, as much as the researcher needed to provide comfort and empathy, it was also necessary to consider what to say or do in that specific situation. The researcher had no trouble comforting those participants who broke down during the interviews, but it was a challenge to rephrase questions that would help them express themselves without being caught up by grief. At times, the researcher was tempted to encourage the participants to share in-depth the matters they had to face following the death of a loved one. However, since these matters were not the focus of the study, they were left undiscovered.

One of the strengths the researcher discovered about herself while conducting interviews was building relationships and trust with the participants. However, this strength has its challenge. The researcher has to wisely use this trust connection to create a safe environment to share their experiences freely. Duncombe and Jessop state that researchers should take advantage of the trust gained to obtain information.³⁰⁰ Considering everything, the researcher clearly explained her role as a researcher, not as a counselor. Conducting the study on grief was challenging. The nature of structured interviews enabled the researcher to ask all predetermined questions leaving nothing out. However, to promote efficiency and a good analysis of the collected data, the researcher paid attention to every word and action of the participants. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes, and this also presented some limitations for participants who needed more time to share their experiences.

³⁰⁰ Brinkmann and Kvale, *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju*, [The Qualitative Research Interview], 93.

Whenever participants needed comfort and consolation, the researcher calmed them down by offering them water to drink or napkins to dry their tears. Also, the researcher kept listening, maintained eye contact, and affirmed whatever the participant described. Though the researcher provided comfort when needed, the comforting words were not excessive. Not because comforting words were unnecessary during the interviews, but because the researcher believed participants were comforted when they first lost their loved ones. Comforting them again after months of losing a loved one could foster more grief than a consolation.

Nevertheless, the interviews went well. Participants were excited to participate in this study. They had a positive attitude, comported themselves well before the researcher, and developed trust during the short time the interview lasted. However, the responses from all participants demonstrated that grief is a shared experience. Participants were delighted to voice and share their experiences. Even though most participants unexpectedly lost their loved ones, they willingly shared their experiences and feelings. They all answered all the structured questions without the researcher asking more questions than what was predetermined.

Since most participants had active jobs, reaching an agreement about the time and location for the interviews was a challenge. The researcher had to hold some interviews on Zoom and others on the telephone. A few interviews were held in person in the researcher's office. One of the participants could not do Zoom, telephone, or come to the researcher's office for a face-to-face interview. Therefore, the researcher had to travel for thirty miles to a nursing home where the participant lived. The interview with this one participant was held in the conference room at Munday Nursing Home. The room was quiet, and the researcher made sure everything discussed and shared was kept confidential. Jennifer Platt explains, "When people are least interrupted, when they can tell their stories in their way, ... they can react naturally and freely and express

themselves fully. Interruptions and leading questions are likely to affect if the adventure into the unknown, into uncharted and undisclosed spheres, has been destroyed."³⁰¹ Fully aware of the impact of such potential distraction, the researcher ensured that the interview process was not interrupted.

All in all, it was a methodological challenge to arrange for this interview. For instance, the failure of organizing interviews on time resulted in conducting interviews in three days instead of five days as the researcher had planned. The researcher saw this as a blessing because she works full-time. However, the researcher welcomed the inconveniences with open arms and made the best of them. No changes were made in the interview guide. The process of the interview was structured, and the researcher was delighted with the contributions given.

Since the researcher is the spiritual leader of the participants, she had to analyze every word that was spoken closely. In a situation whereby a participant used unfamiliar words or language during the interview, the researcher asked for clarification. Though participants included immigrants to the United States, fortunately, they all spoke English. However, the researcher was prepared to deal with any linguistic challenges that might have come up during the interviews. While conducting the interview, the researcher took notes, listened, and allowed the participants to express themselves without interruptions.

Summary

This qualitative research examined the experiences of grieving families through questionnaires and interviews using the narrative method of inquiry. Creswell states that:

³⁰¹ Jennifer Platt. "The History of the Interview." In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, 2nd ed., 9-26. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012.

"Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured."³⁰² Therefore, the themes were collected and analyzed as they emerged. Data was collected from lay members who have faced grief due to a personal loss in the past five years and pastors who have served in a local church and officiated funerals for non-family members. The results were reported using a narrative format, including excerpts from the participant's responses. However, the researcher has ensured that confidentiality is maintained. A copy of the data was secured in a secure location. As required by federal regulations, collected data were kept for three years. After three years, data will be destroyed.

Participants will be made aware that participating in this research is voluntary. Those who considered participating in the study and then decided to withdraw did not jeopardize their relationships with the United Methodist Church or Liberty University. Participants were made aware that it was possible to withdraw from the research if they felt uncomfortable continuing. Participants affirmed their participation in the research by completing a screening survey and signing the consent form before participating in an interview with the researcher. After that, the interviews commenced. In the following chapter, participants' experiences with grief and the grieving process are discussed. The firsthand accounts of participants shed light on how the Church might provide comfort in times of grieving.

³⁰² J. W. Cresswell. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 181.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this research is to study individuals' experiences in times of grief and sorrow and then use the findings to suggest practical methodologies that the Church can use to help bereaved families cope with grief after the death of a loved one. This chapter describes themes that emerged from interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. Twenty-one church members volunteered to participate in this study. However, five participants were not included in the study because of technical difficulties with the online interviews. One potential participant was not included because they had not lost a loved one in the last five years. Another participant could not participate because of age limitations. Another participant met the research requirements but was not included because he did not return the consent form. Another person did not participate because he thought the subject matter might be complex to engage in the study. Two participants decided to withdraw after receiving the news about their overseas deployment in the military. Since the two participants had not signed the consent form yet, they were not included, leaving ten participants eligible to participate in this study.

Regarding the interviews, six interviews were conducted by zoom, and four interviews were conducted in person. No interviews were recorded. Demographic information was kept in a locker, and confidentiality was assured through pseudonyms. The researcher conducted an in-depth interview based on designated questions that were asked of all participants. After the interviews, each participant was given a survey and a questionnaire to complete. The research results are based on data collected during the interviews, surveys, and questionnaires. In other words, as the interviews were conducted, surveys and questionnaires completed, care was taken

to documents and transcribe the results. This chapter presents the study results, participants' backgrounds, and themes emerging from the collected data.

Participant Demographic Information

Ten participants who met the three research criteria were recruited to participate in this study. The criteria for participation included the following:

- Losing a loved one within the past five years;
- Being 18 years of age or older; and
- Being a member of the First United Methodist Church in Haskell, Texas or St. Luke United Methodist Church, El Paso, Texas.

Most of the participants who were willing to participate in this study were females. Males were somewhat hesitant to commit to participation for reasons unknown to the researcher.

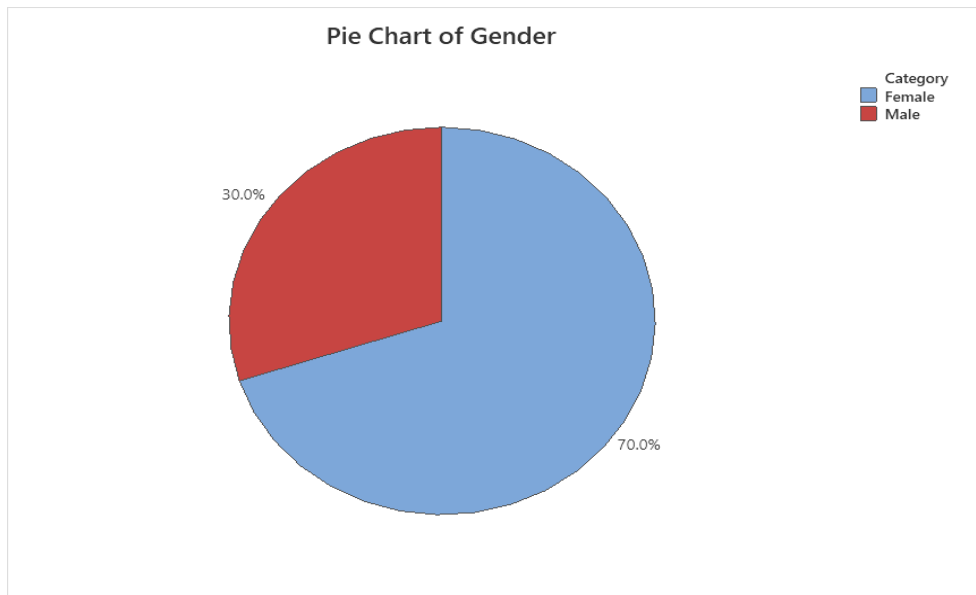


Figure 1: Gender

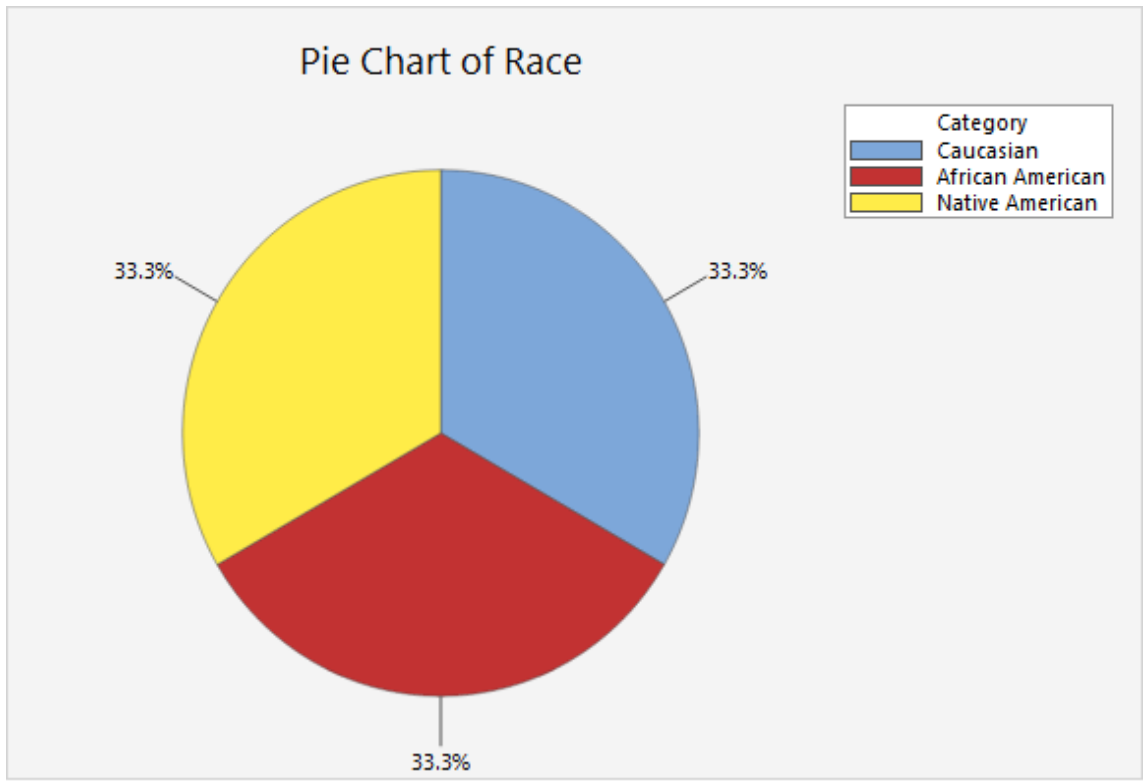
Three of the participants are Caucasian women, two are Native Americans, one is Hispanic, and one is African American. The three other participants were men: one Caucasian, one Native American, and one African American. When combining both women and men

participants, the majority identified as Caucasian (40%), followed by Native Americans (30%), followed by African Americans (20%), and then one Hispanic (10%).

Female Summary Statistics

Race	Count	Percent
Caucasian	3	42.9%
African American	1	14.3%
Hispanic	1	14.3%
Native American	2	28.6%
Total	7	100.0%

Figure 2: Male Race



Participants' ages ranged from 18 to over 65. Two participants are between 18 and 35 years of age. Two participants ranged between 36 and 50 years old. Three of the participants ranged between 51 and 64 years old. Three participants are over 65. Three of the participants are

widowed, three are single and never married, three are married couples with children, and one is divorced.

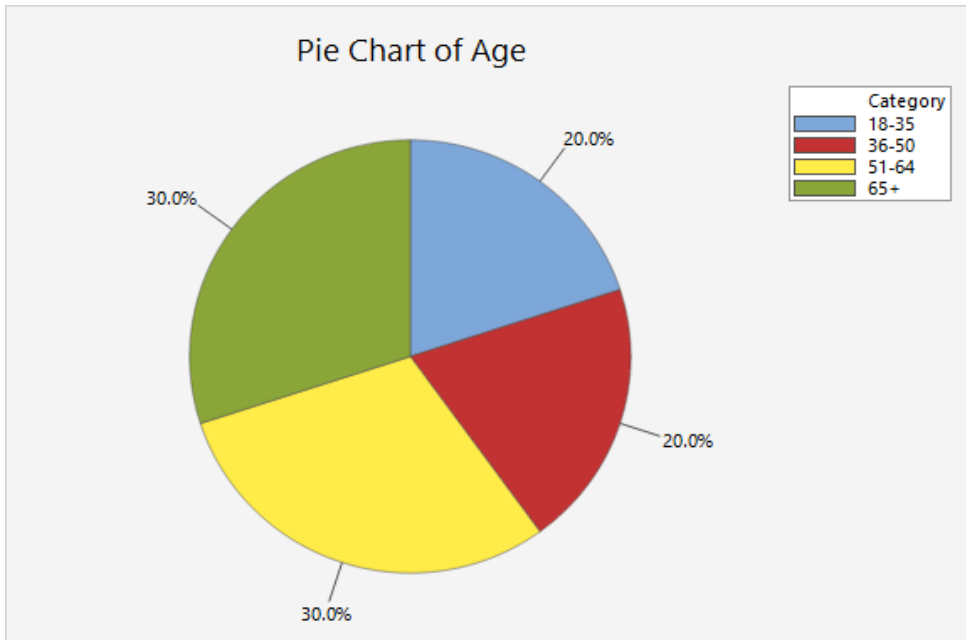


Figure 3: Age

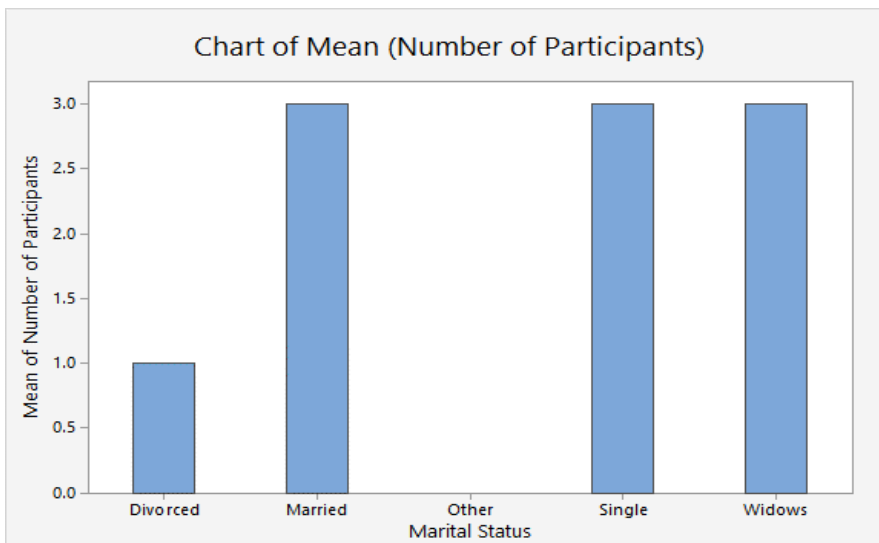


Figure 4: Marital Status

On the interview day, each participant was asked if they understood what they read on the informed consent form. Furthermore, the researcher explained that participating in this study was voluntary, and thus, no payments would be given for participation. Participants were given a few

minutes to ponder the information given. Then, the researcher started the interview by saying a word of prayer and then proceeded with the interview questions. All the participants were eager and willing to contribute to the study. About 60% of the participants shared their experience with grief easily; 20 % did well but had struggled to name the deceased's name. The other 20% found the topic significant in their lives, so they took time to share their experiences more than the other participants.

When the interviews were conducted, all participants had agreed that they had experienced grief in the last five years. The death of a loved one is the hardest thing to deal with because of the bereaved's pain and suffering. All participants had lost someone important in their lives. Three participants indicated that they had lost a child. One single participant indicated that she had suffered from a miscarriage. Three participants shared that they had lost their spouses, two participants had lost one of their parents, and one had experienced grief following the death of a close friend.

Participants were asked questions about when the cause of death and whether the loss was expected or not. Most causes of death were due to illness (40%), followed by suicide (20%), miscarriage (10%), unsure (10%), and other reasons (20%). The researcher asked each participant whether the death was expected or unexpected. About 80 % of the participants indicated that the death of their loved one was unexpected, whereas 20% reported it was expected and had the opportunity to say a final goodbye. It might seem insignificant, but saying goodbye to a loved one has helped the two participants cope with grief.

Relationship with the deceased	Cause of death	Expectancy of the loss
Mother	Unsure	Unexpected

Father	Kidney failure	Unexpected
Spouse	Lung Cancer	Expected
Spouse	Car accident	Unexpected
Child	Suicide	Unexpected
Child	Suicide	Unexpected
Child	Miscarriage	Unexpected
Child	Pneumonia	Unexpected
Friend	Heart attack	Unexpected
Spouse	Lung Cancer	Expected

Table 1: Relationship to the deceased, cause of death, and expectancy of loss.

Presentation of Participants

Ten participants were recruited to participate in this study. Each participant had a unique experience with grief, and yet, they all agreed that the loss of a loved one is something they wish never to experience again. All participants were eager to participate in this research because they felt their grief experience could encourage or help someone who grieves a loved one's loss. In other words, their stories could bring tremendous healing to those who grieve. The following is a description of each participant's grief experience. The names of participants used in this study are pseudonymous, not the participants' actual names.

Pamela is the only child of her parents. Her mother raised her, and her dad died when she was a baby. Pamela lost her mother in December of 2020. She was having fun with her friends when she received the sad news of her mother's passing. Her mother was healthy but died unexpectedly. Pamela was never told what caused her mother's death.

Patrick is the eldest child in a family of four. He lost his father in 2017 when he was 40 years old. He knew that his dad was suffering from kidney failure. His father received a kidney transplant and was discharged from the hospital. After the transplant, his father was feeling better than before and was showing signs of improvement. However, Patrick's father died in his sleep two months after receiving a new kidney. When he found him dead, Patrick explained that he was in denial. He knew that his father had health issues but never expected he was going to die that soon.

Claudette was born in Mexico. Her parents migrated to the United States when she was fifteen. Claudette completed high school and college in El Paso, Texas. She married at the age of 32, and her married produced three beautiful children. Her marriage had its ups and downs in their marriage, and it had not always been easy. However, they loved each other dearly and looking to spend more years together as a couple, but everything changed last year in February 2020, when her husband had a car accident and died on the spot. Claudette came home from work and started preparing dinner as usual. She waited for her husband the night he died, but he did not show up. Claudette tried to reach her husband over the phone, but he was unable to be reached. In the morning, she reported to the police her husband's disappearance. After some investigations, her husband's body was found at a funeral home in El Paso. When her husband did not return that night, Claudette knew something terrible must have happened to him, but death was far from her thoughts.

Leonard, a retired United Methodist Pastor, is 88 years old. He lost his wife of 65 years in 2018. After being in and out of the hospital, they decided to put her in hospice. On June 24, 2018, Leonard realized four missed calls from the hospice home where his wife was being cared

for early in the morning. He called them back and was informed that his wife had taken her last breath two hours before.

Amanda and Paul are a couple. After being married for two years, the couple had desired to start a family. Amanda was 35, and Paul was 36. They were so frustrated when they were told that getting pregnant would be challenging due to Amanda suffering from PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome). After two years of trying, Amanda missed her period. They were so excited to have a child after many years of trying. They even picked a name for their baby in the first semester of pregnancy. At 38 weeks, Amanda gave birth on August 17, 2005. Unfortunately, their child committed suicide in 2019 at the age of 14. They found him lifeless in his room on August 1, 2019. Government officials were called in, and after some examination, their son was pronounced dead. Amanda and Paul's dreams of being parents were shattered.

Sarah is single and never married. She was nineteen years old when she became pregnant in January 2016. Due to family problems, Sarah could not finish high school. She became pregnant but miscarried in the second semester of her pregnancy. Sarah started having menstrual cramps but thought it was normal during pregnancy. However, the bleeding became severe, and the following day she had a complete miscarriage.

Destiny was a single mother of beautiful twin girls. She was 42 years old when one of her twins died from pneumonia. During the interview, she sadly expressed that God could have taken her instead of taking her daughter. She hoped that her children would bury her, but she had to bury one of her twins on February 1, 2021.

Laureano was the only child of her parents. Both her parents died when she was 62. Laureano never married; however, she had a close friend, Vicky, who was like her sister. She

shared everything she had with Vicky. If Laureano had a concern or need advice, Vicky was the first person she would go to for advice. Vicky died after having a heart attack on August 2, 2019.

Sophia is a mom and a grandma of two daughters and two stepchildren: a daughter and a son. She lost her husband in 2018. Her husband had a tumor removed, but the surgeon noticed that his liver was contaminated during the procedure. It was not easy to treat him, according to the doctor. She decided to put him on hospice at home. On October 15, 2018, at midnight, her husband was still breathing. However, that night around 3:50 am, Sophia noticed her husband's breathing had changed. Ten minutes later, he took his last breath.

Participants Grief Experience

Participants were asked about any consequences they experienced after the death of a loved one. The majority (80 %) mentioned they felt lonely following the death of a loved one. Four participants mentioned that they had experienced depression, and three participants suffered from post-traumatic stress. So often, stress occurs when the pursuit of something or the desire to see or touch a loved one is prevented. Stress occurs when a person wants something they cannot have. When a loved one has passed away, things can feel stressful. According to Stroebe et al., "Critical life events such as bereavement are stressful because they require major readjustment."³⁰³ Addiction was another consequence some participants had to endure after the loss of a loved one. Two participants turned to using drugs and alcohol to escape grief. Eating and sleeping disorders were next after addiction. One participant mentioned that she finds it difficult to eat without her husband, especially if she goes to the restaurant she and her husband

³⁰³ Wolfgang Stroebe, Emmanuelle Zech, Margaret S. Stroebe, and Georgios Abakoumkin. "DOES SOCIAL SUPPORT HELP IN BEREAVEMENT?" *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 7 (2005): 1030-50.

used to go to while her husband was alive. Another participant mentioned that she had trouble sleeping; she spent hours watching TV to escape grief.

When her husband died in a car crash, Claudette had to keep herself busy to distract herself from her grief. Fortunately, she lived with her children, and she threw herself into helping them. Claudette stated that friends appreciated how things were handled. However, she was grieving on the inside. When Claudette came across anything her husband loved or hated, she could not help but mourn. Thus, to adapt to life, Claudette kept herself busy during the day. However, she had trouble sleeping at night. She indicated that she felt consumed by grief at night. Every morning when she woke up, she felt empty and unproductive.

One participant indicated having difficulties with trust issues in relationships. Losing a loved one may lead to deficits in trust areas, especially if the survivor thinks someone is responsible for the death of a deceased loved one or if the person needed the most does not show up. For instance, Sarah, after losing her pregnancy, looked to her pastor for comfort. Unfortunately, the pastor was not there for her. She indicated she also pursued a grief counselor. In her narration, she talked to the counselor about how she struggled with grief. She was content that the counselor did not judge her but listened to her grief story. Sarah found solace after telling her counselor about how her miscarriage started. She shared with the counselor her regrets about not doing enough to carry the pregnancy to the full term.

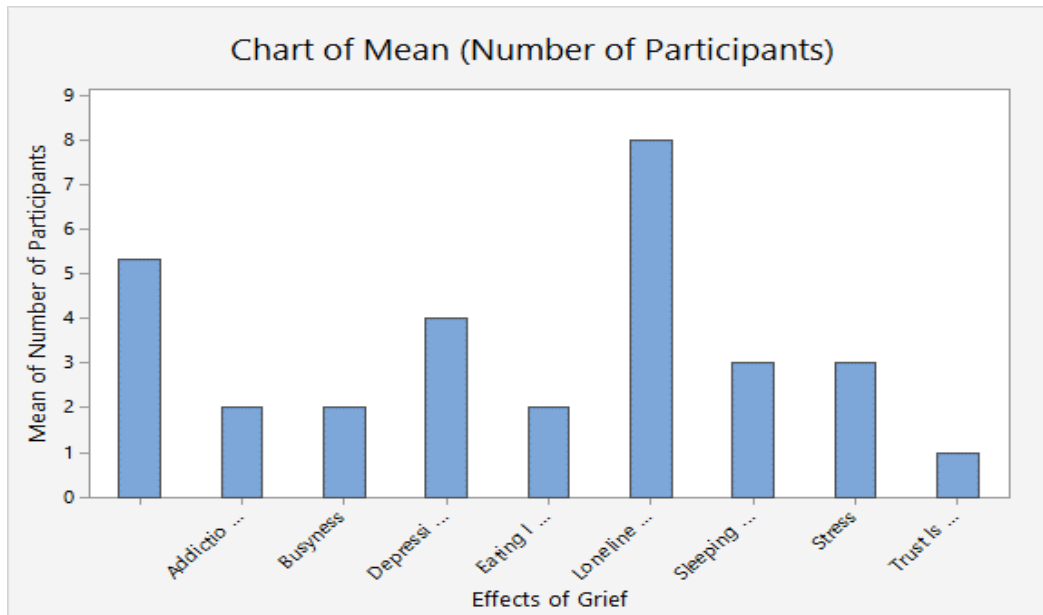


Figure 5: Effects of Grief

The researcher asked each participant for more detail about whether they felt free to express their grief the way they wanted, and eight of them confirmed that they felt free to do so. Eight participants felt they indicated that they expressed their grief and did not care about what others would say. Two participants said they did not show their grief in public because of fear about what others would say. For instance, Sarah said she was free to express her grief because she was alone most of the time. Very few people came to comfort her, indicating that she had to deal with her grief alone.

Amanda and Paul highlighted that their waves of grief were stimulus bound, correlated to internal and external reminders of their son. Another participant, Leonard, asserted that he had accepted his loss. In other words, due to his age, he did not want to grieve much, but the sense of loss kept appearing in his mind and thoughts. According to Leonard, grief is present on special occasions, such as anniversaries, birthdays, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving. Sophia also mentioned the presence of grief during special occasions. She said that she publicly cried during

Sunday worship last year on All Saints Sunday. Grief often comes in waves. In the beginning, the waves can be intense and frequent, but as days go on, the waves of grief come and go and can be more manageable.

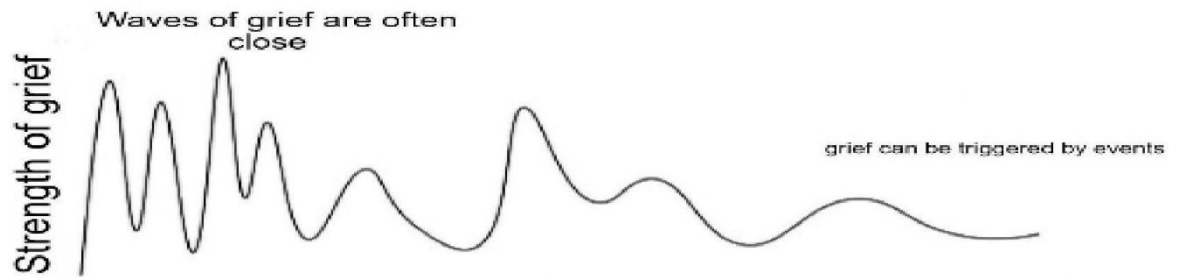


Figure 6: Waves of grief

Patrick indicated that two years after his father's death, he started adjusting to life and learning to live without his father. Though he could not forget his Dad, Patrick believed that his father was no longer suffering and in pain, and for that, he was thankful. As odd as it may seem, Patrick felt more grateful to God for taking his dad to live a pain-free life.

Unlike Patrick, who was with his father at his dying moments, Pamela felt useless for not being there when her mother took her last breath. She grieved for a few months after her mother was buried. However, Pamela pointed out that grieving continued every time memories of her mother popup. Also, Pamela described her grieving process to be much lighter than she had anticipated. It was not because she did not experience challenges; after all, she said that "Life will never be the same without my mother." However, she claimed that she had been coping with life despite the circumstances. Moving in with her friends helped her cope after the death of her mother. During the interview, she mentioned that she tried to occupy her mind with friends to defeat grief.

Destiny and Laureano were participants who struggled with grief the most. Destiny lost one of her twins and Laureano, her best friend. The two recalled going through a tough grief a few days following the burial of their loved ones. Destiny shared that she had lost her grandmother, who was like her Mom, two months before her child passed away, and the pain of that loss was still fresh. In addition to this, Destiny mentioned that seeing the other twin struggle with her sister's death increased stress and anxiety. She pointed out that seeing the other twin in tears caused her to suppress her grief. With these experiences, Destiny concluded that grief is a journey, not merely stages one goes through. Laureano stated that she was filled with sadness after her best friend's death. She developed high blood pressure as a result. Laureano asserted that her grief experiences caused her to feel increased loneliness. Both Destiny and Laureano mentioned that they had to take a sabbatical leave from work for an extended period, unlike other co-workers who had lost loved ones.

When participants were asked if they could cope healthily with grief, all said anger and numbness were their first responses to their loss. They felt anger toward God, toward themselves, toward the people around them, and toward the deceased for leaving them. Sarah went as far as wondering if losing a child through a miscarriage was worth her tears. Then she added: "Of course, it was." The fact that participants were open and willing to share their most profound grief indicated to the researcher that they were prepared to let go of their emotions and feelings. They did not suppress uncomfortable emotions during the interview. Although they all physically appeared strong and expressed themselves in a controlled way, Laureano acknowledged that sometimes she felt distancing herself from others was a good choice. She pointed out that experiencing death destroyed a relationship she worked hard to build; Laureano indicated that it was the worst experience she never wished to go down again. Like Laureano,

Destiny shared that what kept her going was the obligation and responsibility to care for the other twin. She wants to stay healthy and strong for the other twin. Destiny mentioned that "every person has the right to grieve the death of a loved one." However, she did not think that being dragged down by grief was a healthy way to cope with grief. She thinks it is vital to suppress the pain of grief to care for one's immediate family, especially children.

On the other hand, Sophia was annoyed when others said that she was overwhelmed by grief. Others even criticized her for crying more than a lady who lost both her husband and daughter the same day. Sophia was highly drained by what others said to her during the mourning period. However, she continued to mourn her husband regardless of what others said or thought. Sophia mentioned that the decision-making regarding taking care of the house and other things were an extra burden for her after her husband's death.

Claudette mentioned that caring for others caused her to suppress grief. She explained that she had to delay grieving over her husband's death because she needed to remain strong for her children. Claudette acknowledged to have gone through all the five stages of grief but did not manifest them publicly. In her narration, she mentioned that she expressed her feelings later when she went to see a professional for counseling. During that time, Claudette could not stop crying. Claudette believed that her reaction resulted from suppressing the pain and grief she did not get the chance to deal with when her husband died.

All participants were open and comfortable sharing their feelings and emotions. The researcher was content with how the participants comported themselves during the interview. They were calm; some needed extra time to grieve, and some needed time to pray. The overall experience was peaceful and engaging. Though all participants were emotional, they were bold enough to share what they felt in their hearts.

Grief Support Systems

Participants were explicitly asked what method or coping system they used to cope with bereavement. In addition, they were asked what helped them process grief healthily and what were their sources of consolation or support. Participants indicated that working through grief is not an easy process. Most of them confessed that the process of coping with their bereavement took much time and was very painful. However, as life progressed, they were obligated to move on, heal, and find some hope for the future. In coping with bereavement, most participants indicated that their families were principal sources of support. Family members helped participants feel supported and loved. This researcher thinks that family enhances one's self-concept. Participants who coped with the help of family appeared to have higher self-esteem, self-competence, more positive moods, and greater feelings of belonging than those who had no family to support them in their bereavement period.³⁰⁴ Second, family support acted as a grief buffer, moderating grief's impact on physical and emotional health. During the bereavement period, participants who had family support mentioned better healthy coping methods than the two participants who lacked family support. In their research, Stroebe et al. have found that the presence of family support has been related to speedier and more effective coping mechanisms from grief than those without such support.³⁰⁵ Likewise, family support has been found to reduce the negative impact of grief.

Church support was also an area where seven participants could find support and love in their periods of grief. The church people called, offered to bring food and to help whenever

³⁰⁴ Wolfgang Stroebe, Emmanuelle Zech, Margaret S. Stroebe, and Georgios Abakoumkin. "DOES SOCIAL SUPPORT HELP IN BEREAVEMENT?" *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 7 (11, 2005): 1030-50.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1032.

needed. They also showed up at the memorial and graveside services. Participants identified church people as contributors to reduced grief. The church members offered them a framework for understanding the grief they encountered and sustained them from the moment the deceased's death was announced to the time the deceased was laid to rest. Also, the presence of church people provided a sense of belonging. Participants reported that having church people around or having them call and have interactions with church leaders enabled them to have peace and understanding and reassurance that they were not alone as they experienced such difficult times, but instead that the whole church was walking with them. The interactions with church people were also seen as helpful and perceived as the source of psychological well-being and support. Girlinghouse noted that the church provides tangible social support and feelings of security and belonging during times of grief.³⁰⁶

The third supporting system mentioned by six participants was self-strength. Going through grief often makes the bereaved physically, mentally, and even spiritually weak. Laureano would sometimes forget that her best friend, Vicky, was dead to be strong for herself. Pamela also saw self-strength playing a significant part in her healing process. Another of the participants found self-strength as a channel for healing as he strived to have enough rest, eat well, and make sure he interacted with others. Other participants mentioned that self-strength played a significant role in their coping mechanism because people who should have provided strength and support were not there when they needed them most. Sometimes, the people were

³⁰⁶ Girlinghouse and Muse. *Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past*, 2019. 64.

there, but not in the capacity they needed them. For this reason, Sarah found that self-strength provided her with the courage to accept her loss and move forward.

Friends' support was next after the Church, self-strength, and family support. Five participants narrated that they could healthily cope with grief because of the support from friends. Their friends' presence reduced loneliness. Pamela mentioned that friends regularly checked on her. She was relieved to see many friends calling to check her well-being. Amanda and Paula also said that the company of friends provided comfort in their moments of grief. Paul narrated, "Friends called and visited; offered eye contact, hugs, a shoulder to lean on, and a squeeze of the hand. Friends often asked what they can do to help." These were encouraging words that helped him to cope. Friends showed them that they understood the situation they were experienced and reassured them of support.

Professional grief support was next after friends' support. Three of the participants said they could cope healthily with grief after getting help from some grief professionals. Grief is a powerful emotion. The death of a loved one leaves one crushed with sadness. God created humans to be social creatures, and the bonds people make with friends, with family, or with others are meaningful. When a loved one dies, it is undoubtedly the most challenging experience social creatures must endure in life. However, it is possible to cope and rediscover a life full of joy by getting help from grief support professionals. According to the three participants, talking to a counselor helped reduce stress, anxiety, and loneliness. They all agreed that a counselor encouraged them to talk about the memories they had with the deceased. Though emerging from grief is a journey, the participants indicated that they started adapting and adjusting to life without the deceased with time. Patrick, for instance, started going out with his friends more regularly. When she felt lonely, Sarah would call his counselor, who helped her to feel better.

Participants made it clear that professional grief support did not wholly solve their pain and loss. However, talking to a professional grief therapist helped them work through the stages of grief. In other words, talking to grief professionals did not make them forget the deceased or avoid the pain of loss. It did not change the core of who they were either. Nevertheless, it helped them experience and accept the loss, find meaning, and begin working on the healing process. Professional grief therapists help individuals who experience grief to healthily move through grief stages as they mourn the death of a loved one.

Finally, two participants mentioned that talking about a loved one's death helped them cope with grief. They found it helpful to talk about their feelings and tell the story of their loss and pain. They kept journals to write down memories about their deceased loved ones and what they felt since the loss. During the interview, Pamela shared these words: "Talking about the loss can also include writing a poem or tribute about a loved one. The poem or tribute can be shared with others or kept privately."³⁰⁷ Other participants mentioned that talking about losing a loved one with others helped them feel a sense of peace. It helped them establish a connection with the deceased.

Summary Statistics

Grief Support	Count	Percent
Family	6	28.6%
Church	5	23.8%
Self-support	4	19.0%
Friends	3	14.3%
Professional help	2	9.5%
Others	1	4.8%
Total	21	100.0%

³⁰⁷ Interview with Pamela, March 4, 2021.

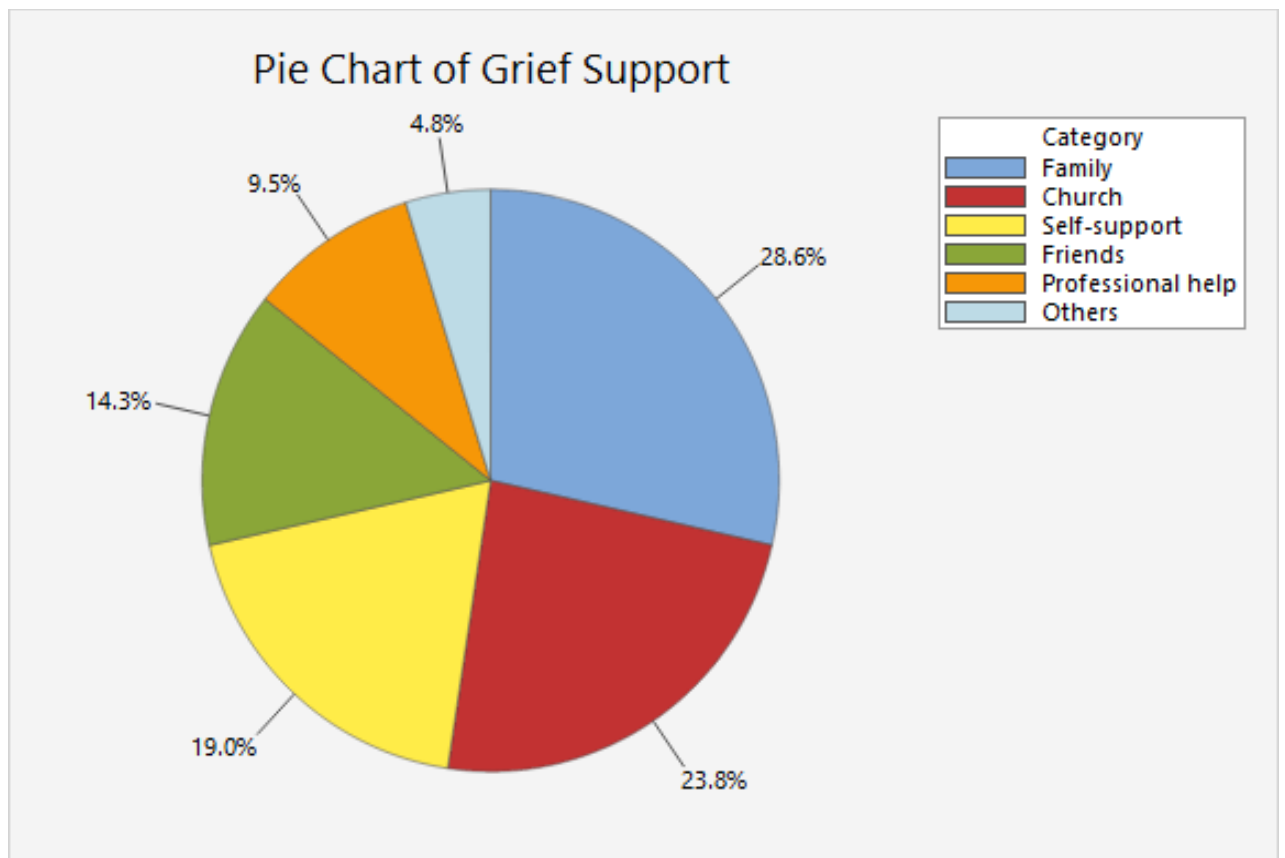


Figure 7: Grief Support

Study Findings

This section explains a range of experiences to help readers understand grief's reality among the participants and their coping mechanisms. Each participant was given enough time to speak individually throughout the whole process. Data collected from these participants captured the richness and complexity of grief. In some instances, the researcher had to rephrase what was said to enhance and strengthen the discussion. As interviews were conducted, attention was paid to writing down the conversations that took place. Transcriptions were carefully assessed and coded by the researcher. During interviews, the researcher set aside her preconceived expectations of

grief experiences to understand what was being said with a new perspective. Participants shared their stories of loss experiences without being influenced by the researcher. Interview quotes are used in this research study to illuminate the overarching themes and present clear participants' thoughts and reactions. Based on the participants' contributions, three overarching themes emerged:

- The Pathways of Grief
 - a. Changes in Behavior
 - b. Feelings of Guilt and Vulnerability
- Pastoral Care
 - a. God's Intervention
 - b. Caring Congregation
- Worship Experience
 - a. Reading Scripture
 - b. Memorial Worship Service
 - c. Music ministry.

Theme one: The Pathways of Grief

God created every creature with a unique DNA. For this reason, each person responds to grief according to their respective DNA. All participants displayed sadness and sorrow accompanied by a powerful yearning to be with the deceased again. The majority of participants in this study indicated that they had a short period to prepare themselves for the death of their loved ones. Amanda and Paul stated that when they found out that their child had committed suicide, they called for help. They knew God was with them and that God was working,

regardless of what they were facing.³⁰⁸ Most participants indicated that they took their loved ones to the hospital to save their lives, but unfortunately, they died. When talking about these experiences, most interviewees recounted never having enough time to prepare for a loss. "The miscarriage happened suddenly,"³⁰⁹ said Sarah. Leonard lived with his wife from the time they were married in 1954. He indicated that his grief started when his wife was put into hospice, which brought on loneliness and sadness. Leonard felt his wife would not get better, but he hoped and prayed to recover. Unfortunately, she got weaker and weaker each day. She was in hospice for one week before she died. Though she was put in hospice, Leonard said he had no time to prepare for her burial.

A few participants lost loved ones in tragic situations. Claudette painfully narrated how she found out about her husband's car accident that took his life. She recalled the dinner (cornbread and chili) she had prepared the day her husband did not return home. Claudette narrated that accepting her husband's death was challenging. She went through denial, anger, bargaining, and depression but tried to hide her feelings. During her bereavement, she was surrounded by her family. When she notified her pastor, the pastor came immediately. Later, the church people began to call, and others brought food. The church fed her for one week. The church members gave the support that enabled her to find a little bit of hope. She reported being lonely after the burial as no one visited her to comfort her.

Amanda and Paula talked about the void left by their son's death following his suicide. It was shocking and unexpected. They described the situation as the most traumatic experience in

³⁰⁸ Interview with Amanda and Paul, March 5, 2021.

³⁰⁹ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

their lives. When their son was pronounced dead, Amanda indicated that she almost passed out, but her husband, Paul, offered comfort.

Pamela, nearly 19, spoke of the traumatic loss of her mother. Her mother was never sick. The day her mother died, they both went shopping that morning. After shopping, Pamela went to see a movie with her friends. About three hours later, she received the news about her mother's passing. Pamela was in shock. She was never told the cause of her mother's death. Her mother was just found lifeless in her room. Pamela said that day was the darkest day of her life.

As participants reflected and talked about their grief experiences, they displayed common emotions. These included joy, laughter, tears, wounds, and moments of sorrow. Though there was some laughter, each participant talked in a manner that stressed the gravity of loss. Most participants related their loss experiences to matters of belief. In situations where loved ones were put in hospice before dying, their death was seen as a release from earthly suffering. Leonard, for example, viewed his wife's death as an end to her suffering. Leonard was not liberated from being a caring husband; instead, he narrated that his wife strongly believed in God, which assured him she was in a good place. Though he was devastated when she died, knowing that his wife was released from pain and suffering gave him comfort in his time of grief and loss.³¹⁰

Such was not the experience of Patrick. His dad had issues with his kidney. Fortunately, a kidney donor had been found, and after the transplant, he was discharged from the hospital. A month later, his dad started complaining about stomach pain. While he was at the hospital, he showed no improvement. The more he was given treatments, the weaker he became. His condition continued to worsen. Patrick knew his dad was in severe pain when he overheard him

³¹⁰ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

saying, "Help me, Lord." Though Patrick believed in God, he found himself questioning with a loud voice, "God, where are you?"³¹¹ Following the death of his Dad, Patrick mourned. He confided in his pastor that he was drained and wished his dad could have taken all of his children with him to heaven. Also, Patrick indicated that eating was difficult for him. He decided to go to his dad's favorite restaurant, the Olive Garden, as a means of coping every Sunday.

Two other participants expressed similar experiences when talking about how the loss of a loved one affected their lives. In some cases, sharing a meal as a family has been significant, and the deceased left an empty chair, impacting the lives of those sitting around the table. The empty chair at the table was a visible reminder of the deceased never returning, which sometimes evoked sorrow. Another participant, Sophia, indicated her struggle as follows: "I eat shrimp often because my husband was a shrimp lover."³¹² Though Sophia did not like shrimp, she indicated that eating shrimp brought her husband's memory and provided solace. Sarah, on the other hand, had a different story to share. After her miscarriage, she struggled to eat though she was starving. These feelings came in waves. Either she had an appetite to eat a large portion of a meal, or she had none.

Claudette echoed similar feelings expressed by other participants. According to Sophia, the most arduous path of grief is realizing the absence of a loved one at the table. She stated, "It brings pain, but sometimes it brings a smile."³¹³ Another participant, Laureano, described dinner time as something that brings memories about the deceased. Also, eating the deceased's favorite food is a way to honor memories of the loved one.

³¹¹ Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

³¹² Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

³¹³ Interview with Claudette, March 5, 2021.

Changes in Behavior

Most participants indicated that grief made them change their way of doing things. For instance, following her husband's death, Claudette resolved to offer herself caring and supporting her children and her in-law's family. She believed it was her responsibility to foster a culture of comforting her children and her in-laws, not only when the death occurred but also beyond the memorial and burial services. Though Claudette was in pain, she quickly suppressed her emotions to make herself available for those who grieved uncontrollably.

In the same way, all participants reported a change of behavior after their loved one's death. Death signaled to them the necessity of changing ways of doing certain things. For example, Patrick reported that his father's death made him adjust and reconsider living and loving his siblings. In other words, the death of his father led him to be a father to his siblings. Patrick narrated that he did all he could to display an excellent example, so when his siblings looked at him, they would see their father in him. Patrick stated, "Memories of a loved one never disappear. No one, except God, can understand the pain and suffering one must endure after a loved one's death. Though other people are willing to help, their help will be temporary."³¹⁴ Therefore, standing firm to be an encourager and comforter opened his eyes to experience the pain of grief.

Pamela expressed the same sentiment. After her mother passed away, she developed a rushing habit to comfort anybody she heard had lost a loved one. Pamela described her new behavior by saying her grief experience put her in an excellent position to comfort others because she understands how it feels to suffer such a loss. The death of Sophia's husband brought a change of behavior for her as well. The loss made her review how she spent time with her

³¹⁴ Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

children and friends going through bereavement. Her behavior change included pointing out that her role was to make herself available to others experiencing grief, helping them to find solace as they experienced grief. Also, her husband's loss made her think twice about what to say or not to say to a grieving person. According to Sophia, offering statements, such as, "take heart! Every person goes through grief! It is not the end of the story! Do not cry like someone without hope!... do not help a bereaved person at all; instead, these statements are uncaring and uncomfoting statements."³¹⁵ In support of her argument, Sophia said, "those statements are not comfoting because each person responds to the loss of a loved one differently."³¹⁶ Therefore, caregivers, friends, and family should reconsider what to say and not say to the bereaved.

The death of Amanda and Paul's son instilled in them a new way of communicating with teenagers. Their feeling that they did not communicate enough with their son made them engage with teenagers in the community so often. The couple believed that the lack of conversing with their boy might have contributed to his death. So, they vowed to make themselves available for other teens who may need their help before it is too late. They resolved to help teens who struggle with life issues regardless of whether they are a family member or not. The couple believed this behavior change made them busy and comfortable as if they were also being comforted by non-family members. Amanda and Paul did this with passion because they loved their child, and every time they remembered him, it gave them the energy to converse with teens to help them avoid thinking of suicidal thoughts. The couple confessed that they did not spend much time with their son; now that he is dead, they want to save other teens from committing suicide.

³¹⁵ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

³¹⁶ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

Feelings of Guilt and Vulnerability

As participants were interviewed, they revealed and displayed the theme of feeling guilty, even though they had not articulated it themselves. In general, female participants were more open and emotional than male participants. All of the participants blamed themselves for not doing enough to help a loved one when they were dying. Realizing it was too late to save the deceased's life brought pain and regret. Some participants wished they had heard the deceased's last words. For instance, Sophia reported that her life would have been impacted if she had heard her husband's last words or wishes. According to Sophia, her life feels empty without her husband by her side. For a while, after he died, she kept busy with planning for the funeral. After the burial, however, she felt guilt and helpless and did not know quite what to do with herself.

When the doctor told Amanda and Paul that their son had slipped away peacefully, they felt guilty for not being by their son's side when he took his last breath, and this was something that kept playing over and over in their minds. They wished they had time to save their son from committing suicide, but it was too late. During the interview, Patrick felt he would have taken his father to another specialist. However, caring for his father made him spend all his savings, causing him to take a loan to survive.

Six (60%) of other remaining participants expressed guilt for not saying a proper goodbye to their loved ones. They indicated a deep need to share with the deceased their last words. Pamela lost her loved one while away from home. As a result, Pamela could not attend the burial. The other five participants attended their loved one's burial service because they lived in the same town. Though attending the burial was not an issue, participants had wished the situation could be changed. Even Sarah, who had a miscarriage, reported the same theme.

Sarah recounted her story that she took prenatal vitamins to help the fetus develop. It was not only painful to have a miscarriage, but the situation was also irreversible. Sarah indicated that she had felt period cramps, and sometimes she could not hear the baby's movement, but she never took it seriously until she started bleeding. After a miscarriage, Sarah blamed herself, and the symptoms she neglected at first began to make sense. Sarah wished to pay attention to the signs of miscarriage. If she had visited a midwife on time, her child could have been born.³¹⁷ Sarah could have been a Mom if she had acted at the right time, and so, feeling guilt was her way of remembering her child.

Laureano could not hide how much she would love to spend more time with her now-deceased friend, Vicky. She felt terrible that she was not present when her friend's heart stopped breathing. The feeling of not being present when a loved one was transitioning from earthly life to the next brought some hope to participants that the situation could have been different if they had been present. Connected to this feeling was Amanda and Paul's story when they talked about how they felt their presence could have saved their son's life. Amanda remembered how their son used to lock himself up in his room. They wished they had asked their son why he would spend so much time in his room and not with friends. The couple recognized that everybody eventually dies, but maybe if Amanda or Paul had been present, something could have been done to save their son from committing suicide.

Participants who lost spouses reported having felt vulnerable after the loss. Sophia described her departed husband as the "cement of the family, one who holds the family together."³¹⁸ Sophia further said her husband was a counselor and motivator in the family.

³¹⁷ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

³¹⁸ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

Losing him created a gap that can never be replaced or fixed. Moreover, his death brought many fears that led Sophia to think and wonder how she could cope with life without her husband. Sophia's husband loved her dearly. He took Sophia's children as his own and adopted two orphans from Cambodia. Thus, Sophia was overwhelmed by the extra responsibilities she had to carry after her husband's death. Their two foster children were in college. The other children were married, but their marriages went through many hardships. As a mother, Sophia had to carry all the responsibilities on her shoulders, making her vulnerable and afraid of embracing her new life.

Eight participants shared the same feeling: vulnerability. They expressed how vulnerable it will be to assume their new roles and responsibilities after losing a loved one. Claudette voiced her vulnerability by sharing that her husband was more than a friend. They spent most of their time together and were apart only when they were both at work. She could not sleep the day her husband did not return home. Sophia had the same experience. She could not help but feel vulnerable. She knew her husband had been ill for some time. Sophia thought that she would be prepared for his loss. However, she was shocked once he died. She displayed regrets in her mind and wished there had been another way to save his life. Sophia thought about the future without her husband. Sophia has now assumed the role of a mother and a father to their children. She could not imagine what the aftermath would be like without her husband.

Amanda and Paul voiced their vulnerability that they felt feeble once their son was pronounced dead. The couple spent years before she could get pregnant. They were proud parents of their only one child. After their son committed suicide, they felt vulnerable, and in Paul's narration, he expressed how his heart was broken. He cried and then tried to be brave to

comfort his wife, Amanda, but he felt defeated. Paul cried when he realized he had no one to call him Daddy again. Death took his role and responsibility of being a father away from him.

Similarly, Pamela expressed how she had missed her mother. Though physically she was away from her mother, Pamela stated that her mother played a counselor and protector role in her life. The distance between them was not a barrier to having her mother involved in her life. As the conversation was going on, Pamela recounted an incident of her mother telling Pamela's friends over the phone to take good care of her. In certain instances, when Pamela was not reachable over the phone, her mother would contact Pamela's friends until she could reach her. Sometimes, Pamela's friends complained about it, but Pamela's mother never cared. She called again and again until she was ensured that her daughter was safe. Her mother's effort to call every day made Pamela feel safe and secure. During the interview, she voiced, "Nobody would ever fill those calls from Mom?"

Leonard experienced vulnerability after the loss of his wife. He said that sometimes he tried to accept what had happened to his wife and move on with life. However, along the way, he felt vulnerable every time he remembered his wife was no more. His wife was supportive, especially when Leonard had health issues. She would take him to urgent care and sometimes to the emergency room. She was a wife who did her best to care for and support her husband.

Theme two: Pastoral Care

As soon as a loved one passed away, all participants indicated that they notified the Church. The pastor shared words of encouragement and condolence immediately after hearing the news about the loss. The pastor also called and offered to bring meals, which all participants appreciated. The pastor frequently asked questions such as: "Is there anything you need? What can we do to help? If you need anything, let us know."

Destiny narrated how her pastor never stopped asking for information about the funeral arrangements. Moreover, she reported that her pastor even offered to help with the planning of the memorial service. Other participants also reported a good coordination planning of the memorial service from the pastor. On the day of service, the pastor attended the service that many appreciated. However, after the burial, things changed. The pastor who showed up and offered to help was nowhere to be seen. He had returned to his everyday business. Those days following the burial, solitude and isolation were experienced by the bereaved. In her narration, Laureano expressed how she needed guidance and pastor support after her friend's burial. However, there was no grief ministry extended to her.

Similarly, most participants (90%) appreciated the comfort and encouragement they received from their pastor during the time of loss. However, Sarah (10%) had a different experience compared to the other nine. She reported that her pastor never showed up to comfort her after she had a miscarriage. One week after her unfortunate event, she decided to visit her pastor at his office and requested the pastor to conduct a memorial service for her child, whom she lost from a miscarriage. However, the pastor rejected her request. Sarah indicated that the pastor never told her why he could not do it, but she thought it could have been a different story if a living child had died and not a miscarriage. Sarah reported that her misfortune situation was not even announced in the Church.

All the other nine participants (90%) agreed that the church's presence was needed. In their narration, participants portrayed the pastor as a family member. The statement by Leonard describes how his pastor got to know about the death of his dear wife. Leonard said that he communicated with his pastor as soon as he learned about his wife's passing. Not long after that, the pastor knocked on his door, hugged him, prayed, and encouraged him. According to Leonard,

it was so comforting when the pastor showed up at his apartment. Leonard described the time the pastor spent in his home as a moment he will never forget. As a retired pastor, he encouraged people in their moments of grief, but he, himself, needed encouragement from a pastor when his wife died. Leonard even appreciated it when the pastor offered to help with planning the memorial service. Leonard was thankful for the quick pastoral response. He felt comforted, knowing that his pastor did his best to support and comfort him during his sad moment. "The pastor's presence brought hope and assurance of the love of God," said Leonard. In his narration, the pastor was fully engaged from the moment his wife passed away and would check on him up to the day of burial. The only difference is that the pastor no longer visited as he used to when the death occurred. After the burial, he rarely visited his home or called him via phone. The pastor, however, assured him that he would be there to offer help whenever he needed it. All Leonard needed to do was call the pastor over the phone, and he would show up. Though not what Leonard expected to hear, he felt comforted to hear about the pastor's availability.

Amanda and Paul were impressed with how the pastor responded when he learned about their son's death. The couple was comforted to see the pastor's willingness to assist them in moments of trouble. The coming of the pastor was essential to them. The pastor played a significant role in organizing things. The couple tremendously recognized the pastor's contribution to the funeral.

Sophia expressed her appreciation and gratitude to her pastor for his role during the memorial service for her husband. Sophia indicated that her pastor was quick to come and comfort her soon after he received the news. She was surrounded by family members when the pastor walked in. She was in pain, but the pastor's presence gave her peace. In her narration, she described the pastor as a valuable person every believer needs to cling to in times of trouble and

sorrow.³¹⁹ Moreover, she explained that the pastor was a reminder of God's presence amid grief. Patrick also described his pastor as a loving and understanding person during grief.³²⁰ The pastor visited his house a few times, and the pastor's visits helped him recover and find hope. The pastor's presence reminded him that he was not abandoned or forsaken when he lost his father. Instead, he was joyful for the fact that his father's death was acknowledged and honored.

God's Intervention

The death of any loved one comes with many questions that so often have no answers. All participants indicated to have prayed to God to change the situation the other way around, yet, the reality was that a loved one was gone forever. After the memorial and burial, most participants said that questions kept coming up in their minds. After her mother was buried, Pamela was puzzled for failing to understand the pain of losing a loved one until she experienced it. She sought God's intervention. Pamela needed answers from God because life did not make sense to her. Her mother had no health issues, yet, she died, and no one knew what caused her death. Patrick also shared the same sentiment when his father died. He spent much money and took a loan, hoping to save his father's life, yet, he died. Patrick asked God to give him an answer to the why question; however, he did not hear from God. In other words, God did not give him an answer. He was able to feel God's presence and intervention through the ministry of pastoral care. For the pastor to show up and bury his father provided God's love and grace that radiated from the pastor to him.

All participants' tales revealed the desire for God's intervention before and after the burial. They all appeared to have questions without answers. They all indicated they had asked

³¹⁹ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

³²⁰ Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

God to come to their aid. Claudette never stopped questioning why God would allow her husband to go to work and never return. "Was not God able to stop the accident? Why would God allow the life of a young man full of energy to be wasted just like that?" she asked. Some participants, such as Sophia, expected her spouse's death. However, she sought God's intervention when her husband died. She wanted answers to why innocent people are not freed from this world's pain and suffering. In anguish, Amanda and Paul asked God why their only son would take his own life. Participants in this study had many questions to ask God, but their pastor could calm them and remind them of the hope found in Jesus.

Amanda and Paul's experience intersected with Sarah's experience, who, after noticing vaginal bleeding, asked God to spare her from miscarrying. In her narration, Sarah said, "When I realized that the bleeding became severe, I decided to ask for God's intervention. I know I will be reunited with my child when Christ comes to resurrect those who died in Christ."³²¹ Destiny failed to understand why one of her twins died. Laureano also failed to understand why her friend transitioned from this life to the next. Finally, when Laureano was able to accept the reality of her friend's death, she remembered saying, "God knows why my friend died from a heart attack."³²² She pointed out that remembering God's power and ability to control everything helped her accept the reality of death. Laureano valued God's intervention because, in her understanding, "the pastor was everything I needed for peace and comfort."³²³ In other words, the pastor's presence embodied God's presence, and this brought peace of mind to her.

³²¹ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

³²² Interview with Laureano, March 2, 2021.

³²³ Interview with Laureano, March 2, 2021.

Caring Congregation

Most participants acknowledged the local church's level of engagement from the moment the death of their loved one was announced to the burial. In other words, participants agreed that the Church brought comfort in the aftermath of a loved one's death. God instructs the Church to serve the vulnerable. Any Church that follows God's instruction as found in the New Testament fulfills the biblical command to comfort the needy.³²⁴

Sophia experienced the ministry of comfort and care from church members immediately after the news about her husband's death was made known publicly. She described her experience as follows, "the care offered by church members meant a lot. The cards, meals, or calls brought not only comfort but also made me filled loved."³²⁵ Similarly, Leonard and others said church members offered to bring food, help with house chores, and plan the funeral instead of worrying about food or keeping the house clean. The care of church members in participants' situations embodied the ministry of service, which provided comfort during their time of need.

The support offered by church members was further shown in Amanda and Paul's experience. Their son's death left them childless. Their comfort was found in the company of believers. They said that church members called, visited, and offered to take them to lunch or dinner. Congregational care helped them process the pain they felt from losing their son.

Moreover, congregational care supported the grief-stricken in different ways. In Destiny's case, church members never stopped asking if they needed anything. Realizing that the church cared helped Destiny through her grief process. She expressed, "I was overwhelmed with peace

³²⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:3-5

³²⁵ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

of heart because church members demonstrated love in tangible ways."³²⁶ Claudette also said the church's ongoing concern for her well-being brought comfort. However, Claudette pointed out that some verbal expressions of care by church members were unnecessary. Claudette felt offended when one of the members said to her that losing a husband in a car accident was the will of God. She had to ask the person who said that to her to leave and never return. In grief, Claudette said, "If a person does not know what to say to those experiencing loss, it is better to be quiet than to say hurtful words."³²⁷ A comforting presence in a time of sorrow is more important than saying discouraging or unkind words. After Sarah lost her pregnancy, she voiced that she needed someone to sit and listen to her. In other words, she needed someone to be there for her and listen to her complaints. She spoke of this as well, "The people who helped me the most were those who sat with me, offered me their shoulders to lean on, and took time to listen."³²⁸

Participants in this study found the Church to be a means of great comfort and care during immediate loss. They received such care through acts of service, words of encouragement, and the ministry of presence. They found it helpful when church members were able to be there for them and listen to them. Card ministry, meals, and worship gatherings provided opportunities for acts of service. Through the work of believers, the love of God is manifested and embodied in the world to bring comfort to grief-stricken individuals.

³²⁶ Interview with Destiny, March 5, 2021.

³²⁷ Interview with Claudette, March 5, 2021.

³²⁸ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

Theme three: Worship Experience

The worship experience can help individuals process grief by reminding them of the gospel truth and the promises found in God. Even though each person can worship on their own, community worship is the occasion when, more than any other time, people gather in fellowship with one another and express their identity in God. All participants, except one, indicated that attending worship service helped them adjust to a new life way. The worship components identified by participants as helpful were reading Scripture, the memorial worship service, and music ministry.

Reading Scripture

Participants expressed how reading Scripture spoke volumes as they walked through the valleys of the shadow and death. Leonard commented, "Hearing some Scriptures being read amid difficult times brings hope and comfort."³²⁹ The pain of losing a loved one is something that can last for days, months, even years. Even though two years had passed since their son committed suicide, Amanda and Paul turned to Scripture for consolation. "I have been underlining any comforting biblical verse I read. It has helped me find reassurance and hope amid my sorrow."³³⁰ God's promises found in Scripture provide healing and comfort to walk again whenever sorrow arises. Scripture is a tool that sorrowful individuals turn to be reminded of God's love, hope, and grace.

Most of the participants found that reading God's word and listening to a funeral sermon was uplifting. "Reading Psalm 23 during the memorial service of my wife brought peace and

³²⁹ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

³³⁰ Interview with Amanda, March 5, 2021.

hope,"³³¹ said Leonard. Although the participants expected the pastor to deliver a sermon, reading Scripture impacted the bereaved families. Patrick was among those who spoke of the power of reading Scripture. He referred to Scripture as a living Word that changes a person's sorrowful situation to a hopeful one. Further, Patrick mentioned that Psalm 23 was read three times during the worship service when his father passed away. Each time Psalm 23 was read, he got something more and different from it, bringing him peace of mind. It also brought reassurance that God was not only present but also in control.³³²

Other facets of Scripture mentioned by participants were biblical stories that bring comfort in times of sorrow. Participants found reassurance and hope in Martha and Marry's story. After losing their brother, Lazarus, joy was restored in their life when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. Sarah also found reassurance and hope in the story of Lazarus. She said, "Though I lost my child due to a miscarriage, I know he is with God."³³³ It helps to know through Scripture that Christ walks with humanity in their pain and wants to bring abundant life. When talking about the power of reading Scripture in ministering to grieving families, one participant commented, "Recovering from the loss of a loved one is a journey that comes in segments. Healing does not happen at once. Like we need to take medicine to feel better, for me, reading Scripture is that medicine."³³⁴

³³¹ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

³³² Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

³³³ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

³³⁴ Interview with Claudette, March 5, 2021.

Memorial Worship Service

Participants mentioned that memorial worship services were necessary in times of grief. A memorial service helps to keep the remembrance of the deceased. The service allows people to share memories, thoughts and pay homage to the deceased. A memorial service provides a space to cherish and acknowledge the life of a departed loved one. Grief experts believe that the act of sharing grief with others helps bring solace. Funerals give people the last chance to say goodbye to a loved one.

Even Sarah, who had a miscarriage, wanted to have a memorial service for her child. Unfortunately, she was denied that privilege. However, all participants indicated that holding a memorial service for a loved one conveyed the gospel truth and instilled hope. It enabled the bereaved to face grief while holding on to the promises of God found in the risen Christ. One of the participants, Leonard, a retired United Methodist Pastor, spoke highly about the importance of memorial services. He commented, "A funeral service is perhaps the only service that many will attend. Even unchurched people will attend a funeral service. Therefore, the service needs to be conducted to captivate and proclaim the message of the gospel."³³⁵

All participants, except Sarah, had a memorial service for their loved ones. They pointed out that memorial services helped them to accept the reality of death. Laureano narrated how her friend's memorial service was simple, yet, it brought healing. She said, "The funeral service of my friend was an essential part of my healing process."³³⁶ Claudette also shared the same sentiment. She stated, "I believed that without a funeral service, the spirit of my deceased

³³⁵ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

³³⁶ Interview with Laureano, March 2, 2021.

husband would be wandering in pain. I was so happy and relieved when we conducted the service for him.”³³⁷

The funeral service for Amanda and Paul's son was comforting to them as well. The tributes and testimonies that their son's friends shared comforted Amanda and Paul and reminded them that their son's life had impacted others. Hearing others tell their son's stories and memories at his memorial service was what Amanda and Paul needed to feel peace and comfort. Stressing the importance of a memorial service, Pamela shared the same perspective. She said, "What I took from my Mom's memorial service was strength to move on with life. The service was filled with the message of hope, which reassured me that others shared my pain."³³⁸ Similarly, Sophia spoke about her husband's memorial service, where sharing memories positively impacted her healing process. She stated,

At my husband's memorial service, one of the attendees said that my husband was like a father he did not have. He would go to my husband whenever he needed wise counseling. My husband would talk to him like a father, and my husband's mentorship to this man has helped him secure a good job and become the person he is today. The words of this young man have stuck with me since that day. It was the first time in a memorial service I have ever attended where a person, unknown to the family, spoke highly about the deceased.³³⁹

Sophia reported how she found solace in memories that were shared during her husband's memorial service.

³³⁷ Interview with Claudette, March 5, 2021.

³³⁸ Interview with Pamela, March 4, 2021.

³³⁹ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

When one of Destiny's twins died, the memorial service was vital to her. As she indicated: "All the components of worship brought joy amid the pain. The service was like inviting me to have faith and remain strong for the other surviving twin."³⁴⁰ Family members and Destiny's pastor planned the service. Though she previously had indicated that she needed a few people to attend the service, many people showed up to show their last love and respect for the deceased. As she recalled what took place that day, Destiny stated, "Seeing many people sharing in your pain was comforting. I was so pleased and thankful to all who came."³⁴¹ For Destiny, the memorial service made a lasting memory that brought peace to her heart. The funeral service brought people together to honor the deceased and allowed attendees to express their final words and say their goodbyes.

Music Ministry

Most of the participants indicated that music helped them bring comfort in their moments of grief. In other words, participants pointed out that music is a tool that helps confront their sorrow, adapt to life after a loved one has passed, or serve to connect them to the deceased. Speaking of music as a tool for confronting sorrow, Destiny indicated how music brought painful memories about the deceased. She said some aspects of the musical worship were challenging, for they reminded her of her deceased daughter. In her narration, "I cannot sing *This Little Light of Mine I'm Gonna Let It Shine* without tears. It was my daughter's favorite song. It is a beautiful song, and it was sung at my daughter's funeral."³⁴² Destiny also indicated how hearing this song played fills her with emotion and sorrow. During the interview with Sophia, she shared how

³⁴⁰ Interview with Destiny, March 5, 2021.

³⁴¹ Interview with Destiny, March 5, 2021.

³⁴² Interview with Destiny, March 5, 2021.

music brought mixed emotions for her and the congregants present at her husband's funeral. She disclosed how singing her husband's favorite song causes emotions to well up in her. Certain music may bring the deceased to mind.

Other participants indicated how music assisted them in adapting to their pain and loss. In the instance of Claudette, who lost her husband in a fatal car accident, she spoke of a season where peace and comfort were brought to life when the song *Amazing Grace* was sung during worship. Through the song's message, Claudette began to adjust her way of life to focus on healing. Similarly, Leonard, a retired United Methodist pastor, spoke of how the song *Amazing Grace* comforted him during grief. He indicated that *Amazing Grace* was a good fit, and each time he heard this song, some of his pain and hurt went away. He stated, "*Amazing Grace* contributed to my healing process."³⁴³ Another participant shared how music is a blessing. He narrated how he asked the pastor to include more songs during his father's funeral service. He stated, "As we sang during the service, the Lord touched my heart."³⁴⁴ After the funeral, Patrick continued to sing and give praise to God for his father's life, and each time he did it, he felt filled with the loving presence of God.

The participant couple, Amanda and Paul, also reported how musical worship brought comfort to the grieving. There is a release of some sort to stand and sing with the body of believers. For Laureano and others, music had a positive impact after experiencing loss. Music helped them to adapt and adjust to life. For some, music served as a connection with the deceased person. Two participants indicated that music served as a bond with the departed loved one. During the interviews, some indicated attachment to the deceased through music. Recalling

³⁴³ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

³⁴⁴ Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

the memorial service of his Dad, Patrick said, "We sang to let go of emotions to adjust to a new way of life."³⁴⁵ Also, Pamela spoke of how tears flowed following her mother's death. However, as the body sang the music of Christ, it helped her dry her tears and bring peace of mind.

In most participants' instances, worship served to cherish and honor memories of their deceased loved ones. They commented that during grief, music could bring either joyful or sorrowful tears. After her daughter's death, Destiny shared how her surviving daughter asked her why she cried during worship service. Destiny responded that it was because the musical worship reminded her of her deceased daughter.

In some instances, participants talked about how they used music to find solace amid grief. Sarah, who had no opportunity to organize a church memorial service for her child, shared how listening to gospel music helped her adapt to a new life. When her midwife confirmed that she sang in the process of miscarrying, she sang through some of the hymns she loved most. She started, "As the bleeding became severe, I sang to commit my child into God's arms. I sang and cried at the same time."³⁴⁶ When stressing the importance of how music processes grief, Leonard added these thoughts, "Music brings solace each day."³⁴⁷

Music can help provide scriptural reinforcement, and the Holy Spirit can work through music to bring comfort amidst grief. One of the participants connected music to biblical themes. Musical worship helps individuals to illuminate gospel truth. Music by itself may not impact much, but the song's message does make a difference. Music conveys a message of hope and peace. Participants from this study found musical worship as a means of bringing comfort and

³⁴⁵ Interview with Patrick, March 2, 2021.

³⁴⁶ Interview with Sarah, March 2, 2021.

³⁴⁷ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

reinforcement of their faith. Music also impacted their spiritual formation. Whether they sang alone or together with other believers, music was seen as an act of the heart. In sharing her thoughts, Laureano stated that musical worship opened her eyes to God's hope in a new way. The benefit of gospel truth expressed through music providing comfort to grief is not a new concept. For example, one of the renowned scholars, Lester Ruth, wrote about how Charles Wesley's hymns communicate gospel truth differently. Ruth stated, "Some of Charles' pieces of music are filled with inspirational words that are personal and yet common to believers."³⁴⁸ Often, mourners' grief is lifted in hearing songs that speak about God's character and attributes.

Another theme that emerged was the efficacy of music. One participant stated, "It makes a great impact when the Holy Spirit is invited to be at the center of musical worship."³⁴⁹ Another participant voiced that the Spirit of God used Christian music to touch his heart and bring reassurance. Through the Holy Spirit's work, one can find healing and peace of heart. In her comment, Sophia quoted Zephaniah 3:17 that says, "The Lord is with you and will rejoice over you with singing."³⁵⁰ Leonard spoke of a time he was presiding over a church member's funeral, and the gentleman began to minister through music. As he began to sing, his voice was unique. It was peaceful. He said he forgot what song the gentleman sang but recalled his expression as he sang. He was singing from the heart. Leonard said that when I stoop up to deliver the message, he said to the gentleman, "You are a blessing. Your voice is amazing, and everyone here got something from your singing." As the gentleman sang, God's Spirit moved. Leonard concluded, "Worship, music, preaching, prayers, or teachers make a difference only if God's Spirit is part of

³⁴⁸ Lester Ruth. "The Example of Charles Wesley," In Smith, chap. 15. Kindle.

³⁴⁹ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

³⁵⁰ Interview with Sophia, March 4, 2021.

it.”³⁵¹ It is only God and the work of the Holy Spirit that can comfort and heal. Participants of this study indicated that music empowered by God's Spirit could move mountains. It can provide healing and comfort to grieving individuals by encouraging them to confront grief, adapt to a new way of life, continue to tie with the deceased person, and reinforce their faith in God.

While worship has different components, participants of this study indicated Scripture reading, music, and the memorial service to be vital components of worship that bring solace during times of pain. In addition, they bring forth a bond with the deceased person. Most of the participants shared that worship service, scripture reading, and music helped them experience God's presence and also brought comforts, such as joy (the deceased is free from physical suffering), hope (the deceased lives eternally), and solace (God is in control). However, they could also experience sadness, helplessness, and anger through worship service, scripture reading, and music.

³⁵¹ Interview with Leonard, March 4, 2021.

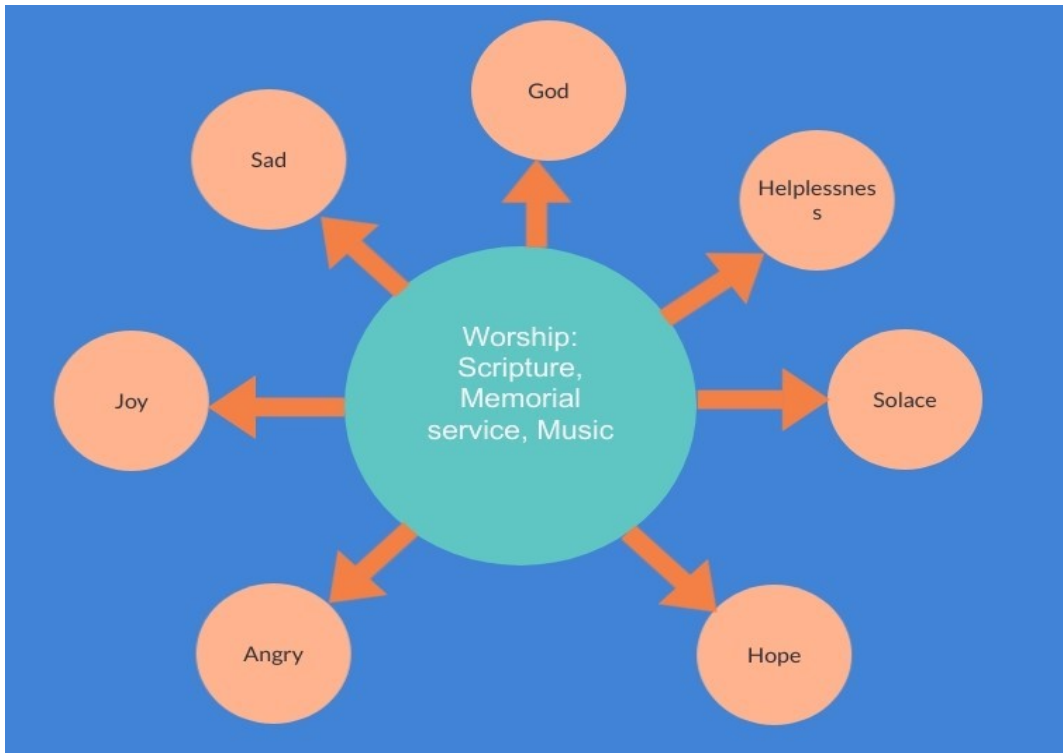


Figure 8: The effects of worship service, Scripture, and music

Summary

This chapter focused on and reviewed the results of the participants' grief experiences and how they have coped with grief. Three themes emerged from the collected data: Grief Path, Pastoral Care, and the Worship Experience. After a loved one has been confirmed dead, participants indicated that their responses included denial in accepting the loss. All participants indicated the difficulties and struggled to adjust to a new way of life with the deceased loved one. However, they were able to adjust with time. Though the participants showed appreciation to the church for stepping up and helping process their grief, the experiences displayed the need to develop grief care beyond the burial because all participants in this study indicated that their grief and pain increased after the burial.

The interviews with the participants made it clear that specific approaches from persons were beneficial and constructive while others were not. Similarly, the interactions and

communication with persons suffering the loss of a loved one varied as well. Following are comments reflecting the do's and don'ts of engaging with persons in the midst of trying to recuperate from the suffering they experience in the journey of emerging from their grief of losing a loved one, sometimes unexpectedly, while others were aware of the pending death of a loved one.

The death of a loved one is so devastating. Gratefully, congregants step up to help those during grief and loss. Most of the things church members say or do may seem insignificant, but the bereaved are much appreciated. However, nothing one says or does can change the reality of death or the emotions a grieving person faces. When talking to the bereaved, it is always proper to use the name of the deceased. Using the deceased's name helps the bereaved to know that someone deeply cares about their loss. In other words, it shows that the deceased is not forgotten.

Nevertheless, one should never say, "move on with life," "be brave," "get over it and focus on what is necessary," "death is inevitable, so be strong." These phrases imply asking the bereaved to forget about the deceased, and honestly, no one wants to forget their deceased loved ones. No matter how many years may pass, the deceased person will always be remembered, especially on their birthday or other important days memorable in the deceased person's life. W. D. Rees was a General Practitioner in London and Canada. He spent a lot of his life in medical practice researching various topics, including bereavement. In one research study conducted by Rees, it was found that thirty-nine percent of 239 bereaved spouses had experienced a sense of the presence of their partner: fourteen percent had had illusions of a physical presence."³⁵² So, trying to make the bereaved forget about the deceased loved one would not help in any way.

³⁵² Michael Dunn, *Time to Grieve: How to Come Through Bereavement to Recovery and Growth*. 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: How To Books, Ltd., 2007), 14.

It is essential to understand that healing from grief varies from person to person and the relationship the bereaved had with the deceased has a significant impact on how one handles grief. The average time of healing varies from one person to another. Some people who grieve recover much more quickly than others. According to Michael Dunn, "Time since the death: it is, indeed, a great healer."³⁵³ Grieving time might be considerably longer if death was unexpected. Survivors may feel pressured by their surroundings to get well and move on with life. Although they may adapt to life without the deceased person, the bereaved's life will never be the same again.

Therefore, it is important to know what to say and what not to say to a bereaved person. Regretfully and unknowingly, people have said both positive and negative things. The same statement or word a person says can be helpful to some people and can have the opposite effect on others. For example, a clergy may say, "She/he is with the Lord now."³⁵⁴ However, it may not feel suitable for an acquaintance to say it. The literature discusses the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.³⁵⁵ It is improper to say to the bereaved that they are in a particular stage of grief. After listening to participants' stories and experiences, this research has compiled a list of do's and don'ts in the event of helping those who grieve.

Do not tell a mourner that they look good and that they are coping well with grief. Saying so may force the grieving person to suppress their feelings to measure what others are saying. Thompson and Lund write, "Allow the grieving person to have troubled feelings without the

³⁵³ Dunn, *Time to Grieve: How to Come Through Bereavement to Recovery and Growth*, 2007, 27.

³⁵⁴ A statement clergy often say during the celebration of life or memorial service to offer hope to the bereaved person or family.

³⁵⁵ Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 2009, 51.

sense of letting them down.”³⁵⁶ When one is overwhelmed by the death of a loved one, it may take time to recover from the shock. Hence, it does not help to tell them that they are doing so well.

So often, people love to say to the bereaved person to call or let them know if they need any help. Please do not say it. “Do not ask the mourner to call you if they need help,” for that is a vague statement. Besides, a traumatized person may not even know what they need. So often, when an offer is vague, the chances are that the mourner will decline that offer and will not call. If one wants to help in whatever way, better make a specific comment on how to help and practical help. Say something like, “Tomorrow, I am going to Walmart or any other grocery store. I will bring fruit for you. Or what do you need from the store? Alternatively, there is some tasty fried chicken that I would like you to taste. I will bring it tonight, so do not cook dinner.” These offers are practical and straightforward. They help the mourner to know precisely how one wants to help.

Do not tell a grieving person what they should do to avoid reinforcing their sense of incompetence. Thus, giving a piece of advice to someone who grieves can be unhelpful. Also, do not suggest when and how long it will take for them to be healed. Grief caused by the death of a loved one never heals completely. People learn to live without the deceased, but they grieve any time they remember their deceased loved ones. So, do not suggest how much time it will take to heal.

The way people respond to grief is unique for every person. So, it is inappropriate to say, “I understand how you feel.” Two people will never have the same experience of grief. It is preferable to sympathize with the person rather than telling them, “I know how you feel.” No one

³⁵⁶ Neil Thompson and Dale A. Lund. *Loss, Grief, and Trauma in the Workplace* (Amityville: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 106. Accessed June 5, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

knows how the other person is feeling. Even two brothers who mourn their father would never understand how the other feels about the loss.

Do not say to a bereaved person that, "It is God's plan for your loved one to die in this way," or "Everything happens for a reason," or "He brought this on himself," or "You can still have another child" or "She did what she was supposed to do, and it was her time to go." These statements show no empathy. The statement does not show care and understanding. However, to help someone involves understanding and caring. Saying the death of someone was God's plan or that God works mysteriously implies no sorrow and understanding about how the mourner feels. Moreover, it sounds like one is blaming God for taking the life of the deceased, which is not valid.

Norman writes, "Our culture does not tolerate suffering, and so we tend to push the bereaved to get out of grief as soon as possible."³⁵⁷ Please do not do it. Do not push the person to return to their everyday life and let go of the deceased by saying, "Aren't you over him yet? He has been dead for a while now" or "Be strong! Be brave!" or "You will get over it" or "She is dead and gone. Nothing you can do to bring her back" or "Time will heal the wounds." One should know that grief work takes time and patience; it cannot be done on a fixed schedule. A grieving person needs to work on healing at their own pace. Pushing or forcing a person to heal fast may be harmful. If grief affects a person's productivity, the situation needs to be managed with care and thoughtfulness. It is not beneficial to hurry the person through their grief process.

So, what should one say or do when someone is grieving? The first thing to do is to get in touch with the bereaved family or person. Being there for a friend or church member in their

³⁵⁷ Norman H. Wright. *The Complete Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling: What to Do and Say When It Matters Most!* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2011), 52.

grieving moments is the most merciful and caring thing one can do. Grieving people need human contact, even if it is only for a few minutes. While with the bereaved, it is important to “acknowledge their loss.”³⁵⁸ A loved one has died. The bereaved may find it difficult to accept the reality about the loved one's death. It may help if the helper acknowledges the reality of the loss by showing genuine care through kind words or actions. It is acceptable to allow tears of sorrow to flow. One can convey expressions such as, "I am sorry for your loss," or "You will be in my thoughts and prayers." These words are a simple way to bring comfort to a grieving person. Spoken words can also convey a message of hope to a grieving friend to feel less alone knowing someone is praying for them.

Do invite the bereaved person into communication. The purpose of communication is for the grieving person to tell their stories or struggles. In doing so, they may find new inspiration. Asking questions about the deceased would be a wonderful gesture. Try to open up the door to communication by asking them questions such as, “How was your day today? How was your night? How do you feel now? If the person has children, it does not hurt to ask, “How are your kids? Where are they? How are they coping? What do you miss about your husband? (Make sure you call the deceased person by name). These questions will allow the grieving person to say what is on their mind. As the bereaved gives answers to questions asked, do the listening. Sharing might bring light into the bereaved's soul and reinforce healing. On the other hand, lack of sharing and human contact often sends the bereaved person into seclusion and alienation. Thompson and Lund suggest that "Do listen 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time. "³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Alan D. Wolfelt. *Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth: 100 Practical Ideas for Parents and Families* (Fort Collins: Companion Press, 2013), 28.

³⁵⁹ Thompson and Lund. *Loss, Grief, and Trauma in the Workplace*, 2009, 108.

According to Thompson and Lund, “Listening is a key part of leadership, especially to people who are grieving.”³⁶⁰ In the same way, listening is the most critical skill pastors, and church members should acquire when ministering to those who grieve. It is essential to understand that listening is not just about paying attention to what has been said—but also listening to what has been omitted.

When listening to the bereaved’s story, "Be patient with the griever's story. It promotes a healthy continuity as the mourner orients himself/herself to a changed future."³⁶¹ During listening, using physical contact such as hugging, holding hands, or an arm around the shoulder might help the mourner find solace. After listening to the bereaved's story, be specific in helping them out – rather than saying, *if you need anything, call me*. Offer to assist them with practical daily chores or shopping or babysitting if they have small children. It is helpful to say a statement such as, "I would love to make dinner for your family today." Gently press the bereaved to accept the offer, but one should also expect "no" for an answer without resentment. Call the bereaved the next day to check in. It is also helpful to encourage a grieving person to eat healthy foods, exercise, and get enough hours of sleep to enhance their physical and emotional health. The grieving process is never easy, so make sure “the bereaved is taking essential healthy steps to maintain their overall well-being.”³⁶²

If the person ministering to the bereaved has lost loved ones in the past, it could be helpful to share their loss experiences. Sharing grief stories might make a big difference to some. So often, it will help the mourner to understand what happened and possibly bring back the

³⁶⁰ Thompson and Lund. *Loss, Grief, and Trauma in the Workplace*, 2009, 108.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 109.

³⁶² Thomas Attig. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*. Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124.

deceased's memory. Though grief is different for each person, David Balk suggests that grief self-disclosure might help the mourner understand that loss is a common human experience.³⁶³ Do not force it if there is no encouraging or empowering story to share with the grieving person. It would be cowardice to speak nonsense. It is better to be silent than share stories to cheer the bereaved up. This attitude may not be beneficial because it denies the bereaved the right to mourn their loss. From the perspective of Norine Dresser and Fredda Wasserman, "It is your presence and compassion that will help the griever more than anything."³⁶⁴ Those supporting a bereaved person or family need to know that two individuals can never share the same grief journey. A person's grief is unique as a fingerprint. Thus, forcing or pushing a person to get out of grief as soon as possible is like telling them to let go of their pain, which is wrong and unacceptable. It is essential to know that a person's grief is impacted by the social situation, physical state, relationship with the deceased person, and life history.³⁶⁵ All these things influence a person's reactions to a loss, so it would be awkward to tell a mourner to return to everyday life as soon as possible. Instead, allow the bereaved to grieve without fear of being judged or rushed to mourn their loss.

Try to stay in touch with the bereaved. It can be encouraging for the bereaved to hear a friendly voice. With modern technology, there is no excuse for failing to connect with the bereaved regularly. If it is impossible to connect with the bereaved physically, it would be wonderful to use forms of modern communication -- Phone calls, email, Facebook, Facetime,

³⁶³ David Balk. *Helping the Bereaved College Student* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2011), 170. Accessed July 25, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

³⁶⁴ Norine Dresser and Fredda Wasserman. *Saying Goodbye to Someone You Love: Your Emotional Journey Through End of Life and Grief: Your Emotional Journey Through End of Life and Grief* (New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2010), 201. Accessed July 25, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

³⁶⁵ Shulamith Kreitler, and Henya Shanun-Klein, eds. *Studies of Grief and Bereavement* (Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2013), 98. Accessed July 25, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

and more. While communicating with the bereaved, try to be open, compassionate, and willing to offer help. Hearing a friend's voice over the phone or reading a friend's words of support and encouragement contribute to the healing process. How much one check-in a grieving friend means a lot. Be mindful and aware of words and language choices so the message conveys the intended sentiments. One must be aware that reaching out to a friend who has lost a loved one electronically can never replace the physical presence. In other words, being physically present with the bereaved person is much more comforting than connecting with them electronically. Nevertheless, if the circumstance does not allow physical contact, using modern technology would be an option.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the research related to this study and discusses the research findings of this project. The chapter also provides recommendations for future research and offers practical suggestions to pastors and congregations to effectively minister to individuals who grieve after the burial of a loved one.

This thesis project sought to study the Church's role in helping grieving families cope after the burial of a loved one. It is a qualitative study about the harrowing experience people had after losing a loved one. Data were collected from ten United Methodist members who had lost a loved one in the past five years. The following research questions guided the research of this study:

- How do Christians react to the concepts of loss?
- In what ways has the Church effectively helped the bereaved families cope with grief?
- Beyond providing meals, sympathy cards, and flowers, how can the Church respond to grieving individuals' ongoing needs?

Data collection was done through interviews, and the results of the study indicate that individuals who lost loved ones experience loneliness after the burial; they require the Church's support to help them cope with grief.

Discussion of the Results

This study was designed to study the support the United Methodist local congregations offer to the bereaved families. Three themes and seven sub-terms that emerged from the data collection reveal the participants' feelings following the death of a loved one and how

appreciative they are for the role the Church played when the death occurred. The themes observed during the interviews include:

- The Pathways of Grief
 - Change of Behavior
 - Feelings of Guilt and Vulnerability
- Pastoral Care
 - God's Intervention
 - A Caring Congregation
- Worship Experience
 - Reading Scripture
 - A Memorial Worship Service
 - Music ministry.

The findings are summarized into three analytical categories: (1) the ability to accept the reality of grief, (2) the value of the Church in helping individuals cope with loss, and (3) the tendency for the bereaved to seek the Church's support beyond the burial of a loved one.

Question One:

How do Christians react to the concepts of loss?

Loss is inevitable; no living being is immortal. Even with this knowledge in mind, people, believers included, accept the reality of death with difficulty. Denial was the dominant theme revealed by most participants. All participants, including Sarah, who had a miscarriage, spoke of how they had hoped the deceased would live to see their grandchildren's children. When Laureano found that her friend had died, she immediately reacted by saying, "I do not believe it!" Claudette's immediate reaction after her husband's death was, "What! My husband cannot be

dead!" Claudette's husband did not return home from work the day the unfortunate incident happened. Claudette thought something had prevented her husband from returning home but never imagined he was involved in a deadly car accident. Asking God to turn the situation around was unproductive. Other participants, Amanda and Paul, prayed to God that their son would wake up, though he was pronounced dead. Patrick prayed about his Dad's death that God would reverse the situation. Everyone enjoys the company of a loved one; hence, it is difficult to accept when a loved one has transitioned from physical life to spiritual life.

The literature review of this thesis underscores the idea of how the reality of lived experiences is personal. In other words, each person in this world has experienced a loss of a family member or a friend, but each situation is unique and personal. For instance, a child's relationship with his deceased mother cannot be compared to a husband's relationship with his deceased wife. Losing a loved one is painful, but how one reacts to a loss is profoundly unique and personal.

Participants in this study showed common experiences and, yet each experience was unique to each participant. In the case of Leonard, he had lost three siblings in the past ten years, but the experience of losing his wife was deeply personal and left him very vulnerable. When his wife died, it seemed all Leonard's hope had gone because his wife was a dear companion. They did everything together, and when Leonard was supposed to take his medications, his wife was always there to support and encourage him. Leonard said that when his brother died in March 2014, he felt very badly. However, the death of his wife came with intense pain. All their children are grown up and have their own families, and his wife was the only person that brought joy to him. Though Leonard's wife was taken to a hospice, Leonard had hoped she would be

discharged. Unfortunately, she did not come back home. It was difficult for Leonard to accept that his wife had passed away.

In Patrick's situation, he shared that his brothers recovered from the death of their father quicker than he did. One factor that slowed his recovery process was the closeness between him and his father. He was his father's boy. To show that he was so close to his father, Patrick spoke passionately that his father was the best gift he had received from God. Hence, his death disorientates Patrick's life.

Also, the literature review demonstrates that individuals who struggle to accept the loss of a loved one are emotional. Amanda, one of the participants, expressed how her son's death made her experience nightmares. She would always see her son alive in her dreams, which made her deny the reality that her son was dead. She wished her dreams were real. All participants seemed to go through a common theme of denial. The participants' reactions to the death of their loved ones reveal how they struggled to grasp reality. However, as days went on, they began accepting their loss.

Some participants were angry at the Lord, while others called upon God for comfort. In trying to avoid pain, some participants isolated themselves from social gatherings, others took a sabbatical leave at work, while others returned to work to forget the unfortunate situation as they mingled with co-workers and friends. Some tried to avoid going to places that would remind them of the deceased person. They tried to take shortcuts through the process of grief, ignoring the feeling of anger that usually is present. However, the more they tried to avoid the pain, the more lonely they felt. It was evident in one of the participants' stories, "After the death of my child, I tried to go to the club to have a fresh mind, but each time I returned home, I felt disoriented and lonely.

Keming Young defines loneliness as being socially alone.³⁶⁶ A person is lonely when he or she feels sad about not being part of society or without companionship. However, what people do not understand is that loneliness is subjective (i.e., personal). A person can never understand what loneliness looks like for another person or how lonely a person feels. In academic circles, loneliness is understood as an unpleasant experience. It often occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.³⁶⁷ In other words, loneliness occurs when a person's interpersonal desires are not achieved. Loneliness, therefore, is not merely about being alone; instead, it is a feeling of discomfort that develops when a person's social relationships seem to be unfulfilled. People who grieve often are vulnerable when it comes to loneliness because a loved one is gone forever. Participants in this study seemed to have the ache of loneliness because the deceased person took a piece of them to the grave. Hence, they feel incomplete without seeing the person, spending time with them, and eating with their loved ones.

The participants' stories pointed out that after the burial of a loved one, they experienced great loneliness. As a result, some participants felt it was essential to support those who experienced such a loss. They understand that losing a loved one leaves a hole that no one else can fill. However, being around people might help the bereaved in the process of coping with grief.

Moreover, participants indicated how they embraced new roles and responsibilities following the death of a loved one. One of the reasons participants embraced new roles and responsibilities is the feeling of being overwhelmed and plagued by vulnerability. The deceased

³⁶⁶ Keming Yang. *Loneliness: A Social Problem* (Abingdon, Oxo: Routledge, 2019), 2.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

persons gave them a sense of belonging. Amanda and Paul, who were proud parents of one, became childless. Sophia and Claudette became widows, and Leonard became a widower. Patrick and Pamela became orphans. Laureano lost a friend who was like a sister she never had. Destiny and Sarah lost children, which made them vulnerable. "Life will never be the same again," said Pamela. She continued, "Now that my mother is dead, I have to work hard to take care of myself."³⁶⁸ Also, Sophia expressed, "My husband used to clean and take care of the yard, do laundry, and do all the cleaning around the house. He used to take my children and grandchildren to different entertainment events. Now that he is no more, I have to do all that. I feel so overwhelmed."³⁶⁹ However, another participant expressed, "Life is not fair. I struggle to understand how an innocent child dies while evil people still live."³⁷⁰ All participants expressed how hard it is to live, knowing a loved one is gone forever. "Life never made sense," said Patrick as he lamented how taking the responsibility of caring for his siblings had overwhelmed him. When a child dies leaving their parents, as was the case of Pamela and Paul, the primary worry was "who will bury the parents?"³⁷¹ Also, Amanda and Paul pointed out the death of their son instilled in them an unusual behavior. Seeing others walk through the valley of grief made Amanda and Paul feel compelled to reach out and help the bereaved cope with their loss. The pain of death and loneliness that stuck with them when their son was buried made them identify with those grieving.

Question Two:

In what ways has the Church effectively helped the bereaved families cope with grief?

³⁶⁸ Interview with Pamela

³⁶⁹ Interview with Sophia

³⁷⁰ Interview with Sarah

³⁷¹ Interview with Amanda and Paul

The second question sought to learn from the participants how the Church had assisted them in coping with grief. All participants, except one, appreciated the support and comfort they received from the Church. Most of the participants indicated that the Church reached out soon after receiving the news about the death. The Church was present to help organize and lead the funeral service. The majority of church members showed up to comfort the bereaved families at the funeral service. The participants were delighted and encouraged by the presence of the church community. One of the participants said, "The Church is the only sacred place I went for solace." The Church preaches and leads people toward God and extends love to those grieving. Also, in bereavement, the Church reaches out to those hurting with a message of encouragement, love, and hope.

The theological framework supports the need for people of faith to support their members during their moments of grief. Those little things that the Church does to help grieving individuals cope make a big difference. For instance, visiting the bereaved homes can help them find comfort when one allows the bereaved person to lean on their shoulder while encouraging them to tell their story. The death narrative described in the Gospel of John, chapter 11, serves as an excellent example of ministering to the bereaved church members. In this chapter, Jesus responded to the bereaved's immediate needs and assured them hope for the future resurrection.

Participants indicated that they felt more comfortable celebrating the life of their loved ones than having a funeral. However, this does not imply they did not grieve. Even Jesus grieved when His friend, Lazarus, died. According to the Christian belief, those who died in Christ live in the presence of the Lord, but the deceased leaves a considerable loss that survivors cannot comprehend but can only mourn. The Church does an incredible job of reaching out to those who

grieve. Besides assisting the bereaved with planning a celebration of life service, church members also provide food, send cards, and engage in thoughtful prayers.

Moreover, participants expressed how the Church facilitated and created spaces for comfort and consolation. Besides being a social network, the congregation provided a phone ministry. The pastor would call for questions or clarifications about the burial process. Participants indicated that planning the memorial service with the pastor was an essential part the Church played during bereavement. According to one of the participants, reaching out, food, planning, and organizing the burial or memorial service was ideal.³⁷² Another participant indicated that the Church plays a role in planning the All-Saints service for the bereaved families, such year.

Among the things participants appreciated about the Church's role during bereavement was its ability to offer hope, an essential aspect when dealing with the loss of a loved one.³⁷³ According to Boersma, hope is the key to dealing with grief.³⁷⁴ As the Church proclaimed hope in Christ's resurrection, it has brought relief to participants. How should Christians mourn a loved one has been a topic of debate for years.³⁷⁵ Christians should mourn like any other human being; however, Christians should grieve in hope. Paul advises Christians in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 not to grieve as those who do not have hope. According to Boersma, grief can affect the

³⁷² Interview with Sophia

³⁷³ James, R. K., and Gilliland, B. E. *Crisis Intervention Strategies*, 7th Edition (Belmont, CA: Brooks and Cole, 2013), 419.

³⁷⁴ Boersma, H. Numbed with Grief: Gregory of Jyssa on bereavement and hope. *Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 7:1 (2014), 46-59. Retrieved May 2, 2021, from <http://www.ebscohost.com>

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

reasoning faculties more than it affects the physical appearance. Despite the chaos, Christians are promised comfort and hope amidst their sorrow.

³⁷⁶The Apostle Paul classified mourning under moral scrutiny.³⁷⁷ Paul tried to explain the difference between grieving with hope and grieving like pagans in his letter to the Thessalonians. For centuries, people have struggled to balance human emotions of grief and joy found in Christ. The Priest, Gregory of Nyssa, also had struggled to live out the moral injunction that Christians should rejoice in the event of death because the deceased is in a better place and that they will meet again in heaven.³⁷⁸ All ten participants pointed out that their loved ones are in heaven with God.³⁷⁹ The researcher observed that the participants were open to the hope of Christ after venting their emotions. Moreover, at times, Christians can display their emotional burden when they are being comforted. Hence, it is always advisable to allow them to express their emotions. As they do so, congregants can support and encourage them with the hope found in the resurrection of Christ.

The Church also played the role of reminding participants of the power and presence of Almighty God. However, some participants felt that hope was snatched away when the Church stopped offering support after burying a loved one. One of the participants, Sophia, stated, "only a few church members showed up to offer support after the burial of my husband."³⁸⁰ Also, Pamela expressed that the pastor called to check on her two days after her mother's burial and

³⁷⁶Holmes. *What are you Crying About?* (Pittsburgh: Holmes House Press, 2014), 33.

³⁷⁷ Boersma, 47.

³⁷⁸ Boersma, 46.

³⁷⁹ Holmes, 25.

³⁸⁰ Interview with Sophia

never called again. Claudette had the same thought to share. She pointed out that, “When my husband died, church members offered to help and support me whenever I needed anything, but after the burial, I was completely alone. No one was there to provide social or spiritual support after my husband was laid to rest.”³⁸¹ Similarly, the rest of the participants seemed concerned that the Church showed little support after the burial of their loved ones. When participants' expectations of finding continuous support and consolation from the Church became disjointed, they had to seek comfort and meaning of the loss somewhere else.

The participants were impacted spiritually after the death of a loved one. Some felt angry with God. Some felt distant from God, and yet, others wondered if God had forsaken them. Eighty percent of the participants questioned their faith in God, especially when God could have done something to save the deceased persons' lives. Though participants expressed various kinds of emotions, they believed God was aware of their emotions. They claimed God knew their hearts and was also with them and loved them, even in times of sorrow. Each participant gave him/herself time to grieve their loss adequately. Besides, some participants' narratives showed that they had to step away from attending worship and church activities in the wake of a death. It led to questioning God, seeking answers to questions such as: why would God allow innocent people to die? Where is God's love in pain and sorrow? As a result, some participants expressed that they needed time to process their loss.

The most evident rationale behind spirituality being tested in death results from the low level of support from the Church after the burial of loved ones. Even though the participants in this study appreciated the Church's role in organizing the celebration of life service, meals, and cards, they tended to be concerned about the lack of support from the Church after the burial.

³⁸¹ Interview with Claudette

Considering that the death of a loved one leaves survivors in loneliness, this tendency is not surprising.

Question Three:

Beyond providing meals, sympathy cards, and flowers, how can the Church respond to grieving individuals' ongoing needs?

The Church is much aware of the practice of comforting grieving families. However, the kind of services offered is not formalized. Traditionally, church members, the pastor included, would call or visit the grieving persons and offer to pray for them or respond to any need the bereaved might have. This effort works until the burial when services fall off, and those who grieve are often left alone to continue to work on their grieving process without additional support.

Though participants were appreciative of the meals, flowers, cards, and other services they received from the congregation, it was evident that they needed a one-on-one encounter with the pastor and church members. Talking to people one-on-one can enhance recovery from loss. Grief comes with confusion, and so often, people do not know what they need at that moment. Material things are appreciated, but not they are not what the participants need the most. From the discussion, the researcher observed that participants needed someone to talk to them, check on them regularly, pray for them and with them, and be there for them. Apart from enhancing communication with the bereaved during the time death stuck, they needed someone to ask them how they cope with their grief regularly, and their concern would provide comfort and peace, which they needed to regain strength. Quoting Scripture alone did not help. They required the presence of a human being for the Scripture to make an impact. Sophia's narration showed that she was displeased by those who were trying to “play God” by seeking to explain

why her husband died in the first place. She explained that she needed empathy and words of encouragement that would point her to God. Instead of directing someone on how they should grieve, Sophia narrated that the Church should show love and support to those suffering by being present. Also, the Church should acknowledge the power of God to guide and direct while ministering to those who mourn.

Moreover, Paul Randolph argues that those who grieve do not need people to help them understand the process of grieving. Neither do they need an explanation of how Jesus Christ responded to those who mourn. Instead, Randolph says, "Grieving individuals need the person that Jesus is."³⁸² The Church has the responsibility to represent Jesus on earth. As Jesus manifests God's love, the Church needs to assist those grieving to put their faith in Christ. The cross and the resurrection of Christ are the sign of Christ's victory over death.

Apart from appreciating the Church's material things, the common theme was that the participants enjoyed face-to-face communication with the pastor and the congregation.

Participants' narratives indicated that at least one person continued to show support and communicated with them during and after the burial. One of the participants, Laureano said,

"There is a lady who attends Sunday school with me. She loves me like her daughter.

Whenever I missed Sunday school, she would call me to find if all was well. The day my friend died, this lady was always there to support me and help me understand that death happens, and it is a path every human being will go through. This lady encouraged me to mourn. She is the only person who continued to visit my house even after the burial, and every time she came to visit, she would offer me her shoulders to lean on as I grieved."

³⁸² Paul Randolph, "Grief: It's Not About a Process; It's About The Person," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 16.

Walking in the same direction, three participants, Claudette, Patrick, and Leonard, disagreed with those who say it is a sign of weakness and vulnerability for Christians to express their emotions publicly. Participants agreed that speaking publicly about feelings provided an opportunity to release their accumulated intense and painful emotions. Church members' support and caring presence helped them cope with grief, which gradually helped them begin to heal. In other words, the most important thing the Church can do for a grieving family is to be present simply. While many are concerned about what to say to a person who just buried his loved one, the most important thing to do is to be there and listen.

Claudette recounted that after the burial of her husband, she felt isolated and alone in her grief. However, when the pastor visited after her husband's funeral, it brought more comfort than the initial visit. She narrated, "I was in so much pain and isolation when my husband was buried. I tried to suppress my grief to comfort my children, who were also mourning their father. I was so comforted when my pastor visited the first week after the burial of my husband. We talked and laughed and prayed. I wanted my pastor to know how much hurt I was experiencing. I needed him to welcome and acknowledge my emotions, even crazy ones. Fortunately, my pastor was so understanding and patient with me. For the few minutes we spent together, I felt relieved, and my mind was at peace."³⁸³

Similarly, Patrick's story pointed out that his grief following his father's burial involved extreme behavior. He expressed feelings of anger, guilt, and vulnerability. He yelled to God and was obsessed with death. Patrick was thrilled that his Church lay leader called him on the phone and offered to pray with him. He remembered telling the church lay leader how angry he was about everything around him. Though the lay leader did not physically come, his words gave

³⁸³ Interview with Claudette

Patrick hope. The lay leader did not judge Patrick, nor did he take his whining reactions personally. As Patrick shared his emotions, the lay leader neither pressured him to move on with life. Patrick felt the lay leader's call contributed to his healing process as the words he offered reassured him of the presence of God. Encouraging words are not only powerful but also connect people to God. Words are what make humans unique from other living creatures.

Leonard indicated that when his wife passed away, he craved human love. The literature supports Leonard's assertion. For instance, Tautges explains that "God's people need an anchor to hold on to during the storms of life."³⁸⁴ Even more than food, cards, and flowers, grieving individuals need the Church to help them feel or remind them of the love of God and others. Love is a biological need. Every person wants to love and to be loved. In grief, lack of love is heightened because of being alone. Love enables the Church to reach out to a grieving person even after the burial of a loved one. The Apostle Paul, in the letter to the Corinthians, states, "Love is patient."³⁸⁵ When ministering to a grieving person, love enables the caregiver to be patient and listen to the bereaved. Showing love helps one calm down, but it also brings some comfort and relief to the recipient. In grief, love helps the Church to respond to the actual need of a grieving person.

All participants were familiar with how the grieving process can be lonely. Though they had friends and the Church to help them out, isolation was pervasive. They felt no one understood their feelings when they needed someone to be just there. Yes, they had friends who cared for their situation; however, friends assumed participants were recovering and moving on with life. Some participants were hesitant to call church members and express their needs.

³⁸⁴ Tautges, *Comfort The Grieving: Ministering God's Grace in Times of Loss*, 2014, 19.

³⁸⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1.

However, they appreciated those who reached out in love and offered their shoulders to lean on. Love is what participants craved more than anything else. Thompson wrote, "Grieving people need the reassurance of a love far beyond their capacity."³⁸⁶ It is why it is crucial to know how to minister to grieving persons so they can experience a healthy bereavement. Sullender notes,

An available, empathetic, non-judgmental, authentic, and supportive church is a laboratory of recovery. However, traumatized people need more than mere empathy, as wonderful as empathy is. Following the burial of a loved one, grieving people can be pretty unstable and desperate. They might need to lean on others, to borrow their strength, maybe even to be carried emotionally or even literally for a while until they can stand on their own two feet again.³⁸⁷

All the participants had an opportunity to share what they wished the Church would have done during their time of grief. Sarah, however, had a different story to share. When Sarah had a miscarriage, she wanted to have a memorial service to remember the lost pregnancy. She needed her loss acknowledged. On the contrary, she was denied this privilege. According to Sarah, the pastor told her that a fetus could not develop and was not a baby. Therefore, he would not organize the service. Sarah was wounded. She cried, and at times she sat in silence. She wished a church member would be present to listen to her compassionately. Simply being with her and listening to her could have been an enormous source of comfort and support. Even though Sarah moved on with life after miscarriage, grief remained a constant companion for her. When the Church is not reaching out to grieving individuals who face a similar situation such as Sarah's, they may miss the opportunity to minister and heal those experiencing grief.

³⁸⁶ Thompson, *The Gift of Encouragement: Restoring Heart to Those Who Have Lost It*, 2013, 9.

³⁸⁷ Sullender, *Resources, and Strategies of Ministry*, 2018, 41.

Practical Methodology for Helping Those Who Mourn Process Grief

Though the Church has fallen short of providing continuous care and support to grieving family members, the Church is significant in providing comfort to those hurting. Moreover, it is common for a grieving person to turn to the Church for physical, spiritual, and emotional support. In a grief situation, the Church is often unsure of how to respond to the bereaved's ongoing needs. From Phillip Kenyon's perspective, comforting and supporting grieving individuals can be challenging, frustrating, and rewarding.³⁸⁸ When a friend is mourning a loved one, it can be challenging to know appropriate words to say or actions to do. So often, the bereaved wrestles with intense emotions, which can make people uncomfortable about offering compassion and support. Also, offering support to grieving can be frustrating because people may be afraid of engaging in the bereaved's grief because they wish not to remember their grief. Hence, they let discomfort prevent them from offering help to a grieving person. Supporting a grieving friend can also be rewarding because it boosts one's happiness and sense of well-being.

It is important to understand that one does not need a degree in psychology or pastoral care and counseling to comfort those grieving. The foundational requirements to provide practical comfort and support include being patient, sensible, flexible, and having a follow-up plan in place.³⁸⁹ When a person loses a loved one, they often do not stop talking about the deceased. Those providing comforts need to be patient enough to be present and listen to the bereaved's story. Those in grief often like to find ways of making meaning to their situation. Being a good listener is critical to helping a grieving person cope with their situation.

³⁸⁸ Phillip Kenyon, "Why We Fail the Grieving" (April 2015): 53.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

How the Church can help Congregation Members Cope with Grief

The Gospel of Christ calls for all believers to bring God's Word to all nations. Lack of spiritual maturity and direction has instilled fear in many believers when ministering to those who grieve. When there is death within the church family, Christians should not recoil in fear; instead, the Church should firmly evangelize the hope found in Christ Jesus. The Apostle Paul encourages the Church in Ephesus to accept the Holy Spirit to be empowered to proclaim the Gospel's truth with all.

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.³⁹⁰

Sadly, church members would refer a grieving person to the pastor rather than proclaiming the hope of the Gospel. The body of Christ is not allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through them. It is one of the reasons church members lack spiritual maturity to minister to those who are grieving. Could this be due to a lack of church leaders preparing and encouraging members to minister to the grieving? In other words, could it be that pastors are not equipping church members enough to minister the Word of hope and comfort to those who grieve?

Further research may be needed to investigate how well pastors or church leaders equip church members to minister to the grieving effectively. Church members are ill-prepared to minister to families in grief. An excellent example of how believers should respond in crisis can be found in Acts 2:42-47. In these passages, the early Christians shared bread, earthly materials, prayed together, devoted themselves to fellowship. Devout fellowship is missing in the Church

³⁹⁰ Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV

today. Individualism, fear, and lack of spiritual maturity have hindered holy fellowship. When a death occurs, believers need to practice the passion and zeal found in Acts 2. Visiting and being with those who grieve may enhance holy fellowship.

When visiting a bereaved family, the comforter is not obliged to say anything. Presence is vital when comforting those who are hurting. In other words, the best way to provide comfort is by being with those who are hurting and letting the bereaved lead the conversation while the comforter listens. It does not mean the comforter should refrain from responding to the bereaved's conversation. Instead, it is encouraged to allow the grieving to express their emotions or tell their stories while the comforter listens and affirms but should not offer advice or solutions on how to grieve. Listening is an effective way to provide comfort because it is non-judgmental and applicable to all grieving family members regardless of the nature of death. Listening allows even those who are introverted to play the role of a comforter.

The most foundational facet of helping those who are grieving is to be around them. The Scripture encourages the Church to visit the orphans and widows.³⁹¹ The Lord Himself supports and cares about those who are hurting. So He argues that a true Church comforts those who grieve. In the OT, when Job was surrounded by affliction, his friends did a good thing to visit him even though their words lacked wisdom. Therefore, to practice a true Church, it is necessary to visit the afflicted continuously. The community of faith needs to care and respond to the needs of grieving families.

In addition to attending the funeral or celebration of life service and providing meals, it is vital to show empathy and listen to brighten up the bereaved's heartbreaking moments. As proclaimers of the Gospel of Christ, reaching out and listening to the bereaved as they tell their

³⁹¹ James 1:27

story is necessary. In the domain of comforting, the comforter should be wise enough to know what to say and what not to say to the bereaved. Listening to those who are experiencing grief is better than saying words filled with judgment and criticism.

One of the essential ministries the Church can develop to help those who grieve is to put in place a group of couples who will serve as comforters. Everybody can offer comfort in their capacity, but this group of comforters will support and care for the bereaved beyond the burial. One of the crucial tools comforters need to have is a calendar. When a death occurs, the comforters need to enter follow-up information into their calendar for an appropriate action date. Noted reminders will help to minister to the grieving effectively. Once follow-up dates have been marked on the calendar, the comforters may consider the following steps:

- Soon after the burial, make a condolence call to the bereaved person or family.
- Three days after the burial, send a comfort card signed by church members.
- After seven days, schedule a visit to see how the person or family is doing and check if they need spiritual or material support.
- After fourteen days, make a call to see if the bereaved needs anything. Be mindful that the bereaved might need something but may choose to remain silent. In this situation, the comforters need to use wisdom and discernment to see what the bereaved might need. For example, if the bereaved is a widow with minor children, the comforters may offer to look after the children to have time for herself to do other things. Another example, if the bereaved is a man who has lost a wife, comforters may offer to bring food or take him to a restaurant for a couple of days after the burial.

- A month later, comforters should reach out to the grieving persons with information about how to deal with grief along with a letter of encouragement.
- Every other month, make a call to see how the bereaved is doing. Offering prayer at the end of the call would serve as a source of comfort to the grieving person.
- On the death anniversary of the person's death, consider calling the bereaved or sending them a letter offering ongoing support.

How Pastors can Minister to the Grieving

The first and foremost thing a pastor should do is to exercise presence. A pastor needs to go and be with the people God placed under their care. When a death occurs within the Church, do not stay at a distance. Rev. Pamela Hernandez, a United Methodist Pastor, has commented, "God's people are a pastor's ministry."³⁹² The researcher recalls going to visit a church member who had lost her spouse. When the researcher arrived at the house, she took a nap while surrounded by her two daughters. After greeting, one of the daughters was unsure if her mom would talk to the pastor. Nonetheless, the daughter whispered to her mom, "Pastor Nadine is here." Immediately, the mother opened her eyes and said, "Pastor Nadine, thank you for coming." Because of the researcher's pastoral presence, she ministered to the entire family about the hope found in Christ Jesus. The following Sunday, after that pastoral visit, she came to Church for the first time after the death of her husband.

Bereaved family members find much comfort when they see their pastor. If a pastor cannot go and be with them, thanks to the gift of technology, he/she can use modern communication to reach out and pray with the bereaved over the phone or via zoom, or through any other means of communication. Nevertheless, pastors should know that voicemail can never

³⁹² Rev. Pamela Hernandez, a United Methodist Pastor serving in the Nashville Annual Conference, shared this a clergy seminar in Nashville, TN, on June 20, 2018.

replace pastoral visits. A thoughtful text can never act as a replacement for hugging a bereaved person or looking into the bereaved's eyes and listening to their stories or struggles. It is highly encouraging for a pastor to be physically present for the people God entrusted to them. When making a pastoral visit, always remember not to overstay but be sensitive to the person's needs. A few minutes is enough for the bereaved to find comfort because of pastoral visits. In other words, it is better to judge the length of stay, depending on the relationship one has with the bereaved family. If the pastor knows them well, then his/her pastoral visit time may be longer than if there is no previous personal relationship.

It is essential to understand that the bereaved family experiences pain and sorrow following the death of a loved one. Therefore, during a pastoral visit, a pastor should avoid saying how sorry they are for the person experiencing grief. Instead, walk with them in their grief, acknowledging and affirming their struggle. The pastor should also respond to the bereaved's immediate needs as soon as possible. If the need is beyond the pastor's ability, he/she may consider referrals.

A pastor should remain positive from the moment a death occurs to the days following the burial. Showing an attitude of faith may affect those in a state of fear. The bereaved may likely question why the unfortunate situation happened to them. Also, they may even wonder what they have done to deserve such punishment or why God has allowed their loved one to die. In a situation like this, pastors are encouraged to seek God's wisdom before responding. Sometimes it is wise to answer the bereaved's questions with a question. For instance, if the bereaved asked, 'Why has death entered their door?' If the pastor has no answer to their question, responding with a question might help. Questions such as, "Where do you see God in all this? In the light of your relationship and faith in God, why do you think God has abandoned you?" Give

them time to express themselves. As the bereaved probes for answers, it allows the pastor to get a picture of what they know regarding the nature and character of God. Also, it will allow the pastor to give answers that are proportionate to the bereaved's faith and belief.

The pastoral ministry includes moments of joy and celebration but also pain and suffering. When tragic moments strike church members, a pastor must also respond with mercy, love, compassion, and grace. No one within the church family is fully prepared for death to strike their loved ones, but God made the Holy Spirit available to guide and lead those who seek His help. Regardless of the nature of death, a pastor must always trust in the power of God to restore the bereaved's joy and hope. Nothing, not even death, can ever separate the love of God from God's people. Though Christians hope to live an eternal life, there are times when the bereaved will need an encouraging word, a tender heart, a shoulder to lean on, and a listening ear. It is common for those who are grieving to be in a state of confusion. Under such cases, a pastor needs to be careful what to say and do. Leon van Rooyen warns, "A pastor should not communicate what the people want to hear but rather communicate the Word of God."³⁹³ When people are mourning, be merciful and compassionate. Do not compromise; instead, speak the truth in love.

Nevertheless, do not feel pressured to utter some profound statement that may add more sorrow than hope. Remember, one of the right things Job's comforters did was to say nothing for one week.³⁹⁴ Saying nothing to those who mourn is not a sign of weakness. The most important is to be with those who grieve. Presence means the world to those who mourn. Taugtes suggests that when ministering love and care to a grieving person or family, "Be open to listening to them,

³⁹³ Leon van Rooyen. *Christian Ministry: Every member a minister* (Tampa, FL: Global Ministries and Relief Inc: 2005), 99.

³⁹⁴ Job 2:13

and ready to serve them."³⁹⁵ If practical assistance has been offered, the pastor should follow up with the bereaved a few days later. Call them and invite them for a cup of tea or coffee at a nearby restaurant. Have enough money to pay for their coffee or whatever they choose to order. While in the restaurant, eating or drinking, be read to listen more than to speak.³⁹⁶

A pastor should always be prepared to deal with every situation within the Church. In other words, a faithful pastor must be prepared for uncertain situations. A family or a person that lost a loved one needs reassurance. A mother who loses a child needs to hear hopeful reassurance from a pastor, who is highly seen as an individual led by the Holy Spirit to guide people through their trial moments. As a pastor goes to be with those who mourn, he/she should be prepared to share some encouraging or comforting scriptural passages by heart. God's Word will never fall flat. There is no need for pastors to show themselves how knowledgeable they are when quoting scriptures. Instead, a pastor should refer to Scripture to proclaim the goodness and faithfulness of God. The following scripture verses might be helpful when comforting those who mourn:

- Matthew 11:25-30 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
- John 14:1-4 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. 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. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

³⁹⁵ Taugets, *Comfort The Grieving: Ministering God's Grace in Times of Loss*, 2014.

³⁹⁶ James 1:19

- Philippians 4:6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”
- 1 Peter 5:7 “Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”

These are just a few comforting bible verses that may bring assurance and hope to the hearts of those who grieve. It is strongly encouraged to know some biblical verses by heart. If the pastor forgets his/her Bible during his pastoral visit, the biblical verses in his heart may be helpful to say. If not a single verse comes to mind, it might be challenging to offer a verse of encouragement from God's Word. Hence, it is essential to store the Gospel truth in heart and minister from Scripture.

Finally, a pastor needs to be a person of prayer. In his book, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote that "God is a sacred anchor. As such, it is vital to go before Him in prayer so the heart may be fired with a zealous and burning desire to love, seek, and serve Him."³⁹⁷ Pastors can help those who mourn by showing them the need to flee to God, a sacred anchor. A pastor should not leave a person who mourns without asking God to comfort them (II Corinthians 1:3). It is not necessary to say a complex or lengthy prayer. Remember, prayer is not a sermon. Just say a biblically rich prayer. Those who grieve need encouragement, hope, and comfort. So, a specific prayer of hope, peace, and God's care may help provide comfort in times of grief. If a pastor feels intimidated to pray during his pastoral visits, he should be encouraged by God's Word as written in Philippians 4:6-7. Therefore, a pastor should pray for every situation. Always encourage those who grieve to invest in prayer and remind them of the

³⁹⁷ Bruce Gordon. *John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2016), 388.

suffering Jesus had to endure on the cross to provide hope of everlasting life to all who believe in Him.

Helping those who grief to flee to God in their moments of sorrow is a great gift a pastor can offer. Let the grieving persons know that they lift their fears, struggles, uncertainties, and emotions to God with the confidence given by the Holy Spirit to all who believe and trust in Him. So, when death occurs, pastors should remember that their presence matters. Go and be with the grieving family for ten to twenty minutes. Secondly, have comforting verses in mind to share and offer a heartfelt, biblically-based prayer. Through the pastor's ministry to those who grieve deeply, God will be known and glorified.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This research shows the struggles individuals encounter as they walk the path to overcoming grief. It also shows the Church's impact in helping those who have lost loved ones to find solace. Within the research, it has been revealed that services provided by the Church, such as conducting celebration of life services, Scripture, music, prayer, the pastor and church member's presence, meals, cards, and flowers, often help the bereaved find comfort and belonging. There is a need for future research to address the effect of the Church on children who deal with grief to learn how Christian children deal with grief. Also, it would be beneficial to conduct research that addresses how the Church responds to grieving females versus males to develop a better understanding of how gender differences affect the way the Church should respond to those who grieve. Conducting a qualitative study would be helpful to study how children, youth, women, and men are affected by grief as they tell their stories and experience.

It would also be beneficial to learn how adults Christians deal with grief compared to how Christian children and youth deal with emotions related to losing a loved one. Is there any

difference? Information on how a pastor's family copes with grief would also be informative. Such research would validate this study's results and elaborate on other ways that church members deal with grief besides relying on the Church.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the real pain of losing a loved one begins after the deceased person has been buried. Participants expressed the need to stay connected to the pastor and Church evidenced that meals and sympathy cards are not what the bereaved need the most. Instead, they need the Church to be present and willing to listen to their stories. In other words, people who grieve need the pastor and a few church members to be around them. They need people who can comfort and pray with them and allow them to share their feelings.

Participants' appreciation for pastoral leadership and the Church at the burial ceremony when the death of a loved one occurred was remarkable. However, the grieving families received few pastoral visitations or phone calls from church members after the burial. At the beginning of this research, the researcher stated that the Church shows little support to those who grieve after the deceased person's burial. This presupposition was affirmed in this study. About ninety percent of the participants appreciated the role of the Church at the time death occurred. However, all agreed that there was little support that went beyond the burial service. In other words, no ministry helped participants recover from their loss beyond the burial. Thus, it implies that it would be beneficial if the bereavement or memorial ministry in the local Church would be extended to provide comfort and support beyond the burial service. Every member who loses a loved one needs to receive this kind of support.

The three overarching themes that emerged from this study indicate that grief caused by death is not something one recovers from so quickly. Instead, it is something participants learned

to live with it. Recovering from grief is a process that leads the bereaved to gain a new identity of becoming an orphan, widow, widower, or childless adult—embracing the new identity after the loss of a loved one left many vulnerable. Also, loneliness often presents itself once the burial is concluded. Particularly challenging times for the bereaved are birthdays, Sundays, holidays, bedtime, and family mealtimes. There is a need for a systematic structure within the Church to provide a path to healthy grief and extended recovery for church members.

The impact of grief upon those who lost loved ones is unique for every person. The literature proves this to be true. No matter how a person reacts to the death of a loved one, their lives remain impacted. In other words, people learn to live with grief. So often, those grieving find comfort and hope when the Church reaches out to offer support. The Bible calls for the body of Christ, the Church, to minister to the bereaved. Effective and holistic ministry to church members in times of grief requires dedication and commitment. Though it is a demanding ministry, it is worthwhile and indispensable. Death is a common expectation for each social being, and the local Church needs to walk with those who grieve, not only when death occurs but also during the days following the deceased's burial or cremation.

This study suggests that local congregations create a ministry composed of people trained to identify parishioners who struggle with grief. The identification will help the grieving family or person to begin to work toward recovery. Depending on how the loss has impacted them, the path to recovery can lead to counseling, referral, or physical help. All in all, the bereaved would feel more secure if surrounded by the church members concerned with their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

When looking for people to join the training for the bereavement team, it would be beneficial to look for people who are:

- Rooted in Scripture;
- Able to communicate effectively with people;
- Kind, empathetic, and courteous;
- Ready and willing to listen;
- Strive to serve the Lord daily by being of service to others;
- Ready to support and strengthen one another;
- Loving and willing to share and sacrifice for others.

The purpose of the bereavement team is to show compassion and care for those within the Church family who grieve. After their loved ones have been buried or cremated, the bereavement team will continue reaching out to the families of the deceased to provide support whenever needed. The foundation for the bereavement team needs to be grounded on Christ's spirit of compassion and sacrifice modeled by the commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Scripture supports the idea of showing care and support to those who grieve. Additionally, the bereavement team should promote Christian sympathy to live out the Church's mission, "To make disciples of Christ." The bereavement team shall exist as a part of the Church's overall ministerial response to those who grieve the death of their loved ones. This research project suggests that the pastor serves as the facilitator and advisor to the team. He/she will notify the team members of any death within the Church.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Sample Letter

February 15, 2021

Ngoy Nadine Ilunga

Dear:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to study practical methodologies pastors and lay members can use to bring continual joy and hope to individuals who continue to grieve following the death of loved ones, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, a member of St. Luke United Methodist Church or First United Methodist, Haskell, have lost a loved one in the past five years and are willing to participate; you will be asked to participate in an interview (in-person or virtual through Zoom), complete a survey and complete a questionnaire. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

To participate in the study, please complete the attached screening survey and return it to the researcher by email or in-person. If you meet the research criteria, the researcher will email you a consent form for you to sign and return it by email or in-person. Upon receipt of your signed consent form, the researcher will contact you to schedule an interview. After the interview, you will be asked to complete a survey and a questionnaire.

Sincerely,
Ngoy Nadine Ilunga, DMIN Researcher

Phone:

Email:

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter (Follow up)

February 15, 2021

Ngoy Nadine Ilunga

Dear:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. Last week, an email was sent to you, inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up letter is being sent to remind you to complete the screening survey that was attached to the letter if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is March 10, 2021. Return a completed screening survey to the researcher by email or in-person.

If you meet the research criteria, the researcher will then email you a consent form. You will need to sign this form and return it to the researcher by email or in-person. Then you will be asked to participate in an interview (in-person or virtual through Zoom) and complete a survey and a questionnaire. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name will be requested as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

Sincerely,

Ngoy Nadine Ilunga
Researcher

Appendix C

Verbal Recruitment Script / Church Announcement

My name is Ngoy Nadine Ilunga, a graduate student from the School of Divinity at Liberty University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research to study practical methodologies pastors and lay members can use to bring continual joy and hope to individuals who grieve following the death of a loved one. You may participate if you are 18 years of age and older, a member of St. Luke United Methodist or First United Methodist Church, Haskell, and have lost a loved one within the past five years.

To participant, you will be asked to complete a screening survey to determine your eligibility. If you meet the research criteria, you will be asked to sign a consent form and return it to the researcher by email or in-person. The researcher will then contact you to schedule an interview that will be done in-person or virtual through Zoom. After the interview you will be asked to complete a survey and a questionnaire. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

Do you have any questions for me?

If you have questions later, please contact me ator you may contact my mentor, Dr. Davis, at

Thanks,

Appendix D

Consent

Title of the Project: To Create a Ministry that will Equip Local Churches to Help Grieving Families Cope with Grief

Principal Investigator: Ngoy Nadine Ilunga, clergy in full connection with the United Methodist New Mexico Annual Conference, Graduate Student, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a member of St. Luke United Methodist Church or First United Methodist, Haskell, and have lost a loved one due to death within the past five years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to create practical methodologies a congregation can use to bring joy and hope to individuals who grieve following the death of their loved ones. The research questions are:

1. How do Christians understand, interpret, and apply the concepts of grief in their lives?
2. In what ways has the church effectively helped the bereaved families cope with grief?
3. Beyond providing meals, sympathy cards, and flowers, how and what can the church do to respond to the ongoing needs of grieving individuals.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an interview with the researcher which will take approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be done either in-person or virtually depending on your availability. You will work with the researcher to determine when and where the interview will take place.

2. Complete a survey which will take approximately 12 minutes to complete. You can do this either at home and return the forms within a week or you can complete them immediately after the interview.
3. Complete a questionnaire which will take approximately 13 minutes. You can do this either at home and return the forms within a week or you can complete them immediately after the interview.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive any direct benefit from participating in this study. The benefit to society includes equipping the church with methodologies to help grieving individuals find peace and hope during moments of grief.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and faculty mentor will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked drawer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all hard copy records will be shredded, and all electronic records will be deleted.
-

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a senior pastor at First United Methodist Church, Haskell and has served St. Luke United Methodist Church. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision about whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address and phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Ngoy Nadine Ilunga. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at and/or You may also contact the researcher’s faculty mentor, Dr. Jack David, at

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix E

Screening Survey

Name: _____ Email: _____

Are you a member of First United Methodist Church, Haskell?

- Yes
- No

How old are you?

- 17 or younger
- 18 - 64
- 65 +

When was the last time you had grieved the loss of your loved one?

- 1 to 2 years ago
- 3 to 5 years ago
- 6 + years ago

After completing this screening survey, please scan and email the form to nnilunga1@liberty.edu or give it to the researcher in-person.

Appendix F

Interview Questions

1. Tell me the name of your loved one and a brief statement about how he or she died, if you feel comfortable doing so.
2. Tell me your story of when and how your grieving began
3. Thinking when your grief started, what was it like for you? b) For people close to you?
4. What feelings did you express after the death of your loved one? Were there feelings of shame, shock, anger, denial, or other feelings? If yes, explain.
5. Were there things friends said to you about the death of your loved one that annoyed you? If so, explain.
6. What do you think friends need/needed to know during your moments of grieving?
7. In your opinion, what is the hardest part of dealing or living with grief?
8. How has the death of your loved one affected your spiritual life? What or who comforts/comforted you as you worked on your grieving process?
9. What is one thing the church has done for you in your moments of grief that lifted your spirit?
10. What was missing that you needed? What do you wish the church could have done to help you?
11. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything that you did not get a chance to say?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix G

Questionnaire Questions

Would you please share with me the circumstances of your loss?

Before your loss, did you attend Sunday worship and participate in church activities and events?

Did your level of participation in church worship and activities change following your loss?

Has the church played a role in processing your grief?

If the church has played a role in how you have processed your grief, would you please explain those experiences?

Were there any things, rituals or actions that provided solace?

As one who had experienced grief, how can you help a friend who is stricken by grief today?

What advice or recommendation would you offer to pastors or church members who desire to support those in their congregations who grieve the loss of a loved one?

Thank you! I appreciate your time and effort you put toward helping this project.

Appendix H

Survey Questions

Thank you for participating in this survey. Please answer each question the best you can, and please write in your answers in the spaces provided. Thank you!

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other (please specify) _____

What is your age range?

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-50
- 51-64
- 65+

What best describes your relationship status?

- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Single, never married
- Other (please specify) _____

Have you, or are you experiencing grief due to the death of a loved one?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what was your relationship with the person you lost? (check all that apply)

- Sister/brother/cousin
- Child
- Parent
- Husband, Ex-Husband, Wife, Ex-wife

- Grandparent
- Friend
- Church member
- Other (please specify) _____

How long would you say you have grieved the loss of your loved one?

- Less than one year
- 1-3 years
- 4-5 years

Do you feel like you were able to cope with grief healthily?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify) _____

If yes, what helped you healthily cope with grief? (Please check all that apply.)

- Self-Strength 9
- Family Support 7
- Friend Support 5
- Professional Support 4
- Church Support 5
- Other (please specify) 3 _____

If you did not cope with grief in a healthy way, what has prevented you from doing so? (Please check all that apply.)

- I did not know how I could
- I did not know I was
- No one helped me
- I did not have the resources to
- Other (please specify) _____

If you have not moved through your grief, are you aware of any consequences you have experienced, such as (Select all that apply)

- Loneliness
- Depression
- Difficulties Eating/Sleeping
- Developed an addiction

Trust issues in relationships

Other (please specify) _____

Do you feel like your church family understands that you are/were experiencing grief?

Yes

No

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 8, 2021

Ngoy Ilunga
Jack Davis

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-297 To Create a Ministry that will Equip Local Churches to Help Grieving Families Cope with Grief

Dear Ngoy Ilunga, Jack Davis:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(ii). 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).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office