

How Does a Church Become a Supportive Community

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To help others through the re-opening of in-person congregational life, it is important to have a basic understanding of what is potentially going to happen when we start gathering face-to-face. We offer the following thoughts about how to minister with those who are grieving.

Everyone has had multiple-losses and not all are due to the pandemic. This past year we have encountered political unrest and a diminished sense of security. Many are fearful and anxious about what might happen. It is natural to grieve our losses. As we cautiously begin in-person worship following a year of separation, certain realities need to be acknowledged. Stephen Arterburn correctly says “the great epidemic of the American church is unresolved grief.” This was true before the pandemic descended upon us and it is a challenge that faces the American church as we move forward. We can’t just ignore our reality by sweeping 2020 under the rug.

As we come back together, some in our congregations will...

- want to go forward without talking about anything that has happened; “I just want this to be over.”
- want/need to celebrate their survival and resiliency.
- want/need to deal with loss.
- dismiss the entire episode as a political hoax.
- be new people and want to know that others care about their presence.
- be self-medicating.
- be talking about how the pandemic was “God’s will” or punishment because of our sin, or wondering where was God.
- want/need to tell their story.

Grief is a single word for the many different thoughts and feelings that go on inside a person when a loved one dies or there is the loss of a significant attachment (i.e. a relationship, job promotion, etc.) Grieving is a natural response to a human loss. Grief occurs when a person we loved, and still love, is no longer physically with us. Grief is normal, natural, and necessary.

Mourning is the expressing of grief. When you cry you are mourning; it is when you have the courage to return to worship. Mourning gives our grief movement. Mourning propels us to reconcile our grief and find our way to a new normal. Mourning is what helps us heal.

It is natural to grieve and imperative to mourn.

There will be in our congregations a large amount of complicated grief and grief overload.

All grief is complicated. What makes the current state so challenging is that almost everyone will have multiple losses to work through. Each person will have multiple losses with different contours and intensity. While complicated grief is not an illness, it is also true that currently the needed supportive communities are not available.

There are other factors that make returning to in-person congregational life complicated.

For every person who returns to worship with shouts of praise to God for a loved one's recovery; another will carry with them anger, hurt and a "I can't stay here" attitude because their loved one died. Many will have grief that is not recognized by others as being a significant loss.

I don't deny that many people will have genuine testimonies about God's miraculous healing, and yet, there will also be individuals who have real miracles in their lives without the flash or grandeur.

Rabbi Earl Grollman has said that the worst grief is the one that you are going through right now. Some however, will want to compare theirs with yours in a way that does not promote healing.

Gerald Sittser in his book *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* notes: "Comparisons exacerbates the loss by driving us to two unhealthy extremes. On the one hand, those coming out on the losing end of the comparison are deprived of the validation they need to identify and experience the loss for the bad thing it is. They sometimes feel like the little boy who just scratched his finger but cried too hard to receive much sympathy. Their loss is dismissed as unworthy of attention and recognition. On the other hand, those coming out on the winning end convince themselves that no one has suffered as much as they have, that no one will ever understand them, and that no one can offer lasting help. They are the ultimate victims. So, they indulge themselves with their pain and gain a strange kind of pleasure in their misery.

Whose loss is worse? The question begs the point. Each experience of loss is unique, each painful in its own way, each as bad as everyone else's but also different. No one will ever know the pain I have experienced because it is my own, just as I will never know the pain you may have experienced. What good is quantifying loss? What good is comparing? The right question to ask is not "Whose is worse?" It is to ask, "What meaning can be gained from suffering, and how can we grow through suffering." pgs. 29-30

Sittser, G. L. (1995) *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House.

Even for persons who feel as if they are handling themselves well, returning to their congregations will be difficult. All of us will enter the sanctuary or classroom and immediately

notice the absence of dear friends. Spouses will return to worship and be sitting by themselves, deep in their thoughts. Grief will be magnified as we struggle with the absences. It means that we must learn to be patient, compassionate, and understanding.

Then there are losses that are considered so insignificant that we sometimes fail to give them attention. So many of the normal activities of life have been abruptly halted or severely curtailed. Rites of passage that in any other year would have been celebrated. The routine diversions of life have eluded us these past several months. For example:

- graduations
- weddings
- proms
- school activities
- funerals
- date nights
- dating
- vacations
- family reunions
- not being able to visit those in nursing homes
- not being allowed to be with those who are hospitalized
- celebrations of accomplishments

It is natural to grieve and it is also natural to heal. God has created us as resilient people. When we give all our losses the attention they deserve, when we do not dismiss them or ignore them out of hand, we validate their worth and move toward the pain that will bring healing.

Allowing others to tell their story is vital for everyone. Telling our story maybe the most important way to heal after loss. Listening to the stories of others is how we, as a supportive/loving community, participate, even promote the movement toward wholeness.

So, how might this work?

- We must listen and be present.
- We must resist the impulse to explain or deny.
- We must understand that we can't fix what hurts.
- Realize that people need more than a "How are you?" or a quick hug.

As a supportive congregation/community we need to learn and practice the art of listening with empathy and compassion to the stories that others are willing to share.

Every wilderness journey has a messy middle. Every person who has made this journey of grief needs a safe place to share their story with a group of compassionate listeners who will tolerate

and even encourage questions. A place where their doubts can be explored without judgment or shame; a place where persons will share compassionate curiosity and help in the search for meaning. The whole church needs to be a supportive community

Possible Scripture for use as we return to in-person congregational life

Genesis 16:6-15	“You are the God who sees me”
Deuteronomy 31:8	God will never leave nor forsake you
Deuteronomy 33:27a	“Underneath are the everlasting arms.” NIV
Job 42:5	Understanding God yourself
Psalms 27:1, 4-9, 13-14	A plea for deliverance
Proverbs 3:5-6	Wisdom is found in our relationship with God
Isaiah 43:1-3a	God is always with us
Mark 8:31-38	God refuses to turn away from our suffering
Luke 5:17-26	The role of a supportive community
Luke 15:4	Leaving the ninety-nine to find the one lost sheep
John 4:5-42	When we refuse to validate the other
John 5:6-9	Jesus sees more than an illness
John 16:32-33	Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me
Revelation 21:4	God will wipe away our tears. Our grief will be acknowledged by God.