

Ministry Profile: The Grief & Bereavement Support Group

Support groups are becoming popular in many churches nationwide. The Cathedral of Saint Paul in Hempstead, New York formed a support group for people suffering grief and bereavement, with the intention of providing help to those recovering from the loss of a loved one.

Grief, if not dealt with properly, can be quite debilitating. One may experience physical as well as emotional duress from unresolved grief. The individual may experience difficulty sleeping, eating, and even thinking clearly. Often the bereaved cannot communicate their need for help.

HISTORY / BACKGROUND

The Cathedral of Saint Paul created the Grief & Bereavement Support Group in March of 1994, with the blessing and spiritual guidance of Father Nicholas Magoulas. The designers of the group include Mrs. Kay Pamas, a caring parishioner who has experienced significant loss in her own immediate family and Mr. William Kallinikos, an active member and former parish council president. Since inception, the group has helped over 140 bereaved individuals to start and stay on the road to recovery and acceptance.

RESOURCES

The group is currently using the book, *Understanding Grief*, by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D as their primary source for structure and content.

Other useful books include:

- O Death, Where is Thy Sting*, by Alexander Schmemmann
- Surviving the Loss of a Loved One*, by Anthony M. Coniaris
- Our Greatest Gift*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen
- On Death and Dying*, by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross
- Daily Vitamins for Hurting Hearts*, by Anthony M. Coniaris

SESSION FORMAT

Meetings are held every 2nd and 4th Wednesday of the month, twelve months a year. The group has found that grief does not take a vacation. The setting is quite informal and relaxed, allowing the participants to speak freely and openly.

Each meeting is based upon a specific subject. Readings and handouts are prepared and read at each meeting, allowing the moderator to begin the discussion between participants.

Participants address one another on a first name basis. All discussions are held in strictest confidence. Confidentiality is an absolute necessity for the successful healing of group members.

BASIC RULES & PROCEDURE

- ◇ Each person's grief is unique. Respect and accept both what you have in common with others and that which is unique to you.
- ◇ Don't set a specific timetable for how long it should take you or others to heal.
- ◇ Feel free to talk about your grief. Respect others who choose not to speak freely.
- ◇ Make every effort not to interrupt when someone else is speaking.
- ◇ Respect others' right to confidentiality. Do not use names of fellow group members in conversations outside the group.
- ◇ Allow each person equal time to express themselves.
- ◇ Attend each group meeting and be on time.
- ◇ Avoid giving advice unless specifically requested by a group member. *This group is for support, not therapy.*
- ◇ Recognize that thoughts and feelings are neither right nor wrong.
- ◇ Create an atmosphere of ready, welcome sharing.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

A letter of invitation from the priest is sent to grieving individuals shortly after the funeral, and after the 40-day and six month memorial. A letter is also sent on a regular basis to neighboring parishes informing them and reminding them of the existence of the program. *These letters will be posted to the Outreach & Evangelism web site: www.outreach.goarch.org.*

THE MEMORIAL CHRISTMAS TREE

As the Christmas holiday approaches, a special Christmas tree is placed in the church. All who have attended the Grief & Bereavement Support Group over the years are invited to a special memorial service celebrated by the priest at which all the names of the departed are read. At the conclusion of the memorial service, each person comes forward and places an ornament on the tree. This tradition has grown over the years with attendance exceeding 175 people.

For additional information on the Grief & Bereavement Support Group at the Cathedral of St. Paul in Hempstead, New York, call 516/483-5700.

This Ministry Profile, letters to the grieving, and additional materials will be posted to the Outreach & Evangelism web site at www.outreach.goarch.org.

An interactive Grief Support Group Message Board for group leaders to share ideas & ask questions will soon be available through the Department of Outreach & Evangelism (email: outreach@goarch.org).