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A Grief Ministry  
Creating A Safe Space To Do The Work of Grieving

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## A Grief Ministry

### Creating A Safe Space To Do The Work Of Grieving

By: Nadine Hendricks McElroy

Until recently, most of the studies concerning grief, mourning, and bereavement were done by a psychiatrist and dealt with Educated White Americans and Europeans, predominantly White Christian widows. Little work has been done on African American grief compared to other ethnic groups as it relates to their grief journey.

The purpose of this study is to create a safe space to examine African American's reaction to grief in a congregation of believers with a particular interest in parishioners who have lost their spouse. Ministries are the church's life, and through them, we minister to one another, giving life and new meaning to those who have suffered a loss. Death had left them with open wounds that needed time to heal. To heal without criticism, without judgment, or labels applied to them by those who knew them and those who did not. A place where they were free to walk into their truths, to cry, to lament, to grieve, to mourn, and to share with others who had suffered the same loss they are experiencing and their story of grieving. To do what was right for them, not what others thought and expected of them. The necessity of creating this safe space provided them the means and the opportunity to grieve in their way and in their own time. This small group ministry resulted in providing this safe space. It allowed them to share not only their feelings of grief and vulnerability but also allowed them to connect as a community through the sharing of their stories and standing on the word of God through scripture and experience. By telling and sharing their grief journey, they will be able to grieve, lament, mourn, and heal with one another while praising God, knowing that this too shall pass.

A Grief Ministry  
Creating A Safe Space To Do The Work Of Grieving

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## **Introduction**

In late 2018, all of 2019, and early 2020 I experienced what I have since named a season of losses. It began with a family member's death, then more family members, several church members, other family members, several classmates, more family, church members, co-workers, and friends. It seemed as if I was either attending, officiating, or doing the Eulogist at a funeral or memorial service every week. I was making hospital visits, walking with members as they made decisions to stop life support, make funeral arrangements, and other times just being a presence for them as they walked through what I called their valley of grief.

One Sunday after church, I went to eat with friends; when I returned home, I had a message from my pastor to call him. My pastor was inquiring about our organist's wife; his memorial service had been the day before. Another member brought it to his attention that she had brought her husband's ashes to church with her. He expressed concern and asked me to check on her. I called her but got no answer. Over the next few days, I left several messages for her but got no response. After several calls during the next week and a visit to the home, I still received no reply, but she came to church the following Sunday, and accurate to the report, she had her husband's ashes under her jacket. After greeting her with the usual hug and how are you, I invited her to lunch, she accepted, opening the door for us to have a needed conversation concerning her and her well-being. Early into the conversation, I discovered she was not sleeping, had not returned to her home since her husband died, and was carrying his ashes with her everywhere she went. We talked more; she cried and revealed she felt responsible for her

husband's death because she was driving the car when the accident occurred that took his life. This encounter with a wife filled with pain, guilt, and overcome with grief was the beginning of my grief ministry, even though I did not know it at that time. I have no idea why God had chosen me to walk with others during their valley of grief, but I felt him leading me in that direction.

This ministry's initial work began with a conversation with my pastor surrounding the incident with the wife carrying her husband's ashes. After explaining what I had in mind to him, he agreed and thought the idea was a good one and offered assistance with whatever I needed. His only advice to me at that time consisted of three words, "take good notes." At this point, I decided, pending approval from the department, that my final project would be to help parishioners through their grieving process. My idea for my final project was approved; now, the work began.

After meetings with her several times and assisting other members of my congregation as they grieved their loss, it became apparent and vital to me to support those in my faith community who were grieving the loss of a loved one, mostly a spouse, and felt alone without any support. My church at that time had what we called a "Because We Care Ministry." The ministry mailed cards and tapes of the service to our sick and shut-in members, those who had suffered a loss, and oversaw food distribution to people in need. They prayed with them, saw that they had what they needed and food to eat. This ministry also prepared and served food to the church members and their families after the funeral service. The ministry was vital and provided an excellent service to the church and our community, but it did not offer grief support.

I had to come to the realization that our expressions of grief should be as profound and sacred as our expressions of love, peace, and joy. But I discovered that there was a lack of resources or theological reflections upon the grief experiences of African Americans, especially this particular group. To address this issue, I developed a new ministry in our congregational setting called “Heart to Heart,” which attended to the particular experiences of grieving African Americans Spouses.

**Thesis statement:**

How can a small group ministry create a safe space for people to do the work of grieving in a way that allows them to reconcile their loss, to lament and cry unto the Lord, and to find continued hope and meaning in life through telling, writing, and sharing their personal grief story with others?

Because churches usually do not have a plan to support those in their congregation who have suffered a loss, the bereaved can quickly drop off the church's radar due to feelings of awkwardness, discomfort with their mortality, and unrealistic expectations. Churches so often do not know how to deal with grieving people. Not knowing what to say or do, we often don't say or do anything. We allow the grieving to suffer the loss alone. Death is something that, as a people, we do not talk about as we should. Even though we may believe if we don't talk about it, it will magically take care of itself, it doesn't and often leads to severe emotional problems that never heal. Some wounds heal quickly with a band-aid, some with stitches; others need more care and more time to heal. “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” Psalm 23:4. Death is something as a group of people we must learn to talk about, seek help when necessary, and allow healing to begin. Ignoring the problem does not make it magically disappear.

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois proudly proclaims that African people brought “three gifts” to America, the “gift of story and song,” the “gift of sweat and brawn,” and the “gift of the spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Through the gifts of story and song, sweat and brawn, as well as that of the spirit, we will show the grief African Americans have suffered over the years. It is through the “gift of the spirit” that African American’s lament and grieve the death of their loved ones as well as all of the other things we lost on our forced journey to America. Through the "gift of story and song," part of our story has been told, but there is so much more we have to tell. In African culture, we had what was called a griot. A griot was the oldest member of the family who kept all of the stories. As the children became of age, he shared those stories with them to learn about themselves and their families and as a sort of road map to how to live a better life. Then we knew our voice, banter, humor, and how we related to each other, separate from the pain and the pathos we endured. It could play an essential role in our lives today because it’s a part of our African culture that’s missing in our lives, especially now, in that we don’t get to know each other, we don’t get to sit down with each other and learn from our past.

“Let me not die while I am still alive.”<sup>2</sup> Such a profound revelation could only be spoken by someone lost in deep despair. Someone who has experienced the unexpected knock of death at their door. Death for those of us who are of the faith community is the separation of the soul (the spiritual part of the body) from the body (the material part of the body), the latter ceasing to function and turning to dust. Death, like a thief that comes in the night, if we had known it was coming, we would have prepared for it, but we are left totally in the dark without any weapon to

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<sup>1</sup> Dubois, W.E.B., *The Soul of Black Folk*: New York: Penguin (1903, reprint 1965, and 2019) 298

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Cohen, <https://tbsoc.com/2017/10/sermon-yizkorz6/24/10 11:58> PM



defend ourselves. Death is personal, intimate, and real, something each one of us must one day face. To pass from this world to the next is an expectation that flows from our religious experience of God in our lives, yet it is something we are never prepared for.

Words cannot express the anguish, the sorrow, and the vast emptiness we face when a loved one dies. Hope itself seems to have passed away with the one we love. Hope, is the expectation of fulfilment or success. Hope is what gets us up in the morning and motivates us to achieve. It is the confidence that we will one-day experience success if we put in the time and energy. Our careers, relationships, and dreams will be victoriously realized if only we try hard enough. Yes, hope like faith is something we look forward to for blessings and good things. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1), but it is in the midst of death that we find the truth, hope doesn't live here. It is through our faith that we are led back to hope. Until we see the hope that fills the void that leads us back to life, we are lost in an open world all of our own. Only through the presence, love, patience, and sharing of our pain with others can we find our way out of the valley of grief. In order to stay on our feet and keep breathing, we have to have hope and a desire to live.

When a death occurs, it presents us with two choices. You can give into the void, the emptiness that fills your heart and causes your lungs to constrict, your inability to think, or even breathe, it can hold you hostage, or you can try to find new meaning in life and work to overcome the void left by the death of the one you loved. Death is the one thing we are never prepared for, even when it's expected. To help those in my congregation cry, mourn, and lament, they needed a safe space to release their hurt, their pain, and sorrow to do the work of grieving. A space to cry out and lament unto the Lord.

## Grief and self-care

As a minister, my first step was to recognize that before I could care for others or offer them grief support, I had to be aware of my own loss history. I could not project what I felt and experienced on those I knew, loved, walked with, and who trusted me. When clergy members are working with individuals who are grieving the loss of a loved one, they have to be careful not to absorb the pain of those they are ministering to. Sometimes, when one empathizes with another person's trauma, you become ineffective as you mix your past trauma with theirs, and healing can't take place. The problem then shifts focus from the parishioners to you, and healing can't happen. This can start a new problem and now we question God's presence in the midst of our sorrows.<sup>3</sup> In our suffering, grief sometimes overwhelms us and leaves us nowhere to go. If we have unresolved issues with the death or loss of a loved one, we may do more harm than good to the persons we are attempting to help. Self-care is something all ministers should be aware of and do on a consistent basis. We do ourselves a disservice when we try to mask or hide the emotions and pain that often accompany our grief.

Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to the loss, grief also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions. Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the suffering one feels when something or someone the individual loved dies. An increase in blood pressure can manifest physical effects, and it may batter the immune system, leaving it depleted and vulnerable to infection. Intense grief can alter the heart muscles and manifest itself in what has come to be known as the "broken heart syndrome," and

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<sup>3</sup> Kelley, Melissa M., *Grief: Contemporary Theory And The Practice of Ministry*: Fortress Press: Minneapolis (2010) pg. 26-27

even lead to death. Cognitive responses may include disbelief, confusion, preoccupation, and inability to sleep. Behavioral responses can be manifested through anger, depression, interpersonal interaction, hostility, and sadness. Social reactions to death can include refusal to leave the house, lack of personal hygiene, letting physical appearance go, refusing to see family or friends, returning to work, negative feelings about taking care of the family who needs us now more than ever. Cultural responses may include a widow wearing black for a year, men wearing a black band on their left arm or more, specific landmarks of celebration like birthdays and anniversaries. A spiritual response usually causes us to rethink our belief in God, religion, death, and life after death. Our faith may become more substantial, or it may even cause some to walk away from their faith altogether. Philosophical responses to grief are different in everyone and manifest themselves in many forms, but the one basic rule we need to focus on is plain and simple: there is no rule. Some cultures have expectations, and others do not; there is no standard or abnormal response, each person has to grieve in their own time and in their own way.

In 1969, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross identified five stages of grief in her book *On Death and Dying*. She named the five stages denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These five stages of grief have been deemed a part of death and dying and the grief process since that time. The five stages of grief are taught in medical schools, nursing schools, and seminaries.

In 2005, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, in their book *On Grief and Grieving Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, added further light on the stages of grief and asserted the stages as tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling.

But know they are no stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order.”<sup>4</sup>

“Denial is a state of disbelief. In this stage one wonders how, if, and why they should go on in life. One questions his/her reality. It is all true? Did the loss really happen? Denial manifests itself through the retelling of the loss or trauma. The retelling is the mind’s way of denying the pain. Anger typically appears in grief when one has discerned that they will probably survive the loss. In this stage anger can be directed inwardly by one believing that they could have stopped the loss from occurring; yet, there is a sense of unfairness about the loss or the trauma in the first place.”<sup>5</sup> You can be angry with yourself or with others, even with the person who died. “Bargaining is the stage where you would do anything to avoid the loss from occurring though the loss has already occurred. Bargaining allows us at times to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over.”<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we attempt to bargain with whatever God we believe in. God, if you do this, I will do that. When we realize that we are powerless to restore order, depression sometimes sets in. Depression is "an appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. Why go on at all?" Depression is acceptance with emotional attachment. The final stage of grief is acceptance. When someone accepts that the loss has happened, it does not mean that everything is finally okay and all is right with the world. It is embracing life again and understanding we can never replace what we have

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<sup>4</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, and Kessler, David, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* Scribner: New York (2005) 7

<sup>5</sup> Kubler-Ross, 10

<sup>6</sup> Kubler-Ross, 16

lost, but we can make new connections, new meaningful relationships, and new interdependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs, and we move, we change, we grow, we evolve." <sup>7</sup>

Grief has its beginning the moment our loved one dies. It is honest emotion and is part of the life of a faith community. We spend the immediate aftermath of the death in disbelief. The task begins with notifying family and friends, making funeral arrangements, contacting insurance companies, and any legal or personal action needed. Somehow, we do these tasks on automatic pilot, doing what needs to be done, seemingly without feeling, sometimes without any emotions.

In their book, *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye*, Noel and Blair state:

“Emotions play a large part in how we look at the world around us. They are not present at birth but develop as we grow and experience life with others and the world around us. Emotions are not due to environmental factors, but human interaction. No two human beings see the world exactly alike, but can develop similarities and perspectives due to shared experiences.”<sup>8</sup>

Not everybody has the same reactions because the death circumstances are different for each of us; thus, grief reactions are mixed. None of us think, feel, act, or speak alike. As survivors, we have to learn what to do with our new selves, and we have to learn to navigate freshwaters. Learn to live again, maybe even love again, as we walk into a whole new truth.

Grief doesn't come and go in an orderly fashion but is best handled when fully and frequently articulated. Just when you think the pangs of anguish have stolen their last breath, another wave sweeps in, and we are forced to revisit the memories, the pain, and the fear. Sometimes we try to

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<sup>7</sup> Kubler-Ross, 16

<sup>8</sup> Noel, Brook, Blair, Pamela D., Ph.D., *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping, and Healing After the Sudden Death of A Loved One*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., (2008) 5&6

resist the demands of grieving. We long to avoid the fierce yet holy pilgrimage we are on. We fight against currents, terrified of being overwhelmed, of being discovered, of becoming lost in our brokenness, without hope for the future. Yet, we find we cannot navigate the waters alone.

Culture tells us to move past this grief process quickly. Take a few days off, a week or two perhaps to grieve; it's okay to cry, to grieve, but don't stay there too long, get over it, pick yourself up and move on. Grief can make those around us uncomfortable. Friends sometimes don't know what to say or do with our pain. Loved ones struggle to find adequate words to comfort our aching wounds. Yet, as painful a season as it is, grief is a necessary part of our healing. To run from grief is to run from the very thing that can defeat the pain of our loss. Grieving is the process God uses to bring us back to a place of wholeness. Grieving is His gift to us; it is the path we must take to our journey of healing, whether we see it in the immediate aftermath or not. "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (II Cor. 1:3-4). We must find what we need to bring us back to life, a new and different life, but we must find and live this new life. If you shut yourself off from those who love you, you will drown; you cannot grieve alone. Words don't have to be spoken; just the presence of others who understand gives hope for the future. But where do we go to get what we need to swim these new waters? We go to those who love and care about us and our feelings of grief. To those who have experienced the same loss, we are feeling today.

## **The Necessity of Grieving**

As an African American female who has suffered many losses, I have learned that telling stories about the present and the past has been one of the most effective ways of dealing with our grief of the past and the present. Passing information from one person to another, from generation to generation, be it our family history of accomplishments, heritage, culture, or tragedies, has brought us comfort and hope for the future. We have an obligation to pass on what we have learned and accomplished as a family group to the next generation. ‘Then the Lord replied: "Write down the revelation, and make it plain on tablets, so that a herald may run with it." (Habakkuk 2:2). As we pass on our stories through narratives and storytelling, we pass on a full and rich history that brings our past, our present, our future, our hurts, our pain, our culture, and the love for life into a road map for living a full, productive and beautiful life today. Many stories have been passed down from generation to generation that are aching to be told and shared; and tell them we must. Yet no one story is all there ever is, but saying it, paves the way for another. We have to learn to take the good with the bad, the bitter with the sweet. We have to walk in our truths and pass them on to the next generation to prepare the way for the next one. Our grief is part of our history, and it is begging to be told. As we grieve for what was lost, we must embrace and prepare for what is to come. We must say to our children our history, and it has to become part of their past so they too may pass it on to their children. Our history must not be lost, and it has to be told again, and again, and again. We must realize that grief over all that we lost is part of our African American story.

Yet, “In the thousands of English language articles, essays, and books by researchers and practitioners writing about grief following a death, there is little about African American grief. We have benefited from reading the works that are literature. But still there are few works

focused on African Americans that it seems to us African American grief has been neglected to a remarkable extent.”<sup>9</sup> The ones that have been done focus on African Americans' deaths by homicide, suicide, gang violence, black on black crime, death at others' hands, and targeted medical neglect.

“One study done by a large southern university was to examine the African American experience of grief with particular emphasis on issues of identity change, interpersonal dimensions of the loss, and continuing attachment with the deceased. Participants were 1,581 bereaved college students (940 Caucasians and 641 African Americans). Each participant completed an Inventory of Complicated Grief-Revised, the Continuing Bonds Scale, and questions regarding the circumstances surrounding his or her loss. Results were that African Americans experienced more frequent deaths by homicide, maintenance of a strong continuing bond with the deceased, greater grief of the loss of extended kin beyond the immediate family, and a sense of support in their grief, despite their tendency to talk less with others about their grief.”<sup>10</sup>

The study was about African Americans, yet most of the participants were Caucasians, but the results cast a negative light on African Americans' identity change issues.

In another study on African American Grief, twenty-six African Americans Adults from a wide range of backgrounds and age groups give voices to their experience of bereavement and grief. It covers everything from racism as a cause of death to visitation, wakes, funerals, the family grief process, as well as African American institutions for dealing with death, i.e., the Funeral Home,

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<sup>9</sup> Rosenblatt, Paul C., Wallace Beverly R., *African American Grief*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York. (2005) xi

<sup>10</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi10.21900/0m.57.2d>



all from an African perspective. Because it is written from an African American perspective it captures our unique history as well as the current status of African Americans in the United States. Unless you are an African American and have lived our experiences, you can only imagine the topics and issues we talk about, issues we have lived through.

There was a time in African American history that we had established traditions and rituals for mourning our dead. “Long before ethnic scholars began sophisticated analyses of African Americans culture, when the majority of blacks lived in segregated rural communities, the loss of a loved one was mourned by the community at large. Their view of death as a communal loss was brought over by slaves from Africa and continued in the New world.”<sup>11</sup> The rituals we lost along the way (the celebration of death, a soul set free), offer traditions we could benefit from if we incorporate them back into our lives today. These traditions and rituals are part of the things that kept our forefathers safe in times of trouble. The practices passed down from generation to generation allowed us to keep our faith and march on to freedom, which we enjoy today.

“Why the neglect of African American grief? Like so many other things that African Americans have had to face and endure, it is based on inequality, injustice, and systemic racism. Many who write about history, forget we as African Americans have a history separate and entirely different from the history lived, and experienced by other races. Those who write about grief may assume that African American grief is not different from Euro-Americans. In fact, we believe that the assumption is even broader than that. It is that grief is a basic human process. So just as all humans breathe in the same way, all

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<sup>11</sup> Churn, Rev. Arlene, Ph.D., *The End is Just The Beginning, Lessons in Grieving for African Americans*. New York, Harlem Moon Broadway Books. (2003) 6

humans grieve in the same way. Thinking along these lines, a person would believe that if we learn about anybody's grief, we learn about everybody's grief."<sup>12</sup>

Not so, our grief is unique to and is rooted and grounded in our past. We must never forget our past. We must know and live with it, then pass it on to the next generations to promote change and healing and deliverance from the lived inequalities, injustice, and systemic racism we live with not only from the past but also from each and every day.

It seems as if the writers have forgotten all of the painful trials African Americans have endured. Brought to this country in chains, beaten, lynched, chased by dogs, families separated, women raped, forced to bear the children of their slave owners, children taken from their mother's arms, women sold, and their children left behind. This is grief also, the grief of a life and heritage loss, a loss that was felt as if you had experienced it yourself when the story was told to you by your grand or great-grandparents. It, too, is a loss that one never recovers from because it is a history, we are never ready to hear and would rather hide from, but one we must not only face but live and grieve with it to seek healing. Yet, some will say racism does not exist today, but I beg to differ and would even suggest that it has a hand in the early death of many African American men and women.

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates states, "Americans believe in the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them-inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail

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<sup>12</sup> Rosenblatt, xi

of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men. But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy.”<sup>13</sup>

Racism is very much alive and running rampant today. When we look at all that we as a race have suffered, combine it with the loss of a loved one, the current world pandemic we are imboiled in today, our grief is compounded and hard to separate from the other trials and tribulations we are going through.

In their book *African American Grief*, Rosenblatt and Wallace state, “On one level, racism is so much a part of life for African Americans that it makes sense that it would be a significant part of a narrative about the deceased. Despite the person’s great capacities, the person did not accomplish what she or he could have done had there been no barriers of racism. Even though she was a nurse’s aide or a cleaning woman, and he was a janitor, they had the capacity to be much more than that, if they had not been pushed down by racism.”<sup>14</sup>

Even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we can see racism’s ugly head when we look at the enormous numbers of young black and brown men in prison. The number of black men and women murdered in the streets by police, whites who claim they are in fear for their lives, black men dying while jogging, or bird watching while black, or even the “Black Lives Matter” Campaign, is fueled by racism. As a civilized society today, we need to look at how we treat one another

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<sup>13</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *Between The World and Me*, Australia: The Text Publishing Company Swann House, (2015) 7

<sup>14</sup> Rosenblatt, 19

and move to a new truth that treats everyone as equal because of their character, not their skin color.

In his article, "Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear," Scott Bader-Sayer states, "Keeping a people in thrall to fear serves the interest of those who hold power, precisely because fear seeks order and stability and militates against social change. Thus, the circle is closed: Fear brings us together to fend off the things we fear, yet because we must continue to fear to maintain our unity, we cannot ever actually overcome our fears; indeed, those who have power to address the causes of fear are least likely to do so because fear benefits those who claim to protect us."<sup>15</sup>

We fear what we don't understand. Some black people lived their entire lives in fear and died without ever overcoming it. Fear has led numerous black men and women to an early grave, many times without any real rhyme or reason. Fear can and does lead to an early grave much more in the African American community than in any other. If asked, no man of any other race would want to be a Black Man in America today because of the injustice and racist treatment he would have to endure just to survive and support himself and his family.

Theologically we have several things that are at stake with the issue of race and racism. (1) If we were all created in God's image, we should all be equal and move toward God, dependent upon one another. (2) As God's created beings, we were meant to flourish in relationships with God and others. (3) Many white Americans today still separate their belief in human equality from the actual trauma that has been forced on blacks since they were brought to this country

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<sup>15</sup> Scott Bader-Sayer, "Thomas Aquinas and the Culture of Fear," *New York: Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 25, 2, (2005):98

against their will in chains and fetters and used scripture to justify their actions. (4) Racism has been embedded in our society for so long; some see it as a way of life, while others still deny its existence and refuse to participate in the change of what God wants us to be. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live-in temples build by hands. And he is not served by human hands; as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they would live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being; as some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" (Acts 17: 24-28)

Though written in the aftermath of 9-11, I find the following quote by Rowan Williams fits our racial climate today.

"Indeed, that particular conflict points up the tragic fact that people who share a history of abuse and oppression may be completely unable to connect their stories with each other sharing the experience doesn't guarantee understanding, it seems. But the sudden and literally brutal discovery that there is no contact to protect people like us from death and danger, and the humiliation of not knowing even where the threat really comes from or when it may strike again-the sheer surprise may yet have its forces in persuading us to make some connections."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, Rowan, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Michigan: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, (2002) 58 & 59

Despite all the experiences of racism and violence that we see today and have lived through, death is something we can never prepare ourselves for. It doesn't matter if the loved one had suffered a long or short illness, lived a long life, was murdered, involved in an accident, suffered a fatal heart attack, contracted a deadly disease, or committed suicide, we are never ready for this visitor called death, yet it comes and touches each and every one of our lives in a way that is unique only to us. No matter how hard the situation, or the circumstances, grieve we must. Grief is unavoidable and can teach us something about ourselves and the social problems we find ourselves in. Death, the pain, sorrow, and suffering it brings though sometimes a relief, is never welcome. It is a reality we could all live without if it were possible.

### **The Project**

The significance of grieving in the context of my ministry led me to design and implement a grief support ministry that allows grieving to happen but not overwhelm or take over the person's life. Giving the parishioners involved the support they need to continue prayerfully will lead them back to a life of hope instead of despair for the future. To walk with them through the valley of grief lead them to the mountain top of renewed hope, faith, and strength. With guidance from the Holy Spirit, each individual, the group leader, and other group participants will share their grief journey and lay the foundation for others as they, too, walk this path.

St. Mary Baptist Missionary Church is a 110-year-old Historical African American Church located in the Colored Addition of Pflugerville, Texas, a suburb located 16 miles north of downtown Austin, Texas. Our average Sunday attendance of 385 covers two services, one at 07:30 and one at 11:00. The two services are completely different. The 07:30 is composed mostly of our seniors with a few couples who work the 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm shift. The service is

very traditional; the music consists primarily of hymns, while the 11:00 service is very contemporary with a mixture of hymns and gospel.

The initial work for this ministry began in the form of a conversation with my pastor surrounding the incident with the wife carrying her husband's ashes with her. After explaining what I had in mind to him, he agreed and thought the idea was a good one and offered assistance with whatever I needed. After receiving approval for my project, I contacted parishioners in my congregation who had suffered the recent loss of their spouse or significant other to determine if they would be willing to participate in such a group. I received an initial response from thirteen people, nine women, and four men. Eight people, six women, and two men, elected to participate in the ministry. Three women and two men were in attendance at the initial meeting but elected to not be a part of the group. Those interested in participating in the group were given a list of six questions to answer and return to me before the first meeting. Included with the questionnaire, they were also asked to select the best day and time for them to meet. It was made clear to the group that participation was strictly voluntary, and anyone could leave the group at any time.

The purpose of our first meeting was to explain to the participants why we were here and what we hoped to accomplish. Again, all eight agreed to be a part of this ministry and its findings and outcomes as my final project for my DMIN Degree. Even though the first formal meeting of the project was very emotional, some participants seem to need to talk and began to share their grief journey thus far. Even though emotions were high, we managed to select a foundational scripture (Matthew 5:4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We also chose a name for the ministry, "Heart to Heart Ministry." The term has great significance to the group in that we recognize when you hug another person, your hearts touch, communicating one to the other, giving peace and solace to each other at that moment and time. Our mission statement,

purpose, goals, and objectives were to be discussed at the next meeting. Since that time, they have all been written and adopted. When we come together, we sit in a circle instead of around a table, identifying as an unbroken chain, united in cause and purpose. Some are in pain, some are fearful, others filled with anxiety, but together we are a united front, providing what each person present needs at that moment.

After reviewing and studying different curriculum, it was agreed by the group to use the bible as our primary tool for the time being. Other material and books on grief, grieving, mourning, and bereavement would also be reviewed and possibly used to supplement our learning and understanding. The group sessions were based on allowing each group participant to speak freely and to feel safe while surrounded by others who were suffering the same pain, fear, anxiety as he or she was going through, while seeking to find the continued meaning in life through telling, writing, and sharing their personal grief story with others?

Many scriptures speak about death (that we only seem to quote at funerals or memorial services) that could bring comfort or clarity to the grieving. These same scriptures will be used to teach our group about death on a very personal level. How do we accomplish this? We begin by allowing those who are grieving to speak their truth. Putting their experiences on paper, journaling your thoughts and feelings can be a comfort source, and start healing. We can be the presence and sometimes the voice they need. We will allow the group members to share their stories of loss, grief, and healing in the safe space created for that purpose, and that purpose alone. We will explore the possibility of inviting speakers to share their experience with their loss of a loved one and their grief journey. We value experience.

We will never insist the participants do these things, only offer them the opportunity and provide the safe space they need-but allow them to share in their way and in their own time.



Each of us has to grieve in our own time and in our way; as previously acknowledged, no two people grieve in the same way. There is no magic period to mourn the death of a loved one. The pain of death can be lessened by positive acts or actions, but the sense of loss never goes away. Death may end life, but it does not bring closure or healing, “the end is just the beginning.”<sup>17</sup>

Without hope, without truth, without a purpose for living, grief can lead to medical, physical, emotional, and spiritual death without resolving one's grief. "Looking at the traditional eschatological doctrine of the Protestant faith we can see how human death, as a dying into the death of Christ, is to be constructed positively as a salvific event that confers the plentitude of life to humans."<sup>18</sup> The Christian faith teaches us that the nature of death is rooted and grounded in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We pray to find again joy, peace, hope, and a new beginning through his word.

## **The Work**

Before the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we held six in-person meetings and discussed the following topics using these scripture references, as well as others. At the beginning of each meeting we had pray, and read a scripture, prior to starting our lesson for that evening. The lessons and lesson plans for each week follows.

### Lessons

1. My Loss: Psalm 34:18, 147:3; John 14:1; Matthew 5:4; Revelation 21:4
2. The Meaning of Grief: Psalm 9:9, 18:2, 22:24, 23, 27:4-5, 30:5, 34:18, 37:39

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<sup>17</sup> Churn, Rev Arlene, Ph.D., *The End Is Just The Beginning: Lessons in Grieving for African Americans*. New York: Harlem Moon Broadway Books

<sup>18</sup> Novello, Henry L., *Death as Transformation: A Contemporary Theology of Death*. Farnham Publishers, Burlington, VT: Ashgate (2011) 34

3. Obstacles to Recovery From a Loss: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Numbers 6:24-26, Psalm 37:23-24

4. How Do You say Goodbye: Psalm 38:18, Revelation 21:4, John 14:1, Joshua 1:9

5. How Do You Recover From Your Loss: Romans 8:28, Matthew 5:4, I Thess. 4:13-14

6. Growing From Your Loss: John 11:25-26, Psalms 23:4, I Corinthians 15:51-57

## Lesson Plans

### Lesson I

#### My Loss

Focus scriptures: Psalm 34:18, 147:3; John 14:1; Matthew 5:4; Revelation 21:4

Death is the separation of the soul (the spiritual part of the body) from the body (the material part of the body), the latter ceasing to function and turning to dust, or simply put the action or fact of dying or being killed, the end of life of a person.

These passages of scripture prepare for the promises of God in times of trials.

1. In these passages of scriptures, it seems that those going through trials are crushed in spirit.
2. In light of the promises made by the Psalmist, those who are crushed in spirit are not so because of their unrighteousness but because there is trouble in the world.
3. The righteous person may have trouble and sorrow, but if he takes refuge in the Lord, he will deliver him from them all.
4. Not only will he deliver them, but he will also heal their broken heart and binds up their wounds.
5. The Lord is not only a builder but a healer.

6. In John 14:1, Jesus explains that a relationship with him is the only way, he blesses those who mourn, and he will comfort them in their sorrow.
7. Revelation 21:4 tells us he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.
8. Close with prayer

## Lesson II

### The Meaning of Grief

Focus scriptures: Psalm 9:9, 18:2, 22:24, 23, 27:4-5, 30:5, 34:18, 37:39

Grief is defined as deep sorrow, mainly that caused by someone's death.

All of these passages of scripture speak to how God helps us in times of trouble.

1. He is a shelter in times of trouble.
2. He is a rock, a fortress, a shield, a who protects.
3. He does not ignore or belittle the suffering or the needy.
4. He is our shepherd.
5. He will hide me in his sanctuary in times of trouble.
6. Trouble doesn't last always.
7. He is our help in times of trouble.
8. Close with prayer

## Lesson III

### Obstacles to Recovery from a Loss

Focus scriptures: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Numbers 6:24-26; Psalm 37:23-24

Obstacles are things that block one's way or prevents or hinders progress.

1. Scripture tells us that there is time for everything under the heavens, and that includes death.
2. Though death will occur to all of us, losing a loved one leaves a hole, a void that has to be dealt with and filled.
3. God will fill that hole, bless us with new things, return a smile to our face, and return our piece.
4. The Lord directs the path of the godly.
5. He picks us up when we fall.
6. He holds us and leads by our hand.
7. Close with prayer

#### Lesson IV

##### How Do You Say Goodbye?

Focal scriptures: Psalm 38:18; Revelations 21:4; John 14:1; Joshua 1:9

Goodbye is used to express good wishes when parting or at the end of a conversation.

1. Saying goodbye to someone you love is one of the hardest things you will ever do.
2. Finding the right words to use can add even more stress to an already unimaginable time.
3. If you have the time and are with them before they die, tell them how much you love them.
4. Share memories with them. You may have to tell them it's ok to go.
5. Read scriptures to them, pray with them, sing or play their favorite music to them.

6. Most of all, remember what God has promised to those of us who are saved.
7. But most of all, listen to what they have to say and honor their wishes.
8. Close with prayer

## Lesson V

### How Do You Recover From Your Loss?

Focus scriptures: Romans 8:28; Matthew 5:4; I Thessalonians 4:13-14

Recovery is the action or process of regaining possession or control of something lost.

1. Romans 8: 28 tells us that God works all things together for our good for those of us who love him and are called according to his purpose. If we believe this and put our hope and trust in him, things will get better with time.
2. Lean on people you love and trust and those who love and trust you. Healing is a process, and no two people progress in the same way. Time is your friend.
3. Happy are the people who grieve because they will be made glad (Matthew 5:4), surround yourself with people you love. If you need time to be alone, take that time to pray and commune with God.
4. Cry, don't try and be brave for yourself or others. The tears will come at some time or another.
5. Please don't place a time limit on how long you will grieve. Take it one day at a time.
6. Know that God is with you. Allow hope and God's peace to surround you. He does care.
7. Trust God and his promises.
8. Close with prayer

## Lesson VI

### Growing from Your Loss

Focus scriptures: John 11:25-26; Psalm 23:4, I Corinthians 15:51-57

As you grow, changing physically and spiritually, you become more significant over time.

1. In John 11:25-26, Jesus tells Martha that he is the resurrection and the life. and ask her if she believes, and she replied, "yes Lord, I believe" .....Healing and growth begin in the mind. When Jesus performed miracles of healing while on earth, he first asked each person one question, "Wilt thou be made whole?" Only when the answer was in the affirmative did the miracle take place.
2. When we walk with Jesus, he will not only be with us but will protect us in our time of need.
3. We have to acknowledge who God, and his promises to us.
4. Things are different for us now, but God and his word do not change. He will do what he has promised.
5. Close with prayer

We began by trying to lead them through the grief process with as little trauma as possible, by assuring them they were in a safe place and could share their feelings, thoughts, and needs, praying that it would lead them to share what was on their hearts, giving them new hope. We wanted to support each one as they learn to cope and deal with the challenges they were facing as they go through the grieving process and life as they have not known before. Speaking of and putting into narrative form how we walked through our valley of grief, maybe the one thing another grieving person may need in the future to regain their faith, hope, and their will to live.

Above all, the participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their way, in their own words and in their own time. Through their expressions of disbelief, pain, anger, and sorrow, each person will find the road to a new hope. At the end of the six sessions, the participants were given a questionnaire to answer and return to the facilitator.

### **Findings:**

At the time of their death, all of the individuals were active members of my church except one. This one person's wife was and still is an active member of St. Mary Baptist Church.

The participants in the group range in age from 39 to 77, four women and two men. All are college graduates, three have Masters' Degrees, one is currently working on her Ph.D., the others have Bachelor's Degrees. They are all the spouse or significant other of the deceased. Three are Educators, one a college professor, one a counselor at the high school level, and one teaches middle school. One worked in the Insurance field, one as a singer/musician, and one in technology. Four are still in the workforce, three have retired.

Of the seven, four had others living in the house with them. Two had school-age children, and one had an adult son with medical issues who could not live alone, one adult son moved back to help care for his sick parent, three in the group had adult children, none of whom lived at home. The two school-age children were in middle and high school and ranged in age from 11-16. The son who moved back home to help care for his father was a college graduate, twenty-four years of age, with a full-time job as an accountant for the State of Texas. The deceased was the parent of the children in each case, and it was the father in each incident who died.

Four of the deceased were suffering from long term illnesses. One from cancer for two years, one from a stroke for 4.5 years, one from a lung disease for five-plus years, one from Agent

Orange and cancer believed to have been succumbed to while in the military in Vietnam and during Desert Storm. In each case of the deceased that required a caregiver, the spouse was the primary caregiver, even though they may have had help at intervals.

The death of one of the deceased was due to an automobile accident, and he was pronounced dead at the scene.

As I read and listened to the stories of each of the deceased's life, no one had any negative thing to say about the dead except for the fact that several of them did not take care of themselves after being diagnosed with the health condition that eventually led to their demise. None of them had been together less than seven years, and several had been together over twenty-five years. As couples, they raised their children, and some had graduated college, others were in middle and high school. Some had traveled extensively, and others had plans to travel once the children left and they retired. Two were church musicians and worked with the youth ministry. The men were part of the choir and the brotherhood, and one was a minister and pastor of a church until his health failed. The female spouse who died worked for the Salvation Army with the meals on wheels program and thoroughly loved and enjoyed what she did, helping those less fortunate than she.

Before their illness, they led full active lives, participating in various activities. Some played golf, some softball, some bowling, some coaching their children's sports. They were part of Fraternities and other organizations. Their lives were complete. Their untimely deaths left a void not only for their partners, children, and other family members but also for the people who knew and loved them personally and their church family.



All of the deaths, in the opinion of their spouse, were sudden and unexpected. One died from a massive coronary with no known prior history of heart problems. One experienced dizziness and shortness of breath after choir rehearsal, was taken to the Emergency Room by EMS, was found to have an enlarged heart, died in surgery three days later. One was hit by a car and pronounced dead at the scene. These are the three I see as sudden and unexpected, but I do understand how each spouse considers the death of their partner as sudden and unexpected. When you receive a diagnosis of cancer, stroke, or one like sarcoidosis, and you live with it for several years, you come to accept or believe that death is somehow a long way off. When a death actually occurs, you see it as sudden and unexpected. Our hearts and our minds find it hard to believe they are gone.

One of the participants believed that racism and discrimination led to targeted medical neglect on the part of the military, which ultimately led to her husband's death. No other person in the group thought that racism and bigotry played an active role in the death of their loved one as it happened today. Still, those over the age of sixty stated they had lived through segregation and the Jim Crow area, especially those in the military, and had experienced it in many forms. As far as racism is concerned, every African American's life has been affected by it on some level or another. Racism is not always overt, but underhanded and sneaky and wears many faces. Because of our heritage, the strength, and the courage instilled in us by our parents and grandparents, we as a people have overcome many obstacles that were placed before us. We can and we do look past it. We were passed over for a position that we had worked for and were qualified to do, for someone younger but less capable and of a different race. Not only was this injustice done to us, but we were expected to train this person for the position everyone knew should have been ours. Yet because of our firm faith in God and our prayers, we were able to

endure, and God saw us through. Racism is not something that people of older generations talked about openly but kept to themselves and prayed about. Those of other races often wonder how we made it; I tell them it is by the grace of God.

Grieving the loss of a spouse is not like the loss of any other. God joined you together, and the separation takes time to manifest itself. When your husband or wife dies, a part of you dies; also, the connection does not go away instantly. You had grown to the point you finished one another's sentences; you thought the same thoughts, you were one (what God has joined together, let man not separate) Matthew 19:6. You cry you can't sleep, feel lost and alone even with people around you. You can't take off your wedding rings; you can't give away their clothing or other personal belongings, you are stuck and can't seem to find the energy to move on or to take the next step. Learning to live with the loss of your spouse is not easy.

Due to the overwhelming grief displayed by one of the participants, the complicated Grief Assessment was completed on each of them. One person was referred first to my pastor, and then to another provider. It was determined the participant needed more help than we could provide in our small ministry group.

What follows are the grief stories of each participant. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individual participants:

### **Their Stories**

#### **Camille**

Camille is a 39-year-old college professor, with sixteen plus years of schooling, currently finishing her Ph.D., and is the wife of the deceased. Other household members are their four

children one son and three daughters. Their ages are 16, 14, 12, and 8. Their years of schooling are 11, 9, 7, and 3. The deceased was the biological father of the four children.

Our life together was full. My husband coached our son's little league team, attended our daughter's basketball games, we did all kind of things as a family, he played golf at least once a month with friends and Phat brothers. His death was due to a massive coronary. We have grieved his death together as a family and as individuals, each in our own way. Many tears have been shed. Crying has helped the children work through their feeling and their emotions. Our lives as a whole have been turned upside down, and it something that "we will have to work through, again as a family and as individuals. My youngest was hit the hardest by her dad's death as they were very close. No one has suffered any health issues, no one has been overly distraught, no drugs are alcohol use. Together as a family and with the Lord's help, we will get through this, and I will seek help for my children and myself if needed.

We had no religious practices per say, we worshipped together as a family. Neither of our families had any traditions, rituals, or religious practices at the death of a loved one. We all came together to support and help one another as we all grieve our loss.

The death of my husband was tough and very painful as he suffered a massive coronary at our 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration. The house was packed with our children, families, and friends, sharing with us as we celebrated 20 years of marriage when he grabbed his chest and collapsed. He was transported to the hospital by EMS and he was pronounced dead in the emergency room. No CPR was necessary as his death was sudden, as far as we all knew, he was a healthy 49-year-old with no prior history of heart problems, no high blood pressure, diabetes, and other medical issues. After the initial shock, I had to begin the work of not only

planning a funeral but explaining to our young children what had happened to their father. I did not have the luxury of grieving at that time, let alone think about what was next.

Crying after the children were in bed helped a lot. At times I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't think, and I felt like I was losing my mind. It was only after I became a part of this group that I was able to talk about and process what had happened. My husband and I had so many plans. Plans for our children, for our lives, for our retirement, now I feel as if I have nothing left. I know it's selfish because it's how I feel. My ability to speak with others who have suffered the loss I have has been my salvation. I can talk without feeling people will think I'm crazy or losing my mind. Just being able to get away from the kids for a couple of hours is refreshing. My husband and I had talked about death and what would happen to the remaining spouse and the children, or even what would happen if we both died at the same time. We had made wills, named guardians for the children, had insurance that would provide for the children and pay the mortgage off, so I wasn't totally unprepared. I knew what we had talked about, but I was not ready for him to die and leave me all alone. This group was the help I needed.

As African Americans, we hold things inside instead of getting the help we need. I believe we all grieve but in different ways according to our faith beliefs. I do not believe racism or discrimination had anything to do with my husband's death. The advice I would give to others grieving a loss is to seek help, don't hold it inside.

### **John**

John is a 77-year-old retired school teacher/football coach with 16 years of schooling and is the husband of the deceased. There were no other household members, but they have three adult children, all of whom are college graduates. His wife worked in sales all of her life. After they

both retired, they traveled, in and out of the country, spent time with their grandchildren, remodeled their home, and did what they called "enjoyed life" until she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She had surgery, then a round of radiation and chemotherapy. After her recovery, we returned to our routine of enjoying life. She kept all of her follow up appointments and was fine until the year of her sixth check-up, and we found her cancer had returned. It was later that I found out how bad it was.

My wife was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2013, had surgery, radiation, and a round of chemo. She recovered and was cancer-free for five years. Cancer came back with a vengeance. We knew cancer had returned and that chemo, radiation, and surgery were in the future, but my wife did not share with our children or me how sick she was. I found out later that she had been informed that she only had a 50% chance of recovery. She would not allow us to go to the doctor with her, and she always told us she was okay. She was scheduled for surgery on a Thursday, came through without and complications, but developed severe pain on Monday, was taken back to surgery on Tuesday and again on Thursday, never regained consciousness, placed on a ventilator, remained in ICU, and died three weeks later.

I know she must have been scared, but I was so hurt and felt betrayed when the doctor told me that she knew her chances and elected to have surgery. Why didn't she tell us, I will never understand? I'm still angry with her.

Like so many men today, I worked, brought home my paycheck, and gave it to my wife. She handled everything that dealt with our finances. Because she took care of the bills, all legal matters like insurance, taxes, our wills, I had no idea where things were and had to tear the house apart to find the things, needed to complete all of the legal issues required when one dies. It was hard, but somehow, I managed to get it all done. I would tell all couples that both parties need to

know where all of the legal documents were located. We never know when tragedy will strike. I know I wasn't prepared.

My wife was a devout Catholic and believed strongly in God, I am Baptist. We didn't have any specific religious practices, I attended her church at times, and she attended mine, we did not have any issues with our different religious beliefs. Her funeral (Rosary) was held at her church. Both of our families were there just as they had been throughout our marriage. Our children all seem to be okay. We all miss her and speak of her at times, but no one has suffered any health problems, alcohol or drug use. All though we did experience racism and discrimination in our lifetime, especially with the careers we had, I do not believe it had anything to do with her death.

Yes, I do think we as African Americans grieve differently than other groups and races simply because we love differently. We hold on to what we have, partly in fear because we don't want to be alone. I would tell other African Americans going through what I went through to seek help, talk to someone, don't hold it inside.

### **Addie**

Addie is a 63-year-old female retired educator with a Bachelor's Degree in education, she was the wife of the deceased. There were no other household members at the time of his first stroke but the couple have two adult children. Prior to his stroke, he was active, participating in various activities including golf, softball, bowling, several organizations and church. Our life together was good, we participated in activities with other couples, went on cruises, traveled and pretty much enjoyed life. I was his primary caregiver until his condition became progressively worse after the second stroke. My husband's death was the results of the effects several strokes played on his body. At the time of his death, our son had moved backed into the home to help me care

for his father. Even though my husband had been sick for 4 ½ years, even though his health was in decline, I did not expect his passing to occur when it did. It was totally unexpected to me.

Prior to my son moving back into the home, I was the primary caregiver. My husband had suffered a major stroke and was still in the recovery stage when he suffered a second stroke. He had not recovered from the residual weakness, cognitive and physical decline from the first stroke when he suffered the second stroke-causing more damage because he had not fully recovered from the first one. He became unable to speak well, recall events, names, etc., he lost full control of his bladder and required catheterization and multiple medications. Eventually he was not able to walk or feed himself. I could not leave him alone, I had to engage professional caregivers, rely on friends or son or take him with me. Eventually I had to purchase a lift chair and a chair lift for our two-story home. My children sent me on a cruise to give me some rest, but I didn't know what to do. I cried out to the Lord on top of the deck of the ship. I heard his voice within and outside say, "Be still."

My health has been affected in that I now suffer with insomnia and several other health issues. I cry a lot; I think of him often, and when I'm at my wit's end, I cry and call on the Lord. I have established two scholarships in his name. I have only been able to go to the cemetery once alone. I constantly second guess and review all my decisions I made on his behalf. I sold my home because it was "our" home. It has not had the same effect on my children or other family members it has on me, they grieve but not to the extent that I do. No one has been driven to use drugs or alcohol, my children and I do talk about him when we are together.

We did not have any religious traditions, rituals, or religious practices, nor our families other than attending and participating in our churches.

I do not feel racism or discrimination had any connection or played a part in his death.

Yes, I do believe there is a difference in the way African Americans grieve in comparison to how whites and other races do in that our grief seems to be more open and lasting. I would tell another African American going through what I had to go through to GRIEVE! Be proactive about your grief, find a group like I did. Let it mean something for you and let their life benefit someone else through advocacy, outreach, or action.

### **Bobby**

Bobby is a 69-year-old male with a Bachelors' Degree who spent his career in the Insurance Industry. He was the husband to the deceased. He and his wife had no children. Before her illness, she worked for the Salvation Army for 12 years, she also worked for the Meals on Wheels Program, but retired after her health failed. She felt Meals on Wheels was the best job she ever had, helping others. Bobby believed they had a wonderful marriage and lived a good life before his's wife's illness. Though they had no children of their own, they spent lots of time with their nieces and nephews. Not having children was something they accepted and did not see it as a loss, but felt that it was what God wanted for them. They felt because they were childless, they were able to do more for others.

My wife was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer and died two years later. I was her primary caregiver. After her diagnosis, everything changed so fast. Two years went by so fast as I witnessed her live the last few months in so much pain, wishing it was me instead of her. Her death was sudden but not unexpected, I did not think she would go so fast. I just wish she was still here with me. I grieve her presence so much, I cry, I feel her presence, I miss her so much.



The specific meaning death has for me is simple, I live to live again. If you call loving the Lord a specific religious practice, then we had one. Her death has had an effect on my daily life, the woman I spent over half of my life with is gone from the physical realm, and I am alone.

Her death had not affected my health or that of anyone in my family. We grieve yes, but we know in the end we will be with her again.

I do not believe racism had anything to do with her death. From a spiritual standpoint, I do not think that African Americans grieve differently than whites or another race, love and loss feel the same whether black or white.

The advice I would give to anyone going through what I am going through is to continue to pray and ask God to guide you every step of the way and to take it one day at a time.

### **Alana**

Alana is a 53-year-old female college graduate who works in the technology field, she is the wife of the deceased. There were no other family members in their household at the time of his death, but she and her husband have three adult children. Her husband died after a lengthy inflammatory lung disease. I don't know if I would classify it as a natural cause, to me natural is you going to sleep and waking up in the arms of Jesus, it was not an accident, nor was it violent. He was a minister and the pastor of a church until he was forced to retire due to his illness. He was in and out of the hospital for most of his illness, putting a strain on his relationship not only with his wife but also his children. His whole personality changed as his illness progressed, making him mean and downright nasty at times. He became non-compliant with his medication and diet and became a chronic complainer. He was difficult to live with at times, but I refused to

put him in any facility. The last time he left home to go to the hospital, he asked the ambulance driver to pause at the door and stated, "this is the last time I will see this place."

My husband suffered with a serious illness for over ten years. Before his illness, he was a good husband and a good father. When the children were younger and still at home, he coached our son's basketball team and our daughter's soccer team. We had date nights; we did things together as a family. When he first became ill, it took a while for the doctors to diagnosis him, even after his diagnosis, he wasn't like that, but as the illness progressed, his whole personality changed. We made excuses for him at first, but after a while that didn't work anymore and our children as well as our friends came around less and less. I became his primary care giver.

Even though he had been sick for a while, I did not think he would die when he left home that day, in the hospital he was given a medication that he had a reaction to and his kidneys shut down. He was given another medication and got better. He was later transferred to a rehab facility for therapy due to his weakened state. When I realized he was not on his water pills, I told the facility and they were supposed to notify the doctor and I don't know to this day if they ever did. A few days later his lungs were full of fluid (one of the symptoms of his disease), he was transferred back to the hospital and died a few days later. His death was sudden, totally unexpected, and in my mind due to targeted medical neglect.

I grieve his loss and miss his presence here with his children and grandchildren. I feel a tinge of guilt at times because I felt such relief when he died, he had been sick so long. I miss his presence, but I know he is not suffering any more.

We did not practice any religious rituals, and the only religious meaning his death had for me is that he was no longer suffering. The effect it has had on our lives is that me and my children have grown closer and spend more time together than ever before.

No one's health has been affected, no one is using drugs or alcohol, but I do believe racism and discrimination played a part in his death. Why, because the doctor did not order his water pills and I will leave that to them, their conscience, and their God.

I do believe that as African Americans we grieve differently than Euro Americans and other cultures in that we see death as being free from all of the things we have had to endure here on this earth.

The advice I would give other African Americans going through what I have had to go through is to find a grief support group or ministry to become a part of. Pray, share with others and don't be afraid to let them know and see you grieve over your loss love.

### **What I Learned Through the Heart-to-Heart Ministry Group Process**

1. Life's inevitable loss of someone you love, especially your spouse, can knock you off your feet and plunge you into devastating despair. I agree with another significant and well published truth, "no two people grieve in the same way." There is no magic trick that points the way and shows you how to recovery. It is only through reading, studying, praying and meditating on God's word and principles, help from others, adjusting to the separation and responding to the loneliness in a positive way will you get through the grieving process. After the initial shock, the pain of grief sets in. Some are open and eagerly share their feeling with others. Talking about the person who died can help to find closure, comfort and peace of mind only if you allow it. If you do not allow the

sadness of the loss to consume you and take over your life, the grief process and devastation in most instances does not last as long. You find comfort being with others who know and share what you are feeling, what you have loss, yet you have hope for the future. They hurt, they cry, they mourn, and feel the hole left in their heart by the death of their spouse, but they do not allow the loss to be the only thing left for them. They choose to live, to find hope as they walk in their new normal.

2. Working with people who are grieving is draining work, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Early in my ministerial journey I discovered the need for self-care and its importance. Self-care was one of the first things I referenced in this paper. If I am not aware of and have not dealt with my own loss, the potential is there for me to project what I think and feel on those I am walking with and do more harm than good. By self-care I mean having a spiritual partner or spiritual director you can confide in. An active prayer life is also essential to the work I do.
3. In Mark 12: 30-31, Jesus tell use “And thou shall the love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.” If I am to walk with my brothers and sisters through their valley of grief, I have to be with them all the way. I have to love them with all my heart. I can’t turn from them to the left or to the right, I have to be with them when they are at their lowest as well as when they are on the mountain top.

Some of our losses are seasonal like the ones I and my group experienced in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Some are expected, others are not, some leave deep scars, others only

scratches, both can become infected if not kept clean and cared for. Sometime the little things are the ones that trip us and we fall down harder than we thought, it is at this time we need to show them the love God has poured in us and let them see there is still hope.

## **Results**

These are the results of my initial questionnaire. Thirteen parishioners answered the questions and attended the initial meeting. Of those in attendance, there were nine women and four men. Eight of the thirteen continued as part of the ministry, six women and two men. They ranged in age from 39 to 77. They were well educated, everyone in the group had at least a Bachelor's Degree. Four were still employed and two had retired. One female left the group without any prior warning or reason why. One was referred to my pastor and eventually was referred to outside help.

Everyone participated in the group when in attendance, telling their story, crying, still searching for answers, asking why, some still not understanding. All admitted to not sleeping or eating, but trying to cope with their current circumstances. None of the group had sought any outside help of any kind prior to receiving my questionnaire.

With the one leaving the group and the one referred out only five questionnaires were returned and became a part of this project.

The results of the final questionnaire revealed much about their grief, depression, anxiety and fear of the unknown. Their answers to the questionnaire are written in the narrative of each participant. The greatest fear expressed by the group was the fear of life without their spouse.

The Complicated Grief Assessment compiled by Holly G. Prigerson, Ph.D., and Paul K.

Maciejewski, Ph.D., was devised in 1995 to assess indicators of pathological grief. It consists of

19 first person statements concerning the immediate bereavement related thoughts and behaviors of grieving individuals. It has 5 response options in four section that range from never to always. Anyone scoring over 25 is considered high risk for requiring clinical intervention. The criteria have to be met in all 4 section to arrive at a diagnosis of Complicated Grief. I used this assessment tool only after one of the group participants made a statement that caused me great concern over her current mental status. Of the 6 participants who were administered the assessment 1 scored 16, 2-18, 1-19, 1-20 and one 39. After speaking with her one on one, I contacted my Pastor, he immediately came to the church and she was referred out and received the help she needed.

## **Conclusion**

After six-sessions with the group, some very interesting things were brought to the forefront. The same issues were felt by several of them, issues they were afraid to express to anyone thus far, even to themselves. The biggest fear each one of them expressed was the fear of being alone. After providing a safe space for them to meet with others who were experiencing the same fears of loss, guilt, and trauma, the participants slowly felt at ease and began to relax. With much encouragement, prayer and coaching, they were able to finally realize they were in a safe space. The more they relaxed, the more the tears flowed. As the tears flowed, they began to tell their stories of what they had loss. They feared the unknown of what was ahead and what would become of them. The fear of being alone, wondering how they would manage, financially, physically, mentally, health concerns, and the fear of dying alone. As you lament, cry and grieve over your loved one, feeling the loss of their physical presence can seem almost unbearable. As you make your way through the fog, trying to process your feeling of anxiety, sadness, guilt, and

depression, knowing these are all normal reaction to your new normal is comforting and helps to give you some peace of mind.

As you navigate these new waters, you learn that it's okay to ask for help without being afraid or embarrassed. They came to realize that not everyone grieves in the same way and that it was ok to just be yourself. This group of spouses needed a safe place to share their hurt, pain, and fears, then to lament, cry out to God, and to speak, and to name the fears and loss they felt when their spouse died. Many had suffered alone and in silence with insomnia, loss of appetite, thoughts of suicide, depression, and anxiety. They had lost their hope and had no desire to move forward. Some suffered from guilt because of the relief they felt when their spouse died who had suffered from a terminal illness. Some thought it was wrong to want to move ahead. They had not, nor could not grasp the concept that God is their ever-present help in times of trouble. In John 5:6 Jesus asked the lame man, "Wilt thou be made whole?" As they shared their personal stories of pain and hope with one another, their burdens were lifted, and they wanted to be healed and to live again. They were then able to cry out to the Lord and say, "yes Lord I want to be healed," I don't have to do this alone.

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## Appendix

## **Appendix I**

### **Initial Questions for Grief Ministry**

1. How long has it been since you lost your spouse?
2. Do you feel you got the support you needed from your church?
  - a. Initially
  - b. In the aftermath
3. Would you be part of a grief ministry at your church if there was one?
4. Would you attend an information session concerning the start of a grief ministry?
5. What do you think you a grief ministry should look like?
6. Have you attended any support groups on grief?

**\*\*\*\*\* What day and time would best fit into your schedule to hold our meetings?**

## **Appendix II**

St. Mary Baptist Church

Heart to Heart to Ministry

### **Mission Statement:**

To help those in our community who have suffered the loss of a loved one to cope with that loss, and to give support not only for their healing, but for their spiritual, and emotional well-being.

### **Purpose:**

1. To understand the grief process and to take the necessary steps toward healing and new hope for the future.
2. To provide a safe place for those who have suffered a loss to share their anguish, sorrow, thought, emptiness, feelings, fears and needs as they learn to live with their new normal.
3. To support one another as they deal with the challenges and concerns, they will have as they learn to live with where they are now.

**Goals:**

1. To learn how to express their anguish, sorrow, thoughts, emptiness, feelings, fears and needs, in ways that are healthy and bring hope for the future.
2. To learn how to resolve the new life issues and any conflict without bringing new hurt to ourselves or others.
3. To learn new and healthy communication skills.
4. To learn how to become friends within our group as we support one another.
5. To learn how to make the best new choices for themselves and their new normal.
6. To learn we are responsible for our own feelings, thoughts, and actions.
7. To learn that making good choices, gives us the power to change our lives and allow us to live with hope in our new normal.

**Guidelines:**

1. All shared information is confidential. What's said in the group stays in the group.
2. Be on Time.
3. No putdowns to self or anyone else---even as a joke.
4. Everyone has the right not to speak.
5. Everyone's participation is important.
6. No side talk or cross talk.
7. No telephone use during meeting.
8. Speak only for yourself.
9. Treated everyone with respect.
10. All beliefs are treated with respect.

**\*Exception to confidentiality**

1. In cases of physical or sexual abuse.
2. When someone is a danger to self or others.
3. When information has to be shared in court.

**Physical Boundaries:****Hugging**

No hugging or physical touch unless you ask the person first “can I give you a hug.”

**Crying**

Tears help a person to work through their feeling and deal with their emotions. Allow

Them to cry, no hugging or touching, allow to retrieve own tissue. You can't fix it.

### Appendix III

#### Final Questionnaire for participants:

1. Name, age, gender, years of schooling, occupation, relationship to deceased.
2. Other household members: name, age, years of schooling, relationship to deceased.
3. How would you describe the life of the deceased?
4. Was death due to an accident, some type of violence, or from natural causes?
5. Was the deceased suffering from an illness at the time of his/her death?
  - a. If so, how long.
6. Were you the primary caregiver?
7. Tell the story of his/her death.
8. Was the death sudden and unexpected?
9. What effect has the death of your spouse had on your daily life?
  - a. With your children, if you have them?
  - b. With other family members?
10. In what ways have you grieved the loss?
11. Has your health been affected?
12. Did you or your spouse have any religious practices?
13. Did your spouse or his family have any traditions, rituals, or religious practices at the death of a loved one?
14. Did the loss affect you or anyone in your family's use of drugs or alcohol?
15. Do you think there is anything different in the way African Americans grieve and how Euro American and other cultures grieve?



16. As an African American, do you think racism or discrimination had any connection to the death of your spouse?
17. What advice would you give to another African American going through what you had to go through?

## Appendix IV

### Complicated Grief Assessment

Please mark the box next to the answer that best describes how the respondent has been feeling over the past month. The blanks refer to the deceased person over whom the respondent is grieving.

#### Criterion A:

A.1a. In the past month, how often have you felt yourself longing and yearning for \_\_\_\_\_?

Almost never (less than once a month) - 1

Rarely (2-6 times/month) - 2

Sometimes (more than 7 times/month, but not every day) – 3

Every day - 4 Several times every day - 5

A.1b. In the past month has the yearning been distressing to you or disruptive to your daily routine?

Yes

No

**A frequency of “every day” or “several times a day” OR distress or disruption caused by the yearning is required for a Complicated Grief diagnosis.**

#### Criteria B:

**Below, 4 of 8 B Criteria must have an intensity of “4” or “5”.**

B1. In the past month, to what extent have you had difficulty accepting the death?

No difficulty accepting the death - 1

A slight sense of difficulty accepting the death - 2

Some difficulty accepting the death - 3

A marked sense of difficulty accepting the death - 4

Extreme difficulty accepting the death - 5

B2. In the past month, to what extent have you had difficulty trusting people?

No difficulty trusting others - 1

A slight sense of difficulty trusting others - 2

Some sense of difficulty trusting others - 3

A marked sense of difficulty trusting others - 4

An extreme sense of difficulty trusting others - 5

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B.3. In the past month, to what extent have you felt bitter over \_\_\_\_\_'s death?

No sense of bitterness – 1

A slight sense of bitterness - 2

Some sense of bitterness - 3

A marked sense of bitterness - 4

An extreme sense of bitterness - 5

B4. Sometimes people who lose a loved one feel uneasy about moving on with their life. In the past month, to what extent do you feel that moving on (for example, making new friends, pursuing new interests) would be difficult for you?

Moving on would not be difficult - 1

Moving on would be a little difficult - 2

Moving on would be somewhat difficult - 3

Moving on would be very difficult – 4

Moving on would be extremely difficult - 5

B.5. In the past month, to what extent have you felt emotionally numb or had difficulty connecting with others?

No sense of numbness - 1

A slight sense of numbness - 2

Some sense of numbness - 3 A marked sense of numbness - 4

An extreme sense of numbness - 5

B.6. In the past month, to what extent do you feel that life is empty or meaningless without \_\_\_\_\_?

No sense of emptiness or meaninglessness - 1

A slight sense of emptiness or meaninglessness - 2

Some sense of emptiness - 3

A marked sense of emptiness - 4

An extreme sense of emptiness - 5

B.7. In the past month, to what extent do you feel that the future holds no meaning or purpose without \_\_\_\_\_?

No sense that the future holds no purpose - 1

A slight sense that the future holds no purpose - 2

Some sense that the future holds no purpose - 3

A marked sense that the future holds no purpose - 4

An extreme sense that the future holds no purpose - 5

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B.8. In the past month, to what extent have you felt on edge, jumpy, or easily startled?

No feelings of being on edge – 1

A slight sense of feeling on edge - 2

Some sense of feeling on edge - 3

A marked sense of feeling on edge – 4

An extreme sense of feeling on edge - 5

### **Criterion C.**

**Has your grief resulted in impairment in your in your social, occupational, or other areas of functioning? For instance, does your grief make it difficult for you to perform your normal daily activities?**

Yes - 1

No - 2

REF - 97

DK - 98

**If Yes, then Criterion C is met.**

### **Criterion D.**

Have any of the above symptoms, including yearning and at least one Criterion B symptom, lasted for at least six months?

Yes - 1

No – 2

**The symptoms must have persisted for at least six months to be considered “Yes.” If the respondent suggested that the symptoms have occurred intermittently, then mark “No.”**

**Complicated Grief Diagnosis = Criteria A, B, C, and D are met.**

**Appendix V**

Books on grief purchased by church and placed in library

1. Churn, Rev. Arlene. Ph.D., *The End Is Just The Beginning*
2. Dobson, Dr. James. *When God Doesn't Make Sense*
3. Grollman, Dr. Earl A. *Living When A Loved One Has Died*
4. Holloway, Karla FC. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*
5. Hsu, Dorothy. *Mending*
6. Kirk-Duggan, Dr. Cheryl A. *Baptized Rage, Transformed Grief: I Got Through, So Can You*
7. Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*
8. Manning, Doug. *Don't Take My Grief Away From Me: What To Do When You Lose A Loved One*
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10. Manning, Doug. *The Power of Presence: Helping People Help People*
11. West, Granger. *Good Grief*
12. Ziglar, Zig. *Confessions of a Grieving Christian*
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