Helping Congregants After a Disaster

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Pan Am 103 plummeted over the unknown Scottish village of Lockerbie. Since that shocking incident, the dead have been eulogized and buried, but for the many living family members the battle to come to grips with reality still goes on. They still have not totally readjusted.

A key person caught in the psychological struggle is the local clergyman. He is expected to come up with correct answers, even under the most trying circumstances. In the immediate period after the tragedy, Pan Am assigned a psychological caseworker to each bereaved family. That professional helper has now gone, although many of the problems still remain. In many cases, only the family's pastor or priest is left.

The clergyman has a role in helping, but it goes well beyond the standard function of providing words of religious comfort to a shocked parishioner. Before he can assist his congregant, he must come to a firm and perceptive understanding of the real problems.

Sudden and unexpected death of a close relative is not an easy experience, as every clergyman knows. There are always the standard questions of "Why?" When the circumstances of death, however, are part of a major disaster, such as the air crash in Lockerbie, an entirely new situation is created.

Several weeks before the Pan Am crash, a high-intensity earthquake struck part of Soviet Armenia. As international television crews recorded in vivid detail, rescue teams from all over the world inundated the stricken area. One of the most moving sights recorded was the somber demeanor of one parent standing motionless as an extrication team retrieved the lifeless body of his small daughter. Without a visible tear or emotion, the father walked off, holding the body of his child Had this man lost all sense of love and human compassion? No!

A true understanding of the tragic situation was that the man had become psychologically numbed by the vast scope of death and destruction he had witnessed. In technical terms, he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a formal name given to the entire gamut of *normal* reactions to mass catastrophe

Those families who traveled to the scene of death in Lockerbie were not the only ones affected by the awesome tragedy. Modern television brought vivid pictures of blood and destruction into many households. At the same time, television did not provide viewers with the social services trained to help people cope with the scenes they were being shown in their own homes. For the general public it was difficult enough. For the family who had lost a member, the situation was catastrophic.

Not all persons affected by Lockerbie expressed themselves in stony silence Others expressed an opposite PTSD reaction—a violent explosion, whether by incidents of physical violence or by legal actions, even against family members

The clergyman summoned to a bereaved family must be acquainted with the phenomenon of PTSD after a disaster. He must realize that if a scene is unpleasant, it is perfectly normal for people to react. People must be reassured. People must realize that their reactions, whether expressed in fears, sleepless nights, or psychological numbness, are not unique to them alone. Although we have a culture where reactions are supposed to be internalized under most circumstances, those vivid reactions *are* quite normal.

For almost every ailment there is a cure. What is the cure for PTSD? Let the person talk out his feelings. The clergyman should let his parishioner talk while he must *listen* to the grief the parishioner expresses. Consoling the parishioner with predetermined and well-polished lines or favorite biblical verses provide the clergyman with an easy script, but this approach does not always solve the problems of catastrophic bereavement.

There are steps a clergyman ca take to assist his congregants when disaster strikes their families:

1. Avoid having the family view the body. Looking at a lifeless victim can be very disturbing, particularly if there has been physical damage to the body Save the family that agony if possible. Try to have identification done by other methods.

2. Help the family identify the body if there is a problem. Sit with the family and obtain a full description of the victim and his clothing. Get his dental records from his dentist and his medical charts from his physician Determine if he ever had been fingerprinted, perhaps in conjunction with government employment; if not, a local police technician can check personal effects for

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and stopped working. Sometimes when a person is as old as Grandpa was, his body doesn't get better like ours do when it gets sick. It's not as strong as ours are. So it stops working, and the person dies, and it can't be fixed anymore. That's what happened to Grandpa. That's why everyone is so sad.

Avoid Euphemisms

In the attempt to soften the blow, adults are tempted to refer to one who has died as "sleeping," "gone away," "lost."

While adults are able to decipher such messages, children are only left confused and even frightened. If a loved one is sleeping, a child fully expects him to awaken. When the deceased does not, the child may become afraid to sleep for fear that he will not awaken either. If one who has died is "gone away" or "lost," the child will eagerly anticipate the time when the person returns or is found. Thus the reality or finality of death is further delayed.

One woman, who was nine when her aunt died, recalls listening to the eulogy where death was described as the "passing of a season." Throughout winter the little girl waited patiently and expectantly for her aunt to return in the spring. Understandably she was most upset when her aunt did not return.

Show Feelings

It is advisable and healthy for adults to express love and sadness, hope and loss, joy and pain. Adults are role models for children. If adults show their grief, children will feel free to express their feelings as well. Based upon personal experience, one mother states. "Don't be afraid to cry in front of the children They must know that it is all right to cry. After all, we cry for those whom we loved very much. Our tears are a tribute to the depth of that love If we do not love, we would not feel the need to cry. It may help to cry together, hold each other, but don't pressure the child to express his feelings."

Share Faith

Your belief in God can become a powerful anchor during times of loss and grief. Dan Schaefer, states that faith "is a wonderful gift, and people who have faith often are much better able to deal with their grief and feelings of loss than those who don't." What sustains you as an adult can also support children as you share your convictions with them

When sharing faith with children, there are two guidelines to follow. The first is simplicity tempered by love. Theological concepts can be extremely abstract and confusing, even to adults. Thus, Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colo., states:

> Adults can only share with children those concepts they truly believe. Any religious explanations about death are best described in concrete, practical terms: children have difficulty understanding abstractions. The theological correctness of the information is less important at this time than the fact the adult is communicating in a loving way.

Second, adults should avoid making God responsible for the death. For example, many well-meaning people will say to children· "God loved Daddy so much that He took him to heaven." What appears to be a religious idea to an adult is heard quite differently by a child who may receive this message: "God loves Mommy and me too Will we be taken away like our daddy?"

In fact, rather than speaking of God "taking" someone, it is much better and more theologically accurate to convey that God accepts and receives those who have died. Here are two examples· "Now that Daddy has died, he is with God," or, "God receives and welcomes all those who die." These statements shift the responsibility from God initiating death to His responding in love to a sad event

Read Together

Selecting a book or booklet appropriate to the age level of the child is an exceptional way to enrich understanding for both the reader and the listener. Most public libraries carry a wide variety of materials on death and can be found in both children and adult sections.

Allow time for discussion and questions following the reading. Be careful not to read several books on the subject at one time lest the child be overwhelmed. Carefully selecting one book or booklet and reading it several times over is the better approach.

One final note should be most encouraging to all parents. It is quite rare for children to be seriously traumatized and immobilized by death. Careful parental attention to children's feelings, along with cultivating and providing "space" for children to talk, is generally enough for them to deal with death and move on.

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prints. Although these tasks are generally performed by police, the assistance of a clergyman is often comforting to a bereaved family.

3. Be honest. If there is a problem, tell the family. If, for example, their relative is among the missing, do not hide the truth from them. Concealing facts eventually casts doubt upon the integrity of the concealer.

4. Listen. Listen to the bereaved family as they talk. Signs of aggression and attempts to fix blame on others can be caught early as you listen to the family sort through the tragic circumstances.

5. Provide emotional support. A clergyman should provide as much support as possible to a family that has experienced disaster. A positive function that he can serve is to act as an intermediary and bring families together who have suffered in the same disaster. They have a common experience that binds them. In fact, victims' families often provide each other with the most critical emotional support.

6. Help is not short-term. It is insufficient to visit a family immediately after a disaster and then conclude there is no remaining problem. Many problems surface only with the passage of time as the family tries to readjust.

There are no easy solutions to explaining disaster to a stricken family.