

# Grief, Loss and Pain in Churches

A handbook for understanding  
and advising in a Christian context

Bill Merrington

kevin  
**mayhew**

**kevin  
mayhew**

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Kevin Mayhew Ltd  
Buxhall, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 3BW  
Tel: +44 (0) 1449 737978 Fax: +44 (0) 1449 737834  
E-mail: [info@kevinmayhewltd.com](mailto:info@kevinmayhewltd.com)

[www.kevinmayhew.com](http://www.kevinmayhew.com)

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The stories used in this book are vignettes or composites of stories gathered over many years. They do not correlate to any one story.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 978 1 84867 375 5  
Catalogue No. 1501273

Cover design by Rob Mortenson  
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Project managed by Free Range Book Design & Production

Printed and bound in Great Britain

*To all the people who graciously allowed me  
to minister to them in God's name.  
To listen, weep, pray, give glimmers of reflection  
and to hope for a better future.*

## About the author

Bill Merrington has been an Anglican priest for over 25 years. Originally an analytical chemist, after a serious illness he retrained in ministry and has since led churches in city, town and countryside in the West Midlands. Bill has a PhD in Psychology specialising in the understanding of the longterm impact on parents when a child dies. He has carried out research in Britain, Lebanon and Africa, looking at the cross-cultural impact of death. He has spoken at a number of national and international conferences, and lectures regularly at universities. Bill has written a number of books for both adults and children. He is currently the Lead Chaplain at Bournemouth University and runs Counselling Care, a support organisation for bereaved parents and children. Bill is married with three grown-up children.

### Other books by Bill Merrington

*Death, Funerals and Heaven*

*Coping when your parents separate*

*When Someone Dies*

*101 ways to cope with grief and loss*

*The Hideway*

*Alice's Dad*

# Contents

Introduction	9
Change in a parish	15
<b>Part One</b>	<b>17</b>
1. You can't avoid the loss issue	19
2. Why is grief so important?	25
3. When loss occurs	35
The bereaved	38
The type of bond	41
Previous losses	44
Age	45
Gender	46
Personality type	51
Complicated grief	53
The deceased	55
The culture and environment	57
Miscellaneous factors	60
4. Making the issue real	63
5. Anticipatory grief	67
6. The journey of grief	75
Emotional reactions	78
Physical reactions	87
Cognitive reactions	88
Behavioural encounters	90
Social impact	92

Intellectual adjustment	94
Spiritual reflection	95
7. The history of grief theories	97

## Part Two 109

8. The role of faith	111
So what is a healthy Christian grief?	113
9. Ministering to the bereaved in a Christian way	119
Opening phase	120
Intermediate phase	122
Is there a time to talk theology?	124
Final phase	128
10. Observe the expert at work	131
11. When does a person need to be referred?	143
12. Grief factor assessment	151
Grief factor case studies	152
13. The role of prayer	155
14. When faith hits the rocks	163
Can I forgive?	170
15. Life after death?	175
16. Funerals	185
Memorial services in church	190
Roadside memorials	191

## Part Three 195

17. The loss of a child in a modern society	197
18. Miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion and infant death	203
Miscarriage	205
Stillbirth	207
Abortion	209
Prenatal Loss	210

Cot deaths	213
Pastoral implications for the loss of a baby	216
19. The death of children	221
20. The death of teenagers	229
21. The death of young adults	237
22. Common issues the church needs to be aware of	
with the loss of children	241
The need not to forget	241
Dreams	242
The wish to die	243
A change of values	245
Shadow grief	246
A strategy of support	259
23. Supporting children in grief	267
Infants	270
Older children	271
Adolescents	273
Techniques that children/youth workers can use	279
24. The death of friends	287

## **Part Four** 293

25. Suicide	295
Pre-suicide events	296
Caring for the survivors	298
The suicidal event	299
Suicide notes	300
Long-term effects	300
26. Murder	305
27. Disaster – post-traumatic stress debriefing	311
What do families need?	313
The complexity of disasters	314

A strategy of help	315
Debriefing	316
<b>Part Five</b>	<b>323</b>
28. Coping with divorce and complex relationships	327
29. The loss attached to parenthood	331
30. Singleness in church	335
31. The problems of age	341
32. The rich, the poor and the unemployed	345
33. When abuse lives in the church	351
34. Christian hopes unfulfilled	357
35. When the minister moves on	361
36. Disenfranchised grief	367
<b>Part Six</b>	<b>371</b>
37. When the pastor weeps	373
38. Support and supervision	387
39. Know yourself	393
40. Developing a pastoral policy	397
41. A time to listen	403
42. Conclusion	407
Resources	411
Glossary	413



## Introduction

Spirituality is like a river flowing through every person  
Unfortunately, it can be dammed  
in times of illness, dying  
or bereavement with  
Pain, fear, and loneliness.  
However, a compassionate,  
caring presence can prevent  
The dam from forming and  
keep the river flowing.  
Lord, teach us together how to keep the river flowing. Amen.

*Steven Jeffers*

In a typical church somewhere in England, there was a new minister of the church. He had only been in post for 18 months but he was finding it hard going. His family hadn't settled in the new area, the schools weren't as good and his wife missed her friends. They weren't the only ones. The minister had wanted to move on to this church and had felt God was in the move, but he had mixed feelings. Yes, he was glad to get away from some of the issues in the other church, but he had also made some really close friends. He valued their support and now felt rather isolated in a church that seemed to be still wrapped up in praising the name of the last minister. His church though was a fairly typical congregation regardless of its size. There was a good number of elderly coping with old age, aches and pains and a few living with widowhood. Two or three people unemployed,

one critically ill and a few with long-term illnesses. There was a good number of young families present with their variously aged children and a couple of mums-to-be. It all looked healthy on the surface. But with a little bit of scratching, one soon found that several couples were coping with children with either learning or behaviour difficulties and one couple struggling to have children. There were also one or two marriages that looked shaky as well as the usual number of divorced people in the church. All in all, a typical church of any denomination. On first visiting, it appeared to be a happy thriving community; it was only as he got to know the people that he began to realise how many issues, particularly loss issues, were present waiting to be recognised and supported.

Being a minister or pastoral worker in a church is both demanding and costly. The good news is that we mainly enter the ministry because of our own positive faith experiences. This usually comes from finding support and wisdom from within the church. Our faith is finely honed as we share our testimonies, painful experiences, loves, pleasures and hopes. We begin ourselves to care for others in need and personally reap the joy of servanthood. Eventually, we find ourselves heading for full-time ministry or giving much of our spare time in a caring capacity to the church. However, the honeymoon doesn't last forever. Before you know it, the joy of entering ministry can quickly become a burden. You can easily find yourself carrying people's stories, struggles, worries and fears.

One of the greatest issues we will have to face is handling loss issues in people's lives. It is here that our own values, beliefs and personal experience will influence our perceptions and actions. But how will we adapt if the events of people's lives challenge our own understanding of our mortality, our faith and what we think we have to offer those in need? How will we cope over a period of time with our emotions, our beliefs and our actions? How many of us give time to stop, reflect and adjust our ministry according to our evolving

faith? It is so easy to end up working in the way of the past, even though our views and beliefs have adjusted and changed. To be truly present in our ministry, we have to learn how to dovetail effectively our developing beliefs and experiences with how we minister and care for others. This is the only way to be truly congruent in our ministry.

The aim of this book is to make ministers and pastoral workers more prepared and equipped in their working context to handle loss issues in such a way that we can maintain a long enduring ministry over many years. This includes understanding the variety of loss events in a parish, getting alongside the bereaved and those carrying loss issues, understanding the variety of grief reactions, preparing a policy within the church and recognising one's own losses in life.

First, I'll put the case that so much of ministry in God's kingdom and the world is handling loss issues. I believe this was at the heart of Jesus' ministry, whether it be to individuals, groups, nations or the whole of mankind. Any ministry therefore needs to have a strategy of how we handle loss both in individuals' lives and in the church or parish. This inevitably raises the question of how we handle our own losses and how they impact upon our ministry.

Secondly, I will begin by looking at who we are and what makes us tick. So much of our personal make-up goes back to early childhood beginnings. We will look at our early attachments and how they influence us in regard to how we cope and adjust to change and loss issues. We will reflect upon our own beginnings and whether we think they still affect us in our ministry today.

The book is divided up into six parts, of which each can be read individually.

Part One outlines the reason why grief is such an important issue in the life of a church and its ministry. We will look why we bother to grieve in the first place and what makes it so complex at times. We will go on a journey of trying to perceive what it is like to be

bereaved and we will then relate this to the many grief theories that have developed over the last century.

Part Two looks at the role of faith and we how we can bring our own Christian approach to this rewarding ministry. We will gain a picture of what might be called a healthy Christian grief approach and will reflect upon the example that the expert in ministry, Jesus, showed in handling grief.

Part Three looks at specific types of losses. We will see how society has changed over the years and how this has impacted upon how we grieve. We will hear different stories helping us to be aware of the differences between having a miscarriage, neo-natal death, abortion and a cot death. We will then journey to see what it is like for parents to lose a young child to a young adult. Finally, we will read about how death affects children and how important it is that we help them to grieve in a way that allows them to carry as little baggage in life as possible. We will conclude with a range of ideas to help pastors, children workers and youth workers to work effectively with bereaved children.

Part Four first looks at the subject of suicide and its particular impact upon the bereaved. We will then compare the difference when a murder occurs and how it affects the family and community. So far we have only looked at singular deaths, so we will then look at what might occur in a parish if a disaster strikes at the heart of the community. We will see what a strategic role the church can play and learn a simple technique called 'post-traumatic distress debriefing' which can be such an effective tool to deploy.

In Part Five, we will consider how not all loss experiences are related to death. So often we have people suffering in church with loss issues that are often unrecognised by the church. This might include recognising long-term problems with partners or children, or living with singleness or handicap of some description. There is also the complex reaction that occurs when a minister moves on and leaves

a congregation and parish behind. This is a period that we often fail to address which also brings complexities for the incoming minister. There are at times so many multiple losses in a church that people can accumulate and go unrecognised. This is call ‘Disenfranchised Grief’.

Finally, Part Six will look at how pastors and churches can survive being involved in this kind of exhausting ministry. We see the importance of understanding ourselves and being willing to seek help that will sustain us in our ministry, so that we ourselves do not end up ill and worn out. To assist us in this, guidance is given into how to formulate a healthy grief-loss policy within the church that both cares for the carers and those being cared for. This policy will affect the whole life of the church. It will encourage the church to be pastorally minded in such a way that it will produce an outreaching congregation that people in the community will hopefully want to be a part of.