



Ministering to bereaved parents

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



MINISTERING TO BEREAVED PARENTS

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is an organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support and understanding to other bereaved parents after the death of their son or daughter (at any age and from any cause). As bereaved parents, we have an overwhelming feeling that it is 'against nature' when our child dies before we do. None of us expects to attend our child's funeral. We hope that by sharing our thoughts and feelings with you, the clergy, we may help you in the difficult task of supporting parents whose child has died.

When our child dies, we experience all the 'normal' feelings of bereavement: disbelief, shock, horror, guilt, anger, blame, regret, loneliness, anguish. These grief feelings are intensified because it is our child who has died; the age at which our son or daughter died is irrelevant to our appalling sense of loss. Their life has been cut short, as have our expectations and dreams for the future. You are asked to help us at this very difficult time.

The circumstances will vary: some families will be well known to you, part of your faith community, but some you will only meet after their child has died. Some families have fought a long battle alongside a terminally ill child, while others are in a state of total shock following a sudden accident, suicide or homicide.

A caring presence is what our family needs most at this time, someone who is prepared to be beside us in our grief, who is not afraid of our emotions. We need you to listen, to help us talk about our child, to be with us in the dark. Some of us will want to pray, finding our faith a support and a sustenance, while others may feel totally estranged from God at this time. We do not need to be given 'solutions' to our pain, to be reassured with clichés like "She is in a better place", "You can have more children". Our children are not replaceable or interchangeable, and we need time to mourn the one we have lost. We need you to accept that we may feel angry with God; sympathetic, prayerful and supportive silence can be as valuable as words at this time.

The funeral arrangements will need to be made, and your knowledge and experience will be invaluable to us, for few of us ever expected to plan our child's funeral. You, as well as the funeral director, can help the family make decisions about the practical matters, such as seeing our child's body, or perhaps having them at home with us so that we can complete our caring for them until the funeral. You can help us to think about the sort of service we want for our child, to explore the options, to have time to focus on our child's life and not just on the dying. When we have a strong faith the funeral will be an affirmation of our beliefs, and our certainty of an afterlife will be a comfort in our loss. But some of us enter an arid wasteland at this time, where previous certainties no longer sustain us; loving support, rather than criticism, will help us best to live through this desert. TCF has a leaflet, *Preparing your child's funeral*, which sets out some of the possibilities that families could consider. If you are taking the service, and the family is unknown to you, all efforts which you make to create a personal occasion will be welcomed. Getting the name right is very important; pet names and abbreviations make a huge difference – we are burying 'Katy', not Katharine, if that is what she was (and will be) called. Encouraging us to make personal choices of music and readings, giving us confidence to include anecdotes and stories, all these will help to make the funeral more personal.

Families who do not belong to a faith community may still need your help. The funeral can be taken by someone closely involved in our child's life, but you may need to tell the family this as they may not realise it. Friends and members of the family can read poems, give the eulogy, choose music which was loved by our child or which says something about them. And, even when you do not share the same faith, your pastoral support will usually be welcome.

The rest of the family, especially surviving brothers and sisters, are often "the forgotten mourners" at this time, as are grandparents. If your ministry to the family can pay them some attention, talk to them about their feelings, and perhaps help them to be involved in the funeral, then you will have given the whole family valuable long-term support. As parents, we are often so overwhelmed by grief that we are not always aware of our other children; this is a time for the support of friends and the faith community.

Your own feelings are an important part of your ministry. You can be professional without seeming detached or distant. We feel supported when you acknowledge your own grief and sorrow at the death of our child, when you are able to sit and look at photos with us, to remember the whole person even when some memories are painful and distressing, when you are not afraid of our tears. Sometimes a bereavement will touch closely on your own experience of loss. TCF has members who are themselves bereaved clergy; if you would find it helpful to correspond or talk with another member of the clergy, please do contact us.

Grieving goes on for a long time and we are grateful to those who stay in touch, who do not fade away as soon as the funeral is over. We often feel at our most lonely and isolated in the following months. It helps if you are able to phone from time to time, or make a pastoral visit. Some of the worst times for us as parents are the anniversary of our child's death, their birthday, and the major festivals, such as Christmas, Mothering Sunday, the New Year. It is then that the gaping hole in our family is felt most acutely. Any support, a card from the church or a phone call, can help us to feel that we are not alone.

For many of us, you as clergy are a source of support and strength, as much for your pastoral caring and sharing as for your role in organised religious services.

Support groups such as TCF can be a source of long-term help to us as we struggle to come to terms with our loss. You may wish to give a family some of our literature, or information about a group which meets in your area. Our particular strength lies in our shared experience, that we can say "I know". We also have groups for those bereaved in particular ways (by suicide, homicide, for those who are now childless, and for grandparents); some correspond via our newsletter or our website, some meet occasionally, some hold regular meetings. As well as the quarterly journal *Compassion*, TCF publishes a range of leaflets; it has an extensive Postal Library for bereaved families and those working with them. TCF as an organisation has no religious affiliations. We have members of different faiths, and of none. We are a befriending, not a counselling, organisation.

The death of our child, or children, is a profound and enduring loss; so far as each of us can, we pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and try to make some sense of what has happened.

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**This leaflet is printed in memory of Naomi, our precious daughter and sister,
taken suddenly to be with her Lord in April 1990, aged 14 years.**

Carol, Adrian and Rebecca Keach

Founder: The Rev. Dr Simon Stephens OBE RN

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma

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