

# Pastoral Care In End of Life Situations: Dealing With The Stigmatized Loss of Stillbirth

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The last and most difficult step in resolving any loss is to make sense of it. In the case of ambiguous loss, gaining meaning is even more difficult than in an ordinary loss, because the grief itself remains unresolved. But if we cannot make sense out of ambiguity, nothing really changes. We merely endure.<sup>1</sup>

Making sense out of ambiguous loss is indeed hard, and, sometimes we must just endure the pain. We all experience ambiguous loss in our daily lives; it could be as small as a co-worker getting laid off from work or as large as the death of a distant family member. The aforementioned losses typically go by the wayside and the trauma or depression (if any) associated with the circumstance dissipates. However, greater forms of ambiguous loss exist in our society that typically occur without any public acknowledgment. Stillbirth is a form of ambiguous loss that occurs on a daily basis in the United States with little to no recognition. In fact, statistically speaking, nearly one in three births results in miscarriage or stillbirth.<sup>2</sup>

Pastors are frequently called upon in times of great need in a person's life, and stillbirth is no exception. Stillbirth can be an especially tough time for families, and Christian families are likely to rely on their pastor or a hospital chaplain to aid in their time of grief. The family will have many questions following the death asking the pastor for advice, guidance and answers to questions that she or he may not be able to answer. Chiefly, the parents may request that their stillborn child be baptized. In order to provide the best care possible to the family, it becomes essential for the pastoral care provider to respond to the family with helpful and straightforward advice on a wide variety of topics

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning To Live With Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 118.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Baum, Andrew & Patricia Kishler, "For Words At A Loss: The Church's Response to Miscarriage & Stillbirth Needs More Work," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 23, no. 1 (January 2010): 18.

including grieving, baptism, and funeral arrangements while creating a community that can support the family for the duration of the grieving process.

For many years, stillbirth has been considered an ambiguous loss that did not warrant much attention. A few decades ago, giving birth to stillborn babies was frequent. In light of frequent stillbirths, parents did not bother to mourn long (or even at all) over a deceased baby. “To put it bluntly, dead babies were just a routine fact of life when many of these old customs [of funerary and mourning practices (or lack thereof)] were spelled out.”<sup>3</sup> With the advancement of medical technology in recent decades, stillbirths have become less and less common. As a result of greater numbers of successful births, mothers and families have a more difficult time coping when a stillbirth does occur. The response of the community surrounding the bereaved parents to a stillbirth today is crucial because most parents are not prepared for the death of their child.

For many mothers of stillborn children today, “it seemed that doctors and nurses considered that dealing with grief was not part of their work, but rather an intrusion into the grieving family’s affairs.”<sup>4</sup> Immediately following the death of a stillborn child, it becomes essential for a pastor to step into the situation in effort to guide the family’s grieving. Any death is traumatic, however, the death of an unborn child can be especially alarming to a family. A child, that they were expecting, is no longer going to be present in their lives. Furthermore, “when a child dies, the family’s hopes and dreams die too.”<sup>5</sup> Emotions are flowing in the birthing room as a stillborn child leaves the mother’s womb.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Experience of Social Support Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 11, no. 2 (March 2002): 182.

<sup>5</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 69.

As a result of rampant emotions bouncing around the room, the pastor must be very tactful when entering into a stillbirth situation.

Describing the situation in the birthing room as she was delivering her stillborn child, Anne Donovan talks about her emotions and what happened as the pastor became present in the situation.

Pieces of myself, ideals and hopes, accomplishments and desires, dreams and expectations—it all went sliding off in an avalanche of oblivion. Those things I had relied on—modern science, women’s intuition, God’s mercy—had failed, and I had nothing to hold on to, medical staff, family members, my husband—they all shifted around me as I was induced and slowly dissolved into labor. There was nothing anyone could do except help me deliver the baby. When a chaplain forced herself into the room to talk about God, I yelled at the nurse to get her away from me. All my multilayered, carefully constructed faith was stripped away as I focused on one thing: The injustice that our little girl didn’t have a chance to take even a single breath.<sup>6</sup>

Donovan’s reaction to the chaplain’s entrance during her birthing session illustrates the importance of how a situation is approached. When entering the room, the chaplain should primarily be concerned with becoming acquainted with those present at the birth. Then, after becoming familiar with the family (unless a parish pastor is caring for his or her parishioner) the pastor must make themselves aware of the concerns of the family.

People surrounding the grieving mother and her family will all be offering support and what they see as kind words amidst all that has occurred. Among all of the comments being shared amongst the family, inevitably someone in the room will state that the death was a result of “God’s will. We cannot understand God’s will.”<sup>7</sup> Believing that God willed the death of a parent’s child is seen as very problematic not only in the eyes of many Christian theologians but also those of the parents. When hearing that God willed

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Donovan, “The Painful Effort To Believe,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, September 19, 1998, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

for their child to die, parents will naturally feel anger towards God. When the phrase God's will is used when referring to the death of a child (or anyone for that matter), many Christians are not acting on misguided theology. Instead, people are uncertain of how to address the situation, so they feel it is best to say that it was God's will for the death to occur, in hope that recognizing God's almighty power would be comforting.<sup>8</sup> This phrase should be avoided at all costs in an effort to illustrate a proper understanding of death towards the family of a stillborn child.

One mother who experienced the death of a stillborn child had many people express to her and her husband that the death of her unborn baby was indeed the will of God. However, this mother found much comfort in what the family's Jewish friends offered in person and in writing after the death of her child. Talking about her experience the mother said,

the letters of Jewish friends expressed a genuine exploration of the sense of injustice and pain that the news of Carly's death stirred in them. They acknowledged their confusion and wished that time would be kind to us. They did not try to placate us with the ideas that someday we would understand why this happened. They spoke from the heart, telling us only: "This is unfair, it is so painful, it is so tragic, we are thinking of you." We grew to reassure their honesty and their willingness to explore.<sup>9</sup>

The family's Jewish friends approached the situation in a manner from which all Christians can learn. Using a more realistic approach to the situation, the Jewish family's named the situation for what it was, death.

Remembering the cross, Christians can also live in negative situations, such as the death of a child, while understanding the situation for what it actually is. Those professing the Christian faith should illuminate grief through their faith knowing that Jesus, God

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 9.

incarnate, suffered in our world experiencing our pains. God, knowing our pain, walks alongside us in all that we do. Therefore, just as God suffers with us, all those surrounding the grieving family (including the pastor) must journey with the family through their pain as an expression of their faith.

In order to fully journey with the grieving family, the pastoral care giver should talk with the grieving mother and her family in efforts of understanding the world from the family's perspective.<sup>10</sup> Listening to how a grieving family member views the world allows for insight into their interactions with others in the family. Understanding how family members interact may prove useful in pastoral care sessions. Knowing how a person interacts within their environment is also important as "A self [a single person] is never a self alone, but exists in dynamic connection with objects (meaning other selves) in its environment."<sup>11</sup>

The parents may elect to name the child, and indeed they should do so in efforts of easing the grieving process. After naming of the child, the child should always be referred to by name in an effort to create a human persona for the child. Full grieving cannot occur unless the baby is recognized as a member of the family, and the child can be better remembered if he or she has a name (as opposed to simply calling the child "baby" followed by the family name).<sup>12</sup> After the child has been named, the pastoral care provider may offer a prayer for comfort, strength and healing towards the family utilizing the child's name.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael S. Koppel, "Self Psychology and End of Life Pastoral Care," *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 2 (November 2004): 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Baum, Andrew & Patricia Kishler, "For Words At A Loss: The Church's Response to Miscarriage & Stillbirth Needs More Work," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 23, no. 1 (January 2010): 9.

Following the naming of the child and a brief prayer, a pastor can present a “memory box” to a grieving couple. The contents of the box could include pen and paper to record any thoughts and possibly a disposable camera. The box also serves as a way to consolidate keepsakes into one central place such as photos, casts of the child’s feet and handprints, etc.<sup>13</sup> Using the camera provided, or another camera in the room, the pastor can facilitate taking pictures of the child. Anyone who wishes to hold the child or take a photo should have the opportunity to do so. Medical staff should not be permitted to withhold a child from the parents or any other family members so long as the parents consent.<sup>14</sup>

Pictures are a significant component to beginning the grieving process. As with the naming of the child, taking photographs allows for the family to acknowledge the humanness of the child. Photographs aid in “establish[ing] a social identity both for the stillborn baby and for his or her parents.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, photos “construct or reconstruct the biography of the family disrupted by the stillbirth to themselves and society.”<sup>16</sup> Photos taken not only create a sense of belonging in the family between the parents and the child, but the images facilitate grieving for the departed. An image allows for grieving inasmuch as “people are finding ways of visibly incorporating the one who has died into their lives thereby affirming the continued social identity of the dead person in the absence of a physical body.”<sup>17</sup> Some parents even go as far as creating websites for their stillborn

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<sup>13</sup> Sandra Londa, “Consoling Rachel: A Bereavement Program for Perinatal Loss,” *Chaplaincy Today* 26, no.1 (2010): 27.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Donovan, “The Painful Effort To Believe,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, September 19, 1998, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Godel, “Images of Stillbirth: Memory, Mourning and Memorial,” *Visual Studies* 22, no. 3 (December 2007): 254.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 254.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 254.

children or posting their pictures elsewhere on the Internet. By placing the photographs and possibly some text on the Internet, parents have been able to create their own kind of memorials for the stigmatized loss they experienced.<sup>18</sup>

After the child has been welcomed into the family, the pastor should encourage the parents to hold a funeral service and burial for the child. Having a funeral service allows for an expression of grief to occur not only for the parents but also others who are close to the family. If grief does not occur, “conflicts, distress, disappointment and depression consume vitality,”<sup>19</sup> not allowing a mother or her family to continue on with their lives. Lack of a funeral service also perpetuates the idea that the stillborn child is not actually a child but a disposable being. The parents should be highly encouraged to hold a funeral service to acknowledge their deceased child. However, if the parents do not acknowledge the stillborn as a member of the family, the issue should not be pressed.<sup>20</sup> The process of deciding whether or not to hold a funeral may also include the extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, children etc.). When the extended family has close bonds between members, it may be as important to hold a funeral for their benefit as it is for the parents.

A funeral can be seen as so utterly important in the eyes of many, such as extended family, for multiple reasons. First, in our society “rituals are used for expressing that something significant and sad has happened.”<sup>21</sup> “Funerals are for the people who are

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>19</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001):70.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Baum, Andrew & Patrica Kishler, “For Words At A Loss,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 23, no. 1 (January 2010): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 70.



alive. It gives them a sense of community”<sup>22</sup> in which the living can express their grief of the deceased. Secondly, holding a funeral can be important to many religious parents, as they want their child to be recognized spiritually. Many parents ask that their child be baptized prior to or during a funeral service. As the idea of having a child baptized may be comforting, the concept of baptizing a deceased person is not theologically adept. In some cases, hospitals allow their staff to baptize children who have been stillborn or die soon after birth under the direction of the staff chaplain.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the practice of baptizing a deceased person, whether they are a child or an adult has no spiritual and biblical foundation.

The pastoral care provider must provide the grieving family with a solid defense of proper baptism while presenting an alternative for dedicating the child to God and honoring the loss of a member of God’s creation. In an effort to better understand how to respond to a family who asks for baptism of their child post mortem, it is important that a firm theological perspective (specifically through a Lutheran lens) of baptism is understood.

Baptism is primarily for those who are living; baptism is for those who are experiencing community, based around their faith in Christ. One of the great church fathers, Augustine, illustrated ideas about death and dying that are much different than today. In Augustine’s time, a person had to be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. For years, all children, deceased and living, were baptized as “although they seem to be the most innocent of God’s creatures, [they] are born alienated

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<sup>22</sup> James Philip Hyatt, “Origin and Meaning of Christian Baptism,” *Encounter* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1960): 268.

<sup>23</sup> Anne & Duncan Campbell, “Emergency Baptism by Health Professionals,” *Pediatric Nursing* 17, no. 2 (March 2005): 41.

from God by a guilt they inherit from our first parents; infants can be freed from this guilt only through the redeeming grace of Christ, which they would receive in the sacrament of baptism.”<sup>24</sup> Naturally, parents seek the best for their children and if baptism means that they are able to relieve their child from eternal damnation, baptism is a logical answer to insuring that a child (living or deceased) lives a happy eternal life.

During the reformation (mid-16<sup>th</sup> century), ideas about baptism were much different from those expressed by early church fathers such as Augustine. Luther’s *Large Catechism* illustrates changed ideology about the sinfulness of infants. “A young child has no particular vices, but becomes vicious and unchaste as he or she grows older. When he or she reaches adulthood, the real vices become more and more potent day by day.”<sup>25</sup> Because of Luther’s reasoning, baptism is no longer essential to the salvation of children. Furthermore, “in baptism there is brought, free of charge, to every person’s door just such a treasure and medicine that swallows up death and keeps all people alive.”<sup>26</sup> If a child were to die before birth, there is no reason to cleanse the baby of sin because he or she was never alive outside of the womb to experience the sinful world.

Baptism also creates a covenant that lays a foundation for spiritual life of the living. When a person is baptized, the following covenant is created between the baptizee and the baptismal sponsors.

As you bring *your children* to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities: to live with them among God’s faithful people, bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim

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<sup>24</sup>Francis A. Sullivan, “The Development of Doctrine About Infants Who Die Unbaptized,” *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 3.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of The Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 465.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 461.

Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.<sup>27</sup>

Baptism not only creates a covenant dedicating the sponsors to nurture the child in their faith life, but baptism also welcomes children (or anyone being baptized) into a specific parish and the greater church for “in baptism people become members not only of the Church universal but of a particular congregation.”<sup>28</sup> Baptism is, practically speaking, a covenant between living people and also a sign of membership. By saying that a stillborn child cannot be baptized is in no way excluding them from eternal life. The stillborn child enters the world lifeless, having never taken a breath on this planet. If the child was born living and had spent some time on earth before becoming ill, an “emergency baptism” could have been performed as the child lived in the earthly Kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup> A living child is exposed to the sins of humanity and can be cleansed of them whereas a stillborn child is not able to become immersed in the sins of the world. Therefore, as baptism is seen as a covenant between people living in community and a stillborn child has no inherent sin, a baptism should not be performed for a stillborn child.

In lieu of baptism, as stated above, a child can be named, commended to God and have a funeral service. In light of a deficiency in funeral liturgy written for unbaptized stillborn children, the following is a funeral liturgy written by the author of this work utilizing various resources and personal reflection.

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<sup>27</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 228.

<sup>28</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

## **Funeral Liturgy For The Stillborn Child**

Prior to the service, the child can be anointed with oil before the family, naming the child before God. The minister can say, *NAME, child of God, you are anointed with oil as a sign of God's presence in you and acknowledgment of his unknown power of the resurrection. Stir up the power of the Holy Spirit, oh God, in the hearts of all those who mourn the loss of NAME. Allow them to come together in community acknowledging each other's sorrows until the pain of loss ceases to exist. AMEN.*

### **Service**

#### **Gathering**

**P** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all mercy and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows so that we can comfort others in their sorrows with the consolation we ourselves have received from God.<sup>30</sup>

**Procession and Acclamation** *The casket is brought to the front of the sanctuary, stopping four times, each time reciting one clause of the acclamation.*

**P** Eternal God, maker of heaven and earth, who formed us from the dust of the earth, who by your breath gave us life, we glorify you.

**C** We glorify you.

**P** Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who suffered death for all humanity, who rose from the grave to open the way to eternal life, we praise you

**C** We praise you.

**P** Holy Spirit, author and giver of life, the comforter of all who sorrow, our sure confidence and everlasting hope, we worship you.

**C** We worship you.

**P** To you , O blessed Trinity, be glory and honor, forever and ever.

**C** AMEN.

**P** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**C** And also with you.<sup>31</sup>

#### **Opening Hymn**

#### **Acknowledgment of Child's Name**

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<sup>30</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 279.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 280.

**P** In baptism, we are cleansed of our sins, God's promise is given to us and we are welcomed into our church family; in baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community where we are to share all of our burdens, suffering together, and rejoice when the time is right.

**P** Today we remember *NAME*, God's child, who did not have the opportunity to live amongst us on earth. We lift up *NAME* to you, oh Lord, living in the hope of the resurrection of all of God's people both living and deceased. May the power of your Holy Spirit be amongst those gathered to remember *NAME* so that they may support each other in community through this tough time.

Let us pray,  
When I speak to you of my sorrow, it moves somehow from its crouching place within. Still I just don't feel complete; Life rarely seems to meet my dreams, God of my hope, God of every new birth, nurture in me, right spirit. AMEN.<sup>32</sup>

### **Word**

Readings

Sermon

Hymn of the Day

Creed

Prayers of the People

### **Sending**

#### **Commendation**

**P** Let us commend *NAME* to the mercy and power of God, our maker who works in unknown ways.

Into your hands, oh God, we commend this child to the Lord's merciful keeping; and let us pray with all our hearts for *NAME*'s parents, X and Y. Even as they grieve at the loss of their child, X and Y give their child to you to hold in your loving care. You are our final home, oh God. We trust in you to give this child eternal happiness and the joy of life he/she was not able to enjoy on earth. We trust in your mercy that your embrace upon this child will be everlasting. AMEN.<sup>33</sup>

### **Committal**

**P** Grace and peace to you from the one who is, who was and who is to come, our lord and savior, Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Let us pray,  
Holy God, remembering the resurrection of Jesus, we are here today to intur your child, *NAME*. Help us to remember your power in the destruction of death while we all live in the hope of your great power. Keep *NAME* whose body we now lay to rest to your everlasting glory.

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<sup>32</sup> Ronna Case, "When Birth Is Also A Funeral," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 32, no. 1 (1978): 20.

<sup>33</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, "The Development of Doctrine About Infants Who Die Unbaptized," *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 9.

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God *NAME*, and we commit his/her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless her/him. The Lord's face shine on her/him with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon her/him with favor and + give her/him peace. AMEN.<sup>34</sup>

Lord God, ever caring and gentle, we commit to your love this little one, who brought joy to our lives for too short of a time. By your power, grant them eternal life. We pray for his/her parents saddened by the loss of their infant. Give them courage and help them in their pain and grief. Allow them to suffer in community. May we all meet one day in the joy and peace of your kingdom. AMEN.<sup>35</sup>

### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Blessing**

**P** Leave this place, never forgetting the grief of those who mourn. Support them always, never departing from their side while they are in sorrow. May God Almighty be with you, Father + Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever, AMEN.

By using the above created liturgy, two tasks are accomplished. First, and most importantly, the family is repeatedly presented with the idea of God's unknown power. Through the liturgy, the family and other mourners are encouraged to trust with hope in their faith and the power of the resurrection. Secondly, the liturgy repeatedly calls on those present to not forget about the family after the birth of a stillborn child. In light of the fact that stillbirth in our social context is oftentimes still considered a stigmatized or ambiguous loss, remaining steadfast to the parents and family during their time of grief is essential. A grieving family may grieve intensely for up to seven years or longer following the death of an unborn child.<sup>36</sup>

Care for the family of a stillborn child does not end after the funeral service is held. The impact of experiencing the death of a child is long lasting. Various members of

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<sup>34</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 284.

<sup>35</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, "The Development of Doctrine About Infants Who Die Unbaptized," *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 9.

<sup>36</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, "Mothers' Grief Following the Death of a Child," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 73.

the family experience loss and grief in different ways. The pastoral care giver must remain steadfast and persistent in their care to a grieving family for an extended period of time following the death. Persistence and patience are paramount as “parents who received plenty of support experienced less intense grief reactions than those who received little support”<sup>37</sup> following the death of a child.

Mothers may suffer the greatest in the aftermath of a child’s death. Even if the child only lived inside the mother’s womb or momentarily outside of its mother’s shelter, the mother has deep ties to the child. After all, the child lived within its mother for up to nine months. After the funeral of a child, contact with those close to the mother typically decreases.<sup>38</sup> This is problematic, as a lack of contact with others does not foster the opportunity for the mother to share her feelings with others; a lack of contact does not allow a mother to talk about what is going on in her life.

Pastoral care givers should periodically contact the grieving mother following the death of her child. The pastor must be willing to be patient and simply listen to what the mother is saying.<sup>39</sup> However, the mother may not be willing or comfortable to talk to another person about the death of her child, especially if the other person is male. Mothers must grieve in a ‘like’ community. Often, ‘like’ community is not based solely on faith but on worldly experience. After the death of a child, mothers sometimes feel “that the experience of losing a child could only be shared by a mother who had gone through a similar experience and reported having received the most help from other parents who had

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<sup>37</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Experience of Social Support Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 11, no. 2 (March 2002): 181.

<sup>38</sup>Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 72.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 73.

cared for”<sup>40</sup> deceased children. A pastoral care giver should be mindful of gender and experiential differences realizing that they are not always able to remedy a situation directly. In this case, the pastor should refer a grieving mother to a support group composed of other women who have lost a child. Mothers often times want to interact with parents having “similar experience, because in their opinion fellow sufferers were the only ones who could understand the experience of losing a child.”<sup>41</sup> In this situation, the pastor is not abandoning the mother but is simply allowing her to express her grief in a manner that is likely more comfortable for her to engage in. It should be remembered that it is not important whom the mother is grieving with, but that the mother is indeed grieving for “remembering the child and talking about the death...[are] perceived to be the best tools for grief work.”<sup>42</sup>

Fathers also grieve as a result of the death of a child. However, fathers grieve in a different way than that of mothers. Resulting from cultural norms, fathers are often forced to grieve internally not expressing their feelings publicly. Coincidentally, men do not like talking about their feelings with others and feel that they are not able to cry. Men, therefore, prefer what is referred to as “direct action.”<sup>43</sup> Direct action means that men are more likely to seek out professional help as a result of their grief. Men may feel the same feelings as women, and it is just as important for men to have the opportunity to grieve

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<sup>40</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Experience of Social Support Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 11, no. 2 (March 2002): 181.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>42</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 76.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 70.



publically, just the same as women. During the grief process, men also tend to return to work sooner after the death of a child as compared to women.<sup>44</sup>

When the male returns back to his normal routine after the grieving process, communication becomes key between parents grieving for a child. Parents must be encouraged to continue to talk about their feelings in relation to their lost child even after one spouse returns to a normal schedule, such as a work routine. Mothers feel that “people close to them were the main source of help”<sup>45</sup> during their grieving. Furthermore, “The spouses’ ability to perpetually review the child’s death was of major importance. Mothers had a greater need than fathers to talk and review the events.”<sup>46</sup> Males must be encouraged by pastoral care givers to listen to their spouses and not forget that they may be grieving in different ways. Both spouses should be urged to listen, console and care for their other constantly.<sup>47</sup> The ability of both spouses to listen, console and care constantly for their other is crucial to successfully journeying through the grieving process together. If the pastoral care giver observes that communication is not occurring between spouses, she or he should talk with the couple to eliminate the lack of communication. If the situation is beyond the pastor’s reach, she or he should refer the couple to couple’s therapy.

The family’s existing children must not be forgotten during the grieving period following the death of a new child in the family. Involving children in the grieving process is actually beneficial to maintaining or strengthening nuclear family ties. After

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>45</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Experience of Social Support Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 11, no. 2 (March 2002): 180.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>47</sup> Hilikka Laakso and Marita Paunonen-Ilmonen, “Mothers’ Grief Following the Death of a Child,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 36, no. 1 (October 2001): 73.

experiencing a death, parents may feel that they are able to take care of their children by themselves. Unfortunately, parents are so wrapped up in their own suffering that they are not fully able to care for their other children's expressions of grief.<sup>48</sup> The pastoral care giver must be willing to reach out to the grieving family's other children with an open heart and honest answers. Honest answers and open conversation are essential to the grief process of all children. When the death of the sibling is talked about openly and honestly, death becomes something real as compared to fantasy when the death is not talked about around the children.<sup>49</sup> Children, no matter their age, shall be given honest answers that do not create any false ideas as a result of using metaphors. For example, a child should be told that their sibling has died as opposed to sleeping.<sup>50</sup> The use of metaphors allows the child to make death out to be something other than what it actually is. Therefore, children should be included in all aspects of the grieving process. Allowing a child to attend the funeral is essential. At the visitation and funeral, the child is able to observe the community that is present to support the family allowing them to know that others care about what they are going through.<sup>51</sup> However, a child should not be forced to attend.

After experiencing a death, a surviving child may feel that they are going to die themselves. If this concern arises among surviving children, the children should be reassured that they are healthy and will continue to live. Children can be reminded that "yes, it is scary when somebody dies. It reminds us that we will die someday too. But it isn't something that we worry about all the time because our bodies are strong...most

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<sup>48</sup> Irene Moriarty, "Mourning The Death Of An Infant: The Siblings' Story," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 32, no. 1 (1978): 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

people live until they are old.”<sup>52</sup> Just as spouses must be ever present to discuss their grieving with each other, parents shall remain steadfast in the support of their children. Children will also often assume that their sibling died as a result of improper care from the parents. Most importantly, children must be reassured that they will be taken care of in a loving manner for the rest of their lives.<sup>53</sup> As soon as possible following the death, parents should return their children to a regular schedule so that children are reassured of their parent’s dedication to their wellbeing.

Experiencing the death of a stillborn child is no easy task. However, through the guidance of the pastor or pastoral care giver coupled with the support of the parent’s extended family and Christian community, the process can become more manageable. Using the right words and effectively explaining concepts are paramount for pastors. Journeying with the grieving family for the duration of the grieving process is the responsibility of all who surround the family in their daily life. Living under the cross and recognizing that bad things happen in the world without explanation, the Christian community must embrace those who experience death in the form of stillbirth. When members of the Christian community name stillbirth for what it actually is, death, the mourning process will become more manageable through recognition of the loss. All Christians must journey together through tough times, living in the hope of the resurrection while supporting each other in all that they do.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 28.

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