

DEATH AND THE FAMILY



Mourning loved ones.

Photo: Andrew Penner.

EDITORIAL

In this editorial, reflections from articles sent in from 11 different countries within the Anglican Communion have been set in the context of points given in a lecture on *Death, Bereavement and Christian Faith* by The Most Revd Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales.

At the time of Jesus, people rarely lived to more than 30 years old. Even 200 years ago, many died either in infancy or in what we would now regard as their prime. Death was therefore an inevitable part of life for most people, and most would have died at home amidst relatives and friends. Nowadays many who live in developed countries reach middle-age before they have any direct experience of bereavement and an increasing number of people die away from home in a hospital or hospice. Although portrayals of

violence and death feature regularly in the papers and on television, these can seem unreal and carry little personal impact. In many Western countries, rituals for mourning have also disappeared and death and grief are seen as private matters to be "got over" as soon as possible. Contrast this with the treatment of death in Africa and other countries such as Papua New Guinea where there are public rituals and community support. Facing death in these cultures, however, may still be difficult: in Kenya coffin-makers near a hospital are forbidden from displaying their wares openly and mentioning death in sermons is frowned on. But as is shown in the account of the much-used little room in a children's hospice in the UK, where a child's body can be tended by the family until the funeral, giving time and space for the expression of grief together with community support, can help the process of mourning.

Bereavement has been described as the most severe crisis of human existence. What about faith at a time of crisis? Christians believe that death is not the end, for we go out not into nothingness but in to the arms of a God of love as portrayed by Jesus. That faith gives us hope but since we will not see our loved ones again in this life, the pain of grief and separation can nevertheless be acute. The Christian has to live within this tension of both loss and hope. When natural disasters or terrible atrocities occur, as happened in New Orleans and in the Sudan, even people of faith may ask profound questions about God's seeming absence. At times such as these, faith hangs on almost by its fingertips, but Christians believe that God is always to be found on the side of those who suffer and that He aches at the wounds of His world. That belief is strengthened by the Christ-like compassion, shown in many of the stories told in this newsletter, of the people who support those suffering terrible loss and bereavement.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



Unhealthy environment for children, DRC.

Photo: Lou Scott-Joynt.

Death of children in Kinshasa, Congo

Kinshasa is the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo situated in one of the eight dioceses of the Anglican Church of Congo. As a big town, it faces many challenges. The most crying challenge is the death of children. There are many reasons for this:

- **Poverty:** when visiting houses in Kinshasa, you learn that most people used to eat once a day. People almost have to fight to get something to eat tonight. Poverty is still the most crying issue that negatively affects human life and because of lack of sufficient food, children are dying.
- **Malnutrition:** as parents are jobless or receive insufficient salary, children do not have enough to eat. Their diet is not respected because they have to depend on their parents' income or on what they find as food that day. This causes malnutrition which leads to children's death.
- **Bad life conditions:** in several parts of Kinshasa, the environment is not safe for human beings, especially for children. There are many mosquitoes that bring malaria and death. Most people do not have nets to protect themselves and several cases of sickness in

Kinshasa clinics are reported as malaria. Many have already died. The most vulnerable group is that of children. Furthermore, it is very warm in Kinshasa.

- **Wars:** the DR Congo is known as one of the countries that has faced several wars, above all its eastern part. In these, the main victims were children who were killed or left as orphans. The displacement caused by the wars is another cause of children's death. In Kinshasa, there are a lot of

orphans, who, because of lack of support, become street children. Crossing avenues in the town, they are full of abandoned street children. They have to look to any means to get something to eat. That is why some of them become thieves or prostitutes when young, and use drugs. This critical situation leads them to premature death.

Facing those challenges, we are involved in health education to help people to protect themselves against some diseases based on bad life-conditions. These challenges slow down the church growth. Furthermore, our mission is to help them in food security by encouraging them in agriculture instead of doing nothing. Having sufficient cheap food helps to avoid some diseases, protect the environment and lessen climactic degradation. We are taking care of orphans only partially because of lack of funds. Seminars or workshops are taking place on nutrition for women. We need your prayers so that God helps us to overcome those challenges on children's deaths.

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Photo Mothers' Union.

AFRICA



Children standing at their mother's grave, S.Africa.

Photo: Chris de Bode/Panos Photos.

KENYA

Death in the African context has been viewed as a cruel robber who robs us of our loved one. And its cruelty is felt wide and far due to the fact that Africans still have and value the extended family. This includes aunts, uncles, grandparents, nephews, first and second cousins, so when death strikes it not only affects the immediate family but also the extended family.

In the Kenyan context, I will speak from two perspectives; first from my own tribe's perspective; secondly from my current work. I am a Luo by tribe but I have lived more than half my years outside my geographical region of birth, so I am a member of the diaspora. The Luo generally hold this extended family concept so close to their heart that not even death can separate them. When a Luo dies, wherever that may be, the remains have to be brought back to his/her ancestral birth place. A recent example is when a prominent sports administrator died in Nairobi and the first wife connived with others and cremated the body secretly in Nairobi, the clan and family still went ahead and buried an empty coffin stuffed with the deceased's clothes in his rural home near Kisumu. Relatives from all walks of life attend funerals and contribute some money for feeding the guests and the transportation of the body back home. These contributions are solely for expenses, and there is hardly anything to

assist the surviving next-of-kin. Sometimes the deceased's assets are auctioned to offset some of the debts – to the detriment of the nuclear family. The Luo culture is so strong that in most cases it dictates to the Church how the burial should be done. Where there is a conflict, the culture takes precedence.

Coming to the faith has played a great role in comforting the bereaved family but their material and financial support has been wanting. In Kenya, churches still depend on voluntary offerings and lack income-generating projects to anchor their financial base. If paying their priest is a hassle, how can they afford to support the bereaved financially? Church people are very good in offering moral and spiritual support initially, but after the burial their support is minimal. Those living away or in cities and towns form welfare associations. Membership is based on tribe affiliation, clan or socio-economic groups. The main aim of these groups is support for their members and their next of kin in times of death – there is no major economic agenda. And the Church usually relies on these groups to help take care of the bereaved.

The faith's moral support gives hope of future re-union with the departed, if they accept Christ as their personal saviour. They emphasise this salvation so much so that many get saved even during their last breath so that they may be able to meet

their departed loved ones. In some cases, the left-behind family can be saved in the crisis only to backslide immediately after the burial due to cultural and traditional beliefs. These cultural and traditional practices, coupled with the extended family, help a great deal in enabling the bereaved cope with the grief and loss.

The Churches in Kenya have no concrete programmes for widows or widowers; even seminars which are occasionally held for them are just for moral support and spiritual nourishment. I think if these seminars could also provide training in skills to empower them economically, they could greatly help to alleviate the endemic squalor in which many widows and widowers live.

Where I live now, away from my homeland, death is hardly mentioned – coffin-makers who erect their workshops near hospitals are not allowed to display coffins openly, because it suggests that the patients will not recover. And even as a priest, as I visit the sick on the verge of death, I am not allowed to say to the relatives that we are losing the patient. Sermons which mention death are openly frowned on, because it will be contrived to mean that death will strike soon in the vicinity.

Although the Church's core business is propagating the gospel of Christ, the lack of programmes to comfort and support the bereaved goes against the spirit of Christ as expounded in James 2:14-17, that faith without works is dead. The Church should be proactive and work to address this apathy. With these programmes, even non-believers can be converted and embrace salvation, just as the early church missionaries who brought Christianity to Kenya started schools and hospitals and converted many.

When death strikes it causes irreparable damage to the family. The Church should prepare people for death, though it is normally a taboo to talk about death, so there is no preparation for this inevitable aspect of life. It is high time the Church put in place programmes to address this silence and this old social problem that has been neglected or wished away as if it does not need an answer.

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AFRICA

NIGERIA

To some, the word "death" sounds like a plague, yet death is the one sure thing we know will happen, as confirmed in many pages of Scripture. How and when this will happen is God's own secret. It is rare to see anyone pray to die, except some elderly who, as a result of ill-health, wonder what they are still doing alive, or a few who feel fed up with life. Death comes in many ways to a family; it may be expected or sudden. Whichever way it comes, there is always denial initially and then confusion, pain, and the *ifs* and *whys* that have no answer.

In Nigeria, when there is a death, it is often attributed to some enemy; this enemy could be a friend or member of the family or some unknown person who has engaged the services of another god. It is usually difficult, when death occurs, to believe the person died of natural causes. Many Christians are often torn between believing what they have read in the Scriptures and the world outside.

Death in the family, in our culture, is death to the extended family, the neighbour and the community at large. As a result, nobody is ever alone when death occurs; death is not a private matter as it is seen in the Western world, but public. Friends and family often gather to pray and give words of comfort and support as well as help in the funeral arrangements. There has never been a need to set up special projects for bereaved families. As soon as a death is announced, the priest or assistant will always be at the family home to pray, counsel, encourage and give support. Mothers' Union and church members are around to help in whatever way they can, especially in areas where the local rituals to be performed will compromise faith; they will arrange to sleep in the house of the bereaved; this is also done by other church members even where faith is not compromised.

Death affects people in different ways. Even though we know and believe it will come, we all run away from its reality. Faith can be strengthened in death or it can be the reason to stop believing. There is no answer to why God should take anyone, especially when we have prayed. For those who have no faith, death in the family not only causes pain, but can lead to separation in the family or cause severe depression.

Let us share in a personal story of faith as told by a friend:

I got a telephone call from my son while I was on night duty to say he was having headaches, vomiting and shivering... I told him to take paracetamol and go to hospital if he



Extended family and community attend a child's funeral, Central Africa.

Photo: Frederic Courbet/Panos Photos.

had none. Little did I know that what started so simple would end in death. My son was with me the previous day, so I had no reason to believe the symptoms were more than 'flu. At 10am, the hospital called me to say he was getting worse. But there was nothing to prepare me for what I met there – this healthy son of the previous day was now wired to every imaginable gadget in the intensive care unit. I called my husband in Nigeria and a prayer chain around the world started; all our clergy in the diocese and members gathered to pray; prayers were being said in America, Canada, United Kingdom. Phone calls came from everywhere, offering prayers and words of Scripture. I believed with all my heart that God would answer our prayers. By the second day, my son and his wife, my niece and other relatives were all with me in the hospital. For 24 hours we prayed, but God took him. Even when the Doctor said, "We think your son will die today," I never believed him, I believed my God who had the power to heal. I said to all in the room, "Is anything too hard for God?" But my son died. As I went in to see him with everybody around, I acknowledged the greatness of God and gave thanks. We held hands and prayed and left him to rest in peace. The effect of this on the rest of my children has been tremendous as their faith has been greatly deepened. My daughter struggles, as this favourite brother of

hers passed on without her there. However she is confident she will see him again. As my husband is a minister, while the Church felt the death, yet they have been strengthened by the way my husband and I have reacted. We had no choice; for many years, we prayed, encouraged and helped people who are bereaved. How else could we react but show that we have a God who cares and loves his children?

As Christians living in the Northern part of Nigeria, we are often caught in conflicts between our Muslim brethren, and this always results in loss of lives and property. The churches are often seen helping to rehabilitate those who are affected. This involves counselling, encouraging and praying with those who are bereaved, while helping those whose houses and businesses are lost to begin a new life. In 2001, our diocese was caught up in one of these horrible conflicts. The diocese through the efforts of the Bishop was able to rehabilitate many and over £40,000 was spent. This also helps to deepen the faith of the people.

Death in the family requires the grace of God to remain strong in the Lord. We are grateful for having extended families in our part of the world that helps during the stages of grieving and afterwards.

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GHANA

Attitude towards death in Ghana is largely influenced by the belief that it concludes the cycle of life. Christians and traditionalists alike consider it to be a transition from physical to spiritual life. Therefore, when a person dies in Ghana, it is believed that he is making a journey to the spirit world, to eternity where he will live as an ancestor (saint) if his life was worthy of emulation.

Whilst in the next world, the dead are believed to have spiritual contact with the living. It is believed they often visit home at night and can appear to relatives in dreams to give them information or advice. They can also give warnings about their children, especially if they are not properly cared for. Such warnings are taken seriously because it is believed failure to heed may result in one's death. Pastoral or spiritual guidance are always sought from the priest in such situations. Counselling to help the client deal with the dream is always employed by the priests, but clients would never be satisfied unless prayers have been said for them.

So much concern is shown for the dead in Ghana because of the value placed on human life. The manner of funeral ritual expresses deep feelings of sorrow and loss. When somebody dies, it affects the whole community and the church to which he belongs. The Church, friends and sympathisers mourn together with the bereaved family. The priest and his congregation would go to console and pray for the family as soon as the death of a member is reported. Regular pastoral visits by both the priest and societies in the church help the bereaved deal with the loss.

Formal education, social and economic factors have influenced performance of funeral rites in Ghana. In the past, people were buried on the day they died. Bodies are now kept in the mortuary for a long time until relatives are adequately organised to give a fitting burial ceremony to the departed soul. Funerals are announced on the radio and television, in the newspapers and through posters. Expensive coffins and shrouds are

provided for the dead, food and refreshment for invited guests on the night of wake-keeping and the day of burial. Many take loans where necessary to meet this expenditure.

The Church considers this practice as unnecessary and a misapplication of resources. The Church, together with leading members of society, has called for constraints in this aspect of our culture. Consequently, the Anglican, Methodist and other Christian churches have ruled that their members should not organise wake-keeping when a member dies, to help control the bereaved family's expenditure. Priests in the Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast have been charged to teach on the Christian meaning of death to their congregations and to engage them to reflect on the impact of the practice on the families.

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Haus Krai

The words '*Haus Krai*' are Melanesian Pidgin for House of Cry – a place where mourning takes place particularly when someone dies. Generally, *Haus Krai* is a process which differs from region to region. In the past pre-colonial era, mourning would take years. That has changed since contact with outside world. Yet mourning remains a process.

In the coastal region where I come from, mourning will go on for weeks or months depending on the nature of the death and who it is for. If someone young or prestigious dies accidentally, the mourning process will be of anger and deep sorrow, and may take months, with immediate relatives in black ashes and rags until the cause of the death is established. Sometimes this can be disastrous, resulting in more deaths. If someone older and or younger dies from sickness or long illness, mourning will not reflect anger and only immediate relatives will take part.

Distant relatives will console immediate relatives for the duration of *Haus Krai*. This usually ends with 'pig killing,' a ceremony observed in slaughtering pigs and feasting to officially end the mourning, thank distant relatives for their consolation and send them away.

In the Highlands where I am working, it is a bit different. Everyone – immediate relatives as well as distant relatives – and

all who come to the *Haus Krai* put on black ashes. The impact is huge – more than that of the coast, especially when a younger or prestigious person dies. Pig-killing occurs twice in the process: the first takes place straight after the burial; the second, with the number of pigs killed reflecting the prestige of the deceased, after some weeks or months to again thank those involved and mark the end of the mourning process.

When *Haus Krai* is in progress, proper observance includes stopping normal operations. It calls for community participation and involvement. If one fails to observe *Haus Krai* one could be seen as perpetrator. *Haus Krai* is a time of mourning and sorrow but sometimes politics take the upper hand. Even after contact with the outside world and much evangelisation by Christian Churches over decades, *Haus Krai* politics are an integral part of PNG.

As with other traditional practices, the Anglican Church of PNG has sought to Christianise the *Haus Krai* rather than abolish it. Mourning is often accompanied by a church youth group playing guitars and singing Christian songs and choruses. The local priest will counsel the mourners (particularly the close relatives) and try to lead their thoughts away from the fear of sorcery towards an awareness of God's hand at work in the situation. This may involve an explanation



Widow of Simbai – a remote Anglican Mission Station in the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

Photo: Chris Luxton.

of the medical and other factors responsible for the death. Changing customary beliefs is, however, a slow process, and except where the members of a family or clan have accepted Christianity at a deep level, the thoughts and feelings of those attending the *Haus Krai* are likely to contain a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements.

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ENGLAND



Sister Frances with Jordie who has recently died.

Photo: Steve Wheeler.

Turning Back the Clocks in a Little Room

Tom was seven years old. One Monday, his teacher phoned and asked his mother to take him home as he was complaining of a headache. The next day he was in intensive care with symptoms of meningitis. This developed into encephalitis and he died two days later. An hour after his death, his parents left the hospital carrying a small bag of his possessions. They telephoned later to ask if they could see his body and were given another appointment. Afterwards they wished they hadn't seen him. He didn't look like their little boy and the viewing room was unfamiliar and unfriendly. Sadly, many families could tell similar stories of the circumstances surrounding their child's death and of the long, lonely months ahead with no offer of support.

I will always be grateful to a woman I met almost 30 years ago. She sought me out, having read of our plans to establish a children's hospice offering respite care, end-of-life care and long-term family support. She told me her ten-year-old daughter had cancer which had not responded to treatment. I got to know them well over the next months and stayed with them in the final days of the little girl's life. She died in her own bed at home. Her mother decided to look after her daughter in the way familiar to her from her Irish childhood. She washed and dressed her, brushed her hair and arranged her toys and treasured possessions around her. There were flowers and candles and her music playing softly. Over the next days, family and friends came to say their goodbyes. Finally the mother lifted her daughter into the coffin and we followed to the service. In a horrendously imperfect world, I believed this was about as perfect as it could be.

We asked the architect of Helen House,

our children's hospice, to design an extra room, like a bedroom, which could be cooled sufficiently for a child to lie during the days between death and the funeral. It is simply called the Little Room. Over the years countless families have made it appropriate for their child – a spaceship, a fairy grotto or just a room filled with the things which they associate with their son or daughter.

Most often the family will stay in Helen House between the death of their child and the funeral, going in and out of the Little Room as often as they like, day or night, sometimes cuddling the child, talking, crying, silent, alone or together. Brothers and sisters, however young, come and go too, included wherever possible. At Helen House, we believe that real memories are easier to live with than those conjured up through imagination brought about by exclusion. We live in a culture which tries to sanitise death and to do what is necessary as quickly as possible. Bereaved families are supposed to be "getting back to normal" in about six weeks, whereas we have learnt that when a child dies, the second year of bereavement is often worse than the first. So we have deliberately turned the clocks back, creating a counter-cultural ethos.

Sometimes we have known the family for a number of years before their child dies, with the opportunity to build a relationship of trust. On other occasions, we have not known the child alive, but have simply been asked by the local hospital if our Little Room is free and if the family can come to us. In both situations, countless families have told us how much it has meant to be able to do things their way and how it gave them back a little control in a world which seemed to have spun dangerously out of control.

During those days after the child has died,

we will help the family to create the Funeral Service if they would like us to do so. They continue to be the people who know their child better than anyone else and we are there simply to support them. The support for each member of the family will continue for as long as they want it, sometimes several years. I believe that it is about walking the walk together in a journey which, for those whose child dies, will be almost unbearably painful. What we have to offer is ourselves as fellow human beings in friendship, often without the answers to those big questions.

As an exceptionally bright ten-year-old once said to me, 'We have the questions, God has the answers, and only in the end when we die will he tell us the answers.'

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Seeds of Hope Children's Garden

The Seeds of Hope Children's Garden is situated within the grounds of Guildford Cathedral in Surrey, England, thanks to the generosity of the Dean and Chapter. It is a unique garden designed to help children and young people explore feelings of loss of all kinds with the support of their families, teachers and carers.

The founder of the Seeds of Hope Children's Garden charity says, "Our aim is to provide a resource to help children and young people explore the feelings they may feel unable to articulate and to enable their friends and classmates to learn more about what they might be going through, in order that no young person ends up feeling as isolated as the young boy who told us,

"The worse thing after my Dad died in the school holidays was going back to my school and nobody saying anything about my Dad; it was like it didn't matter. It did matter and was awful because Mum had told the school. I just didn't want to go to school after that."

The Garden is divided into four areas. The Winter Garden (*Garden of Thought*) is home to a labyrinth, an ancient symbol for the journey of life. This Garden represents the early days of loss when someone has died, when life is hard and there's no sign of colour. But inside the seedpods, things are happening, reminding us that life goes on.

The Spring Garden (*Garden of Hope*) is full of trees in blossom and bulbs bursting out of the ground. A winding path leads the way forward after shock and heartbreak. New leaves show that loss and death can be a beginning as well as an end.

The Summer Garden (*Garden of Light*) is



Life size bronze sculpture of children having fun.

Photo: Seeds of Hope Children's Garden.



The charity has produced an accompanying Activity and Information Pack, full of creative suggestions of ways to use Nature's ever-present cycles of life to encourage learning about change, endings and beginnings, life and death. It includes information for parents and lesson plans for teachers. For the free pack, see details on the website where there is also a virtual Memory Meadow where adults and children can plant a flower in memory of someone who has died.

full of colourful shrubs and roses, reminders that, even in very sad times, there are happy times too. A bronze sculpture of two life-sized children represents the fact that childhood is about having fun. An older girl blows dandelion seeds for a younger boy who is trying to catch them.

The Autumn Garden (Garden of Change) is full of fruits, seeds and berries showing that time passes and nothing stays the same. A bud becomes a flower, a flower becomes a fruit and the fruit will eventually drop from the tree. But in the fruit are the seeds from which new life will grow. Life is a journey full of change.

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DYING ABROAD IN SPAIN

Spain is the holiday destination every year for British people from all walks of life who enjoy the weather, the alcohol, food and the culture. It is often whilst on these holidays, that the dream sets in: retirement to Spain and those two weeks of fun, sun and relaxation for the rest of their lives. Some think out their future here responsibly, but many sell up everything in Britain and just arrive. Some, not yet of retirement age, turn up hoping to get a job and reinvent themselves – perhaps buy a bar or restaurant with no or little idea of how they are going to make it work. Little or no thought has ever gone into health-care for the family, which can be expensive if you are not on the Spanish health system, and death – what is that but something on the horizon? – No need to look at it now. If only they knew how many people will die during the next year from accidents, drugs, illness, or just old age. Not many people take stock and financially prepare themselves or their loved ones for this ordeal.

Most people who move or retire to Spain come as couples, and when illness or death strikes one of them they have no

help from close family. They struggle on alone apart from friends made whilst in Spain. Here, in our small area on the Costa Blanca South, we are averaging 180 funerals a year. As a Reader in training, and having attended a bereavement

seminar in France, one of my roles has been to act as Bereavement co-ordinator from the twelve Tanatorios/Crematorios in our Chaplaincy. Over the two years I have been taking funerals, it has amazed me how lonely the ones left are, once



Bereavement group and helpers, Torrevieja, Spain. The dogs play an important part in helping people relax.

Photo: Keith Brown.

their family – if they have any – have returned home to England after the service. This often takes place within 24-36 hours of the death. I could see that we needed a support group for the survivors who seemed so far from their birthplace and former home. With the help of the Mothers' Union, we have been running a Bereavement Group for a year, and each month our meeting brings new faces to our door, where over a cup of tea they meet other people in a similar situation to themselves and realise that they are not alone with their loneliness, grief and sometimes their guilt.

When requested, we attend hospitals for laying-on of hands to the sick and dying. Each member of our team has an area for

which they are responsible and keep in touch with our bereaved between meetings by telephone. We respond at any time to problems. On one occasion about midnight, a widow, feeling guilty that she lived while her husband had died, drank too much wine and telephoned to inform me she was about to join her husband and kill herself. It's amazing how quickly one can get out of bed, dress and drive 20 kilometres, to spend the next three hours with her – counselling, reassuring, praying and sobering her up. It's all part of our Christian duty here in Spain. We telephone and make home visits for as long as we can to those who have been bereaved and have no one to share their lives with, when we in our Christian family have so much to thank God for.

A number of our bereaved now attend church, a number have joined the Mothers' Union, and last year the Bishop confirmed a husband and daughter who joined the church after losing a wife and mother. We are still in our infancy in our work with people who have been bereaved but, with God's love, help, strength and guidance, we shall go on to be there for those who have lost so much.

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DEATH IN THE ARMY



Death in the Army: repatriation ceremony.

I have recently moved back to parish ministry after eight years as a chaplain in the army. Within a matter of days of my licensing as priest-in-charge, I have been involved – unsurprisingly – in a number of funerals. Of course, where deaths and reactions to death are concerned, there is no such thing as “normal”. But one could say, I think, that none of these funerals have been unusual. All those who died were elderly and their deaths, though still a shock to their loved ones, were not unexpected. Each funeral was attended by between 20 and 50 people and was followed by a quiet gathering in a hall or family home for refreshments.

The last funeral that I conducted while in the army could not have been more different. It was for a young man who had

been killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. His death brought total devastation to his family and friends and comrades. His funeral was attended by hundreds, many in uniform, and the town where it was held was literally brought to a standstill. When we came out of church at the end of the service, the street was about four deep with townspeople who had gathered during the service. At his graveside, as some of his friends lowered his coffin into the ground, others fired a salute; and as the Last Post faded away there was a fly-past by a Harrier jet. The mourners, both civilian and military, gathered at a large

venue, and some serious drinking got underway. This was not a normal funeral or a normal death.

Every death that happens in the army is untimely and unexpected because it is a young person's job. Of course it's a dangerous job, and it's getting more so. Soldiers and their families know the risks, but never think that it – death – is going to happen to them, to their loved one. The task of caring for the bereaved is shared between the chaplain who is deployed on operations, and the chaplain who, with local clergy, provides pastoral care to the families back home. On operations, the chaplain may mark the death by gathering together the immediate friends of the one who has been killed, to share their thoughts and

memories and to offer prayer. There may be a service for the whole unit, and there will be a repatriation service from the airhead, as the coffin is carried aboard the plane to be flown back home.

My experience of the dangers of being deployed is that soldiers tend to ask deeper questions about life and death and the meaning of it all. They may not generally be Christians in an orthodox or traditional sense, but they are often very spiritual people, and they have a strong sense of hope. At that last funeral I conducted as an army chaplain, more than one of the dead soldier's friends had expressed the sentiment: “See you in the re-org” – the reorganisation after the battle. With *The Ride of the Valkyries* being played as his coffin was carried from church, one might think that most soldiers still believe in Valhalla, the Viking warrior heaven. Perhaps they do, but the notion that death has been conquered is a notion that I for one wish to celebrate with all.

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AUSTRALIA

Support for the family and friends of people who are dying

Across the world, increasing numbers of people with chronic and life-limiting conditions are being cared for at home, by family members and/or friends. As their condition worsens, the challenges of the approaching end-of-life stage increase caregivers' need for support. People in the latter stages of illness are more afraid of dying than death, increasing the load on their family caregivers. So how can we meaningfully support family and other caregivers as they journey through the dying process with their loved-one?

Fear of the end-of-life process often arises when people have experienced – or have heard stories about – a painful or traumatic death. Their fear may be compounded by the social invisibility of death that has been prevalent in Western countries during the last two generations. We have been through a period in human history where death occurred in hospitals and nursing homes or dramatised in movies. Real death has largely taken place “behind closed doors” and people have been protected from the normal processes of dying. Therefore, the course of dying is largely an unknown among the general population. In addition to the lack of knowledge concerning end-of-life, the

person and their caregiver often avoid any real discussion about dying because it is too hard to deal with. Talk of dying indicates that people have given up hope. The way people construct hope and loss is critical to their understanding and coping at the end of their life.

Why would hope be a consideration when someone is dying? Even in the face of death, some caregivers gain strength from hope for a last-minute miracle, or a treatment that will give the person more time or quality of life. Alternatively, caregivers who have come to the realisation that death is near, will hope that they will be able to care for the person effectively. They hope to be able to manage the person's symptoms, especially their pain, and enable them to die in comfort and with dignity. Whatever a caregiver's perspective, maintaining hope is important in the support that Christians can offer to people experiencing end-of-life.

What about loss in the care of a person who is dying? The ultimate loss of the person is obvious, but if we are to support caregivers, we need to understand that they have been experiencing losses since the terminal nature of the person's condition was known. Loss arises from many sources,

including relationships, roles, future expectations and finances. Losses may be ambiguous when caregivers do not understand the illness, the treatment, or the wishes of the dying person. Loss of the future is difficult when the person still has life-stages to complete such as marriage or parenting.

As Church members, we can have an important supportive role through being available to listen to caregivers' stories. In listening, we need actively to hear their losses, their courage, their hopes and their pain. Everyone's situation is different, but most caregivers become experts in providing specific care. It is important that we put aside our own experiences and listen to caregivers, looking for opportunities to offer help, not necessarily advice, and identifying points for prayer. The type of support should be negotiated with the caregiver, but can include household tasks, shopping, child-minding or sitting with the person while the caregiver has a break. Supporting others through the dying process can be a vital and rewarding ministry for your parish or community.

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AUSTRALIA

DEATH BY SUICIDE

SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Living Beyond Suicide Family Support Volunteer workshop in the Riverland, S.A.

Living Beyond Suicide Project

Every time I pick up the phone to a family bereaved by suicide and hear their tear-filled voices, I am taken outside myself. I feel like I am standing next to them in their grief, listening as they tell me of their son, mother or friend. No matter the similarities, every person's grief is different. Sometimes it is

wrapped in devastation or hopelessness. Often, what reverberates down the telephone line is sadness, the kind that gets inside your soul and makes you feel tremendously heavy. The grief that masquerades as anger is often easier to hear, so is the relief that some experience after their loved one's suicide.

The journey of grief is long and fraught with pain, particularly when the loss has been sudden, and especially when it is because of suicide. When someone takes their own life, the lives of those who loved them change forever. You are never the same and what you thought was important before will shift. Perhaps the hardest question is *why*, and it is this question that haunts many survivors. It is often never answered. During the hours and days after a suicide, it is hard to ask for help. *Anglicare-South Australia*, an agency of the Anglican Church, has partnered with the local police to provide support and information for families at the acute stages of their loss. This has made possible a connection between the newly bereaved and a group of trained family-support volunteers, many of whom have also been bereaved by suicide. The volunteers are able to visit families in their homes, and provide a unique type of service to those who are suffering. They are a ray of hope. They have been affected by suicide, but they have not been defeated by the pain.

In the search for meaning and in the search of *why*, questions of faith and belief are often asked, sometimes for the first time. The majority of people I work with who are bereaved, have developed or are exploring for the first time a form of spirituality. God doesn't make the pain go away, but He is a comfort, a constant, and a hope for something new.

In one of the most traumatic experiences a person can endure, a spark can ignite deep within. This spark demands honesty and truth and is no longer content with the way things were. New life emerges and, like streams through the wasteland, a way can be found through the desert. Like coal that is transformed into diamonds, the pain of suicide doesn't have to be the end. Instead, I have seen countless people in South Australia, who have lost siblings, parents or children to suicide, journey through the darkness into a brave new world – a world of remembrance, of meaning and of purpose. My life is far richer for having met these people.

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CANADA – DIOCESE OF THE ARCTIC



Life in the Cold.

Photo: Kit MacLachlan.

Michael and Kit MacLachlan spent nearly 6 years in the 90s ministering to an Inuit Parish on the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

Suicide among Young People.

In Kugluktuk, where the Coppermine River opens into the Arctic Ocean, Inuit life has always been very challenging. Until the 1950s, they lived in igloos or sealskin tents, in temperatures down to -50°C. Ferocious blizzards, added to the perils of starvation and drowning, meant death was an inevitable companion – accepted in ways rare to Western society. The Gospel of God, who cared enough to die to give them forgiveness, peace and hope, came to the Kitikmeot (Central Arctic) in the early years of the 20th century and spread with amazing speed. Life in modern communities after the 50s brought new security, and new pressures – low employment, high rates of alcoholism, drug-use and teenage pregnancies – causing minimal parenting and social skills and low self-esteem, often leading to suicidal behaviour. Our ministry had to address issues of suicide again and again to the same family groups. We needed to address the problems of support for young people, their hopes and prospects in the family and at school or work. Among

the poor and disadvantaged, the disparity between hopes and prospects is often huge and the gap needs addressing from both ends.

We sought particularly to communicate better ways of dealing with a host of issues arising out of the grief and anger resulting from the stream of teenage suicides. Among these were blame, guilt, despair and denial. By identifying someone else to blame, families could avoid guilt by absolving themselves of any responsibility. Nevertheless, the friends and relatives of suicides often feel inappropriate guilt, despite the fact that the suicide has rejected those left behind – not the other way round. There are usually issues that have to be faced, but family and friends are not responsible for that final irrevocable decision. Intervention in the peer group and the family was essential to try to avoid the despair that sometimes led to clusters of suicides, as others were in a sense 'released' to consider this option to solve their problems.

It was important to give full recognition to

the value of an individual life both in God's sight and within the community, without denying the fact of suicide. The good memories must be affirmed and remembered as for any loved person, and no feelings of guilt, blame or shame be allowed to replace, or simply delete, those memories.

The ministry of the Church played an important role in dealing with these issues. For example, when an alcoholic wanted to make a new start, stopping drinking was considerably assisted by a return to God along with the support of the Christian community. One of the first ministries we addressed was the training of new Lay Readers from among the local community, and then the gathering together annually of the Lay Readers from the Deanery (which was the size of Western Europe, though with only five small communities) for fellowship, training and encouragement. Suicide intervention and prevention skill-training amongst teachers and nurses also became an annual task, due to the high turnover of staff.

As there were no undertakers in the community, the role of the minister is a comprehensive one at the time of death, along with the nursing station – involving all the preparations for the disposal of the body as well as for the service. Alongside this, the visiting of the families for evening prayers each day until the funeral, was very much valued, as the whole family, including children, gathered for this important part of the grieving process, and would often amount to 20-30 people.

We spent time getting to know and understand people so that they would trust us and talk when a crisis arose. We believed the key to be keeping the lines of communication open, coupled with clear paths for advice and help where people seemed at risk. Intervention is almost never wrong, even though sometimes mistaken. A person not thinking of self-harm can deny it without trauma or being hinted to consider it, but the person considering suicide needs "permission" to speak of it and release the tension.

Since our time in that community, the situation has improved immeasurably and the hugely successful school and new generation of parents and teachers, combined with the experiences the community has come through, have led to an improved and improving atmosphere of hope and expectation for the future which we continue to pray will prove true for all the people of the North.

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Church Leadership Training.

Photo: Kit MacLachlan.

DEATH ON A LARGE SCALE

SUDAN – WAR

Mary remembers

Before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, the Sudan had been engaged in devastating civil war for much of the last 45 years. The almost entirely black African South had rebelled against the predominantly Arab North centred on Khartoum, who had dominated and exploited the Southern Sudanese for centuries. It is estimated that two million Southerners were killed and hundreds of thousands became refugees, suffering all kinds of abuse and hardship. Children witnessed horrendous acts of violence. The amount of desperate suffering cannot be counted. Despite all this, the Christian churches in Southern Sudan have experienced spectacular growth. Mary, now advancing in years, is a member of the Mothers' Union in Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan. She describes what it was like living in Juba during part of the time between 1983 and 2005 when the town was controlled by Northern troops.

"It was terrible. The worst was the white house, once the official residence of Numayri when he was president in the 1970s when he was in Juba. After 1983, it was taken over by the Northern administration and it became a fearful place. Men and boys were taken there with no warning. If they were taken to this white house they were never seen again. We knew they would be killed. If any one reported that a person had said anything against the occupying force, that person would be taken away. Men were afraid to talk and to go out.

They sat at home. When a man disappeared, you could not talk about it much. You were afraid; you kept it to yourself. You were even afraid to tell the children. What could you tell them? Once I said, "Your father has gone to work," but the child said, "No, there is his bag – if he had gone to work he would have taken his bag." They know. The worst thing was that you could do nothing. What could you do? There was no-one to help. Who could help you? If anyone went to ask about someone who had gone to the white house, he would also go inside and not come out. So it was no use going. No-one could do anything to stop this. We could tell God and he made us strong to bear this. We didn't lose our faith.

Sometimes you would not know how people were killed. Sometimes they laid men on the ground and ran over them with trucks. The army officers from the North were in charge but they made the southern Sudanese do the killing – they were very clever.

Church services were held, but if the preacher said anything wrong he could be taken away too. He had to be careful. The Northerners would come to the service to listen. We did not lose our faith in God; our faith made us strong. We have to be strong. We were all the same. Sometimes we could not go in the church to pray. Then we would choose a tree and gather under it and that would be our church. But we did not stop praying.

Some people are very bitter because

of what happened to them as children. They lost their families; they lost their education; they lost their freedom. They did not understand what was happening to them. These are the dangerous ones now. They have been damaged by their experiences and will cause trouble.

The Northerners encouraged tribal rivalry. They wanted people out of Juba and it became very empty. People chose to leave. You were allowed to go to the North. They provided trucks to take them to the airport. Every week you would see people leaving on the trucks. They would go to camps around Khartoum. If you tried to leave to go to other places like Uganda it was very dangerous. You might be caught and killed. The troops patrolled the roads. The Southern Sudan People's Liberation Army was in the area all around the town. And there were mines.

There is hardly any family in Sudan who has not lost someone. We are all the same – we share this past. We know this.

We thank God for this Peace now. We must keep this Peace. We have to go on with our lives. We need to have our own independent country of Southern Sudan. The Church grew in time of war because God gave us hope where there was no hope."

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The blessings of Peace, Sudan.

USA – HURRICANE KATRINA



Flooded church: the water peak was about 4 feet higher than the line showing where it settled for over 2 weeks.

Four years have passed since one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States, but many of those who lived the nightmare of hurricane Katrina still struggle with the fear, the hurt and the loss that resulted from this deadly and life-changing event. I was lucky in that I was not living in New Orleans on 29 August 2005 (I was, quite literally, in the process of moving to the city on that day.) Yet not one of us who worked with and ministered to those who did live there could fail to be shaken to the depth of our soul by the horrific destruction that resulted in the death of so many innocents, the theft of so much personal history, and the near eradication of so much culture. Even after all this time has passed, the simple question "How are you?" asked in greeting in the reclaimed streets of the Crescent City will often elicit a 30-minute Katrina story, a story of how death roared in on winds and waves, and changed everything.

Having hit Florida only a few days earlier as a smaller yet still destructive force, Katrina built her strength over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and made landfall slightly east of New Orleans just before dawn, with maximum sustained winds of 125 miles per hour and a wall of water 21 feet high pushed before her. By 6:30 am, large portions of East New Orleans were submerged: by 7:45am, water was pouring into the lowest lying and poorest areas of the region; by the end of the day, nearly 80% of New Orleans was under water – in places by as much as 16 to 20 feet. Many people who did not have the means for evacuation, or chose not to evacuate for personal reasons, were drowned in their homes almost immediately. Others died trapped in their attics, having fled to the highest place they could find that was sheltered from the wind. And still others died in the long days to come, waiting for rescue, from lack of medical attention or clean drinking water, or from simple heartbreak at what they had witnessed. By the time she was finished, Katrina took the lives of over 1,800 people; nearly 1,600 in the New Orleans area alone.

It was immediately evident to those of us on the ground working for recovery that the communities of faith were going to have to mobilise and shoulder much of the burden of help for those with the least

ability to help themselves. Government at nearly all levels was ineffective, particularly early on. The work was hampered, however, by the fact that many of the men and women of faith who were being called upon to lead the disaster response efforts were themselves victims of the tragedy. Fortunately, God's grace was everywhere, as offers of prayer rushed in along with relief supplies. We received telephone calls, emails, letters and even hand-made cards from children in Sunday School classrooms around the world, giving an emotional and spiritual boost in the darkest of times. Congregations across the country responded to requests for supplies and experienced manpower as we moved back into the city. In a wonderful expression of love, denominational lines seemed for a season to melt away, divisions over theology took a back seat to a united will for Christian mission and people responded with a generosity that was a sight to behold.

In the early days, I can remember struggling and questioning, "How do we help in this tragedy? What can we, or I, possibly do in the face of all of this loss?" The answer, we found, was often as simple as sitting with someone outside of their destroyed home, crying with them as they held onto the one small piece of their past that they had managed to retrieve from the mould-infested ruins; or listening to them shout in anger at God for abandoning them; or holding their hand and praying for them when they could not vocalise their need. The answer was found not in finding ways to replace lost possessions, but in finding ways to respect lost dignity – and to bring the love of Christ to bear and the hope of resurrection to the forefront of life.

In the years that have come and gone since Katrina did her worst, faith communities have been relentless in their work of rebuilding lives, homes (not houses, but homes) and futures. The Office of Disaster Response of the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana alone has welcomed nearly 10,000 volunteers, coordinated the gutting and rebuilding of nearly 1,000 homes at an estimated value of over \$12.6 million and provided case-management services to more than 2,500 families. The targeted work of the Jericho Road Episcopal Housing

Initiative has moved into Central City New Orleans, a place where it was once a common occurrence for one of the least of our brothers or sisters to be hurt and abandoned, and begun a ministry of transformation that builds a sense of self-worth so that such an act is no longer deemed acceptable by the community. And these actions do not include the lives touched and rebuilt by the positive work of several of our congregations working side-by-side with the diocesan-wide efforts, families of faith that have drawn together to be a light shining upon a hill in their particular neighborhood. In these days, the sacraments have been celebrated, the Word of God has been preached, the presence of Christ has been felt and the dignity of every human being has been respected.

The Church has the opportunity – and responsibility – in these times to proclaim resurrection in the face of death, to sing of Easter morning in the darkest hours of Good Friday. The people of south Louisiana were nearly washed away in the muddy flood waters of Katrina, but thanks in large part to the tireless ministry of the Body of Christ, we are rising from those waters to a new and grace-filled life.

Contact Person: The Revd Canon E. Mark Stevenson, Canon to the Ordinary, The Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, PO Box 5026, LA 70801, USA

A PRAYER FOR MOURNING FAMILIES

Our Father in Heaven:
Bless all families who mourn
the loss of dear ones;
lead them to be aware of your
feeling
for the pain and circumstances of
their loss.
Grant to the distraught, peace,
to the destitute, help,
to the bereft, love.
May each mourning family be
uplifted
by the Communion of saints,
and strengthened by the goodness
of your eternal purpose.
In the name of the Risen Christ.
Amen

Revd John Bradford

**THE NEXT
FAMILY NETWORK
NEWSLETTER**
The next newsletter is to be
on the theme of
Reconciliation and the Family.

Visit the Family Network website: www.iafn.net

The views of individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the International Anglican Family Network.