

# Congregational support over the long haul helps people deal with grief and loss

February 12, 2018

WACO—Churches cannot heal people who experience grief, but like a cast provides support to allow a broken bone to mend properly, congregations can offer support as God gradually knits together lives fractured by loss, a Baylor University social work professor said.



Helen Harris, associate professor in Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work

"God has created our bodies with a marvelous capacity to heal," said Helen Harris, associate professor in Baylor's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work.

Likewise, God heals the broken hearts and wounded spirits of grieving

people, and he can use churches to provide the support necessary for fragmented lives to come back together in healthy ways, she insisted.

Often, congregations look to professional caregivers, such as pastors and counselors, as experts in grief and loss, Harris said.

“The people who know the most about grief are the people who are experiencing it,” said Harris, who helped begin the first hospice in Waco.

Christians rightly celebrate the life of a deceased person and find hope in biblical promises of everlasting life, but they also should find ways both to “come alongside” individuals who have experienced loss and “give space” to allow them to express grief, she said.

## **Unique nature of each person’s grief**

As congregations seek to care for people in grief, their ministry should be “high touch, not high structure,” she emphasized. Formulaic approaches fail to take into account the distinctive ways different people experience grief, she said.

“Grief is universal, but it also is highly individual and unique,” she said.

Churches typically do a good job ministering to people in the days immediately surrounding a death, said Harris, a member of First Woodway Baptist Church in Waco.

“We show up at the hospital, at the home, at visitation and at the funeral,” she said. “We bring casseroles, cakes and pies. But it’s not long before the rest of us move on with our busy lives.”

## **‘One loss after another’**

Many church members have an unspoken expectation that people who have experienced loss should “get on with their lives” after a loss, she observed.

“Actually, the grieving person experiences one loss after another for the first year,” Harris said.

The first birthday, wedding anniversary, Thanksgiving and Christmas without a loved one can be painful, she noted.

Harris suggested congregations maintain a bereavement calendar in the church office as a reminder to send a note or make a phone call to members who have experienced loss before holidays and on other personally important dates.

Even beyond the first year, major life events can trigger grief, she added.

## **‘Not all loss is the same’**

“Think about the bride who doesn’t have her dad there to walk her down the aisle,” she said. “Or maybe it’s the birth of a child, and a loved one is not there to experience it.”

Churches also need to keep in mind grief due to ambiguous loss, Harris noted. In some cases, such as Alzheimer’s disease or traumatic brain injury, a loved one may be physically present but psychologically absent. In other cases, such as separation due to divorce or military deployment, the person remains psychologically present but is physically absent.

“Not all loss is the same,” Harris said.

Different circumstances surrounding a loss also have an impact on how churches should minister to individual circumstances, she observed. People

who lose a loved one due to an act of violence or a catastrophic disaster experience trauma, she noted.

“They need to do trauma work first before they begin grief work,” she said.

Grief recovery does not occur as a linear progression, Harris noted.

“It’s a journey, a process that folds back into itself,” she observed.

Christians help people deal with their grief when they acknowledge its reality, respond in empathy and provide support, she noted.

“The church has the most incredible resource of any organization on Earth to help people who are experiencing grief—its individual and corporate relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” she said.