



Grieving Well

By Rev. Joel Fitzgerald, Sr. Director of Church Relations

One of the hardest things I've had to do is tell my children our beloved dog had passed away. Lucky had been with the family since before each of my boys had been born. She was a constant companion and great dog for two rambunctious boys.

Both my wife and I were pastors. Between us we have presided over a hundred funerals. We thought we knew grief. But walking our children through this very real loss showed us that even us "experts" have much to learn about grief.

I was thinking about this as the Foundation has been working with 3 churches through the *C3: Courageous Congregation Collaborative* process. As Rev. Gary Step explained in a previous newsletter:

"C3, developed by the Texas Methodist Foundation and supported in Michigan through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, equips congregations to strengthen five essential "muscles" for ministry today: grieving well, discerning purpose, walking alongside, tending power, and expanding imagination. Michigan cohorts bring church teams together to learn, experience, and apply these practices in their local settings."

As we journey with these churches, I think exercising that first muscle, grieving well, is crucial. The psychologist and Rabbi Edwin Friedman made the connection that church systems are essentially family systems. So, when a church experiences grief, it will behave much like a family, with all the attendant grace and dysfunction that implies.

When a church experiences disruption, from the loss of a beloved member, the loss of children's or music programs, the broader economic losses in their community, it will go through a grief process. The issue arises when that grief is not dealt with, when the grief gets pushed down, where it molds. I'm amazed at how long churches can hold on to the grief over a loss, even one before the lives of any of the current members.

So how does a church grieve well?

Name the grief: Sometimes just naming the grief is important. What loss has been experienced? How does that make us feel? How has that loss impacted us? Naming grief can be the first step to a church seeing itself and situation in a new light.

Ritualize grief: We are a people of ritual, yet the church often does not ritualize its own grief. Creating a ritual can help us process how we are feeling and begin to live into a new reality.

So how did we process the loss of our beloved dog? We found a tree where she liked to dig, and on a warm day in the spring, we buried her remains and one of her favorite toys. Then we went around and shared the funniest stories from her life and closed with a prayer. It was a simple thing. But it provided the space for my 5- and 10-year-old to process their feelings and know that grieving is ok.

Books I'm reading: *Caring for Clergy* by Thad Austin. In this book, Austin delves into research he did on the ecosystem of clergy care. One of Austin's main takeaways is that clergy care is very fragmented, with many providers who often don't talk to each other. Austin challenges the church and care providers to make active effort to coordinate so that all the needs of clergy are taken care of.

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