



# MINISTERING IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY

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Tragedy is a fact of life. In the past year, terrorist bombings, active shooter incidents in schools and churches, and natural disasters occurring worldwide claimed many lives and critically injured more. As ministry leaders, we cannot shield ourselves or our congregations from heartbreak.

Christ warned us tragic times would come. He also promised He would be with us through every moment (Matthew 28:20). This knowledge gives us hope and comfort and helps us cope with loss and grief.

## **The Role of Church Leadership in the Midst of Tragedy**

Ministry leaders are primary points of contact for the bereaved. When a tragedy occurs, church leaders provide emotional support and spiritual guidance for those who experience loss. Tragic deaths, such as a young person's suicide or mass shooting casualties, affect an entire congregation.

## **What You Can Do**

The church's greatest strength is its ability to provide hope and comfort in a time of grief. As spiritual leaders, reach out to those who are hurting and provide for their spiritual needs. Pray with the bereaved and remind them of God's love through their time of suffering. Demonstrate compassion and sympathy through the use of active listening skills. Bereaved individuals are reassured when they believe you hear them, and their emotions are validated.

Equally important is the ability for church leaders to create a safe place for people to grieve together. Open the worship space for prayer vigils. Hold a community



meeting to discuss the tragedy. Creating a safe space for those not directly impacted gives other church members the chance to mourn and find support from each other.

Another option is to hold a meeting with the congregation following a service. Members can then openly dialogue with each other and their spiritual leaders about their experiences, emotions, and concerns about the situation.

These events do not have to be structured, but someone must be designated to make certain all members have a chance to be heard. It is important that everyone involved understands that these meetings are not meant to be group therapy sessions. Limit conversations to the subjects of the tragedy and those directly impacted.

### When to Seek Outside Support

Many times, church and spiritual leaders are sought after by bereaved members to render counseling services. Unless the leader has been trained in clinical counseling or another counseling discipline, providing psychological therapy goes beyond their scope of practice. It may be necessary to meet with the individual(s) once or twice to determine if their needs are of a spiritual or psychological nature.

If the needs are of a psychological nature, such as grief counseling or family therapy, refer the bereaved to trained professional counselors. Ministry leaders should have a referral list of appropriate counselors

and social workers for domestic and child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, marriage and family therapy, and individual counseling.

When an event affects an entire congregation, leaders can network with local professional counselors or aid agencies on behalf of their members. Churches can also assist bereaved members by posting flyers, brochures, or contact information for trusted organizations such as Adventist Community Services, The American Red Cross, The Volunteers of America, or Children’s Disaster Services. Organizations such as these are trained to provide aid and mental health counseling for those coping with large-scale disasters.

### Give Love and Hope

Utilizing outside help is not a sign of weak faith or distrust in God. God knew that the hardships of a sinful world would threaten to overwhelm us; therefore, we are counseled to bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). As Christians, the greatest help we can give to those who are hurting are the gifts of love and hope. Love for each other and hope in a loving God who watches over us, grieves with us, and longs for the day when He can gather us to Himself to wipe every tear from our eyes.



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