

# *Ministering to* Grieving Families:

How Can I Show I Care?

By John E. Dent, Jr

**S**irens split the quiet calmness of the icy early morning air.

Little did I realize that these sirens would forever change the life of my family. I sipped a mug of coffee and went about editing a book on deacon ministry; only later did I realize that I had heard the sounds—just after 7:00 a.m. I was focused on working. My wife took our 13-year-old daughter to school. I suppose I said goodbye, but I really don't remember. I do remember what happened next.

After hearing the dog barking, I was not surprised to hear the doorbell. But I was not prepared for the sight of the two state troopers standing on my porch. I don't know if my heart stopped beating, but I'm sure I held my breath—and waited for the news I knew they must be bringing. I had been a pastor and a chaplain in the Air National Guard; I knew what was coming.

My mind raced. I knew our 20-year-old daughter was upstairs. I remembered that my wife had taken our youngest daughter to school a few minutes earlier. I knew that Ellen, our 17-year-old high school senior had left for school an hour earlier. I couldn't wait any longer. Standing in the doorway I blurted out, "Who is it?" The troopers identified themselves and asked if this was the Dent residence. I suppose that I responded with a yes and invited them inside.

One of the troopers reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a driver's license and asked if I had a daughter named Ellen Marie Dent. When I said yes, he told me that there had been an accident. He said that he was sorry—Ellen didn't make it. I asked for details and the trooper told me that Ellen had skidded on an icy patch, lost control of her car, and hit a school bus. She was killed instantly. I asked about the school bus and the trooper told me that the bus was empty except for the driver who sustained only minor injuries.

Even as the trooper was speaking, I began



thinking about how I was going to tell my wife that we had lost one of our daughters and tell our other girls that they had lost their sister. I knew our lives forever would be different. I remembered the sirens—and I remember praying to God for wisdom and strength.

My seminary education and my training and experience as a chaplain had taught me what to expect and what to do. But all that training and experience didn't prepare me for what the Sunday School class I taught and the church we are members of did for us.

If you have not already had an experience where your Sunday School class and your church ministered to a family in grief, you probably will. If you have ministered to families in grief, you'll probably welcome some ideas on how you can be Christ's hands the next time an opportunity comes to share Christ's love in tangible ways to a family.

## Immediate Actions

What can you do to help grieving families immediately? How can you help meet their needs? Before you do anything else, pray. Pray that God would help you know what to do and say. Pray that God's Holy Spirit would give comfort and strength to the family. Pray that God would use you to bring others closer to Him. We found the following actions by my coworkers, by our church family, and by our neighbors helpful.

- 1. Go to see the family.** Nothing shows you care more than your being there. Nothing else you can do comforts like the presence of other Christians.
- 2. Hug, cry, and pray with the family.** Perhaps more than any other things you can do, these three actions help people know you care.
- 3. Bring food to the home.** Encourage people to increase their intake of liquids. Family members may not feel like eating, but they need to do so.
- 4. Offer to answer the door and the telephone.** Relieving grieving families of these responsibilities frees the family for other things.
- 5. Assist in meeting the needs for out of town guests.** Perhaps you could offer to keep guests in

your home or to make reservations at a hotel for them. You could offer to pick up people from the airport or train or bus stations.

**6. Make sure the ministers know of any needs you uncover.** Ministers can't help when they don't know the needs. Be their eyes and ears. Communicate with them.

**7. Give reassurance by your actions more than with your words.** Words can be helpful, but families remember actions more.

The first day after a family learns of the death of a loved one is extremely important. Take time to show Christ's love through your actions—but don't let it stop then.

## Short-Term Responses

The next several days after families receive news of the death of a loved one offer many opportunities for you to help grieving families.

- 1. Encourage the family to consider setting up a memorial fund.** After families receive several dozen arrangements of flowers or plants, the presence of these gifts loses some of the desired impact. We knew that we'd have lots of flowers so we asked that a memorial fund be set up at our church and at Ellen's high school. We also received many donations made to the Gideons in memory of our daughter.

**2. Ask the family if they need help in transportation during the next few days.**

Offer to drive them where they need to go or offer to lend them a car.

**3. Volunteer to collect their mail, water their plants and flowers, and take care of any pets**—especially if the family has to leave town for the funeral or for a graveside service.

**4. Share cherished memories of the deceased person.** As friends told us what Ellen meant to them, we found comfort.

**5. Offer to provide childcare** (either at their home or at your home). If you have children the same age as their children, consider offering to let their child spend time with your child.

**6. Grieve at home before you go and visit the family**





**who has lost a loved one.** Shedding tears with a grieving family may be helpful, out-of-control emotional displays don't help.

**7. Organize food donations** so that the family will have different types of food (including breakfast foods) for as long as is helpful.

## Long-Range Plans

The world continues to go on even after the loss of a loved one. Many counselors say that the first year will be the most difficult time for grieving families. Your continued presence in their lives and expressions of concern can be helpful.

**1. After the funeral, don't forget to pray for the family.** Their grief process began the moment they

learned of the death of their loved one, but the first year presents difficult times for the family to face. Read and pray Romans 8:26-27 frequently—and let the family know you are praying for them.

**2. Continue to maintain contact with the family.**

Although the cards and phone calls that we received during the first several days were special, the ones we continued to receive months after Ellen was killed provide continued comfort.

**3. Make plans to invite the family over for a meal.** Spending time away from home is helpful for them. Even if your first several invitations are not accepted, don't be afraid to continue to ask.

**4. Encourage the family to go to their pastor or a Christian grief counselor.** Ministers and other trained Christians can help families to work through grief.

**5. Provide helpful resources for families.** Find out if your church has a support group for grieving people. If so, provide this information to the grieving family. If not, contact your pastor and discuss beginning such a group. Secure a list of helpful books, tapes, or videos from your pastor or church media librarian and give this list to the grieving family.

## Conclusion

The day Ellen was killed was one of the most difficult I have experienced. Yet at the same time, the presence of Christian friends and their care for us helped us feel Jesus' love in a tangible way. If you are as faithful in doing for families around you as our Christian friends have been for us, you will bless their lives. May God help you to share His love to those around you.

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## Cautions

**1. Realize that every person (and every family) grieves in different ways.** What may be helpful for one person is not for another. For example, during the first several days after Ellen's death, I needed to joke around; my wife did not want to hear laughter. Neither approach is wrong—the needs of each grieving person are different.

**2. Go with the flow.** Grieving people don't always react logically. One minute a person may want to talk, the next minute he or she may desire silence. Pray and follow the Holy Spirit's guidance in how best to respond.

**3. Remember that you don't have all the answers—and you don't have to.** I can't count the number of people who in the first days after Ellen's death said to me, "I just don't know what to say." I'm convinced that during our earthly lives we won't have the mental or spiritual capacity to understand all that happens.

**4. Avoid platitudes that may sound spiritual.** We do know that God has the answers but sometimes repeating that to grieving people may not be helpful. Although "They're in a better place" may be true, often it's not helpful to say (or to hear).

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