



A Ministry to Bereaved Parents and Their Families

*Inviting Hope to Heal Broken Hearts*

## MINISTERING TO BEREAVED PARENTS: GENTLE ADVICE FOR PASTORS

*Being a pastor doesn't mean you come out of seminary with answers to everything.*

*It doesn't even mean you emerge equipped for very many of the situations and conversations thrust upon you once you enter ministry.*

*But I know a lot of folks expect you to be a pillar of strength, a fountain of wisdom, a well-spring of comfort. I'm sure you try to be all those things but it takes years to develop the experience needed to know what to say and do and what NOT to say and do in the most sensitive and painful moments humans face.*

*So when a thoughtful and inquisitive fellow bereaved parent asked the question below, I found myself REALLY considering the essential advice I'd pass along to a pastor about the unique and uniquely challenging ministry to those whose children have run ahead to Heaven.*

*It is most certainly NOT exhaustive, but hits the high points. It's short, succinct and can go a long way toward promoting healing in shattered hearts.*

*I hope my pastor friends will read it and tuck it away in an easily accessible place. I promise you will need it one day.*

*I hope my fellow bereaved parents and others will pass it along to pastors they know.*

♥Melanie

**This is the question:** *What advice would you give a pastor to serve, encourage, and walk with a grieving parent? What would you tell them not to do?*

**I would tell a pastor to:**

**\*Listen, listen and listen some more**— without correcting or judging. ***This is not a teachable moment.*** Take off the theologian's coat and put on human flesh.

**\*Acknowledge the depth of their loss- not compare it or try to identify with it** (unless you have also lost a child) **and absolutely not minimize it.**

**\*Don't toss Bible verses**— especially those intended to "bright side" their experience.

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**\*Don't stop checking in even if they stop going to church. If your ministry ends at the door of the building, you'll lose lots of sheep.**

**\*It will take longer- *probably by years*-than you think it should for them to return to some semblance of "normal". Be patient.**

**\*Ask, *but don't pressure*, parents who once served (or are serving at the time of loss) if they want to continue serving. Some do, some find it impossible.**

**\*Do not engage in gossip and speculation about "how they're handling" their grief.**

**\*Educate your congregation on the *devastation of grief* in general and *child loss in particular*. (See the story of Jacob-how deeply he grieved when he thought Joseph was dead, what a mess his family was...)**

**\*When appropriate, make space in yearly celebrations or traditions for recognition of those who are mourning and who want to have their child (or other loved one) remembered.**

**\*As time goes on, ask specific questions (How is your grief today? What do you find to be a struggle right now? Could you share something about \_\_\_\_\_, I love to hear about him/her?) and then listen some more.**

***If you know them well, you will have many more opportunities to come alongside as a compassionate companion in their grief.***

*If you don't know them well or you have a very large congregation, you can still use these general guidelines but also engage the help of someone who does know them and who may be better suited to companion them (with your help and support).*

**So many bereaved parents struggle with church and with their faith.**

*Each family and situation will be different.*

***Reaching out in a timely, encouraging, and understanding way helps them hold onto hope.***