

Lessons Learned in Suffering

Story by Carmel Palmer

Calvary Chapel Pastors Share Their Experiences Responding to and Enduring Grief



Jim Lawrence

The night after tornadoes struck the Oklahoma City area, pastor and police chaplain Jim Lawrence of CC Norman, OK, sat in a local church's pew looking at pictures of strangers' children

by candlelight. Hours earlier, he had shepherded the 15 sets of parents away from the devastated Plaza Elementary School to this location, where they awaited news of their children. As they shared favorite memories and described each third-grader to Jim, it was clear they held out hope of being reunited. However, Jim had learned about the magnitude of the disaster from upper command. He was fairly certain of what the parents would officially be informed the following morning—for almost half of them, this had gone from rescue mission to recovery. He could not help thinking of his own 7-year-old, safe at home, and imagine the agony the parents were enduring.

Another chaplain called the parents together for an announcement and then asked if he and Jim could pray for them. He declared, "Chaplain Lawrence will lead us in prayer." Jim recalled, "I asked God to comfort them and be there for them, but even in my prayer I didn't have all the words to say. Yet I think I conveyed that there is always hope in the Lord, regardless of the situation." Training and experience have not made ministering amidst tragedy any easier, Jim confessed. "It's one of the hardest things I'll ever do. I don't do it because I enjoy it. I do it because I'm obeying God's call. Not just as pastors or chaplains, but as Christians, we are called to love and serve, to let the light shine out of the darkness. In every situation, I have to rely on the Holy Spirit, wait on Him to open a door, and step through it. God goes through suffering alongside us and uses it to draw us closer to Him. How incredible is it that we can come alongside someone, offering not merely ourselves but Jesus? If they have Him, they will have solid, lasting hope."

"For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." 2 Corinthians 4:6-7

Singing in the Dark

CC Aurora, CO, acquired the website HopeHelpNow.com to provide a non-threatening platform for struggling people not ready for face-to-face contact. The project lingered on the back burner, however, until the 2012 Aurora Theater shooting catapulted it into action. "Suddenly there were more people seeking help than we could possibly reach physically," reported Pastor Ed Taylor. "We handed out cards with the website's name on them. Initially, we posted people at the memorial 24/7, offering prayer. But people are ready to talk at different points. Through the website, we're able to keep up that availability. More than a year later, we're still getting phone calls and walk-ins." After the Sandy Hook, CT, shooting, HopeHelpNow was temporarily redesigned for CC Southbury, CT's use. Ed continued, "When tragedy strikes, the church is rallying like paramedics. There's no time to set up a website. If HopeHelpNow can be a tool for the local church, we'd love to make that happen."

Last May, the Taylor family was struck by personal tragedy. Eddie, their eldest son—a healthy 26-year-old police officer with no history of drug or alcohol use—went into cardiac arrest while mowing the lawn. After 23 days in a coma, he died, leaving behind a wife and infant son. "It literally knocked me out," Ed confided. "I was gone from the pulpit a long time and I didn't know if I was coming back, if this was the end of my ministry. Satan was slapping us around, we

were struggling through so many layers of grief, but the staff and other Calvary Chapel pastors quietly stepped in and let us begin the healing process. This was no small thing." In fact, he related, there were no small things. Everything people did for the family was greatly appreciated. Meals were provided and anonymous notes of encouragement appeared in the offering boxes—these were things God used to hold back despair. One couple gave them saplings to plant in Eddie's memory. A mother for whom Ed had conducted two memorials for stillborn babies within one year sent them helpful suggestions for facing anniversaries.

"Grief produces a wide variety of emotions that are very scary but also very normal," Ed reflected. "We try not to live in the realm of 'I should have' or 'I could have'—a dangerous, damaging place that doesn't take into account we are human beings who feel human pain. The Bible says:

The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust.

Psalm 103:13-14, NLT

"Jesus Himself underwent grief as a human, and when we are suffering, He is right there with us," Ed continued. "I was away from the pulpit a long time, and when I returned, I couldn't sing the songs—I didn't like those words coming out of my lips; I couldn't believe them. God said, 'It's all right, Ed—just sit there and cry.' But after a few weeks, He said, 'It's okay if you don't believe them yet, but I want you to sing them by faith.' God was so gracious to meet me where I was, but He also enabled me to sing. It has only been a short while. It's still very hard. But I am singing more."



Ed Taylor

Battle for Hope

After a service at Orange County Christian Fellowship, CA, a woman approached Pastor Bryan Jameson. She had health issues so severe that she often had to watch services online. "She told me, 'I used to attend another church, but I just couldn't believe people there understood me. Knowing what you are dealing with, I know you understand my pain,'" Bryan recalled. She was referring to the death of Bryan's 10-year-old daughter, Trinity, in November 2012. Bryan continued, "We don't avoid talking about Trinity, so people learn quickly. God continues bringing suffering people across our path. My grief has given me a credibility I never had before. I don't have to preach on suffering—knowing I have suffered, people believe what I say." Recently Bryan offered premarital counseling to a non-Christian couple. The man had a violent past and a tough reputation. Amazed at Bryan's faith amid his pain, both became believers during the process and have become involved in the fellowship.

Before her death, Trinity met Christian surfer Bethany Hamilton, who lost an arm during a shark attack. "Trinity only had one question for Bethany," Bryan remembered of the event, which happened during his daughter's battle with cancer: "Can I touch your stump?" Bethany agreed, and Trinity reached out to touch where Bethany's pain began. It was pain touching pain, the place where they have common ground. It has become a poignant illustration for me—when my pain touches another's, it creates a bridge I can walk across to share Jesus." Bryan's current ministry is the result of walking day-by-day with Christ through his grief, he stressed—"Trinity's death united our church even more deeply, yet God told me that if I let go of hope, the very thing uniting our church would be



Bryan Jameson

what tore it apart. He challenged me daily to choose hope. The very act of hoping can be exhausting, yet in that hope there is life because it means turning toward God. Job's worship is very different from David's, but

that's the worship I have right now—Job lifts his very pain as an offering to God. Our hearts are empty when we think of Trinity, but God is more real to me today than He was back when everything was fine." ↻

Tips for First Responders



Jerry Paradise

"In my opinion, the body of Christ never looks better to the unsaved community than when they're responding to a disaster," said Jerry Paradise, associate pastor at CC Philadelphia, PA, and a licensed chaplain with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). Since 9/11, CC Philadelphia has partnered with BGEA to provide practical and emotional help to communities recovering from trauma. The church also offers its own chaplaincy training program, which Jerry directs, and has created two CDs of songs and Scriptures for suffering people, *Comfort 1* and *Comfort 2*. Regardless of the trauma an individual is facing—a natural disaster, a shooting, or the death of a loved one—Jerry has found that the appropriate response stays the same:

Ministry of Presence

"A grieving person is bleeding internally—emotionally," Jerry explained. "Nothing you can say intellectually can fix that emotional pain. Just being there shows them you care and are willing to come alongside them in their pain and grief. Nothing trumps that."

Words in Season

"Our words can be salt in the wound or a balm in Gilead," Jerry declared. Don't say things like, 'I know how you feel,' or 'I feel worse than you do,' which puts the focus on you instead of the grieving person, or comments beginning with 'At least ...' which minimizes rather than acknowledges their suffering. Do say things like, 'I'm so sorry,' or 'My heart goes out to you,' which conveys care and sympathy.

Active Listening

"Effective counseling is less about what you say than how you listen," Jerry insisted. "Grieving people often lash out irrationally and ask lots of questions, but really they are venting rather than looking for answers. After Katrina, I rode along with a sheriff's deputy. In all our conversations, he did about 95 percent of the talking. I occasionally asked questions to spur him on, but otherwise I just listened. He later told someone I was the best counselor he'd ever had. It was a healing experience for him, yet I'd done very little in terms of input."

The ultimate goal, Jerry emphasized, is to point people toward Christ—but in a way that they are able to receive. "If you establish a relationship and remain available, then when the pain subsides you can begin speaking into their honest questions and struggles," Jerry concluded.

www.ccpilly.org/resources/comfort-cd