

ST. BOTOLPH'S CHURCH, LONGTHORPE

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

BACKGROUND

Supporting the bereaved has been part of St. Botolph's for some 15 years. It was seen as a priority area by Fr. Haydn Smart shortly after his arrival at St. Botolph's and a small team of visitors was established even before we had Pastoral Assistants or baptism and marriage preparation visitors.

Until about 18 months ago, this took the form of a group of individuals who provided a 'listening ear' to those who had been bereaved. Requests to visit, came from the clergy. There was a group leader who co-ordinated things and chaired regular meetings where feedback, support and some basic training sessions were provided. Sympathy cards were sent out to the bereaved and at the annual All Souls Service (first Sunday in November), all those who had been bereaved in the previous year, as well as all children, were remembered.

BACKGROUND TO CURRENT SITUATION

The interregnum provided us with an opportunity to re-evaluate where we were, and to be open to change. Demands on clergy have increased and lay ministry is being encouraged. When I discussed this with Bill Croft, our present Parish Priest, he offered suggestions for a new approach which he believed would be helpful to the clergy. The fact that there had been a well established team for a number of years, I believe, provided us with the skills and insight to look at how we could change for the better.

HOW WE BEGAN

A meeting was held with our Assistant Priest and Reader, where we told them of our suggestions. They were very receptive and so we set about putting the 'idea' in to practice. I met with the original team who felt the change provided them with an opportunity to try something new. We held a 'farewell and thank you' service in their honour and they all earned their 'retirement' having provided years of loyal service.

CURRENT SITUATION

A new team is being built to work alongside the clergy. Crucially, one of the team accompanies the clergy on the initial visit to the bereaved person or family and takes part, when appropriate, in the funeral service, e.g. reading the lesson or saying the prayers. Visitors have been warmly welcomed at these visits and their presence at the funeral has been much appreciated.

This paves the way for follow up contact by telephone or visiting afterwards. This continues for as long as is appropriate. The work of these visits is essentially empathetic listening informed by a basic understanding of the grieving process. Its motivation is the love of Christ for those who suffer and the hope of resurrection, although matters of faith may or may not surface explicitly during a visit.

The team meets regularly to share things, to provide support to one another, for training, and monitoring practice.

We are developing the idea of inviting the bereaved person, or family, to attend church on the Sunday closest to the first anniversary where special prayers are said and a candle is lit.

RESOURCES

We have a range of resources which we have developed and purchased and which are well received. We have a leaflet which we leave on the first visit and a range of cards which are appropriate to give on follow up visits and anniversaries and other special dates. In addition to the sympathy card which is sent on behalf of St Botolph's, we send a card at the six month and the first anniversary. Clergy and the team each have a 'pack' containing all the resources they need to send or give to the bereaved. Examples of those are here today. It is the responsibility of each visitor to send cards out at those appropriate times.

ANNUAL ALL SOULS SERVICE

The bereaved are invited to a special All Souls service on the first Sunday in November, where their loved ones are remembered by name and by a lit candle which is carried to the altar. Light refreshments are provided afterwards. There is an opportunity to chat to members of the clergy / team and everyone is given a prayer card as they leave. Members of the team are involved in the planning of the service and read the lessons and lead the intercessions. Experience has shown that this service is greatly appreciated by the bereaved.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Don't work in isolation - it is important to share.

Remember we are not counsellors; just listeners and carers, accompanying people on their grief journey.

Meet regularly with team members and clergy to monitor practice; for training and to be open to new ideas.

Do pray! Remember we are doing God's work and He will guide us. Don't try to do it in your own strength.

REWARDING MINISTRY

Although this ministry is accompanying people through a time of grief and sadness, it is not a depressing ministry. It is motivated by the love of Christ and the hope his resurrection brings. It is a huge privilege and immensely rewarding to see people emerge from their sadness and make progress and to have played some small part in that process.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE ANY FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT ME ON 01733 260921 OR BY EMAIL, gcunnington@btinternet.com

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