

# Grief

[Aim: to look at death and bereavement in small village locations and to consider the effects of local death on small communities]

## Story<sup>1</sup>

It was at midnight on the eve of All Saints when Maggie's world fell apart. Without warning her husband collapsed and died leaving her with two small children to care for aged six and ten months. A jumble of questions ran through her mind and then continued to do so over the years. Twenty years on Maggie could see a pattern in the choices she made as a result of being a Christian in a particular rural community. At the time it felt like limping from one forced decision to another with no real choices.

The first problem was how she was going to feed the children and pay the bills? She and her husband had agreed that she wouldn't go back to work at least until the children were both in school. In a rural environment, would it be possible to honour that promise? She and her husband owned a smallholding - but how would she milk the goats, leaving the baby alone in the house while she did it? How could she bring the children up with a sense of identity with their father, without dwelling on his death too much if she remained where she was? Would they lose the sense of identity with him if they gave everything up and moved elsewhere? How would she be able to cope with family outings to church and to other places when every other

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this story has been published in *Stories from the Chronicles*, Volume 2, Marches Chronicles, May 2000.

family seemed to have the father with them? How would she be able to socialise in a community which seemed to be based on couples? Feeling isolated and alone, she also wondered if she would still be and still be seen to be, a member of her husband's family.

Eventually she learned to change direction. She kept sheep instead of goats, grew all the vegetables the family needed and cut back on the work in the garden by growing shrubs instead of flowers. She kept her husband's memory alive by talking to the children about all the things they'd liked to do. She became a complete family in her widowhood. In the community in which Maggie lived, she discovered that death makes particular demands on how you reconstruct your life. She learned to dip her toe into difficult situations and withdraw quickly if it felt uncomfortable. She learned to tell people what had happened before they asked because she couldn't cope with their embarrassment if they stumbled on the information. She learned not to look so that she didn't notice if someone crossed the street because they felt awkward about death. She learned that the world does not feel easy about death so she must grieve silently. She learned that if she did show her feelings, solutions were offered, but these, while well-meaning, were not always helpful. She learned that our society is often stuck in a "couples" way of doing things and enjoying ourselves, and that this was reflected in the rural community in which she lived. However, she learned to take life seriously, filling every minute, because you never know when it will end suddenly. She learned to avoid the "widow" and "single parent" words because they seemed to carry a stigma. She valued the word "family".

Yet she also learned to recognise others' grief and that death is part of life and cannot be avoided. She learned that grief takes a different route for everyone even though there are patterns in common. She learned to encourage her children to be positive about life, to grasp opportunities when they were offered. She was tenacious in pursuit of something even to the point of being "a pain" if she felt the children had some kind of need she couldn't supply. She learned to value family life and that our society seems to undervalue the role of a father. She learned to question if she should provide another father for her children, but never felt that she wanted to. Maggie came to appreciate other people's successes and achievements. She learned that she had skills and achievements of her own untapped before. She learned to admire her children for the way they have taken responsibility for their lives. She learned that life is a series of journeys. One starts as another finishes, others continue and evolve. She learned to trust in the goodness of a future.

## **Discussion**

The sudden death of spouse or partner is a traumatic experience for anyone, but this story shows how rural isolation can intensify the difficulties of recovery and rebuilding. For bereaved people like Maggie, the comfort and support of the local church can be critical in the discovery of new skills and the building up of confidence to start a new life. In this story, Maggie shows a powerful need to make sense of what has happened to her family by honouring promises made to her husband, yet she also had to find ways to adapt to the new burdens and demands placed on her by her young family.

**Christian prayer and active support can either help or hinder the process of rebuilding. There is potential for a loving church community to help Maggie and her children work through the loss of a husband and father without shutting him out of their future lives. In this way, the resurrection hope shown to us in Jesus can begin to put such loss into context. Conversely, a church community which is built up around the idea of "couples" or integrated families, can unwittingly push people like Maggie into a corner, offering sympathy and advice, but presenting her with no place in which to begin to rebuild. The local church has a real opportunity to help Maggie keep her promises to her husband and to help her find ways in which to combine work and motherhood. However, this requires a willingness to stand alongside her in her grief and to stay with her as she finds solutions to the problems. The difficulty in some churches, is that the job of counselling and caring for the bereaved is left exclusively to the clergy, who may be seriously overstretched and seriously under resourced. In such situations, the laity - neighbours and friends - can often be the only ones placed to provide the long term support for people in Maggie's position.**

## **Some suggestions for Bible Study**

**Psalm 68: 5-10**

**Mark 12:41-end**

**1 Timothy 5:3-16**

**Choose one or two questions for discussion**

**How might problems of loneliness and isolation be dealt with in rural communities?**

**What facilities are available in our own church and community to help the bereaved?**

**Are there fewer choices for those who are bereaved in rural locations about how they rebuild their lives?**

**What is our Christian attitude in our own situation towards those people who have lost partners?**

**Suggestions for drama or role play**

**Imagine you are Maggie just after your husband's funeral talking to a member of the clergy about how you see the future. What sort of things might you talk about? How might they respond?**

**Imagine you are one of Maggie's children asking questions about their father. What might Maggie say to them and what role would the support of the church have in her reply?**

## **Reflection**

**We need to think about what God intends for marriage and family life and further to think about what the promises people make to each other mean if a partner dies. What does God intend us to do with unfinished business and how does God encourage us to move on after tragedy and grief?**

## **A Hymn and a Prayer**

**For example, *The Day thou gavest Lord, is ended***

**or *Be still, for the presence of the Lord***

**God,**

**You give us life to live and celebrate.**

**You know our grief when loved ones leave us.**

**Help us recall that you have lived through death and brought all loved ones home.**

**Amen**

