

## **Journeying Through Grief**

Though times of grief and loss are something we all experience during our lives, many of us feel unsure of how to process these experiences. Five years ago, Nancy Welty, a nurse and the lead of the health ministry at College Corner First Presbyterian Church, took the call to help and support others in their grief process. Nancy's instincts told her addressing grief was an area that "needed some real attention." During this time, she came across a series of books about loss of a loved one – a program by Stephen Ministries entitled "*Journeying through Grief*." As she read the books, she realized they were well-written and accessible, and she knew they would be a "great resource" to the folks in her congregation.

After discussing the program with her pastor, he was in full support of the idea, and Nancy ordered a supply of the books. There are four books in the *Journeying Through Grief* program: 1) "A Time to Grieve," 2) "Experiencing Grief," 3) "Finding Hope and Healing," and 4) "Rebuilding and Remembering," and they are meant to be sent to people at four crucial times during the year after a loved one dies - (after three weeks, three months, six months, and on the one year anniversary of the death). According to Stephen Ministries, "Each book focuses on what the person is likely experiencing at that point in grief – offering compassion, understanding, and hope." Ideally, the books aren't simply sent out, but are instead hand-delivered (books one and four) by someone from the church.

For a good while, Nancy and the pastor were able to visit people in their homes, personally delivering books one and four, while also lending a supportive ear to the person grieving. She found that many people "really appreciated this time to talk." She also says the books were immediately well-received by the people they visited, and people found comfort in the program as a whole. As time went on, time constraints prevented Nancy from continuing the visits, but she's proud to say she and her church have now been offering *Journeying through Grief* to their congregation for three years!

In asking Nancy to look back over these years and evaluate the power of this program, she shared part of the reason this program was so personal to her from the very beginning- "I've lost a lot of family, and I've done a lot of grief work. Following these losses, I didn't feel like I got a lot of grief care." She feels like this program gets the experiences of grief and loss out into the open, and "it reminds people it's okay to *feel*." According to Nancy, the books of the program validate people's feelings, whatever they may be, and whenever they're being felt. It also allows people who might never seek out help or attend a support group access to valuable information and support in the comfort of their home.

In offering words of wisdom to churches adopting the program for the first time, she recommended resisting the urge to feel like your group has to do this “perfectly.” In her experience, people usually don’t want or need reassurance or fancy advice, and, in fact, these things (when unsolicited) can cause someone grieving to share *less* in the future. Also, even if you have past experience with loss, it’s important to avoid telling people *how* to feel. Each experience is so unique, and it’s important to allow each person to have their own experience. On the whole, the most important thing you can offer to those experiencing grief is your presence, and a willingness to simply listen. People may not always remember the words you spoke to them during the hardest times, but they will certainly remember your unwavering support.