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COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING CULTURE

DOCTORATE OF MINISTRY PROJECT

LIVE AND LET DIE: EMBRACING THE LIFE, DEATH, AND GRIEF

CYCLES IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

I was at home finishing up my late night supper after having attended a sister friend church. Having been in church, I had turned my phone ringer down, and I sometimes forgot to turn it back up once I was home. After realizing that I had not turned the ringer back up, I reached for my phone and, lo and behold, my sister friend had called me five times. Furthermore, she had texted me three times. I immediately called her back without listening to the voicemail or reading any of the text messages. Once she was on the phone, she asked me, “Are you sitting down?” to which I replied, “Yes.” She went on to ask, “Do you know about your pastor? Did you hear about your pastor? Did you hear from anyone from your church?” “What?” I replied. “No!” “Your pastor died today on the cruise ship.”

What? Rev. Dr. Johnnie G. McCann, Pastor of the St. Luke Baptist Church in Harlem, NY died—on the church’s cruise vacation? Shock, disbelief, and numbness came over me. The date was Thursday, August 21, 2019. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to hear that news. The days ahead for our church would be hard ones. What about our new church building? Who would lead us? Who would be in charge? Much denial, disbelief, hurt, anger, confusion, bewilderment, and grief surged through the congregation, sentiments that persist to this today.

I must admit, this was a lot to digest. I thought to myself, “Wow, God, You really are stretching me!” When my husband became sick and subsequently died in July 2016, after a long illness and two months after I started attending St. Luke, I became

intrigued with death, dying, and living life to the fullest. As an African American woman, a leader in the church, and a member of the ministerial team, I began to reflect on and pay more attention to how the African American church congregation prepares for and copes with death. It seemed that the shock and grief experienced were over the top. Many times, the families seemed not to be prepared emotionally and/or financially. Many seemed to struggle with grief for long periods of time, being stuck in shock and disbelief. What really stood out for me was that, while the pastor and the church congregation were present and available during the funeral process, no services or ministries for families were provided before the death occurred or afterward. I didn't see any follow-up services being delivered to bereaved people. However, I still noticed the symptoms of the disciples in grief long after the funeral was completed, lasting sometimes for months. When I thought back to my previous experiences with bereaved people, in some instances, these symptoms continued for years.

Before the twentieth century, when people became sick and died in the United States, the passing took place among family members, friends, and the immediate community. People died at home with their loved ones and clergy around them. Doctors did what they could but didn't play a significant role relating to death. However, this approach to death changed abruptly in the late 1930s and early 1940s owing to the discovery of antibiotics such as penicillin. World War II motivated further advances in life-saving treatments, and care for the sick and dying shifted from families to doctors. The result has been generations of people who have not experienced death up close and personal, making the dying process unknown to them.

I argue that this is where the fears, superstitions, and taboos associated with death entered in. Furthermore, I contend that this shift took away a significant part of the grieving process for all Americans. Members of the African American community have continued to turn to the faith leaders in their communities as a source of support. Today's African American churches remain places of comfort and caring, providing supportive environments for those facing life's most difficult challenges. It is my contention that the Black church continues to be a unique and influential place to hold conversations and distribute information concerning matters of life, mortality, end-of-life decisions, and advanced care planning. I posited as the basis for this project that taking care of these matters ahead of time can liberate and empower African Americans in terms of dealing with illness, caregiving, dying, and grieving, resulting in lives lived to the fullest. This project rests on the assertion that, for members of the Black faith community, coming together to support one another in identifying and planning for these life issues can enhance a sense of meaning and purpose in life, which is vital for supporting people through, again, illness, caregiving, dying, and grieving. Furthermore, having systems in place in the African American church can alleviate the pressure on pastors, who are the sole support system and may not be equipped to handle such burdens all the time.

This project, then, focused on the African American church. It includes discussion of the history and patterns of African American people in relation to the experience of death and grief. I used my own church context, with specific reference to the loss of our pastor and African Americans experiencing the loss of other loved ones. I paid specific attention to the coronavirus era. This project is groundbreaking in terms

of writing during this pandemic and represents a contribution to scholarly work that is currently being formulated. This dissertation presents a brief history of the African American people, including our history of trauma because of the African diaspora and then being enslaved in America. These experiences have shaped our ideas, thoughts, and practices associated with dying and grieving. A history of the formation of the African American church is also presented, for this institution has continued to be a vital cultural institution for our community.

Further, this project addressed how we as African Americans grieve, why we grieve as we do, and whether these factors could be preventing us from living our lives to the fullest. I have identified the role that the African American church has been playing as a therapeutic community for people who are grieving and the pastor's historical role in ministering to Blacks. I argue that, while most parts of society do not like to talk about death, African American culture approaches life, death, dying, and grieving differently. The question explored in the project, then, was how talking about and preparing for death can help us live our lives to the fullest and with the grieving process and as we ourselves near death. I also considered how African American pastors and leaders can appreciate better how we have grieved as a culture in order to better serve and minister to our disciples in the African American church. Again, I paid particular attention to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our grieving processes.

Finally, I discuss here how African Americans have coped with all of the loss, death, and grief in this country and what, if anything, is needed going forward. Specifically, I identify the already available resources and those that still need to be developed in the Black church context to support the African American outlook on life,

death, and the grieving process, again, in order to help people live life to the fullest.

The ultimate goal of the project was to identify, devise, plan, and implement new ways for the African American Church to continue serving as a therapeutic community in the twenty-first century. Thus, I offer suggestions for educating, bringing healing to, enlightening, and establishing new coping techniques for the African American community. These suggestions are meant to inspire the African American church and community to lead the way for the members of the congregation to live life to the fullest.

For the purpose of this study, I define “African Americans” as an ethnic group of U.S. citizens with total or partial ancestry including any of the African peoples and their descendants who were enslaved in what became the United States. I have used the terms “African American” and “Black” interchangeably. Also, in referring to God/Jesus/the Lord in this study, capitalization serves as a symbol of reverence.

CHAPTER 2. THE DEATH OF OUR PASTOR

Any loss in a church is devastating. In our church, we first suffered loss through the gentrification of Harlem. Many Blacks have been displaced as old buildings have been demolished and replaced by new residential developments. They have been unable to purchase the high-priced cooperatives and condominiums that have sprung up in the community or afford the rent in the neighborhood. Our church became part of this gentrification with the demolition of our old church building to make way for a new church with condominiums on top. In the process, the congregation had to relocate to a temporary space while the new church temple was being built. This transition alone has been a traumatic loss for some in the congregation. Now, the church has been experiencing the loss of its pastor, which left both the leadership and the congregation asking, “Why, God, did You allow our pastor, Dr. McCann, to die? How will we go on in our newly built church edifice without his leadership? Why did You not allow him to see the fruition of our promised land?” I and the congregants have asked these and many other questions.

In the days that followed the pastor’s death, I saw that some disciples had a hard time coping with the loss. Some had stopped coming to church, some were tearful throughout the service (and have remained so), and some have been quiet and pulled away into their own cocoons. Others have stepped up to the plate in terms of leadership whereas before they were reluctant to do so. On the whole, there seemed to be a disconnection in the congregation. There was a brokenness, as if it had been crushed by grief from the loss suffered. People who used to hug me stopped hugging me. Some

stopped speaking as well, perhaps because the pain was too much. Still others have been holding on to each other, offering encouragement, and trying to fill shoes seemingly too big to fill. After the pastor's death, our deacon's ministry decided to appoint our then overseer, Leading Lady McCann, to be in charge as the administrator of the church. It was further decided that we would mourn the loss of our pastor for one year before considering prospective candidates for his replacement. This mourning consisted of a black and purple cloth draped over the pastor's chair in the pulpit and an hour-and-a-half congregational counseling session with a Christian counselor for which we paid. We invited various preachers to the church each Sunday to preach. Many of them were grieving Pastor McCann's death, too. Hearing this "litany of grief" sermons was like living the news of his death over and over again. The pain began to sting again and as each guest preacher shared their grief with us it became that much harder to move forward in our grieving.

Additional thoughts crossed my mind regarding whether our overseer, Dr. McCann's wife, would be able to lead the church and also grieve the death of her husband. These thoughts caused me to ponder more deeply how the African American church in particular has been responding to matters of death and grief. I especially wanted to know whether our church specifically and the Black church in general have been meeting the needs of the congregation in preparing for and handling death and grief.

Before continuing the discussion, I offer a definition of death for the purpose of this paper. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* defines death as "the separation of the soul (the spiritual part of man) from the body

(the material part), the latter ceasing to function and turning to dust.... 'Death' is the opposite of life; it never denotes nonexistence."¹ Therefore, like Albert Einstein's $E=MC^2$ describing how nothing ceases to exist but everything just changes form, so, too, do we as humans change into various forms through the cycle of birth, living, and dying.

¹ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 149.

CHAPTER 3. WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

Old Testament Accounts

Currently, the death rate is 100 percent, yet the probability is that we will not be told by God when our death day will be as the fathers of faith were in the Holy Writ.

Moses is forewarned in Deuteronomy 32:48-50:

That same day the Lord said to Moses, “Go to Moab, to the mountain east of the river, and climb Mount Nebo, which is across from Jericho. Look out across the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to the people of Israel as their own special possession. Then you will die there on the mountain. You will join your ancestors, just as Aaron, your brother, died on Mount Hor and joined his ancestors.”²

God seals Moses’ fate when he fails to trust God’s promise that the water would come from the rock if he spoke to it this time instead of striking the rock as God had told him to do previously. Since Moses is disobedient, God tells him, he will not see the Promised Land. When the time comes, Moses accepts his fate and spends his last hours blessing the tribes of Israel and preparing his successor, Joshua, to lead the people without him. Moses has time to reflect on his life and, though he does not enter into the Promised Land himself, he leads the Israelites for forty years. God grants Moses the time to give his final blessings to the people whom he has so faithfully led, and he is able to die “a good death—in good conscience” that he has fulfilled his God-given purpose in life. Kerry Walters describes dying a good death as being “[O]ne of the most profound gifts the dying can offer the living, particularly when it helps the latter realize that dying well is inseparable from living well.”³ Moses has a conversation with God

² *Chronological Life Application Study Bible* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 325.

³ Kerry Walters, *The Art of Dying and Living Lessons from Saints of Our Time* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 15-16.

and the people about his death. The way in which Moses dies has been decided in conscious and deliberate conversation. Even though the window of his life is closing, Moses is able to choose the manner in which he spent his last days on earth. This is a profound example that the Holy Bible teaches us about how we are to live and die.

Another account of dying in the Holy Bible is Abraham's death. As told in Genesis 25:5-10,

Abraham gave everything he owned to his son Isaac. But before he died, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them off to a land in the east, away from Isaac. Abraham lived for 175 years, and he died at a ripe old age, having lived a long and satisfying life. He breathed his last and joined his ancestors in death. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite. This was the field Abraham had purchased from the Hittites and where he had buried his wife Sarah.⁴

Abraham knows that he is going to die. The Holy Bible records Abraham having conversations with his sons prior to his death about who will inherit his estate and his final wishes regarding where he is to be buried. Abraham has prepared for his burial in that he has already bought land (a burial plot) for the purpose. Though Isaac and Ishmael are otherwise always at odds, they are not when it comes to the burial arrangements for their father. I suggest that this agreement comes about because Abraham has a conversation with both and tells them his final wishes and how they should be carried out. Therefore, there is no argument about their father's wishes or who will inherit all of his riches; he has already made these decisions and communicated them to his sons.

A further account that offers biblical insight into how the old saints handled death is found in Genesis 49:29-33:

⁴ *Chronological*, 50.

Then Jacob instructed them, “Soon I will die and join my ancestors. Bury me with my father and grandfather in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite. This is the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a permanent burial site. There Abraham and his wife Sarah are buried. There Isaac and his wife, Rebekah are buried. And there I buried Leah. It is the plot of land and the cave that my grandfather bought from the Hittites.” When Jacob had finished this charge to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and joined his ancestors in death.⁵

In this passage, as Jacob is dying, he gathers all of his sons together to bless them and tell them his last wishes. He says that he is about to be “gathered to my kin.” He gives his dying address to each of his sons before an audience of all of them together rather than speaking to them individually. However, Jacob does address them specifically and looks beyond to the future of their descendants, the Twelve Tribes of Israel. He blesses them according to their deeds. He further instructs them that he wants to be buried in the cave in the field of Machpelah in the land of Canaan that Abraham bought from the Ephron the Hittite for a burial site and is located in the Promised Land. So, we see that Abraham left a burial site, not just for himself, but for generations to come. It is also important to point out the belief in the ancient world in death-bed prophecies. Thus, we see Jacob in this passage taking on the role of prophet in telling his family members about their futures and what is to take place once he dies. The idea of “gathering to my kin” signifies both his burial in Canaan and the immortality of the soul. Jacob is saying that his soul becomes an inhabitant of another world. He is also inferring that we all die one day, but there is an afterlife. Jacob’s death account shows that death is something involving the whole person. We do not die as a body but in the totality of our being. We die as spiritual and physical beings. Though death may separate us from our families

⁵ *Chronological*, 92.

and loved ones in this world, our souls gather to our kinfolk and ancestors in the afterlife, where we will be with them in eternity.

In the biblical accounts of the deaths of Moses, Abraham, and Jacob, there is no mention of fearing death. Each accepts his death, gathers his family together, and gives a blessing and exact instructions about their wishes after death. There is preparation before the actual death occurs. This account from the ancient world raises the question of when, how, and why people stopped talking about death and embracing it as part of the life cycle, particularly African Americans. I assert that these Old Testament death accounts can be used to help the members of African American congregations to understand that physical death is a part of the life cycle and that there is no need to fear talking about it. I further argue that we can and must prepare for death by embracing death as part of life as Abraham, Moses, and Jacob did.

New Testament Accounts

The fact is that we will all die unless Jesus comes and we are caught up to meet him (1 Thessalonians 4:17). So, as Christians, regarding our theology in relation to life and death, “Christian theological reflection interprets the meaning of things from the perspective of the Christian message of faith in God.”⁶ Faith in God means believing that there is eternal life with Christ, that Jesus is coming back for us, and that we will be with the Lord forever. If we have already died, we will be resurrected and then caught up in the air by Jesus; if we are still alive, we will be caught up in the air by Jesus. The Christian faith is based on the death of Jesus, but this doesn’t mean that the physical body does not die. Eternal life is opposed to a spiritual state, not to a physical

⁶ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 31.

one. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Still, the cycle of life includes death, as in nature. God made four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall. In the winter, things die and return to the earth. In the spring, there is the newness of life. In the summer, things grow to their fullness. In the fall, there is a harvest to prepare for the death of winter. Then the cycle repeats itself again and again. This is the cycle of life.

However, I argue that the body of the Black church has been going through the daily task of surviving, but we are not living our lives and preparing for death as we ought. I contend that thinking about our immortality compels us to consider the limits of the human condition and, thus, to reflect on living better lives now, lives with more gratitude, compassion, and joy. I further suggest that reflecting on death will help us re-evaluate how we live presently in order to develop awareness of how we might improve our lifestyles. When we live mindful and intentional lives, when we live out our life's purpose and our lives to the fullest, we are truly able to celebrate the life of the deceased during the homegoing celebration and afterward. As we acknowledge God as Creator, His promise of eternal life with Christ Jesus, and that He created time of which our lives are bound by, we achieve the mind frame to live each day fully. We realize that we don't have all the time in the world. We cease to put off until tomorrow what we can do today. Kerry Walters also reinforces this point, writing

Once we face up to the inevitability of death, we discover a third good reason to make death our neighbor. Honestly acknowledging our mortality allows us to make choices that realistically take into account the brevity of life. Awareness of our own finitude sharpens our powers of discrimination, allowing us to dismiss the unimportant and focus instead on life-possibilities that promise genuine fulfillment within the time frame given us. In a very real way, acceptance of mortality liberates us to make the most of every moment we have. Appreciation of the goodness of humans, the beauty of nature, and the comforts

of the everyday is enhanced. So is the realization of how silly it is to waste time nursing grudges, clinging to resentments, and stoking anger.⁷

A fire will light under us to bring purpose and joy for living these days that we do have with our family and friends to the fullest. Walters further declares

Viewed in this light, dying, and hence living, take on a significance that pushes through any sadness, fears, and doubts that may arise when we think about our mortality. Although it won't be pleasant, dying needn't be thought of as a senseless termination of life. Instead, it can be seen as the capstone to a life well lived, a final act of virtue, and a participation in the mystery of Christ's cosmic victory over death and decay.⁸

This, I attest, in turn facilitates our passage through the grieving process.

While I acknowledge that talking about death is hard, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate that such discussion can be viewed as an opportunity to elicit a more positive end-of-life experience when the time arrives. Having these difficult conversations earlier in our lives can free us to focus more of our attention on the grieving process and reflecting on the lives of the deceased. Talking about these matters with loved ones ahead of time can clarify what people value most about their lives so that their family members can act in their best interests even when they are not able to communicate. The African American church especially can use these biblical examples to show the importance of embracing death as part of the life cycle.

⁷ Walters, *Art*, 8.

⁸ Walters, *Art*, 16.

CHAPTER 4. CHURCH TALK ABOUT THE LIFE AND DEATH CYCLE

The aim of this study, then, is to explore why Christians are not having these conversations about their end-of-life care and wishes with their families now since death is the foundation of Christian spirituality. I wanted to determine when it became taboo to talk about death and why the church does not talk about death and dying from the pulpit and assess the theologies that have become embedded in twenty-first-century churches so that Christians no longer talk about death and preparing for it beyond the notion that Jesus died for our sins. Stone and Duke have defined embedded theology as “The theological messages intrinsic in and communicated by praying, preaching, hymn singing, personal conduct, liturgy, social action or inaction. And virtually everything else people say and do in the name of their Christian faith, fall into this category.”⁹ Regarding the embedded theologies in the African American church relating to death and dying, in our prayers for the sick, it is necessary to consider whether we are praying only for healing and keeping the person alive or whether our petitions are to God for “Your will be done, Lord” and to keep the person from pain and suffering. We need to consider whether the African American church accepts the idea that death is a part of God’s healing process.

I argue that we, in particular, as people of faith, should be able to embrace death as part of the life cycle that God designed just as we have faith in God through our Lord Jesus Christ who DIED for our sins. To quote Stone and Duke again, “Christian theological reflection interprets the meaning of things from the perspective of the

⁹ Stone and Duke, *Think*, 31.

Christian message of faith in God.”¹⁰ Death is the whole theology of our Christian faith, for, had Jesus not died on the cross and then risen from the grave, Christianity would not exist.

Looking back on our deceased pastor as an example, he used to say that we should look at death in this way. I believe there was nothing that the Rev. Dr. McCann felt he should have done, could have done, or was not doing according to the will of God and God’s purpose for him in his lifetime. When disciples in our congregation died suddenly, he would say, “You can be here today and gone tomorrow,” but we must ask whether anyone took him seriously rather than treating this statement as mere words spoken to fill the void. As preachers, when we give the call to Christian Discipleship at the end of a sermon and say “Tomorrow’s not promised to any of us, now is the time of salvation, now is the time to make it right with God,” we must ask whether we, as ministers of the Gospel, really believe this and whether the people hear in their hearts that we believe it or, instead, these are just words that we say each and every Sunday.

Looking at my former pastor’s death solidified for me that we don’t have all the time in the world and procrastination in living our God-given purpose is not an option for anyone. I wondered whether it is enough just to say a brief word about where we will spend eternity at the end of a sermon on Sunday or during the eulogy. I wanted to explore whether we, in the African American church, only emphasize how short life really is at the funeral or whether there are sermons, Bible studies, workshops, conferences, and Black family ministries dedicated to preparing for dying and congregants’ final wishes after death in our churches. It seemed to me that we have conversations before death about living life to its fullest since Jesus came so that we

¹⁰ Stone and Duke, *Think*, 31.

may have life more abundantly. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “The thief’s purpose is to steal, and kill, and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.”¹¹ I contend that Jesus was not talking only about eternal life after His second coming.

A loss that I experienced in my family provides another example of the importance of having the conversation and embracing death. My brother was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor in his liver. After several unsuccessful rounds of chemotherapy, the doctor decided to let nature take its course. My brother was not a candidate for surgery because he had a weak heart and his chances of surviving the surgery were slim. He was transferred to hospice care, where he spent his last three months. This time was blessed for my brother. He always stayed positive, enjoyed the things that he could do in life, and was happy. Even his doctors were glad to see him, for his joking manner brought laughter and joy to them despite the knowledge that he was terminally ill and didn’t have much time to live. He indulged himself by buying a new pair of cowboy boots that he loved to wear and were a pleasant conversation topic for the doctors as well. Many longtime friends and family members came to visit him, and he was shown much love in many ways.

Since it seemed that he was fairly stable, my sister and I went on a thirteen-day cruise that we had planned over a year earlier. We put the usual precautions in place just in case. The social worker had us sign forms specifying who would be in charge while we were away and who he wanted to handle his final remains and how since I, his healthcare proxy, would be away. We never thought that we would be needing these measures so soon but figured that it was a good idea to get it out the way. Halfway through the cruise, though, my brother took a turn for the worse. The nurse advised us

¹¹ *Chronological*, 1405.

that he didn't have long to live. We prayed that he would hold on until we got back. On Friday, December 13, 2019, the morning that we pulled into the NYC pier from the cruise, my brother died. I experienced another death associated with a cruise. The hospice kept him in his room until the family was able to come and view his body lying dead in the bed there. He seemed very peaceful, just resting with his eyes open. Thank God we had prepared for his death. Since I was his healthcare proxy, he had told me how he wanted things done, and funds had been set aside to ensure that all of the final arrangements would be taken care of. Though my brother was never a church-goer, while living with me prior to entering hospice care, he had said the prayer of salvation and received Jesus as his Savior. We talked about his final wishes. Papers, funds, and forms had been signed and put in place "just in case" something happened, making things easier for me. Furthermore, I was glad that I was able to be with my brother during his last days and have conversations with him. We laughed and reminisced about our childhood, growing up, friends, and adult life. I will always have those memories to cherish. He lived his life fully to the very end. I miss my brother, but knowing what he wanted for his remains and property made it easier to handle his death.

This experience again brought me back to looking at our congregation and our collective and individual loss. It further reinforced for me how talking, preparing, and living our lives to the fullest can help us in life, death, and grieving. I maintain that church leaders, by understanding how we have grieved as a culture, can better serve and minister to our disciples in the African American Church.

CHAPTER 5. THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, 2020-2022

During my research on death, dying, and grieving in the African American church, the coronavirus pandemic emerged. This has been a trying time for our nation and the whole world. Families and friends have been denied access to their loved ones who have been hospitalized prior to dying. After death, many families were still unable to see and identify their loved ones' bodies and say their final goodbyes. Also, these families were unable to plan for funerals, which help individuals through the grieving process. Wayne Oates in *Grief, Transition, and Loss* states that "The primary goal of the funeral is to worship God in the valley of the shadow of death and to care for the mourners."¹² Not only were funerals not being conducted, but some mourners didn't even know where the remains of their loved one were to say a final goodbye. Funeral directors were unable to handle the increased demand for their services. An African American funeral director in Harlem, Isaiah Owens, spoke in an interview of dealing with 100 coronavirus-related deaths in five days, observing that

Most of us live like we are going to be here forever. The coronavirus is hitting the Black and Latino community more in NYC.... The African American community will be in deep mourning for quite some time.... Families can't come into the crematory.... People have to be turned away.... Funeral directors got sick with the coronavirus..... has been "proper" since corona.¹³

The sudden deaths of loved ones from the coronavirus along with social distancing and the shutdown of our society increased the trauma and grief experienced by all families, but Black and Latino families have been disproportionately affected.

¹² Wayne E. Oates, *Grief, Transition, and Loss: A Pastor's Practical Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

¹³ Yousur Al-Hlou and Ora DeKornfeld, "Corona Virus 'Ripped a Hole' in the N.Y.C. Black Community. This Funeral Director Knows," *New York Times*, June 14, 2020.

There have been limited outlets to process the grief, especially with many churches being closed. A Harlem pastor whom I knew died from the coronavirus, and another Harlem congregation lost thirteen disciples to it. A news report about Pastor Mike Carrion, one of nine pastors at the Promised Land Covenant Church in the Bronx, which serves a predominately Black and Latino community that was at one point the epicenter of the U.S. coronavirus outbreak, observed that

[B]efore the pandemic that hit especially hard in this corner of New York City, he would receive a phone call to help someone with death maybe every four to six months. Now pastors are getting back-to-back phone calls about urgent needs exacerbated by the coronavirus, from health issues to job losses to people who have lost loved ones or simply need food. “With New York’s stay-at-home order, the pastors could not gather for a meeting to help their bereaved, or offer a visit, a hug, or an in-person funeral. Instead, they cobbled together what they could online, trying to provide not just spiritual resources but psychological coping tools as well. Some Christians are suspicious of psychotherapy and dismiss it as secular,” Carrion said, but he has embraced therapeutic approaches, especially during this time.¹⁴

One major outcome of the coronavirus has been the Black church’s realization of the need for professional counseling in extreme grief situations, though Blacks have been historically suspicious of therapy. Scholars have been exploring these issues in relation to the topics of life, death, and grief in the “new normal” created by Covid-19. New norms, especially for the church, must be identified for the Black community, which has been hit hard by this virus. If ever there has ever been a time to explore how we as people plan for and handle death as part of the life cycle, it is now.

¹⁴ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “A Pastor in the Bronx Thought He Knew Hardship. Then His Church Saw 13 Coronavirus Deaths,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/05/05/bronx-church-promised-land-coronavirus-deaths/>.

Covid Webinar

At 7 pm on July 9, 2020, Rev. Dr. Sidney Williams, Jr., the Senior Pastor of Bethel AME Church in Morristown, NJ, and CEO of Crossing Capital Group, held and moderated a webinar titled “The Social Impact and the Black Church after COVID-19” with the Rev. Dr. Traci Blackmon, Rev. Dr. Reginald Blount, and Rev. Dr. Matthew Williams, President of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. The Drew community was invited to participate in this conversation. Also participating were Rev. Dr. DeForest Buster Soaries, Jr., of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens, Dr. Herbert R. Reynolds of Nehemiah Church, Rev. Lakesha Womack, a church growth consultant, Rev. Ritney Castine of Trinity AME Church.

The webinar began with a discussion of whether Black churches should begin to reopen for corporate worship while Covid-19 was still spreading. However, the real issue to be addressed, Rev. Dr. Williams, Jr., suggested, was the social impact of the pandemic going forward. He cited Luke 4:18 as an example of how Jesus dealt with social justice issues. Jesus did so when filled with the Holy Spirit. During the beginning stages of the coronavirus pandemic, as discussed, it was not possible to mourn and grieve in the traditional ways. The participants in the webinar considered what the church model would look like after the pandemic and where it would lead. It was suggested that, in terms of money, political support, and community support, the church is moving from the “Mosaic model,” according to which the pastor takes the lead, to the “Nehemiah model,” according to which everyone becomes involved. The church has to be more than just the pastor; it must transform into an inclusive, holistic ministry. For many Black churches, church ends after the praise. Black people want to be fed and

inspired in church, however, so this must change. I concurred with Rev. Dr. Williams and reiterated my belief that this project has merit and that it is crucial for the African American church to develop this path moving forward. In order for the church to be a catalyst in this movement, I suggested, a look at our history in America is in order, and this is the topic of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6. THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: A HISTORY OF TRAUMA AND GRIEF

African Americans' history of trauma and grief started with being abducted from our homelands and continued during the middle passage on the slave ships. Then our ancestors were stripped of their identity and forced into slavery, continuing the grief and trauma. From the very beginning, the suffering, trauma, and tremendous losses that we have had to bear as a people—being captured, held in slave castles, traveling on the slave ships, and then living as slaves in what became the United States of America—have been embedded in us. We had no opportunity to grieve on the slave ships and honor our dead. We were not allowed to grieve being taken from our homelands to a foreign land. We were trained not to grieve our losses by the system of slavery. We were not able to grieve being stripped of our identity, our families, and our freedom. We were not able to grieve for the children taken from us and sold into slavery. We were not able to grieve for the loss of our husbands and wives sold to other plantation masters and separated from their families—to do so meant being beaten, sold away from one's family, or even killed.

Therefore, while enslaved, our ancestors had to learn to suppress their emotions, especially grief. All of this trauma was internalized and became a part of who we are as a people, our history, and our culture. We expect to have a disproportionate amount of death and trauma in our lives as African Americans. We didn't have much of a future to look forward to as enslaved people who once roamed free on their own land. We did not see what was so good about life in America. Nevertheless, because of the innate survival instincts that God has given all human beings, African Americans learned

ways to endure despite being enslaved and oppressed as a people. Our focus was on survival and staying together as families and a people. Constant separation and death have been and remain an expected part of life in the African American community.

I maintain that day-to-day living for African Americans continues to focus on survival, on simply getting through each day alive. There has been no present or future joy to be excited about since we were and, to a great degree, still are unaccustomed to seeing any positive outcomes to loss, death, or tragedy. Nevertheless, we have been taught to go on, to press through, and not to show grief. This habit or practice of being unable to grieve or have hope for the future is a survival mechanism in a situation forced on us that continues today. Therefore, in the African American community, loss and grief became a part of life, of being, even of our DNA. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk in *The Body Keeps Score* alludes to this concept; though his perspective is scientific, focused on medical research and beyond the scope of the present study, it is worth mentioning and noting for further investigation.¹⁵

Death, then, is expected in the African American community. Our culture has learned to tolerate and internalize grief and hopelessness, which have manifested in maladaptive ways, causing character, behavioral, and social problems such as crime and drug and alcohol abuse. The systems of injustice that make it difficult for the Black community to process its trauma are the same unjust systems that blame Black people for the maladaptive ways in which they sometimes act. This antisocial behavior is clearly a symptom of Black trauma and, in many ways, has been misinterpreted by society. As a result, Blacks experience more traumatic situations, such as incarceration,

¹⁵ Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

than the population at large. What I originally thought was a lack of preparedness on the part of Black people is actually a survival and coping tool. However, it is unclear whether the grief caused by slavery and racism has ever been addressed or is still prevalent in the lives of Black people today. Scholars Paul Rosenblatt and Beverly Wallace support this viewpoint in their work on African American grief:

There is a sense that grief is at times not only about the specific loss but about slavery and about other forms of oppression that followed slavery and that, in many cases, have continued up into the present. Grieving is also about the collective loss from the ongoing oppression, and it is also about terrible things that have happened in the African American community as people try to cope with their many losses or, in a sense, give up trying to cope.¹⁶

Also, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted African American oppression, loss, and grief as evidenced by the increase in race-based incidents and mass violence events that have magnified the disparities between communities of color and white communities. On May 25, 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis during a police arrest after allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. In trying to effect the arrest, a police officer kept his knee on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes, during which time he told the officer that he couldn't breathe. He died with the police officer's knee still on his neck. This event was publicized on television and social media during the Covid-19 pandemic when many people of all ethnic groups were at home—working from home, home-schooling their children, being laid off from work, healing from sickness, and/or quarantining because they had contracted the virus. The news of Floyd's death revived the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been protesting police brutality and the use of excessive force on Black people in the United States, again highlighting the oppression, loss, and grief that Blacks have experienced

¹⁶ Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, *African American Grief Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement* (New York: Routledge; Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), xx.

in this country. In the wake of George Floyd's death, thousands marched in the streets. No longer were we concerned about social distancing and contracting Covid-19 in crowds. Blacks, Whites, and members of other ethnic groups started marching in support of Black Lives Matter, not only in the United States but also in other countries also affected by the virus.

The list of African American men and some women who have been killed by police officers claiming that they felt threatened while effecting an arrest is long. The fact that, for members of the African American community, death by racism still occurs further highlights the need to study the grief of African Americans individually and collectively. I advocate the African American church continuing to serve as the focal point for its people. Rosenblatt and Wallace concur, arguing that

In any group in the United States, religious meanings may be important in making sense of a death and what has happened since the death. But for proportionately more African Americans, religion may have a central role. The African American church, in all its diversity, has been central to helping many African Americans cope with a harsh world.¹⁷

Also of concern is Black-on-Black crime in impoverished Black communities, which may be a manifestation of repressed grief. We have learned to live with death, including when it is premature, accidental, and/or violent—as seems to occur at a disproportionately high rate in African American communities. Mental health professionals have an important role to play in this regard working in conjunction with clergy.

¹⁷ Rosenblatt and Wallace, *Grief*, 79.

CHAPTER 7. THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

Robert L. Smith defines the African American church as

that body of Christianity which is predominantly made up of people who are descendants of black Africans brought to the United States during slavery. The Judeo-Christian heritage is the religious and theological foundation of the African American Christian community. In this body there exists a diversity of denominational affiliations, theological positions, religious practices, and socioeconomic standing. Interwoven in this diversity is a black collective reality or experiential dimension that flows out of black ethnicity, cultural particularity, black Christian faith, and shared history of oppression in America.¹⁸

This shared history of oppression has shaped the ways in which we live, embrace life, experience death, and grieve. We have become a family community that supports itself, particularly through the African American church. This is how African Americans have coped with all of the loss, death, and grief in this country since we were not allowed to grieve. Karen Jones Bernstine supports this point, observing that

The black church is considered a family. Members of the church are children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. Historically and theoretically, the church has been the family to embrace persons when any of the other family configurations were absent or lacking. It is the church family that gives unconditional love to hurting individuals and families when the socioeconomic and political systems impinge upon them.¹⁹

This perspective has many positive connotations and provides substance that needs to be built upon. I argue that the Black church has always been a social, political, civil, financial, and therapeutic community for Black people, and the pastors have always been involved in all aspects of their congregants' lives.

¹⁸ Robert London Smith, Jr., *From Strength to Strength: Shaping a Black Practical Theology for the 21st Century* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2007), 13-14.

¹⁹ Karen Jones Bernstine, Louise Bates Evans, Marilyn Magee, and Virginia Sargent, *Church and Family Together: A Congregational Manual for Black Family Ministry* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 5.

Harvard scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. hosted a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) four-part series that first aired on February 16-17, 2021, titled “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song” that brought this point home. The program documented the role of preachers in helping slaves and free Blacks to live another day so that, maybe, things would be better for their children. The Africans who were brought here carried with them traditions of spiritual worship, and the fragments of their spiritual knowing birthed the powerful institution known as the African American or Black church. One form of association in which slaves were allowed to engage was the formation of churches and attending church services, through which they were able to appeal to Christianity in the effort to free themselves from bondage. The broadcast aptly described the Black church as a nation within a nation that made a way out of “no way.”

Deryl Ann Springer, in her doctoral project, “The African American Church: A Vital Resource for the Congregation and the Community for Ministry to Those Who Are Grieving the Loss of a Loved One, states that

J. Deotis Roberts, in his book, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, states that our African American religious tradition was developed in Africa and transported to the New World by slaves and transformed by them through the encounter with the Bible and Christianity into a unique form of Christianity. Upon this experience and reinterpretation there sprang up the black “invisible” church during slavery and the black institutional church in force after the Emancipation.... Gayraud Wilmore, in his study on black religion and the black church tradition, also notes that Black Christianity has its origin in Africa.²⁰

As a body, the African American church from the beginning has had a strong faith in the Scripture. Christianity appealed to the slaves because of the similar stories: the

²⁰ Deryl Ann Springer, “The African American Church: A Vital Resource for the Congregation and the Community for Ministry to Those Who are Grieving the Loss of a Loved One” (D.Min. diss., Azusa Pacific Seminar, Azusa, 2017), 97-98, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 13428031.

children of Israel were slaves, and God delivered them from bondage and freed them, showing the slaves in the Americas that there is reason to hope for a better life. The slaves accepted the religion of their oppressors, related it to their own religious experiences and traditions, and birthed a church that gave hope for freedom. As Penelope J. Moore writes, “Religion is perceived to be an adaptive mechanism that enables poor and oppressed individuals and groups to find spiritual compensation for the material and social benefits that are denied to them on a daily basis.”²¹

In these ways, Christian theology and the Word of God became a way of life for the slaves and served as a survival and coping mechanism. Christianity gave slaves hope in the hereafter, where they would be free from suffering, pain, death, and the injustices done to them. In the words of Oates,

The journey of Jesus Christ provides the way of life we are to live in the face of grief and separation. The Apostle Paul made this clear. We recapitulate Jesus’ experience throughout our lives. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).²²

This concept also has roots in the African religious traditions. As Kwame Gyekye noted,

Traditional African religions hold in common the belief that the soul is an immaterial part of the human being that survives death and that humans, in the afterlife, will give an account to God for their lives in this world. Ideas about the soul held by the African people are highly elaborate and complex.²³

Therefore, it was only logical that African slaves in the New World would accept Christianity as one of their survival tools.

²¹ Penelope J. Moore, “The Black Church: A Natural Resource for Bereavement Support,” *Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 38 (2003), 47.

²² Oates, *Grief*, 84.

²³ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 13.

Consequently, the Black slave preacher replaced the tribal chief from Africa. As just noted, for slaves, the church provided opportunities to meet together and look out for one another, for instance to protect one another from the slave masters. Grieving people sometimes find themselves among others who can relate to their pain, hurt, and grief. The church became a way for Black people to form communities within the context of slavery. In the African American community, the church has historically served as more than a place of worship. This religious institution has helped African Americans cope with a variety of issues, including physical and mental illness, grief and loss, legal concerns, relationship challenges, unemployment, and racism. Thus, pastors, beyond playing the role of spiritual advisor, must respond to their congregants' psychological, sociological, and emotional needs within the community. Early Black pastors have always been involved in the personal lives of their congregants as counselors, advisors, spiritual guides, and friends. The church became the place for those who needed shelter from a storm, a place of solace, comfort, and love.

Since African Americans from their first arrival in this country have always faced hard living, grief, and loss, we have grown accustomed to assimilating these difficulties unconsciously and looking forward to better days in the hereafter. Since slavery, we have conditioned ourselves to live in this world while looking toward the world to come. This perspective has been the driving force for us as a people and the reality of our community. Isaiah 53:3a-4a states, "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows."²⁴ Even Jesus suffered from grief, as in Matthew 26:38a: "Then He said to

²⁴ *The Holy Bible Giant Print Edition New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982), 847-48.

them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.”²⁵ Downtrodden people may see that the brighter day coming may involve standing before the throne of God—that is, they may see that death can be the price of seeing the brighter day of eternal life through Jesus. This has been the conditioning thinking of African American people in this country.

This concept of the hereafter is still seen in Black churches today. For instance, Candace Shields states in her dissertation,

Even though African Americans are not Africans, the influence of African forefathers is still very prevalent in their lives and in much of their culture. It can be seen throughout the African American existence here in the United States that the communal aspects of the African American culture helped the community to exist for as long as it has existed.²⁶

While I agree with most of Shields’ statement here, I disagree with her assertion that we are not Africans; this heritage is in our DNA, as noted earlier. Accordingly, our churches have always been and continue to be filled with traditions and rituals with roots in Africa. The grieving process has been incorporated into the services through hymns, gospel songs, passages from Scripture, and Psalms of lament. Grief has been incorporated into the weekly services. We believe the vision of God expressed in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.²⁷

Religious and sacred music, particularly Black spirituals, have been used during church services as well as funerals, in which contexts they have been known to comfort

²⁵ *Holy Bible*, 1146

²⁶ Candace Charlene Shields, “Ain’t Got Time to Die”: Grief, Loss, and Healing in the African American Community” (Ph.D. diss., School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, 2009), 193 ProQuest Theses & Dissertations, 3353002.

²⁷ *Chronological*, 1626.

our pain, grief, and suffering. This music is rooted in slavery times, when death by beating, mutilation, depression, and other causes associated with enslavement created the need to express grief in terms of the sufferer's "going to a better place." God offered solace and hope for those in pain and made sense of their current situation. The spirituals were a way to bring the hurt and pain to the surface and channel it out, to bring healing to the people. Singing and hearing the songs occasioned togetherness, empathy, support, and hope for one another. This type of music is still sung in the African American church as a source of comfort, joy, and hope in this life and in death. Emphasizing this point, John Diamond, Jr., James Cone, Edward Wimberly, and Wilson Flemister observed that "There are several practices unique to the black religious experience either in form or in content. These practices can be organized into four possibly therapeutic functions: (1) articulation of suffering; (2) location of persecutors; (3) provision of asylum for 'acting-out'; and (4) validation of experiences."²⁸

Celebrating the life of the deceased in the African American family has been the norm in our churches and part of the grieving process since slavery. As stated earlier, during slavery times, death was viewed as a blessing, as a release from the brutal conditions. It was believed that the slave's soul was returning home to Africa, a belief that gave rise to the tradition of referring to a funeral as a "home-going service." This tradition remains prevalent in our churches today, but, instead of the soul going back to Africa, we now believe that it goes to heaven to be with God and Jesus. The service has become a celebration in the midst of mourning. Extravagant celebrations of deceased

²⁸ John C. Diamond Jr., James H. Cone, Edward P. Wimberly, and Wilson N. Flemister, "The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community: Suggested Areas for Research into the Black Religious Experience," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1980), 29-44.

loved ones' lives evolved to feature live music and a festive atmosphere. The notion of home-going still has positive connotations because the deceased is free from pain and finally at peace. The service is a high-energy, emotional, and extravagant celebration of life. The pastor delivers a boisterous eulogy. Now it is acceptable to express grief and, sometimes, this is done in over-the-top, loud, and exaggerated ways. After all, John 11:35 states, "Jesus wept."²⁹ These aspects of the Black funeral have remained part of African American culture, along with having the funeral at a church and/or a Black pastor officiating and delivering the eulogy for services held at a funeral home.

African Americans have dealt with so much death, from being stolen from our homeland and dying on the slave ships to dying on plantations, at the hands of racists, and at a younger age and a disproportionate rate from disease and sickness compared with other ethnicities because of living in poverty and ghetto communities. Through all of this trauma, the African American church has been a place to come to grieve, to be consoled, and to be supported financially and socially irrespective of membership in the church. This tradition has to do with being Black and having a support system in the community. Thus, Penelope Moore reasoned that

The psychological impact of racism emanating from slavery and continuing to the present time is one of the major obstacles for mainstream institutions to overcome in the provision of bereavement care to African Americans. Increasingly, practitioners of bereavement care have turned their attention to the Black Church, which is identified in the literature as an alternative resource for the creation and development of culturally sensitive bereavement supports. The Black Church is considered a viable alternative resource because it has long been recognized as the one "genuine" place where African Americans experience freedom of expression and basic trust in fellow worshippers.³⁰

²⁹ *Holy Bible*, 1237.

³⁰ Moore, "Black Church," 11-20.

African American pastors have authority and prestige within and outside the Black community. They speak on behalf of their congregations and communities regarding political, civil, and social matters. They are very much involved in the lives of the members of their congregations and are consulted for every situation. The African American pastor has been and still is seen as the person to seek out in times of crisis for all kinds of counseling and help, in large part because of the stigma attached to seeking a mental health professional. Thus, Shields argues that

Historically, the African American community has not had the best relationship with the mental health providers. There is a fear that some of the many myths that have been passed down through the years might be true and the awful things that they have heard about from their ancestors might indeed happen to them. Often rather than seek the assistance of a mental health professional, the African American individual will choose to weather the storms in their life alone, or use other drastic measures of escape.³¹

There are financial considerations involved as well. A professional counselor costs money, but the pastor doesn't. The church has become a place where we can let out our anger, let out our grief, let out our sorrows. Particularly at African American home-going services, emotions run high, and everything seems to be exaggerated in the lavish funerals, which have become a way of celebrating the importance of the deceased in a way that they were not celebrated in life. Families may go into debt or postpone funerals until they can raise the money. The Black church is sought after as a financial resource as well. This type of celebration is a tradition that comes from the motherland regarding proper respect and honor for the deceased. African American funerals have always been about the community rather than just about the family experiencing the loss. The community helps to take care of all aspects of the loss, but

³¹ Shields, "Ain't," 199.

new ways of coping must be adapted for the twenty-first century. Rev. Dr. W. Franklyn

Richardson notes that

Historically, the African American church has been an advocate for Black people in areas beyond the sacred side of our lives. Now the Black Church faces the major challenge of rethinking itself for the twenty-first century. Our fundamental message of healing and hope for African Americans is as significant as ever, but we need to connect that message to the issues that affect us now and will affect us in the future.³²

We must, now more than ever, move from oppression to liberation in the twenty-first century with the help of pastors, Christian mental health professionals, trained laypeople, and additional social service resources. As Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. De Vries state in *Living Fully In The Shadow Of Death Assurance And Guidance To Finish Well*, “A spiritual life is not a life of escape—it is one that equips a person to face the realities of life in a way consistent with sound mental health practices...sound mental health principles combined with deep spiritual base can provide the foundation for living and for dying.”³³ Emphasis must be placed on the continuing use of the African American church as a resource for Black people to create healing for future generations, including with respect to post-coronavirus coping skills.

³² Franklyn W. Richardson, “The Black Church’s Twenty-first Century Challenge,” *Ebony Magazine* (August, 1999), 156.

³³ Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. De Vries, *Living Fully in the Shadow of Death: Assurance and Guidance to Finish Well* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 16.

CHAPTER 8. A LOOK AT GRIEF

“Go Down, Death,” James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

(A FUNERAL SERMON)

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband—weep no more;
Grief-stricken son—weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter—weep no more;
She only just gone home.
Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.
And God sat back on his throne.
And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his right hand;
Call me Death!
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death!—Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.
And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hooves of his horses struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.
And God said: go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired—She's weary—

Go down, Death, and bring her to me.
 And Death didn't say a word,
 But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
 And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
 And out and down he rode,
 Through heaven's pearly gates,
 Past suns and moons and stars; on Death rode,
 Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
 Straight down he came.
 While we were watching round her bed,
 She turned her eyes and looked away,
 She saw what we couldn't see;
 She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
 Coming like a falling star.
 But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
 He looked to her like a welcome friend.
 And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
 And she smiled and closed her eyes.
 And Death took her up like a baby,
 And she lay in his icy arms,
 But she didn't feel no chill.
 And death began to ride again—
 Up beyond the evening star,
 Into the glittering light of glory,
 On to the Great White Throne.
 And there he laid Sister Caroline
 On the loving breast of Jesus.
 And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
 And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
 And the angels sang a little song,
 And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
 And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
 Take your rest.
 Weep not—weep not,
 She is not dead;
 She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.³⁴

I assert that grief remains prevalent in the Black community and has not been sufficiently addressed by society. However, the Black church, which still has more influence over the African American community than any other institution, is an ideal platform to start with. The American Dictionary of the English Language defines grief

³⁴ James Weldon Johnson, "Go Down, Death," Poets.org, <https://poets.org/poem/go-down-death>.

as “The pain of mind produced by loss, misfortune, injury or evils of any kind; sorrow; regret.”³⁵ According to Jessica Curiel,

Grief is the natural response to significant loss. It’s the process of saying goodbye to someone or something we love and no longer have. As difficult as it is to grieve our losses, grief is the process that allows us to recover from loss. Grief is often messy and unpredictable, and follows no set timetable. But it is within this grief that God grants us comfort and hope.³⁶

The process involves several stages that an individual should go through in order to heal from the loss. However, many people become “stuck,” so to speak, on one or more of the processes and are unable to reach acceptance, total healing, and mental health. They have not been able to “get over” the death of a loved one. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and other destructive emotions become the operating force in their lives. We start to strengthen what is gone and grieve what remains. Not dealing with loss can cause disorientation in how people think about themselves, the world, and God.

Prolonged grief can lead to actions that seem logical but are actually unhealthy tricks that the mind uses to avoid facing the pain of grief. Doing so involves more than just adjusting the emotions. I argue that this is what has happened in the African American community because of the racism that we have suffered in this country.

Similarly, Rosenblatt and Wallace suggest that

The standard views of grief do not speak at all to how African American grief might be shaped by and responsive to racism, economic disadvantage, the substantial difference in life expectancy between African Americans and Euro-Americans, the social class diversity of many African American families, and for some African Americans, the powerful influence of drugs and community

³⁵ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (Chesapeake: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2004).

³⁶ Jessica Curiel, *Finding Hope in Jesus: Comfort for Loss* (Peabody: Hendrickson Rose Publishing, 2011), 1.

devastation. Nor do the standard view of bereavement speak to the possible influence of the African American church and African American culture(s).³⁷

I am by no means suggesting that Blacks—or any other ethnic group, for that matter—should just “get over” their grief. Rather, I argue that there are specific dynamics to Black grief that must be addressed. Specifically, I contend that the African American church, particularly the clergy, has a vital role to play in assisting those who have lost loved ones in processing their grief. Shields also speaks to this point, affirming that “The African American experience of grief offers a unique cultural, theological, and ecclesiological unique process of encounter with grief, release, reconstruction, and reorientation into the life that has a contribution to make to the wider Christian church in the practices of transforming suffering.”³⁸ This much is evident in the ways in which Blacks form communities to take care of each other during grief. The power of the congregation, the strength of the community, the implementation of love and forgiveness—all of these factors are critical in helping the African American church as a community and its members individually to move past the grief of slavery.

The process of grief accompanies any major loss in life, but the focus here is on the loss of loved ones. I have described death as very much a part of living, but, nevertheless, it remains hard to face. Often, people only talk about death when they come face-to-face with it. Because human beings have an innate drive to survive, talking about death, particularly one’s own, can be a struggle. Death goes against our nature because our nature is to live; the fight for survival is programmed into us. However, we struggle with the idea that death is the natural ending of life, perhaps because it is an unknown. No one has come back from being dead for a long time and

³⁷ Rosenblatt and Wallace, *Grief*, xiii.

³⁸ Shields “Ain’t,” 5.

described the experience. Even the examples of individuals coming back from the dead in the Holy Bible make no mention of their experience of the afterlife. For instance, the return of Lazarus is described as follows: “And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’” The case of the widow’s son in Luke 7:12-15 is similar:

And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother.³⁹

The Bible is silent about what the son said to his mother after being resurrected from the dead as well as what others have experienced in the afterlife.

People just don’t like to talk about death. It makes them uncomfortable. They have to find a way to soften death in their reality. The notion that life continues on the other side or after the Resurrection gives hope to those left mourning. This hope is very real in the African American church, where grieving and mourning loss are common and ongoing, with sudden tragic deaths seemingly a normal part of our community. We have been taught from early childhood to expect death constantly in our communities and to accept it as a fact in our lives with which we must “deal.” Particularly in the church, we are told that God is in control and will ease our pain and that everything will be alright. As a people, we still have the stigma that getting “outside help” during the grieving process is a sign of weakness because the church and the family are all that we need. We can always talk with our pastors if the load seems too much to bear, and they will pray for us.

³⁹ *Holy Bible*, 1188-89.

There are also the testimonies of others in the church about how God delivered them during their time of need. Those who are grieving may be told that their loved ones are in a better place now, with God. Knowing that others have experienced grief and survived is helpful; sharing feelings and emotions and knowing that the feeling is normal has been instrumental for us. Ideally, the traditional rituals of the church—the visits by the pastor, family, and friends, the phone calls, the wake, the planning of the service, the sharing of stories about the deceased, the home-going service, the hymns, the eulogies, the repast afterward—are enough to help those suffering a loss to process their grief.

As has been seen, the primary grieving process for African Americans historically has been an elaborate celebration of the life of the deceased in the belief that, at least, they are free from life's sufferings as their souls go to heaven to be with God and Jesus. We have turned mourning into a celebration. This is why Blacks may spend lavishly to give a "proper" burial even when they can't afford it. The Black tradition of internalizing grief before and after the funeral is not biblical. There is more lament in the Holy Bible than praise. In fact, a whole book is dedicated to the lamentations attributed to Jeremiah, who is known as the "weeping prophet" because he mourned the destruction of God's people in Jerusalem. Jeremiah became the voice of desolate people who needed to express their sorrow and pain. Thus, in Lamentations 1:2a, 20: "She sobs through the night, tears stream down her cheeks.... There is no one left to comfort her.... Lord, see my anguish! My heart is broken and my soul despairs, for I have rebelled against you. In the streets the sword kills, and at home there is only

death.”⁴⁰ This passage shows the importance of giving voice to grief, of “getting it out,” so to speak, through talking, writing, and/or praying. People who have experienced loss and trauma must permit themselves to mourn, to weep, to let it out.

In a word, grief is holy, for God is very much concerned with human suffering. Grief is to be acknowledged rather than seen as something just for the funeral, something to get over quickly and rush through, as appears to be the case in the African American church. We Blacks have to learn to give ourselves room to grieve. We must allow breathing space, space in which to unravel, to not know, to not be strong, to be undone, and to grieve. It is okay not to be okay. There is a saying that “If you grieve well, you live well.” That is, those who grieve well after a tragic loss will be different but better and stronger. Sometimes, however, as believers in Christ, we try to jump over the stages of grief because of Christ. We try to jump right to learning to be a new person without going through the other parts, and this is where, I believe, the church falls short for many families. Quoting Rosenblatt and Wallace once more,

Sometimes the church that the grieving person or deceased belonged to when the death occurred, was particularly supportive and helpful because the members of the church knew the person who died and the whole family. That does not mean the church members helped directly with matters of grief. Their caring mattered, but paradoxically their caring might stay away from the most central problem of all, the grief of a surviving family member.... One way to understand how churches and church congregations might not be of help with grief is that the primary involvement of many churches after a death is in the few days immediately following the death when there are the rituals of visitation, wake, and funeral. Also, the members of the church congregation are human, and in their humanity some may say things that a grieving person would not find helpful.⁴¹

It is in this respect that professionals and trained lay people in the church can help.

African Americans have been taught to live with the grief and injustices that we face on

⁴⁰ *Chronological*, 1094.

⁴¹ Rosenblatt and Wallace, *Grief*, 44.

a daily basis and, therefore, haven't been advised to seek additional help—especially those struggling to adjust to the death of a loved one. This is where the twenty-first-century African American church needs to rethink its way of meeting the needs of the congregation in order for us to “live life in all its fullness.”

The goal of my project, therefore, was to contribute to the efforts by the African American church to help our people heal from the trauma of grief by learning new ways to cope with death that involve fearlessly talking about and planning for it so as to live life to the fullest. Thus, I have explored the role of the African American Church in nurturing a therapeutic community for those suffering death, grief, and loss. The ultimate goal is to devise, plan, and implement new ways for the African American church to continue playing this role while updating it for the twenty-first century. This discussion needs to take into account the resources that are available and those that need to be developed. Historically, the primary grieving process for African Americans has involved lavish celebrations of the delivery of the deceased from life's suffering as the soul travels to heaven to be with God and Jesus. I believe that these lavish celebrations are the result of not being able to express grief as a people collectively. It's about all the racism and grief we have suffered living as a Black person in America. If our lives were not worth anything in the living, at least we could be “put away nicely”. It's about showing the world that our lives really did matter and we are a people of substance and worth. However, I contend that this type of thinking has also preventing us from expressing and processing our grief, and is a form of not dealing with our grief by substituting an elaborate home going for what we really are feeling inside. I argue that this tradition has to change because it causes those who suffer loss to skip

important steps in the grieving process, sometimes even resulting in anti-social behaviors. Nevertheless, the Black church as a whole continues to be a source of comfort through the community and traditions, especially music and rituals, that its services proved. The question remains regarding how the Black church can best complement other resources to advance the community.

CHAPTER 9. COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Contextual Committee consisted of the professional mentor, Rev. Dr. Kimberly Holmes, the contextual liaison, Deaconess Joanne Whitley, and members Deaconess Hannah Cofield, Deacon William Cofield, Rev. Karen Jones, and Deacon Samuel Taylor. The purpose of this committee was to serve as a sounding board, support the candidate in developing the project, participate in evaluating the project, and help with the implementation of the project on this journey by the doctor of ministry candidate in achieving her degree.

December 29, 2020: Contextual Committee Conference Call. The meeting began with an opening scripture (Philippians 4:13), a prayer by Deacon Taylor, and an introduction of the committee members. Deaconess Hannah Cofield offered words of encouragement as a committee participant with fifteen years of experience in this capacity. Rev. Dr. Holmes also joined as an active and willing participant. She held a doctorate in ministry and offered tools, focus, and techniques for achieving the final goal. Rev. Reid, the candidate, presented her Research Module II project proposal to the committee pending final approval by her faculty mentor, Dr. Kevin Miller. Discussion followed. The key points included developing and implementing a Zoom webinar and hosting end-of-life forums and resolution seminars. The next meeting was scheduled for either January 23 or 30, 2021. Rev. Jones closed the meeting with a prayer.

On January 28, 2021, a meeting was held with the newly elected pastor, Rev. Dr. Shane Hilliard, to explain the nature of the project to him. He was very encouraging and stated that the project was an Esther 4:14 prophetic project “[F]or such a time as this.”

Pastor Hilliard went on to state that the Black community was suffering from psychological and emotional depression and that its members have been using unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drinking and drug use, that are associated with homelessness and mental illness. He saw this project as being implemented at the St. Luke Baptist Church in the form of seminars, counseling sessions, and so on. He also wished to see a special component addressing young people grieving loss. Pastor Hilliard said that he saw me training our leaders and using creative ways to help our people to cope with grieving. He suggested that I conduct my projects with the participation of our Women's and Men's Koinonia Ministries, since there was an audience there, and also that I add someone from our social media team since the project would have to be conducted through Zoom owing to Covid-19 prevention measures. In addition, I informed Pastor Hilliard about the GriefShare Project and suggested that it become part of the Bereavement Ministry. I had already spoken to Deacon Marva Horsey, the president of the ministry, and found that she was in agreement.

January 30, 2021: Contextual Committee Conference Call. Rev. Reid read the opening Scripture, Esther 4:14, "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance shall arise for the Jews from elsewhere, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this and for this very occasion?" (Amplified Version). There followed a prayer led by Deaconess Hannah Cofield. Rev. Reid shared that she had cited this scripture because Pastor Hilliard had described her work as an "Esther 4:14 project, for such a time as this." The project received the title "Live and Let Die: Embracing the Life, Death, and Grief Cycle in the African American Church" in 2018, at the start of the doctoral program, before anyone

had heard of Covid-19. Brother Derron Thomas from St. Luke's social media ministry was added to the committee because the project involves social media.

Rev. Reid updated the team on the project's progress. She reported that the research proposal had been completed and submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This board reviews projects to make sure that humans and animals are not being mistreated and/or misrepresented during research. She also reported that an event called "Can We Talk Forum: Having End of Life Conversations" would be held in March 2021 and implemented through Zoom meetings of the Women's and Men's Koinonia. Rev. Dr. Kimberly Holmes would be facilitating a resolution seminar relating to healthcare proxies, wills, power of attorney, and estate planning. Rev. Granby, the funeral director at Granby Funeral Holmes in the Bronx, would be asked to assist in facilitating a seminar by leading a discussion of pre-paid funeral planning to be live-streamed during a service at St. Luke Baptist Church, possibly in April.

The discussion also touched on implementation of the GriefShare project through the St. Luke Bereavement Ministry. Rev. Reid spoke with the president, Deacon Marva Horsey, who said that she was looking forward to adding this project to the ministry. Pastor Hilliard was responsible for approving the members of the GriefShare team. The goal would be to obtain or purchase the program through GriefShare.org, identify the members of the team, and train them. The GriefShare ministry was to be implemented at a later date.

Rev. Reid met with her professional mentor, Rev. Dr. Holmes, on Monday, January 25, 2021. Rev. Reid was scheduled to meet with her faculty mentor at Drew

University Theological School on February 4, 2021, and the next committee meeting was scheduled for February 20, 2021.

February 21, 2021: Contextual Committee Meeting at St. Luke Baptist Church. In attendance were Deacon Cofield, Deaconess Cofield, Deacon Samuel Taylor, and Brother Derron Thomas. Deaconess Cofield opened the proceedings with a prayer. Rev. Reid confirmed the dates for the projects to be conducted. The Zoom webinar, titled “Wills, Trusts, and Estate Planning,” was to be facilitated by Rev. Dr. Holmes and Kenneth Cattenhead. A church announcement would be sent out by email on February 24, 2021, and the church livestream announcements would be sent four days later with the Zoom meeting ID and Passcode. St. Luke’s family and friends would be invited. The next Zoom webinar, titled “Can We Talk Forum: Living Life to the Fullest,” was scheduled for March 19, 2021, and would also be announced through church email and livestream announcements. Brother Thomas with the social media ministry would operate the Zoom sessions, and Rev. Reid would facilitate both webinars. All of the committee members were asked to attend and lend their support during the webinars.

CHAPTER 10. RESEARCH AND PROJECT STUDIES:

A GRIEVING WORKSHOP

On June 6, 2020, Dr. Shannon Mason, M.S. Ed., Ph.D., of Shannon Mason LLC, a mission strategist, speaker, and grief coach, led a virtual seminar workshop titled “Grieving What is Gone, Strengthening What Remains” at First Baptist Church of Hillside (Rev. Dr. Christopher Jones, Pastor), with Lady Nikki Jones serving as facilitator. The workshop took the form of a breakout/discussion-style forum. Biblical references served as examples.

The first breakout session was based on 2 Samuel 21:9-14, “QUOTATION.” The questions for discussion concerned what Rizpah might be grieving, how she might feel physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and the questions that might she might be asking herself and God. The answers from the discussion included that Rizpah might be grieving the death of her son, how he and the others died, the inability to bury them properly, the loss of her heirs and provision in her sons, and her feelings of loss, exhaustion, depression, confusion, delirium, soreness, stiffness, anxiety about the future, and anger toward God and her position as a concubine. Thus, she is full of regret (“If only I had”) and questions for and about God (“Why do I deserve this? What am I supposed to be now? What’s the point of life? Is God really merciful? Is He really good?”), feeling stuck (“How do I deal with this?”) and in need of God (“Give me strength! Where are you, Lord?”). This exercise was intended to help the participants begin to look at grief and identify the misconceptions that people have held on to about it. A key quote that emerged was, “If you grieve well, you live well,” by Dr. Denise Reid. In the second breakout session, the discussion concerned how the participants

typically perceived grief and what they found to be most (and least) helpful while grieving. A key quote that emerged was, “Grief is to be honored, not gotten over or quickly rushed through like some trivial annoyance.”

In the end, what was shared strengthened what remained. I considered which of the strengthening strategies shared on that day (either during the main session or the breakout session) might be helpful in a person’s healing journey. I noted that it is possible to lament to God (a complaint to God honestly seeking something), to write, naming what is not, to write and request help—presenting it before God. A voice recording could also be used. The last question asked of the participants concerned the one thing that they each could commit to incorporating into his or her personal grief and healing and recovery processes.

INTERVIEW

Rev. Karen Jones (formally known as Karen Jones Bernstine), coauthor of the book *Church and Family Together: A Congregational Manual for the Black Family Ministry* and Director of the Department of Pastoral and Spiritual Care at New York University’s Winthrop Hospital in Mineola, NY, discussed with me the hospital’s resources for grieving families. These resources included a bereavement support group that she had developed and that had been held at NYU’s Winthrop Research and Academic Center but, since the advent of Covid-19, have been held virtually. There were general bereavement groups, a widows-only support group, a men-only support group, children’s support groups (ages 8-12), and perinatal groups. The bereavement groups were held weekly, with both daytime and evening sessions, and the webinars were held

monthly. A separate program catered to the bereavement needs of the hospital's employees.

The topics included such issues as dealing with anger in the grief process, advance care planning, coping with loss during the holidays. Seminars were offered on special topics, for example, "Starting Over: Facing a New Future," which addresses the challenges and hopes of moving forward after a loved one has died, "Forming a New Identity: Learning to Live by Myself," which identifies tools for self-awareness and reinvention, "Grief and Anger," addressing the volatile feelings that normally come with grief, "Grieving Differently in a Multicultural Society," which looks at how various ethnic communities deal with hospitalization, death, dying, and the grief process, and "It's Okay for Men to Cry," which creates a safe space for men (only) to discuss loss and avoid the grieving in isolation that is typical male behavior. Also offered is "Good Grief! My Workplace is Changing," which addresses organizational change.

The goal of the seminars and groups is to provide a safe, supportive, and nurturing atmosphere for the participants to share and honor their experiences of grief. The group facilitators, members of the Winthrop Center's Pastoral Care and Social Work Departments, have been trained to lead groups without bias relating to race, culture, gender, age, religion, philosophy, spirituality, or persons of no faith tradition. The groups form and interact in a confidential, judgment-free, respectful, and safe space, and participation is free of charge. They meet in a series of six sessions. Advance care planning has been added to the bereavement support program to help prepare families to make timely decisions in ways that can enhance the quality of patients' lives and care. Thus, part of the program uses the modeling aspects of The Conversation Project

(theconversationproject.org) to engage and motivate people to have end-of-life care conversations with their families. In these ways, the Winthrop Center intends to use its medical professionals, including the members of its palliative care team, to provide education and information, such as an easy-to-follow advance care planning checklist, advance directive information, and similar resources.

RESOURCES

Prepare for Your Care (www.prepareforyourcare.org)

This online program helps the participants to have a voice in their medical care in terms of interacting with doctors and providing family and friends peace of mind when making end-of-life decisions for them. The program consists of five steps: choosing a medical decision-maker, deciding what matters most in life, providing flexibility for your decision-makers, telling others about your wishes, and asking doctors the right questions. The participants consider various scenarios and, based on their end-of-life choices, receive relevant information and guidance.

After filling out the questionnaire, the participants receive guidance about the next steps to take to continue the process with their loved ones and medical providers. For those without access to a computer, the Prepare Question Guide can be printed and filled out to serve as a reference for family members later in conversations about end-of-life issues. Also, the New York Advance Health Care Directive form can be printed and filled out to express individuals' medical and healthcare wishes should they be unable to speak for themselves. The forms are then signed and witnessed by two people, and the participants are encouraged to share them with their loved ones and medical providers.

GriefShare

I attended a Griefshare Ministry session on a Zoom platform that was implemented at the St. Paul Community Baptist Church (SPCBC)⁴². Rev. Dr. David K. Brawley is the lead pastor. Griefshare is a ministry of Church Initiative designed to facilitate efforts by Christian churches to help their members heal after the death of a loved one. The program can be launched quickly since it provides all that a church needs to implement it. It relies on laypeople to lead the ministry and can be an effective outreach to the entire community—and it points the participants toward Christ. This is, then, a lay-driven ministry for those who are grieving. The program runs for thirteen weeks and is usually offered three times a year (in the fall, spring, and summer). It is designed to help the participants find help, hope, and healing in a safe space where they can share with others who have experienced loss.

Each weekly session begins with a Christ-centered video about grief issues featuring leading Christian grief recovery experts and people who have healed after the death of a loved one. The videos convey the stories, reflections, and advice of those who have faced a loss and experienced healing after the grief. Next, the trained lay leaders moderate a group discussion based on the discussion questions provided in the Leader's Guide. The participants discuss what they have seen and have opportunities to share challenges that they are facing or have faced. Each receives a workbook for sorting out their thoughts and emotions with a daily Bible study exploring what God says about such situations, a weekly journal, a gospel presentation, and tear-out cards. The workbook can also be shared during the meetings. The participants are invited to attend as many grief cycles as they would like.

⁴²WWW.SPCBC.COM

GriefShare Session Topics (designed to help people who are hurting on the journey from mourning to joy).

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| *Is This Normal? | *Complicating Factors |
| *Challenges of Grief | *Stuck |
| *The Journey of Grief, Part One | *Lessons of Grief, Part One |
| *The Journey of Grief, Part Two | *Lessons of Grief, Part Two |
| *Grief and Your Relationships | *Heaven |
| | *Why |
| *Guilt and Anger | *What Do I Live for Now? |

The following are the contributors to GriefShare, all of whom have experienced the loss of a loved one.

Sabrina D. Black, clinical director of Abundant Life Counseling Center, is a limited licensed professional counselor, certified addictions counselor, and certified biblical counselor (www.abundantlifecounseling.webs.com).

The late Dr. Bill Wright was the founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Michael Card is a Bible teacher, musician, and author of more than two dozen books, including *A Sacred Sorrow* (www.michaelcard.com).

Carol Cornish is a counselor, teacher, and author of *The Undistracted Widow: Living for God after Losing Your Husband*.

Dr. Larry Crabb is a psychologist and founder of New Way Ministries. He is also the author of several books, including *Shattered Dreams*, *Finding God*, and *The Safest Place on Earth* (www.newwayministries.org).

Zoricelis Davila is a bilingual counselor and author of several books in Spanish, including *No se lo que me pasa! (I Don't Know What Is Wrong with Me!)*.

Dr. Robert DeVries is professor emeritus of church education at Calvin Theological Seminary. He and his wife work together to help people in grief and are coauthors of many books, including *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions* and *From We to Me*.

Joni Eareckson Tada is an author, artist, broadcaster, and founder and president of Joni and Friends Ministries. She has written over fifty books, including *Heaven* and *When God Weeps* (www.joniandfriends.org).

Sandy Elder is a biblical counselor with the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Laverock, PA.

Dr. Michael R. Emlet is a counselor with the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) in Glenside, PA. He also was a family physician for twelve years. He is the author of *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* (www.ccef.org).

Elyse Fitzpatrick is a counselor and director of Women Helping Women Ministries. She has authored and co-authored many books, including *A Steadfast Heart: Experiencing God's Comfort in Life's Storms* and *Overcoming Fear, Worry, and Anxiety* (www.elysefitzpatrick.com).

Julie Ganschow is a counselor and teacher at Reigning Grace Counseling Center in Kansas City, MO. She has authored several books, including *Seeing Depression through the Eyes of Grace* (www.biblicalcounselingforwomen.org).

Anne Graham Lotz is a speaker and president of AnGel Ministries. Her books include *Why? Trusting God When You Don't Understand*, *Heaven: My Father's House*, and *The Vision of His Glory*.

Brad Hambrick is the pastor of counseling at the Summit Church in Durham, NC. His books include *God's Attributes: Rest for Life's Struggles* (www.bradhambrick.com).

Hank Hanegraaff is the president and chairman of the board of the Christian Research Institute and hosts the daily radio program the *Bible Answer Man*. He has authored over twenty books, including *Afterlife: What You Really Want to Know about Heaven and the Hereafter* (www.hankhanegraaff.com).

Dr. Jack Hayford is the founding pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, CA. He has authored or co-authored over 100 books and written over 600 songs (www.jackhayford.org).

Dr. Avak Albert Howsepian is an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California San Francisco-Fresno in the Medical Education Program and a staff psychiatrist at the VA Mental Health Clinic.

Dr. Robert W. Kellemen is a licensed clinical professional counselor. He has authored several books, including *God's Healing for Life's Losses* (www.rpmministries.org).

Dr. Crawford Loritts is an author and the senior pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Roswell, GA.

Susan Lutz served as a counselor at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Glenside, PA.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer is the senior pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago. He has written over twenty books, including *One Minute after You Die*.

Dr. Elias Moitinho is the director of clinical training and an associate professor of counseling at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA.

Lorraine Peterson, author of *Restore My Soul*, has been a teacher in the United States and in American schools in Ecuador and Mexico. She ministers to young people and those who have experienced the death of a loved one.

Dr. David Powlison is a faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Glenside, PA. He has authored books, articles, and booklets, including *Healing after Abortion* and *Facing Death with Hope: Living for What Lasts*. (www.ccef.org).

Lois Rabey is a speaker and writer. She is the author of several books, including *When Your Soul Aches* and *Moments for Those Who Have Lost a Loved One*.

Dr. Robert C. Roberts is a distinguished professor of ethics at Baylor University. He has authored several articles and books, including *Spiritual Emotions*.

Joyce Rogers is a speaker and Bible teacher. She has authored several books, including *Grace for the Widow* and *Lean Hard on Jesus* (www.rejoycerogers.com).

Dr. Joseph Stowell is the president of Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, MI. He has authored *Eternity, the Upside of Down: Finding Hope When It Hurts* and other books.

Dr. Siang-Yang Tan is a professor of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He has authored many publications, including *Rest and Coping with Depression* (with John Ortberg).

Dr. Paul David Tripp is a professor of pastoral life and care at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas, TX. He has authored many books, including *Forever* and *A Shelter in the Time of Storm* (www.paultripp.com).

Dr. Stephen Viars is the pastor and biblical counselor at Faith Baptist Church and Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries in Lafayette, IN. He is the author of *Putting Your Past in Its Place: Moving Forward to Freedom and Forgiveness*.

Dr. Edward T. Welch is a counselor at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Glenside, PA. He has authored *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness* and *When I Am Afraid: A Step-by-Step Guide away from Fear and Anxiety* (www.ccef.org).

H. Norman Wright is a grief therapist and certified trauma specialist. He has authored over seventy books, including *Experiencing Grief* and *Recovering from Losses in Life*.

The late Zig Ziglar was the chairman of the Zig Ziglar Corporation, the mission of which is to equip people to utilize their physical, mental, and spiritual resources fully. He is the author of *Confessions of a Grieving Christian*.

Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge is a licensed clinical psychologist. She is the author of *Getting to the Other Side of Grief* and *Traveling through Grief*.

Free training is available through the GriefShare network that provides step-by-step guidance to help the church train laypeople and implement the group sessions.

Those who apply receive a kit and a welcome call from a *GriefShare* ministry coach who guides church members in setting up the program. The minimum number of individuals to run the group is two team leaders. The Leader's Guide provides instructions for identifying potential leaders in a congregation and resources for recruiting them. The members of churches that are not in session at a particular time can locate an existing GriefShare group on the organization's website.

St. Paul Community Baptist Church went a step further by providing the participants at the end with a booklet titled *Putting My House in Order: Pre-arrangement and Recording of Personal Affairs*. The booklet contains brief explanations of the reasons for making pre-arrangements and pre-financing, the legal aspects of death, selecting a cemetery plot, wills, funeral arrangements, things to be done, records of personal affairs, family and biographical information, and a checklist of things to complete. This book can be easily duplicated by any church or organization.

In order to experience in person how GriefShare is conducted, I attended seven sessions of the St. Paul Community Baptist Church group. The following account describes my observations and impressions of these sessions.

The first session that I attended was held on January 9, 2021, from 10:00 am to 12:45 pm. There were forty-one people in attendance. This session was the sixth in the series; it was titled “Why? From Mourning to Joy.” The scriptural text used was from the Book of Job, when Job asks God why he is suffering. This is the question often asked by those who are grieving a loss: why did You take my loved one from me? This Bible book provides an example of someone who trusts God despite not understanding what God is doing. The video shown at the beginning of the session encouraged the viewers to lament and be honest with God about their feelings and explained that unwarranted assumptions, such as the idea that good people don’t suffer, can intensify the pain of those who are grieving. The video also explored whether God must respond and, even if God did respond, whether the explanation would ease the pain, and it suggested that there are some things that we will never be able to understand. The important thing is not to play the blame game, to blame God or turn our backs on Him. God never answers Job but does reveal Himself to him, asking, “Do you know who I am?” Job loses the God whom he thought he knew and found the God who really is. God doesn’t reveal all of the answers to our questions, but He does reveal Himself. Further, even if we receive the answers, we may still not understand or accept the situation. Answers don’t change anything: the loss still hurts, and the deceased is still gone. As long as God knows, we are fine by faith. Job finds a better relationship with God by changing his way of thinking about God. God doesn’t follow our rules. Job obtains a new intimacy with God and, in the process, offers a prime example of what our trials in life can do. God doesn’t owe us an explanation, but He shows Job compassion by revealing Himself to him. We serve God; He doesn’t serve us. It is important, however, to be honest with God. To

lament to God, to cry and complain—it's okay. God expects us to do so. A lament is a profession of faith, for it shows that we trust God. We can use the Psalms to express ourselves. They show how we feel in the world—lament is based on faith, on real trust in God. Christ lamented to God in Gethsemane (“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”). It is our job to let others know that it is okay to cry—like babies, if they cry long enough, someone will show up. God will show up. God is sovereign. We must trust God in the midst of asking why to obtain hope for the future. God is good, and He understands. Jesus had the emotion of grief. I am glad to have a savior who cries for me. However, we must still pour out our questions in prayer and listen for God to answer in His way. It is important to call people during the holidays, and the church's GriefShare can provide that support system. Feel what you're feeling: the crying and lamenting are excellent.

Many people participating in the share said that they were thankful for the calls and the program and that it had helped them get through hard times. They learned the important lesson that it's okay to feel the pain and cry. Grief is love, and tears are what love looks like. God reads every tear; they are words to Him.

When SPCBC used to hold these meetings in person, the participants were encouraged to let the tears flow but not to wipe them away with a tissue immediately. Providing tissues implies, directly or indirectly, that it's not okay to cry, that one who is grieving must stop crying rather than crying and letting it out.

The participants were having a particularly hard time because of Covid-19 and being isolated, including while grieving. The GriefShare space became especially

important during these times. For one exercise in this lesson, the participants wrote their own lamentations to God to capture how they felt.

After the video, the facilitators led a discussion with the participants, seeking feedback and comments that they wished to share. The purpose of such discussions is not to come up with answers but to provide a platform to talk, share thoughts and feelings, and equip those who are grieving to take the next step in a comfortable and safe setting. The workbook also features exercises to work through during the week and process these thoughts and feelings.

The next session that I attended was titled “Anger and Guilt.” Regret, guilt, and anger must be overcome because they can create obstacles to peace and healing. This video discussed the feeling on the part of those grieving that they could somehow have prevented the lost loved one from dying. The truth is that God has numbered our days before we are born. People hold on to false guilt and regret for being unable to reconcile before a loved one’s death. The only thing to be done afterward is to focus on the good times. True guilt involves unresolved conflict, such as not feeling good about the deceased or the way in which the deceased was treated. These thoughts of “if only” and “what if” can plague a person in grief and block the healing process. It is important to turn over these feelings to God rather than continuing to blame oneself. In cases in which a loved one’s death was caused by another, it is important not to stay angry at the person responsible but instead to forgive and trust in God. Forgiveness frees one who is grieving from what can be lifelong bondage to a bitter and hardened heart. Forgiveness isn’t a one-time act but a continuous choice. The basis for forgiveness is a shift from bitterness to healing, which can begin by looking to Scripture rather than inward. It is impossible to

accept God's forgiveness while failing to extend it to someone else. Our forgiveness is underserved, but it brings us face to face with our own mortality. God's forgiveness is perfect: He hates all sin, but He forgives our sins.

In the video for this session, Dr. Loritts stated that, when blaming God for the death of someone, you must realize that God is not the author of sin. Though He is in charge, we must trust God and know that His ways are not our ways when He does things in a way that we don't agree with. Those who are angry with God should still come to God as they are, continue talking to God, be honest with God about their anger, ask God to help change their opinions about Him, and continue to read the Holy Bible.

The leaders of the group stated that they had observed the growth of the people who were attending these GriefShare meetings. They knew that people were having a hard time because of Covid-19, especially since the pandemic made it difficult or impossible to be around other people, leaving them to cry alone. A young man shared that he had lost his best friend, who was thirty-eight years old, and was unable to be a pallbearer at his funeral. He felt overwhelmed with grief, but the sharing had helped him, and the video, in particular, in dealing with his anger. Faced with burying his aunt on his mother's birthday, he had "checked out" mentally. St. Paul was his mother's church, and, though he didn't attend, he was glad for the group. "Grief will kill you," he said. Hearing these stories was difficult, but it was comforting to be part of the group. The participants had the opportunity to speak their pain and let it out, to cry, and to recognize that even being in isolation to avoid Covid-19 and being unable to work are cause for grief. In any case, it is important for those who are grieving to journal and write about what they feel because grief can be overwhelming. Other questions that came out of the discussion

included how to come together during the pandemic, what the “new norm” would look like, and how to develop new rituals and ways to mourn as a community.

The group offered a healing journey for those experiencing loss as its members helped one another under the leaders’ guidance. The program has been effective because pain shared is pain lessened, and God is close to the broken-hearted and reads tears. Tears are God’s healing waters, so let them flow. One exercise for getting the most out of tears is for those grieving to write letters to lost loved ones and mail them back to themselves: when they read them again, they may not be in the same place anymore.

The next session that I observed was titled “Complicating Factors.” Its purpose was to discuss how traumatic experiences affect grief, how to deal with nightmares and flashbacks, and how your thinking affects your emotions. Any loss can be traumatic, affecting the brain through flashbacks, nightmares, smells, sights, and sounds. To deal with trauma, we must stay in the present and focus on where we are now, which can start with looking around, breathing, thinking about the loss, but coming back to the present. Exposure to trauma can diminish trauma. Another topic of discussion was the trauma resulting from multiple deaths, as we have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of us have lost three or four loved ones in a short time. Also, death from suicide can cause shame and feelings of responsibility that prevent survivors from seeking support because others don’t understand or know what to say. Christians can look at suicide from the perspective that God has already forgiven our past, present, and future sins.

In all of these difficult situations, the mental life of those who are grieving is fertile soil for healing. It is up to us to interpret events, and our interpretations may

involve bad conclusions, bad assumptions, and bad choices in the future. Destructive thoughts nurture bad counsel, such as “God is not good, loving, powerful,” “It’s all my fault,” “Life is meaningless,” “I can’t do this,” “I’m all alone,” or “There’s no hope.” Destructive thinking can cripple relationships, but, when we tell ourselves the right positive things, we can avoid it. The participants in this week’s session were very open. One woman said that she had been an atheist but, thanks to GriefShare, she had become a believer. Another woman shared about a person who had died and, on Facebook, the message to wish this person a happy birthday caused her much pain, but being in the group had allowed her to share and release the pain, which lessened it. Another woman talked about the loss of her daughter and mother, saying that, though she had sons, she still missed the female bonds.

The video also explored post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For the purpose of this study, the point I want to emphasize is that PTSD can occur in someone who has lost a loved one, has seen a loved one die by a violent act or accident, or has learned details about another person’s traumatic experience. It is my belief that Covid-19 has and will continue to cause PTSD in some people because of the large number of people who have died, the lack of social contact, and the constant exposure to social media, all of which can complicate normal grief. Dr. Howsepian listed flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, negative changes in mood, self-image, or attitude about the world, difficulty relaxing, concentrating, or sleeping, being easily startled, and feeling irritable and aggressive among the symptoms of PTSD that complicate normal grief. A diagnosis of PTSD is warranted when these symptoms persist for at least a month, cause significant distress, and/or interfere with important aspects of life.

PTSD is distinct from bereavement in presenting with more aggression, self-destructive activity or thoughts, and fear. The main conclusion regarding this GriefShare topic was that trauma, assault, the threat of death, and witnessing death or assault are likely to result in emotional reactions. Any loss can be traumatic and can affect our brains with flashbacks and nightmares. It is important that people share their pain because fear and depression feed on isolation.

The next GriefShare session that I attended was titled “Stuck.” The participants explored the difficulty that some experience accepting that a loved one has died. In these cases, grieving people may create shrines out of their loved ones’ rooms or cry constantly. If such grief is not addressed, it can be just as intense and raw as it was when the person died even three to five years later. This session explored ways to prevent becoming stuck in grief. Death affects us emotionally, physically, financially, and spiritually, and what we think about our grief and loss determines whether we get stuck. Pain is the emotional cost to working through grief and “doing the tough stuff.” Those who grieve want to be over the hurt and pain, but it is impossible to skip past it. Pushing pain down doesn’t make it go away. Emotions must not be allowed to drive the grief train, for being honest about feelings doesn’t mean letting them rule. It is a mistake to obey and be led by one’s feelings, but it is important to acknowledge and deal with them.

The next session was titled “Lessons of Grief.” There are basic lessons of grief from various types of losses, including the loss of more than the person and what are known as secondary losses. In some instances, grief can be over the loss of a confidante, someone to take the trash out, run errands, cut the grass, or pay the bills, a

companion to do things with, or half of a couple. The loss of a parent can mean the loss of an advisor, comforter, and support system. The first holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries after a loss can be especially difficult. It is very important to plan for these difficult days. It is necessary to identify and consider the things done with the deceased and decide which to keep as traditions and which to leave behind. It is also helpful to plan for rest on days that are likely to be particularly hard rather than feeling that it is necessary to keep busy. In addition, it is important that those who are supporting others who are grieving understand that they don't know but can feel others' pain.

In the GriefShare online group, participants can help each other work through the hurting. The discussion focused on whether to celebrate those who have been lost during birthdays, holidays, and so on and, if so, how. There is no right or wrong; it all depends on what the individuals involved feel that they can handle. The important take-away lesson was that those who are grieving need to avoid being talked into or pushed into doing things with which they feel uncomfortable or find stressful. Prioritizing and planning and accepting one's limitations are key considerations. This session was particularly enlightening for the participants since it was held just after the holiday season of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve, which can be difficult days because of the many traditions, gatherings, and expectations associated with them. It is important to acknowledge that grief consumes energy in any season and that the holidays place additional demands on everyone's time and emotions. All of the participants in the group agreed on the importance of remaining flexible, minimizing stress and pressure, and accepting the help that is offered.

Grief work is not easy and requires emotional security. However, a burden shared is a burden lessened—this is what the concept of sharing grief is all about. It is important to guide those who are grieving without letting them become dependent on others who may not always be there. I contend that the church can use grief work as a way to point people toward Jesus or, for those who haven't been saved yet, a healthcare professional.

The next lesson explored further the difficult lessons of grief. Those who are grieving may have identified themselves in relation to those whom they have lost and then find that they need to move on from these relationships. For example, following a loss, one may no longer be a daughter or may be a widow instead of a wife. We must remember, though, that we are children of the King, and Jesus is here with us in the moment. Everyone who has lost someone remains a person who has Jesus Christ. To figure out one's identity apart from grief, it is necessary to define oneself apart from the one who has been lost and explore personal development.

Grief is not an identity, though, in its early stages, it may be all-consuming. Through perseverance, grief can teach valuable lessons about who we are now, relationally, emotionally, career-wise, spiritually, and with respect to our skills, interests, hobbies, and passions. Grief can teach lessons about resolving conflicts because tomorrow is not promised to us. The time spent with family is valuable, so conflicts must not be allowed to fester. Grief can lead to greater sensitivity and sympathy toward others and can teach us to value and prioritize people over our opinions or petty squabbles. Those who are grieving need to carve out a new identity and figure out what they like to do without those who have been lost. There is no such

thing as a return to normal, for there will be a new normal. All of these considerations, I argue, help us to live life to the fullest.

Grief can bring us closer to God and teach us how to depend on Him in a new and deeper way. Grief is personal yet universal; there is no set way to grieve. Some resort to alcohol, become angry with God and/or others, or mistreat others during their grief. God is patient with us through our process of grief, but grief can prepare us for future trials by helping us to discover who we are apart from the loved ones whom we have lost. It was also noted during this session that men and women grieve differently. The GriefShare program provides opportunities to breathe, rest, engage in self-care, and help someone else. Connections are made during GriefShare among people who have experienced similar losses.

The last session that I attended, which is also the last session in the series, was titled “Heaven.” People have many questions regarding what happens after death. The stories of near-death experiences (not biological death but clinical death) differ, and not one has yet come back from the dead and described the experience. As discussed earlier, even the Holy Bible is silent about the afterlife experiences of those whom Jesus brought back from the dead. It is in this respect that we can truly share our faith about God’s love and forgiveness, so that the sharing of grief can become an evangelism tool or deepen our faith in God. Sharing the principles of God’s love, forgiveness, Jesus’s resurrection, heaven, and eternal life can be a source of comfort for those in bereavement.

I now conclude this discussion of GriefShare with a brief account of the first five sessions, which I did not attend but was able to obtain information about from the

workbook provided. Session One, titled “Normal,” deals with common feelings and responses after the death of a loved one. The moderators provide grieving individuals with a list of feelings and responses to identify with, though it is not meant to be exhaustive. By identifying these feelings and realizing that they are normal, those who are grieving can be reassured that they are not losing their minds. The workbook describes the emotions associated with grief as disorderly and often overlapping. The main point, however, is that it is necessary to experience these feelings and responses in order to heal.

Session Two is titled “Challenges of Grief.” The purpose of this session is to help those who are grieving to identify sources of comfort. A key point stressed in the session is that these sources of comfort may vary from person to person. The session also reinforced the importance of learning about the range of normal responses to grief and finding what works for each individual to handle a loss.

Session Three, “The Journey of Grief: Part One,” presents grief as an unplanned journey following the death of a loved one and explores the various factors that determine the nature and length of this journey. The goal of the lesson is to make sure that the journey is healthy and leads to healing, which can be done by noting surprises along the way, writing a “grief letter” to family and friends to help them provide the appropriate help, and simply surviving to the end. Throughout the journey, it is necessary to be honest both about one’s emotional state, rather than allowing others to set the pace of grief, and about fears associated with a future without the deceased. The discussion also touched on how to move forward through grief by storing memories of loved ones.

Session Four, “Journey of Grief: Part Two,” builds on the themes presented in Session Three. The lessons here emphasize putting effort into healing, recognizing how the events surrounding death affect grief, the best ways to deal with the belongings of the deceased, and how to ask for and accept help. The grief journey can be especially difficult when we underestimate its difficulty or overestimate our ability, but the willingness to face reality initially while it hurts facilitates forward movement, while efforts to avoid pain may result in depression.

Session Five, “Grief and Your Relationships,” explores how relationships with people whom we think we will remain close to after a loved one’s death may drift away while others whom we didn’t know well become closer. The topics discussed include how the death of a loved one affects survivors, why solitude can be a blessing and a curse, how to deal with friends who don’t understand grief, and how to help children while grieving.

CHAPTER 11. PROJECT EVENTS FACILITATED BY RUTHANN REID

1. Zoom Meeting, March 6, 2021

This workshop was announced through St. Luke’s livestream service and emails sent out to the church’s disciples: “Estate Planning Workshop; Facilitators: Rev. Dr. Kimberly Holmes, Director of Training for St. Luke Baptist Church; Kenneth W. Cattenhead, owner of The Family Funeral Home, LLC; and the doctoral candidate: Rev. Ruthann Reid.” Rev. Dr. Holmes, who is also a licensed attorney in the state of New Jersey, conducted a PowerPoint presentation. The stated objective of the workshop was “to equate biblical principles to gain a general understanding of NY law as it relates to basic estate planning, which includes funeral preparations and other services.” The presentation by Dr. Holmes provided general information without getting into the specifics of New York State law, for which the participants were advised to contact an attorney licensed to practice in New York State. There were thirty-nine participants in this Zoom webinar, most of whom were disciples of St. Luke, with a few family members and friends in attendance as well.

The first topic that Dr. Holmes discussed was “New York Estate Planning Law: Making Life Decisions.” She advised that, for those who do not conduct estate planning beforehand, the New York courts decide how their estate is handled. As she described it, state planning includes

- protecting assets and/or giving away property while still competent to do so,
- protecting and/or giving your assets and property after becoming incapacitated,
- protecting and/or giving away assets and property after death,

- healthcare decisions in case of incapacitation, and
- end-of-life care decisions, such as stopping treatment when terminally ill and/or incapacitated.

The documents required for estate planning include

- a will, which is a document stating to whom an individual's assets will be given after death and how;
- a trust, which is a financial plan that protects and manages individuals' assets while they are alive and after death, therefore obviating the need for court proceedings following death;
- durable power of attorney, which is a document that authorizes someone to make financial decisions for those who become disabled;
- healthcare proxy, which is a document that authorizes someone to make healthcare decisions for those who are unable to do so; and
- a living will, which is a document that specifies someone's wishes regarding life-extending medical procedures for those who have a terminal illness and become permanently incapacitated or unconscious.

The next issue discussed was guardianship, which involves the management of the affairs and assets of individuals who cannot do so for themselves. In such situations, a "petition of guardianship" is filed with a court, which appoints a guardian if one appears to be needed and either the individual in question agrees or the court finds that the individual to be is "incapacitated." In this context, "incapacitated" means that the individual is unable to provide for or manage his or her personal needs, assets, and/or financial affairs or to understand the inability to do so. The relevant legal terms include

- alleged incapacitated person (AIP), referring to the individual on whose behalf a petition for guardianship is filed,
- petitioner, referring to the one who files a petition,
- guardian, referring to the person appointed by the court, and
- independent evaluator, referring to the person appointed by the court to consult with the AIP to assess his or her capacity for self-care.

The petition process involves a hearing during which the petitioner and the AIP can produce evidence about the condition of the former. The court then decides whether to appoint a guardian and, if so, the responsibilities involved, such as handling financial and other transactions, including transferring funds to pay bills or support the AIP's dependents, dealing with Medicaid, tax issues, and arranging for home care, nursing, and other forms of medical care.

The discussion then turned to the topic of power of attorney, which Dr. Holmes defined as

A powerful contract in which you give another person or persons (not necessarily, and most often not, an attorney) the authority to make legal and financial decisions for you. The person you give the power of attorney to is called your "agent." Under New York law, any mentally competent person may create a power of attorney. You can also name a "successor agent" who can step in if your first choice agent is unavailable for any reason.

Next, Dr. Holmes defined a will as a written document that takes effect after death concerning how the property and assets of the deceased (the "estate") should be distributed, who will be responsible for distributing them (the "executor"), how outstanding bills and taxes are to be paid, who will care for any minor children, and disposal of the remains. In New York, individuals can make a will who are at least eighteen years of age and are of sound mind, which is to say, able to understand what

doing so means, the value of the assets involved, and the individual or individuals to whom they are giving their money.

A will covers assets that may legally be transferred, such as money, stocks, bonds, coins, stamp collections, real estate, furniture, artwork, books, personal items and papers, vehicles, and future interests in properties. These assets may be bequeathed to any person or institution legally able to receive and hold them, including persons who are living or not yet born, charitable organizations such as churches, individuals or organizations charged to care for pets, and persons for their use during their lifetimes, after which the assets pass transfer to others. Any person who is affected by a will may challenge or “contest” it after its submission to a court for approval on the grounds that one or more individuals involved in its preparation suffered from diminished mental capacity at the time or was under the undue influence of others or any form of duress (pressure), or fraud or other issues of validity.

With a living will, individuals express their wishes regarding end-of-life decisions in advance. Like other forms of wills, a living will includes the individual’s name, a statement that he or she is of sound mind and competent to file such documents, instructions for healthcare professionals and a proxy agent, the date on which the document was signed, and the signatures of the individual involved and at least two witnesses. Living wills are not just for older people since incapacitation can happen at any time. A periodic review of a living will is recommended to ensure that it remains consistent with one’s wishes and amend or revoke it if it does not. In such cases, it is necessary either to draft another living will, destroying or otherwise

indicating the intent to revoke the previous document, and notify the relevant healthcare professionals and/or healthcare proxy agent of the change.

The final topic that Dr. Holmes reviewed was trusts. A trust is a written document giving a person or institution the power to hold and manage assets for the benefit of the trustee or another person. Different from a will, a trust can include the management and investment of assets both during one's lifetime and after death. Also, assets that have been placed in a trust do not require settlement in a probate court.

Dr. Holmes left the participants with the parting assignment of drafting a will. She closed the session with a brief discussion of Scripture: "In the Old Testament, there are biblical guidelines concerning an inheritance, with the oldest getting a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). However, the New Testament speaks to a spiritual inheritance that we shall receive eternally (1 Peter 1:4)."

The participants asked many relevant questions, such as the difference between a trust and a will and the conditions under which the ownership of assets is retained. Other issues that came up during the question-and-answer session included the use of power of attorney for a family member suffering from Alzheimer's disease and the role of a successor agent. The general consensus was that more in-depth workshops were needed for such topics as setting up trusts, accessing Medicare, long-term care, and wills and that this workshop should be held at least yearly.

The next presenter was Kenneth Cattenhead, an African American and the funeral director and owner of The Family Funeral Home in New Jersey with extensive contacts with funeral homes in New York State as well.

Mr. Cattenhead addressed his experience as a funeral director during the Covid-19 pandemic. He stated that Blacks in their twenties were dying from the disease, particularly those who were overweight. He said that the situation has been very difficult for funeral directors psychologically, acknowledging that, at one point, he was unsure whether he could endure the mental and physical toll that it was taking on him. People around him were dying at a rapid rate; he saw them one day, and then they were gone the next. He had had very little sleep, for experiencing deaths at such a rapid rate had caused him to face his own mortality as never before. Though many funeral directors were steering people to cremate their loved ones, he said, he had been careful to ensure that his clients made their own choices and didn't steer them toward either cremation or interment. He noted also that certain songs were sung at just about every funeral, including "Great is Thy Faithfulness," "I'll Fly Away," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "In the Cross," "Peace in the Valley," and "When We All Get to Heaven."

During the webinar presentation, Mr. Cattenhead spoke of the logistics of the funeral process. He first stressed the importance of ensuring that family members know where the relevant documents are and taking out a life insurance policy to pay for the final arrangements. He also mentioned prepaid arrangement planning that can be paid for over a period of time as well as homesetter groups that provide loans for prepaid arrangements that can be paid back over a period of time. The prepaid arrangements may cover embalming, dressing, cosmetology, gravesites, and similar professional services. He pointed out that, while prepaid arrangements may involve monthly interest costs that keep pace with inflation, pre-planning still helps to defer the costs associated

with funerals. There is also a fee associated with the removal of the body (based on the place of death). Further, Mr. Cattenhead confirmed what was said earlier in this study regarding the tendency of Black funerals to be over the top so that families may delay the services in order to raise the necessary funds. Overall, this session emphasized the importance of clarifying one's end-of-life wishes to ease the burden on the family.

2. Zoom Meeting, March 19, 2021

A webinar titled “Can We Talk Forum: Living Life to the Fullest,” in which thirty-six individuals participated, was announced through the St. Luke’s livestream service and emails sent out to the church’s disciples. The Men’s and Women’s Koinonia Ministries hosted this forum. It began with the introduction of the Contextual Consultation Committee and a review of the previous workshop. As the title indicated, the goal was to have a fun and thought-provoking discussion about living life to the fullest.

There followed an exercise, “Write Your Own Six-word Memoir.” This exercise encouraged the participants to consider how they wanted their loved ones and others to remember them by summing up their life stories in just six words that spoke to the essence of who they are and what mattered most to them. The memoir can be about who the participants are now or what they want for the future, a story at once personal and that others can relate to (for instance, “I finally learned that weird is a compliment”), a very specific idea (“I absolutely love romantic comedies”), a very real and perhaps difficult personal sentiment (“Can I say that I beat drug addiction?”), or a personal philosophy (“All you need is God’s love”)—and it’s always okay not to take oneself too seriously (“The prophet said that I’d be richer”). The participants were

invited to share their memoirs, which sparked discussion and became fun, and many were excited about sharing. It turned out that most of them had not shared these thoughts with their family members, so these memoirs can be an easy and fun way to open and start conversations with their families. The participants were encouraged to try this approach at home during family and holiday gatherings to start conversations about preparing for death.

The next exercise is titled “Bucket List.” It started with a question: what are some of the things that you have wanted to do but have not done, and why not? The participants were urged to consider things that they had put on hold since the Covid-19 pandemic began and how it would feel to do them again. The goal of this exercise was for the participants to start thinking in terms of living life to the fullest.

Further discussion questions to provoke or initiate thoughts about this topic could include:

1. If you knew this was your last day/month/year, what would you do differently now, and why?
2. Who would you spend time with?
3. What would be important to say?
4. What is the last sound or voice that you want to hear?
5. What life lessons have you learned, and how might you share them?
6. What is something that you have always wanted to do? Why haven't you done it?

Suggestions: Start a box/scrapbook and put photos of the person or things that you will always cherish and remember. Have this information written down -simple – I shared MY Life Wishes folder and My Life Personal Directives

Brief discussion about leaving a legacy to your children/grandchildren.

Final Thoughts: Affirmations Shared with the Participants

I'll look back on this and smile because it was life and I decided to live it.

I love the life I live and I live the life I love.

Life is like a road trip: enjoy each day but don't carry too much baggage.

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

Don't start your day with the broken pieces of yesterday. Every morning we wake up is the first day of the rest of our lives.

You only live once, but, if you do it right, once is enough.

Sometimes the smallest step in the right direction ends up being the biggest step of your life.

Life is a beach.

A good life is when you assume nothing. Do more, smile often, dream big, laugh a lot, and realize how blessed you are for what you have.

The distance between dreams and reality is action.

I am enough to love myself, which gives me enough power to live my life to the fullest.

I dare to believe that all things are now working together for good in my life.

Do or do not: there is no try.

You are what you do, not what you say you will do.

Those who died yesterday had plans for this morning, and those who died this morning had plans for tonight. Don't take life for granted. In the blink of an eye, everything can change. So, forgive often and love with all your heart. You may never know whether you may not have that chance again.

Speak life!

Between yesterday's mistake and tomorrow's hope, there is a fantastic opportunity called "today." Live it! Love it! The day is yours!

CHAPTER 12. REFLECTIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The African American Church can be a vital resource and support for the Black community in terms of embracing the life, death, and grief cycle. We are still in the covid era lingering pandemic stage meaning we are not back to normal nor has a new normal been established. Covid has brought on a myriad of health issues, especially clinical depression that has been documented and diagnosed in increasing numbers. This mental health surge is directly related to the fact that because of covid, people have not had the proper closure in terms of funeralize and burying their loved ones. Historically, our community as a whole does not grieve well and covid has complicated our grieving processing even further. Compounded with the guilt of not being able to have lavish home goings and forced cremations have added to the guilt and depression of our community. Furthermore, not being able to partake in the graveside committal has added to an already exacerbated situation. Many are experiencing what is being called “post covid stress disorder” in the mental health community. We are only just beginning to see the mental health ramifications of this. It is imperative that the Black Church take the lead role in helping our community to process our grief more effectively in order for us to live life to the fullest. Based on the feedback from the projects that was conducted at St. Luke Baptist church, the congregants have expressed a need and desire to have more workshops, seminars, and teachings to facilitate their journey in planning and coping with life and death decisions.

CHAPTER 13. PLAN OF ACTION FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AT ST. LUKE BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Dr. Shane Hilliard, Pastor of St. Luke Baptist Church has expressed a desire to implement/ enhance our Bereavement Ministry by adding the grief awareness component. He stated this work ties into his vision for the church Christ – Church – and Community. The grief work is threaded in the ministry in terms of ministering to the community. He is committed to get the project up and running before the end of the year. This will be done in conjunction with the Social Justice Ministry for community and Mental Health resources; the Bereavement Ministry for grief support, and the St. Luke Bible Institute for education and teaching. The goal is for St. Luke to lead the Harlem Churches in this important work for the community.

1. Implement a GriefShare Ministry in the church. Identify and train lay leaders to facilitate this ministry, which will be conducted under the existing grief ministry to expand the ministry.
2. Implement existing resources—medical, social, legal, economic, and therapeutic—in the Black community, with advocacy and cultural outreach to develop awareness/training for pastors and lay leaders in the African American Church. This can be done using these systems to support, strengthen, and undergird the church’s disciples in all stages of the life cycle to improve their functioning within the community.
3. Develop/continue to hold educational “Can We Talk” seminars and legal workshops on at least a yearly and preferably a quarterly basis for information on preparing for end-of-life affairs.

4. Continue to engage and possibly update cultural/community rituals and celebrations already in place to strengthen and empower African Americans in our daily lives.

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