

## **Preparing for and Responding to Injury, Illness, Death and Bereavement**

Death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity. Death, then, being the way and condition of life, we cannot love to live, if we cannot bear to die.

William Penn, 1693

Quakers do have something very special to offer the dying and the bereaved, namely that we are at home in silence. Not only are we thoroughly used to it and unembarrassed by it, but we know something about sharing it, encountering others in its depths, and above all, letting ourselves be used in it....People so often talk about someone “getting over” a death. How could you ever fully get over a deep loss? Life has been changed profoundly and irrevocably. You don’t get over sorrow; you work your way right to the centre of it.

Diana Lampen, 1979

## **Preparing for Injury, Illness, and Death**

Injuries are often unexpected, and an individual who has suffered one may be unable to care for herself or himself for a period of time. Serious illness, including mental illness, can also occur at any time. Either injury or illness may require an extended period for recovery and rehabilitation, or may even result in death. In either case there will be a need for support from the meeting.

Meetings are urged to prepare for serious illness or injury of members and attenders. This preparation, often organized by the Care and Counsel or similar committee, includes establishing ways to provide spiritual and practical support for those who are ill or injured as well as for their family loved ones. Practical support may be in the form of transportation to medical appointments and visits to the individual, preparing meals, shopping, providing respite time for caregivers, and/or childcare. The form and provision of practical support will vary depending on the size of the meeting, the geographical spread of the meeting community, and the available support from outside the meeting. Spiritual support may include deep listening as well as holding meetings for worship with the individual and loved ones in a hospital, nursing/rehabilitation facility, or their home. All support should be provided in a manner that respects the dignity of the individual.

Adult Friends have a responsibility to prepare for serious illness which may lead to death. While this work can be emotionally difficult, Friends are urged to execute legal documents that express their wishes and intentions, such as a Medical Power of Attorney for someone to make decisions for them if they cannot, a Durable Power of Attorney for someone to take care of financial and other matters if and when they are incapacitated, a Living Will stating their wishes about the extent of treatment, a Last Will and Testament (or revocable trust) that arranges for care of dependents and disbursement of assets, and a document arranging for disposition of the body after death. These documents should be revisited whenever there are life changes such as marriage, the birth or adoption of a child, the death of a life partner, a move out of state, or a significant inheritance. A clearness committee can be helpful in deciding what goes into those documents.

Preparing for illness and death also involves providing information to those who have been given responsibility for making decisions that are in accordance with the individual's wishes as well as others whose lives will be impacted. Meetings may want to provide periodic opportunities for members to discuss the spiritual and practical issues that arise around serious medical challenges and the end of life. In some meetings, the care and counsel committee or its equivalent maintains a file of Friends' end-of-life wishes so that the meeting can help support those who are ill and their loved ones, or for the purpose of arranging a memorial service. This file may also include information about who to contact in case of emergency or other information that is seen as relevant by the individual establishing the file.

### **Support of the Bereaved**

Death often faces us with the most difficult questions, yet it may be the occasion of our most profound insights into the meaning of life. As Friends seek to surround the bereaved with love and care, the sustaining power of God can bring to all concerned not only courage but a transforming truth about death and life itself. Although life instinctively avoids death, death is not the opposite of life. It is essential to the ongoing, changing nature of life.

North Pacific Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, 1993, p. 99.

Once a member or attender of a meeting has died, the meeting should reach out to the family whether near or far. As we support those who are grieving, we should bear in mind that there is no single path for moving through grief. The meeting should be able to provide listening support to the family and loved ones of the deceased, as well as other forms of pastoral care as needed. It may be useful for the meeting to designate particular individuals or a committee to provide ongoing listening and spiritual support.

Those who provide support for the bereaved should be aware that in some respects grief for the loss of a loved one never ends. There will be moments when the person who has died is just the one we wish to speak with about an experience, and the sense of loss will arise fresh again. The grieving process provides an opportunity for spiritual growth for all concerned. Friends need to support each other in the process of grieving. When the person who has died has been an important part of the meeting, the entire community will be grieving, and the meeting needs to provide an atmosphere where all feel able to express their grief openly. Meetings will want to have literature and knowledge of community resources about issues concerning death and bereavement available.

Special attention needs to be focused on the children or the child siblings of a Friend who has died. Children need a safe environment in which to express their grief. The meeting may wish to consider art projects, special storybooks, or even a memorial meeting for the child and her or his classmates at meeting.

### **Memorial Meetings**

It is customary to have a Memorial Meeting for Worship, sometimes referred to as a Celebration of Life, for a Friend who has died. Illinois Yearly Meeting's Ministry and

Advancement Committee has prepared a *Memorial Meeting Preparation Checklist* (pp. XX-XX) to assist meetings in planning Memorial Meetings for Worship.

Typically a Memorial Meeting for Worship will include people who are not familiar with worship in the manner of Friends. This means that someone, usually the clerk, will rise shortly after the start of the memorial service and explain a Friends Memorial Meeting for Worship. A brief written explanation is often made available.

Gathering together in waiting worship provides an opportunity for all present to remember and hold in prayer the deceased. Out of the silence, individuals may feel called to share messages about the life of the person who died. The messages may focus on the spiritual impact of the Friend's life, or they may be stories about the Friend. Speakers may also share a poem, a song, a Bible verse, or another passage that has special meaning for them at this time. All those present are welcome to speak, allowing a period of silence to frame any spoken message so that all can feel the effect of what has been shared.

Those attending the memorial meeting may find themselves laughing as well as crying as they hear about the deceased individual's life. Many will leave the memorial meeting with a sense that they know the person better because of the spoken messages. The worshiping community may feel a sense of releasing the Friend who has died.

Following the Memorial Meeting for Worship, there is customarily an opportunity for those present to visit individually with the family and loved ones, and to share with each other in an informal manner. It is helpful if the meeting takes responsibility for providing refreshments, setting up, and cleaning up.

Meetings may want to find a larger location for a memorial service than their usual meeting place if it is small or the deceased was well known. Sometimes a meeting may need to coordinate the timing or place for the memorial meeting, especially if the individual was a public figure.

Occasionally, the family of a deceased Friend may request that there be a graveside service in addition to the Memorial Meeting. This service will also be held as worship in the manner of Friends, although it will normally be a much shorter and smaller gathering. Immediately before, during, and after the lowering of the body or the ashes into the grave, silence is maintained. A similar practice is followed if the ashes are scattered rather than buried.

## **Memorial Minute**

In Illinois Yearly Meeting it is customary for the monthly meeting to prepare a memorial minute for any ILYM Friend who has died. A committee or an individual member of the monthly meeting prepares the memorial minute and shares it with the meeting. Once the meeting has approved the memorial minute, it is forwarded to the yearly meeting for inclusion in the next ILYM meeting minute book. The meeting appoints a Friend to read the minute at the meeting for worship for memorials during the yearly meeting sessions.

## **Queries**

*For the individual:*

- Have you discussed with your loved ones your wishes concerning serious medical crises and dying?

- Have you prepared for your own death?
- Are you willing to give up driving and other activities when you no longer have the ability to do them safely?
- Have you prepared durable powers of attorney for financial and medical decisions if you cannot make them for yourself?
- Do you have a will or trust? Have you shared it with others?
- Do you have written instructions for disposition of your body, including possible organ donation, and have you shared these instructions with those who must exercise them?
- Do you give yourself time to grieve when a loved one dies?

*For the meeting:*

- Do we discuss issues concerning the end of life?
- Do we provide opportunities for individuals to gain clearness around issues of aging and dying?
- Do we provide loving support and assistance for those who are aging? Do we do this in a manner that preserves their dignity?
- Are we prepared to support an individual who is dying and extend tender concern to the family and loved ones?
- Do we visit, listen to, and worship with an individual who is dying?
- Do we have emergency contact information on members and attenders?
- If a Friend can no longer drive safely, is the meeting able to provide help with transportation?
- Are we mindful of our limits, individually and as a meeting, in supporting a person who is seriously ill, dying, or grieving? What resources can we turn to when those limits are exceeded?
- Does the meeting have a process that ensures spiritual and practical support for those who are ill or dying?

Life, then, is a gift of time. For each of us the days are numbered. I am grateful for each day I have to walk this beautiful earth. And I do not fear the return to the earth, for I know....that it is part of myself.

Elizabeth Watson, *Guests of My Life*, 1979