

## Responding to the Crisis when a Young Person Dies

by Kristin Witte

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once said, "People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in; their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." Catholic churches are known for their stained glass. When crisis strikes a Catholic parish or school it is the light of Christ that emanates from within revealing true love and beauty.

Crisis is the sudden change that disrupts normal functioning. Crisis can affect an individual, group or organization. An emergency becomes a crisis when it disrupts cognitive, physical, or emotional functions. Tragic death, natural disasters, terrorism, and violent assaults may have a devastating effect on people. An event, however, doesn't make a crisis. It is the overwhelming of resources that make it a crisis. The goal of crisis response is **not** therapy, but rather to help get people back to their level of coping. If therapy is necessary for certain individuals, that should be referred for a later time.

The primary role of a youth minister in times of crisis begins and ends with prayer. Do not forget that the rituals and liturgy present in our Catholic tradition are gifts to be utilized during crisis. We, as a Catholic community, should embrace our tradition in an intentional way during times of storm rather than becoming secular in our response to crisis.



Pragmatically, the following is an outline that a youth minister should consider when serving the community after the death of a young person:

### I. The DYM is a keeper of **Information and Invitation-**

- Verify the event and promulgate nothing that is unconfirmed.
- Make sure the Pastor and other staff are aware and engaged.
- Inform and mobilize adult volunteers and resources from the community.
- Invite all adults assisting with support to attend the adult meeting before the parish gathering.
- Designate someone to speak personally with those adults specifically involved with the crisis and provide support for their feelings.
- Acquire information regarding the family's wishes and how to help the family, making this information available to the parish families. Ask family if it is alright to gather community as soon as possible for prayer and support.
- Identify siblings, family members, close friends, and others who may be profoundly affected and provide them with the offer of a safe location to gather to pray. (ex. the church, a meeting room)
- Notify young people of the details that the family has approved for dissemination and any plans for gathering. Use whichever mode of communication that is most efficient (ex. telephone tree, staff meeting, written communication, e-mail, etc.).
- Media – (if necessary) Have a contact selected for questions should the media become involved.

## II. The DYM **Delegates and Orchestrates** to the community-

- Plan an adult meeting previous to the “Gathering” of young people. Adult meeting should include:
  - Prayer
  - Schedule and expectation of Gathering Event
  - Guidance about ministering to affected young people
  - Importance of self-care
- Plan structured gathering for families and young people which has a clear start and end time. Gathering should include:
  - Prayer
  - Opportunity for storytelling and sharing of feelings and expressing emotions within the safety of the church.
  - Opportunity for community support and emotional expression.
  - Artistic expression options (prayer wall for writing, markers and paper for letter and prayer writing, scrapbooking page for design).
  - Closing prayer and commitment to further ministry (as well as funeral information if available).

## III. The youth minister needs to **Follow up** as grieving is a process, not an event. Follow up for the entire parish community might include:

- Having additional adults available for support at both the wake and funeral.
- Meeting with the pastor, staff, adults and outside resources to process the response by the parish and make recommendations.
- Scheduling a prayer service a month after the death of the young person (ex. rosary or holy hour).
- Providing a scholarship to an event/ program in the name of the young person, hosting a parent meeting to talk about supporting young people after a death.
- Contacting the family of the young person with offers of resources, prayer and support.

During a crisis, it is critically important to remember self-care, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. While busy serving others and accompanying them during a difficult time, often it is the youth minister that becomes exhausted, forgets to eat and exercise, and fails to take time for personal prayer. In Luke 10, Christ tells Martha that “Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her” (NAB). In this same way, in order to minister, we must be grounded and intentionally positioned at the feet of Christ so as to give from the abundance He provides for us.

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