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The Decision

It's personal.

Deciding to offer a Christ-centered support group for your parish is a decision that will change lives! The noble act of reaching out to the bereaved comes to us from Jesus, our Savior. He tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Mt 5:4). He decided that it would come to pass. We are simply his instruments. But what a privilege!

The call to minister to the grieving has already awakened within you; otherwise, this *Seasons of Hope Guidebook: Creating and Sustaining Catholic Bereavement Groups* would not have found its way into your hands. Bereavement outreach in the parish may currently be your life's work. Perhaps now is the time to offer a group or bring a fresh approach to meetings. Or maybe you're one of the first in your parish to recognize the need for a support group that gathers the bereaved together in Christ's name to share their faith, to find healing, and to be enriched by the consoling traditions of our Church—all worthy pursuits that stimulate the imagination. Think of all those who will benefit. What parish is spared dealing with death and dying and funeral rites that may leave many feeling bereft? What about the deaths that parishioners encounter beyond the community of faith?

If you're like me, the death of a loved one broadsided you. Your pain is a powerful catalyst in Christ's hands; he heals your



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crushed spirit so that it soars again. You see clearly in your midst those who need consoling. The silence of their suffering touches your heart. Our hearts are lifelines to the Lord. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us: “The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision . . .” (CCC 2563). Trust it. Perhaps it is where we truly discern the voice of God.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a discerning heart. Her life’s calling to serve the suffering poor might never have been realized if she had not stooped down to pick up that first dying person on the street. She could have walked on by, for surely she was already engaged in worthy service to God, but she chose to help that woman. She decided, and she acted on that decision. The face of Christ shone from those broken souls of Calcutta as surely as it radiates from our brothers and sisters who mourn. So if you wonder whether one person can make a difference, just remember Mother Teresa.

God also picks ordinary members of the clergy, religious, and lay people to accomplish his goals. With *Seasons of Hope* groups, good people like you can bring Christ into the lonely suffering of the bereaved in our Church. Let’s see how it’s done.

It’s about the community of Christ.

The parish is as complicated as any corporate bureaucracy when it comes to making decisions. You may be in a position to witness parish politics either “make or break” efforts to initiate new programs, or you may be outside that arena. I learned firsthand that timing is of the essence. Doors will open if you’re in stride with God’s time. Pray that you are.

Pray that your pastor, parish administrator (PA), or parish life coordinator (PLC) is too, because he or she is likely the ultimate decision maker in the parish. Most pastors, PAs, and PLCs today have heavy assignments and little time to spare. That doesn’t mean yours won’t be open to innovation. These leaders often deal with grieving families and, as people of compassion, they see that losing a loved one breaks many hearts and wounds



Does your parish need a Christ-centered bereavement support group?



many a spirit. Your parish leader has likely suffered through losing a dear one, which might color the response when you approach him or her about the need for a bereavement group.

Think positively. Whether you're a staff person or a volunteer with a calling, parish leaders usually respond positively to ideas that are well thought out, especially when an action-plan is included. They must also perceive a need for a ministry. If you discover that your pastor, PA, or PLC has already decided a faith sharing group for grieving parishioners is needed, thank God and skip to the next chapter!

Most of us have to do some legwork. Sometimes parish leaders want a fact-finding committee to weigh the pros and cons. Ask to be on it. Or you may be asked to investigate and report back. Whether you approach this alone or with a committee, be prepared to present a strong case.

The rest of this chapter will help you build that case. It uses questions that parish leaders and their advisers might pose while making a decision about *Seasons of Hope*. Your detective work connects you to staff and lay leaders you'll work with in the future. Enjoy the encounters and know that the Lord is with you every step of the way!

Factors That Influence the Decision

How many parishioners die annually?

Research the last three years. A staff member is usually responsible for recording deaths for parish and diocesan records. The official book or computer file shows the name of the deceased, age, date of death, family contact/funeral director information, and other comments. The numbers give you a starting point. Then you can figure out if a widow, widower, or parents are left behind, but be aware that some potential participants (family members and friends) won't be obvious.



First Steps

How often do good ideas for your parish go undeveloped because no one knows quite where to start? You need clear vision to begin a faith sharing group for the bereaved and the proper tools for the job. The *Seasons of Hope Guidebook* and *Participant Journal* booklets provide the vision and proven means to accomplish a Christ-centered program that comforts those who mourn.

The rich diversity within the Church across America is awesome to behold. Each parish envisions *Seasons of Hope* through the lens of its unique history and culture, yet the steps to creating the program rely on common God-given gifts and talents of parish leaders. Whether you're a seasoned facilitator of a bereavement ministry, a novice, or a supporter of the efforts, the following tips answer common questions on how to accomplish the mission.

Tasks of the Facilitator (about eight weeks before sessions begin)

Where do you start?

When you undertake a ministry, look to the life of Jesus Christ for inspiration. Time and again scripture shows that the



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Lord reverently prayed to the Father as he began and carried out his mission of salvation. The *Seasons of Hope* ministry is deeply rooted in prayer that seeks God's will. God wants to comfort those who mourn, and the program is an effective way to bring Christ to those who seek him in their grief.

As you prepare for this special outreach to mourners, seek ways that the parish can pray for the ministry. A powerful opportunity during Mass is the Prayer of the Faithful. A petition could be added such as "For those who mourn in our parish—let our new bereavement ministry bring consolation." Check with the parish staff about how to go about this. If you attend daily Mass and can offer a petition from the pew, do so. Writing your request in the book of petitions also reaps the benefit of communal prayer.

Meanwhile, continue to seek God's grace in your own prayer and know that others across the country are praying for you and your parish ministry. We ask God to pour out the Holy Spirit upon you so that you may be fully equipped to build his kingdom through acts of compassion for those who mourn.

 ***What is the pastor's, parish administrator's, or parish life coordinator's perspective?***

The Christ-centered nature of the program, with its use of scripture and Catholic traditions, make it the perfect forum for a pastor, PA, or PLC to share personal knowledge and love of God with the brokenhearted. In them, he or she encounters the suffering face of Christ. When your parish's leader believes that caring for those who mourn is as much a part of the Church's mission as the sacraments and spreading the gospels, he or she will approve the formation of the *Seasons of Hope* ministry. How active your pastor, PA, or PLC becomes depends on how creative that person is with scheduling and his or her desire and ability to personally reach those who mourn. To launch the program, the pastor, PA, or PLC appoints a capable facilitator who understands the concerns of the bereaved. The ideal



candidate is energetic, faith filled, organized, and creative, as well as a proven leader and a person of great compassion.

The facilitator could be a staff member who oversees family life, senior ministry, parish nursing, or spiritual aspects of the community, or an interested volunteer who has leadership skill or professional qualifications. A volunteer leader would report to a pastoral adviser—either the pastor or a designated member of the pastoral staff. In this way, the *Seasons of Hope* ministry always receives pastoral guidance.

A pastor and/or pastoral staff member stirs up community interest in the pre-program phase each season. Whether attendance is encouraged through a homily, Mass announcements, a personal column in the bulletin, invitation letters, or by recommending *Seasons of Hope* to individuals in need, the whole-hearted support of the pastoral staff sends a positive message to parishioners.

The pastor, PA, or PLC can also make a difference at sessions by welcoming participants at the beginning of each season, or stopping by during fellowship. A group is specially blessed if such pastoral leaders lead prayer, co-facilitate, or join the faith sharing circle to share wisdom and compassion. This public and prayerful support from leadership strengthens the ministry.

What does it take to get Seasons of Hope rolling?

Ministering to the bereaved requires gifts, talents, and trust in the benevolence of God. If you are the facilitator, take a moment to give thanks. The Lord has called you and that will bring you joy and peace.

As facilitator you:

- organize the ministry,
- seek teammates,
- implement each season,
- and involve your pastoral adviser and teammate(s) in decisions and tasks.



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 *What are some tips for effective facilitating?*

You want to guide the process without dominating it. Some facilitators like to initiate sharing by giving an example from their own loss. Sometimes that is necessary, but your comments will influence what participants say. Instead, use the *Seasons of Hope* question from the Footprint and let participants go where they need to go with it.

Your goal isn't to teach, give sermons, or talk a lot about yourself. You simply make sharing easy and enjoyable for others. With your support, the bereaved can minister to each other.

 *What's the best way to handle silence?*

Don't fret when silence reigns. Many participants need time to think before they speak, so resist the urge to fill in the quiet. If the pause makes the group uncomfortable, repeat or rephrase the question or move on to another. If silence seems to have nothing to do with the question, get feedback on what is happening in the group.

Sometimes participants aren't comfortable sharing with the group, yet they return each week. Maybe their loss was recent and they are afraid that speaking will intensify their grief. With time, they usually open up. Others may be shy or simply reserved. They might benefit from some gentle coaxing. If such a person is nodding yes as another speaks, I might say to her, "You look like you can relate to that . . ."

Sometimes silent participants want to remain anonymous. Perhaps their loss involves suicide, murder, abortion, or a dreaded disease. Or they harbor deep-rooted ill feelings toward the deceased that they dare not share. If that kind of situation is revealed during faith sharing, it demands great sensitivity. The facilitator and any team members present must respond delicately, lending visible support without prying or asking for more from the participant than he or she seems prepared to share. You may want to talk with the participant outside the



group, possibly referring him or her to a specialty support group or a professional counselor. This is a good time to remember that as a facilitator you have access to a pastoral adviser who may have excellent insight on how to approach the situation.

How does a facilitator maximize sharing?

Each faith sharing group has a personality all its own. Like in any healthy relationship, participants become more comfortable with each other as time passes. You deal with several factors when you pose a question to the group. Initially, you respond to the individual who replies first, and then you ease others into sharing. After a few sessions, a healthy group needs less prompting from you to share with each other.

As you and the group listen to a faith story, whether it is heart wrenching or uplifting, the one speaking receives attention and a message of affirmation and acceptance from the group. Participants are receptive to questions when they sense that what they say will be valued. You can thank them for sharing with words, smiles, nods, or other gestures; just acknowledge and appreciate each participant. This encourages participants to affirm each other.

How do you handle emotional reactions in the group?

Some bereaved never join a group because speaking about their loss brings an emotional meltdown. Those who find the courage to attend have similar concerns. No matter how nicely you explain that the group is a safe place to let tears and emotions flow, participants struggle to control their grief reactions. When participants cry and their words get choked off, don't panic. And don't automatically pass a box of tissues to them unless they look for one. An unsought tissue is often interpreted as a signal to stop crying. Crying actually releases emotions, helping the person.



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When someone can't go on talking, you can respect his or her grieving with quiet attention. If it feels right, offer a petition that lifts the person up to the Lord. Use whatever comes to you at the moment. I might say,

Lord, our friend Lorraine is filled with sorrow
right now.
We lift her broken heart up to you. Bring peace
to her.
We ask in your name. Amen.

When your "Lorraine" has taken a deep breath and looks at you, you might concisely repeat her story before the meltdown to validate it with her and encourage her to go on. Whether her decision is to continue with the tale or decline, she discovers acceptance. The sad moment often is a great gift, because other participants generally speak up and relate to the person's grief.

 *How do you set the pace for sharing?*

It comes as a surprise to some participants when the mood of sharing is upbeat. Sharing the joy our deceased loved ones once brought is just as welcome during faith sharing as tears. No matter what the mood of the session, aim to finish the faith sharing segment on time. Have your partner signal when ten and five minutes remain. If everyone in the group hasn't spoken by then, you still have time to draw the quiet ones in.

 *How do you keep the focus on Christ?*

When a participant or the group wanders away from the posed question, a simple "We're getting off track. The question is . . ." usually does the trick.



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 *Do participants stay for Fellowship Finale?*

They do when the team is enthused about mingling with them. It takes time for participants to reach out to each other. When they get comfortable, a sense of camaraderie and parish community evolves. Then Fellowship becomes something that no one will want to miss.

 *Is there an easy way to remember all the details?*

The following checklist comes in handy. It sums up the weekly process described in this chapter.

Team Activity Checklist

Before the Session

- ___ Read the Footprint and scripture passage for the week.
- ___ Gather Items Needed (listed in the Footprint).

Day of the Session

One hour before Opening:

- ___ Meet at the location and pray together.
- ___ Set up chairs, tissue boxes, lectern (optional), welcome table, focal point display, music equipment, beverages/ refreshments, and signs.

Thirty minutes before Opening

- ___ Greet participants.
- ___ Help with sign-in and nametags (weekly).
- ___ Distribute *Participant Journals* (week one).



What are the unique traits of Seasons of Hope meetings?



Five minutes before Opening

___ Join participants (a teammate stays at welcome table).

(During the Session, facilitator uses a Footprint to lead the group)

Opening: 5–20 minutes (changes weekly)

___ Welcome everyone, mentioning the session theme.

___ Introduce the team.

___ Lead *Seasons of Hope* Prayer using the journal.

___ Seek information on participants noted on the Footprint.

___ Give program details (weeks one and two).

___ Invite participants to share journal ritual, self-help tools/books/community resources (weeks two to six).

___ Share housekeeping details.

Activity: 15–35 minutes (changes weekly)

Facilitator

___ Present the script about the scripture passage.

___ Invite a teammate to read the scripture passage.

___ Complete the script that follows the reading.

___ Give activity instructions (participants refer to Guidepost in journal).

Teammate

___ Read scripture.

___ Assist with materials for activities.



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Session ONE

Point of Departure

Theme: For Whom Are You Looking?

 *Items Needed:*

- nametags
- marker
- sign-in sheet
- pre-session music / player
- signs
- focal point (image of Jesus, votive candles)
- bibles
- *Participant Journals*
- timer or watch
- bell (optional)
- refreshment signup sheet (optional)

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1. Opening (20 minutes)

- ❖ Welcome the group, introduce the team, and pray together the “*Seasons of Hope Prayer*” found at the beginning of the *Participant Journals*.
- ❖ Invite participants to say their name and relation to their deceased loved one. Give an example: “My name is (Donna), and I lost a (daughter)”. Assure them that they will share more during the session.
- ❖ Use the script below to explain the *Seasons of Hope* program, *Participant Journals*, and any housekeeping details.

Script

“Blessed are those who mourn,” our Lord assured us, “for they will be comforted” (Mt 5:4). *Seasons of Hope* brings us together to share in God’s love. The support of this community will enable you to give voice to your unique journey and take a step toward healing and spiritual growth.

You are an expert on your grief. We aren’t here to teach you about its stages. You meet them on your journey. Instead, we will explore mourning through scripture, prayer, reflection, and faith sharing. We will help you focus on your relationship with the Lord and the many ways his Church offers consolation. Along the way, you will find Jesus in others who mourn and within your own heart.

We ask that you bring a bible each week. You will read a passage here and review it again at home. Does anyone need to borrow a bible now? (Have a teammate provide them.)

Please bring your *Participant Journal* booklet too. We use a Guidepost page each week. You will also have a home assignment in the journal that gives a fresh perspective on the weekly scripture reading. There’s also space to write about your loss, and a tradition of the Church that can bring consolation.



The session officially concludes with what we call the Fellowship Finale. It's our informal time together to share refreshments and get to know each other as neighbors and community members.

Now for some housekeeping details:

- ❖ We start promptly each week, so please arrive early enough to sign in and get a nametag.
- ❖ If you can't make a session, please tell us the week before or call (give name and phone number.)
- ❖ Restrooms are located (offer directions).
- ❖ Beverages are available at the (indicate refreshment table). Help yourself.
- ❖ If you have a favorite book or article on bereavement, please feel free to bring it to show the group.

This week (give names) brought snacks for our Fellowship Finale. Let's give a round of applause and thank (her/him/them). (Optional: We need help with refreshments. At the finale, please sign up to bring one plate of snacks. Thank you.)

Are there any questions?

2. Activity (20 minutes)

Script

Many of us become distraught when someone we love leaves this life. We're in good company. Even the Lord's close friends had difficulty dealing with his death! Let's turn to John 20:11–18 for an account of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. It gives a compelling view into grief and the confounding path it puts before us. (Have a teammate read the passage aloud while participants read along in their bibles.)

If Mary Magdalene, a faithful disciple who stood at the foot of the cross on Calvary, let grief blind her to the presence of the risen Jesus, perhaps our preoccupation with our deceased loved ones simply mimics her saintly approach to loss. The first step in





her healing was to embrace Jesus and then to share that fateful encounter with others.

Your presence here shows that you seek the Lord, too. The exercise we are about to do is one way you can share your faith story. Let's open the *Participant Journal* to the Guidepost for session one.

Exercise

Script

In a cluster group, each of you will complete the activity statements in your own words. (Review if desired.)

- My name is _____.
- My departed loved one's name is _____.
- His/her death happened _____ weeks/months/
years ago.
- The cause of death was . . .
- When he/she died, I was at . . .
- My fondest memory of _____

Here's how a cluster group works:

1. Find two people you don't know well and form a group. (Continue when the groups are formed.)
2. Decide who speaks first, second, and last.
3. Each of you has four minutes to complete your assignment.
4. Because listening is such a crucial part of being a participant, please don't interrupt while others tell their story.
5. Change speakers when you hear the bell.

The first speaker's time begins now. (Signal speakers at four-minute intervals.)

(Continue after each person has had time to speak.) Now let's form a circle.





3. Faith Sharing (25 minutes)

Script

Now that you've shared a little about your loved one, it's time for Faith Sharing. Before we begin, let's review the Guide to Group Etiquette found in the *Participant Journal*. (Review the guide.)

Questions (use all that time permits):

1. After your loss, did you experience any emotions like that of Mary Magdalene?
2. If not, what did you experience?
3. How was Christ present to you when your loved one died?

4. Summary (5 minutes)

- ❖ Comment on what the group accomplished today.
- ❖ Announce the next session: Path to Understanding: *Our Source of Consolation*.
- ❖ Encourage *Participant Journal* work at home.
- ❖ Invite everyone to the Fellowship Finale.
- ❖ Pray "Prayer to the Giver of Hope" (group listens and prays silently.)

O Loving God,
spirit of consolation and giver of hope,
we thank you for the gift of your faithful people
who join us today.
We ask you to bless and keep them in your care.
Let us also pray for the souls of our departed
loved ones.

(Pause so that the group may call these to mind.)





May perpetual light shine upon them and bring eternal rest.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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5. Fellowship Finale (30 minutes)

Session SIX

Final Destination

Theme: Do Not Weep

Items Needed:

- pre-session music/player
- prayer table with focal point
- bibles
- *Participant Journal*
- pencils
- camera
- a reminder of the faith of your loved one

1. Opening (5 minutes)

- ❖ Welcome the group and thank those who brought refreshments.
- ❖ Pray together the “*Seasons of Hope Prayer*.”
- ❖ Seek feedback on the fifth *Participant Journal* home assignment: receiving the Eucharist.
- ❖ Ask if anyone brought a bereavement book or article to share and invite him or her to do so.

2. Activity (35 minutes)

(If the chairs are in rows, form a circle.)

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Script

Each week in session, we honor our deceased loved ones with word and prayer. This week we go a step further.

1. I invite each of you to show something that reminds you of the faith of your departed loved one and tell why it is special to you.
2. Then place the item on the prayer table.

Who would like to go first? (Team shares last.)

Thank you for sharing. It's nice to know more about your loved ones. Now we'll focus on scripture.

Script

The love Jesus brings to our lives through our loved ones may not be memorialized in great works like the Bible, but we take comfort in listening to its accounts of his divine kindness to those who mourn. Let's turn to Luke 7:11–17 for such a story. (Have a teammate read the passage aloud while participants read along in their bibles.)

Jesus didn't wait for the grieving widow to seek his help, but rather he reached out to her in love. Those of us who desire his compassion surely will not be disappointed.

3. Faith Sharing (40 minutes)

Questions (use all that time allows):

1. In what way does Jesus dry your tears of sorrow? If your grief isn't filled with sorrow, how has he helped you?
2. In what way would you like Jesus to show his compassion?





4. Summary (5 minutes)

- ❖ Comment on group accomplishments this season and announce future *Seasons of Hope* offerings.
- ❖ Encourage the last *Participant Journal* work at home.
- ❖ Have participants complete the Season Survey in the *Participant Journal* (or reproduced from the download at www.avemariapress.com) and collect them.
- ❖ Invite everyone to the Fellowship Finale.
- ❖ Pray “Prayer to the Giver of Hope” (group listens and prays silently).

O Loving God,
spirit of consolation and giver of hope,
we thank you for the gift of your faithful people
who join us today.

We ask you to bless and keep them in your care.
Let us also pray for the souls of our departed
loved ones.

(Pause so that group members may call these to
mind.)

May perpetual light shine upon them and bring
eternal rest.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Take a group photograph.

5. Fellowship Finale (30 minutes)

