

AT RANDOM

by R. Steven Norman, III

Binding the brokenhearted

An Andrews alum becomes part of bereavement ministry

Eight million persons will experience the stress of a funeral this year. How can we as Seventh-day Adventists help these hurting persons? I faced this challenge within months after I graduated from Andrews Theological Seminary.

I received a call from a friend. "Hi, Norman," she said. "One of my neighbors has just lost her 12-year-old grandson. The family is in shock and needs someone to help them. Would you visit them for me?"

I did not know them, they were not my members, but I felt I should go see them anyway. I drove to the bereaved family's home and introduced myself. I expressed my sympathy and helped them plan the young boy's funeral using a funeral-planning kit I put together. Afterward I offered prayer and left. On the day of the funeral I returned to pray with them just before the funeral and attended the funeral. For the next year or more I made regular visits to the family's home.

During one of these visits, one of the daughters asked, "Pastor Norman, I have to do the Sunday School Lesson review this week. Will you help me prepare it?" Yes, I replied. "In fact I can bring you a set of Bible lessons that will help you to be able to review any Sunday School Lesson in the quarterly." "Really? When can you bring them? Can you bring enough for two of my friends?"

We set a date and began Bible studies. Within a few months she, two of her friends, her daughter and sister were all baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Excited over this experience, I began to study the example of Jesus and ways to enhance my ministry to bereaved families.

I saw that ministry to the brokenhearted was a priority with Jesus. He came to heal the brokenhearted and comfort those who mourn. Therefore ministry to persons whose hearts are broken by sin, divorce, and death will certainly be a priority of those churches which pattern their ministries after Jesus' ministry.

With this knowledge our church looked at several ways of doing bereavement ministry. There were grief-support groups, terminal-care providers and lots of comforting literature. What we did not find at that time was churches with ministries aimed at assisting families with funeral preparation.

To fill this need I wrote a funeral planner that my congregation and I distributed in the community to bereaved co-workers, neighbors, relatives and friends as a gift from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This book was warmly received by families. Now called *Funeral Planning Made Simple*, the book is in its third edition and is widely

used by churches, funeral homes, and bereaved families.

Funeral Planning Made Simple is an easy-to-use funeral-planning guide that reduces the stress of funeral preparation by walking bereaved persons step-by-step through the planning process. It contains a funeral checklist, worksheets for keeping track of expenses, writing the obituary and planning the service, plus helpful program suggestions and spiritual support to help grieving persons find healing in Christ and His Word.

Recently, the pastor of the Mount Olive Seventh-day Adventist church in Dothan, Ala. reported that his church keeps a large supply of *Funeral Planning Made Simple* on hand.

Whenever a member of their congregation or the community dies, a caregiver from their church immediately carries a gift copy to the family, compliments of the Mt. Olive church and offers to have prayer.

If the family asks for help, the caregiver may take a few moments to help them fill out the worksheets and develop the funeral program.

In a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to get into homes, they have used this ministry to make hundreds of friends for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Indeed, their pastor reports that several persons have been baptized in the past two years as a result of this ministry.

A youth leader who reaches out to New York's gangs said, "This book is just what I need. Gang members are tough until a member of the gang is killed. Then for a brief moment, their hearts are tender enough to be open to Christian kindness. I want to use this book to reach them and their families."

When I pastored the New Life Seventh-day Adventist church in Nashville we added another ministry that was needed. Funeral homes were looking for sensitive booklets that provide emotional support for families. Four deaconesses began to distribute the booklet *God Understands* to nineteen funeral homes in the greater Nashville area, compliments of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This ministry allowed our church to minister to hundreds of families each month.

One lady who received *God Understands* when her mother died, later told me, "I have kept the book next to my bed for a whole year so that I can read it when I miss my mother."

This year approximately eight million people's hearts will be broken by the pain of losing a loved one. I see this as eight million opportunities for us to join Jesus' effort to bind the brokenhearted by sharing His love, comfort and hope in practical ways.

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