

Bereavement support and guidance

‘Grieving with Great Hope’ helps in time of loss

BY TANYA CONNOR | THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS

“So many people are nervous about coming – they’re afraid they’re going to cry.”

That’s what Diane Moriarty, pastoral associate at St. Mary Parish in Uxbridge, says about a program about grieving that the parish has repeatedly offered and is planning to expand.

So what keeps them coming?

“The program’s been great,” says participant Christopher Rett, whose daughter Grace, a member of the College of the Holy Cross rowing team, died last year in a motor vehicle accident. In her memory the Grace Center at St. Mary’s Parish and Our Lady of the Valley Regional School there is being built.

“I started last year when we were doing it (the program) on Zoom and I went back again this year to experience it in person,” Mr. Rett says of the grief workshop. He says he’d like to go through it yet again, because at different times a mourner is at different places with his grief, and because he might be able to help others. He also wants to continue with the monthly follow-up that’s sprung from it.

For him the biggest part of the program is that it’s faith-based, unlike secular therapy sessions, where Jesus and belief in eternal life are not included, he says.

He likes the program’s educational component, which puts words to one’s experiences, but “the people that really need to take the class are our friends and family ... to understand what we’re going through and help us,” he says. Fellowship with other participants is more important for him; they understand what you’re going through and provide a safe place to share.

“There’s such a difference in people’s demeanor when they come in the second week,” Mrs. Moriarty says. “They find people are welcoming. They find comfort. They find strength in the program” – because it’s rooted in Christ.

The program, or workshop, is called Grieving with Great Hope, from St. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, “Let us not grieve as others who have no hope” (1 Thes 4:13).

“As Catholics, we have hope for eternal life in the risen Lord for ourselves and for our loved ones,” says a description of the program on St. Mary’s website, <https://stmaryuxbridge.org/grieving-with-great-hope>. It acknowledges, “Though faith can give us a confident expectation that this is not our home, it does not prevent grief and suffering in this life. ... Grief is a natural reaction to loss.”

Mrs. Moriarty says the workbook they use explains that Jesus is our model for grief: he prayed constantly, expressed emotions and wept when his friend Lazarus died (Jn 11:1-45).

“Mourning is an intentional process that helps us heal our grief wounds,” she says, quoting the workbook. She says the seven intentions of mourning are: Pray, remember and honor, acceptance, yield to the pain, enduring connection, redefine and rebuild, and give and receive support.

“Everybody’s grief is as different as your fingerprint; there’s no set path,” she says.

The five-week workshop includes prayer, reflection, videos and small-group sharing each week, with a closing prayer service the final week.



PHOTO BY DIANE MORIARTY

Christopher Rett and Deborah Bonavita make bookmarks at the Grieving with Great Hope workshop. The project was an opportunity for participants to share photos of the loved ones they’ve lost and make a keepsake as one way of remembering them.

The videos feature workshop developers John and Sandy O’Shaughnessy, of Michigan, who each lost their spouse when their children were young. The couple co-founded Good Mourning Ministry, a Catholic Bereavement Apostolate. Mr. O’Shaughnessy is a certified grief counselor and author. Mrs. O’Shaughnessy is a director of religious education with a master’s degree in pastoral ministry with a bereavement emphasis.

Workshop participants are grouped with others with a similar loss – the death of a spouse, child, friend etc. – to share their own stories.

“No matter your loss and no matter if your loss was recent or decades ago, you are invited to attend,” St. Mary’s website says. The \$10 per person charge includes the workbook.

St. Mary’s is wrapping up this fall’s workshop, but Mrs. Moriarty says they plan to offer one next spring – in the daytime, for people who don’t drive at night. The next evening program is planned for next fall.

St. Mary’s began offering it annually four years ago, and has had about 100 participants to date. This fall about half the people are from St. Mary’s, the others from elsewhere, one as far away as West Boylston. Some are not Catholic.

The program has led St. Mary’s to respond to another need – for ongoing support. Mary Ellen Bartlett, a nurse on the team with Mrs. Moriarty, along with Linda Small, a social worker, said follow-up sessions, to check in with participants, were offered after Grieving with Great Hope. Last year when participants met on Zoom, they expressed interest in monthly meetings, so she and Mrs. Small offered them via Zoom. Monthly sessions are to start again, this time in person, next month, after Grieving with Great Hope is over. They are to be from 6:30-8 p.m. the second Friday of the month at St. Mary’s.