

## Ministering to children and youth after a disaster

Prayer is a main component of our response as Christians to disaster or other troubling times in our lives. The practice of prayer is important to young people as well and should be an important part of work with them after a disaster. Group prayer allows young people to voice and share their concerns with a supportive community. Additionally, practices such as centering prayer are calming techniques that they can use on their own in stressful situations.

### WELCOMING PRAYER REQUESTS

Please allow sufficient time for all in your group to make prayer requests if they wish. This is not a time to rush, but a time of quiet presence with God and with each other.

- Ask participants to sit in a circle (if they are not doing so already), preferably on the floor, where everyone can see each other. This method usually reduces excessive squirming or talking and promotes a reverent tone within the group.
- Adult leaders should sit within the circle on the same level as the participants.
- Serenity on the part of the adult leaders is key! If adult leaders are calm and prayerful, participants will take their cues from these leaders as examples for their own behavior.
- For groups of very young children, at least two adults should assist with this prayer circle. If a child becomes squirmy or disruptive, an adult helper – not the leader – should quietly attend to the child. Children who do not want to participate should be able to choose another quiet activity.
- Be aware that you might hear some fairly serious prayer requests, as well as many more typical requests concerning pets and family members.

Please acknowledge each request in a respectful manner, taking each child's prayer request seriously. Reply by praying for the person or pet named. For example, you might nod and say, "we pray for Jack's dog Max."

If you hear of a very serious concern, such as something that affects a participant's health, safety or wellbeing, mention it to the appropriate pastoral staff person or youth leader, so that they can follow up. Otherwise, please keep the prayer request confidential. The purpose of this prayer circle is to provide a safe place where participants might offer their most heartfelt prayers to God. Also, don't try to "fix" problems at this time. You will best minister to young people at this time by simply listening and validating their fears and concerns.

- It is common for young people to express doubts or anger towards God in reaction to loss, sorrow, or disaster. Again, your ministry at this time is to simply listen. You might reply by saying, "sometimes we do feel anger at God or wonder where God is. This is common after something bad happens."
- Close with a prayer that echos the participants' requests, and pray for each participant as well.

## CENTERING PRAYER TECHNIQUES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

ESTIMATED TIME: 1 minute. Try only 30 seconds for early elementary-age children or for those new to silent prayer. Older children might be able to maintain up to 3 minutes of prayerful silence.

Centering Prayer is a silent, meditative prayer form that focuses on placing oneself in the presence of God. The following Centering Prayer techniques may be used with children or teens who experience stress in a post-disaster situation. They can be used both within Christian formation classes and at home or school. The goal of teaching these techniques is to give children tools for prayerfully coping with stress and finding a sense of calm and serenity.

Please be aware that if a disaster has struck recently, young people may express emotions of sadness, grief, or even fear during or after this time. This is common. If possible, ask adults with good pastoral care skills, who know the participants and have worked with them previously to attend your group time and be available to assist with anyone who might need extra attention.

### Tips for leading Centering Prayer:

- Ask participants to make a circle on the floor, either by sitting or by forming a circle with chairs. The adult leaders should take positions within this circle as equal co-participants.
- Participants should be asked to sit up straight, with shoulders relaxed, and feet on the floor (or crossed in front of them if they are sitting on the floor).
- Ask participants to close their eyes OR choose a specific point

## SHARING TIME AFTER CENTERING

### PRAYER:

When the quiet time has concluded, ask the participants to open their eyes. Ask: "what did you experience?" or even "what did you hear?" Young people often have profound spiritual experiences of hearing God in these times of silence. Take their comments seriously! Acknowledge each participant's experiences by thanking them for sharing their experiences with you.

Suggest that when participants feel sad, stressed, confused, or overwhelmed, they might try taking a few moments of Quiet Time at home, at school, or while playing.

As with any small group, please keep these shared thoughts within the group. Don't try to "fix" problems; just listen attentively. If you feel a group member needs special attention as a result of thoughts or feelings expressed during this time, please consult your pastoral staff or youth leader.

End your quiet time together with a prayer for each participant, including their prayer concerns. A familiar song or hymn might also be sung.

to focus on. You might light a candle or place a religious-themed picture or photograph or cross in the center of the circle upon which children might focus.

- Tell participants this is a time for them to simply be with God. Ask them to listen to God in silence.
- Ask participants to take deep breaths, filling up their lower bellies first, then their rib cages, and finally their upper chests. Exhale slowly.
- Ask participants to see how long they go without talking or squirming. You might use a chime, bell, or other sound to indicate the time to start and end this time of quiet.
- Model calm, serene behavior during this exercise. You will likely find that if you are very calm during this time, participants will be calm as well. Let a second adult keep watch for any disruptive behavior and deal with any problems. This second adult might also serve as a timekeeper.