



Widows and Widowers

From the KY Conference of the United Methodist
Church Older Adult Team

FLYING THROUGH THE FOG

It was 1967 and I had been visiting in Pontiac, Michigan. When it was time to return to work in Chicago, I boarded a 12-seater, two prop airplane Grand Rapids. As we flew over the glistening blue of Lake Michigan, we could see dots of cargo ships and boats. As we approached Meigs Field, the pilot informed us to keep our seat belts fastened; we were flying into a heavy, dense, dark fog. The pilot would have to perform an instrument landing instead of a visual landing.

A heavy fog is one way recent widow and widowers describe their mental status after a spouse's death. While surviving spouses appear to be performing normally their minds are like pilots operating in an instrument-only mode in deep fog.

After a spouse dies, a myriad of fog-inducing arrangements have to be made including choosing a funeral home, picking out a casket or urn, selecting clothes to wear, getting hair done, meeting with the preacher, choosing funeral music, contacting friends and relatives, and cleaning the house for visitors.

This is only the beginning of the fog of unfamiliarity widows and widowers have to navigate after the death of a spouse. After the funeral, the surviving spouse writes cards to those who gave flowers or memorials, meets with the funeral director to settle the final bill, notifies the insurance company of the death, and changes names on bank accounts. And yes, the garbage, once handled by their spouse, has to go out...but on what day?

With so much to absorb mentally, along with dealing with grief's emotions, widows and widowers feel like they are walking in a dense fog that has no end.

How can we, as the church, assist surviving spouses whose minds have been working overtime making difficult decisions in the midst of their grief? How are a few ideas for starting or expanding a grief ministry in your church.

- Church leaders should feel comfortable discussing death. Our Sunday School Class used a DVD series, **HEAVEN** (<https://www.cokesbury.com/9780830776191-Heaven>), by Randy Alcorn which assist people talking about death.
- Develop a funeral ministry guide and/or a pre=planning funeral information guide. For a copy of one church's funeral guide go to: <https://encoretnumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/First-UMC-Winchester-Funeral-Ministry-Guide-PDF.pdf>
- Help couples begin conversations about death. Share your church's funeral ministry guide and/or pre-planning funeral information guide with them. Encourage them to fill out advance directives such as **FIVE WISHES** (<https://fivewishes.org/>) Doing so relieves the surviving spouse of having to make many of the funeral-related decisions.
- Couples could make two copies of their guides – giving one to the church to be filed and keeping the other in an accessible place in the home such as a desk drawer.
- Pray that God gives a surviving spouse wisdom and clear thinking when making decisions.
- Be quiet and allow widows and widowers to talk and reminisce.
- Provide useful items such as sandwiches, fruit, canned soup, cookies, tea and soft drinks, paper plates, napkins, and tissues.
- Start a notebook recording the items – dishes and containers – people bring which need to be returned.
- Volunteer to remain at the house during the funeral service. Unfortunately, there are people who read obituaries and take advantage of no one being home during the service.
- If assisting with decision making, encourage the surviving spouse to postpone making major decisions for at least one year.
- Keep in mind it's difficult to concentrate with a foggy mind. It's not unusual for grieving persons to ask for assistance with reading and comprehending. Even one page of legal jargon can be overwhelming.
- Keep children's books on grief and loss in mind or on hand. Some people suffering from grief find them very beneficial. **MY GRANDMA'S ANGELS** on Amazon is one example. While the fog eventually lifts for most people, widows and widowers need a pilot – both spiritually and physically – to help make a smooth landing. Trust God to help you and your church be a part of that person's landing.

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