

How Churches Can Help

In an informal survey, mothers of babies lost during or shortly after pregnancy shared the following ideas of ways churches can help parents who lose a baby. We hope it will be helpful.

Food

- Offer to make meals - at least a week's worth, maybe more depending on the situation. Offer to pick up the containers later. (Even plastic "disposable" dishes have a way of being saved and piling up.) Using an online calendar can help coordinate and prevent duplication of meals (such as "Care Calendar" at <http://www.carecalendar.org/>).
- Bring other foods as well (cookies, muffins, a basket of snacks, etc.)
- Provide gift cards for restaurants that have on-line menus and easy take-out plans (i.e. Chili's, Outback, Panera Bread, Wendy's, Subway, Ruby Tuesdays, pizza, etc.) and for grocery stores.

Other practical tips

- Laundry (pick up and bring back), household chores.
- Offer to take care of other children - but also recognize that sometimes what grieving parents need is relief from mundane household tasks (like laundry) so they can hold and play with their living children.
- Dropping older children off at activities
- Running errands, going to the library, dropping off dry cleaning, etc.
- Going grocery shopping.
- Offer to help with the lawn and other outside chores.

Pastoral Care

- Cards from the church leadership - more than once.
- Visits from the pastor/priest - a casual time of talking; doesn't have to be pre-arranged; don't wait for the parents to ask for it.
- Be sensitive to the spiritual questions parents will have about why God let their baby die; sometimes the question is a question, and sometimes it is just a lament.
- Be sparing in your use of Romans 8:28 and other similar Scriptures. Yes, God will work all things for good, but when used in the wrong timing, it may come off as patronizing and insensitive instead of the powerful promise that it is.
- Don't feel like you have to have the answers. Sometimes parents just need someone to pray with and for them, and to say, "I'm so sorry your baby died." Even the pastor.
- If the church has a counseling service offer that. If they don't, at the very least offer some good, reputable counselors in the area if the couple so desires to pursue that option. Also, be aware of any support groups in your area you can refer them to.

- Be aware of the impact that the loss of a child has on a marriage, and the fact that it may not be apparent for weeks or even months. Be in prayer for this and be prepared to offer resources (books, counseling, a listening ear) if needed.

Special church services

- Ask parents if they want to have a memorial service for their baby, no matter how early the loss.
- Help with the funeral to make sure it is everything the parents want. Make suggestions to the parents, who are very likely at a loss. Keep some sample programs available. Keep in mind that they probably (hopefully) haven't done this before and may have no idea what they want.
- Put funeral announcements on the church website.
- Have a church group put on a reception after the service.
- Help facilitate where donations should go in lieu of flowers.
- Buy a memorial box for the parents as a keepsake for anything which they wish to keep as reminders of their child(ren) so they don't have to shop for this themselves.
- Have a special afternoon or evening service annually or every other year in honor of "heaven's children" - read names of children lost during pregnancy, birth, infancy, or childhood during a candlelit prayer. Solicit names through the church bulletin and announcements at the services. If a child doesn't have a given names, names can be listed as, for example, "Baby Smith", or just a first name if the family wanted to be anonymous. Make it open to all congregants who have lost a child at any point no matter how long ago. This can be a full service, with music, scriptures, sermon and ended with a special candle-lit prayer and the reading of the names.

Congregational Care

- Send cards, a thoughtful gift, or flowers.
- Help where there are known needs.
- Come visit, but keep the visit brief so the parents don't have the pressure to "entertain."
- Cry with the parents - "weep with those who weep."
- Send e-mails of encouragement, but don't expect a response. Likewise, don't be offended if a gift or favor does not generate a thank you note. The parents are in survival mode right now; the thanks will come later. Freely give, without expectations.
- Have a Baby Loss Contact or Group for the church, or as an arm of the regular bereavement ministry, in case someone loses a baby. Make sure they have a plan and are ready to help at a moment's notice.
- Have other couples in the congregation who have been through a similar loss available to mentor/talk with/look out for couples going through a new loss.

- Send cards or packages to other children in the family.
- Call the family to let them know you are thinking of them.
- Remember to say the baby's name.

Prayer

- Include parents on the church prayer list.
- When praying publicly, or in printed announcements, use the baby's name; call it "the death of their baby", not "their miscarriage"
- Don't stop the prayers after only two weeks.

Acknowledgement of birth

- Ask the parents if they would like the birth of their baby to be announced like a normal baby. Hand and footprints or some other symbol could be used in place of a picture. A yellow rose could be used in place of a pink or blue one to indicate that the baby had died (to avoid people making hurtful congratulations calls by mistake).
- Say the baby's(ies') name/s (if the parents named them) and mention their names when you pray for the parents as a church family or post on the weekly/monthly prayer bulletin.
- When the grieving parents do return to church, please do say something. Anything. Silence is so hurtful. At the very least, even if you don't know what to say, make sure that as many people as possible acknowledge that they just lost a precious baby(ies).
- Be sensitive to important dates and record them to remember later -- due dates, loss dates, Mother's Day, Father's Day -- and send a card or a small token or gift. Or even a phone call will do.
- On Mother's Day and Father's Day, be sensitive to the hurting hearts of parents who have lost babies. Use that time as an opportunity to acknowledge that those who have lost children are still parents, or use it to honor all women or all men in the church.

General

- Help the parents make decisions; don't wait for the parents to ask for help.
- Ask, "How are you feeling today about your baby?"
- Don't give too much space.
- Don't forget about the dads, who too often are left to silently grieve, unsupported, after losing a child.
- Don't assume that the woman's friends/family/husband will know best how to help.
- Don't assume if the couple has been through this before that they will know how to deal with this loss any better. They just lost a different child. If anything, each loss will often compound upon one another so they will need double/treble the support.
- If either or both grieving parents are involved in any church ministry, be sure

to make it clear from the outset that nothing is expected or required of them in those areas until they feel ready.

- Please do not tiptoe or speak in hushed tones around parents who have lost a child. Please continue to laugh and be yourself. It is entirely humanly possible to do this and be compassionate at the same time. One day they will start to join in with the chit-chat and laughter again.
- Don't forget the grandparents, who are coping both with the loss of a grandchild and seeing their own child go through intense emotional and spiritual pain.
- Ask the parents how they are coping. Both parents. Ask regularly and be prepared to hear the truth.
- **Don't stop the support, or expect parents to "get over it" after a few weeks or months. They weren't just sick, they weren't just disappointed, they lost a child. Their child. They will never "get over it," but with your support, in time they will move through it and beyond it, into the future God has for them.**

"Even with the passage of time,
don't stop asking how we are doing.
We may be slowly healing
but we will always miss
our baby(ies) terribly."