



SANCTUARY  
Mental Health Ministries

# FAITH, GRIEF, AND COVID-19: A CONVERSATION

## NOTES ON FACILITATION

This discussion guide is designed to help you understand and share experiences of grief in the midst of COVID-19. Many of us have lost jobs, financial security, health, communal connections, and the opportunity to gather and celebrate significant milestones such as graduations, weddings, births, and anniversaries. In addition, we are reminded daily of the lives lost to the virus.

These losses raise larger questions for us as Christians. How do we understand and process grief as people of faith? How can we support vulnerable and grieving members of our community while practicing physical distancing? Where can we find hope and joy in this season? This short series of films tackles these questions, inviting viewers to engage in a conversation about faith, grief, and COVID-19.

Over the course of four sessions, participants will gather virtually, watch a film featuring insights from a panel of experts, and engage in discussion questions, reflection, and prayer.



### [WATCH INTRODUCTORY FILM](#)

## IN PREPARATION

1. Gather a group (as small as you like, but we recommend no larger than seven participants). If you have a larger group, consider using a platform that allows breakout rooms.
2. Choose an online platform that works well for you.
3. Schedule four online meetings of one hour each and send invitations for these meetings to your participants.
4. Send the link for the [intro film](#) to your group, and ask them to watch it before your first meeting.
5. Follow these discussion guides during your online meetings. There is one guide provided for each meeting.

## GUIDELINES AND FACILITATION TIPS

There are many online tools for meeting together as a group. To learn about how to set up an online meeting, you can visit: [Google Hangouts](#), [Zoom](#), [Skype](#), [FaceTime](#), and [Facebook Messenger](#).

Whichever tool you choose, some best practices for e-meeting include:

- Setting up a specific start and end time to help people maintain healthy schedules and rhythms.
- Having the group leader email everyone an invite to your online meeting.
- Starting the meeting with a quick check-in to see how everyone is doing and to make sure that all the technical pieces are in place.
- Asking everyone to mute their microphones during the film.

- Reminding everyone to unmute their microphones after the film to enable discussion.
- Encouraging participants to give the gift of attention and eye contact to those who are speaking. This minimizes distractions and supports interpersonal connections when webcams are being used.
- Suggesting embodied responses to the prayers and spiritual practices found at the end of each session, such as closing eyes and placing hands on hearts during prayers, or practicing deep breathing while listening to prayers read aloud.
- Encouraging participants to have a copy of this discussion guide available for reference during the meeting. (Participants may choose to print this guide, open it in a separate browser window, or have it available on their phones, Kindles, or other devices.)

## DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

### BE FLEXIBLE

Work through the guide in the way that best suits your participants. If you do not have time for all of the discussion prompts, simply choose the questions that are of most interest to your group.

### ENCOURAGE VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Please present all discussion questions as invitations and respect individuals who choose not to share.

### ACKNOWLEDGE REALITY

It can be helpful to acknowledge particular dynamics or circumstances during a discussion. For example, if there is a distracting noise in the background or if a misunderstanding occurs during a discussion, stop and name it before attempting to address the concern.

### PRACTICE GROUNDING OR USE A CONTAINER EXERCISE

At the end of your meetings, it may be appropriate to use a grounding or container exercise to help participants place emotional boundaries around conversations that have been heavy or emotionally difficult.

### MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is essential for establishing trust and a sense of safety in your group. Participants' stories should never be shared outside of the group without their permission.

### CREATE AND RESPECT DIFFERENCES

The following tips can help create an atmosphere of safety and respect:

- Give undivided attention to each person speaking
- Briefly share your own experiences
- Thank participants for sharing
- Encourage participation from everyone
- Respect that participants may not want to share at any given time

### FACILITATION TIP

We suggest that you take some time to review these guidelines before facilitating your first group meeting. These guidelines are meant to support your efforts to create a safe space for all participants.

### GROUNDING EXERCISE

Ask the members of your group to imagine placing burdens into a box or container and then laying it in the hands of God. Here is a sample text you can use:

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*Imagine a container that is strong and sturdy enough to hold any heaviness or burden you are feeling in this moment.*

*What size is your container? What shape is it? What colour is it?  
...Continued on next page.*

- Be patient when presenting the group with a question, and make time for silence and reflection
- Encourage the group to consider and explore different opinions
- Gently alert participants who may be speaking longer than the time can accommodate
- If the person speaking goes off topic, acknowledge their contribution and then guide the group back to the main point of the discussion by asking for additional thoughts

*... You might imagine a mason jar, a gift box, a suitcase, a vault, or any other container that comes to mind.*

*Imagine that you are placing any distressing thoughts or feelings or burdens into the container. Take your time. (Pause)*

*When you are ready, imagine closing the container tightly. Lock it if you would like.*

*Imagine placing your container into God's hands and leaving it there for now.*

## DISCUSSION FORMAT: 1 HOUR



Prayer



Film



Discussion Questions



Prayerful Reflection

## SPECIFIC MEETING TIPS

**Discussion 1** | There is an optional reflection on a sculpture in this discussion. If your group decides to engage in this reflection, decide in advance how each participant will view the art (through an individual link or through a screen sharing function).

The process of creating something in a time of grief can be very meaningful and give people a different way of articulating their emotions. During your first meeting, consider inviting participants to create a piece of art to share with the group at the final meeting. Remember, all of the prompts in this guide are entirely optional and participants are welcome to decline any of these invitations.

**Discussion 2** | Please ask your participants to bring a small nut (such as a hazelnut or walnut), ball, or other round object for the embodiment exercise. Discussion Guide 2 concludes with a link to the musical composition "Spiegel im Spiegel." We recommend that you share it as optional listening.

**Discussion 3** | There is an optional reflection on a painting in this discussion. If your group decides to engage in this reflection, decide in advance how each participant will view the art (through an individual link or through a screen sharing function).

**Discussion 4** | Remind participants to be ready to share any art pieces they've created and would like the group to see.

At the end of the final meeting, participants will be asked to reflect on their experience of the discussions and share what has been meaningful to them in the group time. It may be helpful for some participants to have time to gather their thoughts in advance, so please let them know what to expect before you meet.



# **DISCUSSION 1**

HOW DO WE  
UNDERSTAND GRIEF?



## OPEN WITH PRAYER



## WATCH FILM 1



## READ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. John says that grief can expand our spirituality and our use of Scripture because we begin to ask different questions. Has this been true for you? What are some new questions you've been asking? What are some of the changes you've noticed in your spiritual practices/spirituality? What are some things you'd like to change?
2. Scholar Walter Brueggemann identifies three types of psalms: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of reorientation. What has this season of disorientation felt like for you? What has been orienting in your life? Where do you feel an invitation towards reorientation?
3. Lawrence says that lament gives us the language to access and articulate a huge part of who we are as humans and Christians. Does this resonate with you? Would you say your church offers or creates space for lament?
4. Ruth speaks about "the healing value of tears," and our options to change, adapt, or attack when frustration builds. Embracing vulnerability is the key to adapting and growing. What might healthy vulnerability look like for you? What might it look like in your community?
5. Hillary discusses the "dual process model" for understanding grief. This model suggests that grief is not about progressing through stages, but rather moving back and forth between ways of responding to pain, either through feeling the loss or exploring meaning. This implies a more complex and messy grief process than a standard stage model. How does this compare with your current experience of grief and coping?

### DEFINITIONS

**Grief** - deep sadness, or experience of any kind of loss

**Mourning** - the practices and rituals for processing grief

**Bereavement** - the death of a close family member or friend

**Royal psalms** - a type or genre of psalm; royal psalms are psalms that address the topic of kingship and describe the ideal ruler and his perfect reign; the New Testament authors often interpret these psalms as prophetic declarations about Christ"

**Lament** - a Christian practice that involves articulating grief and calling on God to intervene; lament allows believers to honestly express painful emotions while affirming God's ultimate goodness and faithfulness

**Imago Dei** - a Latin phrase meaning "image of God," used to describe the unique status given to humanity as divine image-bearers (see Genesis 1:26)

**Complicated grief** - sometimes called Persistent Complex Bereavement disorder; a long-lasting acute grief that interferes with a person's ability to resume normal life after the loss of a loved one



## OPTIONAL ART REFLECTION

“Melancholy,” by Albert György, a Romanian sculptor, vividly depicts the presence of absence. What does this sculpture communicate about the experience of grief?

[Albert György – “Melancholy”](#)



## A PRAYER OF LAMENT

O Lord, who hears our cries,  
who is never deaf to our weeping,  
nor blind to our tears:  
We come to you with many griefs,  
sorrow laid heavy on our hearts:

for loved ones who are ill or isolated in uncertainty  
for those trapped in abusive homes  
for livelihoods that have disappeared  
for friends and family we cannot be near  
for goodbyes said at two meters’ distance  
for wedding plans suddenly overturned  
for funerals we cannot attend  
for graduation stages uncrossed  
for the loneliness we feel

### ***A time of silence for lament of these things and others***

Surely you have borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows  
our fears and our anxieties  
are not alien to you.

Lord, in our brokenness and our lament is your presence;  
in the midst of our fear is your peace.  
You, our ever-present help in trouble, are here.

For as long as this season shall last,  
you will not leave us or forsake us.  
You, O Lord, are our Rock.  
Your still, small voice our refuge.

In the unknown waves of this storm, still you anchor us.  
In the roar of the tempest, still you sing to us.  
In the midst of our grief, may we know you still more closely.  
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.


—

***By Leslie Roberts***

Communications Coordinator at Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries

### **FACILITATION TIP**

Ask a participant to read this prayer aloud. The group may decide to engage in an additional time of corporate prayer after the lament is read.

A misty forest of tall evergreen trees, likely a coniferous forest, with a soft, hazy atmosphere. The trees are dark green and silhouetted against a lighter, misty background. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

## **DISCUSSION 2**

HOW DO WE  
UNDERSTAND GRIEF  
AS CHRISTIANS?





## OPEN WITH PRAYER



## WATCH FILM 2



## READ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hillary says that grief can be disruptive if our faith doesn't validate our experiences of suffering. In what ways do you think cultural or spiritual expectations inhibit us from grieving well?
2. John states that happiness is not a gift of the Spirit, but joy is a gift of the Spirit. He also includes suffering, sadness, and brokenness in his definition of joy. Have you ever thought of joy and happiness as being different? Have you experienced the kind of joy John describes? What might it look like to receive the gift of joy in the midst of this difficult season of loss?
3. Ruth speaks about the tension between our present experience of raw grief and our hope of the life to come. How is recognizing this tension helpful when responding to loss?
4. Lawrence says that there is comfort to be found in the hope of the resurrection. How does the promise of a future resurrection reframe our present griefs and losses? In what ways are you encountering God's comfort in this season?



## AN EMBODIED PRAYER INSPIRED BY JULIAN OF NORWICH

**Facilitator:** Julian of Norwich was an English anchoress born in the twelfth century. When she was thirty years old, Julian contracted a serious illness and came so near to death that she was given her last rites. At the end of her illness, she received several visions (frequently referred to as "showings") which she believed came from God. She spent the next twenty years contemplating these visions and recording her insights. Julian's experiences, which today's medical professionals might call hallucinations, were understood and valued within a spiritual framework during her own lifetime.

### DEFINITIONS

**Eschatology** - the study of the ultimate destiny of creation, or "end times" (from the Greek word meaning "last")

**Eschatological hope** - the hope that Christians place in the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final union of heaven and earth

**Parousia** - a Greek word used in the New Testament to describe the appearing or revelation of Christ (especially in reference to the second coming)

### FACILITATION TIP

Invite your participants to locate the nut or round object you asked them to have on hand.

Perhaps, the most famous of these showings is this one:

*And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.*

*In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.*

I invite you to participate in the following reflection and prayer based on Julian's hazelnut vision.

- Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, let yourself relax
- Gently hold the hazelnut—or object representing a hazelnut—in the palm of your hand
- Breathe in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth
- Imagine the small thing in your hands represents all that is created

*(Pause)*

- Imagine it represents your own life

*(Pause)*

- Imagine it represents the life of someone else who is on your heart

*(Pause)*

I want to invite you to give thanks to God:

- For making it *(Pause)*
- For loving it *(Pause)*
- For keeping it *(Pause)*
- For making us *(Pause)*
- For loving us *(Pause)*
- For keeping us *(Pause)*

Thank you God for making it all, for loving it all, and for keeping it all. *(Pause)*

Thank you that you hold each of us gently and with tenderness. Help us to hold space for each other in the same way.

Amen.



## OPTIONAL ART REFLECTION

[Arvo Pärt – “Spiegel im Spiegel \(Mirror in Mirror\)” 10:10](#)

“Spiegel im Spiegel,” by Estonian composer and devout Orthodox Christian Arvo Pärt, stunningly utilizes *tintinnabuli* - a compositional style created by Pärt which is based in his experience with chant music. The term comes from “*tintinnabulum*” – meaning “little bell” in medieval Latin – and the style incorporates two compositional parts: a melody and a triad. In spiritual interpretations of Pärt’s work, the melody represents human suffering and straying while the triad represents divine stability and consolation. Pärt’s style has also been described as holy minimalism which makes space for the listener to experience God.

What memories or emotions does this musical piece evoke for you? What would it be like to “hear” God’s faithful presence and comfort in the midst of your day, or during times of suffering?

A misty forest scene with a stream flowing through it, surrounded by tall evergreen trees. The atmosphere is serene and somewhat somber due to the fog and muted colors.

## **DISCUSSION 3**

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT  
THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING?



## OPEN WITH PRAYER



## WATCH FILM 3



## READ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### DEFINITIONS

**Recursive process** - a process that is repeated multiple times, incorporating the results of reflection on the process into the successive repetitions

1. Hillary talks about being there for people who are experiencing grief and loss. Can you think of some creative ways to be with someone in their grief during this time of physical distancing?
2. Hillary says that when we are able to manage our own feelings, we are better able to be with others in their feelings. What are some ways you manage your emotions? Can you think of a time recently when you were able to be with someone else in their feelings, or when someone else met you in the midst of your grief? What was that experience like?
3. Ruth emphasizes the need to offer regular support to others, especially those who live with depression. What internal or external complicating realities might make the COVID-19 experience more difficult? (Examples may include pre-existing mental health challenges, or challenges arising from the economic and relational ramifications of quarantine.) Are there one or two people in your life you could provide with some extra support?
4. Lawrence speaks about the complicated nature of processing grief during the COVID-19 pandemic. He says that grief should not be rushed. What are some ways you can make room for necessary grieving in your own life, or help create space for others to grieve?
5. John says that receiving other people's grief is important. How might we adopt a posture of receiving other people's grief? What are some of the barriers to receiving the grief of others?



## OPTIONAL ART REFLECTION

[Vincent Van Gogh – “Sorrowing Old Man \(At Eternity’s Gate\)”](#)

What do you notice in this painting? Are there particular details, colors, emotions, or memories that stand out for you? What are some of the unique challenges seniors are facing at this time? Are you currently carrying a vulnerable individual (or individuals) in your heart?



## WALKING WITH GRIEF (A POEM)

Do not hurry  
as you walk with grief;  
it does not help the journey.

Walk slowly,  
pausing often:  
do not hurry  
as you walk with grief.

Be not disturbed  
by memories that come unbidden.  
Swiftly forgive;  
and let Christ speak to you  
unspoken words.  
Unfinished conversation  
will be resolved in Him.  
Be not disturbed.

Be gentle with the one  
who walks with grief.  
If it is you, be gentle with yourself.  
Swiftly forgive,  
walk slowly,  
pausing often.

Take time, be gentle  
as you walk with grief.

## COME NOW (A PRAYER)

Come now  
live in us.  
Let us stay in You,  
since if we be all in You,  
we cannot be far from one another,  
though some may be in heaven  
and some upon earth.

—

Adapted from *David Elginbrod* by George MacDonald, in  
*Celtic Daily Prayer: From the Northumbria Community* (Harper  
Collins: 2000), 225-226.



## **DISCUSSION 4**

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO  
SOMEONE EXPERIENCING  
GRIEF RIGHT NOW?



## OPEN WITH PRAYER



## WATCH FILM 4



## READ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hillary emphasizes the primary need for empathy and presence, and encourages us to resist the temptation to give advice. Why do many of us have a tendency to offer advice when pain is expressed?
2. Ruth encourages us to let people vent their raw feelings of grief. What is your experience of being offered space to share your grief? What was helpful for you?
3. Hillary suggests that it's okay to continue to nurture a connection with someone who has died. What do you think about this? Has this been a helpful practice for you?
4. In recognizing the varied sources of grief in these times, John highlights that every individual has a different experience. How can we generously and hospitably make space for people to grieve their unique losses?



## OPTIONAL ART REFLECTION

If you were invited to create a piece of art inspired by your group's conversations surrounding faith, grief, and COVID-19, you may choose to share your art with the group now and reflect on the process of its creation.



## REFLECTION: LISTENING WELL

Here is an exercise intended to help you practice supportive listening. Each member of the group should take two or three minutes to share the meaningful insights or experiences they have had as a result of the group's conversations about faith and grief. While each individual is speaking, the rest of the group should follow these listening guidelines:

### LISTENING EXERCISE

Listening well is one way that we can receive and make space for the grief of others. We encourage you to reflect on this practice as you respond to individuals in your community who may be experiencing loss at this time.



1. Be aware that listening wholly and attentively is a gift you offer to others.
2. Be aware of your body language; sit in a way that communicates openness and displays your willingness to listen.
3. Listen not only to the words being spoken, but to the emotions being expressed.
4. Don't rush to come up with a response; slow down and focus on simply understanding.

After the speaker is done sharing, select a person from the group to ask one or two questions. Follow these guidelines for framing questions:

1. The best questions are simple, brief, and to the point.
2. Avoid asking questions with right or wrong answers. Instead, ask "how," "what," or "why" questions. These encourage reflection and uncover deeper meaning.
3. Ask questions that help the speaker identify important feelings, images, concerns, and hopes in his or her story.
4. Embrace moments of silence; leave space between questions and answers to encourage further reflection and listening.

# APPENDIX

## ADDITIONAL CREATIVE REFLECTIONS ON GRIEF AND HOPE

- [“Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled,”](#) a sonnet by Malcolm Guite.
- [“Dear Refuge of my Weary Soul,”](#) a hymn by [Anne Steele](#).
- [Every Moment Holy](#) - free liturgy downloads for this season.

## GRIEF RESOURCES

- C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961)
- Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004)
- Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Viking, 2013)
- [GriefShare](#) - GriefShare is a friendly, caring group of people who will walk alongside you through one of life’s most difficult experiences. You don’t have to go through the grieving process alone.

## EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

If you or someone you know is considering suicide, please contact emergency services. For your quick reference, here are nationwide emergency numbers and crisis lines:

- Canada: 911, Crisis Services Canada: 1-833-456-4566 (in British Columbia, you can also call 310-6769 for emotional support, information, and resources specific to mental health)
- United States: 911, National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
- United Kingdom: 999/112, Samaritans: 116 123
- New Zealand: 111, 1737, Lifeline Aotearoa: 0800-543-354
- Australia: 000, Lifeline: 13 11 14

Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries does not provide medical or therapeutic advice. If you are in distress or experiencing suicidal thoughts, please call the crisis line in your area or emergency services.



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[sanctuarymentalhealth.org](http://sanctuarymentalhealth.org)

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For questions related to Sanctuary's resources, email:

[support@sanctuarymentalhealth.org](mailto:support@sanctuarymentalhealth.org)

Photography by Leslie Roberts

## WITH THANKS

The work of Sanctuary has been made possible by the generosity of donors, volunteers, and staff over many years. It would be impossible for us to personally thank the hundreds of people who have made this ministry possible, but to all of you we do offer a heartfelt and sincere thank you. May you and your loved ones continue to know God's peace in the midst; may he always be your sanctuary.

In Partnership With:

