Columns
Horizons
Ministry



(Unsplash/K. Mitch Hodge)



by Nicole Trahan

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 1, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When something tragic happens or when people's lives are in disarray due to an unforeseen circumstance, those of us who work in ministry, counseling or social work are present to offer support, lend an ear, and speak healing words. What if these trusted support systems are going through the same grief or loss or difficulty? It is sometimes difficult to discern how to navigate roles in situations like this.

I found myself in this situation recently. On the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, Sept. 15, one of my co-workers passed away after a short battle with an aggressive form of brain cancer. She was one of the pillars of our school community and our local community more broadly. Ann was at every sporting event cheering on "her" kids, sharing funny stories and pranks at staff Christmas parties, consoling a crying student over a recent loss, silently finding ways to honor, support and assist those most in need. She had a grin and funny remark for any situation — raising six sons with her husband of many years probably helped. An active member of her parish and neighborhood improvement association, Ann was a woman of deep faith and practical wisdom.

A couple days before Ann's funeral we learned that a second co-worker, Judi, was in the intensive care unit after experiencing cardiac arrest while driving on the highway. Miraculously, she was not involved in a collision with another vehicle. However, due to lack of oxygen and the damage to her brain and other organs, the doctors determined she would not recover. Ann's funeral was on a Saturday. Judi passed away the following Tuesday afternoon.

Advertisement

Judi was the personification of selflessness. A woman who embodied joy, patience, good humor, wisdom and care. She would do anything for her students and all she knew. No matter what was happening in my life or at school, I never left a conversation with Judi without a reason to smile. As the director of our special needs program, which she envisioned and established, Judi was passionate about inclusion,

helping students and adults find their place, and offering support for anyone struggling.

The school community is reeling. How does a community recover from losses such as these that occurred so close together? And how much of that healing and recovery falls on the shoulders of the community's counselors, campus ministers and chaplain? How does one minister amid mourning?

I work with the school's ministry and service team, often in conjunction with our counseling staff. In that role I recognize the expectation of offering words of support or healing amid pain and confusion. But I also recognized that I just didn't have those words now. In ordinary situations I struggle to speak words of empathy and compassion without preparation. Writing them is easy. Speaking those words often seems unnatural. And in these extraordinary times, it is even more difficult.

While I struggled to answer these questions for myself, I am grateful that others in our community recognized that we needed support for ourselves before we could offer support to others. I am overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and assistance from nearby schools, friends and grief counselors. A good friend of our community who happens to be the director of campus ministry at our "rival" Catholic school wrote a lovely prayer service for us to use, made copies of the worship aid and took care of all the details. Other area schools have provided breakfast and lunch for our faculty and staff. Dozens of counselors from other schools have been available for students and adults.

People who work in ministry, counseling and social work sometimes need the space and support to go through our own grieving process. It's OK for us to admit that and to accept the support. No one benefits from us "powering through" or stuffing emotions away. We simply cannot give what we do not have.

I humbly ask for your prayers as our school community continues through our grieving process.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing** feature series. View the full series.