



# BETHANY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP

## When a Child Dies

Our tranquil world was thrown into chaos on Sunday 18th February 1990, when our youngest child, Cathal, was killed outside our gate. He was only thirteen. This kind and optimistic child unthinkingly cycled from a side road and was killed by a car. Ironically he was born with a caul covering his head, a sign of good luck called an caipín sonais in Irish. The other irony was that I left my job in Dublin and came to Thurles to teach, and felt confident that my children would be safer on country roads.

The death, even the thought of losing a child is unimaginable, and we were now faced with this nightmare. For long time we entered a dark world. In the first weeks of my grieving I stumbled from class to class, visiting the prayer room between classes to give me the strength for the next one. That first year went by in a blur and the second year was even more severe because of the cold realisation that our child would never return. I was so engrossed in my own pain that I did not see the distress suffered by my children. It was only nineteen years later, when I gave my children a questionnaire for a book on the loss of our child, that I realised the extent of the distress they had endured. The lesson is that the death of a child impacts very severely on siblings, whereas the public tend to sympathise with the parents and the children are often sidelined.

I instinctively knew that there was no way around grieving and opened myself to

the emotions that accompany loss – loneliness, depression, anxiety, anger, rage, disbelief, guilt, fear and terror. While we all grieve differently, most of us somehow reach the stage of acceptance that our loved one is dead. We can never, however, accept the death of a child, simply because it is unacceptable. That does not mean that we forever wallow in sadness. But, we learn to cope and we can ultimately be happy. This takes a long time, and it can only be done if we embrace the painful process of grieving.

Because I never used defence mechanisms such as avoidance or denial, the full brunt of the loss initially rendered me helpless. Apart from making two phone calls to tell my daughters the news of Cathal's death, I sat in the chair overwhelmed by the tragedy. Not every grieving person is incapacitated in this way and many are actively involved in funeral preparations. One feeling I frequently had in the first year was a sense of being insane, an uncommon grieving experience. Every morning when I awoke my stomach was churning and one Sunday I was so agitated that I could not sit, walk, lie or stand. I could feel the stress in every part of my body and the skin had already peeled from the palms of my hands with this stress. I went to a priest noted for his holiness and empathy. He prayed in Latin over me for an hour and I was able to get through the day. We resisted the temptation to make a shrine of Cathal's room and when we felt able to, we gave his toys to neighbouring children and kept one or two



*Above is the image used on the book "When a Child Dies" Footsteps of a Grieving Family. Author Jim O'Shea. (Veritas Publications)*

small things. I found it unbearable, but I managed to compile an album of Cathal's photographs. I still find it painful to look at that album because I see images of my child living and being happy, yet knowing that he is dead. For a long time, too, whenever the phone rang late at night or early in the morning, it triggered alarm and fear that something had happened to one of our other children.

When I look back on how we grieved it is clear that males and females grieve differently. Females are more open to the grief feelings and are better at communicating them. My wife and our three girls talked and cried, while I did not communicate my pain, but felt it intensely and cried profusely each evening after school during the first year. My son, however, buried his grief and spent many years with all that distress bottled up.

What he could not bury was his anger and at times it was frightening and palpable.

Losing a child has been compared to an amputation. You are always aware of it. Apart from its intensity, it is different from other types of grief. We grieve a lost future. What might have been - our adult son, his personality, the life he would have lived, the woman he would have married, the children he would have had, his adult company, his laughter and sense of fun, his companionship and friendship. What a great loss that is! Because of its intensity and duration, the death of a child falls under the heading of complicated grief, and some people normally need a period of professional help until they can cope.

It is a quarter of a century  
*continued on page 2....*

## Update on Withdrawal of Grants to Bethany Bereavement Support Groups by the Child and Family Support Agency Tusla

We wish to acknowledge and thank the Child and Family Support Agency Tusla for their support and financial help given to Bethany Groups in the last 10 – 12 years. The grant aid was of enormous help to us in providing our services of support for bereaved individuals and families in our communities. It enabled Bethany groups to ensure they had sufficient bereavement support volunteers to meet

the needs of a community, buy bereavement-related resources, pay for rent of rooms, talks, mobile phones, printing and catering for public events for the bereaved.

As and from May 2015 this grant aid was withdrawn without notice from the groups.

Written requests were sent to Dr. O'Reilly Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, from the GEC and Bethany Groups throughout the country, request-

ing that the grants be re-instated. In early July our Chairperson and Treasurer met with Tusla representatives to impress upon them the urgent need to re-instate the grants. We stressed the huge impact that lack of funding would have on the quality of the services we offer to bereaved families.

We were informed that the focus of funding this year was to those providing child protection services.

Tusla representatives said it was because they appreciate and value the work that Bethany has been doing and



Winnie Keogh

hopefully will continue to do that they had ring-fenced €10,000 grant for the Bethany GEC to ensure that the work continues.

We urge all Bethany Groups to seek out alternative local and national sources of funding.

Winnie Keogh  
GEC Member

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### When a Child Dies

since we lost Cathal. So how are we now? That intense pain has long since gone, although in those early days we thought it would never end, a thought many grieving people have as they travel the long road of bereavement. I have seen this in many cases of loss, including relationship breakdowns. But it did ease as the pain of grief always does. We are a happy and united family but we miss him and I think of him every day with a sense of sadness. We enjoy our lives, but at particular times of the year we experience a passing sadness. For most of my family it is at anniversary or birthday times, for me it is Christmas, because Cathal used to help me put up the Christmas tree. We have found different ways to cope, using a combination of prayer, investing in our family clusters, counselling, work, friendships, pastimes and, in my case, writing.

Writing can be a very healing exercise. Three of us kept a diary during the first year of our grieving, noting our feeling and thoughts and transferring some of our pain onto the pages of our diaries.

Writing a book on our loss meant re-reading the diaries, looking at letters sent to us at the time, reading the inquest notes, looking at Mass cards, reading Cathal's short stories and his school copies and reading the local press account. This was at times traumatic but ultimately healing.

One of the most healing aspects was planting a memorial tree. As I write this article the white flowers of Cathal's Cotoneaster tree have fallen to the ground and green berries, which will soon turn red, are forming. It will always be a symbol of the happiness and sorrow we experienced when Cathal lived and then left us. His loss means that we are more sensitive to the losses of others and in my work as a counsellor I can draw on my own experiences to try and understand bereaved clients. Meaning is important in our lives, and it is not always about what we do or achieve in life, but it is sometimes in our death that meaning lies. Such it was with our child, whose death changed us and made us better people.

Jim O'Shea,  
Author of *When a Child Dies. Footsteps of a Grieving Family.*  
(Veritas Publications).

## Upcoming Talks

### Coping with Loss - A talk by Brid Carroll

If you have lost a loved one by sudden or traumatic death or after a long illness this talk may help you on your journey of grief and loss.

**Venue** - Clayton Hotel, Dublin Airport (formerly Bewley's Hotel), Stockhole Lane, Co Dublin

**Date** - Wednesday 14th October at 8.00pm  
(Admission free, donations welcome)

### Irish Hospice Foundation

Information Evening for the Public about Bereavement

**Venue:** Alexander Hotel, Dublin 2

**Date:** Thursday 5th November 2015 from 5.30 to 8pm

**Keynote Speaker:** Jane McKenna

(Founder of the LauraLynn Children's Hospice Foundation)

Bethany will have a stand at the venue that evening

## Compulsory

### Child Safeguarding and Protection Training for all Bethany Members

Facilitated by Fr. Paddy Boyle

**Venue:** Milltown Institute,

Sandford Road, Ranelagh.

**Saturday 3rd October 2015**

**10.00am - 1.00pm**

**Registration 9.30am**

It is imperative that all Bethany volunteers undertake this Workshop, or an equivalent training in their own region.

Please confirm numbers attending by

**25th September 2015**

by **Texting** 087 9905299 or

**Email:** bethansupport@eircom.net.

# Day of Reflection Review



On 9th May Sally Hyland SJG inspired us with a wonderful day on 'Tending the Quality of Presence - the inner/outer Journey. 'The morning began with a beautiful meditation, morning prayer and introduction to the artist Sieger Köder and 'The Invitation Poster'

"It was you who created my inmost self, knit me together in my mother's womb". **Psalm 139:13**

The journey inwards leads us to thirst for deeper meaning. Who am I? As Thomas Merton says 'Someone loved by God'. We have to go to our source to grow in compassion and tolerance. Psalm 366 tells us 'Be not afraid.' To grow in compassion and more tolerance we need to spend time alone with God. He is always ahead of us and we learn that suffering is a tremendous teacher. We are 'graced through it'.

Every sentence had such deep meaning interspersed with wonderful stories from Sally's experience in the Cameroons to her journey with a homeless man in Dublin who showed nothing but gratitude to 'the Man above'.

From pain comes our journey of reaching out. As Rinpoche says 'In the practice of healing, a kind heart is as valuable as medical training, because it is the source of happiness for both one-self and others.'

It is the manifestation of compassion guided by wisdom. Love eliminates fear. Through prayer we learn 'just to be'. We have to step out of the way and learn to listen 'Holy listening that leads a soul into life.' We have to be the escorts of grace. Healing is ongoing and it requires 'self care'. We can have a soul ruined by rules and regulations. We must get back to the heart of the matter and know how to feel. The language of God is the experience God writes into our lives. Gen 28:10-19. Healing is about slowing down, always about becoming.

In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well John: 4 she met Jesus who gave her dignity to become a missionary witness and agent of love. Nobody has more worth than anybody else and it requires 'letting go of our power and letting God into our space.' Listening creates the space that God can work in. The opening of the heart is a life-times work.

We can be resistant to change and must get out of our 'embeddedness as Robert Keegan writes in 'The Evolving Self' or Patrick Kavanagh in 'The Great Hunger' 'God is in the bits and pieces of every day'. Victor Frankly in Man's Search for Meaning says 'A person can survive any how if you have a why'. From insight comes transformation.

We must learn to enjoy and be in the now. Healing is an invitational word. Do you know what you want to be made well? We are all marked by wounds. All scarred but scars say wounds have been healed and transformed to emerge with new wisdom and light.

Sally posed the question: Are our minds big enough to be compassionate and agents of healing? The blazing trail of compassion 'starts with you'. It is 'honouring the God working in you.'

There was a tiny jug and a large jug on the table and Sally asked - What are your thirsts? What is the most precious thing about you at this time? What does the jar represent for you? What do you need to let down to become a more effective Bethany member?

From there we were reminded again of Patrick Kavanagh that 'cracks are the doorway to God'. 'My room is a rustic attic but it has a little window that lets in the stars'. We have

to learn to love ourselves to truly tend to the needs of others. But we are never alone. God is in us. 'God is Love.' We know him through others. So we must find meaning, treasuring and appreciating what we have and grown into which brings us 'Back to the Well.'

We thank Sally for such a wonderful insightful day that is just briefly synopsised here.

*Moira Staines*

## Dates for the Diary....

### Next Training Workshop

St. John the Baptist Church, Parish Centre, Blackrock  
Monday 28th September to 7th December 2015.

Full day Saturday 5th December 2015.

Interviews Saturday 19th September 2015.

### Further details from Liz Ronaldson

Email: [ronaldson6@eircom.net](mailto:ronaldson6@eircom.net) or

Mobile: 087 2392465.

**Training: Esker 2015:** 25th - 27th September and 6th - 8th November 2015.

Further information:

Sr. Mary Glennon 087 3204569

Email: [mbglennon@eircom.net](mailto:mbglennon@eircom.net)

**Orlagh Weekend:** 20th to 22nd November

A Weekend Retreat for those bereaved at least 1 year

Contact: Anne Butler 087 2050514

Email: [annebutler@live.ie](mailto:annebutler@live.ie)

### Northern Ireland:

Good Shepherd Centre, Belfast. 24th September 2015 with final day 12th December at Drumalis.

Contact: Claire Dowds Tel: 00447766934246

Email: [cdowds181@gmail.com](mailto:cdowds181@gmail.com)

### Compulsory Child Safeguarding & Protection

3rd October the Milltown Institute 9.30am to 1.00pm

It is imperative that all Bethany volunteers undertake this Workshop, or an equivalent training in their own region.

## Bethany Support Service - Caring for the Carers

In 1984 Fr. John Murphy SJ, with others, decided that there was a need for a voluntary parish-based Bereavement Support Service in Dublin which would reach out to as many people as possible who were going through a grieving process. The first task of this pioneering group was to start looking for Volunteers to train in supporting the bereaved. The first volunteers came forward!

More than thirty years later Volunteers continue to come forward. Nowadays the volunteers come from all parts of the country, year after year. They give up their free time for over twelve weeks to undertake the necessary training to equip them with the skills of listening with the heart and to more fully understand the journey of grief. Their generosity continues in the giving of their time voluntarily to meeting the bereaved and lonely in many different settings, irrespective of time or season or

of their personal circumstances. Others give additional time to working on various committees, helping with the development and management of the organisation.

Without our Volunteer force there simply would be no Bethany Bereavement Support Service.

In this Newsletter we salute our Volunteers – past and present. Whether they joined us for a few months or many years, they are part of the story of Bethany. We salute all those who have gone before us who had the vision in the beginning to go out into the deep and had the courage to begin. We salute all those who came along later and contributed so much to the development of Bethany over the past thirty years.

### Bethany Support Team

As the organisation expands year on year and the demands on volunteers increase, the GEC has established a Bethany Support Team who will visit centres and clusters of groups with a view to

offering support, motivation and guidance. Each member of the team has immense experience within Bethany and should prove a worthwhile resource to groups or individuals. The co-ordinator of the team is Anne Butler and the other members are Winnie Keogh, Maeve Mason and Moira Staines.

The team will be able to offer guidance with the integration of newly trained members into existing centres, the setting up of new groups, recruitment of new members and ways to advertise the Bethany service in each locality. There will be an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate all that is going well and to be

refreshed and motivated in carrying on the work of supporting the bereaved.

While this development is initially a pilot scheme in the wider Dublin area, it is envisaged in the near future to establish support teams throughout the country with a view to caring for the carers – our volunteers.

To complete the circle of caring for the carers the Support Team will have group supervision several times a year to ensure the professional delivery of the Support Service to Bethany groups and also for their own self-care.

*Bethany GEC*

## Strategic Plan 2015 - 2018

Armed with Bethany Members feedback comments on the Parish Report Forms for 2014 the GEC took the decision to enlist the services of a management consultant and begin the process of developing a Strategic Plan for Bethany for the period 2015-18.

The challenge to the GEC was to look 5-10 years out and determine how the GEC wants Bethany to develop. From there we worked backwards to determine the optimal ways in which it can reach that goal. The GEC was to become more strategic.

The key areas to be fleshed out in greater detail over the coming year are as follows:

- GEC Development
- Membership Development
- Communications and Public Events and Visibility
- Training and Programme Development

At a follow-up meeting we



*Margaret Chambers  
Chairperson GEC*

identified Communications/Public Events/Visibility as our first priority and we have started working on this goal. If you have any thoughts or ideas on this area please email me at: [margareтчambers@eircom.net](mailto:margareтчambers@eircom.net) and I will get back to you.

*More on this at the AGM and in the Spring Newsletter.*

*Margaret Chambers*

## GEC Notices

**Bethany General Executive Council (GEC)** is seeking to co-opt one additional Bethany member onto the GEC committee.

If you are interested or want to hear more please email: [margareтчambers@eircom.net](mailto:margareтчambers@eircom.net)

**Bethany General Executive Council (GEC)** is seeking a volunteer member to record and write up minutes of GEC monthly meetings.

If you are interested or want to hear more please email: [john\\_maeve@fastmail.fm](mailto:john_maeve@fastmail.fm)

## General Executive Committee 2015

Fr. Myles O' Reilly - **Spiritual Director**

Margaret Chambers- **Chairperson**

Maeve Mason - **Secretary**

Anne Butler - **Treasurer**

Shirley Scott - **Website/Newsletter co-ordinator**

Winnie Keogh, Gobnait O Grady,

Liz Ronaldson and Moira Staines.

## Bethany Bereavement Support Group contact details:

Bethany Bereavement Support Group,  
c/o Rathfarnham Parish Centre, Willbrook Road,  
Rathfarnham, Dublin 14.

**Bethany Phone:** 087 9905299

**Email:** [bethanysupport@eircom.net](mailto:bethanysupport@eircom.net)

**Website:** [www.bethany.ie](http://www.bethany.ie)