

Matthew 5: 'blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted'.

## **Normalising grief and accompanying the bereaved in the Diocese of Leeds**

Breda Theakston presentation

**For 'Growing Old Gracefully Online session - Thursday 18th July 2024**

Thank you very much for inviting me to share what I know of the work of this relatively new ministry in the Diocese of Leeds.

I am here to stand in for Helen Edwards who has a much clearer picture of the whole history of the EPBC as Helen was the one whose concern about the lack of community mourning during the Covid crisis led to its creation. I only joined after the fact.

EPBC stands for *Elizabeth Prout Bereavement Care*. Elizabeth Prout was the saint who started the Sisters of the Cross and Passion while working among the poor and destitute in Manchester in the 19th century.

[Elizabeth, the only child of Anglican parents, had converted to Catholicism as a young woman and at one point was disowned by her parents. Mid 19th century England was not an easy place to be a Catholic as, even though 1850 saw the restoration of the hierarchy after the suppression of Mass and priests in what became known as the 'reformation' in the 16th century, there was still a strong residual suspicion of Catholics. But the mid 19th century was also a time of huge social and industrial change and unrest and some people in Anglicanism (most famously those in the 'Oxford movement') engaged with the truths of the Catholic Church and converted (including the most famously of all St John Henry Newman).]

Elizabeth Prout left her comfortable family home in Shrewsbury to teach in Manchester. There she saw the dreadful poverty and conditions among the factory workers and the Irish immigrants coming to England to escape the famine. She started to feed and minister to the poor and, helped by 2 priests and two young women who joined her, in a home they called St Joseph's Convent, she set up an institute to educate the poor as she believed that education was the best way for people to get out of poverty.

This was the start of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion whose commitment to education has had a big impact in Leeds (including starting what is now Trinity and All Saints University). The sisters who are in our diocese currently run the Briery Retreat House in Ilkley and Helen (Edwards who should have been speaking tonight) is connected there as a prayer guide and a parish retreat leader. When Helen shared with the sisters at the Briery her concern for the difficulties people were having being left alone with their grief during lockdowns, they pondered the possibility of setting up a bereavement ministry in our diocese. With the blessing of (and financial support from) Bishop Marcus, the Elizabeth Prout Bereavement Care ministry (EPBC), named in honour of their founder, was born.

The main goal of the ministry is to recruit, train and support people with the right skills (particularly compassionate listening) as grief companions/bereavement ministers across the diocese.

They set up a structure for the ministry within which grief companions could be trained and equipped to work safely (according to Diocesan Safeguarding guidelines) within their own parishes and other catholic communities.

There is a core team comprising of the Briery sisters, a chaplain and a couple or 3 grief companions. These meet regularly to manage the ministry and make sure that recruitment, training and ongoing support and development, especially spiritual development, is of the highest quality so that grief companions feel well equipped and able to support those in their community who need that little bit of extra accompaniment in the event of a bereavement. Not everyone who is bereaved wants or needs someone to accompany them.

What do grief companions/bereavement ministers do? We never make assumptions about what a grieving person should or should not do. Our aim is to 'normalise' their grief and to be a safe space for them to express some of the pain that they may not be able to express anywhere else. We find out from the bereaved person what *they* want to do to honour their deceased loved one. It will be different for different people. Some people will want to think about what rituals they might like to start (or continue) that help them to feel less alone and less lost after a death (e.g. lighting candles; talking to photos; organising annual memorials, visiting the grave; writing; drawing; organising or campaigning publicly in honour of their loved one). Every grief companion needs DBS and the Level 3 safeguarding certificate (easy and free to do online). They also need to have done the basic grief companion training (usually about 12 hours over 4-6 weeks via zoom or two weekend days in real time) before they can actively volunteer in their local parish or school or other Catholic organisation.

We, the core team of the EPBC, offer a 'bereavement ministers pack' with everything a newly trained grief companion needs to start, including a booklet for the bereaved explaining what a person can expect from their grief companion. We start with a gentle conversation explaining who we are and who we are NOT (this is a 'ministry of accompaniment', we are **not** counsellors). Referrals to us usually come through the parish priest or manager (if it's a Catholic school or other organisation). We initially offer up to 6 sessions of up to one hour each. In reality that may vary wildly but we keep the booklet in sight so that we can regularly touch base with the person to check whether either or both of us are ready to stop the sessions or to continue for a while. We, the EPBC team and grief companions, support each other in the event of any particular concerns and we are encouraged to look out for other local or national organisations that might be able to meet the needs of the bereaved persons that we cannot. (We do not want to encourage over dependence on us.)

We have about 25 trained grief companions working in half a dozen parishes which support a bereavement minister. We have one or two school chaplains are also trained grief companions. Some parishes use their bereavement minister (there is a very simple commissioning prayer that priests can use if they wish) to meet with people on an individual basis. Some parishes

organise drop-in sessions where people can come for a coffee and find support and a listening ear without committing to regular private meetings.

All grief companions/bereavement ministers have to be trained to Level 3 on the Diocesan Safeguarding Training course and it is recommended that we work in pairs (if possible, it's a sensitive issue) and know what to do and where to turn if we have any concerns at all about the person we are accompanying.

At least twice a year the EPBC team organise a support session for all trained grief companions to check in with how it is going and note what extra support they would like. The last session was in May when we had a guest speaker to talk to us about 'children and grief'. (We are not trained to work with children but sometimes there will be children in the family of the person we are accompanying and we need to know how to help them to support those children with their loss.)

We are currently in the process of growth as it is clear that we do not yet have enough people trained and willing to do this beautiful ministry or accompaniment among those who mourn in our local churches. Also the core team has been limited recently as the two sisters from the Briery have taken a back seat to cope with their own health issues. So we have recently recruited some of our trained grief companions to join the core EPBC team in order that we can continue to offer the service that all our diocesan grief companions/bereavement ministers need.

### **How to get started?**

- See also the Briery website <https://www.briery.org.uk/elizabeth-prout-bereavementcare/> and the diocesan website under 'bereavement'
- <https://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/elizabeth-prout-bereavement-care-2/>
- Contact us via the email [epbereavementcare@dioceseofleeds.org.uk](mailto:epbereavementcare@dioceseofleeds.org.uk) or telephone the Briery on 01943 607287 (and ask to be put on the waiting list for training)
- Talk to your parish priest or manager at work.
- Find someone to work with (to volunteer locally with you)
- Join the next training (due in the New Year 2025)
- Training is charged at cost (room and catering) and is a valid parish expense so we can send you an invoice for your parish priest
- Do DBS (your parish safeguarding rep manages that)
- Complete Level 3 Safeguarding training
- You will then be added to our EPBC records as a grief companion/bereavement minister and will be invited to all our support and development events.
- We will act as a resource for you (as well as your parish priest) as you navigate this role.

*Breda Theakston*

**Elizabeth Prout Bereavement Care**

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