

# Fertility Grief in Faith Communities

## Experiences of Nurture and Pain

### Project Pomegranate

The questions below were posed to a group of men and women who have experienced fertility grief from infertility, miscarriage, and infant loss. Many of the answers reflect the specific experiences and theological leanings of particular individuals! But these specific answers offer great insights that can inform the way we worship, speak, write, pray, and nurture in community with those whose fertility grief is a heavy burden.

We invite you to work with these answers as you consider the ways your own faith community can engage fertility grief. We have removed identifying information from these answers. But we are happy to talk with you personally and to come into your communities and lead workshops or brainstorming sessions!

We also invite you to share your own answers to these questions as we compile helpful databases for faith communities. For more information, or to share your answers, please contact Mary Elizabeth Hanchey, [mehanchey@gmail.com](mailto:mehanchey@gmail.com).

1. Did your pastor or faith community know about your fertility grief - your struggle with infertility, or your miscarriage, or the loss of your infant? Were you comfortable sharing this story? If so, why? If not, why?
2. If your pastor or faith community responded in ways that were helpful - what did you especially appreciate?
3. Are there things that you wish your pastor or faith community had done to support you?
4. What was the most painful experience you faced in worship during this time? (A particular hymn? Language from the pulpit? Mother's Day? Advent?)
5. What was the most nurturing moment you experienced in worship during this time?
6. How does someone experiencing fertility grief experience the programmatic ministry of your church? Consider whether there are adult classes that are comfortable for those who are not parents. Consider the language used in the bulletin and newsletters. Consider the focus and structure of church events outside of worship and Sunday School.
7. What wisdom can you offer to pastors and faith communities learning to be sensitive to the fertility grief that is certainly present, but may be undetected?

## Questions with Responses

**1. Did your pastor or faith community know about your fertility grief - your struggle with infertility, or your miscarriage, or the loss of your infant? Were you comfortable sharing this story? If so, why? If not, why?**

Yes, the church staff knew but it was not widely shared in the congregation. I don't recall being asked about sharing the news but I would have been open to the question and appreciative of having someone else do the hard work of informing others. One of the women on staff reached out to me directly with words of sympathy and shared grief.

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**No one** knew anything, until I sat down in Sunday School one morning and couldn't stop crying. The week prior I was supposed to teach the class. I had called a couple of people late Saturday afternoon to see if I could find someone to fill in. I just said that I wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be able to be there. So, the following Sunday we got up and went to church. When I walked in the door, an incredibly kind man came to me concerned and asked if I was feeling better. "Did you have the flu?" He asked. The tears just came.

"No..." I said. "It wasn't the flu."

We are members of an intergenerational class with many members who have already raised their children and are now grandparents, and some members who have no children. What we learned on the Sunday morning I cried was that our class was full of people who had experienced fertility grief and miscarriage a generation ago. People who felt our pain and sadness and expressed it with a collective, audible, "Ahhhhh..." when my husband told them that I had miscarried the weekend before.

And after the collective response, the individual stories came. Some of them were told briefly in that moment and others came out after the class was over. Cards came in the mail. We were not alone. People understood. My deep sadness and tears were affirmed. That was the first miscarriage. We did not mention the other two publicly, just to family and close friends. I began to feel like it was easier to keep it private.

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**No**, our priest did not know about our infertility process until we were trying for our second child (both children were conceived through IVF), and my treatments/procedures interfered with a couple of church commitments. After he knew, he only once made a comment, a sort of "we're rooting for you" message that was helpful, but we never discussed it more deeply. I'm sure he was waiting for an indication from me that I wanted to talk about it. Only 3 people knew about our first miscarriage, and no one knew about the second. I don't know if my hesitation to involve others in our grief speaks more to the taboo of the subject, or to the privacy-loving independent New England culture we live in. My guess is probably the latter.

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**Yes**, my pastor did know and I think it was generally known that I was trying to get pregnant. When I wasn't pregnant month after month people stopped asking or if they did ask I would start crying and they wouldn't ask again. For the most part infertility made people uncomfortable. In some ways it's like talking about sex in church which seems strange, too! But I wanted someone to listen or say they cared, etc, etc. I didn't want the issue to be ignored or treated as taboo.

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**No**, not many people knew. I struggled to get pregnant, but when I was struggling I was a seminarian, and in some ways, without a true pastor at the time. I could have gone to my field ed supervisor or professor, but did not. I suppose I did not feel comfortable with any of them sharing something that private with a priest (which many of the professors were). I finally shared the struggle with my spiritual director. I just found that keeping that struggle from her felt dishonest in the context of sharing my spiritual journey. It was a major part of my relationship (or what felt like the fracturing of my relationship) with God. So I finally broke down and told her.

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**Yes**, my faith community did know because, though it was difficult to share our struggles, our desire for the body to be praying for us in the midst of our attempts to conceive and adopt outweighed our hesitation to share. Also sharing was likely easier for us than for most because our body was (and is) very small, 20 to 30 people on any given Sunday.

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**Yes**, our pastor knew about our miscarriages and infertility. I was serving on a church staff at the time. Our pastor was AWESOME! He was so sensitive and kind and acknowledged that each loss was a big deal to us. He prayed with and for us, sat with my family while I was having a surgery after a miscarriage. And while our church family knew of some of our losses, our pastor and church staff did their best to shield us and maintain our privacy while ministering to us and allowing our church family to love on us. We felt like our church, and particularly our church staff, was a safe place for us to share our journey.

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**No**, my faith community did not know about my infertility struggle although a few close friends within my faith community did know.

The **first** reason that I did not share the information with my faith community is that I was so young, and knew so few people who had experienced infertility, that I had a false perception that I was alone in the struggle. I was fearful of being honest and vulnerable in front of a larger community because I was not sure if people would understand or respond in helpful ways.

The **second** reason that I was silent is that I was part of the leadership of that faith community – I was on staff as a minister for part of the time we dealt with infertility. There were so many conflicting emotions and concerns at the time. After all, in polite Southern society, professionals do not talk about their family planning and emotional turmoil with their boss and colleagues. And, as one of the few women on staff (and the only woman of child-bearing years), I was keenly aware that my reproductive timeline was a matter of concern for church operations even if it remained unstated.

Pregnancy rumors would surface from time to time – an unfortunate side effect of my age, status as a married woman, and weight gain – and I would hear comments like, “Why didn’t you tell us you were pregnant when you were interviewing?!?” Or, “Are you going to be able to lead the youth retreat if you’re pregnant?” All of these small moments communicated that, for better or for worse, my reproductive issues would affect how people judged my effectiveness as a minister and employee.

**Third**, I am not sure how well churches know how to take care of their own ministers. Ministers take care of their parishioners – no the other way around. I never felt as if I had permission to “need” the support of my church family since I was *their* minister. Eventually, my position at that church ended and I became a “normal person” in a different church. I never shared my struggle there, either, simply because I did not have the time and investment in the relationships there to trust others with something so personal. The church also did not have any existing outlet for expressing the grief so I would have had to seek out the space to share, which was something that made me feel quite uncomfortable.

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**Yes**, my pastor did know and I think it was generally known that I was trying to get pregnant. When I wasn't pregnant month after month people stopped asking or if they did ask I would start crying and they wouldn't ask again. For the most part infertility made people uncomfortable. In some ways it's like talking about sex in church which seems strange, too! But I wanted someone to listen or say they cared, etc, etc. I didn't want the issue to be ignored or treated as taboo.

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**Yes**. My husband was one of four pastors on staff at the church. When we finally did share with them, the pastors and their wives were great; some gave us space, and helped to lessen our load when we needed it; and some reached out and stood beside us as we went from procedure to ultrasound and back. As members of the church found out, it was mixed. Some of them were very worried we would “act like God” and use fertility treatments they didn't approve of, and some were phenomenal at knowing when to say something, and when to just stand beside us and hold us through the tough times. Very often, the only light we saw was through the eyes and actions of our congregation. The women's group was women of all ages, and a great help to me.

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**Yes**, our pastor and much of our faith community knew of our miscarriage. I can't remember ever doubting that we should share our story. I already knew women in the church who had

also had miscarriages and I knew that they had been supported. Perhaps if they had not been brave and shared their stories before me, I might have been more hesitant.

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**Yes**, I felt comfortable sharing our fertility journey with our pastor when I heard her pray for those waiting to hear of word of a baby coming. I had never heard clergy mention anything about fertility or loss of a baby until then. It was in this moment, sitting in that pew, that I found permission to share my grief. It took away the shame that I felt. When I met with our pastor to share my story, she invited me to share with members of the congregation. She told me about a woman who had experienced a miscarriage and how she could help me through my journey. When she told me this couple had just announced the pregnancy news right before the loss, I cringed and said how sorry I was. She quickly corrected me, saying how supportive the congregation had been to this family, and how so many had shared their own experiences of loss - so many had mourned with this family.

I also wondered how many people before me had suffered in silence.

## **2. If your pastor or faith community responded in ways that were helpful - what did you especially appreciate?**

I appreciated the **caring but direct words** from women on staff who understood our losses. I appreciated learning that other women I knew at church were "in the club" and could share stories.

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The week of our first miscarriage, I went to the side chapel during communion to pray with a member of the lay intercessory prayer team. I very rarely pray with that team, even though my husband is a member, because I tend to be so private and personal about my prayer life. When I knelt to pray with her, I simply said that my husband and I had been trying to get pregnant, and that week we had had a - I don't even remember the word I used - something like "setback" or "discouraging experience."

Whatever I said, I remember that I didn't explicitly say that we had lost a pregnancy or had a miscarriage. But somehow she knew. And she prayed with me the **most beautiful prayer of mourning** for "this little one who was not to be." I lost it, sobbing on her shoulder as she held my hands and continued praying.

It was the only time anyone in either of our miscarriages acknowledged that we had lost what to me was already a child, my child, even though it was so early. I was so grateful to her for that. I had been wasting a lot of energy trying to convince myself to "move on" and not "over react" because it was "only" 5-6 weeks into the pregnancy.

I knew of people who had lost pregnancies much farther along, or even had a stillborn child, and I felt I should feel “lucky” that didn’t happen to me. That day, the lay intercessor validated my grief, the grief of a mother who had lost a child, or the vision of a child, or the love of a child in my heart.

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Conversations with women who had also struggled were important in helping me process my own grief.

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The Sunday after our failed IVF attempt, our **pastor and his wife came to our home**. (My husband and I had stayed home from church.) Our pastor brought us some fresh blueberries and he and his wife sat with us, prayed for us, allowed us to cry with them, and then left. A small gesture but one that required courage on their part and provided comfort for us.

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After our loss through IVF my husband and I decided to adopt. However, international adoption is a fairly slow process, so we still had years that were marked by acute longing for a child and sadness over our lost one. One Sunday a member of our church acknowledged that the child in Ethiopia that we would adopt in the future had potentially already been born and, thus, he led the body in prayer for that child. I very much appreciated this because of course my husband and I had been praying in faith for our child, but it was especially encouraging to have the body join us in that act of faith. Also our friend's words revealed that he **was tracking with us**, that though no child had appeared yet, our friend was holding us--and our longing--in mind and heart.

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Several things were particularly helpful. **Prayer most of all**. Our pastor's wife (who is also a minister) stopped by one morning to visit and prayed with us. It was touching to me when she thanked God that our children, the ones we lost, were in God’s presence and that we would see them one day. I had never thought about that and this idea is comforting to me. I also really appreciated the cards from folks offering their love and sympathy and sharing their stories of infertility and loss, some that happened long ago. One lady came by our house and brought me a tea pot, tea cup, and several kinds of tea, her way of encouraging me to nurture myself.

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Mostly there was the **gift of presence**: they would ask how things were going, what we needed, etc. and hold us up in whatever way we needed.

I remember fondly a few occasions where a **nurse in the congregation** gave me a shot I needed during a fertility treatment when my husband was out of town, or a friend from church drove me and sat with me during a procedure. The wife of one of the minister's would

take me out for **sushi** when a cycle didn't work; I couldn't eat it if I was pregnant, and we both liked it so we connected over sushi during a very emotional time.

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I appreciated people personally **following up with me** and checking on me. One Sunday I was so distraught over the message ("Knock and the door will be opened, ask and you will receive,") that I left the service. Friends who saw me walk out of worship found me after church, or called or emailed to support me. That day ended up being very comforting.

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I had a missed miscarriage and had to have a D&C to complete it. A good friend who had also experienced two miscarriages **came to the clinic** to be with my husband and me before the surgery. She stayed with my husband while I was undergoing the procedure. She had already brought us soup when we found out that we had lost the baby. These acts, along with the cards we received from various church members, helped us feel that we were not alone in our grief.

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Our pastor reached out to us after a Sunday that a baby cried during the service. I will never forget the feeling that she had thought of me during the service and **remembered our suffering**. I realize that pastors know of a lot of suffering in their congregations, but the fact that she remembered mine and reached out to us made me feel less alone. It was probably a small act on her part, but to us, it meant so very much.

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### **3. Are there things that you wish your pastor or faith community had done to support you?**

At the time that our grief was most acute - no; in retrospect I think it would have helped if our story had been **shared among the community**. (And it would have helped for a staff member or other leaders to do the hard work of sharing).

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I don't hold anything against the church or our priest, because I did not share what we were going through to many people. **Prayer groups or individual conversations** would have been the place to draw this out of me.

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I suppose that **just having the issue talked about** would have been helpful. To be honest, **I have not yet been a part of a parish that actively talks about infertility and loss**.

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I would have preferred is that people share their stories in a **personal setting**...not in the hallway at church on a Sunday morning.

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I wish their had been **men** willing to share their similar stories and offer support and empathy to my husband.

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I simply wish that the church had **talked about it**. Infertility and miscarriage **simply did not exist in the church** because it was **never mentioned from the pulpit** unless it was in reference to a positive outcome. For example, there was a particularly moving baby dedication after a child was born via IVF. The IVF was mentioned only obliquely and the church was saved hearing about the devastating journey to get to that fateful procedure. We only heard about the couple's struggle once it was resolved in the form of a precious baby. Simple actions – like mentioning infertility in a list of griefs during a pastoral prayer, or inviting someone who has experienced miscarriage to write for the newsletter or give a testimony, or mentioning the struggle in a sermon – carry so much weight than pastors think.

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Looking back, in a church of over 1,500, **surely I was not the only woman** going through this. A support group would have been a wonderful help, but I couldn't see that at the time. Infertility feels so lonely, it's hard to realize that you are not the only one dealing with it.

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**Acknowledging** the struggle of infertility in worship, during the Christmas season and Mother's Day especially, would have meant so much. No one left us out on purpose, but by keeping silent from the pulpit, our struggle was left in the dark.

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I needed to feel that my infertility **wasn't a punishment** for something I had done. I can imagine that some in other church communities are made to feel that if they pray more that it will happen. Or encouraged not to seek medical intervention. I am lucky I was not in a church environment like this, or I would not have 3 children today.

**4. What was the most painful experience you faced in worship during this time? (A particular hymn? Language from the pulpit? Mother's Day? Advent?)**



The very hardest thing: rehearsing "sweet baby Jesus" carols for Christmas cantata. **Torture**, for weeks.

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**All Saints Sunday**, which is the first Sunday in November, came a couple of weeks after our first miscarriage. I found myself thinking about the grieving I was doing for the person I had never met, the person not acknowledged in that particular service.

The following year, I was on our worship committee. Another woman on the committee and I had experienced miscarriages in the previous year and a couple in the church had lost a baby at 36 weeks. We asked the pastor and committee about including the acknowledgement of these types of losses in the service. Everyone responded with openness, care and compassion and the pastor named these losses (not individually, but collectively) in the service. I felt like my grief had been included.

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It was the **Christmas Eve** service after we had been trying to conceive for a year, at the point we realized we were going to need fertility treatments. I sat in our beautiful candle-lit church, surrounded by happy families. And a large family sat two rows ahead of us. Among their many children was the most perfect, happy, sweet, angelic infant you could imagine. As I watched her nuzzle into her mother's neck, and the mother sway throughout the hymns, I cried through most of the service. I cried because that mother-child love and family-ness was not going to come easily to us, and I did not in fact know if it would ever come to us. That service has stuck with me, and I remember it every year on Christmas Eve, and wonder if another woman in the room is feeling the same way I did 7 years ago.

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**Mother's Day** was the hardest for us in churches that celebrated in what seems to be the trend--giving a flower to mothers (in the sense of someone who was/is the mother to a child). Of course it did not take into account people whose child had died. For me, it was hard because I wanted to be a mom in the sense of mothering a child, but I was a mom to so many kids in the community. (I taught school for 4 years and directed a community center for 4 years where people referred to the kids as Brittany's kids).

The churches I have been a part of more recently, in Atlanta, have typically done it differently: every woman gets a flower because she is a mother in some way to someone. Obviously, that is a fine solution. But really, Mothers Day can be ignored in church--it's not a religious holiday!

**Baby Dedications** were also very difficult. I love baby dedications and I'm not saying that they shouldn't happen - they should! But I felt sad. It was helpful to know about it ahead of time: sometimes I planned to skip that Sunday; sometimes I would come in late, or just prepare myself before entering worship.

Much is made over the mother and father during Baby Dedications. It is helpful when future mothers/fathers/parents and people **wanting to become** mothers/fathers/parents were also mentioned in the service when a baby dedication took place.

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When we had our miscarriage, it was November and we were approaching Advent. The last thing I wanted to hear about was a **pregnant Mary**.

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**Mother's Day** was always hard. But this was helpful: our church acknowledged the pain of loss, mothers and children who were estranged, and other difficult situations in a prayer on Mother's Day. And our church never gave out flowers or made moms stand up in the service or anything like that.

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The **absence of language** from the pulpit was the most painful – it perpetuated both the belief that my struggle wasn't real and the feeling that I was alone. But, there were also a few concrete things that were troubling.

One Advent the pastor spoke eloquently about how the **church was like a pregnant woman** during the season. The pastor spoke at length about the joys of pregnancy – of feeling the kicks and dreaming of the baby's future – but he emphasized that the ultimate joy of Advent came with the birth of the long-anticipated child that we could nurture and know. It was a beautiful image, but I left the sanctuary in tears before the close of the sermon.

Another small, painful moment came each time a minister referred to having a child as **"starting a family."** It is amazing how often we use that language. I was a married woman who was also a daughter and granddaughter and aunt. I was in family! I hated the repeated message that my family did not begin until a child came.

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We baptize infants in our congregation. I remember **hiding behind a post** for baptisms (so I couldn't see) or not going at all. For so long I didn't speak my grief, and I now realize it must have been happening to other women as well.

I had it out with Mary, the mother of Jesus, one day; I was waiting in the library for my husband to finish a meeting. There was a collection of **creche's** in there, and I found myself literally surrounded by reminders that God made a teenager pregnant that never even asked, and here I stood, just after our miscarriage. I said some unholy things in that library, thankfully only God and I heard.

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There was a Sunday that the liturgist read, "Knock and the door will be open, **ask and you shall receive**" and I heard myself say an expletive, out loud, and got up and walked out. Friends found me in the restroom and sat with me in my pain, but that was NOT the Sunday to hear that scripture!

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My miscarriage happened in November so Advent was difficult for me. I can't imagine any way that Advent wouldn't have been hard for me that year, as I thought of **Mary carrying her baby**.

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When you are experiencing fertility issues, everywhere you go or look, there are **pregnant women**. This is no different at church. I think the hardest thing about being in church at this time was seeing pregnant women. That cannot be changed, but it is painful.

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**5. What was the most nurturing moment you experienced in worship during this time?**

I have appreciated churches that acknowledge the **pain of Mother's Day** rather than just use the day as an occasion for celebration.

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Ironically? **Enjoying other people's children** in worship and feeling that they are a little but mine too.

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We were nurtured when our **friends prayed for us** as we struggled with infertility and waited for an international adoption to take place. One day the body was praying for the baby of another member who was pregnant. We were in a circle around her, and at the end of those prayers, another member prayed also for my baby, who was at the time still to be revealed.

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I found comfort in the **sacred rituals** of worship... silence, communion, the doxology. The contemplative aspects of worship were also very soothing to me.

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To be honest, **I am not sure that I had one**—at least not in relation to infertility (the church still remained nurturing in other ways). I tended to withdraw from church the longer that we dealt with infertility. It was my way of protecting myself from unintentionally harmful words and unsafe environments to betray my increasingly-erratic emotions. I admit that this is counter-intuitive. In times of pain, one should theoretically cling to the church. I just never felt like the church was a safe place to express my pain.

I have experienced wonderfully nurturing moments after our child was born. And since we do, and will, struggle to have any additional children, I have been fed and sustained through the efforts of and for others. One example is the service of lament and hope for a couple working through infertility (look for this story on the Baptist Women in Ministry Blog). An entire service dedicated to helping the couple name their grief and walk into their hope!!

And, I have been blessed by our current church where infertility and miscarriage are present in **words spoken from the pulpit**, in pastoral prayers, in annual services, and, therefore, in the everyday hallway conversation amongst members.

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A few weeks after my miscarriage, "Amazing Grace" was one of our hymns on Sunday morning. I had been fine throughout the service until I sang the words "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come." I broke down in silent sobs as I sang and finally sat down in the pew. After the service, our pastor gave me a hug and said **"if you can't cry in church**, then where can you cry?" I felt that my grief was acknowledged and welcomed in our worship.

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We wanted privacy. We did not want the world knowing what we were going through, but we appreciated prayer, so for an open prayer to be made **for anyone** experiencing the grief of fertility issues made us feel remembered.

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**6. How does someone experiencing fertility grief experience the programmatic ministry of your church? Consider whether there are adult classes that are comfortable for those who are not parents. Consider the language used in the bulletin and newsletters. Consider the focus and structure of church events outside of worship and Sunday School.**

Fertility grief is **hidden** at our church: it is not addressed directly in any media that I can think of. But the events that come to mind do not depend on family structure, which I believe to be a very good thing. Families of all shapes, including singles, widow(er)s, gaggles of kids, participate together and are welcomed.

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Our church is very family focused. This is part of the reason we are in a class where most of the adults are older. Our age and stage of life **does not match** the traditional pattern the church outlines.

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My current church **does not have a lot of options** for people in my age bracket who don't have kids. They have one class that is called "Families of Faith" and it is for people who have children. I also attend the class called Mothers of Young Ones (MOYOS) at another local church. This class is an incredible support for me and the others and needs to be in place but I suppose it is exclusionary.

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I find that I constantly struggle with **language**. Sometimes it is about infertility grief, but often it is also around singlehood. Preaching, teaching, and writing often involve inviting people or describing general situations. But generalizing is often painful to some. Furthermore, I often reference my own children in preaching, and I have no idea whether that is isolating. In some ways, my stories are stories about all children (and their behaviors), but perhaps they are painful to hear. I really do not know.

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I attend a very small church, so there are no special classes for, well, anything. When a member of our body experiences loss or grief, s/he does so in the **context of the whole body**. There are pros and cons to this intimacy. During my period of loss and grief, my pastor's wife began, finally, after decades, processing a miscarriage she'd suffered. There was something about my own process that freed her up to experience her own loss with the Lord, even years later. I think that is a benefit to corporate grieving: we all get the opportunity to go into our grief with God and our fellow believers, and to not run from or hide it anymore.

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There were plenty of options for classes and programs for non-parents. I do think it might have been helpful to have some sort of **specific prayer group** for families going through infertility, miscarriage, and infant death. Not a place to compare treatments but a safe place to be supported, to cry out to God, and to be reminded of God's faithfulness.

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Those grieving infertility and miscarriage experience so much through the lens of what we do not have. Therefore **language matters**. Churches must use language that does not exclude women and men who do not have children. Offering space and time for talking about grief together would have been a big help to me. I don't know of anyone dealing with it presently, so we do not offer a group, but it is such a silent problem, that perhaps we should keep a time and space available, for those who are suffering in silence.

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Our Sunday School classes are based on the curriculum that is utilized, and is not set up for parents or "empty nesters," for instance, so by design it is welcoming. I'm not sure how the subject would be discussed if it came up in class, however. The groups gather by gender, or by the service they are performing, such as mission: this is intended to **provide a place** for everyone.

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Having children takes over people's lives for a time and I understand that. I wish there weren't such a divide in people who have children and who do not have children. I will never forget being introduced to someone and she said, "do you have children?" I gave my standard answer, "not yet" and she said, "oh, then **we have nothing in common**." While, I would never say that to someone, I understand how all-consuming children can be. Although, I don't think that is a church thing, probably a society thing!

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There were so many great people that I did not meet until I started having children. I feel like there is a **big divide in church**: young people, those married without children, adults with young children, adults with teenagers, and empty nesters. I do not feel that these groups freely interact. Maybe this is also true for the greater society. When you are lumped into a group, such as "adults without children", but you want to be in the "adults with young children" it can create another divide in the church experience.

### **7. What wisdom can you offer to pastors and faith communities learning to be sensitive to the fertility grief that is certainly present, but may be undetected?**

The hardest thing for us to do in terms of connecting faith and grief was to find a liturgy for burial at home of our unborn. We were flailing about for words that were strong enough, solemn enough, hopeful enough because **we couldn't find words** of our own to do justice to the enormity of our grief at that moment. I finally located one from the Uniting Church in Australia that we adapted.

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Be aware that it is present. Statistics tell us it is prevalent.

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Be cautious about any statement intended to comfort, which begins with, "**Well at least...**" These statements simply minimize the grief. While there might be a "bright side" or "some good that will come." For me, in the early days of grief, there was nothing but pure, raw grief and sadness. People would say, "Well at least you know you can get pregnant." I didn't find that statement helpful at all. What was the use of getting pregnant if I could not carry the child? Five years later, I find myself feeling grateful for the chance to know the excitement and joy of learning that I was pregnant four times.

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Know that **even parents who have children** grieve the loss of the children they never met.

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Know and hold in awareness that the clinical term for miscarriage is "**spontaneous abortion.**" I would imagine that many of us who have miscarried know that. Therefore, sermons about abortion can carry a weight not recognized by the preacher.

Carrying a child is a huge responsibility. When that child dies in your womb, it can feel like a failure - maybe there was something you could have done, but didn't; maybe it is somehow your fault that your child's heart is no longer beating. Grief is not always rational.

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I might just suggest to clergy to **seek out individual conversations** and relationships with all of their parishioners to let them know they want to hear about what they are dealing with at the moment. Don't make assumptions that people will let you know if

everything isn't going well. I think the question, "Is there anything I can include in my prayers for you?" might have gotten me to share. Because really prayers are the best way that anyone can help you through this (unless you already have a child - in which case, offering childcare assistance to accommodate the crazy schedule of appointments and fertility treatments can also be very valuable!).

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When someone wants to talk about fertility grief, **just listen**. Just listen and promise to pray. And encourage them to let you know specific times they would like you to pray - such as before a particular test or procedure, or blood results.

And when you are listening, please, please, please don't tell them the story of the couple you knew in the past who tried for years and years and after they finally gave up trying, they got pregnant, and named their child "Jude" because Jude is the patron saint of lost causes (believe it or not, I have heard this story more than once, about different Judes; and many other times I heard it about babies who did not end up being named Jude). **Do not be tempted to tell this story**. You mean it to convey hope, but it never gave me hope. It was just a reminder that I might be wasting years of my life "trying" and this might take 5, 9, 13, 15 years.

I already knew it was a long shot for us, and that everyone's story is different, and that it might not happen for me.

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Prayer is so important. And being prayed for is so important. A friend who serves in worship with me knew about what we were going through, because it meant that some weekends she had to cover for me if I had to be at a procedure. When I told her we were starting another IVF cycle (after several failed attempts), she said, "Ooh, don't tell me about it, I don't want to know. . ." - I knew as she said it that what she was referring to was that she cared for us very much and did not want to know that we might be disappointed again, or have to experience another loss. She just wanted to hear about it when it was all over and we could joyfully announce we were pregnant. But I stopped her as she was talking and insisted, "**But I NEED you to know**". I need to know that someone out there, one person, is praying for us. I can't be the only one who knows this; I can't carry this around by myself. Even if we are disappointed or if it doesn't work out. I need someone else to know." She of course immediately responded that she had already been praying, and would continue to do so, whatever we needed. That was an important conversation for me.

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The best wisdom I can give is to **acknowledge** that infertility and pregnancy loss exist; they are real; they affect a lot of people but that the Church exists to support people where they are and in the issues they are facing, no matter what they are and the level of discomfort that might be present.

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We all need to be more thoughtful when we talk about grief: we need to include fertility grief as part of our discussion. I find that I talk about grief and death a lot. We have a cemetery connected to our property, so it a part of our on-going conversation. But I wonder where people go who do not have a normalized place of grief (like a cemetery). I have been thinking about how we might **make space** for recognizing infertility grief.

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Do not to go to the "**happily ever after**" stories. You know the kind, "My sister lost a child, but then they [insert various things here--got a dog, prayed & fasted, adopted a child], and now they have three children!" There are many things hurtful about this scenario. First, it's a nonstarter: don't allow your happy endings to crowd out the grief-stricken person's process or his/her story. Also pat advice--to buy a dog, pray & fast, or adopt a child--does the same thing, tries to fix and not listen. It says, essentially, "You don't have **real pain** that deserves my ear or requires time to heal."

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Everyone in a congregation struggles with something, most things unknown to the rest of us. It is important to consider varying situations when planning classes, celebrations. Accepting that sometimes it's just too difficult for some folks to participate in some things is important. And accepting a person's "**no**" to things like teaching VBS or helping with an Easter egg hunt without making them feel guilty is important.

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The statistics are clear and available – 1 in 7 couples struggle with infertility. One in 4-5 KNOWN pregnancies ends in miscarriage. Do you have more than 7 couples of child-bearing age? Then chances are, **at least one of them** is dealing with infertility. And more have endured miscarriage(s). You might not know of a specific couple who is dealing with these issues, but you cannot pretend that the issue is absent. So now that you know, be mindful of your words! Remember that small things matter for good and for ill. One explicit reference to infertility or miscarriage behind the pulpit can provide weeks of comfort. Talk about it! This is not a taboo issue and the more it is brought into the light, the more people feel cared for and connected. And, if you do happen to have a parishioner who trusts you enough to confide in you about these struggles, see if you can collaborate with that person. You might be surprised how helpful he or she might be to illuminate where your unexamined vocabulary and practices either honor or dishonor those in the midst of this particular type of grief.

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Please, if you are going to preach on a text that references infertility (like Sarah or Rachel or Hannah), reach out to someone who has experienced infertility to dialogue with you about the experience, or even critique your sermon before it is preached. Please do not preach about infertility as if you know what it feels like (if you have never walked through it). And please do not reduce the experience of our biblical matriarchs by **trivializing their anguish** because "God had a plan" or everything worked out in the end.

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Please, please don't try to explain why this is happening! Do not tell us it is a test, or it is God's will! It doesn't matter to us what you believe about why this is happening, we just want to know that we are not alone, and that **God has not left us**. Telling us it is God's will makes us feel like we are failures, or somehow not good enough. Also, say out loud once in a while during the prayer of the people that we remember and pray for those that struggle with infertility. We are in your church, and other members of the congregation have family and friends that are dealing with it. Saying it out loud will give us the courage to say it out loud, too, and help us connect.

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It is hard to know what is helpful to everyone because nothing is helpful to everyone. Some people want to wear their grief on their sleeve for all to see, some, like us, want to sit back and not share. It is important to **create a space** and culture in which people can share their fertility grief with the pastors.

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Grief **does not end when a baby is born.**

In some ways, it makes fertility grief even harder because you know what you are missing if another child is not born into your family. Society seems to believe that another pregnancy "**makes up**" for a baby lost or infertility that has been experienced. It is so much more complex than this. The most important and helpful experience we had, was someone being present and standing witness for us. It is such a lonely experience, having a pastoral witness can make all the difference.