

Elizabeth Ministry

God sends a friend to hurting families

By Barbara Curtis

I have had four miscarriages. Two I flushed down the toilet ... and the other two were taken by hospital staff and disposed of. I can't tell you the guilt and shame I feel for not honoring my babies and being so ignorant of what to do. One baby I wrapped up gently and brought to my doctor because he asked to do a test on the remains. I was shocked when he returned to the room empty-handed and told me he had thrown "it" away—including the bag I bought special, which had the words "True Love" written on it.

Jennifer left this comment on my blog recently. After years of feeling isolated and alone, mothers of miscarried babies have finally found a safe place for sharing their feelings: the Internet. Her story is typical of their outpourings of grief and shame. Miscarriage is a loss the world doesn't seem to understand. After all, the baby wasn't born yet. Why can't the mother let go?

So, besides the pain of losing a baby, many women struggle with guilt and shame for their overwhelming sadness—thinking there must be something wrong with them. Jennifer continued,

It's hard relating with people unless they've been there, and it's hard relating with the world because most of the world doesn't acknowledge [he/she] was a true life. You seem to get a pat on the back and a "Well, you can try again." And it's like this one carried no weight at all because [he/she] never saw the sun or breathed air?!

But even after acknowledging and sharing our grief, it still feels as if something has been left undone.

Like Jennifer, I've had four miscarriages. Like Jennifer, I felt a sense of loss beyond the baby—a loss you feel later when you realize your baby was flushed down the toilet or given up to a doctor who didn't care.

Does respect for life end at death? Of course not. This is why we treat the remains of our loved ones with dignity. We bury our dead. We have funerals and memorials, offer eulogies, and send sympathy cards. With these traditions the healing process begins as God ministers, through the hands of others, to those who mourn.

But, when it comes to babies who die before or shortly after birth, without traditions, we've been at a loss. In a state of shock, mothers have often let those babies go without the dignity they deserve. And realizing this later only adds to their burden.

Now there's a place to find help. Elizabeth Ministry is an international movement that not only provides mentoring and tangible help to mothers who have experienced miscarriage, but also educates health care providers and clergy on how to improve their outreach to families in such times of need.



www.restoredtraditions.com

Our failure to walk the talk

The ministry's roots can be traced back to the early 1990s. While working as a family life minister in a Wisconsin parish, Jeannie Hanne-mann noticed a disconnect when it came to serving grieving parents. Despite the scientific fact that life starts at the moment a human being is created, many of us—even in the Church and pro-life community—act as though life begins at least a little more at birth or when the baby comes home from the hospital.

Jeannie's personal experiences had made her very empathetic toward those who have lost a child. She was four years old when her brother Jimmy died. Born prematurely, he lived only three days. "I didn't realize until later the great sensitivity of my parents. It was amazing how they kept Jimmy part of our family life," she said.

As a young wife, Jeannie had several miscarriages, and that also influenced her perspective. "When I looked at how the world didn't honor babies who died, I thought, 'How can we be against abortion if we don't honor them?'"

Though it came naturally to her to comfort grieving parents and help

them begin the healing process, Jeannie found she was the exception rather than the rule. Starting small, she began training others to help families in their parishes. Then, at her bishop's request, she put together a starter program that would allow Elizabeth Ministries to spring up in other parishes nationwide and eventually worldwide.

The power of peer support

Twenty years later, Elizabeth Ministry has broadened its umbrella to cover all aspects of family life: chastity; infertility; birth and breast-feeding; healing from abortion, miscarriage, and stillbirth; healing from sexual sins—and much more.

The ministry now has over 700 registered local chapters. Though faithful to Catholic teaching, chapters have been formed in various Christian churches that agree to uphold its mission. Anyone who believes in respect for life from a human being's biological beginning until natural death—and is under a priest's or pastor's authority—may start a chapter. Volunteers become Elizabeth Ministers to others facing situations they themselves have experienced. A mother of twins, for example, can mentor another mother of twins—through pregnancy, birth, and life. A mother who has suffered miscarriage can help another mother undergoing the same trauma.

Elizabeth Ministry is built not on professional counselors, but on volunteers offering peer support, mentoring, and friendship. No lengthy training is necessary—just a woman's willingness to share her experience, her story, and her comforting presence.

Elizabeth Ministry has begun training members of the clergy, to update them not only on pastoral support for grief and loss, but also on assisted reproductive technology's impact on families. Jeannie expects to publish a pastoral guide for miscarriage and other early losses in early 2012.

Elizabeth Ministry's retreat center in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, offers programs, workshops, and retreats—most notably, mother-daughter weekends that nurture that special bond and encourage discussion of what it means to be a woman.

Practical help for painful situations

Beyond books, greeting cards, and commemorative jewelry, Elizabeth Ministry's Online Gift and Resource Center offers products designed to sensitively help mothers through times of loss and grief, and treat the remains of babies miscarried or lost prematurely with dignity and respect.

While most miscarriages are unanticipated, some women learn beforehand that the baby's heart has stopped. Then they must wait for the body to be released from the womb. "Women call and say, 'The doctor says I'm going to lose my baby. What should I do?'" Jeannie reported. For these scenarios, Elizabeth Ministry offers a miscarriage delivery aid that allows the baby's body to be caught in a small piece of netting and then placed in a velvet pouch for burial. For more developed babies, there are tiny burial vessels.



The annual Miscarriage Memorial provides consolation and healing.

Looking at these items brought tears to my eyes. As a mom who, like Jennifer, knew no other way, I rejoice for women who will have the peace of knowing they have provided a loving and dignified resting place for the remains of a baby who didn't survive, but whom they hope to be reunited with in heaven. What a comfort that would be! And what a comfort to have a shoulder to cry on—that of someone who has made the same journey and can show the way, through a local chapter or by calling Elizabeth Ministry.

"For so long, these things were just not talked about, not properly mourned," Jeannie said. "Hospitals discarded miscarried babies with hospital waste. Or they put them in jars of formaldehyde. This is not respectful." So, the ministry also strives to educate hospital staff on the need for proper burial.

Meeting multiple needs

Elizabeth Ministry is finding ways to help families facing other problems as well.

Early on, Jeannie understood the connection between prenatal testing and abortion. A health care professional alerted her to the "search-and-



Miscarriage Memorial attendees place names on memorial wreaths as part of the naming ceremony.

Additional resources for bereaved families

- Families may request a free burial gown, hat, and blanket set for their deceased baby by calling Elizabeth Ministry at 920-766-9380.
- Heaven's Gain (see *Celebrate Life*, Jan.-Feb. 2010) specializes in providing small baby caskets and burial products for families suffering the loss of a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, or preemie death. It also provides books, memorial items, practical advice, and a forum for sharing stories. Visit www.HeavensGain.com or e-mail Heavensgain@heavensgain.com (an auto responder will send you the phone number).
- The Archdiocese of Saint Louis' Respect Life Apostolate offers the Order for the Naming and Commendation for an Infant Who Died before Birth, a special rite offered for families who have lost children before birth through miscarriage, accident, or abortion. The rite takes place within a Mass, and allows families to name their child and commend him or her to God's care. For more information, call 314-792-7555 or visit www.ArchStL.org/RespectLife.
- A Place of Hope creates and places memorials, or helps to create a Garden of Hope at locations around the country, to honor babies lost through abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, and other forms of early death. Visit www.HopeMonument.com or call 307-332-3384.
- The National Memorial for the Unborn, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, honors preborn children lost through abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, and other forms of early death. You can place a brass name plate on the Wall of Names to honor an aborted baby, or place a brick paver in the garden to honor a miscarried or stillborn baby. Visit www.MemorialfortheUnborn.org, or call 800-505-5565 or 423-899-1677.
- The LLOST Foundation supports families and friends who have lost a loved one, and its Treasured Memories campaign donates resources to hospitals' perinatal bereavement programs. Links to many helpful resources and organizations are available on its website. Visit www.LLOST.org or write to The LLOST Foundation, P.O. Box 151892, Kingstowne, VA 22315.



Bruce and Jeannie Hannemann

destroy mission" being launched to identify problems and push for ending these pregnancies. Families who buck the pressure to abort need special support too, for even as they prepare to welcome their preborn baby, they're dealing with the grief of not having the "perfect" child they expected. Elizabeth Ministry provides helpful pamphlets as well as numerous links to online resources for specific birth problems.

Jeannie and her husband, Bruce, are very excited about their newest program—Reclaiming Eden—which uses the same peer support and mentoring approach, through local church chapters, to help men fight pornography and sexual addictions, and bring healing to families affected by sexual sin.

In January 2012, Elizabeth Ministry expects to launch its KinCommunity Association, which will provide peer support and mentoring through online discussion groups.

The greatest gift

Clearly, God took an obedient woman—Jeannie Hannemann—and ensured that the seeds she sowed yielded far more than anything she might have envisioned. Listening to her describe the prolific growth of what began 20 years ago as a one-woman ministry leaves you breathless. Her energy seems boundless. "I've never worked so hard in my life," she admitted. With only three paid staff members, Elizabeth Ministry depends on a staff of very dedicated volunteers.

How does she do it? "It's my passion, my vocation, my calling," she said—inspired by her own experience with miscarriage and loss, being told by doctors she would never carry children to term, and waiting eight and a half years for God to prove them wrong. She eventually gave birth to two daughters, but Bruce and Jeannie's path to parenthood wasn't smooth.

The biblical story of a young woman, who, though pregnant during her betrothal, traveled to help a postmenopausal relative in the last few months of her pregnancy, struck a chord in Jeannie's heart. In the story of Mary and Elizabeth, she found the theme of her ministry: help provided through peer support. "God could have given them any gift He wanted," Jeannie observed. "But the greatest gift is someone who understands."

Barbara Curtis, mother of 12—including four sons with Down syndrome (three of whom are adopted)—is a prolific writer whose work has previously appeared in *Celebrate Life*. Her books include *Lord, Please Meet Me in the Laundry Room: Heavenly Help for Earthly Moms* and *Mommy, Teach Me!* Visit her at www.BarbaraCurtis.com or her blog, www.MommyLife.net. For more information on Elizabeth Ministry, visit www.ElizabethMinistry.com or call 920-766-9380.

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