



**GLOBAL GRIEF
SUPPORT**

“How many days after a person dies, does the soul hang around?”

“How many days after a person dies, does the soul hang around?” That was one of many questions asked by the 40+ participants in the grief support workshop this past weekend near Guatemala City. I went to Guatemala, thinking that we would be discussing questions about grief related to the hundreds that died from the eruption of the Fuego Volcano last year. One entire village had been buried in the molten ashes. Loved ones are still looking for bodies.

But, this group of church leaders and pastors came from remote agricultural areas in the north of Guatemala, and their losses were more often related to illnesses or political violence. References to the decades-long civil war kept coming up in the questions and comments. For example, “How do you grieve the loss of a loved one who has been kidnapped and disappeared and you never find the body to bury?”

In my conversations on grief in many nations, I often come across challenging cultural and religious questions, but I have to say that the challenges of the workshop in Guatemala surpassed my expectations. We had to communicate across so many cultural and religious belief systems as we navigated the terrain of grief and loss. The Indigenous groups have Mayan ancestry, influenced by centuries of Catholicism and Shamanism. Mayans believed that death was a gateway to another life just as “alive” or more alive than the “living.” Mayan rituals were designed to help guide the soul of the dead to the other world so they wouldn’t bother those left behind. The colonial Catholic Church syncretized, modified, and integrated many of the Mayan beliefs.

I learned that this group of church leaders had never had training on grief and loss, so it was understandable that they would have a host of questions. For example, “Do you baptize a newborn baby that has died?” “If the family cannot provide a proper burial for a loved one who died, will the spirit of that person come back to haunt and bother the family?” “How many days after a person dies does the soul hang around?”

One participant told of the death of his brother, who had been kidnapped and disappeared during their civil war. Many years later the bones were discovered, buried in a field. He demanded that the government transport the bones back to his village where he and his family gave his brother a proper burial in a cemetery. He said he knew the people who killed his brother. The issue that complicated his grief was, “How can I

forgive those who killed my brother?" "Or do I seek vengeance?" "What is the role of forgiveness in the grief process?"

We discussed the faith-integrated model of grief support that I proposed—a model of companioning---walking with the bereaved on their journey of grief. We looked at faith and scriptural resources that can be very helpful to those who mourn. By the end of the workshop, we all realized that we had just scratched the surface of a very complicated theme. They invited me back to explore those themes in more depth.

For Group Work

1. Do a round with this invitation. "Please share how funeral rituals are different in your country of origin compared to your experience of funerals here."
2. What do you miss when you are not able to conduct a funeral in the tradition of your country of origin? Is that another loss? How does the absence of those traditions complicate your grieving here?
3. Are you able to incorporate some of the traditions of your culture as you grieve here?
4. Are there cultural beliefs in your country of origin related to how long the soul of the deceased lingers before moving on to heavenly places? How is the Roman Catholic tradition of the novena related to these beliefs?