



North American Association of Christians in Social Work
A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work

PO Box 121
Botsford, CT 06404
www.nacsw.org
888.426.4712

**ADJUSTING THE PRACTICE LENS: IMPACT OF GRIEF-INDUCED
CHANGE ON CHURCH AND SPIRITUALITY**

By: Nancy Peters, Ph.D., MSW

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2010
November, 2010
Raleigh-Durham, NC**

Grief is a universal experience. Thus is it inevitable that social workers will encounter a grieving client. Yet, despite reams of research, clinicians continue to fall short in meeting the needs of the bereaved. In addition, with an estimated 90% of Americans reporting a religious preference and approximately 96% considering themselves spiritual, it is imperative that social workers recognize the interrelationship between grief, church, and spiritual. A recent interpretive qualitative study involving 15 bereaved participants found change to perhaps be the most significant aspect of grief (Peters, 2008). In fact, participants clearly indicated that grief is a process of adapting to on-going changes in the majority, if not all, of the imbricated aspects of their lives. Thus the impact of grief-induced change on church, and spiritual relationships is a critical aspect of grief work.

Additionally, researchers and clinicians agree that church and spirituality are highly valuable to countless individuals in times of grief. In fact, church and spirituality are both well established as coping skills of the bereaved. What is less documented is the importance of grief work that incorporates the client's belief systems. In truth, until the last decade, both, religion and spirituality were largely ignored as part of the counseling process.

Furthermore, counselors today need to be prepared to work with a client regardless of where on the religious or spiritual map they are. For example, some clients may find their belief system a source of great comfort and a major aspect of their coping. Others may need assistance in healing past religious and spiritual experiences. Still others may be seeking meaning to their live events through religious and spiritual avenues. In addition, counselors may have clients that profess no religious or spiritual connections, yet feel the need to discuss the impact of the lack thereof.

Incorporating religious and spiritual aspects of a client's life into grief counseling requires an appreciation of what makes it important, working definitions of terms, and an understanding of current theoretically based assessment and evidence-based interventions. In addition, counselors need to be ever cognoscente of the cultural and ethnical aspects involved. Lastly, social workers' need an awareness of the impact of their personal church and spiritual experiences on the therapeutic relationship.

Peters, N. R. (2008). The interrelationship between grief and attachment prior to and following the death of a partner. UMI dissertation Services. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest.

Nancy R. Peters, MSW, Ph.D

Dr. Peters has worked in the field of Social Work for over 21 years, specializing in trauma, grief, and attachment. She is currently the Program Coordinator for Walla Walla University's Missoula, Montana Extension site, as well as an Associate Professor in the program.