



(L-R): Yaa Addison '23, Katie Delacenserie, St. Mary's Arlington, Mark Witte '25, Michele Causton '23, Jackie Ly, St. Mary's Arlington, Sarah Spurlock Biggs '23, Ryan Missel '23, Maria DiPasquantonio, St. Mary's Arlington, Catherine Gilbert Mourner's Path instructor, and Janettarose Greene '23.

Walking the Mourner's Path

By Wendy A. Jordan

Grieving is hard, personal, and painful, but it does not have to be experienced alone. That's the concept that shapes Walking the Mourner's Path, an eight-week program offered nationwide that gathers people who have suffered loss and moves them toward joy.

The faith-based program, which started 28 years ago and is owned by Saint Anthony on the Desert, Scottsdale, Ariz., provides a confidential space for small groups to express their feelings and learn how to grieve and heal under the guidance of trained facilitators. This March, Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) hosted a facilitator training school for Walking the Mourner's Path.

Catherine Gilbert, Mourner's Path program director for 12 years, conducted the three-day training. She remembers that when she first became involved with Mourner's Path: "I was most surprised at how poorly we grieve as a culture." She adds that once we get beyond the immediate rituals, there is little to help mourners. COVID has made the isolation and lack of support even worse.

Now, after the peak of the pandemic, she says: "The world is starting over. There is a real need for the Mourner's Path." Each eight-week program includes up to 10 mourners, with two lay facilitators, and a member of the clergy who can observe and provide additional insight regarding individual needs. The program augments but does not replace any necessary pastoral or mental health support. Gilbert says the program is best suited for "people at least six months down the road after loss so that they are ready to find a way to embrace joy again."

The Rev. Janettarose Greene, a senior at VTS at the time of the seminary's facilitator training and immediate past Student Body President, met with Dean Markham and the Associate Dean of Students to propose sponsoring

a facilitator training on campus. Both, she says, were supportive.

Greene had participated in the first Mourner's Path program offered at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Va., in 2018. "I was grieving my parents and I was pushing my grief down. I am much better for having taken Mourner's Path. Before going through the program, the sense of loss was just under the surface. Now it's not. I've learned to live with it. I feel less raw, less easily hurt. I will be forever changed," she says.

As a seminarian, Greene served at two parishes last summer - St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Richmond and St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. - and supported a funeral at each of them. Having been through the Mourner's Path program, she says: "I felt very strong. I was able to be a pastoral presence to two very different grieving families. I had my own grief in check and was able to be present for them and with them."

Four St. Mary's parishioners who had just been trained as facilitators were guides for the 2018 group and subsequent St. Mary's Mourner's Path programs. The 11 participants in this year's VTS facilitator training included Greene and three other St. Mary's members who completed that 2018 program.

One of those newly trained facilitators is Jackie Ly, now Family Formation Minister at St. Mary's. "In 2017 I lost my husband suddenly when he was 38," she says. "It was a complete shock and a difficult loss." Ly had joined a widows' support group online, but it lacked the diversity of losses and the structure of the in-person Mourner's Path program. Each weekly, 90-minute meeting has preparatory homework and a pre-selected topic, such as understanding grief, looking at the truth, and examining change, which Ly says helps to maintain focus and to move the group through the thinking and work of mourning.

In the facilitator training, she learned that a Mourner's Path facilitator is not a leader but "much more of a guide from the side," assisting with communication, enabling everyone to share, and "pulling back from tangents." As Gilbert notes: "Facilitators are not the fixers, but are there to open doors and keep people progressing using the program workbook. We're not the sage on the stage. Christ is the fixer."

With its weekly steps, its workbook and the help of facilitators, Ly says the program "encourages everyone to be aware of their own relationship with Christ and how it helps in the path of mourning and healing."

Gilbert explains that the founding principle of the program is: "Where is God in my pain?" She says participants explore this in a way that's safe. "As they make progress, one of the great things is to see the light of the Holy Spirit in our participants. They find a way to enjoy life, to find happiness, and to enter into a new relationship with their loved one." She adds: "Facilitator skills are tools that can be used again and again, by clergy as well as lay people."

VTS Student Body President Hayden Paul agrees. He took the Mourner's Path facilitator training this March and said it offered great skills for future clergy persons. "We learned the skill of sitting with a person whatever the need may be."

Continuing the practitioner training symposiums initiated by Greene as Student Body President, Paul would like to offer Mourner's Path facilitator training at VTS again, along with other programs that cover managerial and pastoral care practices.

For more information about Walking the Mourner's Path and upcoming facilitator training programs around the country, visit mournerspath.com.

"They find a way to enjoy life, to find happiness, and to enter into a new relationship with their loved one."

Catherine Gilbert