Ruth Radley

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The call in action

Hi everyone,

Spring is finally upon us – I LOVE all the blossom and have found my favourite tree in Brum. I love spring – so much hope, and leaving work when it's still light makes such a difference.

In my last letter I mentioned doing some home visits. A neighbouring community NHS trust has asked for our services and been able to raise funding to pay the chaplaincy team to support their palliative care staff who go into children's homes, often over a long period, and make precious relationships with the families. We also debrief the team after a child has died, and make some home visits ourselves. The trust is trying to raise funds to extend this support to those with children who have long-term conditions or illnesses. One parent said recently, "In hospital there is always someone to help you... when you are at home, you are much more on your own, and it's often scary."

Before you read further, I would like to give a trigger warning that from here I am talking about preparing a child for the death of her sibling and talking about child death. Please only read on if you feel strong enough to be able to do this and have good support if it is likely to affect you.

Of course, I am not sharing the real names or identifying details of the child or family – I will simply call her Annabel. I hope you will be able to see some of the privilege I have in working with children like her.

Annabel is an eight-year-old whose sibling sadly will die. Her family have made the very brave decision to be open and honest with Annabel about what is happening. I believe they have made the right choice that will ultimately help her through the grief to come, but it does come with a cost of comforting her when she has sad moments.

When we work with children, we never force them to share their feelings – rather, we will drop a few things into conversation, which the child may choose to pick up on, and offer a choice of activities. A few weeks ago we made a memory box together. We talked about different things that could be put inside it, so that when her sibling is no longer with us, Annabel can look at these things to remember happy times. She absolutely loved making it, and was able to share it with her mum. Although Annabel declined to share what she had put in it on my next visit, the nurse who had referred her told me that Annabel had excitedly shown it to her.

On my next visit, I took a copy of the book An Invisible String, written for children to help them with grief. The idea running through the book is that we all have an invisible string connecting us to those we love, wherever they may be. I also took a few activities, one of which was making a kite. Annabel loved the idea of making a kite, and we had fun while she decorated the fabric and attached the tail. She dragged me outside to try to fly it, but there just wasn't enough wind! We eventually accepted defeat and came inside to do another activity. As Annabel sculpted some clay,



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My call: To see children become whole and empowered to use their God-given gifts.

My role: I work in the multi-faith chaplaincy team at Birmingham Children's Hospital (BCH), providing spiritual care and support to children and families.



My favourite tree in Brum: I loved it while it was just branches, but now it has burst into bloom, it's simply amazing!

I asked her how she would make sure that when there was a lot of wind, the kite wouldn't fly away. Without hesitation she said she would hold on tight to the string. I paused, then told her that reminded me of a book about an invisible string. Annabel didn't want me to read the story with her, but was happy for me to tell her about it. She shared with me that she knew what invisible meant, because Harry Potter had an invisible cloak! I explained how the story talks about an invisible string connecting us to those we love. Annabel IMMEDIATELY linked this to people in heaven, and told me names of other family members who had already died. In fact, I had to say it links us to people still on earth too, and we talked about her mummy. I asked if there was anyone else, and she said her sibling's name – we were able to talk about how even when her sibling has gone to heaven, there will still be this invisible string of love connecting them. It was really a very special afternoon. I feel so privileged to be able to spend this time with her. Indeed, every time I spend time with a sibling, I honestly feel that the fact someone is coming to see them is in itself healing, since they are so used to medical professionals coming to see their sick sibling.

For the last three years I have also lectured at Cliff College for their BA students in youth and children's pathways. It's part of an amazing week of tackling many deep and difficult issues that face children and young people. My sessions cover working with sick and dying children and working with bereaved children and young people. I share this with you because I pose a question to the students towards the end: "In your usual programmes, how do you incorporate exploration and discussions about death, so that when a child/young person in your care experiences it, they are already familiar with the concept and not afraid to ask questions or talk about it?" It may be relatively easy to presume that no child in your circle will be affected by grief, but research at York University recently revealed:

"... the number of children in England with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions increased to 86,625 in 2017/2018 compared to 32,975 in 2001/2002." (york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/research/rise-children-life-limiting-conditions/)

Child Bereavement UK states:

A parent of children under 18 dies every 22 minutes in the UK; around 23,600 a year. This equates to around 111 children being bereaved of a parent every day.

1 in 29 5–16 year olds has been bereaved of a parent or sibling – that's a child in every average class. (childbereavementuk.org/death-bereavement-statistics)

These sobering reports help us to see that children in our vicinities may be being affected by the death of a loved one much more than we realise. If you are able to have these discussions with the children and youth workers at your church and other organisations, it may help prepare them to be there for a child or young person when they most need it.

As ever, thank you again for your support which enables me to continue to do this. Please do keep praying for funding to be apparent for me to continue.

Take care,

Ruth



Photos from top to bottom: DIY kites that we use to decorate; The invisible string book, the story I talked about with Annabel; Other books in our collection to use with children, helping them to explore how they feel and remember their sibling.

GOING FURTHER WITH CHURCH MISSION SOCIETY

Are you pondering a call to cross-cultural mission? We'd love to connect and help you discern what God might be saying. Find out more about how we can help you to step into God's mission at churchmissionsociety.org/explore

You can give to Ruth at: churchmissionsociety.org/radley Contact details: ruthieradley@gmail.com

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