

The hardest loss to bear?

Suffering Love : Coping with the Death of a Child

by Bill Merrington

Advantage, £7.50

In all the years of my pastoral work there is one experience which, despite regular exposure, always brings me to tears – the suffering and death of a young child. It is the combination of a deep sense of tragedy and waste with the feeling of vulnerability, anger and grief.

Bill Merrington writes about this and succeeds in providing a useful framework within which experience can be understood, reflected upon and used. He draws on his own experience and that of bereaved relatives in a realistic assessment of how we are to think, feel and cope with grief. Under-girding this exploration is the conviction that, with love and care, we can all learn to live with loss and that it is possible to go forward to a new and meaningful life.

The result is a fascinating and carefully written book which abounds with wisdom and insight. Merrington uses his faith as a tool to help him explore the geography of grief and has drawn on the theological wisdom of others to throw light on the darkness of the terrain. I hope church groups and parent self-help groups might use some of this material for their growth through reflection on pain and grief.

Two concerns continue to puzzle me and demand, I feel, further attention. There is always a gap, some space, between those who listen and those who suffer. Some interesting things take place in *this space between*. Power and powerlessness; questions and answers; noise and silence; faith and fear.

The danger for those who listen (and I include both myself and Merrington in this category) is that we cope with our deep sense of uselessness with words, interpretation, noise and even God! Sometimes there isn't anything to say and the terror and chaos demand silence: a faithful presence in and through the darkness.

My second concern follows from this. Whilst holding firm to my own convictions I increasingly come across many people for whom the language of faith, spirituality or counselling is remote, privatised and meaningless. Put another way, individuals don't have the language or framework of meaning within which to understand what is happening to them. This is an area that needs much more thought and action on the part of those who participate in pastoral care today. Merrington has provided us with a useful compass on our journey. I hope this book leads to loving action and care.

James Woodward