

The grieving garden

by Anna Lisa Gross

We rang the bell, one month at a time. We had no words to soothe all the suffering, heal all the illness, comfort all the grief. We passed the bell: Kay Bates rang once for the person who died of COVID-19 in March. Jim Bates rang once for the person who died in April. Then twice in May. By the time we got to November, Molly Cripe-Birt rang 16 times for the 16 people who died in Tippecanoe County. There were 57 in December, rung by the Belser Brown family. Already there had been 43 people lost in January (now more than 50), rung by Pastor Steve Crain.

The bell rang faster as the deaths sped up. We felt the ringing in our bodies, and we shared the vibrations with the ground on which we stood. We witnessed the loss—not fully, not sufficiently, but we felt the loss as it rang through us.

We had been longing for a public space for mourning throughout this pandemic. As many religious services, funerals, and other essential social/spiritual communities and rituals have moved online, we carry un-tended grief.

Grieving is not something we all know how to do—just like we don’t all know how to have meaningful social/spiritual interaction on Zoom.

How can we encourage mourning during a pandemic, without risking viral spread?


How can we begin to understand the reality of hundreds of thousands dead in the US alone? The numbers rise and just become . . . numbers.

This grieving garden seeks to offer a safe place for people

to mourn, without necessarily having any religious tradition or expertise in grief. We have a prayer flag for each person who has died of COVID-19 in Tippecanoe County, a number still too high to really comprehend. It’s 138 as of our first vigil on Jan. 24. That’s 138 sets of families, coworkers, friends, classmates, who are missing someone.

Initially we hoped that the grieving garden would have one empty chair for each person. An empty chair symbolizes the empty space left behind when someone dies. A yard full, a “garden” full of empty chairs, would demonstrate how many people we are missing. Passersby could sit down and reflect, pray, and mourn.

As the deaths climbed, we realized we couldn’t pull this off with chairs and we considered other options. We chose prayer flags. We’ve been painting the date of death on each flag, to personalize the death with the public information we have about those who have died in Tippecanoe County. We don’t want to infringe on anyone’s privacy. We do want families and friends to be able to visit the grieving garden and recognize that their loved one is represented, that their loved one is remembered in this small but tangible way.

Lafayette Church of the Brethren, which has a yard along busy 18th Street, hosts the garden. We are grateful to see people come by to pray, remember, reflect. 

Anna Lisa Gross is an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren living in Lafayette, Ind. She has served as a hospital and hospice chaplain and interim pastor of several congregations.



On the grieving garden sign, yellow chrysanthemums represent mourning the dead, purple hyacinth represent sadness, and pink lilies represent resurrection.