



A Christological Approach to Pastoral Care: Toward a Therapeutic Approach to Addressing the Needs of Grieving Persons in the Akan Community of Ghana

Alfred Korankye¹; Isaac Boaheng²

¹ Queen's College, Canada

² Research Fellow, University of the Free State, South Africa

² Senior Lecturer, Department of Theology, Christian Service University College, Kumasi, Ghana

E-mail: korankye87@yahoo.co.uk; iboaheng@csuc.edu.gh

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Abstract

This paper presents a Christological approach to pastoral care, primarily focusing on addressing the needs of grieving individuals within the Akan community of Ghana. The paper delves into the Akan people's unique cultural context and traditional mourning practices. It draws on philosophical and therapeutic perspectives and investigates the intersections of Christianity and Akan culture by integrating elements of both in offering effective pastoral care for the bereaved. Through a theological analysis of John 11:32-35, the paper proposes a holistic approach and framework for supporting grieving individuals who recognize their cultural identity while providing spiritual and emotional healing. The paper used a literature-based research approach whereby data collected from already published works were thematically analyzed. The main argument is that to offer a holistic approach to grieving for those experiencing grief in the African community that encapsulates comfort, sensitivity, empathy, and hope, pastoral caregivers must adopt Christ's approach that emphasizes compassionate presence and solidarity in suffering and loss. The paper contributes to African Christian theological discourse on caring for grieving persons.

Keywords: *John 11:32-35, Akan, Empathy, Grieving, Hope, Pastoral Care, Therapeutic*

Introduction

Grief, as a universal human experience, is characterized primarily by emotional, psychological, and occasionally physical responses to loss. Arthur (2020) observes that grief has both social and spiritual dimensions. It may result from death-related losses or losses that are not death-related (Arthur 2020). The intensity of grief varies based on the person involved and the support received from others. People of

different cultures express their support in various ways to help grieving individuals through their moments of grief and find ways to adjust to life after loss. For example, the Akan community in Ghana has elaborate rituals and ceremonies to honour the deceased and console the bereaved. These activities have deep roots in their cultural practices, customs, and beliefs.

Despite the significance of these cultural practices in addressing the needs of grieving people, there appears to be a lack of culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches that incorporate Christological principles within the Akan community of Ghana. This, in turn, hampers the holistic healing and support required for grieving people to navigate the complexities of grief within their cultural and spiritual contexts.

Given this, this paper seeks to examine how principles of Christ in John 11:32-35 could be integrated into pastoral care practices to effectively address the needs of grieving people within the Akan community of Ghana. To accomplish this, the paper will first examine the cultural context of grief within the Akan community, then identify some Christological principles for pastoral care based on John 11:32-35, and finally propose therapeutic approaches that are both culturally sensitive and rooted in Christian theology.

Death and Grieving in the Akan Context

The Akan community is one of the prominent tribes in West Africa, mainly found in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and other parts of the region. In Ghana, Akan is the largest ethnic group and the language spoken is Akan (Agyekum, 2006). The Akan people are made up of the Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzima and Ahanta (Adjei, Adinkrah, & Mpiani, 2024). As a native language, Akan is spoken in nine (9) out of the sixteen (16) regions in Ghana consisting of Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, Bono East, Central, Eastern, Oti, Western and Western North. There are thirteen (13) dialects among the Akans namely Agona, Akyem, Akuapem, Akwamu, Asante, Assin, Bono, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwamu, Twifo and Wassaw (Agyekum, 2020). The Akans have established common political, social, religious, and cultural institutions with varying levels of variation at the local level.

In the life of an Akan, the time a person is born (birth) grows and enters adulthood, and the time he dies (thus departs from the world and enters the world of his forebearers) is very crucial (Boaheng, 2021). These three stages are signified by rituals and ceremonies known as “rites of passage” (Boaheng, 2021, p.17). The Akan people believe that human beings (*onipa*) are composed of three parts: the body (*honam*), which is made up of the mother’s blood; the spirit (*sunsum*), which comes from the father at birth; and the soul (*kra*), which comes from God (considered to be the only surviving components after death) (Boaheng, 2021).

Death is an inevitable occurrence in every known human society. In the Akan worldview death occurs when the soul of a person departs from the body (Boaheng, 2023). In their tradition, death only affects the body since both the soul (*kraa*) and the spirit (*honhom*) the intrinsically and symbiotically connected part of a person automatically departs from the body (Boaheng, 2023). This departed soul may become an ancestor living in the other world called *Asamando* (Ancestral land) (Boaheng, 2023). Thus, to the Akan, “death shuts the door of physical, visible, bodily existence of a person and opens another door, the door to a new life” (Ogbonna, 2020, p.22). This makes death transitional in the view of the Akans and not the end. It is a journey to the land of the ancestors. One becomes an ancestor and is accepted in *Asamando* when one dies a natural death, dies at a good age (of above 70 years), has offspring as well as having proper burial and elaborate funeral rites (Boaheng, 2021). The deceased are believed to join their ancestors in the spirit world, where they continue to influence the lives of their living relatives (Osei-Mensah, 1999). There are consequences of “blessings” and “curses” on the living, depending on how they mourn an ancestor (Ogbonna, 2020). Cultural beliefs and practices characterize the grieving of their loss in Akan society some of which are discussed below.

Funerals in African societies especially in the Akan communities are celebrated with utmost grandeur and solemnity (Adjei et al., 2024). Customs regarding commemorating one's death require a befitting burial and funerary rites to enable the deceased to reach *Asamando*. It is believed that when the family of the deceased fails to perform a befitting burial for the dead, he cannot rest in peace, and will be denied entry into *Asamando* and may become a wandering ghost (*saman twɛntwɛn*) and punish the family for failing to bid it proper farewell (Boaheng, 2021). Also, if the deceased does not receive a proper burial and funeral, or if there is any dissatisfaction with aspects of the mourning rituals, certain individuals may be summoned to *Asamando* to account for their negligence (Adjei, Adinkrah, & Mpiani, 2024). This implies that the person will become ill and pass on to the ancestral land following the culmination of the funeral ceremonies, with no possibility of returning even if proven innocent. Befitting funeral rites involves the various traditional and religious rites and ceremonies that facilitate the journey of the dead to the land of the ancestors (Boaheng, 2021). The funeral rites in Akan are mostly performed for those who died a natural death.

In the Akan community, funeral rites become an opportunity for living relatives and sympathizers to express their feelings of sorrow and loss (Osei-Bonsu and Dei, 2014). It is an occasion which brings together family relatives who have been away for a long time to share their love with the bereaved family and bid farewell to the deceased. Scholars have argued that the gathering of the living members is the most important aspect of the funeral rites in the Akan community (Osei-Bonsu and Dei, 2014). Adjei *et al* (2024, p.481) have observed that,

when members of the lineage come together to mourn a member, opportunity is created for resolving preexisting conflicts among members. It is a common practice among the Akan to set aside a special day, post the funeral rites, to settle all cases that the surviving members of the family may have against one another, and sometimes against the deceased. Sometimes, any misunderstanding between any surviving member of the family and the deceased may be settled before the funeral rites are held to allow the affected surviving member(s) the peaceful and spiritually unrestrained opportunity to participate in all mourning rituals.

The significance of the social dimension of the funeral rites appears to inform the choice of Saturday *memenda* for organizing funerals in Akan society since it is generally thought to be a free day for all (Osei-Bonsu and Dei, 2014). In the view of Bossman (cited in Osei-Bonsu and Dei, 2014, p.61), "he who is negligent being sure to bleed freely if he cannot urge lawful reasons for his absence (non-participation)." This implies that if someone becomes careless and absents himself or herself without reasonable cause, they should be prepared to face repercussions, possibly in the form of punishment. Osei-Bonsu and Dei argue that behaviours of that sort are upfront to the norms of the society and may attract curses on the entire community (Osei-Bonsu and Dei, 2014). This highlights the significance that the Akans place on fulfilling their responsibilities and being accountable, especially in the event of the death of a family member within their community.

The day for the funerary rites begins with the laying-in-state of the deceased for public viewing (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). In the Akan community, it is the responsibility of the family of the deceased to prepare the corpse for burial to help the grieving family come to terms with the departure of the loved one (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). Mostly, the deceased is laid-in-state in the house of his or her father except for royals who are laid-in-state at the royal house (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). The laying in state normally goes with wake keeping called in Akan *Apesie* (Ogbonna, 2020). During the wake and laying-in-state, loved ones and sympathizers of both the bereaved family and the deceased come around to mourn with the grieving family. This is mostly done at dawn. During this time sympathizers cry, sing a dirge, chant words, file past the corpse and on a few occasions fire gunshots to express their grief to commemorate the departure of the deceased and to console the bereaved family (Ogbonna, 2020). Money and other items known as *adesiedeɛ* (mats, pillows, bed sheets, buckets,

matches, and handkerchiefs, among others) are given to aid the deceased in his journey to the ancestors (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). Some of these items are normally put in the casket to be buried with the deceased while the family keeps others.

After the burial, family members sit in state and people come to greet, mourn, and sympathize with them (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). In the Akan tradition during this time, the bereaved family and the sympathizers wear mostly black or red cloth to signify sorrow, pain, and loss of their loved ones (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). As part of the rites, the bereaved normally sit to shake hands with sympathizers who join to console them. At the funeral durbar, sympathizers and loved ones make donations in the form of cash to help defray some of the incurred debts during the funeral and to support the bereaved family (Boaheng & Asibu-Dadzie Jnr., 2020). The Akan people call this *nsewa* (funeral donation) (Adu-Gyamfi, Fordjour, Adjei, & Marfo, 2020). In Akan tradition, it is irresponsible to attend a funeral without giving a present to the bereaved family (Adu-Gyamfi *et al.*, 2020). A table is normally mounted to receive gifts from loved ones. This is done from the morning until 6 pm.

After the formal durbar, sympathizers leave for their various homes leaving the bereaved family or individual with few close relatives. One could observe from the discussion that Akan's grieving traditions seem to honour the dead more than offering support for the bereaved. This is evident in some sayings regarding the grieving process in the Akan community. For instance, the Akan common proverb *abusua dɔ funu* (“the family loves a dead body”) suggests the concept behind the Akan mourning of the dead. De Witte (2003) opines that this ideology in Akan societies has resulted in the neglect of the elderly and the sick only to waste money and display wealth during funeral ceremonies. Moreover, after the funeral ceremony, some sympathizers normally make statement like *N'ayie no (he) baeɛ paa*, thus “many came to mourn the dead”, echoing the essence of the ceremony in the Akan communities. In their tradition, “a funeral with a large number of mourners and wailers is a sign of worthiness of one's existence here on earth” (Osei-Mensah, 1999, p.263). Furthermore, supporting this viewpoint, a funeral is deemed successful when notable dignitaries attend it. For the children of the deceased, organizing such an elaborate funeral ceremony primarily serves as a means of expressing gratitude for the care and support they received from the deceased while alive (Boateng, 2012). This suggests an idea that the focus of funeral ceremony in Akan society centers on the deceased in honour of his impact or influence on the sympathizers' life. Others are influenced by the deceased's contribution and impact on the individual's life or the society at large, which has nothing to do with the bereaved. It must be acknowledged that some on the other hand come to support the bereaved but in the context of burying their dead, but little is done afterwards to help the bereaved navigate through their pain. Surprisingly, the bereaved family mostly make statements that sum up the essence of funeral rites which are characterized by extravagant items and celebration in the phrase “*Yerehye (yɛɛhyɛ) no animuonyam*” (“We are glorifying the dead”). From this standpoint, the underlying purpose of funeral ceremonies within the Akan community becomes apparent from the outset. In many instances, family and friends typically offer their support to the grieving with the expectation that when they face hardship, the same support will be reciprocated—a practice underlined in the Akan expression *ayie yɛ nkogya-nkogya*. Moreover, some sympathizers are “less concerned about the discrepancy between the quality of “care” before and after someone's death, than the disgrace of not attending the funereal” (Van der Geest, 1995, p.37).

Some of the issues that arise after the burial and the funeral rites of the dead sometimes bring more grief to the bereaved than their loss itself. The activities of in-laws, uncles, aunties, and other family members during and after the funeral ceremony sometimes deepen the wounds of the bereaved. In precolonial Akan communities, funeral expenses such as coffins, advertisements, mortuary services, canopies, music attendance, refreshments, food, tombs, and lying in repose were the responsibility of the entire family, as the community was communal (Adu-Gyamfi, Fordjour, Adjei, & Marfo, 2020). However, in contemporary Akan society, these costs are partially borne by the immediate family of the deceased, which includes the wife, and children (Adu-Gyamfi, Fordjour, Adjei, & Marfo, 2020). Moreover, funerals

have turned into extravagant celebrations where wealthy individuals flaunt their riches (Jack, Amoah, & Hope, 2020). This trend puts unnecessary financial strain on some family members, leading them to take out loans from individuals and banks, resulting in debt for the deceased's family. As a result of this, some possessions of the deceased that could be valuable assets to the bereaved family are often sold to cover some of the incurred debts. According to Amponsah, this transformation in funeral celebrations has not only brought consequences on the bereaved family but the community and the nation at large (Amponsah, 2014). Krishna (as cited in Amponsah 2014, p.2) posits that expenditures in these celebrations are likely to “bring about poverty or have a negative effect on the finances of people in the bereaved family.”

Boateng (2012) contends that throughout the entire funeral ceremony, the people in the Akan community provide social support to the grieving family, aiming to offer solace and defray some of the financial burdens associated with the funeral proceedings through contributions of food, drinks, and monetary donations. While this support may help, it's essential to recognize that it alone may not fully heal a grieving individual. Boaheng (2022) has argued that holistic healing for those experiencing grief should address not only the physical aspect but also the emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions.

From the preceding discussions, it is evident that Akan grieving rituals and funeral customs prioritize and honour the deceased. How can the grieving process acknowledge the tradition of honouring the departed while also offering comprehensive healing and support to help the grieving adapt to life after their loss? A holistic grieving process is therefore crucial. The next sections considers Jesus' approach to grieving one's loss.

Christ's Approach to Pastoral Care in John 11:32-35

The Gospel narrative in John 11:32-35 presents a dramatic scene in which Jesus was confronted with the death of His beloved friend Lazarus. His response to the grief and pain expressed by Mary and Martha and the sympathizers around for the loss of the loved one is striking and worth exploring. A thorough consideration of this text reveals Christ's compassion, empathy, and transformational power in ministering to individuals who have experienced loss and pain.

In John 11, we discover the story of Lazarus' sickness and death. Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, becomes ill, and despite the pleadings of his sisters Mary and Martha, Jesus delays his arrival. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. The setting is filled with sadness, grief, and concerns regarding Jesus' seeming delay. Verse 32 describes Jesus' interaction with Mary, one of Lazarus' sisters. From the text Mary's statement "...if you had been here my brother wouldn't have died" (verse 32) echoes feelings of longing for Jesus during the time of her pain. "The Lord's delay must have been an added grief to Martha and Mary, for they had learned to lean on Him" (Macaulay, 1978, p.136). Jesus will bear not just the weight of their grief over their loss, but also the burden of questioning whether He seems to have abandoned them (Macaulay, 1978). To MacArthur, her "words were simply a poignant expression of grief mingled with faith she expressed in her statement" (MacArthur, 2006). This suggests that Martha was experiencing profound sadness due to the loss of her brother Lazarus as a result of Jesus' neglect. Her words carried deep emotional weight. To Hunter (Hunter, 1965) despite her disappointment in Jesus' delaying, she was firm in her trust in Christ's power with God that the delay may yet be good. Her words to Jesus convey some sense of trust, strength, or solace in Jesus' presence. Even though Jesus might have been perceived to have delayed, his arrival seemed to have provided some level of faith in Martha.

Again, in verse 33, Jesus was troubled and groaned in the spirit when he saw Martha and the people mourn. The word *enebrimesato* translated as "deeply moved" or "troubled" presents so much difficulty to commentators (Lindars, 1972). Lindars argues that it is evident that Jesus' emotions are that of grief (v. 35) and that there is a good reason to take this display of emotions in conjunction with His "troubled soul" at the thought of His impending death (Lindars, 1972). This underscores his emotional response to the grief of Mary and the Sympathizers who were mourning Lazarus by being troubled in

spirit. Wright has posited that “One person’s grief communicates to another; it’s part of the strange business of being human that when we are with very sad people their sadness infects us even if we don’t share their particular grief” (Wright, 2004). From this perspective, it was not surprising that Jesus was moved when He got into this sorrowful scene. He shared their grief. He was just being human. According to Calvin, Jesus identified with the situation of Martha and Mary by showing strong emotions of grief and tears, that He is as much affected by our ills as if He had suffered them Himself (Calvin, 1959). This seemed to contradict his divinity. Some perceived Him to be the Messiah, others as a prophet, and to some a teacher, yet he identified with the people’s situation of immense pain and sorrow. Irrespective of the power He carried and the ability to raise Lazarus He first identified with the situation of Mary and Martha in their loss.

Moreover, we see Jesus identify with the people’s emotions in verse 35 “Jesus wept” when he was taken to the tomb. Elowsky asks, “What need was there to weep for him who he was soon about to raise?” (Elowsky, 2014, p.20). He suggests, “He wept to give us an example of sympathy and kindness toward our fellow human beings” (Elowsky, 2014, p.20). This position is supported by Augustine as cited by Elowsky who posits that Jesus wept to teach us to weep for others (Elowsky, 2014). This indicates that Jesus wept to identify with human pain and grief as an example for us towards others. Moreover, to Potamus of Lisbon, “God wept in order that God might do, with tears and compassion, what human beings do on behalf of their fellow human beings” (Elowsky, 2014, p.21). The act of weeping demonstrates Jesus’s full humanity despite his divinity as the Son of God. For Jesus who was known for his great faith and miraculous power to still make room to connect with genuine human emotions, including sorrow and grief depicts an appreciation of the emotional state of the family of Lazarus. The “man of sorrows,” acquainted with the grief and pain of humanity, shares, and bears it to the point of tears, underscoring the relational aspect of His ministry. Macaulay amplifies Jesus’ action with this poem;

Is there anyone can help us, one who understands our hearts
When the thorns of life have pierced them till they bleed:
One who sympathizes with us, and in wondrous love imparts
Just the very, very blessing that we need?

Yes, there’s one, only one,
The blessed, blessed Jesus, He’s the one.
When afflictions crush the soul,
And waves of trouble roll,
And you need a friend to help you, He’s the one! (Macaulay, 1978, p.138).

Jesus does not just perform miracles or preach from a distance. Instead, he enters the joys and sorrows of people’s lives, forming authentic connections with them. Jesus’ tears also reveal his empathy towards those who are mourning, showing his deep compassion and solidarity with humanity’s pain and suffering. Instead of remaining aloof or detached, Jesus fully engages with the emotions of those he came to serve.

Again, Jesus offers authentic comfort to aid healing for the bereaved family. Christ’s response extends beyond mere empathy to offer genuine comfort and hope by providing a tangible expression of comfort and reassurance to Mary and her family. While his tears convey his shared sorrow, his subsequent actions demonstrate his divine power to bring about transformation and restoration. He doesn’t merely offer words of comfort by telling Mary about the hope of resurrection but goes further to provide a concrete solution to their grief by performing a miraculous act of resurrection. This act of raising Lazarus from the dead is significant because it showcases his authority over death itself. This act goes beyond comforting Mary and her family in their grief but also emphasizes hope, transformation, and restoration even in the face of death.

A Christological-Therapeutic Approach to Grief for the Akan Community

A Christological-therapeutic approach to grief for the Akan community involves integrating principles of Christian theology with Akan cultural norms and traditions. This approach recognizes the importance of both the spiritual and cultural dimensions in the grieving process, seeking to provide holistic care that respects traditional practices while offering the comfort of Christ's teachings. The life and ministry of Jesus Christ, particularly his interactions with those who grieved, serve as a powerful model for pastoral care. By weaving the teachings and example of Christ with the cultural practices of the Akan people, pastoral caregivers and Christian ministers can create a framework that speaks directly to the hearts and minds of grieving people in the Akan community. In examining Christ's teachings and actions, particularly in John 11:32-35, we find a profound model for navigating grief that transcends cultural boundaries.

Demonstrate Empathy and Compassion for those who are Grieving

From the discussions above, showing empathy and genuine compassion towards the bereaved family and community is very crucial not just for the dead but for the bereaved as well. Like Jesus, Christian ministers are called to embody empathy and compassion in their interactions with those who are involved in all forms of grief. The ability to enter another person's pain without judgment or hesitation is foundational to effective pastoral care. It is of utmost importance for pastoral caregivers within the Akan community of Ghana to empathize and express genuine compassion towards the person grieving. Cultural beliefs and practices that seek to provide a befitting burial ceremony for the deceased must be honoured without neglect for the bereaved. Christian ministers must however endeavor to offer their presence as a significant part of their support to the bereaved just as Jesus did for Mary and Martha. This may offer a sense of comfort and hope to the grieving persons to hold up in the time of grieving their loss.

Moreover, beyond compassionate presence Jesus wept alongside Mary and the others mourning the death of their beloved Lazarus to show His deep emotional connection with humanity and His willingness to enter the pain of people grieving for their loss. This holds a significant part of the grieving process to the bereaved family because "the ways we treat our grief and the way others approach itself" (Cacciatore, 2017, p.24). This suggests that others approach towards us in grieving moments has a significant impact on our ability to navigate the grieving process. Pastoral caregivers in Akan community must therefore demonstrate empathetic and supportive responses which provide comfort, validation, and a sense of belonging during times of sorrows since contrary responses can make people feel even more alone and distressed.

Incorporate Christian Virtues with Sensitivity in Diverse Cultural Contexts

Christian ministers must be sensitive to the rituals and practices that hold significance within the Akan community, such as funeral ceremonies, funeral donations and communal mourning customs. By respecting and honouring these traditions, Christian ministers can build trust and rapport with the bereaved while providing culturally relevant support. This is critical because effective pastoral care practice in culturally sensitive communities like the Akan must learn to recognize certain practices that give identity to the Akan people. This means that the virtues of empathy, love, and compassion among others can only be expressed and understood in a manner that resonates with the tradition and culture of the people within the Akan community without disregarding the integrity of Scripture. Certain practices and norms must be recognized and respected and not be discarded and regarded as pagan by Pastoral caregivers during the grieving process of individuals in the Akan community. Christian ministers must endeavor to approach grieving families in Akan communities with humility and openness to learn about and incorporate their cultural practices and norms to help hold tradition as a significant part of the society.

Communicate the Message of Hope, Comfort and Restoration

Pastoral care to deal with grief also should incorporate the communication of hope and healing. Christ's response to Mary's grief demonstrates the transformational power of hope in the face of despair. Caregivers must offer a message of hope just like Jesus did for Martha and Mary when he assured them of the resurrection of their brother. This is important because Jesus' words and actions resonate with the Akan belief that when one dies, he or she is in transition just like Paul taught that "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13-14). This provides hope and assurance for the bereaved family that all is not lost. Just as it is a consolation for the dead that he joins his ancestors, the living Akan Christian must be assured that there is hope of resurrection for their loved ones. Such a message of hope embodies Christ's caring presence, bringing people through their darkest times and into the light of hope, emphasizing the ongoing promise of healing in faith. Pastoral caregivers must act as conduits of heavenly consolation, providing peace and reassurance to individuals facing difficulty while demonstrating the redeeming power of hope in the face of life's challenges and tragedies.

Conclusion

The article sought to offer a therapeutic approach to addressing the needs of grieving persons in the Akan Community of Ghana. From the essay, it could be observed that Akan cultural beliefs and practices regarding grieving appear to focus more on the deceased than the bereaved. It appears that their funerary rites are primarily intended to offer the deceased a welcoming entry into the land of their ancestors. However, this practice seems not to offer a holistic approach to grieving in that, during the period of grieving, all activities are done in honour of the deceased with little or no provision made for the restoration of the bereaved for their loss. Because of this, this paper explored Christ's approach to grieving based on John 11:32-35 and proposed a model for the Akan Community to enhance a proper honour of the deceased and holistic healing and support for the bereaved as well.

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