

Pastoral reflections on dying well

Dorothy Nickel Friesen

I thought I could not pastor people who were dying. After all, I had little experience with death, and my childhood was remarkably free of personal trauma with death. Death had not touched me in a dramatic way. I had not seen anyone linger in death. I had not heard the death rattle as last breaths were drawn. I had not spent hours in vigil near the bedside of someone I loved.

Then I became pastor of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio. I have now officiated at more than eighty funerals—some for people whose lives were measured prenatally, in weeks or months; others for people who had lived more than a hundred years on this earth. I have prayed with those who yearned to die and with those who feared death. I have held the hands of those

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who could not respond to a human voice, and I have cradled a lifeless infant as she seemed to sleep in my hands. I have led worship services where hundreds overflowed the sanctuary, and I have stood beside an open grave with a few bystanders shivering in the wintry air. I have presided professionally at funerals for total strangers, and I have wept hot tears for parishioners whom I loved deeply.

When potentially fatal illness strikes young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, thoughts of death creep into the psyche of the one afflicted. At such times a pastor can ignore that person's intimations of mortality, dismissing as inappropriate both fear of death and welcoming of death: she can minimize the situation or change the subject. Or she can embrace this holy moment of awareness.

When people in our congregation were dying, I tried to engage them and their family at their particular levels of understanding

and awareness. Then I tried to move them, sometimes ever so gently and sometimes quite boldly, toward facing the prospect of their death. “Does anyone else know that you are ill?” “Have you ever thought about dying?” “Are you afraid of suffering?” “What happened in your family when someone died?” “Tell me about your favorite Bible story or hymn.”

These more private efforts were often coupled with more public work to alert family members, circles of friends, and the faith community about this impending death. We prayed for people by name. We organized volunteers to assist in daily living

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or by providing support for a grief-stricken spouse. We took turns with around-the-clock vigils. We prepared funeral services in which God’s name was honored and the individual was remembered with a mixture of congregational traditions and unique family requests. We provided a lunch for the grieving family and friends with a simple menu and genuine hospitality.

But I am convinced that it is not enough for a pastor to provide good and thoughtful pastoral care, to lead a worship service full of grace, and to meet the next death as a matter of routine. I have concluded that a congregation must see dying, as living, as a matter of stewardship. Just as the extravagance of some weddings leaves modesty behind, so the temptation to show love for the dead by sparing no expense violates our commitment to simplicity. The idea that “my wife never had much in life, but I’m going to see to it that she has the top-of-the-line casket” detracts from the community’s celebration of life.

The deacons and nurture commission members at First Mennonite Church in Bluffton put together a booklet, *Preparing for Death: A Resource Guide*, for each household in the congregation. This booklet was routinely used in classes for those exploring membership in the congregation, and it was the subject of a session in a summer series on stewardship. Patterned after several other Mennonite congregational resources, this forty-page booklet was full of resources and suggestions about the issues, questions, and decisions that surround death. We urged each adult to fill out

a form indicating their wishes for disposition of their body, funeral plans, and legacy gifts. In short, we offered a practical guide for talking about a topic we tend to avoid and for making plans for a difficult time.

More than that, the congregation modeled its willingness to embrace death by building its own caskets. Following the strong leadership of my predecessor as pastor, the congregation had begun a ministry of building simple but beautiful caskets as an act of compassion and stewardship. Construction was done by a crew—mostly men—who loved to work with wood, had tender hearts, and saw this project as their Christian service to others in the congregation. After the construction, a second crew—mostly women—lined the caskets, carefully pleating the ivory-colored cloth. Not long after I became pastor at First Mennonite Church, I walked into an upstairs classroom to find the two crews completing a casket. Every now and then workers would stop long enough to recount stories about people who had died, recalling them in fond remembrance. A man recently widowed wept silently as he carefully pinned folds into the lining fabric. Constructing and lining caskets proved to be a service both for the dead and for the living.

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Once, we received the tragic news that a baby would be stillborn. Her grandfather called the casket-building committee and requested their help to make a coffin for his first grandchild. That tiny wooden box became a treasured gift to an already beloved child. As we moved to the burial site, the young father carried the casket under one arm, his other arm holding his weeping wife. We all knew that their anguish was eased by the congregation's tender love made tangible by the little casket. In the congregation the

birth of a child is usually announced on Sunday morning with a red rose in a vase on the pulpit. The Sunday after this baby's death, the red rose lay on the pulpit instead of standing in a vase: "Death has come to our congregation. We grieve the loss of this child, and we mark her death symbolically. We cry together; let us pray together."

Preparing a congregation for death is an ongoing pastoral task. Preaching about death, teaching about death, and finding rituals for death are pastoral responsibilities. But pastors can take up the task of caring for the dying only as they face their own mortality and their own fears. All my fears—that I could not attend to the dying, that I would not find the right words, that I would weep in public, that I would say the wrong things, that I would get sick in emergency rooms—disappeared as I lived into my pastoral vocation. I found fitting words and actions, and I never experienced nausea as I witnessed horrible injuries, awful trauma, and cold death. Yet I often left such scenes so exhausted that I could barely talk, and more than once, as I stepped in the door of my home, tears flowed uncontrollably. Death had taken its toll—again. Resting, reading comforting scriptures, talking, and writing all became ways for me to cope and heal and thrive in ministry to the dying.

My experiences have taught me something about dying. The truth is that living well contributes to dying well. Those who have a strong faith, family, and fruitful vocation will often understand death as both a human reality and as a process in which God is at work. In my experience, in many instances those who lived well—had strengthened their faith, had communicated with their families about dying, and were quick to acknowledge their fears and their affirmations—died well and peacefully.

Most people fear the pain of dying, but I have witnessed only one death in which pain seemed to wrack the dying person's body. In my estimation, that pain was the result of denial that death was imminent, and family discord about palliative measures. The power of modern medicine, prayer, and support can make dying a release from suffering and a sweet passage to another life. Pastors can help people deal with the fears, explain the dying process, prepare family members for death, and then gently guide them through after-death decisions. Signing papers for organ donation can become an opportunity for pastoral care. Talking about the loss of a parent can become an entrée into a teenager's topsy-turvy world. Planning a funeral with an estranged family member can become a time to heal wounds and offer reconciliation.

Pastors can help most effectively when they are aware of community resources offered by hospice programs, hospital

chaplains, and other health professionals. Drawing on such resources strengthens families, because they know they are not alone. Pastors can develop congregational care teams that offer ongoing support in a crisis: Identify legal, financial, mental health, nursing, pastoral, and social work resources in your congregation or community. Who likes to cook? Who can provide transportation? Who will care for children? Who can pray? Who will visit? While confidentiality and respect for family wishes are paramount, pastors and congregations can offer support in many, many ways when a loved one is dying and after death occurs.

Pastors are afforded the rare privilege of access to the dying and to their families. We are allowed in emergency rooms, delivery rooms, nursing homes, funeral homes, and people's houses at almost any hour of the day or night. We see people at their worst and in their greatest distress. Our presence brings hope simply

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because we represent both the community of faith and the resources of our Christian faith. Just by showing up, we communicate the availability of God's love and compassion and the support of the church community. Death is the occasion of important pastoral ministry.

Finally, the celebration of life and of Christ's victory over death is most appropriately celebrated in the worship sanctuary with a service of Christian witness. Community traditions are strong ("We use the funeral home—not the church—because so few people will be there"), and families sometimes try to pack in cute anecdotes ("Can we tell

the one about when Dad fell into the lake?"). Some of this remembering is appropriate in worship because our faith is also about God's work in our lives, but it is a pastoral act to steer the planning for the funeral service toward worship and to encourage reserving most of the reminiscing for the meal and social gathering times.

One of my greatest joys was in listening as family and friends told stories about the person who had died. Weaving parts of the story of that one life together with the big story of salvation became a pastoral discipline that took enormous energy. The

reward was often a biblical meditation that was personal, hopeful, and pertinent. But in Christian funerals we do well to keep the focus on the acts of God through Christ Jesus and not on the recital of human accomplishments, however dramatic and noteworthy the latter seem.

I have become a better pastor because I have had many opportunities to care for those who are dying and their families. My faith is stronger because of my familiarity with death in its many faces. I want to live a long and fruitful life, but these experiences have taken away my fear of dying. This statement of faith—I am not afraid to die—I can now make because as a pastor I have had the privilege of accompanying others in their living and in their dying. Thanks be to God.

About the author

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