

Congregational Conversations on Death and Dying

Workshops and resources make the talking easier

LINDA WALSH AND IVY FOO ANSWER THE DAILY CALL to care for the lives of their parishioners by faithfully walking alongside them during times of grieving. Linda, a faith community nurse and director of pastoral care, and Ivy, pastoral care coordinator, work alongside other lay and clergy to serve the needs at the Catholic Church of St. Ann's in Marietta, Georgia. The pastoral care team at St. Ann's embraces open conversation about dying, advance directives, funeral planning workshop, and bereavement support.

"Even if you know your loved one is close to the end of life," Linda Walsh says, "It's hard to have these discussions at that time. Part of it came from our own personal experiences and having to have

a conversation at a delicate time. We felt it was giving people the option of having discussions in advance, fulfilling their wishes, and finally taking a huge burden off their families."

BY LAUREN HALES

Whether you are a congregation with a dedicated pastoral care staff, or a small church with a part-time pastor, the model at St. Ann's for ministry around grief-related topics can be adjusted to fit any situation.

Choosing to Die Well

Dying well, even discussing death in general, does not come easy for many Christians despite our promise that, "the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Every person will face death, and the church can play a pivotal role in preparing people emotionally and logistically. Linda advises, "If someone is starting out, I would first



Ivy Foo



Linda Walsh

develop a booklet or guide for their congregation to be able to use when the time comes. St. Ann's has handed out end-of-life booklets in advance of a death, when visiting with a family, or when our priest was going to do the Sacrament of the Sick. If the conversation turns to how to handle planning a funeral, it is a blessing to be able to offer it up to them so that they can get answers for some of their questions and concerns."

When beginning with an information guide, be sure to include specific issues that are the most pressing for your congregation, based on your denomination's policies and beliefs. Reach out to your denomination or conference leadership and ask about common ethical questions. If a congregant's family member is deathly ill, is there an official stance or guidance on the use of hydration, nutrition and ventilators? If extraordinary measures of care of the sick individual are causing excessive burden on the family, when might they withdraw care? These are questions that people might be afraid to pose, not wanting to risk seeming selfish or less faithful in the eyes of their peers. Yet having this information printed in a booklet or posted on the church website could be a lifeline for those who need it.

Consider including such basic information as to who to call and when in the instance of a death. Is a clergy person on call 24/7? Or

do volunteers rotate that responsibility? Death occurs at all times and in all places, so ease your congregants' minds by providing clear information on who they should contact in their time of grief.

In defining policies and procedures, be sure to include a segment on your church's stance on cremation versus burial. If you allow for cremation, must the "cremains" be buried? Or can they be scattered or divided between several vessels? Linda and Ivy, after hearing about so many cases of their parishioners believing that they

Planning a Funeral

St. Ann's doesn't just have well-researched church policy on dying available to their congregation; they also regularly hold a funeral planning workshop for their parishioners. Ivy explains, "We had a church down the street who did not have a pastoral care department, and one of the members wanted to make sure that her church had more of a ministry to those going through grief, more help than she received when her husband passed away. So she came to us, knowing what we did, and asked for our

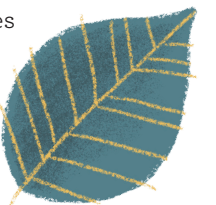
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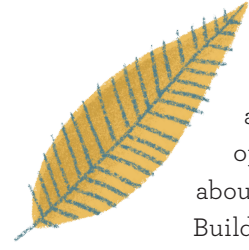
could not cremate their loved ones, are intentional about including the Catholic Church's official position on cremation in their funeral planning booklet.

In addition to information on church policy and procedure surrounding death, be sure to include information on your state's advance directive paperwork. Advance directives are legal documents that allow people to dictate what level of medical treatment they would like to receive should they become unable to indicate their wishes for themselves. The paperwork varies state by state, but it can be a powerful way for someone to take the burden of deciding what medical care to give in times of crisis off the shoulders of loved ones.

help. Since she had a new pastor, he was very open to starting a funeral ministry based on our program here."

While a funeral planning workshop might seem out of the reach of a small congregation, Linda and Ivy suggest that smaller churches arm themselves with a dedicated volunteer pastoral care team. Even if the only paid staff at your church is the pastor, "When the clergy has supportive people around him or her to help, they can free themselves up to be more present to minister on the very intimate faith-based need for the family that arrives at the time





of death.” Whether you have a paid or volunteer pastoral care team, hosting a funeral planning workshop will invite open conversation in the congregation about death and grieving.

Building on the information collected in the information booklet, begin your workshop with a reiteration of these ethical and religious directives, preferably presented by your clergy or someone equally qualified to answer questions in a way that reflects your theological tradition. Now is an appropriate time to discuss your church’s views on topics like cremation, extraordinary care, cure versus care (hospice care), and even what your congregants can expect from clergy during their final hours or moments, the “last rites” of your particular Christian expression. Linda and Ivy have found it extremely beneficial at this point to bring in a trained and experienced representative to speak on their state’s advance directives, and to have participants brainstorm what their personal wishes would be. If you don’t have access to a guest speaker, seek out online resources to help you prepare a presentation and walk participants through key questions.

After going through information on preparedness before death, Linda and Ivy transition the workshop to focus on how they can help parishioners plan their own or a loved one’s funeral. Even if your church doesn’t regularly plan funerals, here are some things to consider including in your workshop:

- What kinds of funeral services can a congregant choose from? Explain the difference between a funeral service (with the body or ashes present) and a memorial service (either post-burial or with no remains present).
- In some traditions, there is a difference between a mass in the church with the Eucharist and a funeral service at the funeral home, though the body may be present at either.

- Will the burial at the gravesite be private or open? Let the congregant know that they can hold a service at the church and then have a private family burial if they would like.

These are choices that they may not be aware of, and personalization of the remembrance of loved ones can make a positive impact on the grieving process.

Ongoing Considerations

Each situation and family will be unique, and in recognizing that, Linda and Ivy include a segment in their funeral planning workshop (and in their booklet) that outlines possible funeral service choices that people may preselect. They offer Bible passage recommendations, hymns, and even the ability to designate who you want to give your eulogy or remarks of remembrance and perform the duty of pallbearer.

St. Ann’s keeps people’s choices on file, and in the time of their death, the care team offers the personalized service to the loved ones. Linda and Ivy say that this is a huge relief to families, as it takes away the guessing, and even potential arguing, by communicating exactly what the deceased requested. They tell the story of one man who, after his wife, son, and daughter had passed away, had only one daughter left. “He came in and planned his funeral with us in advance. When his daughter walked in to do his funeral planning, it was done in 30 minutes. She was so relieved and felt like it was a gift from her father, since she had already gone through this three times before.” Encourage people to think about deciding these details ahead of time as a gift to those who will be mourning their passing—the gift of knowing exactly what would have made their loved one happiest.

Funerals do not just include faith communities, so do emphasize to your workshop attendees that they will have to work closely with a funeral home. Both Linda and Ivy hesitate to recommend services

at a particular funeral home. This is because Linda and Ivy focus on the spiritual aspect, not the financial, of funerals. However, providing a simple list of homes in your surrounding area and encouraging your members to be smart consumers can be the push that people need to make appropriate decisions regarding their funeral home arrangements.

Finally, over the years St. Ann’s has also included a segment on the often overlooked financial and legal aspects of a person’s passing. Linda discusses the ins and outs of personal wills, fiduciary considerations (such as existing credit cards, bank accounts, safe deposit boxes), keeping your end-of-life wishes filed and organized, and even how to discuss these difficult topics with family and friends.

Linda says, “We tell people, it’s not over after the funeral. We’re here for them afterward. We support them through the bereavement process. Think about how you can reach out to people afterward, as a church.”

St. Ann’s pastoral care team works hard to serve the deep spiritual and physical needs that they experience every day with their parishioners. Helping someone to die well, to make choices beforehand on how they would like to be remembered, and providing a clear and effortless process for funerals might not seem like the most important duties to perform, but it is often the greatest gift to give someone in the midst of grief. Emulating Jesus by not walking away from death and dying, but through embracing the struggle and the sadness of our human condition is a beautiful interpretation of the gospel of Christ.



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TIPS FOR A RESOURCE TABLE AT YOUR WORKSHOP

- Explanation of types of funeral services in your tradition
- Choices for suggested Scripture readings
- Variety of suggested hymns and musical selections
- Remarks of remembrances (who, how many, how long)
- Who to call, and when, after a death occurs
- Fees, if any, associated with using your church building
- Repast or reception: does your church offer volunteers to help?
- Appropriate honorariums for minister, musicians or others
- Information on your state’s advance directive requirements
- Advance directive workbooks, such as *Five Wishes*
- Local hospice organization brochures
- Local home health organization brochures
- Listing of cemeteries and funeral homes

At the time of creating this resource, Lauren Hales was an assistant editor and faith community engagement coordinator at Church Health in Memphis, Tennessee. Permission to reproduce for noncommercial ministry purposes.

End-of-Life Terminology

Advance directive: a person’s statement of wishes regarding future treatment in the event the person is unable to make competent decisions at a later date under specific circumstances.

Comfort or palliative care: treatment that focuses on improving quality of life through pain management and relief from psychological, emotional, and spiritual stress.

Financial power of attorney: document written and signed by a person authorizing someone to be an agent for purposing of signing checks, transacting business, or signing legal document; it can be general, specific, or limited in nature.

Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order: a physician’s written instructions not to attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation in the event of a cardiac or respiratory arrest. The DNR is attached to the medical chart and filed at hospitals, doctor’s offices, and care facilities.

Durable power of attorney: a legal document that names the person who can make medical decisions for you when you become incapacitated or incompetent.

Living trust: formed during a person’s lifetime to separate property for a specific cause and protect it from general risk and obligations.

Living will: legal document stating preferences for future medical treatment in case an individual cannot make competent decisions

Medical power of attorney: an appointed stand-in with legal authority to make medical decisions for someone unable to do so.

Probate: the process of proving the validity of a will.