

Pastoral accompaniment at the end of life

By Elizabeth Neve

We are often uncomfortable when it comes to talking about death and dying, and indeed, unlike our ancestors, many of us will never have witnessed someone dying (Mannix, 2017, p. 145). Consequently, as pastoral carers we can feel anxious about accompanying the dying and wonder what, if anything, we can offer the dying person and their family.

Dying, however, is not solely a physiological process but a holistic one (Wyatt, 2018, p. 5; Nolan, 2012, p. 25). It is not just a medical event, but an emotional, relational and spiritual one. While good physical symptom control is always important for a dignified death, the emotional, relational and spiritual aspects of death must also be addressed, and it is in these domains that good pastoral care can contribute to a good death. The Christian think tank Theos stated in their 2023 report *Ashes to Ashes* that churches and faith communities “have an important role to play, in offering both pastoral care and theological accompaniment to the dying and the bereaved” (Theos, 2023).

Similarly, Professor John Wyatt (Christian doctor, ethicist and theologian) believes that “for Christians, pastoral care is vital to the process of dying well”. In his seminal book *Dying Well*, he argues that: “To die well I have to be at peace with God, and the most important people in my life” (2018, pp. 25,85). Thus, as pastoral carers we have an amazing opportunity and indeed privilege to facilitate and support this crucial process of finding peace both with God and with loved ones as death approaches.

Our commitment to the dying flows from our faith in and love of God. It is focused on the needs of the dying and their family and reflects the hope that comes from knowing God’s grace is at work in every situation, even and especially at such a difficult time. Pastoral care and accompaniment of the dying can therefore be described as a ministry of both hope and support.

What the focus of that support looks like will vary over time and with each situation, and as pastoral

carers we need to be sensitive to what type of support is helpful at different times. However, support can be helpful:

- as the reality of a diagnosis is grasped
- as plans are made and expectations adjusted
- as frailty increases and life becomes more challenging.

While it can feel overwhelming to think about how we might provide this important ministry of hope and support, understanding more about what the various aspects of good pastoral care at the end of life look like can be helpful.

Death is an emotional event

“Suffering is not a question that demands an answer, it’s not a problem that demands a solution. It’s a mystery that demands a presence” (Wyatt, 2018, p. 131).

We could say death is the biggest mystery of all and, as such, it demands our presence as a witness to suffering. Indeed, although rarely verbalised, many people fear being abandoned and facing death alone (Wyatt, 2018, p. 135). The incarnational model, or “the ministry of presence”, is fundamental to the pastoral care of the dying, as we are tasked “not to fix things, but to be with” (Wells, 2018, p. 14).

This presence involves a commitment to listen attentively, sensitively and selflessly, respecting the other, whatever the person’s ideas or choices may seem to be. The process of dying can affect how a dying person acts and speaks. Those actively dying may have difficulty sharing what they are going through, and this can lead to a deep feeling of loneliness. A dying person may be fearful or angry (with the disease or with God) and may lash out often uncharacteristically at family.

By allowing and encouraging people to express their hidden fears and emotions, pastoral carers can facilitate difficult but important conversations, providing a safe place to say unsafe things. It is



also important to be aware of the gift of silence in these tender conversations, noticing the moments when a conversation touches on the unconscious, and moments when the Holy Spirit is at work.

Listening well also provides opportunities for the dying to remember and share life stories, helping them to review their life and legacy. Listening enables the person to connect meaningfully with all areas of their lives: past, present and future. As a person tells their story they hear it too; this can help them make sense of their life and begin the key process of re-ordering their priorities as they begin to let go of life.

Death is a relational event

“Dying offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to mend, strengthen and celebrate our relationships and bonds with those whom we love” (Wyatt, 2018, p. 26).

Because dying is a relational event, celebrating, completing and healing important relationships is key to dying well. Death tears us apart from those

we love and so getting a chance to say: “Farewell”, “Thank you”, “I love you”, “I’m sorry”, “I forgive you” and/or “Please forgive me” is of immense importance. For some individuals relational healing in terms of reconciliation or forgiveness may need to be offered or received.

Facilitating and supporting difficult conversations around family reconciliation and also advance

planning may be something that pastoral carers can do by being present and listening well. We are not there to give advice (unless asked for), but we can help the family explore what is important to them and how that can be managed as death approaches.

The pastoral care of the dying person’s loved ones must not be overlooked and needs to address practical, emotional and spiritual needs. Watching a loved one

die is extremely distressing and exhausting; the emotional anguish and despair of saying goodbye is often compounded by the need to provide for the relentless physical needs of the dying person. Emotions at such a time are often complex and mixed, with feelings of anticipatory grief mixed with relief as the end draws near.

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Death is a spiritual event

“Dying is a terrible mystery, but it is an opportunity for growth” (Wyatt, 2018, p. 39).

When we seek to care for the dying, we are accompanying people on what could be described as the most crucial journey of their life: a journey *with* God and *to* God.

It is, therefore, important that the spiritual journey which happens as a person approaches death is both acknowledged and supported.

The end of life is often when spiritual matters come to the fore and so some individuals may wish to re-examine and reiterate their beliefs in order to die peacefully. Even a latent spirituality or faith may be suddenly awakened. Significant spiritual and theological questions are often provoked, alongside a search for meaning and a questioning of core beliefs.

Spiritually a dying person is still very much alive and new spiritual awareness and growth are possible. Indeed, Wyatt states that: “Dying can give an opportunity to devote attention to the inner self that by God’s grace can be renewed, restored and gloried for eternity” (2018, p. 22). For Christians, the spiritual preparation for death and meeting Jesus involves focusing on God in the present moment, and may include repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Supporting this process is fundamental to the pastoral care of those at the end of their lives.

However, there are times when someone’s Christian faith does not provide the comfort they would hope for or expect (Walker, 2020, p. 3). Individuals may experience anger, fear or doubts and even disappointment in God. There may be questions concerning the meaning of life, or fears around what happens after death. When these thoughts are not acknowledged and processed, spiritual distress is more likely. However, offering the dying an empathic and non-judgemental space to voice and explore their fears and questions may extend some comfort amid their distress. The pastoral carer may then be able to sensitively offer reminders of the realities of our Christian faith, placing hope in the loving presence of God who promises to walk with us, including through the “valley of the shadow of death”

(Psalm 23:4), and comfort through the love and faithfulness of those around us.

Pastoral carers may also facilitate the process of lament by encouraging the dying person to bring their suffering and sorrow into the presence of God through prayer. Lament is a powerful pastoral tool because it can spur movement towards God when our natural instinct may be to move away from him (Swinton, 2018, pp. 114,118). And for the dying, and their family, bringing their pain and distress to God can be a very intense but ultimately restorative practice.

Sometimes the dying person and their family will have questions around the expectation of divine healing. There can be an inner conflict between the knowledge that God can and does cure miraculously, and the realisation that death

is approaching. There may be disappointment and anger with God that ‘prophetic words’ promising healing are not being fulfilled. However, those who are terminally ill need to be supported by those who are prepared to face their reality with them, rather than well-wishers who hold on to a constant hope of healing, potentially robbing the dying of their preparation for death (Carson, 2010, p. 118).

Rituals of faith can provide comfort and support both for the person dying and their family and friends. Rituals can include practices such as prayer, blessings, anointing and

communion. In some Christian denominations this role will be undertaken by ordained ministers, and in these situations pastoral carers have a crucial role in coordinating such provision. In other churches this role may be undertaken by experienced pastoral carers themselves.

Rituals can give form and meaning to feelings and events, particularly when words fail or are inadequate. They can facilitate the creation of memories and continuing bonds that can become important to the family of the dying person. They can also help to maintain the dying person’s sense of identity as they face the transition from life to death. Communion is an important practice for many, as an acknowledgement of our utter dependence on Christ and our willingness to receive his saving presence and grace. It is, in effect, food for the journey.

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Prayer can similarly put structure around what cannot be articulated and, while discernment is needed in knowing how to pray, we can pray for three things no matter the situation: for peace, strength and God's perspective.

Whatever ritual is constructed or offered, it is important to keep it brief as people's attention spans at the end of life can be limited.

As death approaches

When someone is approaching death, it is usually a time for family and friends to gather around them. However, if a pastoral carer has been supporting the family or the dying person, it may be appropriate for them to be present, even if they are not in the room with the dying person. Their presence may be of considerable practical and emotional support.

When someone is in the last hours of life, there may be unpleasant sights, smells and sounds, and it may be difficult to know what to say or do. As ever, Professor John Wyatt offers us the following helpful advice: "Dying is not a journey to be taken alone. It is to be taken with those who will stay, and watch and pray" (Wyatt, 2018, pp. 91).

And so, as pastoral carers we stay, we watch and we pray. In terms of how we can 'be present' at this precious time:

- Be attentive to the needs of the dying person, and their family; look for ways to serve the family.
- Touch can be important at this time, such as holding a hand, as it conveys more than words. Always ask for permission first or offer tentatively.
- Gentle background conversation or music can be comforting, as hearing is the last sense to go and so sounds in the form of music, voices or from the natural world become more important.
- The dying person may talk about their dead relatives coming to meet them – this is common and there is no need to be disturbed by this; rather, listen respectfully.
- Remember those important last words that might need to be said to and by loved ones: "Thank you", "I'm sorry", "I love you" etc. It is not a time for discussions and arguments about funerals or inheritance.
- If something concerns you or the family, seek out help or advice.

The moment of the end of life can be an incredibly sensitive time. Encourage families to take their time and say their goodbyes in private.





Our own needs

When we accompany someone who is dying, we need to be aware of our own needs, our limits and our personal triggers. Our conversations with the dying can remind us of our own mortality and vulnerability, and the beliefs that give shape to the meaning of our lives. Therefore, having a pastoral theology that is well founded and thoughtfully examined is helpful when we seek to offer care in any distressing situation. Equally, being comfortable with the mystery of God enables us to care sensitively in the places between life and death.

Spending time at the bedside of a dying person and with their family can be exhausting, so taking regular breaks and sharing the load with other pastoral carers is essential. Pastoral carers also need their own spiritual support when involved in situations such as these so, if you have the opportunity, utilise any pastoral supervision available to you.

All pastoral encounters do not just affect the person seeking help, but the pastoral carer too. At the very least, pastoral encounters with the dying remind us we are fragile and limited, but in many cases caring for families through the experience of death can be transformative and even life-enhancing. Nolan describes the experience as “being a gift that can bring about opportunities for personal and spiritual growth” (2012, pp. 131,137). It is therefore useful for pastoral carers to take time to intentionally reflect on the experience of accompanying the dying, as there is often much to be processed and equally much to be learned.



Upcoming training event

If you would like to learn more about pastoral accompaniment at the end of life, you may wish to attend ACC’s training events with Elizabeth Neve and Dr Rory Mac Giolla Chomhaill, which will be happening on **11 November 2024** and 12 May 2025.

References

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About the author

Elizabeth Neve has been involved in church pastoral care for over 20 years and has previously worked as a bereavement counsellor and chaplain. She now works as a European Mentoring & Coaching Council senior accredited coach and mentor, specialising in grief, loss and the end of life. In 2022 she completed an MA in spiritual formation at Waverley Abbey College and writes and delivers pastoral training courses for ACC.