



# Ministering God's Constancy: Pastoral Dimensions of End-of-Life Decisions

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## I. MINISTERING THE PRESENCE AND THE PROMISES

**A** DYING PERSON IS A LIVING PERSON, AT LEAST UP TO A TEMPORAL AND MEDICAL point, as yet not clearly defined within our legal system. As Christians, the preferential prejudice must be toward the assumption of sensate personhood to the last possible authenticated or imaginable moment of life. This person, though dying, is a creation of God. Such persons are chosen and cherished children of God, especially as they slip into the embrace of the Almighty. They continue to be members of the body of Christ. No medical atmosphere of technological expertise dare lure us from these convictions.

Pastors and laity minister this theology in their very presence and accompaniment of a person dying. We minister not just care but the gospel, the presence of the living Christ. We are the hands and heart of Christ conveying the constancy and trustworthiness of God by and through God's grace. The enfolding presence of God in Christ is communicated precisely at the time when that trust may be failing. In accompaniment and care, we reveal the love of God which reunites this person and us in Christ. In prayer, touch, and presence, we assist our sister or brother to pass into the care of God, commending them to God. We assure them of the forgiveness of God that is everlasting, both to the dying person and those who

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surround them. Thus are proclaimed again the promises of God. Now most surely God is God. God is all in all.

## II. CAUTIONS

Because of the emotional intensity of being with persons who are dying and those who must make end-of-life decisions and because of the pressures of truncated time, we often are so absorbed that our thoughts and actions cannot be reflective. The advance of medical technology sets before us both temptations and possibilities with regard to what can be “done” in times of dying. Thus it is wise to contemplate some cautions beforehand.

End-of-life decisions arise not merely with the elderly. Newborn babies with life-threatening conditions, people of every age involved in critical accidents, the final progressions of genetic conditions and diseases unto death, the desperate deteriorations of addictive substances – all of these create times of imminent death. In ministering to people at such times, we must remember that, theologically, life has a wider definition than the one encompassed by the phrase “end-of-life.” Human life extends into the life in and with God. At the same time we must take seriously the precious, created nature of “this” life as a gift from God for which we are stewards.

Theologically, life is never merely the life of an individual, isolated person. All of life is life with God and with our neighbors. All human life is also life in multidimensional participation with nature. There is a communal and relational character to life. We are never dealing with just an individual. We are always participating in the life of the other and the whole. In all matters and decisions, we are before the face of God and within the Spirit of Christ. This environment may be perceived positively, as a context of renewal, or as a death-dealing reality. Dying and death occur within the grace and presence of God. However, dying and death can cause a rejection of that actuality by the person dying and/or by those surrounding them.

In making end-of-life decisions and caring for a dying person, we must never be programmed. There is no handbook or computerized program for going through these hours and days. Often clergy and laity feel there is a “right” thing to do and they do not know the program. In a technological age in which all problems are theoretically solvable, people tend to think there are precise techniques to be used in every situation. In the care of the dying, many people withdraw, either because of their own fear of death or because they feel inadequate, not “programmed” for solving this problem. There are many modes of dying, and the person dying is an individual with a unique history. Consequently, the decisions that need to be made during the time of dying are not totally determined. This awareness of uncertainty is what may make the decisions seem excruciatingly difficult. It is also why people need a pastoral presence – not only the person dying, but also the persons surrounding the dying, i.e., doctors, nurses, technicians, hospice workers, friends, and relatives. Of course, a pastor must have accurate information on many legal and medical matters in order to help interpret

clearly what other professionals might be saying to a person and their family. In these situations the art of ministry and the authenticity of caring are more important than a predetermined set of responses.

Hospice and hospital staffs are often skeptical of pastors. From hard experience, they have felt their own efforts disrupted or undermined by ministers. Hospice staff members have often encountered the ill ease of pastors with the dying, pastors who either inexplicably contribute to the avoidance of discussing death and dying or who provide programmed and often saccharine phrases. Hospital staff are accustomed to seeing ministers literally run into the rooms of the sick, pray or administer the sacrament, and quickly leave. They appear to be performing tasks or *pro forma* rituals, with little actual ministry to the dying person and their family. Of course, this is not the rule with us, but the mythology of such pastors is alive in the nursing and hospice communities. Hospice workers have told me of their anger at ministers who refuse to “aid” the dying person by giving permission to die when that counsel would be pastorally appropriate. Pastors ministering in hospitals, hospices, and hospice home-help programs must be aware that they may have to win their way with these staffs. Such convincing authentication will be part of the art of ministry. At the same time, it is necessary also to be firm with medical professionals about the crucial nature of pastoral ministries.

We each face many difficult issues in our technological age with regard to end-of-life decisions. There are no easy answers to questions involving organ or tissue “harvesting,” the demand for bodies and organs for research, the excruciating decisions regarding who receives critical transplants, the growing mentality of technological efficiency and economic cost-benefit analysis that forces decisions solely on the basis of data analysis, the economics of research, the use of experimental drugs and therapies governed by sources of funds with their own self-interest, and our abilities for genetic “engineering.” End-of-life decisions can be contextualized by any of these factors. Ministers must be aware of the complexities of these issues, participate in the discussion of such factors in policy formation, and be accurate interpreters of all this to dying persons, their families, and support persons. In these cases, humility is an essential characteristic of all concerned.

It is wise to remember that many medical “professionals” are concerned about these issues and equally conflicted about them. Ministers who develop sustaining relations with the persons providing medical services can be effective promoters of dialogue on these issues. They can be effective advocates and informed participants in the formation of just, caring policy and orientations related to end-of-life decisions.

### III. PREPARING FOR END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

Pastors can be effectively proactive by initiating programs in their congregations related to end-of-life decisions. These programs and workshops may be planned and led by others as well as by the pastor. Such occasions provide opportunity for the sustained biblical exploration and theological reflection that is often

not possible during the hours of crisis. Workshops on the stewardship of the ending of our lives might include information on estate planning and wills, “living” wills, funeral home policies and costs, plans for one’s own funeral, and medical and residential possibilities in the last years of one’s life. In workshops in my own congregation, I always included a form regarding decisions at the time of dying and death. The form was to be kept in the church files and shared with a trusted family member or friend. The form covered various areas regarding wishes for decisions at the end of one’s life, and desires for one’s own funeral. This information was extremely helpful in ministering at times of death. However, it also was extraordinarily difficult to get people to fill out such forms. In my own ministry, persons who went through this process were extremely moved and thankful for it. It opened doors for exploration and spaces for discussion of matters often hidden or suppressed. In the midst of the workshop sessions, it is important to include prayer and worship. In congregations, I usually tried to do workshops on issues related to dying in weekly sessions over a period of three to four weeks. That length of time allowed the exploration of feelings, questions, and the posing of options.

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS FOR MINISTERING

The “theology of the cross” is a valued resource at times of dying and death. In this theology, the suffering, death, and resurrection of God, Jesus Christ, presents a reality which plants paradigmatic theological seeds to be nurtured in our ministries. God has gone through death. God has died and been raised. The sufferings are real but also really known by God in Christ. There is a hiddenness to the will and working of God. There are no “answers” that are logically and immediately persuasive for the great mysteries and tragedies of life. However, God accompanies us and is before us even in the valley of the shadow of death and in death itself. The humility of God, God’s suffering and extensive grace in Jesus Christ, comes out to us; it reaches out most especially in the dark corners of the extremities of life. The power of God for reconciliation, resurrection, redemption, and new life reaches to us through dying and death. We also enter into the passion of Jesus in some forms of our own suffering. We are never abandoned by God who knows us as God’s precious creation. The promises of God are trustworthy, applying to all aspects of life, including dying and death. The resurrection of Jesus is complete in our history and is drawing us into its power and reality.

For many persons, suffering is an issue of character. We admire those who keep a “stiff upper lip.” Males, especially, are urged to tough it out! However, I have come to believe that there are multiple sorts of sufferings and not one character of suffering. Often we imply by our ministries or our way of proclaiming the gospel that Christians will be so full of faith that suffering will not affect them. This is most certainly not true. It was not true in the suffering of Jesus.

In ministering at the edges of life, it is important to remember that there is a communal dimension to every human life. Thus, ministry to the dying is also a ministering to the communities that interpenetrate their lives. Equally, decisions

regarding the dying person are decisions with more than individual consequences. They also implicate and involve communities. This is so often forgotten at the extremities of life. We are all familiar with how persons who are severely depressed feel so isolated and alone that they believe their suicide will not affect anyone else. In fact, they believe that they and the world will go forth better without their continuing to live. In extremities of suffering and mourning impending death, persons often feel isolated and tend to think that they are cut off from the world. The pastor ministers God and neighbor, the communal nature of all of our lives. The presence of the minister and members of the congregation help to convey this reality.

As members together in the body of Christ, often, at the point of actual dying or threatened death, we must be the "life" of the other who is losing life. Is this not the function and ministry of the body for its parts? Grafted together in Christ by grace, we become more the life of the other as the other loses power. In this process, the meaning, integrity, and blessedness in Christ of the one suffering is upheld by those of us who are with them in the body of Christ. Entering into the passion of Christ, we are not abandoned but accompanied.

#### V. PASTORAL ORIENTATIONS FOR MINISTERING

In ministry to the dying, pastors and others must have an "un-preoccupied" presence. This attitude is an art of ministry. Ministers will be tempted to be distracted or hurried. We might be tempted to flee or stay away because of our own ambiguity about dying and death. However, by the grace of God, we can be fully present to the moment, to the context, and to the persons before us. Ministers bring the church, the gospel, the Christ who is already there. They enable an intentional focus. Jesus has modelled this ministry for us. He also stood before people in his society without being preoccupied with prejudices or prescribed actions of his culture. Jesus broke boundaries and creatively proclaimed and ministered grace. Ministers also need to be "un-preoccupied," so they can pray and listen for the ministry of Christ to themselves.

Pastoral caregivers dare not allow the hospital or the technologists to distance them from the dying person. Some may be tempted to avoid direct ministry by excusing themselves: "The hospital staff wants us to leave." "There are only certain hours for the intensive care ward." "I wanted to see her but the hospital staff were attending to her." Yes, we must be sensitive to the real needs of the doctors, nurses, and hospital staff, but we must be assertive about the call under which we serve. There are still hospitals that hurry everyone away at the point of death. They want to hide dying. It may be an embarrassment to their abilities to cure. Fortunately, much of this behavior is changing, but it has not yet fully changed.

When decisions about dying and death are at hand, pastors need to be fully present, attentively listening to interpret to the family or friends, inquisitive about options, and assertively insistent about their ministry and the ethical, theological, and spiritual perspectives to the discussion, decisions, and actions. Pastoral presence should be one which is centered evidently in the scriptures and prayer.

## VI. PASTORAL CALLINGS IN THE MIDST OF END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

As we minister to a dying person and their family or friends making end-of-life decisions, we have several specific “callings” to fulfill.

*Celebration:* The word “celebrate” has root meanings which include “honor” and “proclaim.” Ministering to the dying and to those making critical decisions enables celebration in that deep sense. There will be confusion, fear, anxiety, sorrow, and moments of joy and relief. A pastor’s celebration can enable the feeling and freeing of these natural emotions among others, their exploration, and their being offered up in honesty to God. We celebrate a life, a dying, and a death. Each requires its own mode of celebration. The celebration may involve scripture reading, mutual conversation and consolation, confession, proclamation, prayers of thanksgiving, and eucharist. The celebrations may be very short, even momentary, or extended. They may be at bedside, in another room, or in a chapel. Ministers must never merely assume what others are feeling and thinking or “tell” them what they are thinking and feeling without careful empathetic conversation. Listening and observing will inform the manner and mode of celebration in each moment. This celebration is a ministry that proclaims God and the presence of Christ, and also honors those who are dying, their family, community, and God.

*Confession:* In the midst of dying, life returns. It is a time of memory and often of regrets. It is a time of endings which may or may not be conclusions. Ministry must be sensitive to the need for confession. At the rim of death, we all are more conscious that we are becoming apparent to God. We have always been intimately known by God, but we play our own hiding games. People who are dying should be allowed the dignity of honest confession, if they desire it, and confidentiality. Both before and after a death, families often rehearse their histories with one another. In that process, their family history is written anew. The pastor can sensitively provide times for confession and prayer.

The pastor’s very presence ministers the presence and constancy of God and the gospel. The pastor represents the living Christ who re-presents the gospel. Pastoral presence, ministry, touch, and words will convey the assurances of a trustworthy God. In the gospel promises, we minister the constancy of life in Christ and the trustworthiness of God. We are vessels of God’s grace. The manner in which we enable confession, and proclaim forgiveness and the resurrection promises, will color the clarity of the gospel.

*Contemplation:* In many moments, the proclamation of the gospel may take the form of silent contemplation. We have confidence in the words of the scriptures; we let them be heard, and then we let them work in silence. In the midst of end-of-life decisions, we must not crowd out reality by much talk and action. Simplicity, directness, clarity, and honesty are best. The words of scripture and classical prayers have ministered through many ages. This is not the time for evasion, creativity, or clever innovation. The struggle of the hours and the anguish of the minutes, the torture of decisions affecting life, and the inescapable reality of

dying bear their own depth. Ministers provide the grounding theme of the scriptures. The primary ministry is God's in Christ.

*Release:* In dying, human beings are released into the care of God. It is not always easy for either the person dying or the family and friends to allow that going. There are times when the pastor "gives permission" to die—the assurance that God is all in all. It is the ultimate releasing of our self-possessing. Family and friends also have to be nurtured into a confidence to let go and allow God to be fully God for and with this person. Even the ascension of Jesus brought fear, panic, mourning, and avoidance. That is in part why the disciples were locked away at Pentecost. In the midst of end-of-life decisions and dying, enabling people to release themselves or another into God's care is a sign of forgiveness and hope.

*Integration:* We have been taught in the traditional biblical language that all will be gathered into Christ and delivered up to the Father. Now, proleptically, that gospel is enacted. Ministry in the midst of dying is never completed at death or even at the funeral. The funeral is a celebration, with aspects of thanksgiving, confession, absolution, confident proclamation, praise, sustenance, and hope. Ministers are called upon to integrate the particularity of this death into the realities of the gospel. Pastoral ministry is the assurance: "Here, even here, God is for you."

We are faithful to our ministry of the gospel and to the person who has died as we follow through in the funereal rites and commend people into the care of God, proclaiming our common waiting on God's Kingdom. It is an initiation into the glorious company of apostles, prophets, martyrs, and saints.

The decisions made in the often compacted hours around dying hardly have time to be integrated into people's lives. This ministry will have to be carried forth in the weeks and months, even years, that follow. The rituals of the orthodox Jewish mourning rites cover the span of a year. Here we see a constancy that gives this deep experience the time to be integrated into the lives of family, friends, and the whole community. We have lost much of this savoring memory, healing, and hope. There is opportunity for significant ministry in the months that follow a death. Too often, we and the community simply move on.

Decisions surrounding the termination of earthly life are loaded with finality, but are often ambiguous. Such decisions can be lifted up to the Lord in prayer; but often they will break upon persons anew as waves of regret, remorse, or, in extreme family situations, recrimination. Pastors need to be sensitive to the signs of such "drowning." Often individuals will attempt to cover their feelings in public. If ministry has been available and constant, there is more of a chance that pastors will observe or be allowed to perceive these depressions. They will call forth our healing, forgiving, and reconciling ministry.

*God is all in all:* Prayerful pastoral care of persons through end-of-life decisions requires absolute attentiveness to the moment out of a deep and confident grounding in the faith. The art of ministry must be such a part of our being that in times of crisis the faith flows out carried by the Spirit. We are rooted in Christ and grafted into the body of Christ. We minister that constancy of God and the absolute trustworthiness of what God has done in Christ. We minister the accompaniment

of the Spirit in the valley of the shadow of dying and the cavern or oasis of death itself. There is no programmed way of dying nor is there a program for ministry in those times. Our call is to minister, to care. We care as an agent of Christ. At these times, God is all in all. Everything in life that could possibly distract us from God is being stripped away, as is all our confidence in what we can accomplish or control. Every future we have sought to build is being stripped away. It is a time for great faith. It can be a time of peace or a time of struggle for the person dying and for their family and friends.

Not all people are called to heroic and stoic dying. Some may be, though others will be plagued by struggles and questions. There will not be fully coherent, absolutely sure, or perfect answers to the questions that people ask. Many pastors fear that they will not have the answers and thus avoid the questions. Some pastors set up their ministry in these situations so the questions cannot be asked or will seem like declarations of lack of faith. But for us, just as for Jesus in the garden and on the cross, the struggle itself is theologically important. To deny the struggle is to fail to give the powers of evil their due; thus, they will not actually be defeated.

In ministry at the end of life, the call is to represent the accompanying presence of God in Christ. This is the One who goes before us, the only One. This is the One who prepares the way, the only One. This is the One who enables us to hold each other in memory and hope, the only One. As for Job, there are no absolute answers to ultimate questions. There is confident faith in God and letting go into God.

Our ministry in the presence of dying and at death is a ministering of the presence of God who holds all of us in the divine hands and will not let us go. ☩