



Your Life Matters!
To Others . . . To this World . . . To God.

What Religious Communities Can Do In Suicide Prevention From What Does The Bible Say about Suicide? (1986) By James T. Clemons

The Rev. James T. Clemons, Ph.D., a United Methodist Minister was known as a ground-breaking leader in suicide prevention, a topic he extensively researched for more than 25 years. He published more than 25 articles on suicide prevention and four books on the topic. He advised four Protestant denominations on writing compassionate policies about suicide. Dr. Clemons died January 14, 2011.

The following are a few suggestions about what churches, and perhaps other religious groups, can do to prevent suicide. Religious communities should not be in the background. Our concern, our thought, our energies, and our faith are desperately needed to help prevent suicide. Fortunately, there are things we can do.

Each of us can be more pastoral. Human compassion to those who are in pain and in need of help is so thoroughly grounded in the Bible that it calls for little or no comment. When the tragedy of suicide occurs, or is imminent, we can do everything possible to comfort and strengthen the suffering and bereaved. Suicidologists insist that the removal of the age-old stigma will be a positive contribution to the prevention of suicide.

We can be better informed, especially on ways to identifying suicidal behavior and knowing when to intervene. Teenagers especially need to learn to recognize when their peers are giving the slightest hint of suicidal behavior, and to realize that they must take such signals seriously. They must also be able to intervene effectively. We can all learn which of the many agencies are ready to provide proper help, and we can help publicize those resources.

We can do our biblical and theological homework. While pastors carry the major responsibility for leading congregations to engage in Bible studies and helping them to do their theological task, lay persons can make sure that such needs and opportunities are not overlooked. It would not be improper to ask, "When did we last hear (preach) a sermon on suicide, other than at a funeral?"

We can work for better understanding in our communities. Unfortunately, there are some Christians who are still quite ruthless in their response to the bereaved. There are also many who, fearing recrimination, do not feel free to tell their story, and so continue to carry the burden of unresolved grief, guilt, anger, and resentment. Some churches are beginning to take an active role in providing opportunities for those with such needs to meet together for mutual support. Concerned citizens can establish local crisis centers, and they can urge public officials to assume leadership in getting the job done. Still others can work to lessen the number of suicides in jails and prisons.

We can urge our own denomination or judicatory to clarify its position, to publicize it, and to urge its study and implementation.

We can proclaim the gospel! Strange as it may seem, the good news that grace which makes each life precious and free can be the basis for helping the helpless and giving hope to the hopeless. Evangelism, in the best sense of sharing the good news, as well as the abundant life, can be a source of liberation that gives rich or poor, young or old, of whatever class or color, a sense of belonging and meaning in life that can offset many of the reasons why people commit suicide. Shalom is that concept from Hebrew Scriptures which seeks holistic well-being for each member of the community. It is a concept that would be particularly helpful for congregations that take seriously their obligation to love each of their neighbors and all the members of their neighborhood. To these I would add yet another, as expressed in some of the denominational statements cited above: **we can work within social structures to eliminate those dehumanizing economic, educational, medical, and prison conditions and all prejudices against minorities that contribute to despair, a sense of worthlessness, and a lack of hope among our fellow citizens.** In all things, we are to love each other as God has loved us. (p 114-116)

Sample Christian Resources

In addition to the resources listed below, you are also encouraged to look at the sample Jewish prayers and sermon starters. Since most are based on Hebrew Bible (aka “Old Testament”) scripture, they are part of the Christian tradition and offer deep wisdom and hope.

Sermon Starters:

Coming Out of the Dark (John 1: 1-5)

The creation story from the first chapter of Genesis tells of God creating light out of the darkness. Light is a symbol of hope and new life throughout our sacred scriptures. The Gospel of John proclaims, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1: 5) The foundation of our faith is God’s victory over darkness and the ultimate triumph of light. Darkness can be terrifying for those experiencing mental illness. But love comes out of the darkness and this love gradually draws us back into the light of this world. For persons experiencing a mental illness, we can be instruments of God’s love by extending care, compassion and hope to those in the grip of darkness and despair.

~Rev. Alan Johnson

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32)

When young adults have a mental illness they often feel lost and abandoned by family, friends and church. Parents need to realize that young people make mistakes because they are young and sometimes because their judgment is impaired by a mental illness. Most, like the prodigal son, come home. If they don’t seem to be headed in this direction, parents need to know the signs and not be afraid to intervene. Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. The church can play a vital role in educating the congregation so the church can be a safe, supportive community for youth and families struggling with these issues.

~Rev. Alan Johnson

The Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:11-34)

When the Apostle Paul heals a slave girl of the spirit that had overtaken her, he and his helper Silas are arrested and imprisoned in the city of Philippi. That night, an earthquake breaks open the prison cell. Thinking his prisoners have escaped, the jailer draws his sword to kill himself. But Paul and Silas have not fled. Instead they stayed and reassure the jailer that there is a better way to live his life. Sometimes our role is to help the person who is in distress to find a new direction—in the words of the African-American spiritual, to “find the way out of no way.”

~Rev. Talitha Arnold

Jesus' Encounters with Persons with Mental Illness

The very first story of Jesus' healing someone is that of the man with the “unclean spirit” in the Capernaum synagogue. (Mark 1:21-28). In fact, there are more stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing persons afflicted with “troubled spirits,” “unclean spirits,” “demons” (all 1st Century ways of talking about mental illnesses and/or spiritual distress) than all the other healing stories combined. (e.g., Mark 5:1-20; Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 8:28-34; 9:32-34; Matthew 12:22-24, etc.).

Regardless of what one believes about the actual healing, the stories offer insight into Jesus' care for persons with mental distress. He reaches out to them, listens to them, shows compassion toward them, offers comfort and hope. We are called to do the same.

~Rev. Talitha Arnold

Self-Denial & Self Surrender

Mark 8:34-35

And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever would lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.”

This verse could be misunderstood to be speaking about suicide. This is not the case and below is commentary from two well-known theologians about how it can be better understood as a call to self-denial and/or self surrender, not suicide.

Self-Denial

“Jesus' calls to self-denial, to taking up one's cross, and to losing one's life in order to save it, are mentioned six times in the four Gospels. (See also Matt. 10_39; Luke 9:24; 14:26-27; 17:33; John 12:25.) Through the centuries they have prompted innumerable acts of selfless courage. In the context of Mark's Gospel, they emphasize the necessity of putting a low priority on the value of one's own life when it comes to a choice between maintaining that life at all costs and bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ. Thus life itself could more easily be dispensed with in order to serve others in Christ's name.”
(*What does the Bible say about Suicide*, by James T. Clemons, May 2007, p. 63)

Self-Surrender

“Once “crucified” with Christ that is “surrendered to Him you in fact can live and have meaning and purpose in your life. With self-surrender, Christ asks us to take the one thing that we own (the self) and give it back to God. In surrendering the self, we may naturally fear that nothing will be left. We wonder about how are we to live without the self, which give us identity, value, and worth in this world. However, it is in the total surrender of one’s life that one finds true meaning and joy in life. The surrendered self no long accommodates itself to the pattern and values of this world, for it has been liberated from the demands of the world and placed in the hands of Jesus. The self is now free.” (E. Stanley Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*, p. 20)

Prayers:

God our Creator, you give breath to each person you made.
You treasure the gifts of each unique person.
But when life becomes a burden rather than a gift,
God of life, hold us.
When darkness strangles the will to live, when days become endless nights,
God of light, shine on us.
When no one seems to understand, when we walk and wait alone,
God of love, embrace us with your presence.
Where there is despair, bring hope; where there is shame, give value and worth;
where there is emptiness, bring fulfillment; where there is suffering in mind and body, bring healing.
God of hope, hear our prayer for life.
~Cindy Holtrop, *Pathways to Promise*

From chaos and emptiness,
From loneliness and lifelessness,
Come, Creator, Come.
From darkness and shapelessness,
From the abyss and awfulness,
Come, Creator, Come.
From fearfulness and hopelessness,
From weakness and dreadfulness,
Come, Creator, Come.
~A Celtic Prayer - David Adam

God, I’m afraid. Afraid to believe that I could be different, that I could change. Afraid to believe that you could replace my mourning with dancing and I could become a person who feels the sadness of life but still chooses to pursue joy. I want to live today, right now, as someone who chooses joy. Give me strength and courage to look for your blessings on this journey. In Jesus’s name, Amen.
~Kay Warren, *Choose Joy*

God go before you to lead you,

God go behind you to protect you,
God go beneath you to support you,
God go beside you to befriend you.
Do not be afraid.
May the blessing of God our Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit be upon you.
Do not be afraid.
~Unknown source