

A Suicide Care Plan: One Church's Model



by KENDRA FABEL

Upbeat and cheerful, Glenn walks into your office and says, “Pastor, I’m donating my car to the church. I won’t be needing it anymore.” You’re caught off guard because for the past few weeks Glenn has been sullen and agitated. He recently lost his job, and for a man in his late sixties finding a new one has not proven easy. His wife has threatened to leave him and his lack of sleep contributes to his disheveled appearance. Your last meeting with him was particularly hard as Glenn disclosed that his father died by suicide when he was thirteen. Today, he asks if you think his dad is in heaven.

Early in your ministry, you would not have recognized the clues. But after decades, you have gleaned enough life experience to know the warning signs. Alarm bells begin to sound in your mind as you consider Glenn’s history of depression followed by donating his car and his sudden change in mood. His father’s suicide during his formative years adds to your concern. You feel regret for not asking sooner, but now realize that you must act. With fear and courage you ask Glenn if he is thinking about suicide. While he initially denies any suicidal thoughts, you wisely

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ask again later in the conversation. This time, Glenn admits that, yes, he is thinking about ending his life. But now what?

This is a fictional account, but it could easily happen. Churches are often one of the first places to hear about a person's struggle with thoughts of suicide.¹ But unfortunately, many pastors and biblical counselors find themselves ill-equipped to handle such disclosures. For some, the subject was never covered during their seminary training. Other helpers,

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such as small group leaders, youth workers, elders, and deacons may have had no formal training, much less training in how to handle a suicidal crisis. To hear someone reveal they want to die by suicide can be terrifying. This sense of terror is magnified when you have no idea what to do or how to respond as a church. But the church must be prepared to respond

because one study in 2015 showed that 4% of the adult population in the United States had serious thoughts of suicide.² This may not seem like a big number, but when you apply this statistic to your church it can quickly become overwhelming as you think about what care for these very vulnerable people might look like.

When I was starting as a counseling intern at my church, I was given this very task: to figure out how we ought to respond to a suicidal ideation disclosure. It was a daunting task, and the gravity of the situation often weighed heavily upon me. At the same time, I wanted to be prepared *before* a crisis occurred. I knew that having a suicide crisis plan in place could both preserve lives and help alleviate fears about what to do in the event of a disclosure.

1. "The Role of Clergy in Preventing Suicide," Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), accessed July 28, 2021, <https://suicidepreventionministry.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Role-of-Clergy.pdf>.

2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *NSDUH Data Review: Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior among Adults: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, September 2016, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DR-FFR3-2015/NSDUH-DR-FFR3-2015.htm>.

It is the vision of our church—New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California—“to present everyone mature in Christ.”³ We seek to accomplish this vision by helping those in our midst who are thinking about taking their life by suicide to, instead, choose life. We want to help each other recognize that as image bearers of the Holy God, our lives have meaning and purpose. As a congregation, we strive to grow together by learning how to recognize the warning signs and risk factors for suicide and to make ourselves a safe place for people to come for help. We point one another to Christ by walking alongside those in suicidal crisis while simultaneously referring strugglers out to a licensed mental health professional when needed.⁴

Our church has identified several key values to live by that also help us as we navigate suicidal crises:

1. We are *biblical*, and we understand that even true Christians can experience feelings of deep despair in life (1 Kings 19:4; Job 7:15–16; 2 Cor 1:8).
2. We will *respect* those in suicidal crisis and seek to listen to and understand them well (James 1:19; 1 Peter 2:17).
3. We believe in *unity* (1 Cor 1:10). Our church leadership is unified in their recognition of the importance of inquiring about suicidal ideations, persuading someone to get help, and referring a person to a mental health professional when deemed necessary. These referrals are not meant to replace our help, but rather to complement our desire to walk alongside people and love them well.
4. In *humility*, we recognize that were it not for God’s grace upon us, we too could despair of life. So we seek to be as patient and loving to those experiencing this despair as we would want for ourselves (Luke 6:31; 1 Cor 15:10; Col 3:12; James 3:13; 1 Peter 5:5).

3. “Our Vision,” New Life Presbyterian Church, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.newlifepca.com/about/>.

4. When we are helping someone who has attempted suicide or is at serious risk of doing so, it is our policy to refer the person to a licensed mental health professional for care. This gives the struggler access to someone with advanced training and experience and helps reduce our liability.

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