

Myths About Suicide and How to Prevent the Tragedy

When the suicide of Robin Williams just last month sent shock waves throughout the world, fans of the comedian and actor were given a minuscule glimpse into the devastating emotional effect suicide has on families and communities every time someone takes their own life.

Suicide presents unique questions and challenges to churches and Christian individuals. In a church culture where material and spiritual success signifies divine approval, suicide can be deeply unsettling. How the church meets these challenges is often literally a question of life or death.

Karen Mason is Associate Professor of Counseling and Psychology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and has worked extensively in the mental health field. This week her book, Preventing Suicide: a Handbook for Pastors, Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors (InterVarsity Press, 2014), is released. In it she brings her deep knowledge and long experience to bear on this most sensitive and, in the church, taboo and misunderstood matter.

What prompted you to write *Preventing Suicide*?

I am passionate about suicide prevention and about supporting clergy in their key role in suicide prevention. I wrote *Preventing Suicide* because while there are books written for suicide survivors from a Christian perspective (suicide survivors are people who have lost someone they know to suicide), there are very few resources for clergy focused on the larger task of suicide prevention particularly from a Christian perspective.

When I think about the church and suicide, I first and foremost think about the aftermath of suicide—funerals,

pastoral counseling, a comforting community, etc. But your book deals specifically with preventing suicide. What unique resources do churches have in the prevention of suicide and how good are they at putting these resources to use?

Think about suicide prevention as standing by a stream to prevent drowning. You could stand downstream and pull people out of the stream or you could go upstream and build a fence around the stream to prevent people from falling in. The church is engaged in suicide prevention upstream and downstream. Upstream, pastoral caregivers work out this key role in terms of contributing to a theology of life, death and suicide and offering community where support is needed and where relationship skills are learned and practiced.

Clergy are teaching and preaching about things that protect against suicide, such as reasons for living and how to build a life worth living, and moral objections to suicide. The thesis of *Preventing Suicide* is that pastoral caregivers (pastors, chaplains and pastoral counselors) are needed in suicide prevention because of their unique and vital contributions of practical theology and the faith community. Downstream, clergy are gatekeepers, key people who recognize suicidal individuals and refer them to mental-health professionals. Suicidal people come to clergy for help and, in their gatekeeper role, clergy help prevent suicide. Clergy like most gatekeepers differ in their skill level, and some clergy can sometimes miss suicidal tendencies or aren't sure how to intervene.

In your experience as a psychologist and teacher, what do church leaders struggle with the most in relation to suicide? How do you address these difficulties in the book?

I would like *Preventing Suicide* to empower pastoral caregivers in the suicide-prevention tasks they engage in. I hope the book challenges myths about suicide so that pastoral caregivers understand that suicide exists in faith communities perhaps in larger numbers than they expected and that all ages

and genders could be at risk. I hope the book helps clergy to develop a clearly articulated theology of suicide and particularly a commitment to help people develop reasons for living and lives worth living, and helps clergy develop gatekeeper risk-assessment skills and postvention skills (what to do following a suicide).

What are some of the most prevalent myths about suicide that you find in churches and among church leaders? How do you answer them?

Whenever I give a talk on suicide prevention, invariably someone will say that real Christians don't become suicidal. Of course only God knows if a person is a Christian, but I've met a number of suicidal individuals who struggle with suicidal thinking with the help of their Christian faith. Other Christians have written about their suicidal thinking such as John Donne, a 17th-century Anglican priest; Dr. Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Episcopal priest and theologian; the Rev. Dr. Jim Stout, Presbyterian minister; and Dr. Rev. Edward John Carnell, past president of Fuller Theological Seminary.

The biographers of William Cowper, 18th-century hymnodist, have written about his suicidality. Dr. Francis Schaeffer's son has written about his father's suicidal thinking. In *Preventing Suicide* I challenge other myths such as "People who kill themselves are just being selfish," or "If someone wants to kill herself there is nothing I can do," or "Asking someone about suicidal thinking will plant the idea in the person's mind."

How can Christian lay individuals best be of help to those close to them who struggle with mental illness and suicidal thoughts and those who survived suicide attempts?

What is most important is for lay individuals to extend friendship to people with mental illness and suicidal thoughts and those who have survived suicide attempts. Dr. Thomas

Joiner has developed the prevailing theory on why people become suicidal. He believes that suicidal people's human needs to belong and to feel effective have been thwarted.

He believes that suicidal people feel isolated from others and feel like they are a burden. To help a person with suicidal thoughts or who has survived a suicide attempt, reach out to them in person, by phone, or even by sending a note. Help the person find a way to contribute to the faith community in a meaningful way. Another way is to help them get connected to mental-health treatment.

In the last year or so, some high-profile suicides have taken place in the evangelical church—Matthew, son of pastor Rick Warren and his wife, Kay, probably most prominent among them. How, in your estimation, have Christians generally responded? What is good and what is bad? What needs to change, and how is that change achieved?

First I want to say that suicide is heart-breaking, and I grieve with all the survivors touched by these suicides. Second, God can redeem the evil of suicide, and one way may be that the church begins to engage the conversation about suicide. It is good when Christians can engage the issue of suicide directly—stigma-free—when people become suicidal, attempt it or die by suicide.

Paul addressed the suicidal Philippian jailer directly (Acts 16:28). I admire Rick and Kay Warren, who have spoken out on the issue of guns and suicide. The Warrens' church also sponsored a large mental-health conference. One way to reduce the secrecy around suicide is to seek more information about how to prevent suicide by reading *Preventing Suicide* or looking at the Suicide Prevention Resource Center website ([\(\)](#)) or other websites such as the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([\(\)](#)), or the American Association of Suicidology ([\(\)](#)).

Suicide is contagious. When a person dies by suicide, clusters

sometimes arise with several other people subsequently taking their lives. How does this dynamic work itself out in the church and Christian communities?

Suicide contagion ought be a concern in a church following a suicide. How suicide is talked about at the funeral or in a youth group or how a person is memorialized matters to how much contagion occurs. Contagion also is most likely to occur with vulnerable people such as adolescents and young adults who are in small, intense social networks or among those who are already suicidal or suggestible.

It's important to avoid talking in detail about the method or the location; to avoid romanticizing the person who died so that vulnerable others might view suicide as a way to garner recognition in death; and to avoid saying the person is now at peace such that vulnerable people might view suicide as a viable solution to their problems. *Preventing Suicide* provides many other suggestions for faith communities for avoiding contagion.

It is said that Protestant take their own lives more than Catholics do. How do denominational ties and different theologies affect suicide rates? What other factors play a part?

Emile Durkheim published *Le Suicide* in 1897 about his finding that more Protestants died by suicide than Catholics. His theory was that there was greater social regulation or integration among Catholics, a factor that he believed protected against suicide. What is currently clear is that religiosity protects against suicide. It's less clear in the U.S. whether the suicide rate for Protestants is higher than the rate for Catholics because religious affiliation is not tracked by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, in looking at suicide rates across the countries of the world, there seems to be a relationship between disapproving of suicide and lower suicide rates.

Historically and still for many branches of Christianity, suicide has been seen as a mortal sin. What's your take on that?

I didn't share my theology of suicide in *Preventing Suicide* because what is important to me is to encourage clergy to reflect for themselves on their theology of suicide. Different Christian clergy will have a different answer to your question. Chapter 3 of *Preventing Suicide* goes into great detail about the importance of a theology of suicide as well as describing the spectrum of Christian views on suicide and sin and the reasons Christians use to argue that suicide is or is not a sin, that it's a forgivable or an unforgivable sin. In the chapter, you can read the views of Luther, Calvin, Bonhoeffer and the current view in the Catholic Church.

Clergy have told us that they would rather have thought this through before a person comes to their office to ask if suicide damns a person to hell. Because of the importance of this question and the complexity of the possible answers, I'd refer you to *Preventing Suicide*. But I can say that in my research I've found that most people, whatever their theology, object to suicide.

What's the one thing you would like to say to a Christian who is contemplating suicide?

I would like to ask if they are receiving mental-health treatment. Suicidal thinking often comes in the context of a mental-health problem, which needs treatment. If I could ask another question, I'd like to ask if the person would feel free to call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (8255) () if he or she has suicidal thoughts.

Reprinted with permission from Theologues. **Arni Zachariassen** studied theology and religion at the universities of Aberdeen and Manchester. He now lives in his home country of the Faroe Islands where he enjoys the company of his wife and two kids.

He's quite a boring fellow, especially according to the teenagers he hangs out with in his daily capacity as a youth worker, indulging the simple pleasures of reading, listening to heavy metal and cooking.