### DIOCESAN LITURGICAL COMMISSION

**SUGGESTIONS TO ASSIST PRIESTS**

**AND FUNERAL PLANNING TEAMS**

**IN PLANNING A FUNERAL SERVICE**

**OR REQUIEM MASS**

**IN THE EVENT OF A SUICIDE**

**BACKGROUND**

Suicide remains the leading cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 44. The overall suicide rate in 2015 was 12.6 per 100,000 in Australia. This is the highest rate in 10-plus years. The most recent Australian data (ABS, Causes of Death, 2015) reports deaths due to suicide in 2015 at 3,027. This equates to more than eight deaths by suicide in Australia each day. Deaths by suicide in Australia occur among males at a rate three times greater than that for females. However, during the past decade, there has been an increase in suicide deaths by females. [[1]](#footnote-1)

We need to be careful in our pastoral care of the suicide bereaved when it comes to our use of language.

There are phrases that can highlight the choice that was made without implying judgment or stigma. A phrase such as the deceased has “taken her/his own life”. The words are important, but what is more essential is our use of them as concerned pastors. Take extra care over every word.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**THE FUNERAL - USE OF LANGUAGE**

We need to be especially understanding of families that have experienced suicides.

When talking with the family of the deceased, do not be afraid to talk about death, just as you would normally talk about the death of anyone.

Some things to avoid saying:

- "At least you have other children."

- "You're strong; you can handle it."

- "You need to get over it and move on."

- "Be strong."

- "She/he is in a better place."

- "Why do you think she/he did this?"

- "How did she/he do it?"

- "Did she/he leave a note?"

Some better things to say:

- "Tell me a good memory you have of your loved one."

- "I can't imagine how much pain you're in. We hurt, too, because we loved her/him."

- "I love you and my prayers are with you."

- "What a terrible loss for your family."

- "Focus on the way they lived and loved, not the way they died." [[3]](#footnote-3)

**PLANNING THE FUNERAL**

To organise and lead the funeral or memorial service of someone who has died as a result of suicide, is a daunting task. Celebrants who prepare and lead such services need to be able to manage their own feelings of sadness and fear before, during and after the service. The understandable emotions felt by celebrants result from their awareness of the often tragic circumstances surrounding the death of the person, whose loved ones they are supporting and ministering to. The natural fear in the heart and mind of celebrants needs to be managed, if they are to provide a “still point” for those who are grieving. To lead a funeral or memorial service for someone who has died as a result of suicide requires knowledge of the grief process, experience of previous deaths and considerable emotional and spiritual maturity. No celebrant confronted with the challenge of helping prepare and lead such services can ever “get used to” such situations. The celebrant needs to show empathy and compassion, but not be overwhelmed by the tragedy they are assisting (often large numbers) of other people to accept and begin to deal with.

The celebrant needs to spend many hours before any funeral or memorial service, alongside friends and family of the deceased hearing their stories, showing empathy and assisting them to create an event which “rings true” for their loved one.

The funeral or memorial service provides an opportunity for family and friends to celebrate the life of their loved one, regardless of how their loved one died. The funeral or memorial service also creates the context within which family and friends can continue the process of grieving deeply together. Many attending the service will still be in shock and may not remember much of what is said afterwards. It is an art for the celebrant to achieve the right balance between the celebration of the person’s life and grieving, between smiling and tears.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

Plan as you would any funeral whether it is to be held in the Church or other venue. Families should be encouraged to choose hymns and readings that offer hope:

***Readings:***

Isaiah 43: 1-4

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

Romans 8:31-35, 27-39

Philippians 4:5b-7

Revelation 21:1-5a

***Psalms:***

Psalm 23

Psalm 27

Psalm 46

Psalm 121

***Gospels:***

Luke 24:13-35

John 6:37-40

John 11:17-27

John 12:20-28

John 14: 1-6

Careful consideration needs to be given as to who will speak at the funeral. It is generally not a good idea to provide an open platform, but suggest families invite a mature good friend of the family who would share good memories of the person. Invite them to share for only five minutes.

During the funeral the celebrant should avoid words such as “we will never recover from this loss.” Hope of recovery from trauma and grief needs to be sensitively offered in the midst of pain; hope and reassurance that there is a way through this, together from darkness to light. Celebrants can embody this hope by the way in which they conduct the service and by their attitude to those who are grieving. The homily should be brief and focus on the capacity of humans to deal with tragedy with support from a loving God.

**SAMPLE PRAYERS**

Below are some examples of prayers for dealing with death in the event of a suicide. These can be adapted depending on circumstances.

God our Creator,

you are the source of all love and life.

We give you thanks for *N.*,

for the remarkable gift she/he was and will continue to be.

As we farewell a wife/husband, mother/father, aunt/uncle and friend,

we do so with heavy hearts.

We remember all that she/he has meant to us,

and give thanks for the rich memories we have:

Her/his love of their family and friends,

her/his delight in *insert their particular qualities that communicate the personality of the deceased.*

We also remember the times when she/he was hard to understand,

when she/he moved beyond our reach

and we couldn’t touch her/him with our love and care.

Heal our memories of hurt and bring us to forgiveness and life.

Loving God, surround us with your compassion.

Do not let grief overwhelm us.

Give us strength and courage to leave *N.* in your care.

We pray for *N’s. spouse* as the horizon shifts for her/him,

and for immediate family,

for the wider family,

and those, who through *N’s.* generosity, became family. [[5]](#footnote-5)

God our strength and our redeemer:

You do not leave us in this life nor abandon us in death.

Renew in us your sustaining strength,

for we believe that there is nothing in all creation

that can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

God of hope,

we come to you in shock and grief and confusion of heart.

Help us to find peace in the knowledge of

your loving mercy to all your children,

and give us light to guide us out of our darkness

into the assurance of your love,

in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Merciful God,

hear the cries of our grief,

We come to you in prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen. [[6]](#footnote-6)

1. https://www.lifeline.org.au/about-lifeline/lifeline-information/statistics-on-suicide-in-austra [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.perth.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/AWA224-Hard-Places-v4-LR.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.perth.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/AWA224-Hard-Places-v4-LR.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.methodist.org.nz/files/docs/waikato%20waiariki/guidelines%20for%20suicide%20funerals.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.perth.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/AWA224-Hard-Places-v4-LR.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://nouwen-network.com/shortprayersforcomfortafteradeathbysuicide.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)