

Practical Pastoral Care for Those Considering or Requesting MAiD

Dr David Shebino
Thanatology Specialist, Professor – Tyndale University, and Pastor

Introduction

This document provides guidance for pastors and lay leaders in offering compassionate pastoral care when a congregant is considering or has chosen MAiD (Medical Assistance in Dying). It is intended as a practical resource to support pastoral conversations, visits, and follow-up care in situations that are often emotionally, morally, and spiritually complex.

This guidance seeks to hold together two commitments. First, the church's theological position on MAiD, grounded in the affirmation of the sacredness and dignity of human life. Second, the call to offer pastoral care that reflects Christ's compassion, presence, and faithfulness to those who are suffering.

As a church, we affirm that every human life is created in the image of God and possesses inherent dignity. We also recognize that many within our tradition hold theological or moral objections to MAiD. At the same time, the ministry of Jesus demonstrates a commitment to accompany people in their suffering without abandonment. Faithfulness to Christian teaching and compassionate presence must therefore be held together with grace, clarity, and integrity.

The Initial Approach

A congregant may share that they (or a family member) are considering MAiD. This disclosure often reflects deeper fears, concerns, or experiences of suffering. Common themes may include:

- "I don't want to suffer."
- "I don't want to be a burden."
- "I feel that my life no longer has meaning or purpose."

In these early conversations, the pastor's primary responsibility is to listen deeply and without judgment. Helpful responses often take the form of open-ended questions, such as:

- *What is leading you to think about this now?*
- *What has been most difficult for you lately?*

As trust develops, pastors may gently and faithfully communicate core theological and pastoral affirmations. These truths should not be offered as arguments or corrections, but as assurances grounded in relationship:

- Each person is made in the image of God.
- Each person is precious to God, even in weakness.
- A person's value is not based on ability, independence, or productivity.
- Life is a gift from God.
- God is present with us in suffering.

Exploring Alternatives

Pastoral care also includes helping individuals consider other forms of support and care that may address suffering and fear. Exploring alternatives is not about pressuring a change of decision, but

about ensuring the person knows they are not alone and that their suffering matters.

Such options may include:

- Palliative care.
- Pain management, including palliative sedation when appropriate.
- Ongoing spiritual support.
- Family and community care.

Throughout these conversations, it is essential to communicate clearly and consistently that the individual will not be abandoned.

Pastoral Care at Key Moments

Before the MAiD Procedure

In the period leading up to the procedure, pastors can offer:

- Space to discuss spiritual questions, doubts, and fears.
- Prayer, Scripture, and the celebration of Communion, as appropriate.

Pastors should not act as witnesses to the MAiD process or offer actions or language that would be understood as endorsing the procedure.

Day of MAiD

On the day of MAiD, pastoral presence may include:

- Visiting the individual before the procedure.
- Offering prayer and Scripture.

To maintain pastoral and moral integrity, pastors should not remain present during the administration of MAiD. It is appropriate to excuse oneself respectfully, having previously communicated this boundary with gentleness, clarity and compassion.

After MAiD

Pastoral care continues after the death of the individual. Family members and loved ones may experience a wide range of emotions, often simultaneously and sometimes changing over time. These may include:

- Relief
- Anger
- Guilt
- Regret
- Confusion

Pastors should provide follow-up care in the weeks after the service, offering space for lament, prayer, conversation, and the naming of complex grief.

Self-Care for Pastoral Leaders

Providing pastoral care in MAiD-related situations can be spiritually and emotionally demanding.

Pastors and lay leaders are encouraged to:

- Debrief with a trusted colleague, spiritual director or therapist.
- Seek peer support.
- Attend to signs of moral distress or compassion fatigue.

Such practices are essential for sustaining long-term pastoral ministry.

Conclusion

Providing pastoral care in situations involving MAiD is challenging and requires wisdom, humility, and courage. While maintaining personal and theological conscience, pastors are still called to offer compassionate, faithful care. This work does not require moral compromise, but it does require presence, love, and a commitment to walk with people in their suffering.