



What Can Religious Communities Do?

By Rev. James T. Clemons

Following a *Christian Century* article in which I pointed out the church's failure to deal with the current crisis, I was criticized for not having given answers to the questions I raised. The point was well taken, even though the purpose of the article was to serve as a kind of theological and ethical gadfly to get others to go about answering the questions for themselves.

My own response to that specific criticism was first to ask specific ethicists, preachers, and denominational leaders to join me in moving the church. Secondly, I responded by formulating my own thoughts as to what the church and other religious communities could be doing.

It is a source of some comfort to know that at least two leaders in Christian ethics and one in sociology have written on the subject as a result of my nagging, that a few pastors have decided to preach on it, and that several churches and C.P.E. groups have conducted classes and seminars on various aspects of the problem. I have edited two books, one on sermons and the other on various perspectives, each designed to help religious groups to make a more faithful response. In addition, I helped to initiate and guide the resolution adopted by the United Methodist General Conference. I can only hope that these results will indicate what can be done by religious groups and individuals, and that the overall response will help to bring about a reduction in the number of suicides and a more humane, caring environment for all those in need.

It remains now only to present a few suggestions as to what churches, and perhaps other religious groups, might do to respond to the current crisis, (of suicide). These thoughts are based in part on an article I wrote for *Response*, a publication for United Methodist Women, in October 1986. At that time, I identified some specific programs that could be implemented immediately to begin moving the church.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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?

4. 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. Archaic laws need to be taken off the books if no one really believes them to be just, or if they are being ignored. 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.
5. We can urge our own denomination or judicatory to clarify its position, to publicize it, and to urge its study and implementation.
6. We can proclaim the gospel! Strange as it may seem, the good news of 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: 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.

In times of unparalleled tragedy such as we are facing America today, religious communities should not be in the background. Our concern, our thought, our energies, and our faith are desperately needed to turn the tide. Fortunately, there are things we can do. (p 113-116)

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.

This selection, first written in 1986, comes from Clemons' book, *What Does the Bible Say About Suicide*, and provides his perspective about what religious communities can do to help prevent suicide.