



Health Care Planning Conversations in Our Faith Communities

A Conversation with The Reverend Laura E. Everett

Clergy have long held an important role at the very end of life. Do you see a role for clergy when adults and families are first making a plan about their preferences and choices for care?

I would love to see an expanded role for clergy, religious leaders and pastors in connecting with families long before we are with them at the end stage of life. One of the gifts of being a member of a congregation is that you have a sense that we are all in this together through life's multiple stages- birth, growth, illness, aging, and death. We say that's all a part of life, and that all life is holy. Clergy can have an important role in talking with congregants about making faithfully informed health care decisions long before a crisis situation.

What does it mean to make faithfully informed decisions?

To make faithfully informed decisions about end of life care is an invitation to look at our deepest values and to ask- *What do I believe about life? What do I believe about the commitment I have to my family and my community? What does it mean to live well in my faith, and die well?* We know our congregants are faced with these questions and making decisions about their health care and the care of their loved ones. Clergy can ask these big questions and explore their meaning within our faith communities to support congregants in their personal journey of making faithfully informed choices.

Why should religious communities have a central role in health care planning discussions?

Church, synagogues, mosques - we are all at our best when we hold the complexities of life and find ways of gathering together to make meaning about what we are experiencing in life. Our religious communities are a natural space to explore complicated issues like health care planning and end of life care within our faith. Not all Christians will make the same choices of care, not all Presbyterians, not all Methodists, not all Jews will think the same and have had the same life experiences. Having early conversations honors the diversity of experiences that everyone has



and the different ways they interact with their traditions. I believe we can have a central role acknowledging life's complexities and modeling a faithful process by initiating these important discussions in own communities.

Do you think adults and families would welcome health care planning discussions within their congregations?

There is great wisdom in our communities. I think congregants would welcome being able to share person-to-person experiences like- *How do I make hard decisions about my father's care when his illness prevents him from telling me the kind of care he wants? How do I give my seriously ill mother the best care while also caring for young children?* Understanding how faith impacts our decision making and exploring these questions within our faith can be a great gift to our communities. It's one of the reasons why I love church. It's a multi-generational space where if we start these discussions and create space for this community conversation, deep wisdom will emerge around these complex questions of how to live well and how to die well.

How can religious communities start the discussion?

There are many ways religious communities can open up the discussion through sermons, Bible study, and group discussions. Scripture is full of beautiful images of what it means to live faithfully as well as images of death and dying. Our trusting community can share experiences and act generously and kindly as we explore these tender conversations together. One reason Honoring Choices Massachusetts is a great resource to pastors is that it offers information and group discussion materials to help us host these conversations right in our communities.

What is the benefit of having early conversations in our congregations?

At our best our religious communities are a reminder that we do not live alone and ideally we do not die alone. We are part of a web of Creation and a web of relationships that extend beyond us. Providing a safe place to have the first conversation invites a normalizing of this discussion, and opens the door for on-going conversations as part of our community experience. It really says to our community- you do not have to be alone in this; you are part of a larger community who will hold you all through life and be there for you at death. What a great gift of fellowship and affirmation of life in caring for each other.

Biography

The Rev. Laura E. Everett serves as the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, the state ecumenical partnership of seventeen Orthodox and Protestant member denominations. The Massachusetts Council of Churches is a "network of individuals, congregations and denominations convinced that what binds us together in Christ is stronger than what divides us." www.masscouncilofchurches.org