

10 guidelines for pastoral care during the coronavirus outbreak

How can we accompany people through this valley of anxiety, fear, and death?

by *Eileen R. Campbell-Reed*

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Officials are arguing over whether the novel coronavirus has reached the level of pandemic, as outbreaks continue to spread globally. Meanwhile, religious leaders still must care for people—many of whom are feeling a rise in anxiety verging on panic.

How can ministers, chaplains, counselors, and educators accompany people pastorally through this valley of anxiety, fear, and death? Here are 10 brief guidelines.

1. Monitor and follow the health guidelines. The Centers for Disease Control, the [World Health Organization](#), and [your state health department](#) are monitoring the situation closely. Follow their guidelines. Stay healthy yourself. (Like the flight attendant says: *when the oxygen masks drop, put your own mask on first before helping anyone else.*) Model for others how to show up without panic. Basic and accurate information is widely available, but sometimes when anxiety is high, even looking for the basics becomes especially challenging. Providing it can be part of pastoral care.

2. Be a non-anxious presence. Even if you zoned out during your pastoral care class in seminary, you probably heard this one phrase. That's because showing up calm, emotionally present, and free from anxiety engenders trust and provides the right kind of care in any crisis, from papercut to pandemic. For caregivers to show up non-anxiously means managing our own feelings, so we neither try to flee the situation nor flood it with our own emotions or anxieties. People will borrow our calm and compassion to assist them in reducing their own anxieties.

3. Show up for people, even if it's not in person. "Avoid close contact" is becoming a mantra in this crisis, [especially for people over 60](#). Some groups of [people will experience social stigma around the disease](#). In this age, we can show up for people digitally. It is not the same as being able

to reach out and hold a hand. Yet we are fortunate to have this viable option. You are likely already connected to people on various social platforms, so use them—with care—to offer your support.

4. Listen in love. No matter what turn a crisis takes, [one of the most enduring and powerful gifts we can offer is to listen](#). By listening we embody the love of the sacred, the love of a wider community, the love of life itself. Compassionate listening is exactly what people need when they are faced with the overwhelming, uncontrollable circumstances of a crisis.

5. Find ways to make community. The human desire to be helpful is incredibly strong. Although a crisis may lead some people to withdraw, it can also be a significant opportunity to pull together and support each other. Pastors who convey leadership and imagination can pull people together in organized, caring, and sustainable ways.

6. Help people take the long view. Find ways to remind people that God's loving presence was here before the universe itself, and it will be here long after the universe has passed away. Seeing ourselves as part of a much larger picture offers groundedness and hope. It can help us maintain a sense of hopefulness about God's loving presence in our lives, even when circumstances threaten to dim our hope.

7. Keep values alive. Hospice workers and chaplains often say that people die the way they lived. And while not every crisis will be a deadly one, we are all going to die. In frightening times, our job is to call on people to live into their best sense of how to be in the world. This does not mean being dishonest about a crisis and its threats. It does mean we keep leaning into God's sustaining presence, loving our neighbors, and facing death with the same purpose and values by which we faced life.

8. Don't be afraid to talk about death. When talking to people who are afraid, we may tap quickly into an underlying fear of death itself. When this turn in the conversation happens, don't suppress it. Helping people grieve well—before, during, and after losses—helps them live better in every area of life. Making space to talk about death means expanding our capacities to live each moment as a gift.

9. Pray. Spoken prayers for people who are anxious and in great need can reshape a situation's meaning. Yet in times of trauma and crisis, using

too many words can sound hollow—and prayers can come off as judgment or preachy advice. Perhaps the better path is the prayer of participation. We participate in God’s life and one another’s lives by showing up, by meditating in silence and renewing our sense of purpose, by bearing honest witness to the situation.

10. Tag out. Remember that you, too, are a finite and limited creature. Tend to your own needs. Lean into your own community for support. And take turns with others giving care. It is tempting to believe in a crisis that we must give or do everything right now. Mostly this is not possible. Sabbath is not a luxury. Self-care is not selfish. As this outbreak continues to unfold, take steps to renew your own energy and hope in the Spirit of God.