



Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life: Part V

This five-part prayer resource written by faculty, program directors, and leaders from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary community provides thoughtful essays on ways Christians can pray with people experiencing life's challenges.

Part V topics include:

- » Crises
- » Financial Distress
- » Global Church Issues
- » Murder and Terrorism
- » National Issues and Tragedies / Natural Disasters
- » Suicide
- » Uncertainty about the Future



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Dear Reader of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life,”

As a seminary focused on preparing people for ministry in the way of Jesus, our hope at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is that “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” will help you think well for the work of helping bear the burdens of others. The present installment represents Part V of this resource.

The essays that are included aim at helping Christian leaders—especially newer leaders—navigate theologically complicated issues with the people to whom they minister. The articles address topics by answering questions such as:

1. What is helpful to say/pray in this regard? What is unhelpful to say/pray, and why?
2. How can one incorporate Scripture in a prayer without becoming “preachy”—and what Scriptures might one use with respect to the particular circumstance faced?
3. Are there specific liturgies or prayers (individual or corporate) that might be used or consulted regarding the given difficulty?
4. What books of prayers (or books on the topic of prayer) might one consult?

These thoughtful essays do not give specific, “correct” answers on how all Christians should pray with people in such circumstances . . . readers from a variety of viewpoints will be likely to find contributions that speak to their own needs for effective ministry.

Throughout this resource you’ll find a number of hyperlinked biblical passages. We encourage you to read these selections and consider how God’s word might further shape your care for others dealing with life’s challenges.

The Scripture quotations contained in the essays are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Part V of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” includes essays on the following topics:

- » **Crises**
The Rev. Dr. John C. Welch ’02, Vice President for Student Services and Community Engagement and Dean of Students
- » **Financial Distress**
The Rev. Carolyn Cranston ’99, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations
- » **Global Church Issues**
The Rev. Balajiedlang (Bala) Khylllep, Associate Director of the World Mission Initiative
- » **Murder and Terrorism**
The Rev. Dr. Kang-Yup Na, PTS Board Member / Associate Professor of Religion, Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pa.
- » **National Issues and Tragedies / Natural Disasters**
The Rev. Dr. Kenneth J. Woo, Assistant Professor of Church History
- » **Suicide**
The Rev. Mary Robin Craig ’10, Pastor, Spiritual Director / Suicide Prevention – Mental Health Advocate
- » **Uncertainty about the Future**
The Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens, Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality and Ministry

CRISES

The Rev. Dr. John C. Welch '02, Vice President for Student Services and Community Engagement and Dean of Students

Crisis. They come in all forms—crises of health . . . family . . . identity . . . finances . . . even faith. At times they are intertwined. A health crisis can lead to a family crisis and then to a crisis of faith. A financial crisis can lead to an identity crisis and then to a family crisis. A crisis of faith can lead to an identity crisis and then to a family crisis before resulting in a crisis of faith. A conglomerate of crises can weave a tapestry of turmoil.

Consider this vignette. A family has been called to the bedside of a loved one whose physical health has declined to a point where medical professionals consider further treatment options futile because her future quality of life would be compromised. She has also lost the acumen to make good decisions for herself. To complicate matters further, the patient has never shared with any family member what her wishes might be if she were to lose her decision-making capacity. So the family must make the decision whether to continue or discontinue treatment. The patient is facing a medical crisis, and given the current state of affairs, the family is also in a state of crisis for never having imagined being in this situation—one of having to make a life-altering or life-terminating decision for their loved one.

As a medical ethics intern, I once found myself meeting with a family in this very situation—a family left to make such a difficult decision. The loved one's body was breaking down, and more treatment would only cause further harm. My supervisor at the time said to the family, "Her body is already speaking for her." Those few simple words made the difference for the family.

Despite our best efforts to care for our bodies, they will always in time follow the course of our fallen world. But in several places Scripture reminds us just who it is that our bodies belong to: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:8). So also go Psalm 100:3, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture," and Psalm 139:13, "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." A gentle,

situation-sensitive pastoral reminder of verses such as these can bring comfort in situations of physical crisis.

In another vein, consider a man who loses his job after 25 years of employment in a company that decided to restructure. After months of searching, his attempts to find new employment continue to be unsuccessful, healthcare coverage has ended, and his unemployment benefits will soon run out. He and his wife have two teenaged children—the family is struggling to make ends meet. This brewing financial crisis is putting a strain on their familial relationships as well. The husband and father didn't do anything to lose his job—or ever expect to—nor did the family expect to be mired in financial trouble. A family of four who regularly attended worship and church camp, who tried to be faithful members of their congregation, could now also be embarking on a crisis of faith. "Why would this happen to us?" "What did we do to deserve this?"

Such questions could be rumbling beneath the surface of their emotions while friends and other family members, wanting to be helpful by offering advice, are sometimes instead unintentionally stirring the pot of confusion as the family ponders the options for the right direction to take. In such circumstances, it is always important to recall to the crisis-sufferer the one in whom we can and should put our trust. Proverbs 3:5-6 offers this reminder: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." In the Psalms we also find words of comfort and guidance—for example, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him" (Ps 28:7); "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act" (Ps 37:5); and "From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge . . ." (Ps 61:2).

Crisis comes without invitation and at inopportune times. A crisis can wrench the faith even of a strong believer from its moorings. But the strength, courage, and patience to

weather through is possible if we allow ourselves to be placed in the care of our loving Creator God. This prayer invites the crisis-sufferer to do just that:

God of mercy and God of grace, the waters of this crisis are becoming overwhelming for _____. He/she does not trust him/herself to make the right decision at this time, for he/she is afraid of only making things worse. We know that at every turn you are there, but the journey through seems daunting. Hold the hand of _____, Lord, and walk him/her through. May your Spirit serve as his/her compass, and may his/her current misfortune and need for your help serve to remind him/her of your trustworthy love and as a reminder to others of your grace.

FINANCIAL DISTRESS

The Rev. Carolyn Cranston '99, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt 6:31-32).

Financial hardships are a reality in life. As companies downsize, illness strikes, resources are used unwisely, recent graduates lack job prospects, and others age without the necessary resources for financial support, personal debt can mount. Many people are facing difficult financial situations and do not know where to turn. So they come to their pastor or spiritual advisor seeking prayer and guidance. Scripture references are always a sound way to begin such conversations, but for the person seeking help, it is often difficult to believe in the heart what the head knows to be true.

When a person seeks you out to ask for help, listen. Often people in need don't come expecting a solution to the problem; they simply want to be able to tell their story without fear of judgment. Be open and affirming as you listen. Avoid the temptation to preach the prosperity gospel. I have found it to be very true that the more we give to others the more we find God providing for our needs, but we do not give to others so that God will give us what we want. We give in response to God's love and faithfulness. Prayer is the best way to connect with God and to come into God's guiding presence.

We do not pray to change God—we pray to change ourselves and how we deal with our circumstances. Prayer opens us up to hearing what God has to say to us. Sometimes the more broken we are, the easier it is to humble ourselves before God and patiently wait for guidance.

I am reminded of a wonderful story in a little book by Anthony Bloom titled *Beginning to Pray*. Bloom talks about the need to let go of everything, to give our lives and trust to God totally. He wrote about going somewhere with a

friend as a teenager and planning to arrive at a time when they would surely be offered lunch. Due to a train delay, they arrived after the lunch hour and felt extremely hungry. They asked whether they could be given something to eat. The only food available was half a cucumber. Bloom couldn't imagine being grateful to receive his share—a quarter of a cucumber!—but his friend, a strong believer, immediately began to pray and give thanks. Remembering that experience, Bloom comments,

In all my life I haven't been so grateful to God for any amount or quantity of food. I ate it as one would eat sacred food. I ate it carefully, not to miss any moment of this rich delight of the fresh cucumber, and after we had finished I had no hesitation in saying, “And now, let us give thanks to the Lord,” and we started again in gratitude.

In our weakness, God may teach us what is truly important. We may learn how to handle resources more effectively. We may learn that we can live on far less than we thought we could. Perhaps we may experience God's directing us to a new career or resources to help in our times of distress. There is no end to what God can accomplish in us when we reach out in all our brokenness and surrender our lives to our Lord.

The approach to you by someone experiencing financial distress often offers not only an opportune time to share Scripture verses and prayer with that person but also to direct him or her to resources that can help immensely in getting out of debt. One such resource consists in the program Financial Peace University, by Dave Ramsey. Many churches offer this program. Books and CDs/DVDs are also available for self-teaching. Generally, however, going through this process in a group is more helpful, supportive, and effective.

Financial stress and at times distress always lurk. When ministering to others experiencing these hardships, remember to listen, suggest helpful resources for overcoming financial distress, share Scripture, and always pray—in a sincere and sensitive manner, such as is demonstrated in the prayer below:

Dear Lord, help _____ to find firm ground in an uncertain economy. As he/she seeks work and assistance, give him/her strength not to be anxious when things seem to be going nowhere. Give _____ patience not to despair when things look bleak; give him/her serenity to know that you are right here, present with him/her, helping to carry his/her cross each day. May _____ do your will in all things that your holy name may be praised! Thank you, Lord, for all the ways that you care for and protect _____. For all things we are truly grateful. Amen.

Helpful resources for people experiencing financial distress include:

- » Financial Peace University, Dave Ramsey, www.daveramsey.com/fpu
- » www.beliefnet.com/prayers/protestant/work/prayer-for-help-with-finances.aspx
- » www.iprayprayer.com/prayers-money-prayers-finances-prayer-help-times-financial-hardship/

The Scripture passages below can also be a source of help, assurance, and comfort in such times:

- » [Psalm 46:1-3](#)
- » [Proverbs 19:21](#)
- » [Ecclesiastes 7:14](#)
- » [Luke 12:27-28](#)
- » [Philippians 4:6-7](#)
- » [1 Thessalonians 5:16-18](#)
- » [James 1:5](#)
- » [1 Peter 5:6-7](#)

GLOBAL CHURCH ISSUES

The Rev. Balajiedlang (Bala) Khyllap, Associate Director of the World Mission Initiative

Whenever I return home to India, I am always asked questions about the church in the United States—questions such as, “How many Christians are there in the city you live in?” and “How is church attendance in the U.S.?” In fact, I get similar questions from friends here in the U.S. inquiring about Christians in my part of India. Christians from across the world are indeed intrigued to find out the state of Christian faith and practices in other parts of the world. I hope this interest comes not only out of our curiosity but also out of our deep sense of connection with our brothers and sisters who are trying to live faithfully to God within their own contexts.

When we start praying for the “global church,” we have to examine what and who it is we tend to pray for. My guess is that most of us are praying for those in the southern hemisphere—the Global South, especially those countries experiencing poverty and social and political unrest. Witness the fact that many world prayer books focus on stories or problems from countries in the Global South and not in the Western world. This lopsidedness gives the impression that only the church and people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America need our prayers.

While it is important that we pray for our brothers and sisters in these contexts, I believe it sets up an unhelpful divide. This tendency to focus on praying for Christians in the Global South stems from the traditional perception that Christianity is a Western religion and that it spread globally from the West. Yet the truth is that Christianity had sprung out of Asia and spread through Asia and Africa long before it went to Western Europe (e.g., [Acts 8:26-40](#)). So in today's world, praying for the global church doesn't necessarily mean only praying for the church in India or Sierra Leone—it can also mean praying for the church in the U.S. or Germany.

The need for prayer for churches throughout the world is further accented by the rapid growth of the church in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In all contexts—from north to south, east to west—faithful people are facing barriers, from poverty to societal apathy, from political persecution to political exploitation of their faith. No matter how privileged

the church might be or appear to be in a given context, all Christian believers throughout the world need support in prayer by their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Furthermore, we pray for the global church because Scripture instructs us to do so ([1 Tim 2:1](#)). From a biblical perspective, we know that as Christians we are all connected as one in Jesus Christ. Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church clearly states that, since we are all parts of the body of Christ, we cannot neglect some parts of the body and think they are not important or that we don't need them ([1 Cor 12:12-31](#)). For Paul, if one part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers. We need each other in order to grow and learn.

Praying for the global church can be difficult especially when we don't agree with the particular beliefs of a specific church. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, there are 45,000 Christian denominations in our world today (Todd M. Johnson and Cindy M. Wu, *Our Global Families: Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World*, 2015, p. 56). Just imagine the number of theological differences and the varieties of ways we do church and mission. I personally find it tempting to start praying, “God, help these people see the light,” which really means, “God, help these people figure out that I am right, and they are wrong.” Yet the truth is that we should pray for God's truth and love to shine forth in all parts of the world even when doing so makes us uncomfortable.

Praying for the global church can be overwhelming, too. There is so much going on in our world that we can get lost in who and what to pray for. But trying to be specific in our prayers can be very helpful on both ends. It can be done by finding a global church partner, an individual, or a neighborhood community from a different culture or country where a mutual relationship can be established and mutual learning, sharing, and praying can be experienced by both sides.

So, as we pray for the global church, let us remember that God is at work in different parts of the world, and together with our brothers and sisters around the world we are called

to participate in God's work by praying together for God's reign in it. And let us begin by praying for the global church:

God of all nations, whose name and glory are manifested through all the diversity of cultures, races, and languages all around the world: We confess O God, that even though we know you have created everyone in your own image, oftentimes our words and actions deny this truth. Help us, O Lord, truly to see your face and hear your voice through the many faces and voices of our brothers and sisters around the world.

Lord, we pray for your church throughout the world, that amid our differences we may realize we are all parts of one body. Give us the strength to love, to listen, to hear, to share our resources, and to work alongside those who think and worship you differently, knowing that there is so much we can learn from one another and that together we can make your "Kin-dom" realized in this world. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

MURDER AND TERRORISM

The Rev. Dr. Kang-Yup Na, PTS Board Member
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Praying is difficult. In one of the most significant texts in the Bible, Paul writes, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26). In our most honest moments, even as we are praying we might admit this truth. We ought to pray, so we do. But how often do we reflect deeply and honestly about what we are doing?

Long predating people’s spurning of public “thoughts and prayers” as pointless cliché in the face of gun violence and terrorism, Christians have prayed before, during, and after tragic events that have devastated life in spheres private, regional, national, and global. But even though prayer is one of the central acts of our faith, many Christians pray without spending much time thinking about what prayer is and about the many questions that pertain to praying. Why should one pray—and what kind of prayer? Who should pray—and for whom? When should one pray—and where? How should one pray—for how long and how often? Praying is both natural and difficult, especially when heartbreaking calamity strikes hard and near, as it does when murder and terrorism touch a person’s life.

Following Jesus’ teaching and example we pray, “Your will be done” (Matt 6:10; 26:42). But ordinarily we ask God to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves or the world—perhaps partly because it is so difficult to discern God’s will for us, for others, and our world. Despite our best intentions, in our praying we really mean, “Please grant what I wish for me, for others, and for the world.” We pray as though to bend God’s will toward our hopes and desires—desires that seem to us to follow our understanding of God’s will for peace and the well-being of all people. But notwithstanding all the prayers we offer, the world goes on in a way that reminds us we are not in control of what happens, no matter how much we pray. We might even recognize that our prayers unwittingly indicate our acknowledgment of that reality; that is to say, the very effort to exert our will and effect our desires through prayer—with God’s blessing, of course—is a way of expressing our helplessness and hopelessness.

How authentic of Paul and how salutary for us, then, for him to say, “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Sometimes sighs too deep for words may be the best kind of prayer. We can find examples of “silence as prayer” in both the Bible and subsequent Christian tradition (the monastic practice of silence, and contemplative prayers, for example); one of the best illustrations comes in Job 2:11-13, which depicts how Job’s three friends respond to his ineffable suffering. The entire pericope deserves lengthy reflection and can teach us much about compassion and prayer, but as regards prayer with others about murder and terrorism, note particularly the final verse: “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

With all these preparatory considerations, inadequate as they are, we will find it hard to pray about murder—the intentional taking of human life by another human being—and terrorism—the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims. Murder and acts of terrorism instill fear in a person or society through violent acts. Even more burdensome than the violence itself is the human agency involved: for every murder and act of terrorism, there is a murderer and a terrorist, whether acting alone or with others.

And for all who are affected by murder and terrorism, there follow some of the strongest human emotions: grief, anger, and fear. Without neglecting these strong feelings in ourselves and in others, it helps to take a deep breath, the very breath that marked the beginning of human life (Gen 2:7), and to sigh deeply as we meditate and pray—pray to find inner peace, pray to be transformed even by such tragedies into more compassionate people who are mindful of others’ suffering:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love, . . . Where there is despair, hope; . . . O divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console, to be understood, as to understand, to be loved, as to love.

(St. Francis of Assisi)

With sensitivity to the appropriate time for interceding with others who have experienced the tragedies of murder and terrorism, our compassion and sympathy must go in at least two directions—though in many cases and for many of us, reluctantly so. Clearly, Christians will not differ from others in being shaken by the fact of murder as also of an act of terrorism. But as Christians we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt 5:44). There are, therefore, at least three parties with whom it is appropriate to pray:

- » the two sets of victims of every act of murder and terrorism, namely, the direct target(s) of a violent act and those related to or directly affected by the violence—family members, friends, a town;
- » and third, as difficult as it is to accept, the perpetrator of the murder and/or terrorism, who bears the same *imago Dei* as the victims and ourselves (Gen 1:26–27). The most difficult prayer task might be that of praying *with* a murderer or terrorist—a Christian vocation for prison chaplains, to be sure; but all Christians can at least pray for those who are called to pray with murderers and terrorists.
- » Beyond these parties, prayer for a fourth element is appropriate: the very act of violence that is murder and terrorism—constant companions throughout human history.

Private prayer in the way of Job's friends—that is, prayer in the presence of those who suffer—can be helpful for those affected by murder and terrorism; so also can prayer that is somewhat “distanced” from the tragedies and those involved in them—prayer in communities of faith, during congregational worship, in prayer circles, in Bible study groups, and in the public square, if appropriate.

Murder is the first crime recorded in the Bible (Gen 4:8)—a crime for which human beings have found no earthly remedy. Acts of terrifying violence appear throughout the pages of the Old and New Testaments. As long as murder and terrorism are human realities, Christians must pray alongside victims as well as perpetrators with sighs too deep for words. Such is the mission and calling of those who follow the One crucified on the cross, a victim of murder and terror, whose death authenticates God's love and the Good News embodied in the risen Jesus Christ.

I have found Anthony Bloom's *Beginning to Pray* to be one of the most insightful and helpful books for my own reflections on prayer. In praying with people whose lives have been touched by murder and terrorism, consider the silent presence of the friends of Job. When words are appropriate, a prayer such as the one below might usher a measure of comfort:

[Prepare with slow, deep breathing.]

Lord of life, have mercy on us and grant us peace. Hear the cries of your children who have been shaken by the horror of violence and the loss of human life. As we grieve with sighs too deep for words, grant us strength to trust in your love to surround our fear and anger. Grant us compassion for those who caused so much anguish; may they also know your love for them. Heal us all and make us whole; make us instruments of your peace and love, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

NATIONAL ISSUES AND TRAGEDIES / NATURAL DISASTERS

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth J. Woo, Assistant Professor of Church History

The psalmist declares with confidence: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). These words have been a comfort to God’s people throughout history. Martin Luther’s popular hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* is based on Psalm 46. Christians today continue to seek refuge and strength in the one whose presence with us means “we will not fear,” not even if “the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling” (Ps 46:2-3).

But what if our experience does not match these words, despite our earnest efforts to make them our own? How can we pray when we are less confident, more fearful than we would like to be in the face of real tragedies and inexplicable circumstances that affect millions of people? In an age when wars, famine, natural disasters, and disease persist alongside seemingly daily reports of school shootings, the ravages of addiction, and gross misconduct by our elected officials, what does it look like to come together as a community to seek God on behalf of our communities?

Scripture abounds with examples of God’s people turning to God not only during times of personal distress (e.g., [2 Sam 12:16-17](#); [Jas 5:14-15](#)), but also to express the needs of a whole nation or society (e.g., [Exod 2:23-25](#); [1 Sam 12:10-11](#); [1 Tim 2:1-2](#)). In times of national issues and tragedy, including natural disasters, God’s word invites us to consider how our prayers together might be characterized by *honesty*, *humility*, and *hope*.

Psalms of individual and corporate lament invite groups to approach God with *honesty*, thus naming the truth of tragedy, including the difficult questions it might raise for one’s view of God and God’s goodness. In his 1557 commentary on Psalms, the Reformer John Calvin called the book “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,” for it expresses the full range of human emotions: “the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.” More than a mirror, the psalms of the Bible are

also, according to Calvin, an invitation to approach God as the psalmists did—namely, by taking less care with our words and leaving nothing unsaid. The authors of Psalm 44, for example, attribute their nation’s desolation and abandonment to God. Unable to comprehend, much less accept, God’s reasons for their plight, they call on God to wake up: “Rouse yourself!” (v. 23). Such raw emotion can be jarring, its vulnerability unsettling. Yet Scripture invites us to leave off sugar coating and guarded speech in the face of adversity. This approach can be a great comfort for groups in prayer by both uniting individuals in the solidarity of shared experience and giving voice to the depth of pain that often marks our common journey.

Such truthfulness in prayer also fosters *humility* in the face of diverse, frequently complex responses to national issues and tragedies. Not everyone engages adversity in the same way, even when affected by similar circumstances. Jesus warned his followers against seeking explanations for tragedies by speculating about God’s judgment against the sins of others ([Luke 13:1-5](#)). The proliferation of inflammatory religious rhetoric that characterizes our national discourse is an example of how quickly speech becomes a weapon to demean and destroy other people with little thought and even less justification. Christians should take care that such patterns of division do not infect our prayers and thus distort our view of ourselves and God, so that prayer becomes a means of self-elevation at the expense of others rather than serving as a means to seek the Lord, whose grace we all need.

Honesty and humility in prayer challenge our demands for certainty by opening our hearts to the reality that tragic events afflicting an entire nation can arise from complicated causes perhaps decades, even centuries in the making—causes that cannot be reduced to the decisions of a single person or group. In many cases, such as the devastation resulting from natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, etc.), tragedy defies tidy explanations, including all claims regarding human responsibility. Prayer in these instances might focus on lament over the loss of life and livelihood. We might also

offer petitions for comfort for those experiencing grief or displacement, wisdom for those charged with providing relief, and the manifold grace of God to meet people struggling in a variety of ways.

Finally, in prayer we should remember that the one to whom we turn is the one in whom we *hope*. Expectation is the posture of prayer. When faced with concerns that stretch our capacities to comprehend them, not to mention our ability to control them, we rejoice that we are not alone. We gather with others who share our situation. God is in our midst. God hears and acts on our behalf. Although we lack the answers we seek and struggle with the ones we have, in Christ we are assured that God remains with us and for us:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39).

A prayer such as the following may bring comfort to people struggling with experiences that are difficult, perhaps impossible to understand and in most cases beyond our control:

In these uncertain and tumultuous times, have mercy on us, O Lord! Be our refuge and strength, a very present comfort and help in trouble. We cry out on behalf of the afflicted. Draw near to those who mourn. Help us to love others well, to listen patiently, and to serve courageously with wise words and just deeds. Give us abundant grace to reach across the divisions that have fractured our communities and nation—discord now magnified in the face of adversity—that we may live in peace with others because of our hope in Christ, through whom you are reconciling the world to yourself and making all things new. Amen.

SUICIDE

The Rev. Mary Robin Craig '10, Pastor, Spiritual Director, and Suicide Prevention/Mental Health Advocate

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand (Ps 88:4-5).

These poignant verses express some of the pathos both of persons contemplating suicide and people who have lost a loved one to suicide. It is important to recognize that praying with people contemplating suicide is a distinct topic from praying with people grieving loss from suicide. In the former situation, it is essential that the individual involved find help from a qualified and experienced counseling professional, as well as receive spiritual guidance and support. Since most of us are unqualified to assess whether someone is suicidal, it is crucial to learn what questions to ask and what to do if you are at all concerned about someone's safety and need to guide him or her to appropriate assistance. (For help in doing so, see the organizations listed below.)

Individuals grieving the loss of a loved one from suicide often need help from a qualified and experienced counseling professional, too. And they also need spiritual guidance and support. But the call to pray with someone who has suffered such a loss can be terrifying. What does it mean that a beloved friend or family member has seemingly made a choice against life, has taken action in a way that violates the basic human instinct in favor of self-preservation? A parent has died, rather than persevere to care for a child; a child has ended a life that his or her parents and grandparents cherish far more than their own; a sibling has communicated to brothers and sisters that their shared life experience is not worth sustaining. Those who die by suicide do terrible violence to their bodies; they often die alone and in deep psychic pain. The horror of the event is indescribable. The anguish and guilt experienced by those left behind render them inconsolable. How in the world can you pray with someone who feels, every day, that she has been rejected and forsaken by a loved one and, quite possibly, by God as well, or that he has been flung into the endless depths of a dark well of despair?

It can help to learn something about suicide loss before trying to pray with someone who has experienced it firsthand. It can help to know that experts estimate that 90 percent of deaths by suicide are a consequence of undiagnosed and/or untreated mental illness. Excepting those making considered decisions in response to life-diminishing illnesses, people do not "choose" to die, nor do they choose to hurt or damage those they love. They have not "committed" a crime. People who die by suicide are trying to end intolerable pain.

It can help to know that their loved ones, in addition to being left with the word "Why?" echoing throughout the remainder of their lives, will usually be devastated and immobilized by guilt and shame. They often wonder either why they didn't do more to help the person they have lost, or how it can be that they didn't even know the depth of their loved one's pain, and they are horrified to realize that their loved one, the beneficiary of love and support from others, has "thrown it all away."

It can help to realize that survivors will bump into the stigma of suicide where they least expect it—a refusal to conduct a funeral, avoidance by acquaintances in the street, intimations that they are to blame. It can help to know they are often angered and hurt by the responses of others.

Praying with someone about loss from suicide is not the time for casual platitudes about God's plan or God's supposed need for another angel in heaven. It is most especially not a time to try to tell a survivor—someone who has lived through a loved one's death by suicide—those often misquoted words, "God never gives us more than we can handle" (erroneously based on [1 Corinthians 10:13](#), which specifically addresses temptation to sin, not endurance of grief). To say in these circumstances that God is implicated in some sort of test of one's capacity for managing traumatic experiences may result in the suicide survivor's further dismay and alienation from God. Neither is it the time to say, "I know how you feel," since (unless you yourself are a survivor) you do not know, nor to say, "I can't imagine." The latter comment establishes a barrier between you and someone who already feels isolated from others, and it conveys a sense

that what has happened is so awful that you cannot bear to enter into the experience even as a companion.

Prayer with a person experiencing loss from suicide is a time to listen, to sit still, and to be present. It is a time to make space for expressions of rage, of agony, of astonishment, and of rejection of faith. It is a time to make it possible for stories to be told about loved ones now gone. "Tell me what your mother is like." "What is one of your favorite memories?" You might ask someone how he or she imagines the moments after the loved one's death. You do not have to find those ideas compatible with your own or give a lecture about Christian doctrine—your call is to offer the survivor the gift of attentive listening. It can be difficult to remember that companionship and prayer in silence can be much more effective than words, no matter how eloquent, when the unthinkable has happened. A willingness to stay with someone through the wilderness is of far more significance than the most profound speech made in an attempt to lead someone prematurely into a space of healing.

I have asked a number of suicide survivors what they have found most helpful in prayer. Many of them mention the Psalms, as well as fiction and poetry in which sorrow is articulated and assurances of God's boundless love are found. For survivors who are tormented by questions of life after death, books containing reassuring depictions of heaven can be helpful. [Psalm 88](#), the only one of the psalms of lament in which there is no articulation of a turning point toward gratitude and hope, can be deeply meaningful to people who wonder whether any passages in the Bible bear witness to their feelings. (It might be noted that, despite conveying despair, Psalm 88 is addressed to God and reflects a dark confidence that God will hear the psalmist's angry and even sarcastic entreaties.)

Suicide survivors are living the consequences of a loved one's having reached a point beyond what was tolerable, but the loved one's arrival at that destination was not the work of God. The scriptural path for survivors of suicide leads, I think, toward [Romans 8:38-39](#) and [Revelation 21:4](#)—passages well worth sharing with someone who has known this loss, though even these passages may be too much for a survivor to bear at first. When the immediate experience of catastrophe passes, those left behind encounter the crushing realization that their loved one died with a wearying and excruciating sense of emptiness and separation from God, from love—from however their loved one might have characterized the Holy in his or her life. Our hope can be that, someday, the survivor(s) of suicide with whom you are praying will gain confidence in the assurance that, appearances to the contrary, there can be no separation from the love of God—that there will, indeed, be a New Creation in which God will wipe away every tear, and "mourning and crying and pain will be no more." We cannot force fractured spirits into such a conviction, but we can be present to them in the knowledge that our simple availability will be a prayer in itself.

A possible prayer using words might be as follows:
O God, from whom nothing can ever separate us, my dearest (name of suicide survivor) is in your hands. Surround him/her with the light of your love and with assurances of love and safety. Help him/her to find a way to live again and to know that, even in the most desperate of situations and most disastrous of events, you are there—unseen and unheard, perhaps, but nevertheless present and active in our broken and hurting lives. These requests I make in the name of the One who came that we might live anew. Amen.

Poetry resources for prayer:

- » Mary Oliver, "Love Sorrow" (in *Red Bird* [Boston: Beacon, 2009]), and "Heavy" (in *Thirst* [Boston: Beacon, 2007])
- » Billy Collins, "The Wires of the Night" (in *Questions about Angels* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999])
- » Emily Dickinson, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—" (in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, 1999)

Organizations with help for those who are suicidal and for those who have experienced suicide loss include:

- » The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, www.afsp.org
- » Alliance of Hope for Suicide Survivors, www.allianceofhope.org
- » Soul Shop: Ministering to Suicidal Desperation, www.soulshopmovement.org
- » Action Alliance, <http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/faith-communities-task-force>

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE

The Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens, Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality and Ministry

A spouse says, “I need to talk to you, and you’d better sit down for this.”

A physician calls and invites you to come in to discuss your recent medical tests.

A manager summons you into her office in the midst of a downsizing at your workplace.

Each of these conversations can render what you thought was a stable, predictable future suddenly uncertain. And congregations are filled with people for whom unexpected events and unwelcome news are throwing well-ordered lives into chaos.

Remember also: *Every* future is uncertain. And some spiritual traditions have found ways to embrace the uncertainty of everyday life.

For example, the ancient Celts had a tradition of viewing life as a *perigrinatio*—a journey with no firm destination. They viewed life as a journey of discovery as one walked with God into the unpredictable. Sometimes Celtic Christians would set out on a journey in a small boat called a coracle—a vessel with no rudder, sails, or oars—to travel wherever the waves of the sea and the Spirit of God led.

That image of sailing in a coracle provides a wonderful metaphor for life. Every day, when your feet hit the floor and slide into your slippers, and you shuffle into the kitchen to pour the coffee, you are already in a coracle, the Celtic tradition teaches—on an adventure into an unknown future, however known the journey seems, however well-planned the day. The Celtic notion of life as a journey invites a shift in perspective: each moment becomes a fresh, fathomless mystery, a wave we’ve never ridden, a surf we’ve never sailed. A boat never travels the same river twice. Every future is uncertain.

Yes, Christian leaders find themselves praying with people for whom specific events have upended plans, and pastors are first and foremost teachers of prayer. But one of the chief

pastoral tasks is to help every person under one’s care learn to discover that *all* our futures are uncertain. And then to live life accordingly—abandoned to God in trust.

So whether you find yourself ministering to a person who’s received a new diagnosis of cancer, or a new retiree with a well-planned next decade, here are some points to keep in mind as you pray with and instruct that person in the practice of prayer:

Pray to embrace the uncertainty. Uncertainty is not something to run from—in fact, we can’t escape it. So we can pray that, in whatever our circumstance, the Spirit of God will help us to loosen our grip on our imagined sense of control and accept the uncertainty of our lives.

Pray for the grace to trust God’s loving presence. Only one thing is certain—that God’s unfailing, loving presence will never leave us. I can’t imagine anything more important than praying to God to give the grace to trust God’s loving, sustaining presence in each moment—whatever that moment entails.

Pray to learn to receive the present as a gift. Even as we learn to embrace an uncertain future and grow in our trust of God’s loving presence, we can also ask God to give us the grace to receive the present moment as a gift. Our futures may be uncertain, but the present is here—often full of beauty and joy and love. But we can miss the present because our fear too often fixates on the future. And even when the present offers pain, sorrow, and tragedy, we can ask to glimpse more clearly the ways God is with us.

Finally, *we can pray to stay faithful on the journey.* Even when facing an uncertain future, we are still called to love as God loves, offer hope when we can, and serve our neighbors. As we walk into the future, we can ask to be given the grace to continue to love others, offer grace, and extend care. We can ask to share God’s love with open hearts and generous spirits, whenever the future opens possibilities for such love.

Thomas Merton offers a well-known prayer that begins, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end." That prayer names the condition for each one of us. Some know this uncertainty acutely—life's events have made clear how dubious the future can be. Others of us, who think our futures are sure, who believe we are in control of how it will end, need to learn the truth of this prayer.

Whichever group one is in, we can always pray that God will help us acknowledge and accept the uncertainty of our lives, grow our trust in God's loving presence, receive the gift of life in this moment as a gift of grace, and continue to serve others in love as we ride our little coracles into the unknown, upheld all the while by God's infinite love.

Merton ends his prayer by expressing the trust we might all aspire to as we face the unknown: "Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Gracious God, each day we awaken not knowing what the future will hold. Help us to let go of our need to control the future, so that we might be open to your grace and presence in each moment. When uncertainty causes us to worry, may we know the certainty of your love. And may what we learn as we face the unknown help us to open ourselves in love to others who fear the future. Amen.

SAMPLE PRAYERS

CRISES

God of mercy and God of grace, the waters of this crisis are becoming overwhelming for _____. He/she does not trust him/herself to make the right decision at this time, for he/she is afraid of only making things worse. We know that at every turn you are there, but the journey through seems daunting. Hold the hand of _____, Lord, and walk him/her through. May your Spirit serve as his/her compass, and may his/her current misfortune and need for your help serve to remind him/her of your trustworthy love and as a reminder to others of your grace.

FINANCIAL DISTRESS

Dear Lord, help _____ to find firm ground in an uncertain economy. As he/she sees work and assistance, give him/her strength not to be anxious when things seem to be going nowhere. Give _____ patience not to despair when things look bleak; give him/her serenity to know that you are right here, present with him/her, helping to carry his/her cross each day. May _____ do your will in all things that your holy name may be praised! Thank you, Lord, for all the ways that you care for and protect _____. For all things we are truly grateful. Amen.

GLOBAL CHURCH ISSUES

God of all nations, whose name and glory are manifested through all the diversity of cultures, races, and languages all around the world: We confess O God, that even though we know you have created everyone in your own image, oftentimes our words and actions deny this truth. Help us, O Lord, truly to see your face and hear your voice through the many faces and voices of our brothers and sisters around the world.

Lord, we pray for your church throughout the world, that amid our differences we may realize we are all parts of one body. Give us the strength to love, to listen, to hear, to share our resources, and to work alongside those who think and worship you differently, knowing that there is so much we can learn from one another and that together we can make your “Kin-dom” realized in this world. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

MURDER AND TERRORISM

[Prepare with slow, deep breathing.]

Lord of life, have mercy on us and grant us peace. Hear the cries of your children who have been shaken by the horror of violence and the loss of human life. As we grieve with sighs too deep for words, grant us strength to trust in your love to surround our fear and anger. Grant us compassion for those who caused so much anguish; may they also know your love for them. Heal us all and make us whole; make us instruments of your peace and love, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

NATIONAL ISSUES AND TRAGEDIES / NATURAL DISASTERS

In these uncertain and tumultuous times, have mercy on us, O Lord! Be our refuge and strength, a very present comfort and help in trouble. We cry out on behalf of the afflicted. Draw near to those who mourn. Help us to love others well, to listen patiently, and to serve courageously with wise words and just deeds. Give us abundant grace to reach across the divisions that have fractured our communities and nation—discord now magnified in the face of adversity—that we may live in peace with others because of our hope in Christ, through whom you are reconciling the world to yourself and making all things new. Amen.

SUICIDE

O God, from whom nothing can ever separate us, my dearest (name of suicide survivor) is in your hands. Surround him/her with the light of your love and with assurances of love and safety. Help him/her to find a way to live again and to know that, even in the most desperate of situations and most disastrous of events, you are there—unseen and unheard, perhaps, but nevertheless present and active in our broken and hurting lives. These requests I make in the name of the One who came that we might live anew. Amen.

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Gracious God, each day we awaken not knowing what the future will hold. Help us to let go of our need to control the future, so that we might be open to your grace and presence in each moment. When uncertainty causes us to worry, may we know the certainty of your love. And may what we learn as we face the unknown help us to open ourselves in love to others who fear the future. Amen.

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