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Faith and death

When to help, and how: Clergy learning ways to serve terminally ill

By Jennifer Garza - jgarza@sacbee.com

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On a January afternoon, the Rev. Faith Moran lay dying in the South Land Park home where her husband had prepared the death experience she would have wanted.

The couple rented the one-story house five months before. Her hospice home, Faith called it. The smell of burning candles filled the room.

She was surrounded by items that she loved – a Jewish prayer shawl, a quilt made for her by Muslim children, a prayer book from Brahma Kumaris nuns.

As members of the clergy, the Morans saw patients from all faith traditions deal with death in nearly every way possible. Some planned all the details and their religious beliefs influenced their decisions – from when to start pain medication to what they want said at their memorial. Most, however, did not.

The Rev. Michael Moran applied what he learned over the years in the most intimate way. He guided his wife's journey from life to, as he saw it, everlasting.

Faith Moran lost consciousness 10 days earlier. After five years of suffering from posterior cortical atrophy, an incurable form of progressive dementia, she fell into the world between the living and dead.

Her husband, with whom she co-founded the Spiritual Life Center in Sacramento, said his wife was "in transition."

He stood near her bedside.

"Faith," he said, memorizing her face. "It's OK to let go. It's OK."

Preparing someone for their death is a role familiar to clergy. Many are now embracing a more organized approach.

Churches regularly offer end-of-life planning, covering everything from living wills to where their religious beliefs stand on suffering. Pastors hand out brochures on care during private counseling sessions. They devote Sunday morning sermons to the topic, even if it makes

their members uncomfortable.

Are people listening?

"Those who are planners are listening," says Kathy Glasmire, associate director of Sacramento Healthcare Decisions of the new efforts by pastors to get their members to prepare for their last days. "But a lot of people don't want to think about it until they have to."

Two weeks ago, more than 50 local faith leaders attended an end-of-life seminar sponsored by Sacramento Healthcare Decisions and the Compassionate Care Alliance of the Greater Sacramento Region.

Though many of the faith leaders have years of experience, they still had questions. How much do they talk about religion? Should they ask the patient if there's anything they'd like to say in their final hours? What do you say to a patient who is angry with God?

It's a different experience every time they walk into a hospital or hospice room.

"The first thing I do is try to gauge where they're at spiritually, emotionally, physically and proceed accordingly," says Pamela Boehle-Silva, parish nurse at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Rocklin who attended the conference. She has been a nurse for 24 years.

"I've had people ask, 'why me,' and want to know if God is punishing them," says Boehle-Silva. "On the flip side, I've seen people with a strong sense of God's presence. Both experiences are normal."

As the population ages and medical advances prolong life, members of the clergy are finding themselves dealing with these questions more often.

Not everyone wants a spiritual leader at their bedside. A relative or friend is often the one who contacts a faith leader to call on the patient. Some may not be happy to see the visitor. In that case, most quickly leave.

Middle aged and elderly people who are members of a congregation or who have some kind of religious affiliation are most likely to want a faith leader with them at their deathbed.

"One of the biggest findings in the past 15 years is the significant drop in the number of young people who do not have that comfortable lifelong affiliation," says Lucy Bregman, religion professor at Temple University in Philadelphia who has written about death and spirituality.

"Nobody knows what's going to happen when these people get older and are more likely to need or want this kind of care. What are they going to do? Who are they going to call?"

At the seminar, many faith leaders had different approaches but they all agreed on what matters most – just being there.

"Sometimes you don't have to say anything," says Jackie Kortright, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church in Loomis. "A lot of times, they want some kind of spiritual presence."

They Morans were always together. They met in 1981 at church in Bellevue, Wash. She was a Sunday school teacher. He was a radio announcer. She called and said they should attend a friend's party together. He thought she wanted a ride.

They were rarely apart after that. When Faith was diagnosed, Michael Moran had been strong – both for her and their congregation. But when the hospital bed had been delivered to their hospice home, he broke down. They had not slept apart during their 25-year marriage.

On this day, he stood by her and ran his fingers across her cheek. He closed his eyes and prayed while one of his wife's favorite CDs – Eastern chanting – played in the background.

He drew strength from his beliefs and the religious community. Faith's impending death became an interfaith event – leaders from across the region stopped to say goodbye to the petite woman who was beloved for her efforts to build bridges between faiths.

Rabbi David Wechsler-Azen of Congregation Beth Shalom in Carmichael and the Rev. Jim Lee of Christ Unity Church in Sacramento were by her side.

The long illness had taken a toll on Michael Moran. "There were times when I had a pity party," he says. "But she wouldn't let me."

Before losing consciousness, his wife was in a lot of pain. He felt guilty. He didn't believe she should have suffered. "We believe in medicate and meditate," he says. "But she didn't want to miss out on seeing everybody."

That night, Michael Moran sent an e-mail to a friend in the Muslim community. "Faith is safely cocooned in the prayers of many faiths which would make her very happy. She is experiencing her vision of peace, honor and respect."

On Jan. 17, Faith Moran died. The first six weeks after her death, her husband says, "were a nightmare." He slept on the couch.

He has since moved out of the hospice home and back into their two-story house in the Pocket area. He is back at work. On the first weekend in May, he threw a party for all those who helped during his wife's final days.

Moran believes the experience of caring for his wife while she was dying will make him a better pastor, one who will be more understanding when he is called on to minister to someone in their last days.

"This was a spiritual journey unlike any I've ever been on before," says Moran.

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