

Appendix 4

Prayerful Discernment Process for Congregational Use

When your congregants arrive, they will probably be nervous. If you can, have soft drinks and water (not caffeine) available, and perhaps some cookies, that might help ease things up. Be sure to have lots of paper, pens, tissues, and water on the tables already. (You will find a PowerPoint version of this process at www.deathisnottheenemy.com.)

As with clergy, I suggest that some ground rules be set before beginning this process:

- Turn off cell phones.
- Stay present. In other words, if you finish before others, do not start reading a book or doing needlework. Stay in the moment.
- Try not to talk during the process. It can be distracting for others and for you. If you are not sure what a question means, answer it as best you can.
- When you are finished, put your pen down to signal that you are done, and we can move onto the next question.
- If you cannot answer a question, that is okay.
- There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, only your answers.
- No one will see your answers. They are for you only—you do not have to share them, unless you want to.

Today we are going to be talking about our living and our dying. You may feel strong emotions in response to the questions I am going to be asking. That is okay and is to be expected. Be aware of why you are feeling what you are feeling and make a note about it for yourself. If you need to, take a deep breath, drink some water, and allow yourself to feel what you are feeling. I will be here with you and so will God.

Read aloud Psalm 139:1–18, 23–24.

Opening Prayer

Holy One, we come here this day and thank You for all that You have given us. You have called us to serve You and we do so humbly knowing that You love us just as we are and for who we are. Holy God, we come together this day to talk about our living and our dying. This is scary for most of us so we are trusting in You to hold us as we explore our hopes, our fears, our mortality. Help us to remember that You are here with us and will never desert us. Help us always to remember that there is nothing that we cannot accomplish when we include You in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

Reflection

- Take a few minutes to reflect on who you are and what is important to you. Think about what you have accomplished and what you still want to do. Think about the most important aspect of yourself (for example, your body, your mind)—what is it that makes you, you?

- What do you hope that others will see as your legacy?
- What do you think people will say about you after you have died?
- What do you hope people will say about you after you have died?
- Consider how you would like to die. For example, do you see yourself in a hospital or at home or someplace else?
- Is your death sudden or is it lingering?
- Why is it important to you whether it is sudden or lingering?
- Who do you want present with you while you are dying?
- Who do you *not* want present with you while you are dying?
- Are there things you want to make sure that you say to particular people? Give some examples, if you wish.
- Do you have a bottom line in terms of what you would physically or mentally need or want to be able to do in order for your life to have meaning for you? What is that bottom line?
- What if that bottom line is reached. Do you want extraordinary measures used to keep you alive no matter what?
- Where does your belief system fit into your living and your dying?
- Where is God in your dying? Where do you see God — or maybe you don't see God?
- Do you think that God would want you to stay alive at all costs, no matter what?
- Have you talked with your family about your wishes? If the answer is “no,” Why not?
- Have you talked with a clergyperson about your wishes? If the answer is “no,” Why not?
- Have you talked with your doctor about your wishes? If the answer is “no,” why not?
- What is your greatest fear about dying?

Discuss the process, reminding the participants that they do not have to share their answers if they don't want to.

- How did it feel to be asked these questions?
- How did you feel as you wrote your responses to them?
- Did any of your answers surprise you?
- Did you learn anything about yourself that you didn't already know?
- What bothers you the most about your death?
- Are you afraid of death?
- Are you afraid of the dying process?
- Do you think that you can talk with your family members about your fears and concerns regarding your dying and your death?
- Are you going to have these conversations with your family? If not, why not?

Read aloud Psalm 139:1–18, 23–24.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, this has been a difficult time for some of us. It has forced us to face our humanness in a way that is not necessarily comfortable for us. Thank you for being present with us and helping us to begin to look at our living and our dying. Remind us when we are fearful of death that You will be there with us each step of the way. Help us as we begin to have these discussions with our family members. Let Your love and presence be felt in each person who explores their fears, their concerns, and their mortality. Help us to always to remember that through our faith in You, we can live and we can die. We pray these prayers with the assurance of the love and compassion that your Son, Jesus Christ, has shown to us throughout our lives. We know that Jesus will be there to welcome our souls into God's presence. Amen.

After the process is completed, you might want to have available blank copies of the form your state uses for advance directives. Distribute them and encourage the participants to complete them. If you are willing, offer to “stop by” to help them if they feel that they need your support in conversations with family members.