Religion and Death: The Clerical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This first descriptive report on the perspectives, experiences, and actions of clergy relative to terminal patients and their families details a highly emotionally charged complex of interactions. Some 276 clerics from fourteen different bodies provided information on their involvement in death-work, spiritual and personal resources, satisfactions and doubts, pastoral goals and purposes, and their background and outlooks regarding their own demise. Implications of these findings are explored with respect to various forms and contents of training and experience. Psychological versus spiritual roles are of special significance in clergy-patient-family relationships.

There seems to be no more central theme in the Western religious tradition than death. Despite the weakening of spiritual bonds in the modern world, a religious response is likely when death is confronted. Furthermore, clergy are still viewed as linking life and death—this world and what is to come—and as intercessories for finite humans before infinite God. The event of death is also often the most significant moment in the lives of those involved in this drama—dying patients, grieving family, and the clergy.

Recent years have witnessed an outpouring of discussion and research on the attitudes and understandings of medical and paramedical professionals concerning death. A vast pastoral and theological literature exists and continues to grow rapidly as knowledgeable clerics offer their experiences and recommendations to eager and concerned readers. However, little empirical research has been undertaken with clergy—the major professional group involved with death and grief. The early research of Fulton and Fulton and Geis focused on attitudes of clergy toward funerals and funeral directors. Preston and Horton studied clerical attitudes toward euthanasia. Kutscher and Kutscher looked at bereavement perspectives among an unselected group of forty clerics.

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Recognizing that clergy are often called in by the terminally ill and their families and that they attempt to provide encouragement and support, it is evident that "death-work" is a significant part of their professional role. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, theology is a source of strength in facing death; the clergy have a clear responsibility in this area. Recognition of the importance of their position and how to be effective in it are of fundamental significance. These considerations led to the present work. This is an initial descriptive effort to define the experiences, feelings, and actions of a large number of clergy when they are confronted with terminality.

Method

Sample. Of 309 clergy invited to participate in this study, 276 from fourteen religious groups were studied. In the analyses reported, three clergy were deleted from the sample, as only those groups having fifteen or more representatives were studied. Hence, results reported here are based on the responses of 273 clergy from eleven religious bodies.

The sample involved clergy from twenty-three different states. There were 264 men and nine women. The latter, all currently involved with terminal patients and their families or with bereaved families, were affiliated with the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, United and U.S. Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints, and Roman Catholic groups.

The average age of the clergy was 44.1 years; on the average 16.9 years had elapsed since they were ordained. A variety of educational levels had been attained, ranging from no college degrees to doctorates. Most persons had achieved masters' degrees.

In terms of current religious activity, most were engaged in parish work, some in teaching, some as military chaplains, and some as hospital chaplains. Tests and Materials. A 54-item questionnaire was constructed by the authors. In addition to demographic data, this instrument gathered information concerning frequency of work with terminal patients and their families, number of home calls made on a bereaved family, and goals and purposes in dealing with dying persons. The satisfaction of the clergy with their theology relative to death- and grief-work was evaluated, along with their feelings of effectiveness in pastoral care of the dying and bereaved. Perspectives on how, by whom, and to what degree terminal patients should be informed of their conditions were also sought. In addition, their views on the purposes of funerals were obtained.

Personal views on death were then assessed, using both individual items and scales constructed for such purposes. Single questions were directed at whether their clerical experiences with death had influenced their own acceptance of death, and whether fear and anxiety about death are viewed as motivators of religious activity. Five highly reliable, relatively brief scales based on previous work were also administered to the sample. These assessed