
Compassion Sabbath — Engaging Clergy and Faith Communities in Improving Spiritual Care of the Dying

by JoEllen Wurth and M.C. Sullivan

Compassion Sabbath debuted in September 1998 and reached its apogee February 4-6, 2000. This article sets forth its goals and accomplishments as a public outreach/community education component of Midwest Bioethics Center's three-year strategic initiative to improve the care of seriously ill and dying people. It was specifically designed to invite faith communities to share in this endeavor.

In September 1998, Midwest Bioethics Center and the *Compassion Sabbath* Task force held a celebration, a reception, to begin the official celebration of *Compassion Sabbath*. Grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Dunn Family Foundation, and the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Kansas City supported the project that was to become one of the largest, ad hoc multifaith collaborations in the Kansas City area.

The project was envisioned as part of the community outreach/public engagement strategy of PATHWAYS to Improved End of Life Care: A Community Approach. Its major goals were to

- provide spiritual, psychological, and social support to seriously ill and dying members of faith communities, their families, and caregivers;
- identify the roles of faith communities in the supportive care of the dying;
- provide tools and enhance the skills of clergy who daily confront the spiritual issues related to death and dying; and
- increase awareness of local and national resources that are available to faith communities in their ministry to the seriously ill and dying.

Compassion Sabbath was built from the ground up — like other projects sponsored by Midwest Bioethics Center — as a community-based initiative. The original idea came from discussions with two clergy members of Midwest Bioethics Center boards, following which the Center convened an interfaith and multid denominational task force cochaired by the Reverends Robert L. Hill and Kelvin Calloway.

The task force was charged to design the project, identify technical resources, invent curricula, and plan and implement an outreach program to involve as many churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith communities as feasible in a metropolitan area that draws on four states. The task force developed and published a *Compassion Sabbath* Resource Kit, sponsored a day-long leadership conference, offered three weekend sessions for lay leaders, parish nurses, and other staff who would lead their communities' involvement in *Compassion Sabbath* weekend, and hosted a prayer breakfast on the Thursday before the "first-ever" *Compassion Sabbath* Weekend, February 4-6, 2000.

Two additional resources were key to *Compassion Sabbath's* initial success. Chris Tathum and the ETC Institute of Olathe, Kansas, worked with the task force and Center staff to create, pilot, validate, and disseminate a survey of faith leaders

in the Kansas City area. The purpose of this survey was to establish a baseline for evaluating the impact that *Compassion Sabbath* will have on the ministry to seriously ill and dying persons in Kansas City. ETC Institute will also conduct a postproject survey to help us determine the most helpful and valuable parts of the program. These components will become the key aspects of *Compassion Sabbath* 2001 and 2002, as well as the national rollout of this program.

Jane Mobley and Associates also worked with Midwest Bioethics Center and the task force to publicize *Compassion Sabbath*. This firm designed the program's logo and website, and did media training for key members of the task force and Center staff. Together with Center staff, this firm conducted a public awareness campaign to spread the word about this project. The logo, like the program's name, contributes to the public's ability to recognize the program. "Your program will be a great success," a member of a national communications firm told us, "because of its title. '*Compassion Sabbath*' sings."

Objectives and Outcomes

Compassion Sabbath was consciously designed as a community outreach program. It is an opportunity for members of faith communities to examine and understand, and then to dismantle, the barriers that prevent people from getting the spiritual and psychological help they need to deal creatively with serious illness and the end of life. The clergy and faith communities were the selected audience for this outreach, because they believe, according to data we collected in the preproject survey and focus groups, that ministry to the dying is one of their greatest priorities. The same data revealed that most clergy feel inadequately prepared to perform this task. "Dying is not something we can turn our backs on," one pastor told her congregation. "Rather, let our community be the place where tears are heard."

To meet this challenge, the project also intended to improve the ability of faith leaders to deal with issues related to death and to increase the availability, and awareness, of spiritual resources

to help the seriously ill and dying. The task force and Center staff knew intuitively, and this project confirmed, that clergy, no less than other professionals, are at a loss to overcome the cultural bias against talking about the end of life. In focus groups and in response to the preproject survey, faith leaders told the task force and the Center that they wanted help:

- There is a perception that death equals failure.
- We need to get people comfortable with dying.
- We need to learn how to get people to view death as part of life. Pastors don't have guidance.
- Medical people treat people that are dying like they don't exist.
- We need to inform people about services like hospice.
- We need "people that are trained and know what resources are available to visit with the seriously ill and their families."

The clergy, we discovered, wanted from *Compassion Sabbath* what they usually dispense: spiritual counsel and support. "We need," one pastor told his focus group, "to rehabilitate the faith community's power to deal with death."

The program began officially in April 1999, when Martin E. Marty, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago, gave the keynote address at Midwest Bioethics Center's seventh annual dinner. Marty, whom *Time* magazine has dubbed the preeminent theologian of American religions, spoke about the need people have for the solace of home and community to guide them through the death of a family member or their own dying – and the importance of calling the faith communities together to heed this need. Before *Compassion Sabbath* had run its course, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian, Native American, and as many as eight Christian denominations were represented in the list of nearly 500 congregations who participated in the inaugural *Compassion Sabbath* weekend. Since then, many more have expressed their desire to participate in the program.

"A Matter of Life and Death," a clergy conference to improve the care of the seriously ill and dying, followed Marty's address at the annual dinner. This conference, in September 1999, was a watershed for some clergy. Again, Martin E. Marty gave the keynote address. His stories vividly portrayed the plight and privilege that faith leaders have when they "near the abyss of mystery to minister to their friends and community at the door of death."

Other speakers included Israel Kestenbaum, on "Finding God at the Bedside"; Valery Yancey, on "Hanging on and Letting Go"; and Wallace S. Hartsfield, on "What Happens When the Faith Community Loses One." Opportunities for smaller, breakout sessions occurred twice during the conference, allowing participants their choice from a wide variety of topics on end-of-life issues and an opportunity to express their feelings about a subject that even they avoid.

From April to September, the task force and Center staff worked with local members of the faith communities to produce worship and educational resources that clergy and other leaders could use to develop their own observance of *Compassion Sabbath* weekend, or more generally to help their communities minister to the spiritual needs of the seriously ill and dying. We had envisioned that each community participating in the project would use the materials written from his or her faith perspective and perhaps enrich them with perspectives and examples drawn from other traditions. And this cross-fertilization worked, although a few clergy asked us to be more explicit about the Christian naming of God.

The resource kit, including a notebook and video, was distributed to clergy at the September conference and to other faith leaders at three weekend training sessions. The training workshop provided a key to how this resource might be used to inaugurate the *Compassion Sabbath* weekend. Individual sessions explored rituals for death and dying, preaching materials, community resources related to caring for the dying and their families, and two curricula for Sunday School classes, faith-sharing groups, or other adult study settings.

The first curriculum, "For Everything There Is a Season," was designed specifically for faith communities; the second, "Caring Conversations — More Lessons from the Angel of Death," can be used by faith communities and by more secularly oriented study groups or civic organizations. Both curricula offer a penetrating look at our values, spirituality, autonomy, and need for meaning and hope when illness strikes, or when we or someone

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we know is in the last chapter of life. Both curricula introduce faith communities to the practical side of bioethics: health care decision making, advance directives, treatment redirection from aggressive curative care to comfort care for the dying, and the use and limits of medical interventions. The entire *Compassion Sabbath* Resource Kit is now available to other communities.

Compassion Sabbath Weekend arrived at last, the first weekend in February, and the celebrations were as diverse as the nearly 500 communities participating. Center staff members attended as many services throughout the community as time allowed. The impact of knowing that so many people from so many traditions and backgrounds were simultaneously focusing on the notion of how we can better meet the responsibility we have to provide better spiritual care of the dying made a profound impression on all involved. We collected bulletin announcements, sample homilies, discussion group outlines, special blessings for caregivers and providers to the seriously ill and dying, and rituals — among the latter, a pastor who gave each family a plant with an envelope containing a map and a suggestion that the plant be personally delivered to a member of the congregation who was ill or elderly.

Conclusion

Thus, the climax of *Compassion Sabbath* occurred that first weekend in February when so many churches, synagogues, and mosques celebrated — each within its own assembly or membership — their duties and obligations to seriously ill and dying people. The project, as Myra Christopher, the Center's president and chief executive officer, has already said (see p. 12), "clearly has the potential to become a national event, and we are already in conversation with several national funders to explore how that can happen." In the meantime, hospital chaplains, parish nurses, and lay ministers to the sick have joined pastors, rabbis, imams, and other faith leaders in continuing efforts to overcome the taboo that our culture imposes against talking about the end of life.

We think that is a good beginning. However, as we began *Compassion Sabbath* with a survey to determine (1) how faith community leaders viewed their ministry prior to their participation in the program, and (2) the vision they wanted *Compassion Sabbath* to realize; so will we end this first phase of the project. The results of a survey administered to faith leaders following their participation in the various events of *Compassion Sabbath* will be reported early this fall (2000). This survey and the anecdotal record that Midwest Bioethics Center has been collecting since the program's inception will help shape subsequent weekends — first in Kansas City, but also nationwide.

Some results are already evident. We know, for example, from purchase orders that the *Compassion Sabbath* Resource Kit has immediate usefulness to congregations and other multifaith groups wanting to do a similar project in their local community. And, through the Center's connections with Last Acts, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-

funded national coalition of organizations seeking to help individuals and organizations pursue better care of the dying, both *Compassion Sabbath* and *Caring Conversations*, the two projects specifically designed to fulfill the community outreach/public engagement strategy of PATHWAYS, have become nationally acclaimed.

Responses to the inclusion of these programs in a resource manual for use in connection with the upcoming PBS special: *On Our Own Terms, Dying in America* (a Bill Moyers production) has also led to an increased volume of sales and inquiries. Thus, we know what the program is; what it *will* be depends on ETC Institute's final survey and the results of the national planning meeting to be held in September.

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