Christian Evangelicals: The Challenge for Hospice and Palliative Care

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DIVERSITY AND END-OF-LIFE CARE

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Foreword by Richard Payne, MD
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CHAPTER 13

Christian Evangelicals: The Challenge for Hospice and Palliative Care

Kenneth J. Doka

When a hospice is committed to the original mission of hospice, its services can be a great relief for both a patient and family members.... Unfortunately some hospices and hospice organizations are actively promoting actions that hasten death, including terminal sedation, withdrawal of nutrition and hydration, and "by delivering pain relief sufficient to cause death by incidentally suppressing breathing" (Illinois Right to Life Committee, 2008).

This statement by the Illinois Right to Life Committee exemplifies the ambivalence that some Christian evangelicals have toward hospice care. On one hand, there is recognition that hospice care offers a needed service—providing compassionate care to those who are dying. In some cases, evangelical congregations have founded hospices or have been part of coalitions instrumental in beginning local hospices. Yet, there is also an anxiety that some practices of hospice may hasten death.

The suspicion and fears about hospice within the evangelical community are both unnecessary and unwarranted. Evangelical Christians are emerging

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1 This unsourced quotation is taken from the chapter "Rational Suicide in Terminal Illness" by Thomas Attig in Hospice Foundation of America's 2005 book, Living with Grief: Ethical Dilemmas at the End of Life. The entire passage reads, "And, although the ethics of euthanasia is not the subject of this chapter, it is well known that hastening death is practiced and approved in many ways in contemporary terminal care when suffering is extreme and irremediable—for example, by terminal sedation, by delivering pain relief sufficient to cause death by incidentally suppressing breathing, or by withdrawing nutrition and hydration. Given the obligation to relieve suffering, such practices are not incompatible with the physicians' oaths" (Attig, 2005).
as a major spiritual culture in the United States. Hospices and palliative care units need to be sensitive and reach out to them as they would any distinct cultural entity.

This chapter seeks to facilitate that process. It begins by attempting to define the largely amorphous evangelical movement, noting the basic beliefs that define evangelicals. Second, the chapter explores the cultural issues that might arise as hospices interact with evangelicals in their own communities. Finally, the chapter offers suggestions for hospices to improve communication, alleviate needless fears, and better serve the evangelical community.

THE CULTURE OF CHRISTIAN EVANGELICALS

It may seem odd to describe Christian evangelicals as a cultural group. However, culture is best defined as a way of life characterized by shared values, beliefs, and behaviors. Such an inclusive definition transcends ethnicity or race as the sole determinant of culture. Under this definition, many faith communities—including Orthodox Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, conservative Muslims, and evangelical Christians—can be considered cultures.

The evangelical movement is amorphous and somewhat difficult to define. Generally, it consists of a variety of Christian church bodies such as Southern Baptists or Pentecostals that are regarded as traditional or conservative in their approach to scripture. The term *evangelical* is usually attributed to Harold John Ockenga, who in a 1947 essay used the term *neo-evangelicals* to describe a split in the fundamentalist wing of Christianity (Henry, 1947). The evangelicals wished to distinguish their beliefs from those of liberal Protestants (whom they perceived as departing from historical Christian views in an attempt to accommodate to the larger, secular culture) and fundamentalists (whom they perceived as too separatist and unconcerned with the social implications of faith).

The evangelicals were not opposed to ecumenical involvement and discussion, provided such dialogue did not involve the surrender of core beliefs. The Reverend Billy Graham, for example, was often criticized by fundamentalists for his willingness to work with groups such as Roman Catholics. In fact, the evangelicals often looked at themselves as a movement that sought to revitalize Protestant churches by helping them develop both a clear Christian identity and a committed mission to change their general culture.

The evangelical movement can also be distinguished from the religious or Christian right, although many evangelicals are involved in it. The religious right is essentially a coalition of Christian political and social organizations that
espouse a conservative political agenda. The coalition includes active right-to-life groups (often including conservative Lutherans and Roman Catholics not generally identified as evangelicals) and fundamentalists. In addition, some evangelicals are active in other movements, such as environmentalism, efforts to combat poverty, and attempts to care compassionately for persons with AIDS—positions not usually associated with the religious right. However, in many ways, the Christian right includes the most active and visible manifestation of the evangelical approach to political life, even though other political strains exist within the evangelical movement.

The evangelical movement is large. Slightly more than 25% of Americans define their religious affiliation as evangelical (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The culture is marked by church involvement, private piety, and modest dress, as well as shared values and beliefs. Most evangelicals believe that Jesus is the promised messiah and that eternal salvation is only possible for those who personally accept Jesus as their savior. Most evangelicals consider themselves "born again"; that is, they believe that their acceptance of Jesus as their savior represents a new birth as a child of God. Evangelicals also believe that witnessing to their faith is an essential responsibility. Their view of Christian scripture is both literal and authoritative.

Many evangelicals believe that the Bible is divinely inspired and historically and scientifically accurate. Thus, as the word of God, scripture is to be consulted in every aspect of life. Because of this perspective on the Bible, many evangelicals espouse beliefs that support traditional gender roles. In fact, Brown (2002) notes that the fight against feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment was one of the first forays of the religious right in the political arena—it offered both a common cause and a common enemy. Most evangelicals believe that homosexuality is morally wrong and oppose same-sex marriage. Many also oppose policies and initiatives that would interfere with parents' rights to raise their children according to biblical principles. Many support, for example, the right of parents to home-school their children.

Evangelicals as a whole tend to see the separation of church and state as contrary to the wishes of the founding fathers. In many ways, evangelical views of history emphasize religious reasons for colonial migration and tend to focus on American exceptionalism; that is, the notion that America was to be a Christian New Zion—a model to other nations. This spiritual interpretation stresses the religious affiliations of the founding fathers, ignoring the influence of the Enlightenment and the largely Deist views of these early leaders. In this
view, the separation of church and state simply meant that churches were not to be publicly supported, nor was any particular denomination officially favored.

To many evangelicals, secular influences have eroded this exceptionalism. Hence, most evangelicals favor school prayer and would allow religious symbols, such as Christmas crèches, to be displayed in public places. Most oppose efforts to remove religious mottos such as "In God We Trust" from coins or "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. Many see the use of terminology such as winter break or spring break in schools instead of Christmas or Easter as unnecessary surrenders to pluralism or humanism.

Central to evangelical belief is a strong sense of the sanctity of life, which comes from scriptural interpretations rooted in Judeo-Christian history. Judaism historically has strongly emphasized the sanctity of life: Life was a gift of God that could only be surrendered when God willed it. Many biblical scholars hold that God’s rejection of the Jewish patriarch Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac represented a clear rejection of human sacrifice prevalent in the fertility cults of the time. When the first Christian disciples (Jewish adherents of the new faith) reached Rome, they found many practices—suicide, infanticide, and abortion—that offended their sensibilities. Hence, early Christian literature strongly reaffirmed these historic beliefs.

Even the evangelical rejection of evolution follows not just from a literal interpretation of scripture but also from a belief in the sacredness of life. To accept evolution would make humans little more than highly evolved animals subject to the same laws of nature, rather than a special creation of God, answerable to God’s laws.

This belief that life is created by God and hence sacred is behind much evangelical opposition to abortion. It also underlies evangelical objection to embryonic stem cell research, as they consider embryos living beings, and the use of embryos for research suggests a philosophy of utilitarianism that denies the sanctity of life.

At life’s end, most evangelicals would oppose suicide, including physician-assisted suicide when a patient nears death. Many evangelicals also oppose practices such as palliative sedation, decisions not to artificially hydrate or feed a patient, and even among some, do-not-resuscitate orders. A smaller segment of the evangelical community is wary of pain management if it has the effect of hastening death, and some might even hold that suffering at the end of life is both natural and perhaps even salutary. These positions have led, in some cases, to suspicion of hospice.
For example, Ron Panzer, president of Hospice Patients Alliance, whose blog posts are often cited both by evangelicals and the right-to-life movement, claims, “While many in the hospice movement assert they will neither hasten death nor prolong death, hospice staff around the country may misuse common end-of-life interventions to hasten death.... They die of dehydration while sleeping, thereby allowing for a ‘pretty’ or ‘peaceful’ but unnatural death, i.e., murder.... The National Right-to-Life Committee has known about these hospice killings for years, yet has refused to expose these killings” (Abbott, 2005). Abbott finds conspiracy in the interrelationships of varied groups in the end-of-life movement, such as the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) and Choice in Dying (formerly known as the Euthanasia Society).

While Panzer’s views may be extreme, the Terri Schiavo case crystallized evangelical suspicion of the hospice movement. Ambivalence and underlying suspicion were evident when many right-to-life groups and Christian evangelicals joined to maintain vigils around the central Florida hospice that was caring for Schiavo. Technically, hospice care was not the issue; rather, the legal case revolved around who could decide to end such care. However, hospice care was forced to center stage in the struggle between Schiavo’s parents and her husband over whether or not to withdraw artificial nutrition. As the case was vigorously contested in the political and legal realms, prominent evangelicals such as James Dobson and Jesse Jackson joined pickets outside the hospice where Schiavo resided.

While Panzer and the Schiavo case have raised evangelical concerns about hospice in general, these concerns have not necessarily translated to local hospices. Many evangelical churches have been active in creating or supporting hospices in their communities, even serving as chaplains.

**Hospices and Evangelicals: An Unnecessary Divide**

Evangelical suspicion regarding hospice is unnecessary and unwarranted. Ironically, the roots of hospice have a strong connection to Christianity in general and evangelical Christianity in particular. Cicely Saunders, the founder of the first modern hospice, was a deeply religious woman who, though originally agnostic, converted to Christianity after having a religious experience while vacationing with a friend in 1947 (Richmond, 2005). She was a member of the Church of England, but she often spoke admirably of evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, noting that she served as a volunteer during one of his crusades (Klass, 2008).
Saunders's spiritual motives and religious symbolism are evident in her choice of the word *hospice.* Hospices originally were maintained by religious orders as places of rest for people on pilgrimages. In the 19th century, a religious order used the term for facilities designed to care for the indigent dying in both England and Ireland. Saunders selected the name St. Christopher's for the facility she designed, as St. Christopher was the patron saint of travelers. Thus, in designing the first modern hospice, she deliberately selected a term steeped in Christian history and symbolism. In fact, she initially hoped that the hospice would be a mission outreach of the Church of England, but diverse sources of funding required that it be open to all faiths. Saunders described it as a religious foundation of an open character (Richmond, 2005).

Beyond these strong religious roots, hospice embraced a philosophy that encompassed spiritual care. To Saunders and those who followed her, the central purpose of hospice was to relieve suffering at the end of life. She understood suffering in a holistic way: Pain was not only physical but also psychological, spiritual, social, and familial. Saunders and her staff at St. Christopher's pioneered palliative medicine and pain management, but her hospice philosophy emphasized that care should always address spiritual, psychological, social, and familial needs. Chaplains and spiritual care were (and are) a critical component of hospice. Saunders emphasized that life should be lived fully until it ended, and she stressed that the end of life could be a time of great spiritual growth.

Saunders was a vigorous opponent of euthanasia. Some of her opposition arose from her beliefs as a committed Christian (Richmond, 2005); however, she also strongly believed that effective pain management and holistic care obviated any need for assisted suicide or other forms of euthanasia. Indeed, in her later years she sometimes claimed that her motivation for starting hospice was her opposition to assisted or unassisted suicide of those suffering terminal illness (Klass, 2008). Hospice itself was an answer.

The spiritual emphasis of hospice continued as hospice crossed the Atlantic and developed in the United States. Most of the early pioneers were both inspired and trained at St. Christopher's hospice. They shared the philosophy of holistic care—a philosophy that clearly acknowledged the importance of the spiritual.

However, two factors in the importation of hospice into the United States may have affected the evangelical perception of hospice. The three people who developed the first hospice in the United States in Branford, Connecticut—
Sylvia Lack, Florence Wald, and the Reverend Sally Bailey—were committed Christians, but they came from a more mainline Protestant tradition, one rooted in New England Protestant culture and heavily influenced by the Yale School of Divinity. Hence, their spiritual approach was more liberal and their language somewhat different from the evangelical tones of Saunders.

In addition, they embraced more pluralistic notions of patient diversity, autonomy, and choice. For example, Wald believed that patients should have a range of options available to them at the end of life—hospice care being one (Friedrich, 1999).

This respect for patient autonomy was evident in the position of the Oregon Hospice Association. In 1994, the Oregon Hospice Association opposed the Death with Dignity Act—an act that, with certain restrictions, essentially legalized physician-assisted suicide in Oregon. However, in the 1997 vote on whether to repeal the act, the association declined to endorse repeal, seeing it as an issue of patient choice. In 1999, Ann Jackson, executive director and CEO of the Oregon Hospice Association, testified in opposition to the proposed Pain Relief Promotion Act of 1999, sponsored by Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL) and Senator Don Nickles (R-OK), which would have essentially nullified Oregon's law. Jackson's position was not in support of assisted suicide; rather, she emphasized that the implementation of such a law might create even more legislative oversight that would inhibit effective pain management. Even on this topic, the lack of consensus should be noted: Samira Beckwith, CEO of Hope Hospice in Florida, representing the National Hospice Organization (now NHPCO), testified in favor of the bill.

The core of disagreement is not whether assisted suicide should be legalized; rather, it reflects more nuanced positions regarding pain management, patient autonomy, and freedom to choose options at the end of life. Unfortunately, these nuanced positions do not translate well to some segments of the evangelical community that tend to see issues in a polarized frame.

**Evangelicals and Grief**

One of the core aspects of hospice philosophy is that the family is the unit of care, and that care continues after the death of the patient in the form of grief support. Evangelical perspectives and approaches toward grief may vary. Evangelicals firmly believe in resurrection—that anyone who accepts the saving grace offered through Christ will enter heaven. For some evangelicals, then, a death is to be welcomed and a funeral service is a homecoming—a celebration...
that the person has returned to his or her creator. With such a belief, grief can be perceived as self-centered or even a sign of lack of faith.

Most evangelicals, though, have a more nuanced view. While affirming the resurrection of the dead, they acknowledge the feelings of grief and loss experienced by survivors. Such feelings would simply be perceived as an expression of love and attachment that exist along with the belief in eventual reunion. The Christian writer Helmut Thielicke expressed this paradoxical view well: "I walk into the night of death, truly the darkest night; yet I know Who awaits me in the morning" (1970, p. 198). Such a view affirms both the promise of faith and the reality of grief. Some evangelical churches have participated in special services held at the winter solstice. These services allow bereaved persons to come together on “the darkest night” to hear a message of hope, validation, and comfort for those experiencing loss and grief in the midst of the Christmas season.

**BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAP**

While substantive conflicts may not exist between hospice and the values of the evangelical community, hospices may need to approach evangelicals as another distinct cultural group that merits outreach.

Outreach can begin as a local hospice examines its own cultural milieu. Hospices are not monolithic; some hospices are a very good fit with evangelical culture. Their roots may lie in evangelical churches or other culturally compatible groups. Their language, materials, policies, and approaches may be consonant with evangelicals. Their staff and chaplaincy may be rooted in the evangelical community.

Other hospices may have different histories, approaches, or philosophies. They may have roots in other religious traditions—liberal Protestantism, even Buddhist or New Age spiritualities. Such hospices might well serve evangelicals at the end of life, but the fit with evangelical culture might not be as comfortable. In situations in which the hospice culture is not congruent with the evangelical culture, the hospice should openly communicate its philosophy, approach, and policies, even as it offers care.

Outreach can be done in a number of ways, depending on community demographics. In communities with megachurches, the hospice might give special presentations to the pastoral and church staff. Where there are many smaller evangelical churches, personal contacts and events such as clergy breakfasts can be useful forms of outreach. Evangelicals should know about hospice's attractive points: for example, its history of strong religious roots and...
its contemporary emphasis on holistic (including spiritual) care. Naturally, evangelical clergy should be represented among hospice chaplains and spiritual care communities, and even on hospice boards. Effective communication between hospice staff and evangelical churches when members enter hospice also engenders trust.

As with other groups, hospice staff may initially encounter mistrust among evangelicals who harbor suspicions about hospice. Clearly defining policies in nondefensive ways should clarify hospice's mission.

Counseling services, whether in the dying process or through grief counseling after the death, might be another point of mistrust. Many evangelicals favor Christian counseling, in the belief that people will only find contentment when their actions are aligned with God's will. Christian counseling often is highly directive, seeking to apply biblically based principles to the person's struggle. This approach is very different from the way most counselors function. Some highly religious persons may be very sensitive to any perception that their spiritual beliefs are being discounted or disrespected, and may even believe that seeking or accepting counseling in the first place is a sign of a lack of faith.

Counselors should reassure clients by showing interest in and respecting their religious beliefs; in fact, they might be able to use the beliefs, rituals, faith practices, and even communities in their interventions. For example, it can help to cultivate sensitive clergy and chaplains in the evangelical community who may be appropriate contacts when clients struggle with spiritual issues at life's end. Grief bibliographic resources should include material that evangelicals might find useful. C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) is one such resource. Lewis is generally accepted in the evangelical community; this book is a graphic and powerful account of his own spiritual struggles with loss and grief as his beloved wife died. Finally, counselors should be aware of their own issues as they counsel evangelical clients. Many issues and beliefs—for example, those having to do with the role of women—can raise significant countertransference issues for counselors.

**CONCLUSION**

In a way, evangelicals can be a hidden culture, and membership may not be visible, but it is a large culture. As hospice continues to serve communities, outreach to diverse groups should certainly encompass the evangelical community. For some in this community, who believe that life is a divine gift and a person should fight death until the last moment, hospice may not be an appropriate alternative. For most evangelicals, though, the gift of hospice—a
peaceful death, neither hastened nor forestalled—is what Cicely Saunders intended it to be: a place of respite on a continuing journey.

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