

Congregational Conversations

After the April 16 kickoff for National Healthcare Decisions Day, you may want to consider establishing Congregational Conversation groups within your parish to discuss end-of-life wishes. Congregational conversations are designed to be a learning, organizing and planning forum for meaningful change. They are a series of open discussions that launch efforts to improve end-of-life care within a congregation. The information below details how to setup a forum.

Why convene Congregational Conversations?

- Healthcare system often fails families and patients at end-of-life
- Death and dying is now becoming a mainstream topic of conversation
- Culture and systems at end-of-life care present emotional physical and financial issues for patients and their loved ones
- Other realities are possible – if we have the conversation in advance

Congregational Conversations identify key gaps

- Poor pain management
- Financing policies that promote cure over care
- Disjointed systems

Deficits were turned into opportunities like

- Palliative care
- Caregiver training and support
- Advance Care Planning

Vision

- Patients and loved ones are informed about choices and challenges they will face
- Patients and loved ones are provided with resources to help them – at home and in institutional and community based settings

Congregational Conversation Invitees

- Consider who to invite to the Congregational Conversation. Think about your congregation. Who are the thought leaders on end-of-life issues whose opinions are valued? Who is open-minded and enjoys a good debate? You want to include those who can tell a story about their end-of-life experiences that could lead to an AHA Moment! for the group.
- It is wise to invite more than fewer initially, anticipating that not everyone you invite will be able to participate.

Once the participants have been identified, focus on number of sessions, time of day to host and length of each session. Suggested topics include:

Issues at End-of-life

- This session introduces the core dilemma of end-of-life care: People's expressed desires to be at peace, in comfort and in familiar surroundings during their last days or months of life are in direct contrast to the type of medical care provided to the majority of patients at end-of-life, which tends to be increasingly invasive, expensive and aggressive and which places a low priority on comfort.

Cultural traditions at end-of-life

- This session is the one which will be the most unique in each congregation that holds a conversation. The focus should be on the prevailing norms in that congregation whether they are set by the common faith that brings the group together.

Planning for End-of-Life

- This session will focus on how to begin planning for end-of-life
 - Initiating discussion of death and dying with both healthy parishioners and parishioners with life-limiting illnesses
 - Preparing the legal group for end-of-life decision making
 - Navigating the social context that may influence or complicate quality end-of-life care
 - Presenting and utilizing information on medical prognosis to make difficult end-of-life decisions

Implementing End-of-life decisions

- This session, along with the one that precedes it, provides a 'tool kit' for end-of-life care
- Specific topics to be covered include:
 - Accessing palliative care and hospice services
 - Providing basic palliative care when a dedicated service is not available
 - Assisting families in the time leading up to and immediately following the death of a loved one

Personal Experiences

- This session is the highlight of Congregational Conversations. Rather than having an agenda, this session is dedicated entirely to the group members' personal experiences with death and dying. Needless to say, it is the most emotional of the sessions, but it is also regularly the most enlightening because the participants are able to hear how the larger concepts discussed in previous sessions have played out in the lives of individuals.

Planning for Change

- The purpose of the final session is to assemble what we have already learned in a useful way for developing an action strategy

- To make sure we use everyone's time wisely and get everything accomplished, there may be some homework
 - Review Summary of lessons learned
 - Develop questions
 - How would you like to be involved going forward