

# A Story of Faith

A faith leader has answered the call to serve and care for people. Yet many admit to being afraid and unsure as how to answer that call when it comes from a congregation member struggling with thoughts of suicide. Many faith leaders feel conflicted when a family reaches out after a loved one has died by suicide.

“I think about my first experience of being invited to join a family after receiving word that their son had ended his life and I was really unnerved by it,” says Dave, a congregational care pastor.

“The phone call came, they gave me a little bit of an indication of what had happened, and asked if I’d come by. Honestly, I was very nervous and didn’t know what I should do, or what I would say—I wasn’t sure I would even go. I felt a lot of pressure about things that I thought I needed to say so it produced a lot of anxiety for me.”



Dave is one of many faith leaders and laypeople interviewed in LivingWorks Faith, an online program that equips Christian clergy and lay leaders to deal with suicide in their communities. With close to half of all Americans attending religious services monthly, and lower but still significant percentages in Australia and Canada, church leaders can provide vital support in suicide awareness and prevention—yet that isn’t always the case. Reasons are myriad and can range from leaders being untrained, unprepared, or believing it is not their place to intervene, all the way to factors—both spoken and unspoken—that stigmatise suicide and make it difficult to talk about.

LivingWorks Faith aims to train clergy and laypeople as critical caregivers who can promote life and support those struggling with suicide. The program starts off by shining a light on understanding suicide in the context of faith.

## **UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING THROUGH THE STIGMA**

“The interesting thing about the Bible is it doesn’t condemn suicide as directly as the church historically has done,” explains Glen Bloomstrom, LivingWorks Director of Faith Community Engagement. Bloomstrom is a trainer in both LivingWorks safeTALK and ASIST—in-person trainings that teach people suicide awareness and intervention skills—and an adjunct seminary professor, so he is well-schooled in church history and its intersection with suicide.

LivingWorks Faith walks learners through how the teachings of the Bible and historical practices of the church don't always align. It dives deep into the Old and New Testaments and provides a timeline of the interpretation of suicide as a mortal and unforgivable sin in both the church and society throughout history. This content highlights how suicide has been stigmatised in both religious and non-religious realms, though thankfully this stigma is beginning to shift in many settings.



A church that was compassionate towards those facing mental health concerns would have been welcome to Jenita, a therapist who attended bible college and struggled with suicide. She felt embarrassed and un-Christian because she didn't feel the joy Christians are "supposed" to feel. After being released from the hospital after a suicide attempt, her pastor came to visit, "...and he wanted to talk about what sin had provoked my depression and what areas in my life I was short in because he believed someone who was full of the Spirit wouldn't be depressed," she says in one of the videos that comprise the LivingWorks Faith curriculum.

Bloomstrom notes that the stigma is more evident in some regions, especially rural communities. "People will say 'I'm not even going to pick up this brochure at the back of the church on mental health in case anyone sees me do it.'"

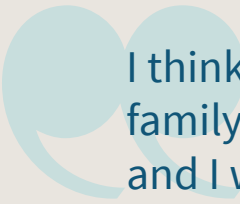
LivingWorks Faith provides a portrait of suicide and the church throughout the ages that offers clergy the opportunity to promote life rather than alienating those experiencing mental health concerns and life crises.

## A FAITH-BASED PROGRAM FROM A SCIENCE-INFORMED ORGANIZATION

Many might wonder how a world-leading, evidence-based suicide intervention company came to be involved in a training program for Christian leaders and lay workers? Being a retired Army Chaplain, Bloomstrom has long been an advocate for training chaplains, clergy, and faith leaders. After joining LivingWorks in 2012, Bloomstrom leveraged this background to highlight the vital role that faith leaders play in diverse communities around the world. These “natural helpers” were already being approached, and were embedded as trusted advisors within their communities. It only made sense to equip them with skills in suicide prevention.

Another key catalyst came when the United States Navy contracted LivingWorks to find ways to expand their suicide prevention program beyond LivingWorks ASIST and safeTALK to address postvention—what to do after there have been suicide behaviours. The creation of faith-leader suicide prevention competencies through the Department of Defense (DoD) as well as concurrent research by Dr. Karen Mason of the National Action Alliance Faith Communities Taskforce, enabled a consultative, evidence-informed framework to be established outlining the core skills and competencies faith leaders need to respond to the issue of suicide.

The resulting guide was published in April 2019\*. It has informed and helped shape LivingWorks Faith throughout its creation.



I think about my first experience of being invited to join a family after receiving word that their son had ended his life and I was really unnerved by it...Honestly, I was very nervous and didn't know what I should do, or what I would say—I wasn't sure I would even go. I felt a lot of pressure about things that I thought I needed to say and so it produced a lot of anxiety for me.

— Dave, Congregational Care Pastor

## HOW LIVINGWORKS FAITH WORKS

Knowing that doing a multi-faith program would be in danger of “pleasing no one”, Bloomstrom’s team focused on the Christian faith for the first iteration of LivingWorks Faith and assembled a group of diverse Christian leaders as a sounding board.

“The challenge was to find a middle ground among diverse Christian traditions to agree that suicide prevention is a worthy topic of study and to agree on commonalities to try to walk down a very narrow road where everybody says, ‘I can go with that. Yes, that’s valuable training. I’m not offended. I’m not left out,’” says Bloomstrom.

This group’s work, along with researchers, survivors, survivor families, and program developers, resulted in a comprehensive, competency-based online training that covers all aspects along the suicide continuum: prevention, intervention, and bereavement for faith communities. In other words, how to create more supportive faith communities so that those with suicidal thoughts are able to get help; how to intervene in the moment of crisis; and how to minister with sensitivity and compassion if a suicide does take place.

\* National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: Faith Communities Task Force. (2019). Suicide prevention competencies for faith leaders: Supporting life before, during, and after a suicidal crisis. Washington, DC: Education Development Center.

Through eight self-paced online modules that take five to seven total hours to complete, the program explores what scripture says about suicide, ways to prevent it, and how to support the community in the event it occurs. A companion guide serves as a vital tool for tracking progress and reflecting on what participants are learning, and the videos put human faces to real-life stories of suicide you won't easily forget.



### HELPING PEOPLE “DO THE BRAVE THING”

It was a long road to bring LivingWorks Faith to launch, but the program is now available and pilot testing shows that it's applicable and meaningful for diverse Christian communities. Bloomstrom's dream is for LivingWorks Faith to be taken up by diverse seminaries, training programs, continuing education networks, and churches.

“I'm extremely excited about this virtually untapped part of our society that could reinforce efforts and save lives,” Bloomstrom says. “I am extremely passionate about natural helpers, and people of faith, you know, loving thy neighbour. And so, being alert for invitations to help someone in need, and seeing them that way, rather than allowing them to repel us. Stepping in is the brave thing to do. It's the human thing to do. It's our role and our calling.”

*Learn more about LivingWorks Faith*  
[www.livingworks.com.au](http://www.livingworks.com.au)