

Southern Baptist leader urges churches to confront suicide

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NEW ORLEANS (BNG)—Every minister will encounter the “serious and tragic reality” of suicide, Southern Baptist Convention leader Frank Page advised students at [New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in a recent chapel address.

Frank Page, president of the [SBC Executive Committee](#), told the story of losing his oldest daughter, Melissa, to suicide in 2009. It’s impossible for someone who hasn’t been through it to imagine what it’s like losing a loved one by suicide, Page said, but it’s something every minister confronts sooner or later.

“Someday, somebody in your church, in your sphere of influence, is going to go through this, perhaps already has,” he said. “Why? Because it’s epidemic in our culture.”

Suicide is rising among all races across socio-economic levels, and particularly among younger people, Page reported. He noted a massive jump in death by suicide among young women ages 18-29.

Social scientists don’t know why, but Page named part of the problem: “I believe women, young women particularly, in this culture are pressured more than they ever have been in all of history in ways that are appropriate and in ways that are not appropriate, and that pressure makes them break.”

Young women, veterans at risk

Suicide is up significantly among veterans and more prevalent in certain

locations, like Alaska, where in some months it has outpaced car accidents as the No. 1 killer of teenagers, he said.

“It’s now making its way into middle school and upper levels of grade school as children are seeing it as a true option as a way to end the pain of their lives,” Page said.

Page, a former pastor and past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, warned prospective ministers they are entering “a church culture that mirrors a secular culture where there is often times little hope and little help.”

Page, author of [*Melissa: A Father’s Lessons from a Daughter’s Suicide*](#), published in 2013 by LifeWay Christian Resources, said his Christian faith is all that got him through the experience.

Sharing the word of peace

“It’s our only source of hope and help, and you, as a minister of the gospel, have the ability to share that word of peace with countless people throughout your life,” Page said.

Another role that ministers can play, Page said, is “to confront and refute bad theology,” including the notion that Christians who commit suicide lose their salvation and go to hell. “If salvation is true, it is forever,” he said.

Ministers should teach church members how to deal with people who are going through difficult times, Page insisted. That includes avoiding “platitudes that are often inaccurate” such as telling a depressed person, “You just need to snap out of it.”

“One thing you never tell a person who is really struggling is to snap out of it,” he said. “If they could snap out of it, they would snap out of it.”

Shun inappropriate platitudes

Well-meaning people may offer platitudes like “she’s in a better place,” but they are inappropriate at the time. “That may be true, and my Melissa is in a better place, but I want her beside her daddy,” he said.

Churches need to “develop a welcoming place for hurting people,” he asserted. To that end, he organized a 23-member volunteer mental-health advisory council composed of congregational leaders and mental-health professionals in May.

“We’re trying to provide resources to churches that help church know better how to minister to hurting people, because we find the church is often, not always, but often extremely inept at knowing how to handle difficulties and mental illnesses,” Page said. “In fact, one mentally ill person said to me just a few months ago, ‘The one place in the world I would never be honest about my struggles is at the church.’”

Suicide “is a horrible experience” with lasting effects on those left behind, Page said.

“When it happens, marriages fail,” he said. “The instances of divorce among those who experience suicide in the immediate family dramatically increases. Suicides themselves dramatically increase among survivors ... in the family.”

“There are ongoing consequences of any kind of tragedy, but particularly for suicide,” Page said. “People desperately need to know the only place you are going to find help and hope is in the Lord.”