

# The role of the Danish pastors in preventing of suicidal behavior among vulnerable groups



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## Introduction

The pastors have extensive contact with suicidal people and their relatives, therefore the pastors can be a significant resource in preventing suicide. By increasing their knowledge of suicide they may help identifying people exhibiting suicidal behaviour. A lack of knowledge and understanding of suicidal ideation and behaviour can be stressful for the prevention of suicide attempts and suicides. Among working pastors there is often a great uncertainty about how suicidal ideation and behaviour should be managed and prevented.

The purpose of the study is to examine pastors' perception of suicide and their role in prevention. How much do they know about suicidal behaviour? What kind of myths do they believe about suicide? Do they think that suicide is an unacceptable sin? Do people have the right to die or are they obligated to live?

## Methodology

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire administered to 914 pastors and by 47 qualitative interviews. Quantitative data was analyzed for differences in knowledge and attitude using regression modelling in SAS 9.4. The data from interview was analyzed manually. All the recorded interviews were transcribed and categorized into categories, which were then merged into themes. Collected interview data was used to interpret and support questionnaire data and to extend understanding of the pastors' role in the prevention of suicide.

## Main Findings

- The majority of the pastors (82%) had talked with suicidal people, and 34 % met people who expressed a wish to get help to die.
- Only 51% of the pastors had fully or partially correctly answered questions concerning the knowledge on suicidal behaviour. Half of the pastors did not know the main facts about suicidal behaviour. For example they didn't know that younger persons attempt suicide more often than older persons or that more older than younger people commit suicide.
- Myths about suicide and suicide attempt still exists among the pastors. The answers that were missed by many pastors reflected some misperceptions about suicide:
  - 55% (Yes) - *Suicide is often preceded by an attempted suicide.* Correct answer: No
  - 44% (No)- *Most attempted suicides are impulsive acts.* Correct answer: Yes
  - 43% (No) - *Those who repeatedly attempt suicide do not wish*

to die. Correct answer: Yes

- The perception that "suicide is a sin" is still prevalent among the pastors. More male than female pastors believed that suicide is a sin against God, a sin against others and it is a forgivable sin (Table 1).

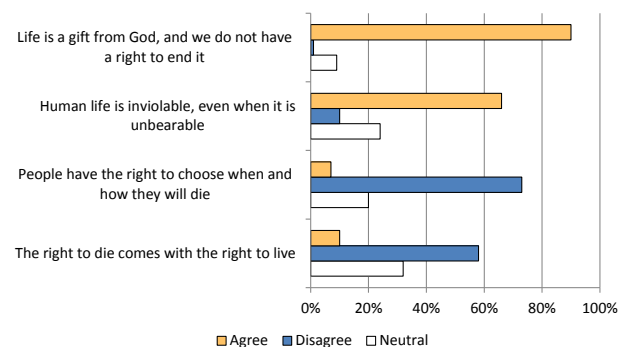
**Table 1.** Gender differences in attitudes on whether or not it is sinful to commit suicide.

	Male Pastors	CI	Female Pastors	p
Suicide is a sin against God	2.50 35 %	[1.81-3.46]	1 21%	<0.001
Suicide is a sin against others	2.14 59%	[1.51-3.02]	1 46%	<0.001
Suicide is a forgivable sin	2.77 73%	[1.68-4.56]	1 54%	<0.001
Suicide is a selfish act	2.32 56%	[1.59-3.37]	1 42%	<0.001

Multiple regression model (adjusted for sex, age, experience, region). Female pastors = reference group. CI = confidence interval with confidence level 0.95

- Pastors had different opinions on a number of statements regarding the right to die or the obligation to live (Figure 1.)

**Figure 1.** Pastors' attitudes on whether or not people have the right to die or are obligated to live.



## Conclusion

There are several obstacles related to pastors' roles in preventing suicide: lack of knowledge and misperceptions about suicide. Whether suicide is a sin or not is a sensitive issue, because it might be adversely important to family who have lost a loved one to suicide.

The current results show that suicide prevention can be a challenge for pastors and therefore as a part of the project we are currently working on educational material aimed for the pastors. The material will focus on how to prevent suicides among vulnerable groups.