
Proposal 9: VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING TASK GROUP

That the Synod:

1. Recognises the 2019 Synod affirmation that:

- (a) life is a gift of God, and all human life, regardless of circumstance, is precious to and has dignity before God;**
- (b) 'neither death nor life, neither suffering nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (see Romans 8:38-39);**
- (c) as followers of Christ and through God's accompanying grace, gifts of fresh wisdom, peace, courage and compassion can be birthed in the midst of suffering, which is a deep and abiding mystery;**
- (d) 'while death is the end of mortal life it marks a new beginning in our relationship with God' (see *Uniting in Worship 2*; Funeral Liturgy);**
- (e) as followers of Christ we are called to spiritual discernment and responsibility as we journey through life and death;**
- (f) as the body of Christ we are called to be a loving and supportive community around people in need of care as they or their loved ones move closer to the end of mortal life;**
- (g) as citizens in a pluralistic culture we also seek to care for and respect our neighbours who may not hold to our faith in God yet may experience fear, uncertainty, pain, grief or sometimes, extreme and extended suffering, as they prepare for their own death or that of their loved ones; and**
- (h) multi-disciplinary palliative care is a vital service that can optimise the quality of life for someone who has an active, progressive, advanced disease, with little or no prospect of cure even as they move closer to their death;**

2. Urges the WA Government to live up to its commitment to increased financial and practical support for the extension of quality palliative care services and better access across the state as announced during 2019 and beyond;

3. (a) Acknowledges again that within the Church there is a diversity of faithful Christian understandings and responses to dying and to 'voluntary assisted dying' which are consistent with the affirmations in clause 1;

(b) Encourages its ministry agents, members and agencies to respect the freedom of people to hold different views with regard to the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act (WA) 2019 - ranging from conscientious objection to active endorsement - while offering pastoral support to all;

(c) Requests its ministry agents, Elders and congregational or faith community pastoral carers to respect the right of any eligible person to explore, or take up the option of, voluntary assisted dying within the law, and to offer appropriate compassionate, emotional and spiritual support for such people as well as for other affected family members, friends or carers; or if the caregiver is conscientiously or practically unable to offer support, that appropriate referral be made to another suitable caregiver;

(d) Requests its agencies to recognise the legal right of eligible people to seek voluntary assisted dying and to not impede any person's access to information about voluntary assisted dying or referral to services for support with voluntary assisted dying.

(e) Requests its agencies to determine their policies and procedures in relation to voluntary assisted dying in compliance with Western Australia’s Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2019 and reflective of the affirmations in clause 1, including offering compassionate, emotional and spiritual support for staff and for people seeking voluntary assisted dying, their family members or friends. In the event that a caregiver is conscientiously or practically unable to offer support, that appropriate referral be made to another suitable caregiver;

4. (a) Notes the Report of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Task Group and their intention to prepare resources to assist the Church, its agencies and members to engage in discussion and learning promoting deeper understanding about dying and other end of life matters including voluntary assisted dying;

(b) Authorises an extension of up to six months for the Task Group to continue its work, under a revised title such as ‘End of Life Care Task Group, with the oversight and support of the Synod Standing Committee.

Mover: Rev Ken Devereux

Seconder: Rev Steve Francis

Rationale:

Important background to this proposal is contained in the Report of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Taskgroup.

Further information about the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act WA (2019) and steps being taken during the current Implementation Phase can be found at the website:

<https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/voluntaryassisteddying>

Under ‘Implementation information and updates’ an introductory Fact Sheet is available in English, Chinese, Farsi, Indonesian and other languages.

Under ‘Related Links’: End of Life Choices there are links to the comprehensive and informative consultations conducted by the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices as well as its detailed report ‘My Life, My Choice’.

The Uniting Church Synod Task Group is not setting out to convince people to support or oppose voluntary assisted dying. Rather it seeks to promote informed understanding of the new law in WA. Additionally it is seeking to provide a simple and accessible toolkit that can give people starting points for personal, family and group discussion and learning about numerous different aspects associated with preparation for death and dying. Approaching this in an attitude of prayer and a deliberate connection with biblical groundings and Christian faith can make this a deeply meaningful, engaging and life-enhancing opportunity.

This is important for all of us. It is not a subject confined to the elderly or to those living with terminal health conditions.

Voluntary Assisted Dying means that some adults could ask for medical help to end their life if they have a disease or illness that is so severe it is going to cause their death and they are suffering badly. To be eligible for voluntary assisted dying in WA, the person must meet all of particular criteria. This includes that they:

- are aged 18 years or over
- are an Australian citizen or permanent resident who has been ordinarily resident in Western Australia for at least 12 months

- have been diagnosed with at least one disease, illness or medical condition that is advanced, progressive and will cause death; and, will, on the balance of probabilities cause death within a period of 6 months (or 12 months for neurodegenerative); and, is causing suffering that cannot be relieved in a manner that the person considers tolerable
- must have decision-making capacity in relation to voluntary assisted dying
- must be acting voluntarily and without coercion

Health practitioners are also able to refuse to participate in voluntary assisted dying for any reason (including conscientious objection). Apart from authorised medical practitioners or nurse practitioners, health care workers must not initiate discussion about, voluntary assisted dying to a person to whom they are providing health or professional care services.

Some other Uniting Church approaches to VAD within their caring agencies:.

The Queensland Synod last year addressed VAD and concluded in part: “..., we do not support the legalisation of voluntary assisted dying in Queensland. If legalised, our facilities will not provide this as a service and our staff, in the course of their employment, will not participate in medical acts to end a life through voluntary assisted dying.”

The Victorian/Tasmanian Synod responded to the Victorian VAD legislation in 2019 and: gave permission “within Victoria to UCA institutions (Uniting VicTas and Uniting AgeWell) and the UCA-affiliated hospital group (Epworth HealthCare) to make voluntary assisted dying allowable within the context of their facilities and services for their patients, clients and residents, under the conditions described in the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.”

The comprehensive document *UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Response to the introduction of voluntary assisted dying legislation in Victoria (2019)* was referred to in last year’s Synod resourcing. This includes a valuable collection of theological and pastoral resources that could be of further benefit to the West Australian Synod.

As shown in the introductory affirmations, which the Western Australian Synod endorsed last year, Uniting Church ministers and members have a rich heritage that can help us face death with calmness, peace, courage and hope through our faith in God’s abiding presence. Let us be faithful witnesses to our community in these challenging times where many are fearful of the possibilities of illness, sudden isolation or death.

Mover: Rev Ken Devereux (kendevx@gmail.com)

Seconder: Rev Steve Francis (steve.francis@wa.uca.org.au)