



Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) Task Group

Task Group Members

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| Rev Steve Francis | <i>Moderator, Convenor</i> |
| Susy Thomas | <i>Moderator-Elect</i> |
| Dr Doug Bridge | <i>Retired Specialist in Palliative Care</i> |
| Dr Rachel Currie | <i>A youthful member and hospital doctor</i> |
| Dr Arthur Criddle | <i>Retired General Physician and Geriatrician</i> |
| Rev Ken Devereux | <i>Recently retired hospital chaplain</i> |
| Dr Brian Hill | <i>Retired Professor of Education</i> |

Congress (UAICC) and Cross-cultural participation has been invited

BACKGROUND

In September 2019 the Synod discussed the sensitive, complex and controversial subject of Voluntary Assisted Dying and agreed to a series of affirmations related to the matter. These are recorded in the Synod Minutes as well as in the 2020 Report of the Standing Committee. The Synod recognised that within the Church there is a diversity of faithful Christian understandings and responses to dying and to voluntary assisted dying.

The Synod commended the WA Government for its commitment to increasing financial allocations to Palliative Care services and urged it to continue to extend quality palliative care services across the state.

The Synod Standing committee was asked to develop a process for consultation with congregations, faith communities and agencies about the issue of Voluntary Assisted Dying, ensuring that this is appropriately resourced and with the hope that a proposal be brought to Synod 2020.

In December 2019 the West Australian Parliament concluded its extensive research, debate and amendment with the passing of the **Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2019**.

'Voluntary assisted dying' within the new law, allows for people with eligible conditions to access certain medication and to enable them to legally choose the manner and timing of their death. The term 'voluntary assisted dying' emphasises the voluntary nature of the choice of the person and their enduring capacity to make this decision. An implementation phase was also established so that the Department of Health and other relevant people and organisations could establish the necessary resources and education required before the Act becomes operational in mid 2021.

Unfortunately but inevitably, the Covid-19 Pandemic disrupted church and community life in 2020 and the proposed consultation within the Uniting Church about VAD was delayed and the scope of consultation and resourcing was significantly limited as other matters took priority.

WORK OF THE TASK GROUP

However, around July the Task Group the Synod Standing Committee had commissioned began to meet. They found themselves to be a diverse group in regard to their subject, but through the use of several video-conference meetings and email communications, they established a common purpose



and set out to address the issues. These are still very important for our consideration. Indeed, the Coronavirus and associated risks and fears of death highlighted the opportunity for Christian responses to individual and communal understandings of life and death and preparedness for death.

Dr Doug Bridge, after long experience in palliative care, expressed the view that he was deeply disturbed by the passing of the VAD legislation. He strongly felt that a higher priority was the extension of quality palliative care and that alternative strategies and therapies could be applied to extreme cases of distress and suffering towards the end of life. He was concerned that the euphemistic language of 'voluntary assisted dying' hid blunt realities that 'euthanasia' or 'physician assisted suicide' expressed more directly. Drawing attention to an international specialist in palliative care, Kathryn Mannix, he shared the view that in contemporary Western society people simply do not know what a 'normal death' looks like. The media produce misleading depictions of a person's death. Real dying is overwhelmingly gentle and peaceful.

Ken Devereux, based on his personal experience and involvement in the health sector as a chaplain, expressed the view that the West Australian VAD Act could be complementary to quality multi-disciplinary palliative care. It could offer relief to a person who had a disease, illness or medical condition that was advanced, progressive and likely to cause death in the coming months, and who was experiencing what they felt was intolerable suffering. Various safeguards have been set out to protect against coercive influences upon the person; procedural regulation gives protection to family and medical personnel involved as well as giving options for health workers to conscientiously object to being involved in the implementation of the process for someone who had chosen the voluntary assisted dying pathway.

Other task group members held a variety of viewpoints, but overall there was a pragmatic acceptance that the law had been enacted; it was now becoming an option, yet it would only be applicable to a small proportion of people. Since the church is actively involved in helping people approach death or work through suffering and grief, it is appropriate for us to apply Gospel values to our pastoral and theological endeavours alongside practical steps to help people relate to death and dying in contemporary society.

"We should all talk about death" was one of the conclusions of the WA Parliament's Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices in its extensive 2018 Report **My Life, My Choice**. "Inherently, as a society, we do not like to talk about death... [It] is inevitable and if we want to increase the likelihood of dying a "good death" people – patients, families, carers and health professionals – must talk about it."

The Synod Task Group acknowledges this broad community reluctance and agrees that this is a primary need the Uniting Church can do more to address, both within the church and more widely. This gap is also apparent within the community fears, anxieties and dislocating social consequences that the Coronavirus has thrown up here and universally.

The Task Group proposes a simple but wide-ranging educational resource kit to help people better understand death and dying, and to connect that to Christian faith perspectives. This can lead into opportunities to raise understandings about Advance Health Directives, Enduring Power of Guardianship as well as the possibilities and practices of voluntary assisted dying.

Hence, the Task Group has set about preparing two resources for personal or group seminar use. One booklet will contain short case studies that raise a variety of issues prompting thought, discussion and learning about various aspects of the subject matter. This could assist with the personal formation

or refining of conscience as well as providing an informed basis for considering 'conscientious objection'. A supplementary manual will offer relevant information on medical procedures, legal requirements and optional documents, Christian perspectives and links to other resources.

Being conscious of many sensitivities in these end of life matters, the Task Group is conscious of the need to take further steps to engage in culturally appropriate ways with Indigenous people and with particular migrant based congregations and communities.

NEXT STEPS

A Proposal is being put forward in order to give the Synod an opportunity to consider the work of the Task Group, and if appropriate to endorse its continued work on such resource materials in the next few months.

The proposal also offers some guidance for Uniting Church ministers, members and agencies in WA relating to the existence of the new Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation which will become operational within the next year.

FOOTNOTE: Dr Arthur Criddle is a member of the Juniper Board, but was not appointed by that Board, nor did he claim to represent the Board.

Rev Ken Devereux (on behalf of the VAD Task Group)

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