



# Reflections to the ELCIC Task Force on Decisions at the End of Life

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**By Bishop Allan Grundahl (Retired)**

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# Personal Reflections on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID)

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As a highly respected colleague put it to me: "It's easy to pontificate at a distance," after his wife had died an agonizing death from ALS.

Though "Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) was not requested, he did not recommend MAID, but he did indicate that this issue is not 'black and white.'"

So we Christians wrestle with this very significant social and religious issue.

Following the questions supplied by members of the ELCIC/NCC Task Force, I share out of my consideration of and reflection upon "Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID):

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## **1) The Supreme Court Carter decision signals a change in society's understanding of death and dying. How does such a transition in understanding influence theological understandings of death and dying?**

Since the life of the church and theological understandings are imbedded in the milieu of our Canadian society, there is inevitable influence on our Christian perspectives while, at the same time, our Christian perspectives are to, and do, influence society and government actions.

Some would see this as Christians "following" rather than "leading" the attitudes of world. However, since Almighty God works both through the "world" and the "church," then we Christians need to be alert to the possibility of God sometimes using the world to prod Christians to take a fresh and perhaps deeper look at possibilities which traditionally we have felt to be clear-cut...while at the same time to be alert to what expressions we Christians should make out of our religious convictions to influence society and government.

Thus, with the issue before us right now of "Medical Assistance in Dying", we Christians need to give deep and concerned consideration of this current issue.

## **2) The Carter decision upheld an individual's freedom to choose. How does our faith tradition balance its communities' shared value of the sanctity of life against the individual's right to seek assistance with her/his death?**

First an "imbalance" needs to be recognized in our society. On the one hand, Canada is progressive in having adopted a *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, strongly focused on the individual. On the other hand, Canada has never produced a balancing document such as a "Canadian Charter of Community Values" for this country.

Thus presently, most decisions are made by looking mostly or primarily at what is or seems right and good for the “individual,” often at the expense of what might be another conviction which is important for or held by the community and/or this country.

Therefore government is often reticent to make decisions on contentious issues for fear of losing votes. Consequently, critical decisions are often left to the Supreme Court and we end up, in fact, being “ruled” by a very few individuals (judges) who are neither elected nor maybe even representative of most Canadians.

For the MAID issue, I think the Supreme Court had virtually no other course to follow than to base its decision on the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and thus focus mostly on the “individual,” since there is no “Canadian Charter of Community Values” in existence.

Therefore, the role of the Christian Church can only simply voice in every way possible that life is sacred, indeed given of God, and the rights of an individual to choose MAID must also be informed by the importance of the “community,” based on the revelation of Holy Scriptures and expressed in Christian theology.

### **3) Traditional faith perspectives often view suffering as an appropriate if not valued dimension of authentic witness. Has our experience and tolerance for suffering changed, calling into question the validity of such traditional perspectives on suffering?**

No doubt those perspectives have changed in our society... on two counts. First, the rights of the “individual” in Canada (and beyond) have been pushed to the fore by our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Second, technology and a host of other factors have produced in our society an expectation of quick fixes for almost everything.

Thus our experience and tolerance for suffering has changed so that it seems very evident to many that there can and should be a quick fix for suffering... and that every individual has the right to make their own decision about it. So traditional faith perspectives about suffering, including any value in suffering, has virtually vanished from contemporary thinking except in some Christian circles.

### **4) Can assisting another in her/his death be understood as a faithful witness of Christian healing?**

Assisting a person in her/his death can be understood as a faithful witness of Christian healing when the overarching perspective of God’s LOVE is recognized along with the conviction that the final and complete healing for all of us is assured in the life to come... through the death and resurrection of our Lord.

However, that stance is very complex and affects many others besides the person requesting MAID and the person(s) assisting—thus, becoming a very wide challenge of ministry for the Christian Church. Families, friends, medical persons, nurses and any kind of caregiver may hold deep convictions on both sides of MAID. Therefore, Christian leadership at all levels will need to rise to the needs for ministry

in these contentious issues. Within care-giving organizations and facilities, total freedom must be given for anyone to refrain from involvement with MAID... and without fear of any recrimination whether they are involved or not.

It will also need to be recognized that the very act of Government to approve MAID will also add possible pressure to ordinary, aging and/or ill individuals to feel that maybe they “should” consider MAID for themselves when they might never have thought of that possibility before this Government action—or before such a decision by a care-giving institution. In fact, a decision by a care-giving institution to not approve of MAID may help an aging and/or ill person to be more cautious about considering MAID. This might be the Christian way to be counter-cultural and emphasize the sanctity of life.

Furthermore, this subtle pressure to consider MAID may easily give rise to considering more factors than simply personal suffering. An older and/or ill person might wonder if MAID should be chosen so as not to be a burden on families and/or caregivers, or to help someone to benefit from financial help (from their estate) sooner, or to avoid expense for themselves, or their dear ones or the medical system, or... The list may be endless! The MAID possibility may even produce relational issues— anxiousness in declining years, wondering if their dear ones or others might really be wishing they would die sooner rather than later, thus deprecating the quality of their relationship as aging/illness progresses.

Of course, there are also the challenges of protecting the vulnerable as well as recognizing the danger of pressure-for-gain made by folks who may stand to profit from a person choosing MAID.

At the same time, if MAID is chosen with the honest conviction that God’s overarching LOVE is at the heart of doing the very best for an aging and/or ill person to hasten death, I think Christians can be involved—trusting that only God can read the intent of mind, and also trusting that God’s Spirit will guide in dealing with all the complexities involved.

**5) How can a Christian tradition such as ours justify/explain/support assisted dying in such a way as does not betray centuries of theological practice as belief?**

Christian teaching, theology, tradition and practice all need to be taken seriously, but those elements must never become gods in themselves... thus allowing or not allowing for change and newness beyond those long-held Christian convictions out of our past.

Jesus himself said in the gospel of John that there was much more Christ could say but his followers were not ready yet... but the Spirit would lead into all truth... which indicates there will be newness of perspectives that may never have occurred to any generation before, all down through history.

Thus, it will probably always “seem” that new perspectives are sometimes betraying centuries of theological practice and belief. However, we Christians need always to be cautious not to make the past our god, but be open to the Spirit’s newness of revelation and perspectives.

**6) Suggest a theological framework within which pastoral/spiritual-care providers may ground their ministry with those who seek assisted dying.**

All scripture and church tradition needs to be taken seriously. Scriptures such as the commandment not to kill... and St. Paul's reminder that we are not our own; we are bought with a price... and our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit... and thus life is sacred and to be highly respected—all such and other Scriptures must be foundational.

However, a single even greater principle also needs to be recognized: that the over-arching principle of all scripture and revelation is the principle of God's LOVE. Thus an openness to allow for modifications of traditional understandings is continuously necessary and may very well be the leading of God's Spirit into newness for every age. Jesus himself exemplified such modifications regarding the Killing and Sabbath commandments.

Both of the above factors need to be part of a theological framework in dealing with MAID decisions, but the second is paramount—God's LOVE and care and concern.

**7) Suggest a faith-based model for ethical decision-making appropriate to this concern.**

A faith-based model for making decisions related to MAID is, first of all, to make it very clear that life is sacred and given by God and that God will walk with us to endure even the worst kind of suffering.

However, when a person feels he/she is suffering unbearably, perhaps with even worse to come (as far as current medical knowledge can determine), then pastors and spiritual-care providers should assure the one suffering that God's overarching desire and will is to love and care for and want the best for every person... which can include MAID as a last resort.

Finally, since those involved in MAID situations may never be completely clear or settled with whatever decision is made, it is important to remind all involved in a MAID situation that all scripture and revelation reveals not only a loving God but also a forgiving God who will not hold it against anyone when a decision is made in error. Christians live as "forgiven people" under a compassionate and forgiving God.

**8) Suggest a theological framework which understands assisted dying within the context of achieving a faith-based quality of life.**

A faith-based quality of life depends entirely on a loving and forgiving God.

We imperfect human beings are simply expected to recognize that truth and then use the intellect and decision-making abilities God has given us... to make the best informed decision possible at the time... always trusting in God's love as well as God's forgiveness when we err.

Then Christians can live life to the fullest as varied measures of health allow. And Christians can die with confidence, whether assisted or not, that God has prepared the best yet to come.

Thanks be to God!