



An ELCIC Resolution on Decisions-At-The-End-Of-Life

**Approved at the Sixth Biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
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- MS That the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada affirm the following guidelines for assisting persons who are facing the reality of dealing with the often tragic and dehumanizing consequences of a terminal illness or trauma. Therefore we;
- support all appropriate efforts to provide palliative and hospice care to individuals who are experiencing tragic or dehumanizing consequences of a terminal illness or trauma.
 - support one another as a caring community which reaches out to those who stand in need in times of death and dying. We support others in the caring community who reach out to those who stand in need in time of dying. In these circumstances Christians are called on to provide assurance of the ever present reality of God's love by providing spiritual care for those both inside and outside the community of the church, helping relieve the pain of suffering, promoting a spirit of compassion and giving comfort to physical needs.
 - are not called on to pursue every medical treatment available in every circumstance. When Christians are called on to assist in treatment decisions, it is helpful to assess the recommended intervention in terms of specific purpose and its estimated degree of efficacy. When a treatment will not help improve a patient's underlying condition, will not provide palliative assistance to the patient, or will not prevent death from occurring from that condition, then such treatment need not be supported or continued. Christians should support the full disclosure to those called on to help make treatment decisions, of the pertinent facts of a patient's condition and the effects of all treatments considered.
 - do not support the legalization of "physician assisted" death or "mercy killing" in which the purpose of medical treatment or private action is the deliberate taking of a life which has been created in God's image. Such action would too easily allow persons to take advantage of those most vulnerable. Nevertheless, Christians should feel free to support in an ambiguous situation, appropriate medical treatment whose primary purpose is palliative care or which seeks to address a patient's underlying condition, but which may also have life undermining side-effects.
 - should seek to provide support and guidance to family, friends, and health care professionals about what treatment and care they would want for the patient in circumstances where the patient may be unable to communicate. Christians should not support any treatment given without the consent of a patient, or if that is not possible, without the witnessed consent of those who have been given authority to speak on behalf of the patient.

- encourage individuals to empower and help alleviate potential guilt of family and friends who may have to make treatment decisions on behalf of the patient by discussing and documenting treatment wishes and the values that inform these wishes.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Modern medical science has made remarkable advances in the later half of the twentieth century. These advances have enabled persons to live fuller and longer lives than ever before. Many diseases previously thought to be uncontrollable, have become manageable. Genetic disorders never before diagnosed have been more successfully identified for treatment. The ability to sustain life in the face of life threatening trauma has been dramatically increased.

While this has been a blessing for many, it has also confronted others with a sometimes tragic and dehumanizingly prolonged context for dying. Persons facing the ravages of the advanced terminal stages of diseases often find themselves confronting a painful, self negating, radically degenerative future and death, which can be unduly prolonged by the ability of science to simply keep persons alive. It is in such situations, that cut people off from meaningful relationships and rob them of their ability to have any significant input into decisions about their treatment, that individuals find their humanity most undermined.

It is this agonizing reality which has prompted recent proposals by some in Canada, to permit such individuals to obtain, legally, the help of physicians and/or friends in bringing their life to an end. This is a practice often referred to as “mercy killing”, “physician assisted death”, or “euthanasia”. Currently such help cannot be legally given in Canada.

In the face of these proposals and the reality they point to, persons are now seeking to discern what policies and practices might best serve the human dignity of persons who are dying, and when must one draw the line against actions that are morally unacceptable. Should the laws be changed or not? And if so, how far should they go? If not, how should they be more humanely applied? As concerned Christians, how should individuals respond to these proposals and the agonizing reality to which they point? Are there guidelines which Christians can turn to which through prayer and careful reflection will help them address these concerns?

CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS:

A foundation for Christian guidelines in the matter of euthanasia can be found in the *Lutheran Social Statement On Death and Dying* adopted by the ELCIC from one of its predecessor bodies. From that document certain affirmations and insights can be drawn which are helpful to our Christian reflection on issues regarding death, dying, and euthanasia. These affirmations and insights include:

The recognition that as Christians we are part of a caring community; a part of the web of human relations we call friends and family, a part of a faith family we call the church; a part of the body of Christ through baptism.

The recognition that God has created us in God's image and given each of us the gift of life. As Christians we are called on to be thankful stewards of this gift for the well being of all creation, including ourselves. In light of this, as a church, we have affirmed that, deliberately destroying life created in the image of God is contrary to the Christian conscience (p. 6 On Death and Dying).

The recognition that life in its full Biblical sense includes equally an affirmation of both the biological and the relationship dimension of our being. These two dimensions form an interdependent whole. Quality of life and maintenance of life must both be a concern of Christians.

The recognition that out of respect for all persons as created in God's image, the carefully and prayerfully considered decisions of individuals regarding their medical treatment needs to be given serious and appropriate recognition. To best make such decisions individuals need to be provided full and accurate pertinent information about the underlying condition to be treated and about the affects of the treatment.

The recognition that God is present for all through the Resurrection faith of the church, giving hope and meaning through all the dimensions of the life process. This life process includes death and dying (Romans 14:7-10).