

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME III

H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Voluntary Assisted Dying

Prepared by the Committee for Care Ministries and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions. Adopted by the College of Bishops and General Church Board, 21 July 2023.

PREAMBLE

Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation has been introduced in Australia and New Zealand. As it is now a legal process, this statement outlines how God's people can respond to this practice.

We believe, teach and confess that God is the Creator of all things, including humankind. Among all of God's living creatures, human beings are unique in being made in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27).

God has blessed all humanity richly, providing food and clothing, home and family, daily work and all we need from day to day (Luther's Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed).

We also acknowledge that many people in our society experience chronic disease accompanied by social, emotional, and spiritual pain and feelings of despair.

We also believe, teach and confess that God's Son, Jesus Christ, is God in the flesh (John 1:14) has come into the world to save and redeem our humanity, including humanity's suffering, to save us from despair. Whenever confronted by sickness, suffering and hopelessness Jesus did not bring death but life and healing (Luke 7:1-17; John 11). Because of His innocent suffering and death, we can live under him in his kingdom in this life even in suffering because we belong to him who is risen from the dead (Luther's Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed).

Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit calls us, individually and as the Christian church, to live as children of the light (1 Thessalonians 5:5 & Luther's Small Catechism, Explanation of the

Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). The light of his Word guides us to care for those who are sick and suffering and who despair in this life.

We acknowledge the advances in medical science and practice which enhance life expectancy and quality, particularly the science and practice of palliative care. We thank God for these gifts that promote life. We also acknowledge that God has set limits in this life, that we are mortal, and death is inevitable before the final appearance of our Lord. When God allows it to come to us, we can welcome death with hope in the resurrection from the dead. We can pray as Simeon did at the end of his life when holding the infant Jesus in his arms, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your Word for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30). The Church affirms letting the sick and dying depart in peace, and rejects the practice of actively ending their life.

Pastors are called to be diligent in their ministry of word and sacrament to the sick and dying. Jesus Christ encourages his people to comfort and support all whose life is made more difficult through suffering, sickness or the fear of death (DSTO Vol 1H *Euthanasia or mercy killing*).

In providing aged and community services, Lutheran agencies live and work in both the left-hand and right-hand kingdoms of God. We are to honour government and to obey its laws and regulations as far as they conform to God's will. With Christ's apostles we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

LCANZ POSITION STATEMENT

The LCA NZ does not support Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD), however it undertakes to support all people, seeking to bring God's love to life in crucial life and death situations. Staff and volunteers in aged care and other community care settings will not participate in the processes of VAD or seek to influence decisions, as directed by state laws. However, a respectful and pastoral approach will be negotiated and maintained throughout the process, extending to family members as they face imminent bereavement and the need for after-death rituals and care.

DEFINITIONS

Voluntary assisted dying

The term 'voluntary assisted dying' evolved in Australia in recent years following inquiries and parliamentary debates of laws enabling a terminally ill person to seek medical assistance to end their lives. This term is now commonly used in Australia, rather than euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide or dying.

Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) refers to the assistance provided to a person by a health practitioner to end their life. It includes:

- 'self-administration', where the person takes the VAD lethal dose themselves, and
- 'practitioner administration', where the person is given the lethal dose by a doctor (or in some Australian States, a nurse practitioner or registered nurse).

The refusal to continue medical treatment at the end of life is not voluntary assisted dying.

Voluntary

'Voluntary' indicates that the practice is a voluntary choice of the person, without coercion and that they are mentally competent (have capacity) to decide to access VAD.

Leadership Teams

'Leadership Teams' means all those board members, office bearers, committee members and decision makers in the Church, including districts, agencies and congregations.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this statement is to affirm our responsibility as Christians to be faithful to God's gift of life, and to encourage pastoral engagement with people both within and beyond our churches who feel their suffering is too much to cope with.

This statement is not intended to present a prescriptive list of actions that must be followed by individuals, congregations, and agencies. Instead, it provides a set of guidelines and suggestions that these groups can use as a starting point for developing their own life affirming actions as appropriate to their circumstances and available within their resources.

This statement supplements rather than replaces the existing DSTO document on Euthanasia (LCA 1981).

RELEVANCE

The statement is relevant to all levels of the Church – from individuals to congregations, groups and agencies. As such, it is specifically relevant to all ministries and activities of the Church, including but not restricted to:

- Churchwide Office, Boards, Committees, Agencies and Departments
- District Offices, Boards, Committees, Agencies and Departments
- Congregations, and their councils, officers, agencies and staff
- Schools, Colleges and Early Learning Centres
- Aged Care and Community Services
- Other Agencies of the Church

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STATEMENT

- To encourage and support action throughout the Church to fulfil our role as people who affirm life.
- To acknowledge that in the midst of life there is death and that people have legal choices about how and when they die.
- To affirm the understanding of the sanctity of human life.
- To reemphasise the Church's grave concerns about the risk to our society, in particular to some of our most vulnerable fellow citizens, of granting to ourselves the right to define when a life is worthless, and of legalising and normalising the taking of so-called "worthless life".
- To advocate for and encourage the implementation and use of high-quality palliative care to manage pain and suffering for those who are terminally ill.

- To encourage and support pastors, chaplains and pastoral carers as they minister to people who may be affected by voluntary assisted dying.
- To provide information to those responsible for governance and management of services that may work with people who could be eligible for voluntary assisted dying.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE CHURCH

Church Leadership Teams are encouraged to intentionally consider how to undertake their activities in a way that witnesses to Christ's love of all. This might include:

- Rejoicing in the gift of life and being committed to enriching and enhancing the life experience of those under its care.
- Supporting the physical, spiritual, emotional, mental and social/family wellbeing of each person.
- When people are approaching the end of life and are terminally ill, realising that they need more focused care from medical professionals and nurses, chaplains and family so that they can if they choose, experience increased attention and love.
- Where palliative care is supplied as a part of a service's core business, that maximum physical comfort is the goal and those people nearing the end of their life are more confident in their situation and need not fear the loss of control.

The LCA NZ acknowledges Voluntary Assisted Dying services may be sought by some people in our society. However, the legislated support for VAD practice raises complex issues for both secular and church organisations, particularly those organisations caring for the sick, the ageing and the dying.

RESPONSIBLE PERSON/S

- General Church Board (GCB) is responsible to ensure this statement is actively publicised across the LCA NZ.
- District Church Boards (DCB) are responsible to ensure this statement and any related procedures are actively publicised within their respective Districts.
- Congregation/Parish Councils are responsible for considering this statement in their day-to-day operations.
- Governance Boards of all LCA NZ-related entities are responsible for encouraging the consideration of this statement, where applicable, for decisions in their day-to-day operations.

REFERENCES

LCA 1981, *Euthanasia or mercy killing*, DSTO Vol 1-H, found at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/>

ADDITIONAL READING

End of Life Law in Australia 2022, VAD Factsheet, found at <https://www.eldac.com.au/tabid/5757/Default.aspx>

LCA 2001, *The two kingdoms and social ethics*, DSTO Vol 2-1, found at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/>

LCA 2018, *God's love – our care: Theology underpinning the practice of Lutheran care*, found at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/local-mission/gods-love-our-care/>

LCA 2019, *Called to Transformative Action: The ethos underpinning Lutheran aged care and community services*, found at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/local-mission/gods-love-our-care/>

Lutherans for Life n.d., *Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide*, found at <https://www.lutheransforlife.lca.org.au/end-of-life-issues/euthanasia-physician-assisted-suicide/>

Seligmann, J C. 2022, *End of life issues paper*, Care Ministries LCA NZ, found at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/local-mission/care-ministries/events-training-resources/>

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