

Statement of Convergence on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide Christmas of 1996

Recognizing that issues around decisions at the end of life were front-and-centre in both church and society, the Commission on Faith and Witness undertook a survey of its membership, resulting in the release of the following ecumenical statement of convergence on euthanasia and assisted suicide. The statement was released in December, 1996. Since that time, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's biennial convention passed a statement on Decisions at the End of Life that affirms the direction of the position of the CFW's statement.

Much discussion is being generated in both public and private forums on the changing of Canadian law and practice to accept so called "new" approaches to death and dying. The Commission on Faith and Witness of The Canadian Council of Churches has surveyed the ethical positions of its member churches. While acknowledging the existence of a diversity of opinion both among and within our communities, we believe that we can detect a remarkable degree of convergence on these issues.

The Churches share in a long history of providing many forms of health care, healing and support of the suffering and dying. Churches actively supported the development of palliative care facilities, including pain management. This is expressed in the central role they have played in the development of hospices and palliative care institutions in many parts of the world. These programs attempt to alleviate pain and maintain dignity of life even at the moment of death. Christians are called by God to form caring communities which make God's love real for those who are suffering or facing death. It is through these communities that we bear witness to the possibility that human life can have dignity and meaning even in the context of the realities of pain, suffering and death.

All of our member churches are very concerned about this issue, but are approaching it in a variety of ways. Some member churches, notably the British Methodist Episcopal Church, Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, and the United Church of Canada have urged their individual congregations to study the question, and see euthanasia not as a policy but a pastoral issue. The Society of Friends is continuing to study the issue but has not reached unity. Others, including the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Reformed Church in Canada are in a process of study and affirm the direction of the following convergence. Still others, including the Armenian Orthodox Church, Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, Coptic Orthodox Church, Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada, Ethiopian Orthodox Tawehedo Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Orthodox Church in America, Presbyterian Church in Canada, Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, are prepared to speak with one voice on euthanasia and assisted suicide as follows:

Much of the convergence in Christian thought follows from the conviction that life is entrusted to us by God. As in many other religious traditions, life is seen as something larger than any individual person's "ownership" of it and, therefore, is not ours to discard. Many member Churches believe that the move to legalize euthanasia or assisted suicide would run contrary to the wisdom expressed in this widely held religious vision. It would be destructive of both human dignity and community. These churches share with other members of society a concern for the protection and respect of life. To change current law and practice to enable a physician, family member or any private citizen to take the life of another or assist in their suicide would undermine the ultimate respect for human life itself and create new victims in complex situations. The request for assistance in committing suicide, and the provision of such assistance has to be looked at as a failure of human community. While pain and despair are real, the solution should not be found in the termination of life. But the Christian response is always one of hope. From this hope there arises the commitment to give all members of society, especially the most vulnerable, the assurance that they will receive care and support in all circumstances of their lives, and not have dehumanizing medical interventions forced upon them.

The Faith and Witness Commission has used the following definitions:

- *Euthanasia is an action or omission whose primary intention is to end a person's life, with or without that person's consent, for compassionate reasons*
- *Euthanasia does not include:*
 - *withholding or withdrawing medical treatment when its burdens on the dying person outweighs its benefits;*
 - *giving drugs to relieve pain, even if an unintended effect is to shorten life;*
 - *respecting a person's refusal of treatment or request to discontinue treatment*
- *Assisted Suicide is the providing of information, assistance or the means for a person to take his or her own life.*