



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Over the last year, the Uniting Church in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania has been considering the issue of Voluntary Assisted Dying. This conversation has continued over the years, with a variety of views expressed by members of the Church.

Anticipating that legislation might be passed in Victoria, the 2017 Synod requested a consultation process across the Synod. The aim was to bring to the 2019 Synod, a report and recommendations regarding the Church's response to any potential legislation.

When legislation was passed in Victoria, it became more important to know how the Church in this Synod might respond to those who look to us for guidance. This includes members of congregations, ministers and pastors, members who are supporting loved ones and those who are personally considering voluntary assisted dying, as well as Uniting VicTas, Uniting AgeWell, and the Church-affiliated hospital group Epworth HealthCare.

Last week, members of the 2019 Synod of Victoria and Tasmania met together in careful consideration, discussion and prayer to discern our response to the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Legislation. The Synod heard a wide range of strongly and faithfully held views, from various theological and cultural perspectives.

Synod members listened to each other, seeking the Spirit's leading as they worked together as a Christian community in openness, honesty and respect. The original proposals were tested and reshaped, until we could decide together on the response of the Church in our Synod.

Together we affirmed aspects of our core Christian beliefs. We affirmed that life is a gift of God, that all life is precious to God, and has dignity before God, regardless of circumstances. We affirmed that the love of God in Christ holds us throughout all of our lives and in our dying, and that there is nothing that can separate us from the unbounded love of God. We affirmed the distinctive Christian theology and mystery of suffering. We are held within the love of God who enters into our sufferings, bringing grace and peace even in our darkest moments. We affirmed the calling of Christians to be discerning communities of love and care to others, in their journey through life and death.

We affirmed that palliative care is the primary way in which we support and care for those at the end of life, including their families, and called on the Victorian Government to increase resourcing for this.

We recognised that there is a range of faithful Christian responses to voluntary assisted dying which reflect these deeply held Christian beliefs. In relation to the very specific limitations of the 2017 Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation, we recognised that exploring or accessing voluntary assisted dying, as well as conscientiously objecting, are all faithful Christian responses.

In light of all this, permission was given to the relevant UCA institutions and associated hospital group within Victoria, to make voluntary assisted dying allowable for their patients, clients and residents, under the specific conditions of the legislation.

This decision honours the diversity of faithful Christian responses within our Church, and gives people the freedom to follow their own conscience in this matter. While this decision may be difficult or challenging for some members or communities of our Church, the resolution commits to respecting the range of faithfully held Christian responses.

Taking into account the range of cultural and language needs, and the range of faithful Christian responses, the Synod resolved to resource those who offer spiritual and pastoral support to people (and their families) who are exploring, accessing, or who have accessed voluntary assisted dying. Translations of this letter into other languages may also be available, if needed.

I encourage you to share this letter and the attached resolution (unconfirmed minute) with your congregations, faith communities, or organisations, that we may together explore what this means in our life of faith and witness to the grace and love of God in our midst.

May the grace and peace of Christ continue to fill us with God's unbounding and renewing love.



Rev Denise Liersch
Moderator



Unconfirmed Minute from the 14th Synod Meeting of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

26 Response to Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Legislation

That the Synod resolved:

(a) To affirm that:

- (i) life is a gift of God, and all human life, regardless of circumstance, is precious to and has dignity before God;**
- (ii) neither death nor life, neither suffering nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (see Romans 8:38-39);**
- (iii) as followers of Christ and through God's accompanying grace, fresh wisdom, peace and compassion can be birthed in the midst of suffering, which, without idolising suffering, is a deep and abiding mystery;**
- (iv) while death is the end of mortal life it marks a new beginning in our relationship with God (see *Uniting in Worship 2*; Funeral Liturgy);**
- (v) as followers of Christ we are called to spiritual discernment and responsibility as we journey through life and death; and**
- (vi) as the body of Christ we are called to be a loving and supportive community to people in need of care, including at the end of life.**

(b) To affirm that, in the light of (a) above, palliative care be the primary means through which end of life care is provided "for a person with an active, progressive, advanced disease, who has little or no prospect of cure and who is expected to die and for whom the primary goal is to optimise the quality of life." (see Palliative Care Australia: palliative care definition).

(c) To acknowledge that:

- (i) it is a legal right, as of 19 June 2019, for all Victorians who meet the eligibility criteria and follow the process described in the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017 to access voluntary assisted dying; and**
- (ii) most people will find palliative care and end of life services give them the support they need at the end of their life (see DHHS Fact Sheet on Understanding voluntary assisted dying).**

(d) To recognise that within the Synod:

- (i) there is a range of faithful Christian responses to voluntary assisted dying which are consistent with the affirmations in clause (a); and**
- (ii) exploring, accessing, and conscientiously objecting to voluntary assisted dying are all within the range of faithful Christian responses to the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.**

- (e) In the light of clauses (a), (b), (c) and (d) above, to give permission within Victoria to UCA institutions (Uniting VicTas and Uniting AgeWell) and the UCA-affiliated hospital group (Epworth HealthCare) to make voluntary assisted dying allowable within the context of their facilities and services for their patients, clients and residents, under the conditions described in the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.
- (f) To request that the relevant UCA institutions (Uniting VicTas and Uniting AgeWell) and the UCA-affiliated hospital group (Epworth HealthCare) in Victoria ensure they develop and adopt clear policies and procedures that allow staff and volunteers to conscientiously object to participating in voluntary assisted dying, in accordance with the provisions outlined in the relevant legislation.
- (g) To commit to the provision of a compassionate pastoral response to all people, including those who choose to explore or access voluntary assisted dying within Victoria and their families, associated with the Church, UCA institutions (Uniting VicTas and Uniting AgeWell) and the UCA-affiliated hospital group (Epworth HealthCare).
- (h) To request equipping Leadership for Mission (eLM), in collaboration with the Synod Ethics Committee, to resource UCA ministers, lay leaders, chaplains, pastoral care workers and others who offer spiritual and pastoral support to people (and their families) who are exploring, accessing, or who have accessed voluntary assisted dying, including taking into account

 - i. engagement with First Peoples;
 - ii. diverse cultural and language needs;
 - iii. the range of faithful Christian responses; and
 - iv. the need for prayers and liturgical support for pastoral care and funerals, in consultation with the Assembly's Transforming Worship Panel.
- (i) To write to the Victorian Premier and relevant government ministers:

 - i. to call on the Victorian Government to increase resourcing for palliative care as the primary means through which end of life care is offered and delivered; and
 - ii. to encourage the Victorian Government to engage with First Peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities in resourcing the understanding of the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.
- (j) To advise the Leader of the Opposition and shadow spokespeople of the action in (i) above.