

The Value of Human Life / Position on Assisted Dying

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Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	For discussion and for the Council to decide the preferred option for further work.
Draft Resolutions	13/1. The Council receives the report. 13/2. The Council supports Option 1 as outlined in the paper. OR 13/3. The Council supports Option 2 as outlined in the paper. OR 13/4. The Council supports Option 3 as outlined in the paper. and requests that the necessary work is undertaken to put it into action.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To assist the Methodist Council in reaching a position on assisted dying, if considered appropriate, in response to Notices of Motion brought to the Conference in 2015.
Main Points	There have been considerable medical and societal changes since a statement on voluntary euthanasia was adopted by the Conference in 1974. An Assisted Dying Bill was introduced to Parliament earlier this year and may have prompted the Notices of Motion placed before the 2015 Conference. Recognising the great sensitivity of this topic, the Conference referred them to the Council to determine an appropriate response. It should be noted that, since then, the Assisted Dying Bill was overwhelmingly defeated.
Background Context and Relevant Documents	Statement on voluntary euthanasia 1974. NoMs 2015/212 and 2015/221

Summary of Impact

Faith & Order	Work by Faith and Order will be required if Option 2 is preferred
Financial	Option 1: no implications Option 2 has significant implications for cost and workload which need further work to define and scope. Option 3 would be simpler / less costly.
Wider Connexional	Issue that may be of wide interest and relevance but also of great personal sensitivity to those whose experience of the death of friends or family members was a painful one.
External (eg ecumenical)	Equally of wide interest. It could however be argued that the “moment has passed” as far as the public debate is concerned.

The Value of Human Life / Position on Assisted Dying

Summary

1. The Methodist Conference in 2015 considered the Notices of Motion 2015/212 (The Value of Human Life) and 2015/221, which was a proposed amendment to 212 (see section 8 below). These motions referred to the position of the Methodist Church on assisted dying. After some debate it was decided to refer both motions without a vote to the Methodist Council. This paper outlines the background behind the motions, and offers the Council three possible ways forward, each of which will have different implications for the use of resources and the workload of members of the Connexional Team. Whilst some urge us to engage in the debate around assisted dying as normative and a helpful activity, it should be remembered that engaging in the debate at all is difficult for some whose experience of the death of friends or family members was a painful one.

Background

1974 Conference Statement

2. In 1974 the Methodist Conference agreed a statement on voluntary euthanasia.¹ This statement draws a distinction between a compassionate response when “the body is moving with a certain appropriateness towards death” (or medical interference where a person “may survive physically but who will permanently lack any significant capacity to enjoy or even to respond to their environment”), and euthanasia which is interference “aimed at precipitating death”. The statement warns of the sense of burden which elderly people might feel, as well as the risk of abuse from family members if assisted dying were permitted.
3. The statement outlines the “biblical strands” available to Christians engaging in the debate on euthanasia, and by extension to assisted dying [noting the exclusive language of the time]: “The Christian, therefore, approaches the euthanasia debate with many biblical strands in his hands: the dignity of man as made for unbroken fellowship with God; the eternal dimension of life which sets death in perspective; the call to use responsibly all God’s gifts including the powers man has over the lives of others; and above all the need to find in every situation the way of compassion.”
4. Statements of the Methodist Conference are judged to be effective for at least a decade; the statement on euthanasia is 40 years old. In this time palliative care has changed beyond recognition. The first hospice was opened just seven years before the statement was written, but most towns would not have had one. Palliative medicine is now a speciality in its own right, available within hospitals as well as in hospices. Much more can be done in terms of medication for pain and other symptoms. There is an understanding of “spiritual pain” and “total pain”, addressing all the causes of patients’ symptoms not just the physical ones.

Legislation

5. Over the past decade, private members’ legislation to legalise assisted dying has been introduced on a number of occasions. Over this time the terminology and emphasis of the legislation has changed, with the focus increasingly moving towards terminal illness and removing the involvement of medical practitioners, but it has been voted out on each occasion. Most recently a Private Member’s Bill to allow assisted suicide for mentally

¹ Voluntary euthanasia is generally accepted to be different to assisted dying. Whilst euthanasia means “a good death”, it has connotations of a person being involved in taking the life of another. Assisted dying places responsibility for decision making on the person who is dying.

competent adults deemed to have less than six months to live (in England and Wales) was introduced under the ballot by Rob Marris MP. Apart from a debate on the Director of Public Prosecutions' guidelines in 2012 this was the first time the House of Commons had debated assisted suicide for many years.

6. The Churches have avoided a high profile public campaign, with the Care not Killing coalition leading on the lobbying work, with the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church working behind the scenes. The Secretary of the Conference has signed two public statements on behalf of the Methodist Church, using the statement on Euthanasia as the basis for the church's position.
7. There have also been a number of court cases brought by people seeking the right to die, but the courts have ruled that Parliament is the body to decide. The Director of Public Prosecutions has issued guidance on public interest factors which will tend for or against prosecution in cases of assisted suicide. Prosecution will be less likely if the victim has reached a clear and settled decision, if the suspect is motivated wholly by compassion and has sought to dissuade the victim, and has reported the matter to the police.

2015 Methodist Conference

8. Two Notices of Motion were proposed at the 2015 Conference, two months before legislation was due to be considered in Parliament to legalise assisted dying.

Notice of Motion 2015/212: The Value of Human Life

The Conference:

Believes that every human life is of intrinsic value and ought to be affirmed and cherished. Notes its previously expressed opposition to euthanasia, in the Statement adopted by the 1974 Conference.

Expresses serious concern about moves to legalise assisted dying, which would have a seriously detrimental effect on the wellbeing of individuals and on the nature and shape of our society, and can only add to the pressures that many vulnerable terminally ill people will feel, placing them at increased risk of distress and coercion at a time when they most need love and support.

Believes that the hallmarks of a truly compassionate society include high quality palliative care, greater support for carers and enhanced end of life services. It commends those who provide these, whether professionally or voluntarily, but feels that more could and should be done.

Calls upon Her Majesty's Government to give such services a higher priority and upon the Methodist people to increase the practical and prayerful support they give to the terminally ill and to their carers.

9. This Notice of Motion was brought in an attempt to strengthen and update the Methodist Church's position on assisted dying in advance of the parliamentary debate, to raise the profile of the debate within the Church, and to focus the attention of the Methodist people upon care for the terminally ill and their carers.
10. An amendment to this Notice of Motion was brought by some who believed that the original Motion did not represent the range of views on assisted dying within the Church.

Notice of Motion 2015/221: Amendment to Notice of Motion 2015/212 'The Value of Human Life'

Third bullet point to read: 'Notes the serious concern expressed by many about moves to legalise assisted dying, which they believe would have a seriously detrimental effect on the wellbeing of individuals and on the nature and shape of our society and could add...' (last lines

as printed). Fourth bullet to read: 'Also notes the position of others that, where death is considered both certain and imminent, a compassionate due judicial dispensation to allow assisted end-of-life could be appropriate'

11. When the Notices of Motion were debated together, it was judged by the Presidency that the tone of the debate quickly became upsetting for those who were grieving or who had witnessed painful deaths. The Notices of Motion were referred to the Methodist Council without further debate.

Where we are now

12. In September the Assisted Dying Bill was defeated in the House of Commons by 330 votes to 118. This was felt to be a much larger majority than had been expected, so the issue is likely to be off the agenda in this parliament.

Options for Methodist Council

13. **Option 1:**
Do nothing. The political drive for the Church to take a position on assisted dying has probably passed for this parliament. The Methodist Church has a statement on Euthanasia which, although dated in terms of language, is still relevant and has allowed the Church to join in ecumenical and inter-faith initiatives on assisted dying in line with its current position. It might also be possible under this option to update the language of the statement without changing the position of the Church.
14. **Cost:** This option will clearly have no additional budget or workload implications.
15. **Option 2:**
Ask a full working group to review the position of the Methodist Church on assisted dying. The issue is not likely to come before Parliament for a few years, but that does not mean it is not a pressing ethical issue for people. The Church can use the opportunity of a period of political space in order to get its thoughts in order. Palliative care has changed dramatically over the last 40 years, and the legal position is evolving. Does our statement adequately wrestle with the ethical and theological issues? As with most issues we are a broad church, but do we really have a sense of the range of attitudes towards assisted dying within the Church? Can we confidently say that the accepted orthodox position of opposition to assisted dying is really held by most Methodists? A working party would consider the medical, legal, ethical and theological position, explore how Methodists experience and understand the issues involved, examine how the Church supports those affected, particularly carers, and consider whether to revisit the Church's position on assisted dying.
16. **Cost:** Such a working group would be a significant commitment both for the people who volunteer to serve on it, but also in terms of the budget and workload for the Team. A budget of £3,750 pa is allocated towards the costs of working parties (to cover meeting, travel and accommodation costs), but a working party with such a substantial task as this would require significant executive support and senior staff time [estimated very roughly at 1-2 days a week each over say 18 months], This would either need to be funded from elsewhere (eg seconded) or would require choices about which other work cannot be undertaken. Decisions would need to be made about whether the work could be started within this budget/workplan cycle or the next. The Faith and Order Committee would clearly need to be involved too.
17. **Option 3**
Resource the Church better to respond to the needs of those requiring palliative care and understand the issues involved. Identify pieces of work which could involve chaplains and

specialists in palliative care in hospices and hospitals promoting a better understanding of the care and support that can be provided to those facing death, and their relatives, including how churches could offer more support. It could involve signposting people towards existing resources on death, dying or assisted dying produced by others, but would stop short of a full review of the Methodist Church's position. The 1974 statement said *"the need is not so much to change the law as to alter the attitude of society towards death; we are often still not good at talking about death, but if we believe that "death is part of life" then we need to do so well."* This would fit well with the "Manifesto" from the 11-18 stream at 3Generate, which included the statement: "We feel the Church needs to change the general mindset that death is a bad thing."

18. **Cost:** This would require a volunteer or team member to spend the equivalent of a few days or perhaps weeks identifying and promoting resources, linking with existing organisations in this field, and perhaps identifying ways of giving profile to hospice chaplains and staff within the life of the Church, working with the communications team and other relevant parties.
19. The Methodist Council is asked to identify which of the three options it favours and, if none of them, how it wishes to proceed. If option 2 is chosen, then a further paper will need to be brought to the Council outlining terms of reference and membership of the working group.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 13/1. The Council receives the report.**
- 13/2. The Council supports Option 1 as outlined in the paper.**
OR
- 13/3. The Council supports Option 2 as outlined in the paper.**
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