

Written evidence submitted by Revd Canon Rosie Harper (ADY0066)

I have been ordained in the Church of England since 1999 and served as a Parish Priest until 2021. I am also an honorary Canon of Christchurch Cathedral Oxford. I served as a member of General Synod for 11 years until 2021. I am a trustee of Dignity in Dying and also of My Death and My Decision. I also belong to the group IFDiD (Interfaith leaders for Dignity in Dying) chaired by Rabbi Jonathan Romain

I write to support the call for a change in current legislation.

I would very much like you to accept this submission because it reflects the views of the vast majority of Church of England members but represents quite a lone voice amongst senior clergy. There have been times when I have needed considerable courage to voice my beliefs about Assisted Dying within official church circles such as General Synod. I spoke once on the floor of General Synod in favour of a change in the law in 2010. I was the only such voice, but when I sat down my phone was full of messages of support from other members saying they agreed with me but did not dare say so. So powerful is the tabu in the Church of England. At a local parish level I have had complete support.

- *Lived experience*

During my time as a Parish Priest I have walked with many people and their families in the last weeks of their lives. I have also taken almost 1,000 funerals. The stories I have heard have been about a lot of kindness and many 'good' deaths. I have also witnessed people dying in great pain who have expressed very clearly how much they wish to be helped to die. Preparing funerals with the families I heard how unbearable it feels to be begged by their dying loved one to help them die and be unable to help. At the level of common humanity and compassion there needs to be a better way.

By birth I am both Swiss and British and so I know that there is a better way. The conversations my Swiss family have around their dying is rich and honest. Very few choose an assisted death but all bear witness to the fact that knowing it to be possible makes a huge emotional difference and reduces the fear.

I crystalised my own approach within my faith because of a good experience of an assisted death. My Uncle who lived in Zurich made this choice. He had open and deep conversations with his family and the moment of his death, surrounded by his family, with good wine and music, was one of beauty. His wife told me later that she was so grateful to live in a civilized county where this has been possible. The probability of a truly horrible last few days was very high and neither he or his family had to endure or remember that. I cannot imagine that a God who we call loving would require that degree of suffering when we have the means to do it better.

- *Theology*

Much of the Church of England still lives within a Victorian construct of a Paternalistic God. The truth is much deeper than that and involves creation and incarnation and freedom. Saying that only God controls the moment of your death implies a controlling God lacking in compassion.

The theme of paternalism applies not only to the church. Whilst we have a high level of autonomy for most of our lives this is withdrawn by people in white coats standing at the end of our bed at the very moment when we need it the most.

- I do not believe in a God who requires of us the most extreme suffering simply in order to shore up his sovereignty. Nor do I believe that holding on to life at all costs is the uncontested goal of humanity.
- God offers us freedom, allows us to co-create our lives with our creator, ultimately gives us freedom of will to accept or reject his love. Much of our civil society is based on that very free will. Such a God surely does not insist on extreme suffering when there is a different, better way? There is no condemnation in the bible for someone who is too compassionate.
- In supporting a change in legislation which allows Assisted Dying there will not be any requirement for any individual to act against their conscience in their own lives, but by failing to support the change you personally are requiring other people to suffer extreme agony on behalf of your own conscience. That is neither moral or Christian.

The Devil in the detail

There are various people of faith who would agree with the above but cannot get past the doubt that it would be impossible to construct legislation that would not be abused. Clear and robust safeguards are essential. In constructing such safeguards we would move to a far better place than we now occupy. Much of end of life treatment is done on a nod and a wink, withdrawing nutrition and increasing morphine. Even worse, due to fear of litigation urgently needed morphine is withheld out of fear. Proper articulation of everyone's wishes and explicit conversations about dying, such as happens in Switzerland, will make the process more not less safe.

At present there are those who travel to Switzerland to end their lives sooner than they would were it available in this country. A change in the law here would prevent such unnecessary early deaths and allow equal access to an assisted death which at the moment is only available for those who can afford it.

For a small but important number of people it would be transformative to have control over the manner of their death when its inevitability becomes clear. I fully support a change in the law to make this possible.

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