

Written evidence submitted by Religious Alliance for Dignity in Dying (ADY0241)

The Religious Alliance for Dignity in Dying was formed in mid 2021 and has since amassed nearly 900 members of faith who support the campaign for an assisted dying law for terminally ill, mentally competent adults in the UK.

Our members represent major faith groups in the UK and numerous denominations within those groups. The majority of our members are, as one might expect, from the Christian faith, with the Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church of Wales, Church of Ireland, Catholicism, Baptism, Evangelism, Methodism, Unitarianism, United Reformed Church, Quakerism, Scottish Episcopal, Pentecostal, New Life Church, Jehovah's Witness and Mormon denominations all represented. We have a substantial minority of Jewish members, representing Liberal Judaism, Reform Judaism, Modern Orthodox, Masorti and United Synagogue. We also have members from Islamic, Hindu, Zoroastrian and Pagan faith groups.

Alliance members include clergy as well as ordinary lay people. Some clergy members were part of the precursory group, Inter-faith leaders for Dignity in Dying, which I set up in 2014 while Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill was progressing through the House of Lords. Eminent members among our ranks include former archbishop of Canterbury Lord George Carey, Oxford Imam Taj Hargey, the Bishop of Buckingham Alan Wilson and the Reverend Michael Sadgrove Dean Emeritus of Durham. The Liberal Jews, led by CEO Rabbi Charley Baginsky and with support of former CEO and senior Rabbi Danny Rich, have joined the Alliance as a faith group, alongside the Modern Church, an Anglican society promoting liberal Christian theology. The Unitarians led by Chief Officer Liz Slade have recognised the strong support of their members. Several Quaker members have raised concerns about the lack of an assisted dying law with their local area meetings, which may progress through to regional and national meeting levels in due course.

An aim of the Alliance is to demonstrate that people of all faiths and positions within those faiths can and do support giving dying people choice at the end of life. We challenge the notion, as sometimes purported in public discourse, that religious people are monolithically opposed to assisted dying. In fact, the opposite is true. Polling has consistently shown that religious people are supportive of giving terminally ill adults the option of an assisted death, with a 2019 Populus poll finding that approximately 80% of religious people were in favour of law change. We provide an alternative voice to challenge those, particularly some religious leaders, who wrongly claim to speak for all religious people in their opposition to assisted dying. In a 2021 YouGov poll of 5,039 adults, 53% of religious people felt it was wrong for religious leaders to actively campaign against an assisted dying bill that was debated in the House of Commons in 2015, with just 22% saying they felt it was right for them to do so.

If I may give my personal view, I am a minister of religion who has changed my mind from being against assisted dying to being in favour of it as an option in limited circumstances.

For a long time I was against the idea of assisted dying on the grounds of the sanctity of life, as well as the 'slippery slope' argument. However, after many years as a congregational minister of seeing people die in pain, I see no merit in individuals being forced to live out their last days in misery if they want to avoid it. There are four reasons for my change of heart.

First, it is borne out of seeing so many people suffering in their last few weeks, with many of them saying to me words such as “Can’t you do anything to get the doctors to put me out of my misery” or “Every night before I go to sleep, I pray I won’t wake up”. The final straw for me was when I went to visit someone in a hospice who was crouched on his knees on top of his bed – the only position in which he was not in agony.

This sense of profound disquiet was reinforced by the realisation of how deeply unsatisfactory is the current situation, for the options are bad ones: the terminally ill patient suffering on in pain; or dying through suicide (sometimes botched, and always traumatic for the relatives); or going to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland, where assisted dying is permitted, but which means not only huge cost, but also dying earlier than necessary as one has to be fit enough to travel abroad.

The second reason for my change of view was on discovering how robust are the safeguards being proposed around assisted dying and that they are sufficiently strong to ensure that it is not abused. Namely, that it only applies to someone who is terminally ill, mentally competent and wishes it of their own free will. There also needs to be processes in place to ensure these conditions apply (such as the person must be assessed by two independent doctors to ensure that he/she is terminally ill and of sound mind, while they should be made aware of hospice care and other options).

Third, I came to the conclusion that there are profound religious reasons for permitting assisted dying if the above conditions are met. They include the fact that if we believe, as I do, that a loving God wishes us to have the opportunity to have as good a life as possible, then that should extend to having as good a death as possible.

The final reason was when I heard that the proposals being put forward for legislation in England and Wales are almost exactly the same as those that have been operating in Oregon for the last twenty-five years. It means we are not taking a leap into the dark, but have statistical evidence and well-founded research on what happens in such a system, with the result being immensely reassuring that it works as intended.

Of course, there are many in the religious community who regard a painful death as a regrettable part of the natural cycle of life, to be mitigated through medical care if possible and to be endured if not. That is entirely their prerogative and must be respected. The question is whether those who wish to avoid that pain and indignity should have the right to do so? I firmly believe that the answer is “yes”. Belief in the sanctity of life - in other words, how precious it is - does not mean believing in the sanctity of suffering or disregarding steps to avoid it. There is nothing holy about agony. If a terminally-ill person does not wish to live out his/her last few months in pain, for what purpose should they be forced to do so, and in whose interest is that life being prolonged? It is not a religious kindness to force them to suffer on against their will.

Obviously, in my search for a religious response, I turned to my religious tradition to see what it had to say about assisted dying. Although it condemns suicide, assisted dying is an entirely different category – for in most suicide cases, if the person did not die through suicide, they would have lived for many years, but that is not the case with assisted dying. A biblical passage that – deliberately or accidentally – is relevant to the changing perceptions today is the famous line in the Book of Ecclesiastes 3.2: ‘There is a time to be born and a time to die’. It is noticeable that it does not say who chooses that time. In previous eras it was assumed that both were pre-ordained by God, and that any human interference was

sinful, but now it can be read very differently. The time to die could just as well be our decision.

Moreover, the 'God-barrier' has long been pushed aside both in the beginning and end of life, with humans acting in lieu of God, whether by doctors' efforts to create life via test tubes or postpone death through heart transplants. Why should a terminally ill person not have the same decision-making rights? The objection raised by some, that assisted dying is 'playing God', ignores the fact that we frequently 'play God' - doing so every time we give a blood transfusion or provide a road accident victim artificial limbs. Should we stop doing that? If the religious ideal is *imitatio dei*, then it is our duty to use our God-given abilities to imitate God as much as possible. Assisted dying is part of the constant act of playing God in the sense that God wants us to help those in distress: to heal where possible, to comfort when needed, and to help let go of life when desired - that is what being religious means.

On a pastoral level, there are those who are worried about the effect on doctor-patient relationships if doctors are involved in the process of assisted dying. But if the doctor is providing a prescription for life ending medication only in response to the patient's request (and it is the patient who will self-administer it at a later date in a place of their own choosing) their role will continue to be seen as beneficial and patient-oriented. It is significant that the declaration taken by most doctors upon qualifying is no longer the Hippocratic Oath (which spoke of not causing harm to a patient), but has generally been replaced by the Geneva Declaration (which changed the emphasis to considering the health of patients). It would be acceding to a patient's request for release from pain - not just physical pain, but total pain.

Until now, the most daringly sympathetic religious response was that one is permitted to pray for the person's death. In previous generations, this was seen as a legitimate way of nudging God in the right direction, and justifies us being more pro-active today if that is what the person wishes. Hospices and palliative care do a wonderful job and can be the answer for many individuals, but those whom they cannot help need different answers, and assisted dying might be one of them. Assisted dying should be available as an option for those who so wish to take it.

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