

The Anglican Church of Canada



L'Église anglicane du Canada

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A Statement from the Primate on the Supreme Court's Ruling on Physician-Assisted Dying

The recent ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada, striking down the long held ban on physician-assisted dying is cause for celebration among many Canadians and cause for great concern among many others.

For those who have long advocated for a person's right, in the face of immense and intolerable suffering, to end their life with medical assistance the ruling is a victory. For those who hold to the conviction that our life is something larger than any individual person's "ownership" of it, and is not simply ours to "discard" the ruling is deeply troubling.

Whatever one's perspective, serious attention needs to be given to the court ruling's intent and application. While enabling legislation may not be imminent, we know consideration of any new laws will be a matter of intense public interest and debate within Canadian society at large, within the country's medical community, and certainly within and among the churches, including ours.

In 1998 the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada received and commended for study throughout the church a document entitled *Care in Dying*.

Grounded in the hope we embrace as Christians this document called for a renewal of the church's commitment to the provision of the best quality of palliative care in keeping with the dignity and sanctity of human life.

The document reminded us that "The Anglican Church of Canada shares with other Christian communities in a long history of providing many forms of health care, healing, and support of the suffering and dying. Churches have actively supported the development of palliative care facilities and practices, including pain management. This commitment is expressed in the central role they have played in the development of hospices and palliative care institutions in many parts of the

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world. In Canada these programs involve health care professionals and volunteers from the church community in the attempt to alleviate pain and maintain dignity of life even at the moment of death. Christians are called by God to take part in caring communities that 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."

The document called us to uphold "good medical practice that sustains the commitment to care even when it is no longer possible to cure. Such care may involve the removal of therapies that are ineffective and/or intolerably burdensome, in favour of palliative measures. We do not support the idea that care can include an act or omission whose primary intention is to end a person's life. Our underlying commitment is that health care delivery as a whole should reflect the desire of Canadians to be a community that sustains the dignity and worth of all its members."

The document highlighted some of the same concerns that have already been named in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling; especially its warning that "the legalization of euthanasia could present special risks for those in our society who are already vulnerable," particularly the elderly, children, and those whose mental capacity has been compromised.

Care in Dying continues to be a valuable study resource for parishes wanting to engage the topic from the deep wells of our faith, and is available online: www.anglican.ca/faith/focus/ethics/care-in-dying/

In response to the re-emergence of this important topic on the country's agenda, our church has reopened the conversation. A task force on physician-assisted death has been established through Faith, Worship and Ministry to resource and guide us in these discussions. Chaired by the Rev. Canon Eric Beresford, it includes expertise from the medical, nursing, and legal professions as well as expertise from ethicists and pastors, particularly chaplains engaged in the care of the terminally ill. Even within the task force there is a declared diversity of opinion over what constitutes appropriate end-of-life care.

The bishops from our church and our full communion partner, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, have also renewed their engagement in this conversation.

As conversations continue we must exhibit an unwavering resolve to include those most affected by our deliberations: those suffering through intolerable physical pain, emotional anguish and spiritual turmoil. Let us hear their voices and those of their families.

As a church we remain deeply committed to the ministry of accompanying people in their lifelong journey. We recognize the need to walk in a particular way with those who are suffering debilitating illnesses. We recognize the need to offer people a listening ear and a pastoral heart as in the face of death they ponder the meaning and value of their lives. We recognize the importance of a person's right to dignity in life and in death.

In these matters of immense human suffering and our sure and certain hope in God's promises, I encourage our church's continuing engagement and prayers.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred Hiltz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

The Most Reverend Fred Hiltz
Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada