

Care Connected with Voluntary Assisted Dying

Bishops Guidelines



Anglican Diocese of
Grafton

Purpose

This policy offers guidance to clergy, lay ministers and other church workers in the diocese of Grafton in relation to care connected with voluntary assisted dying.

Context

The *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2022* was passed by the Parliament of New South Wales on 19 May, 2022 and took effect on 28 November 2023.

<https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/pdf/inforce/2023-11-29/act-2022-017>

Scope

This policy applies in all Ministry Units including parishes, ministry districts, schools, Anglicare North Coast, and Hospital Chaplaincies.

Limitations

Because VAD is a new development in NSW, this document is intended to be an initial resource. It will be improved and refined over time.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the staff of NSW Health who entered into a conversation with us when we were developing this document, offering us a better understanding of VAD in NSW and the value and place of spiritual and pastoral care for those who have chosen this pathway. We thank the Diocese of Newcastle for permission to use aspects of their Episcopal Direction (NA_ED_006) on Care Connected with Voluntary Assisted Dying in the creation of this Policy. We also thank the Diocese of Sydney for permission to use parts of their Pastoral Guidance and Theological Reflections for VAD in NSW.

The Bishop's Registry

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Definition

Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) is the term used in the Act to describe the process by which an eligible individual may choose to end their life through the administration of an approved and prescribed VAD substance.

Pastoral Reflection

Christians are convinced about the sacredness of life and the dignity of each person. Christians seek to bear witness to God's presence, love, compassion and mercy. This conviction moves us to defend and protect the marginalised, the vulnerable, the oppressed and the fragile.

Through careful and effective palliative care, many blessings in relationships can occur between the news of terminal illness and death, including relation with God. Palliative care does not include the practice of VAD. Palliative care affirms life and regards dying as a normal process. It offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death. It intends neither to hasten or postpone death, and is therefore not a form of euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, or VAD. Palliative care should be encouraged in the end-of-life situation to improve the quality of life of the person with terminal illness, and to provide support for the family and carers.

Recently Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) in New South Wales has created a new way of responding to the ending of life. While the wider community seems to have welcomed this change, some Christians are deeply confronted by VAD. Some lay ministers, clergy, chaplains and other church workers may find themselves in a place of personal tension or struggle. Yet Anglicans are expected to respond in ways that remind us of God's unconditional love for every person and our great hope for eternal life.

The following guidelines establish an approach to work and ministry with those contemplating voluntary assisted dying. They draw on Scripture and the Christian tradition of caring for the sick and dying. They have been informed by and draw on the experience of churches in other jurisdictions where voluntary assisted dying is already in place.

The Diocese of Sydney offers a number of [pastoral scenarios](#) that are useful for reflection here, as is the [Theological Reflection](#) on Conscience and disputable matters.

Those who developed the principles below (the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle) have drawn on the principle of 'accompaniment'. Accompaniment means we commit not to abandon another person. We seek to be alongside another person as a bearer of hope and consolation.

Where a person is shaped by the Christian faith, they will base their work and ministry in the reality of Jesus journey through death and resurrection. In him we find the hope of heaven and the invitation to trust in God. Since its earliest days, the Church, following the example of Jesus Christ the healer, has engaged in works of compassion, including caring for the sick and the dying. Like the Good Samaritan, we too are called to offer enduring care to everyone. A person regarded with uncertainty, moved by compassion, reached out to an injured person, cared for him with his own hands, accompanied him to an inn, provided the resources for his care, assured him of his ongoing concern and promised to return to him.

For Christians the provision of service and our commitment to care for the dying flows from our faith, is focused on the needs of the other, and is filled with empathy, reflecting the hope that comes

from knowing God's grace is at work, day by day, in every person, every place and every circumstance. Spiritual care recognises the sacredness of life and seeks to bring comfort, compassion and dignity for the dying.

Principles

When we are called to accompany those contemplating voluntary assisted dying and their loved ones, we remember that:

Accompaniment is a commitment

- Accompaniment of the dying is rarely easy, often demands courage, and draws on a readiness to give of ourselves.
- The invitation to accompany a person in their dying is a gift.
- In the professional and/or ministerial context it draws on specific skills. Those offering care should be supported and receive supervision.
- Those in a close accompanying role are strongly encouraged to engage in appropriate self-care.

Accompaniment and care of the dying is a work and ministry of hope and support

- The act of accompaniment is an active reminder for believers of God's own commitment to us. God is our companion in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23).
- Accompaniment is a commitment to journey with a person and their loved ones. It is not focussed on any particular outcome.
- In our context, we express generous care as part of an organisation and community informed by faith.

Spiritual care will be offered to those contemplating voluntary assisted dying and their loved ones.

- Spiritual care will be offered to those considering voluntary assisted dying and their loved ones when they seek it.
- Spiritual care includes offering prayers for and with those facing death and their loved ones.
- The sacraments – the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace - are to be provided to a person who requests them.
- Family and loved ones of those seeking access to voluntary assisted dying may hold varying views. Any division or tension needs to be listened to and attended to with great sensitivity.
- The respect shown on the journey towards the death continues during the period of the funeral and grieving. We offer the hope of God's mercy and witness to the hope of the resurrection.
- The funeral should be an occasion of deep respect for all.

Accompaniment is always voluntary and respectful of conscience

- Accompanying someone who is expressing a desire for voluntary assisted dying does not imply moral agreement by the accompanier. Nor does it ask the accompanier to suspend their own moral or ethical belief which may differ from the one being accompanied. We undertake our work and ministry amidst complex and sometimes competing views.
- No one should ever feel obliged to do or say something that goes against their own conscience.
- If an individual decides that there is a limit to their ability to accompany a person seeking assisted dying, such a decision should be fully respected. At the same time, they should ensure that provision is made for the person to be accompanied by another.

General pastoral support

- The introduction of voluntary assisted dying changes the healthcare landscape. All clergy, chaplains, lay ministers and other church workers deserve care and respect as they navigate their faith, belief, ethics, and practice in a changed environment.
- The Church remains committed to prayer and practical action that ensures the dignity of all human life.

Wisdom in expressing opinions

- While church workers have the right to make public comment and enter public debate on political and social issues, they also have the responsibility to be sensitive to the needs of the audience they are addressing.
- Those making public comment on voluntary assisted dying do so as an individual citizen and not on behalf of the Diocese.
- Church workers must not disclose issues of a confidential nature.

The Bishop's Guidelines for Care Connected with Voluntary Assisted Dying

1. Care, spiritual care, and sacramental ministry will be offered to people considering voluntary assisted dying and their loved ones.
2. This ministry is an expression of care and an act of compassion to those who seek the ministry of the Church or who seek services provided by a Diocesan entity.
3. Those exercising this ministry must recognise and respect the conscience of person contemplating voluntary assisted dying.
4. No one should ever feel obliged to do or say something that goes against their own conscience.
5. If a church worker decides that there is a limit to their ability to be engaged with a person seeking assisted dying, such a decision should be fully respected. Provision should be made for the person to be accompanied by another.
6. Should a licensed minister of the diocese receive a request to conduct a funeral service for a person who has died as a result of VAD, the minister is free to conduct the service themselves or arrange for it to be taken by another minister so licensed.
7. Depending on the wishes of the person and their family, it would be appropriate for the minister offering spiritual care to be involved in the funeral or memorial service in some way.
8. Church workers must exercise wisdom when expressing their opinion about voluntary assisted Dying. This is to ensure they do not jeopardize the VAD process or create anguish or concern among the people we support