End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Baptist Union of Scotland

I firstly wish to express my gratitude for the opportunity to write to you at this early stage of the bill’s progress and have my views and the views of those I serve expressed. However I would want to express regret that the deadline is so close to the Westminster election and has been somewhat, understandably, overshadowed by it.

I write as a servant leader of the Baptist Christians in Scotland, currently a group of 12,000 members with many more participating in regular worship with us. You will not be surprised that the thrust of my letter is one of great concern born out of a sense of the intrinsic value that we place on life, the pastoral concern that we have demonstrated for generations in this country, and our concern for the impact that such a bill would have on society as whole.

I would wish to say at the outset that I write in opposition to assisted suicide in principle and that any comments relating to the suggested legislation in no way suggests support of it.

1. Do you agree that a person should be able to request end of life assistance from a registered medical practitioner?

Our churches have demonstrated over the last 150 years a commitment to providing pastoral care of individuals and communities including support of the most vulnerable in society. While we remain sympathetic to the fears and desires of those anticipating a painful and debilitating illness and death, we do not feel that this bill is the solution. We would rather support the continuing advancement in palliative medicine which seeks to support the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those facing death.

The proposed legislation breaches the long held societal prohibition on the taking of human life, which in turn will have vast and varied implications on attitudes to many aspects of health and social care beyond the parameters outlined in the Bill. Concern must be raised at any thought that suggests the sick, disabled, and dying are in any way a burden on society.

I note that the bill makes reference to the word dignity without definition. Dignity is a difficult word to define as we all have different values that we bring to this word. We hold a specifically Christian view of the sanctity of all human life which in our understanding stems from humanity being created in the image of God. We strongly believe that dignity must flow out of this belief and remain consistent with it. As a Christian body in Scotland we would want to say that every human life should be treated with dignity from the cradle to the grave and that the very act of taking of life we would see as an undignified end.
We would also contend that the introduction of protocols, mental health assessments, financial calculations by the family to ascertain whether they can afford assisted suicide in the timescale they desire, at a time of stress hardly seems to deliver a dignified end. Conversely, we would bear witness to the fact that medical expertise and pastoral care from medical staff, clergy, family and friends have allowed thousands in our nations to cross the boundary of death in a dignified and compassionate way that addressed not only the needs of the dying but also of the family and medical staff.

2. Are you satisfied with the requirements for age and connection with Scotland as set out in the Bill?

We do not wish to specifically respond to this question.

Are you satisfied with the two categories of people who would qualify to be assisted under the terms of the Bill?

The ambiguity in the legislation at this point is of concern and makes it difficult to comment on who would qualify for assistance. In relation to the phrase “live life independently”, the argument exists that healthy existence is never independent, but that interdependence leads to a greater health in the individual and in society as a whole.

3. The Bill outlines a several stage consent and verification process that would be required to be followed for an eligible person to receive end of life assistance. Are you satisfied with this process?

We do not wish to respond to this question.

4. Do you consider the nature and level of safeguards as set in the Bill to be appropriate?

Our interdependence as a society is ignored in the safeguards contained in the Bill. The impact on family, community, and medical personnel is omitted and could lead to great trauma. It is impossible for a person to ask for assistance to end their life without that affecting their family, community and the medical staff. The safeguards included in this Bill focus only on the individual who may wish to end their life.

This Bill would also cause a fundamental change in the nature of medical and social care within this nation, altering the very relationships that we look to in times of crisis to bring help and care. The Bill fails to provide safeguards to those critical relationships in our society.

It is our view that the value of human life is not determined by whether a person has the capacity to live without support, nor need the quality of a life be diminished because a person needs assistance, provided that the assistance provided is respectful, loving and appropriate to the needs of the recipient.
We are also concerned at the subjective check endorsed by the Bill regarding “undue influence”. We are not convinced that it is possible to provide a legal process which can check whether a vulnerable person, dependent on the care of others, is acting freely.

5. Do you have any other considerations on the Bill not included in the answers to the above questions?

The drafting of the Bill includes the possibility of euthanasia. We would urge that the possibility of euthanasia be explicitly prohibited.

A general concern exists amongst Scottish Baptists that our Scottish society would be the poorer by the introduction of this Bill. We would lose dignity, devalue the weak and vulnerable, blur the boundaries of medical support and remove from our experience what are real personal tragedies yet produce in the long term so much strength of character and resilience within our nation.

Please be assured of my prayers and the prayers of the congregations of the Baptist Union of Scotland at this time, as you work through this process. I would humbly make myself available to the committee if they wish to pursue any of the concepts expressed in this letter.

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General Director
Baptist Union of Scotland
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