VCC Faith and Order Commission

DRAFT Introduction

The Victorian Faith and Order Commission is grateful to the many churches and church bodies that have produced documents in response to the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation. The documents in this collection have been received from members churches.

On 29 November, 2017, the Victorian Government passed the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act, to take effect on 19 June, 2019. These dates are important in reading these documents, as the date on the document gives an indication of the purpose of those who wrote it. Generally speaking, those documents written prior to the passing of the legislation are directed at the wisdom or otherwise of passing the legislation, while those documents written afterwards are aimed at questions of how to cope with what the legislation now has made legal.

The responses of VCC member churches to the Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation have come in many forms. Some are ‘whole of church’ official responses, while others are discussion papers or policy documents for church caring agencies. From the responses, we judge that our churches are in agreement on fundamental theological affirmations, such as the sanctity of life and the recognition that life is a good gift of God. We are also in substantial agreement as to the necessity for good palliative care and for pastoral accompanying of all people as they approach their death.

There are significant divergences around responses to the legislation itself. Some churches actively opposed the introduction of the legislation, while others did not. Some churches have required their agencies to have no use of the legislation within their facilities, while others have not. Opposition to the legislation identifies assisted dying with co-operation with suicide, which is co-operation with an immoral, anti-life act. There are also a series of concerns for the opening of a legal door to downgrading the sanctity of human life and the possibilities of pressure on frail, elderly people to get out of the way of the new generation. These concerns obviously weigh with all churches. Broadly speaking, all churches support the provision of good palliative care as the preferred and recommended basis for ‘end of life’ care, which ideally should be available to all.

Despite significant agreement with these attitudes and concerns, some churches have chosen to accept that voluntary assisted dying is now a legal option for certain people (in carefully defined categories) and that, in a pluralist society, church caring institutions can develop appropriate ways of accompanying people in their terminal stages of life even if they are choosing to make use of the voluntary assisted dying procedures. For these churches, the rights of staff to opt out of involvement is also an issue.

There is a significant debate ahead of us with respect to the issue of suicide. Should voluntary assisted dying simply be rejected as suicide? While the suicide of otherwise healthy people is rightly seen as a rejection God’s good gift of life, an acceptance of one’s own death when our life circumstances indicate that this is indeed the time, may not be. The Voluntary Assisted Dying Act requires that it is only able to be used when it is in fact motivated by the recognition of the person that the appropriate time of their death has arrived and that they are in a recognised medical condition which is terminal.

Our churches largely agree in preferring palliative care to any recommendation in favour of using the provisions of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act. Palliative care includes support for people to come to terms with their dying, which aims at acceptance. We may be needing to balance our cultural commitment to the preservation of physical life ‘at all costs’ with the reality of our dying and our need to be able to die with dignity. Individuals do have an important right to refuse medical interventions. In our consideration of these issues, we have pondered the significance for this issue of the Biblical teaching that Jesus laid down his life for us. We invite all readers of these documents to ponder these questions.