

**Commission on Faith and Witness
Canadian Council of Churches**

Statement of Support for Universal Access to Palliative Care in Canada

Adopted by Consensus October 2016

As Christians in Canada, we support just access for all to dignified, quality palliative care.¹

We see the provision of such care as an intrinsic human responsibility toward the suffering person because of the inestimable worth and dignity of every human being, created as we are in the image of God, and because of Jesus' command to care for the sick (Mt 25:36). All life is sacred,² but all earthly life must end. When an illness cannot be cured or when natural life draws to a close, it is essential to offer relief of pain and suffering.

The provision of palliative care surrounds the dying person with compassion and enables this person, and her or his family, to prepare for death while living life as fully as possible. Palliative care "places the priority on the worth and dignity of the whole person and their biological, emotional, physical, environmental, social and spiritual needs wherever they may be in Canada."³ It embraces concern for the well-being and comfort of all in the process of dying, regardless of the cause of death. Access to palliative care should be universal, that is, available to all the dying in our country in accordance with their particular needs and wherever they reside.

Providing palliative care to all in need of it is the joint responsibility of all members of society including private caregivers, the health care system, and government. We understand that dignified palliative care need not always occur in hospital or hospice, but may well happen at home. But in any case, mutual support between government-supplied health care workers, family, friends and others is the foundation of any experience of palliative care. Our churches are committed to participating in this work, and to collaborating wherever possible to ensure that no one in Canada need face death and dying without the dignity and support of quality palliative care. We rely upon all levels of government to accept and support their necessary role in this key aspect of universal health care.

1 The World Health Organization provides the following definition:

Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual. Palliative care

- provides relief from pain and other distressing symptoms;
- affirms life and regards dying as a normal process;
- intends neither to hasten nor postpone death;
- integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care;
- offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death;
- offers a support system to help the family cope during the patient's illness and in their own bereavement;
- uses a team approach to address the needs of patients and their families, including bereavement counseling, if indicated;
- will enhance the quality of life, and may also positively influence the course of illness;
- is applicable early in the course of illness, in conjunction with other therapies that are intended to prolong life, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy, and includes those investigations needed to better understand and manage distressing clinical complications. <<http://www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/>>

2 See the full discussion in Commission on Faith and Witness, *Becoming Human: On Theological Anthropology in an Age of Engineering Life*. <https://www.councilofchurches.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Becoming_Human.pdf>

3 Canadian Council of Churches, *A Health Care Covenant for All People in Canada*, <https://www.councilofchurches.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/CCC_HealthCareCovenant.pdf>, p. 3.