

Providing real dignity in dying



BY BISHOP JONATHAN, BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

MANY of you will have experience of ministering to those who are dying – as clergy or lay ministers, as churchgoers who visit in our communities, and as relatives of loved ones. We all know the Church’s ministry among the dying and bereaved remains a hugely significant part of our service to society.

However, many in our society are saying farewell to loved ones without an adequate rite of passage. Funeral plans can sometimes bypass church involvement (and even the ministry of secular celebrants). As a Church, we need to raise our game and encourage good conversations about death, dying and bereavement.

But there is another issue for those approaching the end of our lives. You may be aware of a bill to legalise assisted dying for those who are terminally ill, which will be debated in Parliament on November 29. If passed, it allows those who are terminally ill and have less than six months to live to choose to have their life ended.

I’m deeply concerned by this move to legalise assisted suicide. Twice our General Synod has voted for the law to remain unchanged, in 2012 and 2022. Its opposition is grounded firstly in a solid knowledge of good palliative care – from experience we know

that a good death is possible for most, if resources are applied. Secondly, it is rooted in concern for the welfare of the most vulnerable: the elderly and those living in poverty or with disability.

There is a narrative in our society that to be a good parent or grandparent, you should make funeral arrangements so as not to be ‘a burden’ on your family.

I fear it is a short step from this to an unconscious pressure for those who are terminally ill to believe it would be better to end their life early than to be an inconvenience to loved ones or society. Having permission to die prematurely can easily slip into feeling a duty to do so.

The language we hear is all about ‘dignity’ or ‘choice’. But we all know it is possible to have a ‘good death’ without shortening your life. The hospice movement has taught us it’s possible to ‘die with dignity’ when you are valued and cared for until your final breath.

Do talk and pray about these issues, and – if you feel moved to – do write to your MP before November 29. As we consider what it means to minister to the sick and to prepare the dying for their death, do pray that we will grow in faithfulness to the Christ-like God who accompanies us in life and in death.

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