

Vulnerable people would be placed at risk should Parliament approve proposals to legalise assisted suicide, leaders of faith communities in Britain warn today in a letter to MPs.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster and the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis have joined more than 20 other faith leaders in signing a letter to MPs highlighting the dangers of the Assisted Dying no 2 Bill.

The Private Member's Bill proposes legalising assisted suicide for terminally ill people with six months or less to live and will be debated on Friday September 11 in the House of Commons.

In their letter, the faith leaders warn that the Bill has the potential to affect the lives of a 'great number' of people whose circumstances make them vulnerable in different ways.

"If passed, it will directly affect not only those who are terminally ill and who wish to end their lives, but also their families and friends and the health professionals who care for them," they say in the letter.

"It also has the potential to have a significant impact on other vulnerable individuals: those who believe that they have become burdens to family and carers and feel under pressure within themselves to 'do the decent thing' and, tragically, those who might be pressured by others to seek a medically-assisted death.

"In the UK some 500,000 elderly people are abused each year, most by family members, often for financial reasons. Many of these would also be vulnerable to pressure to end their lives prematurely."

For very many people, the natural processes of dying, along with good palliative care, enable them and their families to experience precious moments of love, care, reconciliation and hope - processes that ought not to be cut short, the faith leaders write.

The best response to individuals' end of life concerns lies in ensuring that all receive compassionate, high quality palliative care and this is best pursued under current legislation.

"Sadly, there are still instances of painful or distressing death, though due to advances in palliative care, these are much less common than was once the case," they say.

"For very many people, however, the natural processes of dying, allied with good palliative care, enable them and their families to experience precious moments of love, care, reconciliation and even hope; processes that ought not to be truncated. For many, a change in the law would result, not in greater comfort, but in an added burden to consider ending their lives prematurely; a burden they ought not to be asked to bear.

"We believe that the best response to individuals' end of life concerns lies in ensuring that all receive compassionate, high-quality palliative care and that this is best pursued under current legislation. A law based on this Assisted Dying Bill would put at risk many more vulnerable people than it seeks to help."

Here is the full text of the letter and list of signatories:

Assisted Dying Bill, 11th September 2015

To all Members of Parliament,

As leaders of faith communities, we wish to express concern at the provisions of the Assisted Dying No. 2 Bill, currently in the House of Commons. In doing so, we are conscious that the bill touches deeply on some of the most difficult and testing circumstances that people may face.

While much could be said on the legal and ethical implications of the bill, our focus in writing is pastoral. In our communities and through healthcare chaplaincy we care daily for the elderly, the ill, the dying and their families; our concern is rooted in a profoundly human and profoundly sacred calling to care for the most vulnerable in our society, a concern shared by people of all faiths and of none.

The bill has the potential to affect the lives of a great number of people whose circumstances make them vulnerable in different ways. If passed, it will directly affect not only those who are terminally ill and who wish to end their lives, but also their families and friends and the health professionals who care for them. It also has the potential to have a significant impact on other vulnerable individuals: those who believe that they have become burdens to family and carers and feel under pressure within themselves to 'do the decent thing' and, tragically, those who might be pressured by others to seek a medically-assisted death. In the UK some 500,000 elderly people are abused each year, most by family members, often for financial reasons. Many of these would also be vulnerable to pressure to end their lives prematurely.

It may not be possible fully to meet the needs and aspirations of all those who in various ways are vulnerable, but we are convinced that the current law, alongside the published policy for prosecutors, provides much greater protection for the vulnerable than would legislation based on this bill.

Sadly, there are still instances of painful or distressing death, though due to advances in palliative care, these are much less common than was once the case. For very many people, however, the natural processes of dying, allied with good palliative care, enable them and their families to experience precious moments of love, care, reconciliation and even hope; processes that ought not to be truncated. For many, a change in the law would result, not in greater comfort, but in an added burden to consider ending their lives prematurely; a burden they ought not to be asked to bear.

We believe that the best response to individuals' end of life concerns lies in ensuring that all receive compassionate, high-quality palliative care and that this is best pursued under current legislation. A law based on this Assisted Dying Bill would put at risk many more vulnerable people

than it seeks to help.

Most Revd and Rt. Hon Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster

Full list of signatories:

- Commissioner Clive Adams, Territorial Commander, The Salvation Army, UK and Republic of Ireland
- Reverend Yemi Adedeji, Director, One People Commission
- Mr Yousif Al-Khoei, Director Al-Khoei Foundation
- His Grace Bishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox Church, United Kingdom
- Stuart Blount, National Leadership Team, Elim Pentecostal Churches
- Revd Lyndon Bowring, Executive Chairman, CARE (Christian Action, Research and Education)
- Steve Clifford, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance
- Revd David Coffey OBE, Baptist Missionary Society Global Ambassador
- Malcolm M Deboo, President, Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe
- Rev Trevor Howard, UK Coordinator, Churches in Communities International
- Billy Kennedy, Leader of Pioneer & CTE President
- Rev Stephen Keyworth, Faith and Society Team Leader, Baptist Union of Great Britain
- Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth
- Most Rev Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales
- His Eminence Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster
- Rev Dr Hugh Osgood, The Free Churches Moderator
- Rev John Partington, National Leader, Assemblies of God GB
- Revd Gareth Powell, Secretary of the Methodist Conference
- Mohammad Shahid Raza OBE, Founder Trustee, British Muslim Forum and Head Imam, Leicester Central Mosque.
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Dr Shuja Shafi, Secretary General, The Muslim Council of Britain

- Dr Natubhai Shah, Chair/CEO Jain Network
- Lord Singh of Wimbledon, Director, Network of Sikh Organisations UK
- Bhai Sahib Bhai (Dr) Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia, Chairman, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha
- Most Revd and Rt. Hon Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

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