

Testimony in Support of Raised Bill No. 6645,  
“An Act Concerning Compassionate Aid in Dying for Terminally Ill Patients”

The Rev. Joshua Mason Pawelek  
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Society: East, Manchester, CT  
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Distinguished Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am the Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester and a resident of Glastonbury. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Raised Bill No. 6645, “An Act Concerning Compassionate Aid in Dying for Terminally Ill Patients.”

The heart of the matter is this: providing aid in dying under the strict conditions contained in this bill preserves human dignity. Every day there are people who receive news that there are no remaining medical interventions to treat a terminal illness that will inevitably and quickly end their life. Some of those people—not many, but some—upon receiving this news and after careful consideration of all the ramifications, find in themselves a strong desire to end their life by their own hand rather than let their disease run its course.

Why this desire? They may be in great pain, but that’s not typically the reason—they know palliative care is available. They may be emotionally and spiritually depleted from fighting their disease, but that’s also not typically the reason. They may be losing their mental faculties and fear becoming a burden to their loved ones. This is sometimes part of their calculus, but it’s rarely the primary reason.

The reason some people seek aid in dying is because it assures them they will maintain their human dignity as their life winds down. Our dignity lies in our ability to make choices about our destiny. When choice is denied, dignity is denied. Ending one’s life by one’s own hand is a final choice. For those who desire to end their own life after careful spiritual discernment and after meeting the strict conditions contained in this bill, it is death with dignity.

There are some among us—not many, but some—who experience the denial of aid in dying at the end of life as a deeply painful stripping away of their dignity. There are some who experience the denial of aid in dying at the end of life as a failure of compassion, care and love. There are some who experience the denial of aid in dying at the end of life as abuse and a cause of greater suffering. Raised bill no. 6645 is for such people. I urge you to support it.

As a pastor who is very likely to be asked to serve as a witness to requests for medication to aid in dying, assuming the person in question meets the criteria contained in this bill, I cannot imagine saying “no, I don’t support you.” For me, to witness such a request, and to be present at the time of death if invited, would be an act of the most compassionate, loving ministry I can provide.

Some might argue that simply allowing a disease to take its course without hastening death—to allow a person’s life to wind down “naturally”—is also death with dignity. I agree. I note that many people choose to die this “naturally” and we often characterize their deaths as dignified. As a pastor I will always first counsel those under my care to strive for such a death rather than seek aid in dying. However, I also recognize there will always be people who are better able to let their lives end naturally if they have the comfort of knowing they can end their lives by their own hand. The heart of the matter is choice. Having choices brings comfort and solace. Data from Oregon, where the first aid in dying law was passed, suggest that many of those who obtain a prescription for life-ending medication don’t ultimately use it. They choose to let their life end “naturally.” Having legal access to the medication preserves their ability to choose how and when they will die. Preserving choice sustains dignity.

For the sake of sustaining human dignity, I urge you to vote in favor of raised bill 6645. Your favorable vote is far more than a political act. It is an act of great compassion, care and love.

Thank you.