

Statement on DC Death with Dignity Law, July 10, 2015

Good morning Committee Chair Alexander, Councilmember Cheh and members of the Committee,

My name is Verdell A. Wright, and I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with you concerning legislation that would authorize aid in dying for terminally ill adults in the District of Columbia. I come from the perspective of a licensed minister and a religious scholar, who has studied the history, theology, and implications of Christianity.

One of the central themes of the Christian faith is compassion and safety. When Jesus uses the term “Kingdom of God,” he’s not referring to a faraway place in the clouds. Rather, Jesus is describing the bounds in which God’s way of thinking and doing takes place without interruption. God’s way involves everyone having enough and existing with peace and dignity.

My research as a scholar of Christianity has not revealed any overt reason why the Death with Dignity Act should not be enacted into law. In fact, such legislation is necessary to ensure the safety of those who choose to exert some measure of control over their final days. While the understanding that God should be the only one to decide when life begins or ends exists in many Christian circles, in practice, that notion makes this legislation no less necessary. After all, if we believed God to be the main arbitrator of life and death, we would not aim to eat healthy. We would not go to visit doctors. We would not take medications.

We constantly engage in medical procedures that prolong and enhance life, with little to no assurance that these actions are divinely sanctioned. These actions are undertaken with the hope that somehow the will of God is being honored. It is my opinion, as a scholar and practitioner of the Christian faith, that this consideration extends to end of life choices.

Polls show that the majority of Americans agree with legislation that allows patients, with their families, to make their own decisions about the end of life, including the decision to take aid in dying medication that helps them avoid a prolonged, painful death. My recommendation is that the District of Columbia pass legislation that would make that option a reality for residents.

Thank you, Councilmember Alexander, for allowing the space to discuss this important health issue.