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To whom it may concern,

Thank you for the opportunity to make submissions for the inquiry into Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD).

I serve as the Pastor of the Alice Springs Lutheran Church and work closely with Finke River Mission. Together we minister to the 5000 or so Indigenous and non-Indigenous Lutherans living in Central Australia. I would like to make a simple response to the question:
Do you support making VAD legal in the NT?

While the Lutheran Church of Australia has always been clear in its opposition to Euthanasia, I feel an increasing concern personally and pastorally to raise questions about the wisdom of introducing such a practice to the Northern Territory.

I visit regularly at Alice Springs Hospital and especially in the Palliative Care Unit. I see the amazing work that is done to support people at the end of life. As a result of this care, people often return home, sometimes to remote communities, with an extended life expectancy. I have not seen this occur anywhere else like it does here.

I also witness the hard work of hospital staff to communicate cross culturally and into various Indigenous languages. The Finke River Mission has a long history and positive track record in this regard. But I know from experience that miscommunication is a daily reality and many patients have a hard time understanding what is communicated to them about their own health diagnosis, treatment options and long-term outcomes.

I believe that introducing VAD into this scenario would be a recipe for disaster and would undo a lot of good work currently being done. It would reduce the trust of many people in the medical profession and make people wary of attending hospitals and clinics.

I am forever encouraging people to seek out medical help in Alice Springs. This can be hard work when people have a mixture of backgrounds and worldviews, some traditional Indigenous perspectives, some Christian ones, some more superstitious, some more scientific.

But what seems to matter in this scenario is the relationships of trust built up over many years. We need to continue to get the message across that doctors and nurses are trustworthy people and hospitals are places you go to live and get better, not to die, especially not to be assisted to die. Suicide rates are high enough here already, and the shame and sorrow around those who choose to end their own lives is immense.

I realise that much of my opinion is informed by my Christian faith and some would not see that as valid. But I believe faith also brings unique perspectives and what I have written is also supported by experience and common sense. I personally see life as a gift to be received and lived, enjoyed and embraced, supported and surrounded, until all avenues are exhausted.

Be assured of our concern and prayers in the difficult inquiry process of which you are a part.

Pastor Ben Pfeiffer

Alice Springs Lutheran Church