

On living wills and prolongation of life: Denominational statements

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The Terri Schiavo case serves as a reminder of how important advance written directions are to family members when an incapacitated loved one is at death's door, say church leaders. And at least three denominations reminded members of the general tendency of ecumenical churches to oppose extraordinary medical means to prolong life.

The United Methodists, at their quadrennial general conference last year, approved a lengthy document on "faithful care" that advised against "romanticizing" dying and for accepting "relief of suffering as a goal for care of dying persons rather than focusing primarily on prolonging life."

While opposing the deliberate taking of a patient's life to relieve suffering, the Methodist statement said that the use of medical technologies "requires responsible judgment about when life-sustaining treatments truly support the goals of life and when they have reached their limits."

The Episcopal Church spoke collectively at its 1991 general convention on issues surrounding life-sustaining treatments: "There is no moral obligation to prolong the act of dying by extraordinary means and at all costs if [a] dying person is ill and has no reasonable expectation of recovery." Officials recommended a book published in 2000 by the Episcopal-related Morehouse Publishing, *Faithful Living, Faithful Dying*, that reflects the church's task force studies related to end-of-life concerns.

In the United Church of Christ, top executive John H. Thomas recounted a situation that contrasted with family disagreements in the Schiavo case. "When my father had a massive stroke that left him alive but in an irreversible vegetative state, my brother, sister, mother and I did not have to debate his care among ourselves." His parents were clear about their desires "and had shared them in a legally binding way with their doctor," he said.

“We came comfortably to the decision to withdraw life support,” though the father died one day before the plug was to be pulled. Thomas said the family had four days to begin preparing for life without the father—“precious family time, experienced within the embrace of the church.”

Congregations can make available to members information and forms related to so-called “living wills” or “advance directives,” according to the United Methodist News Service. Free forms are offered for each state by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, a nonprofit group based in Arlington, Virginia. Its e-mail address is consumers@hgpc.org, and its telephone number is (800) 658-8898.