

Nearly half of Finnish pastors have a positive attitude towards euthanasia

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One in five pastors would approve of euthanasia as part of Finnish health care, and up to half of pastors have a positive attitude towards it, a new Ph.D. thesis from the University of Eastern Finland shows.

"This is surprising, considering that Christian churches and communities tend to oppose euthanasia. Earlier studies have also shown that religious

professionals are usually against euthanasia," Ph.D. Student Miia Kontro says.

Roughly half of Finnish pastors have a positive attitude towards euthanasia when it is not part of Finnish health care. However, 50 percent of pastors do not approve of euthanasia under any circumstances. Although the attitudes held by pastors are clearly more negative than those of nurses and the general public, the proportion of pastors who approve of euthanasia is nevertheless significant.

Completed in the field of practical theology, the doctoral dissertation analyzed the attitudes of pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland towards euthanasia, as well as factors contributing to those attitudes. The study shows that among pastors, the probability of an eventual death is a factor that makes them more inclined to approve of euthanasia. However, mere human suffering as a subjective experience is not strong enough a ground for approval.

Two in five pastors would approve of euthanasia for a person who is very likely to die in the upcoming few days, whereas only one in five pastors would approve of euthanasia for a person who is in pain and has a remaining life expectancy of less than one year.

"It is noteworthy that when this question becomes personal, more than one third of pastors would approve of their own euthanasia if they were suffering from unbearable pain. Moreover, 8 percent of pastors who oppose euthanasia for others would allow it for themselves."

Role of religion divides pastors' opinions

The idea of an omnipotent God who is the guardian of life and death is dominant among pastors. 61 percent of pastors believe that life is in the hands of God, and man should not meddle with how and when that life

ends. However, only 13 percent of pastors believe that euthanasia will lead to consequences in the afterlife.

Male pastors considered euthanasia to be against God's will more frequently than female pastors.

"This is true for all Finnish dioceses except for the Borgå Diocese, where male pastors have a more positive attitude towards euthanasia than female pastors do. It can be assumed these attitudes will become increasingly positive in the future, as the number of female pastors is growing, and women also have more leadership roles in parishes. Research shows that parishes led by women are more liberal than those led by men," Kontro sums up.

Earlier studies have also shown that female pastors are more actively involved with society than men, and they are also more open to change. This puts pressures of change on the church, as can be seen, for example, in the discourse on the rights of same-sex couples.

Pastors in the Diocese of Oulu and the Diocese of Lapua have a clearly more [negative attitude](#) towards euthanasia than pastors in other dioceses, and euthanasia is also more frequently regarded as something that is against God's will. Out of all Finnish dioceses, pastors in the Diocese of Helsinki have the most [positive attitude](#) towards euthanasia.

The importance of religion in a pastor's life is also a variable that clearly explains attitudes towards euthanasia: the less important religion is, the more positive the [attitude](#). There was no statistically significant association between pastors' [euthanasia](#)-related attitudes and their age or job description, nor with encountering dying people in the course of their work.

The data for the study were collected via an [online survey](#) in

collaboration with the trade union of pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. A total of 541 pastors responded to the survey.

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

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