

'WE NEED TO REVISIT SA LAWS'

I support assisted dying, says Tutu

Sapa-AFP and Staff Writer

ANGLICAN Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has come out strongly in support of assisted dying for the terminally ill.

Writing in Britain's Observer newspaper, Tutu said he had been convinced by the case of Craig Schonegevel, a 28-year-old South African who had neurofibromatosis and ended up taking 12 sleeping pills and pulling plastic bags over his head because doctors were unable to end his life.

"Some people opine that with good palliative care there is no need for assisted dying, no need for people to request to be legally given a lethal dose of

medication," the Nobel Peace laureate wrote. "That was not the case for Craig Schonegevel. Others assert their right to autonomy and consciousness – why exit in the fog of sedation when there's the alternative of being alert and truly present with loved ones?"

Tutu's comments were published on Saturday, a day after the former leader of the Church of England, George Carey, expressed support for a bill to legalise assisted dying in Britain, saying he had changed his mind about the issue.

South Africa's legal system denied Schonegevel the right to die with dignity, Tutu said.

"We need to revisit our own South African laws, which are not aligned to a constitution

that espouses the human right to dignity."

Tutu slammed the way Nelson Mandela had been treated in his final months.

"What was done to Madiba was disgraceful. There was that occasion when Madiba was televised with political leaders, President Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa. You could see Madiba was not fully there. He did not speak. He was not connecting. My friend was no longer himself. It was an affront to Madiba's dignity."

Tutu said he had asked his family not to prolong his life artificially. He said he would want to die at home after saying goodbye to loved ones.

"Recently I discussed my

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wishes with my youngest daughter, Mpho: my choice of the liturgy, hymns, and who should preach," Tutu wrote.

"I'd like to lie overnight in St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. It was such an important place in my life; it's where I became a deacon, where so many important things happened. I would like to be cremated... I'd like my ashes to be interred at St George's Cathedral."

He was uncomfortable with some African traditions.

"The turning of photos to face the wall, the clearing of furniture from the bedroom and placing of straw mats for the women to sit on for days. I am comfortable that on my passing these traditions should not be followed.

"It concerns me how people get into debt at funerals, buying expensive caskets, slaughtering animals they can ill afford... I want to role model modesty. I would like a simple coffin, the one of plain wood, with the rope handles.

"I would like modest refreshments after my funeral. If people want to slaughter an animal as part of traditional ritual, I'd be happy with a sheep or a goat – it doesn't need to be a big animal. My memorial stone should also be modest. My concern is not just about affordability; it's my strong preference that money should be spent on the living."

The Church of England has called for an inquiry into assisted dying. Britain's Assisted Dying Bill is to have its second reading in the House of Lords on Friday.

A call for South Africa to legalise assisted dying was made in 2012 by UWC Professor Sean Davison, who had served five months' home detention in New Zealand after helping his cancer-stricken mother to end her life. She had asked him for help and he gave her a lethal dose of morphine. He was arrested after a leak from his draft book on his experience.

It was a letter from Tutu, testifying to his character, that helped him to gain bail.

Tutu wrote: "Although I respect the law in New Zealand I feel the case of Dr Sean Davison is an exceptional and tragic one... in my option he is an upright citizen who has made a contribution to society and has much more to offer."

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