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The Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science) and End-of-Life Care

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LIVING WITH GRIEF



SPIRITUALITY
AND
END-OF-LIFE CARE

PART OF THE LIVING WITH GRIEF® SERIES



HOSPICE FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

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& AMY S. TUCCI

Foreword by Keith G. Meador

The Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science) and End-of-Life Care

Kenneth J. Doka

The Church of Christ, Scientist was founded by Mary Baker Eddy in Boston in 1879. Popularly known as Christian Scientists, the Church accepts the Bible as interpreted through Mary Baker Eddy's 1866 book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. Christian Scientists accept some core beliefs of Christianity such as the virgin birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. However, they do not view Jesus as divine, but rather as a *way-shower* sent by God as the Messiah to show the way to others. Central to Christian Science belief is that the spiritual world is good and true and that it is the only reality. The material world is false, evil, and illusionary. While the Church of Christ, Scientist does not publish membership numbers, it has acknowledged that membership has declined over the past several decades. Estimates of membership vary from 100,000 to 400,000.

SENSITIVITIES IN END-OF-LIFE CARE

While these statements reflect the official position of Christian Scientist church, it is always important to recognize that individual beliefs and practices may vary from denominational doctrine.

- *Medical Care:* Christian Scientists do not forbid members from accepting conventional medical care. However, their beliefs suggest that they should rely on prayer for healing. Focusing on the true spiritual world precludes treatment from the material world, as using conventional treatment would counteract and contradict spiritual methods. It is therefore unlikely that many Christian Scientists would seek hospice or palliative care.
- *Christian Science Practitioners and Nurses:* Christian Science practitioners are individuals trained by the Church to help and heal others by prayer according to the tenets of the Church. Christian Science nurses, also

trained by the Church, offer nonmedical care including bathing, dressing wounds, feeding, and other such services. In addition to practitioners, local branches will elect *readers* for a given period of time who lead worship. There are no ordained clergy.

- *Christian Science and Medical Care of Children*: Christian Scientists follow laws regarding the vaccination or medical treatment of children. In many states, Christian Scientists have successfully lobbied for accommodations that exempt children from medical practices such as vaccinations if objections to such practices are religiously motivated. Some states also allow the provision of spiritual healing as a defense against penalties for neglect when parents do not use conventional health care.
- *End-of-Life Ethics*: Christian Scientists can rely on their own consciences and preferences for end-of-life care.
- *Rituals*: There are no specific rituals to be performed, but it would be customary to inform a Christian Science practitioner should a Christian Scientist be admitted to a hospital or hospice. There is no specific format for funerals. If the family chooses to have a funeral service, it will likely be conducted by a Christian Science practitioner, reader, or friend of the family. Readings are likely to be from scripture or the writings of Mary Baker Eddy. While there is not generally a eulogy, the family can decide to do whatever they wish.
- *Afterlife*: Christian Science theology does not accept the belief of heaven, hell, or a judgment day. Heaven is a state of mind that seeks oneness with God while hell is a self-made anguish rooted in a belief of the material world. Death is considered illusionary. After “death,” spiritual development continues.