Jehovah’s Witnesses and End-of-Life Care

Kenneth J. Doka

*The College of New Rochelle, kdoka@cnr.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs](http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs)

Part of the [Gerontology Commons](http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs)

**Recommended Citation**

SPIRITUALITY AND END-OF-LIFE CARE
PART OF THE LIVING WITH GRIEF® SERIES

HOSPICE FOUNDATION OF AMERICA
EDITED BY KENNETH J. DOKA & AMY S. TUCCI
Foreword by Keith G. Meador
The Jehovah's Witnesses is a Christian denomination that differs from mainline Christianity in a number of ways including a rejection of Trinitarian beliefs. Emerging from the millennial movements of the 19th century, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the present world order is in its last days—that Armageddon is approaching. After a climactic battle between God and Satan, earth will become a paradise for those Witnesses who survived and those who were resurrected. They believe that 144,000 will be welcomed into heaven itself. Jehovah's Witnesses have no ordained clergy and are directed by a Governing Body of Elders. They worship in Kingdom Halls. Since they view the world as corrupt and hold that Jehovah's Witnesses alone hold the truth, they tend to limit their associations with nonmembers. Baptized members who violate the basic moral principles or dispute doctrines may be shunned or disfellowshipped until they publicly repent. It is estimated that there are around a million members in the United States and somewhat more than a 100,000 members in Canada.

Sensitivities in End-of-Life Care

While these statements reflect the official position of the Jehovah's Witnesses, it is always important to recognize that individual beliefs and practices may vary from denominational doctrine.

• Medical Care: Jehovah's Witnesses accept medical and surgical treatment. However, a strong, defining belief of Jehovah's Witnesses is that they do not accept blood transfusions because they believe they are prohibited by scripture. This prohibition includes whole blood, packed red cells, plasma, white blood cells, and platelets. Preoperative autologous donation is also proscribed. Procedures that use blood fractions such as serums, hemophiliac preparations, or immune globulins or other procedures such as hemodialysis are left to the consciences of members. In cases where doctors feel compelled to get a court order mandating prohibited
treatments, such as with a minor child, Jehovah's Witnesses wish to be informed and represented at court. Jehovah's Witnesses have pioneered the use of bloodless medical and surgical alternatives.

- **Hospital Liaison Committees:** In major cities and medical centers, Jehovah's Witnesses will likely have a Hospital Liaison Committee to facilitate communication between physicians, patients, and families, and assist in arranging appropriate care. In smaller communities, the Body of Elders may assume this role.

- **Advance Care Directives:** Most Witnesses will carry an advance directive that refuses blood transfusions.

- **End-of-Life Care:** Jehovah's Witnesses believe life is sacred and that the willful taking of life is prohibited. However, Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that scripture mandates futile care that is costly and prolongs the dying process. Jehovah's Witnesses are encouraged to have advance directives that document their personal wishes.

- **Organ Donation and Transplantation:** There is no perceived scriptural objection to donation or transplantation. Such decisions can be made by individual Witnesses.

- **Autopsies:** Unless required by law, Jehovah's Witnesses generally prefer not to have autopsies performed.

- **Holidays and Birthdays:** Jehovah's Witnesses believe that all glory should be directed to Jehovah. Aside from commemorating Christ's death (around the time of Easter and Passover), they do not recognize other holidays or birthdays.

- **Dietary Issues:** While Jehovah's Witnesses will avoid eating meats that have not been drained of blood or foods such as blood sausage or soup, there are no other special dietary considerations.

- **Spiritual Care:** While Jehovah's Witnesses have no distinct rituals that are performed at the end of life, they may wish to read scriptures or pray if they are able. Members of their faith may visit to pray and read scripture. Funeral services are conducted by an Elder. They may be at Kingdom Hall, the funeral home, the home of the deceased, or the graveside. Usually brief, the services include readings and emphasize God's promised salvation and reunion.

- **Afterlife:** Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that the soul is immortal or that there is a hell. They hope that should they die before the end time, they will be resurrected to share in paradise.