

Oregon was the first state in the US to pass medical aid in dying legislation in **1994**. Leaders and members of First Unitarian in Portland were central to changing public policy regarding death-with-dignity. First UU Portland was a kind of home for the campaign leading up to its passage. All the drafting took place there, all the meetings. After the law was drafted, the congregation hosted press conferences to garner voter support; its ministers and lay leaders have been involved for decades. Let's look at some of those leaders.

First Unitarian's involvement began in the 1960s with its then-minister, the **Rev. Dr. Richard Steiner**, an early advocate of aid in dying. After he retired and became terminally ill, Steiner obtained medication that he used to end his life. His decision became a quiet part of the church's history.

The congregation's next long-serving minister, the **Rev. Dr. Alan Deale**, took up the cause. Deale spoke before the Oregon legislature in 1991, when state Senator Frank



The Reverend Dr. Alan Deale—distinguished preacher, church builder, strong institutionalist, social justice activist, and fighter for death with dignity—died on 29 January 2018, aged 90.



Barbara Coombs Lee is president emerita/senior advisor of Compassion & Choices. She is also a member of First UU in Portland, OR.

Roberts, who was dying of cancer, introduced a death with dignity bill. It failed—after scores of other clergy spoke in opposition. **Barbara Coombs Lee** worked for the legislature and attended that hearing. At the time she was unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism, and then, in walked Rev. Deale. "Here comes this diminutive man with a bow tie who says, 'My

denomination promotes and supports this legislation. It is part of our theology, our doctrine of the inherent worth and dignity of every person,

and it is what people deserve at the end of life,'" Coombs Lee recalled. "I thought, 'I've found my church.'"

"It's a fascinating thing that it came out of the church so wholly," said the **Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell**, who served as senior minister from 1992 to 2009. Coombs Lee took the campaign around Oregon and to the media to



Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, Minister Emerita UU Portland



Rev. William G. Sinkford, former UUA President, and recently retired (2022) Senior Minister at UU Portland.

raise support among voters. Many other UUs gathered signatures and did other grassroots work. "Choice and autonomy over one's own life, including the right to refuse medical treatment when one is dying, are central to UU principles," said **The Rev. William G. Sinkford**. "Moreover, in contrast to some Christian traditions, there is a strong strain of Unitarian progressive theology which argues that the notion of suffering being redemptive was a wrong turn from the very beginning. It is true that we often suffer, and I don't think it does anything

toward saving us."

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