

ORGAN DONATION AND TRANSPLANT

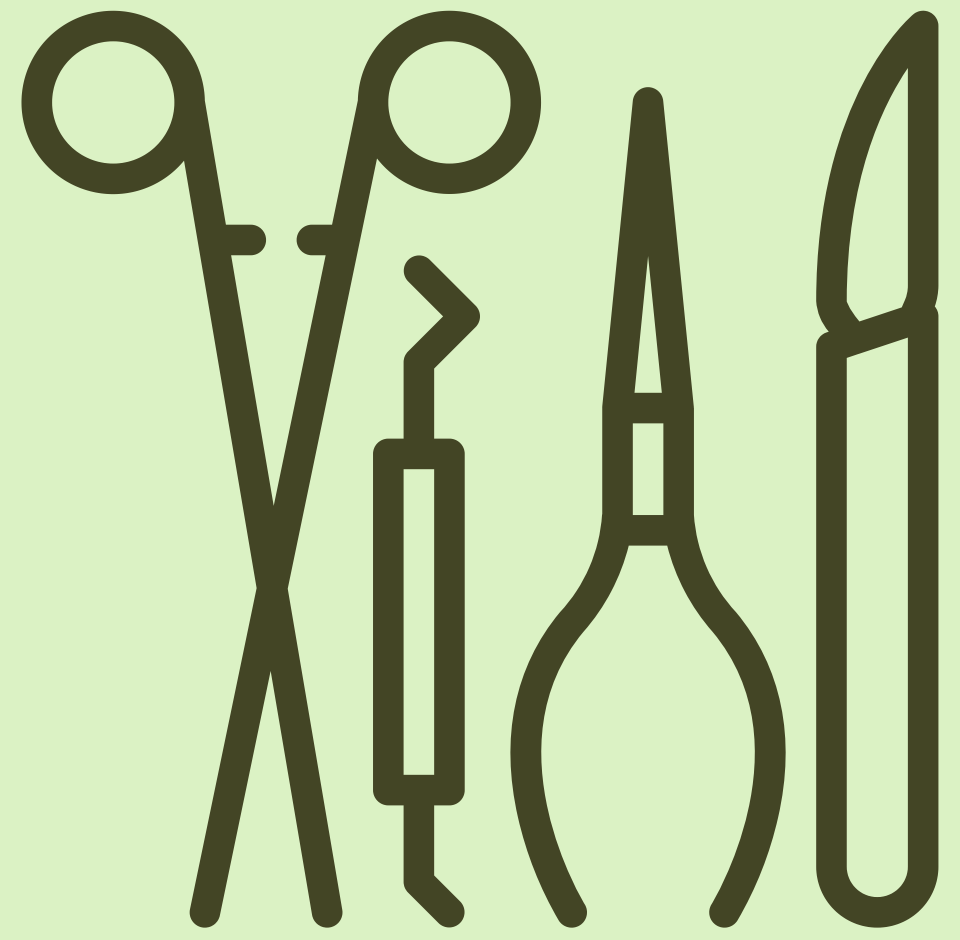
Organ donation and transplants have become increasingly popular medical procedures due to their life-saving potential. Experts say that one person's organ and tissue donations can save eight lives and improve 75 lives!^[1]

But at what cost? As with all good gifts, it's important to view organ donation through the lens of Christianity. A Christian perspective helps us respond to the topic of organ donation and decide whether or not to become a donor.



THE FACTS

What is a transplant?



A transplant occurs when a section of bodily tissue or organ is moved from one spot on a person's body to another, or to a different individual.^[2]

What is an organ donation?

Organ donation occurs when a partial or whole organ is given to someone else without compensation.^[3]



Who are organ recipients?



Organ recipients are those who are experiencing end-stage organ failure where no other medical treatments would benefit the patient.

What body parts can be transplanted?

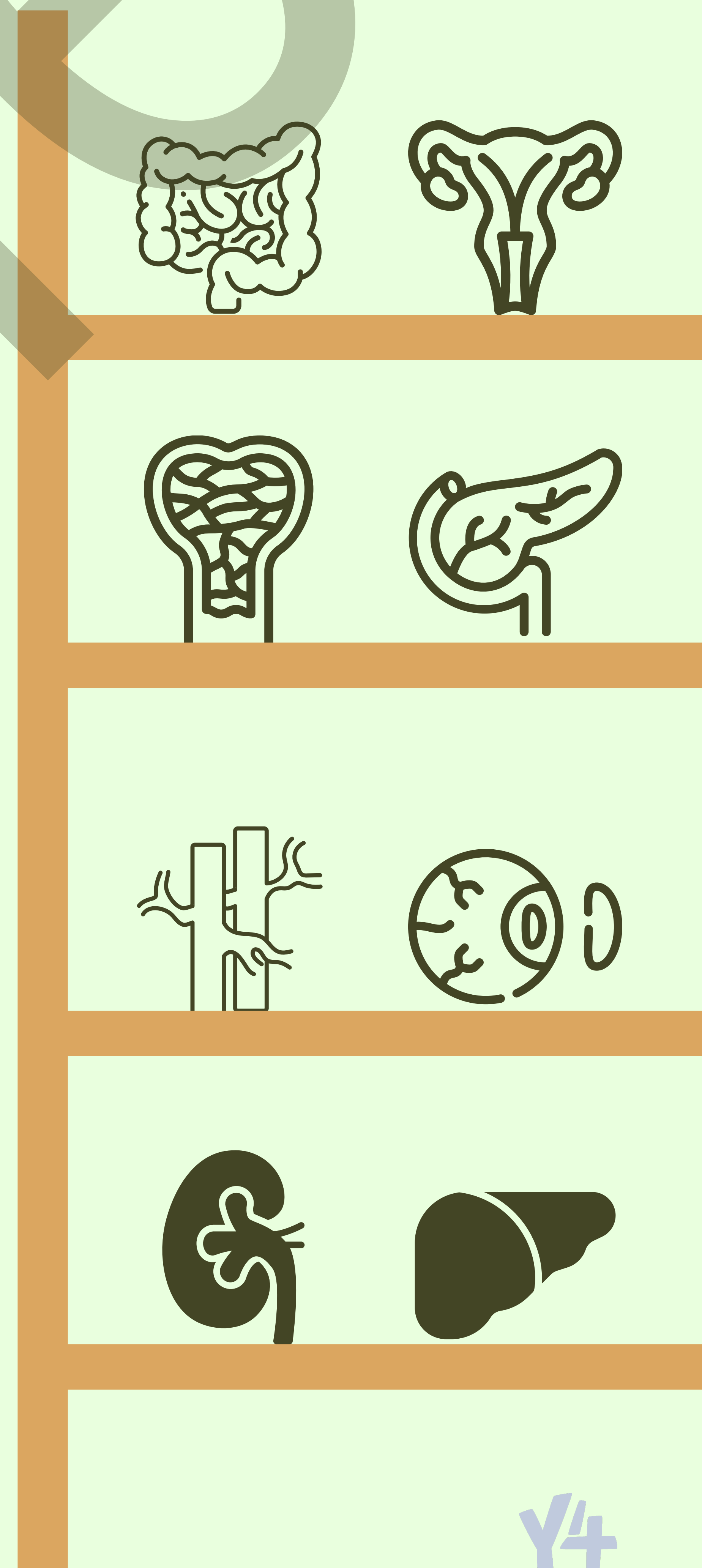
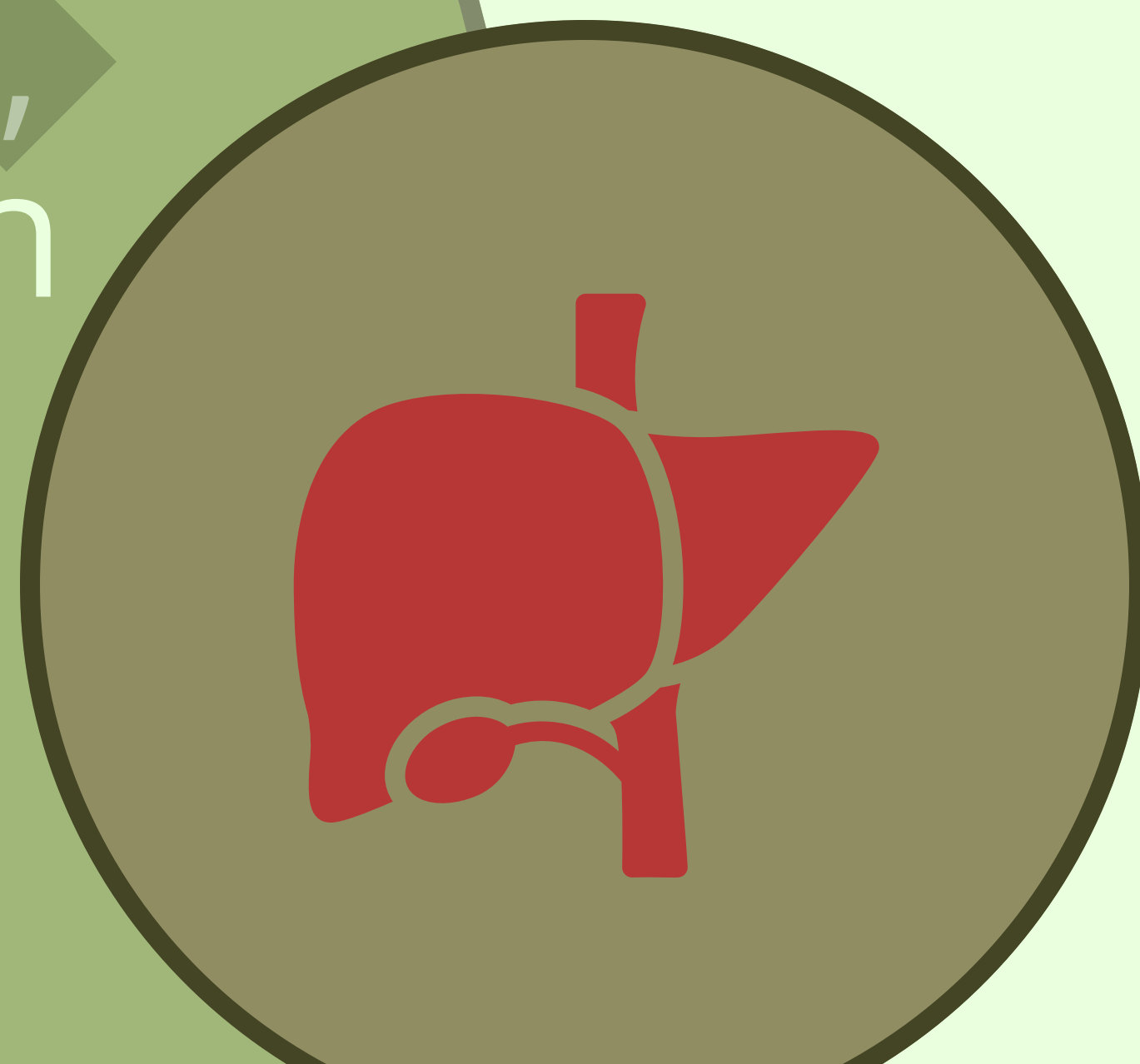
From a living person: One kidney, part of the liver, a uterus, and in rare circumstances, a portion of a lung, intestine, or pancreas^[4]

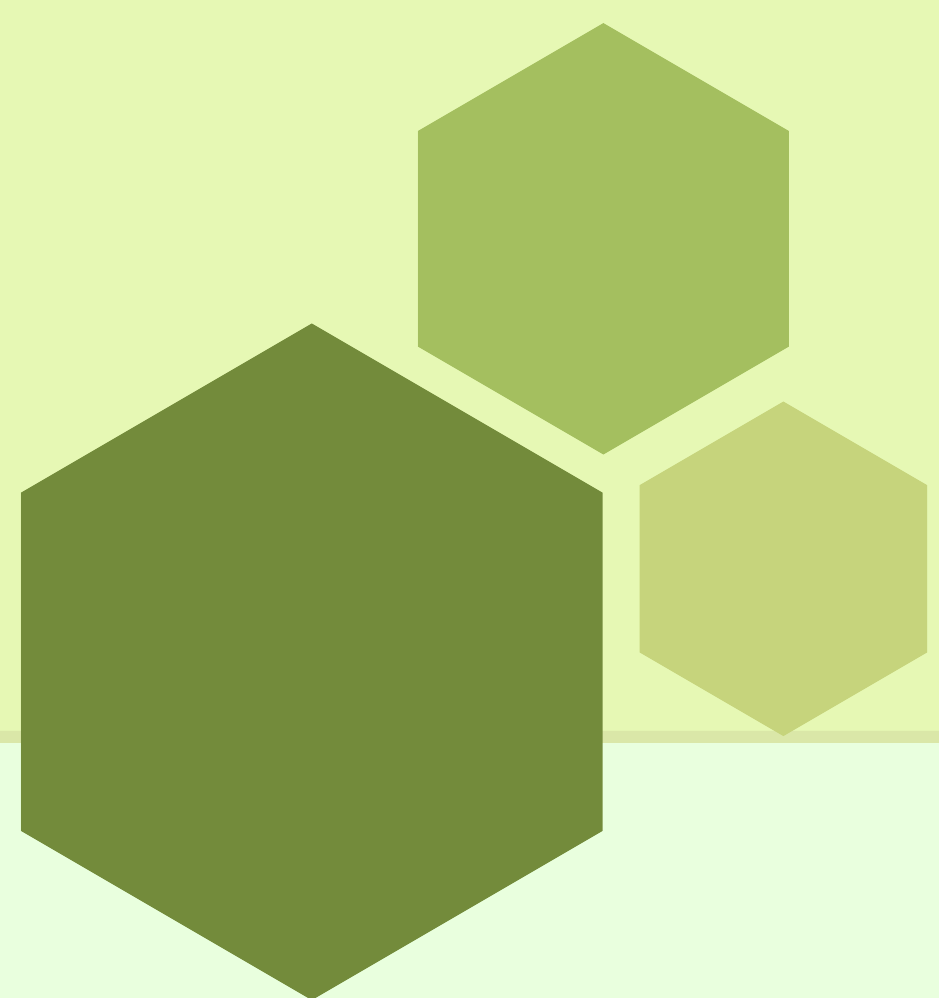
From a deceased donor:

- ~ Organs - liver, kidney, pancreas, heart, lungs, intestines, uterus
- ~ Tissues - corneas, heart valves, bone marrow, bones, skin, tendons, ligaments, cartilage, blood vessels, and nerves
- ~ In rare cases, a hand or face may also be transplanted.^[5]

Fun Fact

When a partial liver is donated and transplanted, it will regrow both in the donor and the recipient.^[6]





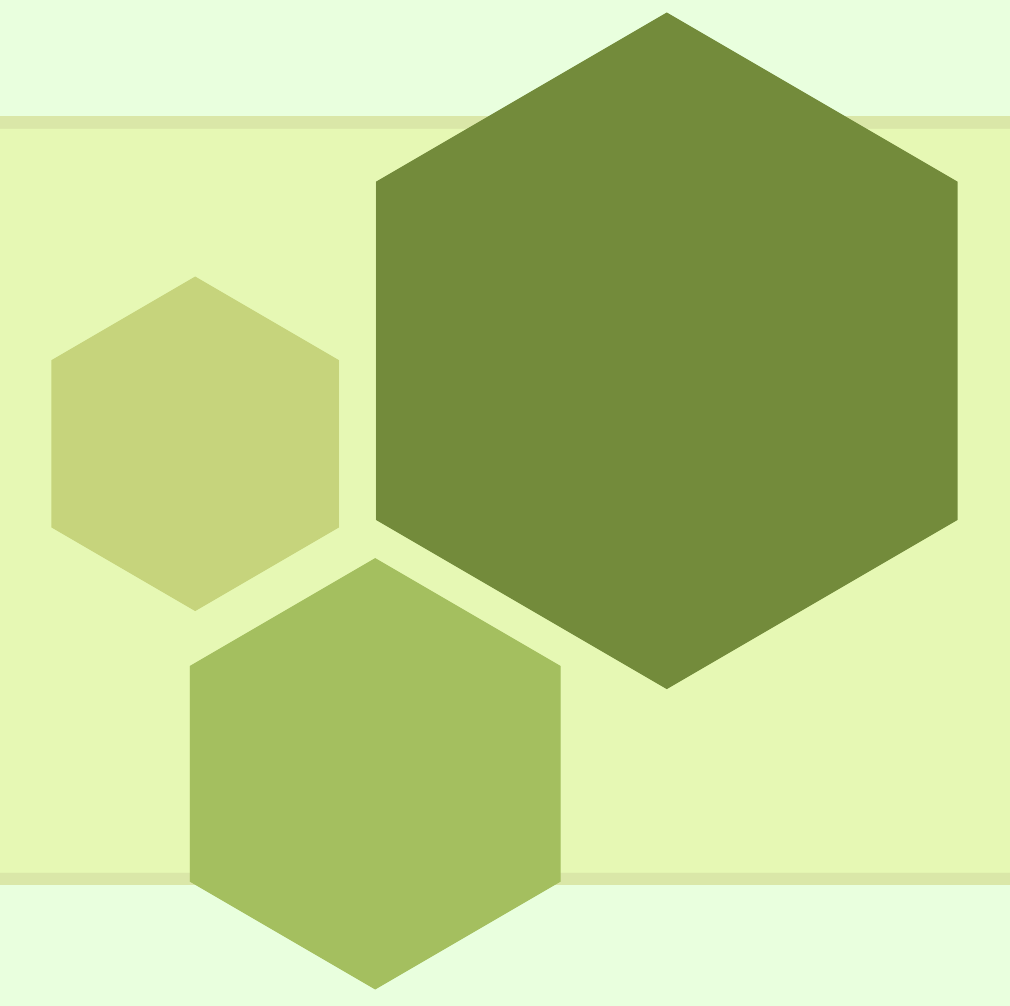
Who are the donors?

There are three types of organ donors: living donors, donors who had a cardiac death, and brain-dead donors.



Living Donors – Living donors are most often biological relatives of the organ recipient. However, living donors can also be coworkers or strangers who see a need and want to help. Non-relatives can give their organs through organ donation organizations. According to Mayo Clinic, “More than 5,700 living-organ donations are reported each year in the United States.”^[7]

The benefit of living donations is that the recipient often has fewer recovery complications, and the transplanted organ has a longer life span.



Deceased Donor - A deceased donor is someone who can provide organs for donation after experiencing cardiac death or being declared brain dead.^[8]



What is cardiac death? - Cardiac death occurs when the heart and lungs permanently stop their functions.^[9]



What is brain death? - Brain death occurs when the brain and brain stem cease functions due to low blood and oxygen supply.^[10] Medical devices like ventilators maintain a patient's cardiopulmonary system (heart and lungs).

BIOETHICAL DILEMMAS AS FOR-LIFE CHRISTIANS

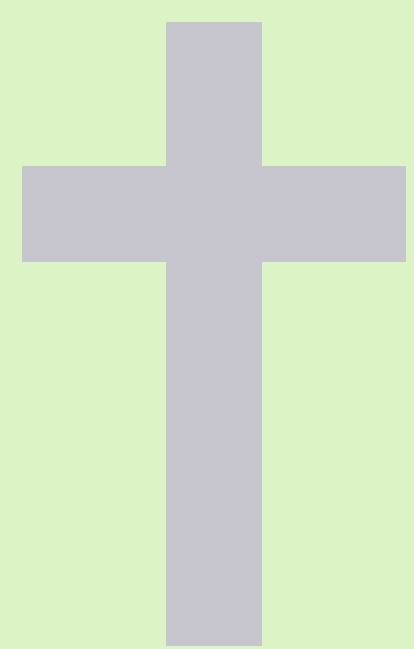
Where do for-life Christians stand on organ donation?



Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't provide a specific stance on organ donation, but we do know that we are called to love and care for one another. Organ donation is good and godly, as it upholds the lives of those sick and suffering.



God is at work through medical advancements, and the gift of healthy organs can allow people to continue in their vocations as spouse, father or mother, pastor, coworker, and friend.



In fact, upholding another's life through organ donation can be an act of sacrificial love, one that reflects our Savior's giving of His own body to grant life to others. However, as for-life Christians, we need to be aware of a few things.

When does death occur?

God is the giver and taker of life. It is by His hands that death separates the body and soul. Luke 23:46 records the moment Jesus' body and soul separate:

"Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last."

Christ's Spirit left Him, and then He breathed His last. This is the moment of death - when the soul and body separate. Because it's difficult to measure this process, we rely on the cessation of function in the brain, heart, and lungs. If one of these functions is still happening naturally, or through a medical machine, the person is still living.

Why is brain death an issue?

While we rejoice in the ways God has worked through science to temporarily combat the brokenness of this world, not all things are good for Christians. When brain death is declared, the heart and lungs are likely still operating, so true death hasn't happened.^[11]

Here are some thoughts for consideration:

Someone who is brain dead can maintain homeostasis, digest food, and produce excrement.^[12, 13]

The term "brain dead" was created to protect doctors who harvest organs so they wouldn't get charged with homicide.^[14]

A 27-year-old pregnant mother who was declared brain dead continued to carry her baby for nine weeks. The doctors delivered a healthy baby at 31 weeks gestation.^[15]

Organs from a donor who is brain dead are optimal for donation, as the organs can be procured before the heart stops bringing blood and oxygen to the organ.

What about heart and lung transplants?

Hearts and lungs can only be donated by brain dead donors. These organs are still performing their functions in the donor's body and are essential to life. When these organs are taken away from the donor, there is a loss of life. As for-life Christians, we are wary of the fact that one person's life is being taken so someone else can live. Both lives should be upheld, not one taken for the sake of the other.

How is a brain dead organ donation different from "pulling the plug"?

God has created our life, and He will determine when it comes to an end. When preparing a brain dead patient for an organ donation, a team of doctors will end the functions of his or her heart, lungs, and other important organs. Therefore, the doctors are determining the end of someone's life, not God.

In comparison, when we turn off a patient's life-saving support, we are leaving the dying process in God's hands. The heart may beat a few more times, and the breath could remain in the lungs for a few more minutes. We wait on God to determine the end of life.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Christians make a confession for life and for Christ even as we die. When you consent to becoming an organ donor, this becomes your final wish, despite what your family might want. Unfortunately, many organ donation centers don't distinguish between brain death and cardiac death. They could take whatever organs meet the necessary criteria by whatever means they see fit.

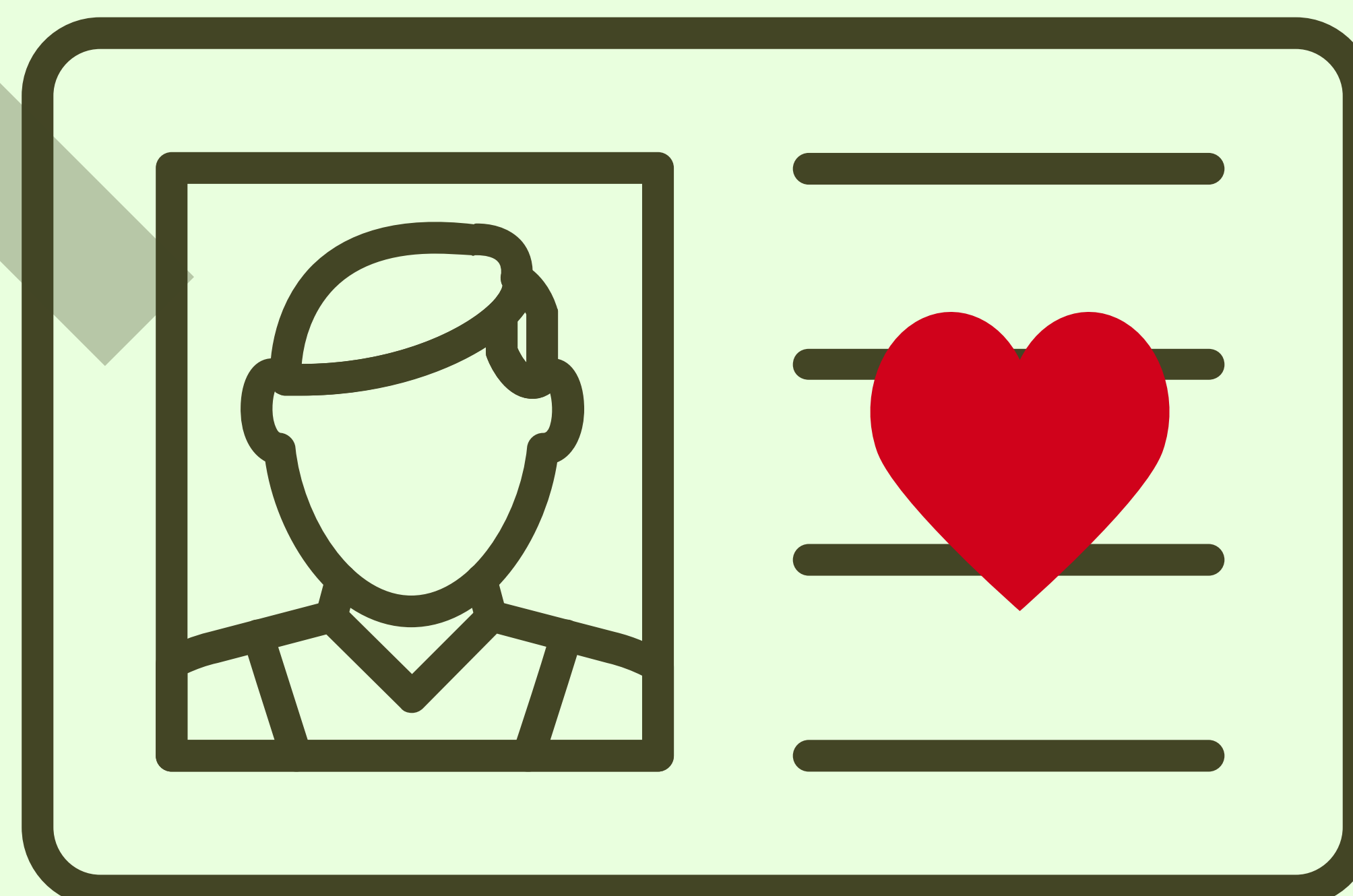
Again, Christians want to make a life-affirming confession even in death. This may include becoming an organ donor; however, it's important to realize that donations have limits. Our bodies are not only gifts from God now, but they will also be gifts made new at the resurrection. Because of this, some practices, like donating your body to science, are unadvisable. The process of post-mortem mutilation and experimentation is not always respectful of the body's sanctity; it does not treat the body as a gift from God. In addition, a person has no control over what research scientists facilitate, some of which may violate the Christian conscience.





One of the best ways to avoid being placed in a situation that might include a brain dead donation is to opt out of becoming a registered donor, especially when applying for a driver's license. Instead, make your desire to be an organ donor known to your family, husband, or wife. Discuss which donations can be life-affirming and which donations would end your life. This allows your loved ones to be your advocates so that your organs are harvested at the appropriate time after the brain, heart, and lungs have ceased their functions. Another way to do this is through Christian Advanced Directives.

To take your name off the organ donor list, contact your local Secretary of State.



HOW DO WE RESPOND TO ORGAN TRANSPLANT AND DONATION?

Christians are called to uphold life, even when it means making hard decisions. We all want to see our loved ones live long, full lives, but we trust in God's plan for life. In some cases, we uphold life through organ donation and transplants, but at other times, we find contentment in the days God intends to give and avoid an organ donation that could take someone else's life.



It is also important to remember that not all people with organ failure will qualify for an organ transplant, and some may receive a spot on the list but never receive an organ match. This can be a very difficult time for families. It's important to show them love and support as they cherish the time left with their loved ones as Paul calls us to do in Galatians 6:2:

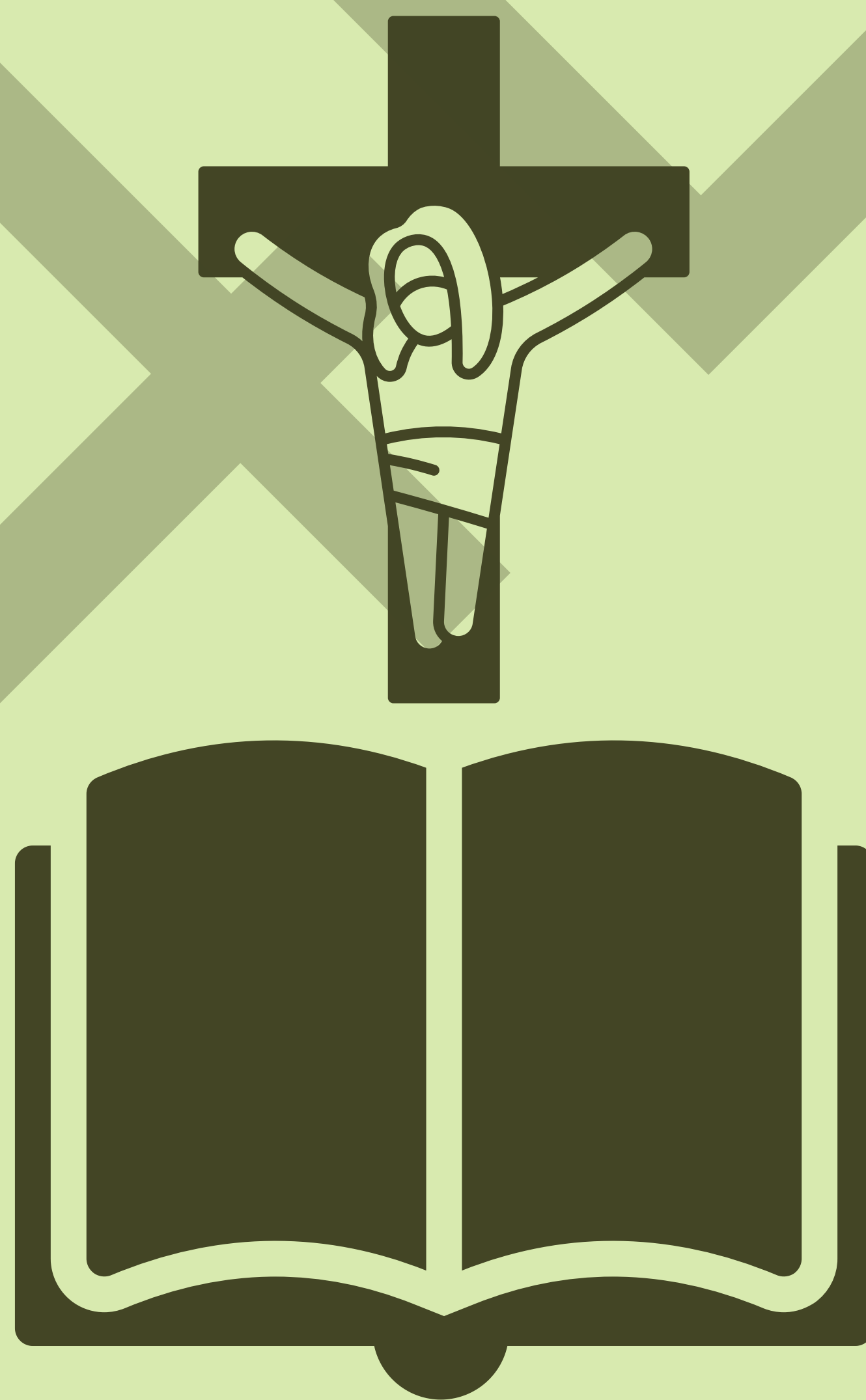
"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Each of us has only days remaining, and we rejoice in the days God has given us.



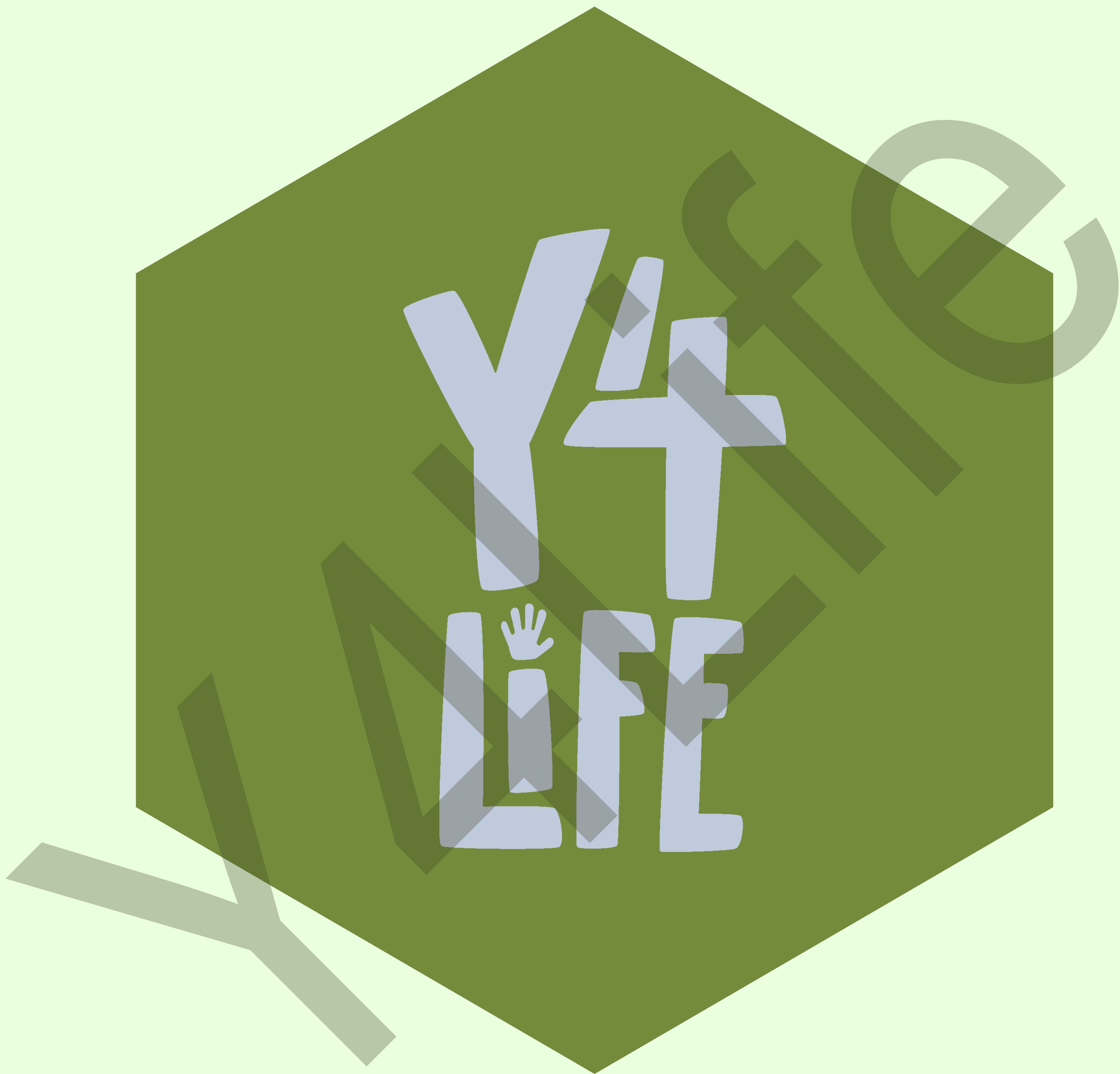
For those who have unknowingly received an organ from someone declared "brain dead," be assured that you are forgiven. Because of Christ's death on the cross, God's forgiveness and mercy are yours. Christ's perfect life and death cover all sins. His resurrection gives us promise, peace, and hope!

Romans 14:8 - "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."



SOURCES

- [1] <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/organ-donation/art-20047529>
- [2] <https://www.britannica.com/science/transplant-surgery>
- [3] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/organ-donation>
- [4][5] <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/11750-organ-donation-and-transplantation>
- [6] <https://code-medical-ethics.ama-assn.org/ethics-opinions/transplantation-organs-living-donors>
- [7] <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/living-donor-transplant/about/pac-20384787#:~:text=The%20donor%20may%20be%3A%201%20A%20first-degree%20relative%2C,who%20has%20heard%20about%20the%20transplant%20candidate%27s%20need>
- [8][9][10] <https://optn.transplant.hrsa.gov/patients/glossary/>
- [11] <https://www.organdonor.gov/learn/process/donation-after-life>
- [12] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3372912/#R6>
- [13] <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/how-communicate-clearly-about-brain-death-and-first-person-consent-donate/2016-02>
- [14] <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/reexamining-flawed-legal-basis-dead-donor-rule-foundation-organ-donation-policy/2020-12#:~:text=Organ%20donation%20in%20modern%20medicine%20is%20governed%20by,requirement%20known%20as%20the%20dead%20donor%20rule%20%28DDR%29.>
- [15] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/3392814/>



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