

## INSIDE

- ▶ Christian fast-food chain in Lisburn keeps Sunday special
- ▶ Controversies leaving MPs with doubts over assisted suicide Bill
- ▶ Institute cautions Stormont to tread carefully on equality law

## Defending gospel freedom

We enjoy widespread religious liberty and freedom of expression in the UK, but should never take this for granted.

The prevalence of abortion censorship zones and proposals for a new definition of 'Islamophobia' have left many people increasingly concerned that free speech is being eroded.

Our new legal case on behalf of Pastor Clive Johnston defends the hard-won freedom to preach the Gospel in public. Preaching Christ crucified is a stumbling block and an offence to many, but it is not against the law.

The case comes at a sensitive time. The Executive's plan to consolidate existing equality laws may be well-meaning, but risks undermining religious liberty. Until we intervened, no consideration had been given to the impact on existing rights and freedoms.

And we are right to be wary. As our team recently told MLAs, no one envisaged equality law being used to try to force the Christian family running Ashers Baking Company to promote same-sex marriage. Equality law is supposed to be a shield to defend our liberty, not a sword to attack it.

## CI backs pastor facing prosecution for gospel preaching in censorship zone

The Christian Institute is providing legal support to a retired pastor from Co. Tyrone facing prosecution for preaching the Gospel in one of the Province's eight abortion censorship zones.

Pastor Clive Johnston, 76, from Strabane was preaching on John 3:16 near Causeway Hospital in Coleraine on Sunday 7 July 2024 when he was cautioned by police. An officer claimed Pastor Johnston was breaking the 'Safe Access Zones' law, even though he had made no reference to abortion.



▶ Pastor Clive Johnston

The zones were introduced in 2023 after pro-abortion lobbyists claimed they were necessary to protect abortion centres' staff and visitors from protestors.

On 21 March, at Coleraine Magistrates' Court, the grandfather

of seven denied a charge of seeking to 'influence' people accessing abortion services.

The Institute's Simon Calvert said: "We have amazing gospel freedom in this country and we encourage Christians to use that freedom so

that more people will hear about the love of God. That's why we've taken on this case. Prosecuting someone for preaching John 3:16 near a hospital on a quiet Sunday is an outrageous restriction on freedom of religion and freedom of speech."

# Christian fast-food chain in Lisburn keeps Sunday special

Chick-fil-A, a US fast-food chain run on Christian principles, guarantees that staff at its new store in Lisburn will not have to work on Sundays.

The successful company's outlet at a motorway service station is only open Monday to Saturday, in keeping with its founder's desire to allow employees a "day to rest and worship if they choose".

The company's UK website says its corporate purpose is to "glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is



entrusted to us", and to have "a positive influence on all who come in contact" with the business.

Retired Free Presbyterian minister David McIlveen

welcomed the principled stand, commenting that "preserving the Lord's Day" benefits everyone.

In contrast, supermarket giant

Lidl continues to press councils to grant towns 'holiday resort status', making it possible for stores to bypass Sunday trading regulations and open from 9am to 9pm during the 'peak tourist season'.

Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive of Retail NI hit back at the retailer's latest bid to open for longer in Coleraine and Ballymoney. He argued the application had nothing to do with tourism and everything to do with large supermarkets "trying to exploit a loophole in the legislation".

# Controversies leaving MPs with doubts over assisted suicide Bill

MPs are growing increasingly concerned about Kim Leadbeater's assisted suicide Bill, with multiple safeguards being rejected by the Westminster Committee tasked with scrutinising the legislation.

The Bill would allow

adults in England and Wales deemed to be terminally ill and with less than six months to live to get help to kill themselves.

Scores of amendments have already been considered and dismissed. As many as 30 MPs who voted

for it in principle are now worried that the Bill requires medics to offer assisted suicide to their patients.

Others are indignant at the way the Committee has excluded expert witnesses who disagree with assisted suicide. It has been accused of 'heavily skewing' the witness selection towards those in favour of the Bill.

However, the greatest outrage came after what was billed as

the 'ultimate safeguard' – a High Court judge to approve assisted suicide requests – was ditched.

Several MPs noted that this measure had persuaded colleagues to back the Bill at Second Reading.

Labour MP Florence Eshalomi wrote: "The key safeguard that was used to persuade MPs who raised valid questions about the bill has now been dropped. To say this is worrying is an understatement."



# Govt urged to reject chilling 'Islamophobia' definition

The UK Government has been urged not to adopt a highly controversial definition of 'Islamophobia' because it would threaten free speech.

Shadow Justice Secretary Robert Jenrick raised concerns that the definition, which claims Islamophobia is "rooted in racism" and "targets expressions of Muslimness", would have "a chilling effect on freedom of speech".

Former Labour MP Khalid Mahmood, one of the first Muslims to be elected to Westminster, has also argued that it would not help to "tackle discrimination".

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner has launched a working group to advise on tackling allegations of racial and

religious hatred, with particular focus on Islamophobia.

In response to Mr Jenrick's concerns, the Government said it would outline any updates on its position "in due course".

The Government had recently rejected a Home Office-commissioned report calling for a wider definition of extremism to cover "behaviours and activity of concern" such as alleged "conspiracy theories".



# Parents risk criminalisation under proposed England smacking ban

Activists are once again seeking to criminalise parents who tap their child on the back of the hand, claiming it is abuse.

Jess Asato MP has been seeking to introduce a ban by amending the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

The Westminster Government recently confirmed

it did not plan to ban smacking in England. Minister for School Standards Catherine McKinnell said it will consider the issue when Wales publishes an assessment of its 2022 smacking ban, which is due by the end of this year. But she emphasised that abusive parents are already caught by existing legislation

and called it "absurd" to suggest that the current law could be used as a defence in cases of serious harm or murder.

The Minister also said the Government should consider the views of those who might be "disproportionately affected" by changing the law.



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# Institute cautions Stormont to tread carefully on equality law

The Institute has warned that plans to consolidate existing equality laws in Northern Ireland must be handled very carefully to avoid undermining religious liberty.

Solicitor-Advocate Sam Webster told Stormont's Committee for the Executive that drawing together the Province's "patchwork of equality law" into a single piece of legislation could undermine the work of churches.



Ahead of the hearing, the Institute had written to the Committee to highlight problems during the passing of the Equality Act 2010 at Westminster. Errors made it more difficult for churches in Great Britain to understand

their rights and freedoms.

In the light of that experience, Mr Webster urged the Committee to pay particular regard to the impact of possible changes on religious freedom and the work of churches.

He reflected that, when the Fair Employment and Treatment Order was passed in 1998, nobody had ever envisaged the Ashers Baking Company case ending up at the Supreme Court.

"Caution needs to be exercised, because why should the citizen have to go all the way to the Supreme Court in order to get the law clarified, in order to defend his or her rights to freedom of expression or religious freedom?"

# House of Commons prayers 'part of our nation's Christian heritage'

Muslim MP Shockat Adam has defended the use of Christian prayers before each sitting of the House of Commons.

Opposing a move to abandon the tradition,

Mr Adam said the prayers were "part of our Christian heritage and Parliament's traditions".

Attendance is voluntary but the National Secular

Society is campaigning to axe the practice, which dates back to 1558.



*"Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our King and his government, to Members of Parliament and all in positions of responsibility, the guidance of your Spirit. May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed. Amen."*

Form of the main prayer in the House of Commons

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Tear off and keep

# Pray continually

1 Thessalonians 5:17

## SUNDAY

**PRAY** With thanksgiving for all of God's blessings on the UK.

## MONDAY

**PRAY** For dangerous legislation on assisted suicide to be rejected.

## TUESDAY

**PRAY** Thanking God for His gift of marriage and the blessings it brings.

## WEDNESDAY

**PRAY** That families would remain free from intrusive state interference.

## THURSDAY

**PRAY** That plans to restrict preaching and prayer through a new 'conversion therapy' law would be dropped.

## FRIDAY

**PRAY** For our work supporting the freedom of Clive Johnston and others to publicly preach the Gospel.

## SATURDAY

**PRAY** That the Lord will bless the staff and work of The Christian Institute.

