

# Questions for Candidates

Northern Ireland Assembly  
Election 2022



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# Introduction

An election to the Northern Ireland Assembly has been called for 5 May 2022. As Christian citizens we should think carefully about how to vote. The Christian Institute is a registered charity and cannot endorse any political party or candidate in the election. We cannot tell you who to vote for.

To help you find out the views of the people standing for election in your constituency, we have prepared this Questions for Candidates briefing.

Nations must have laws to restrain evil and to uphold what is good (Romans 13:1-7). But governments are not responsible for everything, and if there is to be democracy they must not be. Many Christians are gravely concerned about legislative proposals which intrude into family life, evangelism and the work of the local church.

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It is important to recognise that society is more than the state. Society is made up of families and many institutions and organisations between the state and its citizens. Government by itself cannot solve all our problems – or even come close.

The issues we have highlighted in the enclosed list of questions are those where we believe the Bible is clear. They are issues where biblical principles, and in particular the Ten Commandments, directly apply. We cannot break God's law without consequences – to a degree

in this life, and fully in the life to come. Men and women reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7). A nation will never be blessed by breaking God's laws.

## CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP

The state is a means of God's 'common grace'. The Bible is clear that the governing authorities act on God's behalf to restrain evil. This is for the good of all people, not only Christian believers.

The Christian has dual citizenship, of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and of the earthly nation in which God has placed us. The Christian's duty is to obey the governing authorities in all points, except where they forbid what God commands, or command what God forbids (Acts 5:29).

As well as duties, being a citizen gives us certain liberties. The Apostle Paul was prepared both to use and to not use his liberties as a Roman citizen, depending upon whichever option most benefited the Gospel (Acts 16:22-24, 37-39; 21:39; 22:25-29; 25:10-12).

In the United Kingdom in the 21st century, we live in what is historically a relatively unusual situation – we live in a democracy. Unique responsibilities flow from living in a democracy. One is that we have the right to vote. Surely Christians should exercise this responsibility.

Christians should use their vote because it can influence the policies and laws introduced by the next Assembly. Christians want to say that discussions about the economy or the provision of public services must not ignore the massive spiritual and moral problems in our nation.

In the West today we live in a collapsing culture in which God's moral law is openly flouted. Things will not get better unless this is addressed. The only real and lasting solution to the problem of man's sin is uniquely provided in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel makes clear that there can never be 'political salvation'. Nevertheless, it does instruct us to pray that our political leaders would provide freedom for the Gospel, and freedom for Christians to live peaceful and quiet lives in godliness and holiness (I Timothy 2:1-2). We are to pray that the governing authorities will fulfil their God-given mandate and govern according to God's moral law (Romans 13:1-7, I Peter 2:13-14). The Assembly election provides a vital opportunity for Christians to speak out and play our part.

## **BIBLICAL PRIORITIES**

The Bible provides a clear basis for knowing right from wrong. God's moral law is laid down for all people – not just for Christians.

The Lord Jesus Christ criticised the Pharisees and told them that they had neglected the more important matters of the law (Matthew 23:23) namely justice, mercy and faithfulness. This included setting aside the commands of God by neglecting to support their parents in order to observe a man-made tradition (Mark 7:9-12). For the Lord Jesus Christ, and for us, it is God's commands that tell us what constitutes justice, mercy and faithfulness.

God has been pleased to give us the Ten Commandments as a summary of his moral law.

When it comes to votes in the Assembly there are cases where MLAs are voting for or against what is taught in Scripture. For example, a vote for abortion was a vote to break the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13). Similarly, it was a direct contravention of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14) to vote for homosexual marriage. These are not matters of political opinion, but straightforward issues of right or wrong.

Debates about student tuition fees, healthcare reform, or transport policy can all involve a moral component. But from a biblical perspective these issues can never be as important as a debate on whether euthanasia should be legalised. We need to weigh up what is most important.

## **SPEAKING TO CANDIDATES**

Candidates or their representatives may knock on your door, phone you, or stop you in the street to ask how you intend to vote. This presents an ideal opportunity to raise concerns and to find out where the candidates stand on biblical issues. The candidate's opinions on certain moral issues can be quite different from the position of their party.

More than at any other time the candidates will be open to listening to your views. Should they be elected, they will be representing you at Stormont.

Think through one or two issues and have questions ready in case canvassers contact you. Limit yourself to the one or two issues with which you are most concerned. Be prepared to give a reason for your view. This briefing will help you get to grips with the issues you are interested in.

# Questions

## 1. HATE CRIME



**Should it be a hate crime to disagree with same-sex marriage or say it is impossible to change sex?**

Hate crime laws have been used against Christians, both in the UK and around the world. Many of those who oppose biblical truth claim that disagreement is hatred. Parents have been accused of hatred for objecting to their children being taught LGBT ideology in schools.

The Department of Justice is currently reviewing hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland. It has recently completed a public consultation on 'stirring up hatred' offences. Such offences could profoundly restrict free speech and religious liberty as the culture becomes less sympathetic to biblical values. They could easily impact our freedom to proclaim Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, or call people to repent of sin.

The existing law has a 'dwelling defence' which ensures that conversations in the home are protected from the reach of the offence. It is a crucial protection for family life. The consultation paper asked whether this should be replaced. Another key issue concerned the 'indicators of hate' that could be used in guidance. The suggested language was very vague and subjective.

The consultation document follows the hate crime review conducted by Judge Desmond Marrinan. His report recommended scrapping the existing protection for those who disagree with same-sex marriage. It also recommended not including the freedom of expression clauses present in the Public Order Act 1986 for religion and sexual orientation.

## 2. CONVERSION THERAPY



**Would you protect parenting, prayer, preaching, and pastoral advice from a 'conversion therapy' ban?**

Last year a majority of MLAs backed a non-binding motion calling for a ban on conversion therapy in Northern Ireland. Legislation will be prepared following the Assembly election and MLAs will vote on this.

Activists and the media have created a sense of crisis around conversion therapy. It is claimed that there are people trying to coerce homosexuals to become heterosexuals. Examples of abusive practices by quack medical practitioners and charlatan preachers have been cited, but these are largely illegal already. Activists are calling for prayer, preaching, pastoral conversations and even parental decision-making to be included in the ban.

Some politicians are buying into this and muddling the ordinary work of churches with dangerous pseudo-medical practices.

The Australian state of Victoria has recently introduced a conversion therapy ban that criminalises prayer and pastoral advice which upholds the Bible’s teaching on sexual ethics. The Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in Victoria has begun ‘re-educating’ church ministers on how to comply with the new law. It says that parents not agreeing to puberty blockers for their kids and churches withdrawing membership from congregants who reject the Christian sexual ethic are unlawful forms of ‘conversion therapy’.<sup>1</sup>

A founder of the Ban Conversion Therapy campaign in the UK has said that “‘Spiritual guidance’ is really just religious speak for conversion therapy” and “the pernicious power of prayer must be dealt with”.<sup>2</sup> But a ban on spiritual guidance and prayer would be tyrannical. Police and the courts would have to decide which kinds of prayer are criminal and which are not.

Activists also want a ban to cover trans issues and some current Northern Ireland Executive Ministers support this.<sup>3</sup> It could mean a parent who urges their child not to seek damaging puberty blockers would be breaking the law.



### 3. ASSISTED SUICIDE



**Will you oppose attempts to legalise assisted suicide?**

Right now, attempts are being made to legalise assisted suicide in the rest of the UK. In the Republic of Ireland, proposals to allow euthanasia and assisted suicide are being redrafted. These could all impact Northern Ireland. It is also likely that some MLAs will press for this issue to be debated in the next Assembly mandate.

Assisted suicide denies the value of human life as created in the image of God. It pressures vulnerable people into ending their lives prematurely for fear of becoming a burden. The choice to die very quickly becomes a duty to die. This is the opposite of compassion. True compassion for those who are terminally ill means valuing their lives and supporting palliative care for all who need it.

Once the law says that assisted suicide or euthanasia are valid choices for some, where does it stop? Evidence from other countries shows that when a society starts down this path the safeguards are short-lived. In the Netherlands, the key criterion of ‘unbearable suffering’ is now interpreted much more broadly. There has been a marked increase in the number of euthanasia cases for patients with dementia and with psychiatric disorders.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of euthanasia cases now involve elderly people who are not terminally ill but simply have conditions associated with normal old age.

In Belgium the law on euthanasia introduced in 2002 was confined to adults. In 2014 it was extended to allow euthanasia for children with no lower age limit. It is now applied to people with the first symptoms of chronic diseases like Alzheimer's, patients suffering from depression, and older people with a combination of complaints.<sup>5</sup>

Canada only legalised euthanasia in 2016, but it has already scrapped the requirement for a person to be terminally ill and will extend it to those with mental illness from next year.<sup>6</sup>

## 4. GENDER IDEOLOGY



**Will you resist moves to allow biological men to use women's toilets and changing rooms?**

The 2004 Gender Recognition Act allows an adult to change legal sex providing they have lived for at least two years as if they were a member of the opposite sex and they have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria agreed by two doctors. Under this law, a man who has fathered children can be issued with a birth certificate stating that he was born female. That is bad enough, but activists are calling for the law to be further liberalised to allow 'self-declaration' of gender and to scrap the legal requirements of medical consent.

Gender ideology claims that a person's subjective internal feelings of gender are who they really are and that this internal sense of identity overrides the physical

biology of a person's body. The truth is that your body is not separate from the real you. The Bible teaches that a person is a coherent whole, body and soul together. God has deliberately created men and women different from one another, but both are in His image.

It is not possible to change sex. Hormone treatment and reassignment surgery may make a person look more like a member of the opposite sex, but it cannot turn a man into a woman or vice versa. Surgery is not even required for a person to change their legal sex under the Gender Recognition Act.

The impact of gender ideology on children and young people is increasing. The number of teenagers claiming to be transgender has risen dramatically in recent years. Every year, many are being put on courses of puberty-blocking drugs. Many women are concerned about the dangers of men being granted access to female toilets and changing rooms.

There is a real likelihood of activists pressing for a new 'choose your own sex' law at Stormont. That means the MLAs elected in May will have the responsibility of voting on this absolutely fundamental issue.

## 5. ABORTION



**What is your position on the current abortion laws?**

Until 2019, Northern Ireland had some of the strongest protections for the unborn

in Europe. Sadly, Westminster imposed the UK's most liberal abortion regime on the Province – despite the Assembly voting to express its opposition.

In the rest of the UK, abortion was legalised in 1967. Since then over 9 million babies have been aborted on the mainland. Over 200,000 abortions are now carried out annually in Great Britain.

Northern Ireland's new law goes beyond even those in England, Scotland and Wales, with abortions allowed up to 12 weeks without giving any reason. As with the rest of the UK, abortion is legal for most reasons up to 24 weeks and up to birth on the grounds of disability. This could include Down's syndrome, and even cleft palate.

A Bill to outlaw abortion on the basis of disability was rejected by the Assembly last year. MLAs went on to pass a Bill imposing 'buffer zones' around abortion clinics. Fines of up to £500 will stop people from handing out pro-life literature or speaking to anyone about abortion.

A campaign is underway to allow 'DIY' home abortions in Northern Ireland. In the rest of the UK, safeguards on unsupervised abortion were removed at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 as an 'emergency' measure. Being able to take both abortion pills at home has now been made permanent in England and Wales.

The Bible teaches us that every human life is created in the image of God – whether a baby is able-bodied or disabled. Christians must obey the Lord Jesus Christ's command to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:39), both before and after they are born.

## 6. SMACKING



**Should parents be criminalised for occasionally giving their children a mild smack?**

In February, MLAs from four different political parties tabled amendments to the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking) Bill to remove the defence of 'reasonable chastisement'. This would have criminalised loving parents who occasionally smack their children. The amendments were rejected by the Speaker's office as falling outside the scope of a bill dealing with sexual abuse and human trafficking. However, a number of current MLAs clearly want to make it illegal for parents to smack their own children. A Bill on this issue could be introduced after the election.

A smacking ban will not help protect children, but it will criminalise ordinary mothers and fathers. There are lots of ways to teach a child right from wrong, and every child is different. But parents who occasionally use a mild smack should not be treated as if they are child abusers.

It is grossly misleading to describe a loving smack as violent. The law already protects children from violence. Criminalising smacking could overwhelm police and social workers with trivial reports so that real cases of child abuse are missed.

# Questions for Candidates

1. Should it be a hate crime to disagree with same-sex marriage or say it is impossible to change sex?
2. Would you protect parenting, prayer, preaching, and pastoral advice from a 'conversion therapy' ban?
3. Will you oppose attempts to legalise assisted suicide?
4. Will you resist moves to allow biological men to use women's toilets and changing rooms?
5. What is your position on the current abortion laws?
6. Should parents be criminalised for occasionally giving their children a mild smack?

**REFERENCES:** 1 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 'Have you experienced a change or suppression practice?', see <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/have-you-experienced-a-change-or-suppression-practice/> as at 1 April 2022 | 2 *Gay Times online*, 17 March 2021, see <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/ban-conversion-therapy-co-founder-whats-more-threatening-than-telling-someone-they-will-spend-an-eternity-in-hell/> as at 1 April 2022; *The Independent online*, 20 February 2021, see <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/lgbt-conversion-therapy-ban-mental-health-b1805080.html> as at 1 April 2022; | 3 Northern Ireland Assembly, Official Report, 20 April 2021 | 4 *Regional Euthanasia Review Committees: Annual Report 2019*, March 2020, page 12; *Regional Euthanasia Review Committees: Annual Report 2009*, May 2010, page 5 | 5 Jones, D A, Gastmans, C and MacKellar, C (Eds), *Euthanasia and assisted suicide: lessons from Belgium*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, page 102 | 6 *Global News online*, 17 March 2021, see <https://globalnews.ca/news/7703262/canada-senate-passes-bill-c-7/> as at 1 April 2022; 'Should Mentally Ill Patients Have the Right to Euthanasia?', *Psychology Today*, 21 April 2021, see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/finding-purpose/202104/should-mentally-ill-patients-have-the-right-euthanasia> as at 1 April 2022

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