

**Please see below correspondence from Rt Rev Dr David Bruce,
Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

Dear MLA

Can I first again express my gratitude to you for your work and service to your constituents over the past year as we have all navigated the challenges that have arisen in response to the global pandemic. Not many of us could have imagined that we would still be in a position of lockdown nearly 12 months later. Throughout our congregations we very much miss gathering in person for public worship, but recognise the effort required by all of us at this time.

You might recall that some of my colleagues wrote to you back in June 2020, asking you to support a Private Members' Motion rejecting the imposition of abortion legislation which extends to non-fatal disabilities, including Down Syndrome. The cross-party votes on that non-binding debate (either the motion or amendment) firmly rejected abortion up to term on the basis of non-fatal disabilities, currently permitted by Regulation 7(1)(b) of the [Abortion \(Northern Ireland\) \(No.2\) Regulations 2020](#).

Today (16th February) the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill was introduced to the Assembly, and recognising that there will be support amongst many MLAs from a range of parties, I would encourage you to vote for this legislation during its second stage debate in a few weeks' time.

PCI remains firmly opposed to the abortion legislation introduced at Westminster and imposed on the people of Northern Ireland last year, along with nearly 80% of all of those that responded to the NIO consultation. That the regulations include provision for abortion up to full term for a pre-born child diagnosed with a non-fatal condition like Down Syndrome, club foot or cleft lip makes it a more extreme abortion regime than that introduced to the Republic of Ireland.

It is also contrary to the concluding observations of the 2017 report from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) which found that existing laws, regulations and practices in the UK discriminate against persons with disabilities.

Specifically, it stated that:

“The Committee is concerned about perceptions in society that stigmatize persons with disabilities as living a life of less value than that of others and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of fetal impairment.

“The Committee recommends that the State party amend its abortion law accordingly. Women's rights to reproductive and sexual autonomy should be respected without legalizing selection abortion on the ground of fetal deficiency.”

Furthermore even the flawed CEDAW report, on which Northern Ireland's abortion legislation is based, stated that stereotypes towards persons with disabilities should not be perpetuated. This is exactly what the currently legislation permits. To provide abortion services to full-term on the grounds of disability risks creating a culture where termination is considered to be an option “just in case” quality of life is not as good as had been expected with a child without a disability.

This sends a profound message to society about the value that is placed on all human life, not only at birth but also those who may become incapacitated in some way due to illness or injury later in life. Within PCI we would wish to affirm that all human life has value and dignity, because of our belief

that we are all made in the image of God. We believe that our worth and identity derives from this principle, rather than a subjective judgement about quality of life.

Many of us know and love people, both adults and children, across our families and friendship groups who have lived with a disability from birth. PCI acknowledges that caring for a loved one with a disability can bring additional challenges and complexity to family life.

Under the auspices of the Council for Social Witness, PCI provides care and support for adults living with learning disabilities through its residential homes at Aaron House in Dundonald, Lawnfield House in Newcastle, and in supported housing at Willow Brook in Coleraine. We would be delighted to welcome you at any of these venues to give you a better insight into this work at a time when restrictions on movement and interactions with others are lifted.

Some of our congregations provide youth clubs and activities for children and young people with profound disabilities, open to anyone in the community, not just church members. While of course there is much that we can still do in regard to making activities on Sundays and throughout the week more accommodating and inclusive of those with disabilities we are taking steps by providing training for ministers and leaders and sharing examples of good practice from within and outside the denomination.

Supporting the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill provides an opportunity to send a strong signal that, in this part of the world, all human life is valued. This is something that we in PCI, and I in my role as Moderator wish to identify with, and I am sure that you do as well.

Yours sincerely

David Bruce



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