KEY POINTS:

- The law on abortion in Northern Ireland is unique and very different to abortion laws in Great Britain and the rest of Western Europe. We celebrate this distinctive law in Northern Ireland which attempts to strike a delicate balance between protecting the life and wellbeing of the mother and her unborn child.

- Abortion in Northern Ireland is permitted but only in more limited circumstances, where the continuance of the pregnancy threatens the life of the woman, or would adversely affect her physical or mental health in a manner that is real and serious and permanent or long term.

- Abortion is a devolved issue and legislative decisions around abortion law in Northern Ireland should be made by locally elected representatives. To try to impose legislation at this time without a devolved Assembly in place would be to interfere in a sensitive political issue at a sensitive political moment.

- We refuse to be drawn into a false dichotomy which pits a woman's rights against those of her child. We seek the flourishing, life and wellbeing of each woman, her family, unborn child and the wider community. We reflect this in our language, policy and practice.

- It is damaging to women, children and wider society to measure progress or equality for women by their ability to end the lives of their unborn children. Many women are pro-life and pro-women and the simplistic mantra of ‘trust women’ and choice fails to engage in any meaningful way in the systemic issues that lead women to believe that abortion is their best or only option in a pregnancy crisis. The choice of abortion in most circumstances in GB (98%) has nothing to do with any medical reason around any risk to the life or physical health of the women or unborn child involved. We oppose any idea of creating a ‘human right to end a human life’ in these situations.

- The hard cases of life-limiting conditions and pregnancy resulting from sexual crime were mentioned in the recent Supreme Court cases. These are incredibly complex and emotive and we respond with compassion and practical help through the work and actions of some of our member Churches and organisations. Abortions in these cases have taken place in Northern Ireland but the assessment is made on the risk to the women on a case by case basis rather than an automatic right because of certain foetal conditions or circumstances of conception. These abortions however account for a tiny percentage of all abortions in GB where around 98% of abortions (according to DOH statistics published every year) involve physically healthy women and physically healthy babies. In this highly sensitive and polarised space we advocate for the life and dignity of each woman and unborn child.

- We speak of pregnancy crisis care and abortion through a lens of relationships, wellbeing, human dignity and social justice. We advocate with humility and sensitivity for vulnerable women and children.

A Human Approach

- At the outset we acknowledge tragedy and seek to respond with compassion. This consultation raises very sensitive issues – women in crisis, babies with profoundly life-limiting disabilities and pregnancies resulting from rape and other sexual crimes. In a polarised debate
we make it very clear that we advocate for the life, dignity and care of each woman and unborn child in our families and our wider community.

- **Bodily autonomy and personal freedom is a very important principle** to be protected in law and the state must have a good reason to prevent anyone doing something with or to their own bodies. The law places many limits on personal freedom including our bodies, not based on our sex, but on what harm might be done to other human beings. Abortion is an example of where people wish to draw these lines in different places because of differing views of the common good and what constitutes and violates human dignity most.

- **The inherent dignity of all - including tiny family members.** A pre-born child has intrinsic value and worth as a human being, a member of our race and community. As such, the child should be afforded both protection of life and human dignity.

- **The ‘women’ and ‘foetuses’ mentioned in the consultation are not abstract or distant.** They are us. Wives, daughters, sisters, grandchildren, neighbours and friends, our family and community members.

- **Suffering is part of human experience.** Rather than prematurely ending life we choose to stand in solidarity alongside those who hurt. We weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. We show solidarity and practical care for the sick and terminally ill, those who are traumatised or have been abused and those who are grieving. We do this in every other area of life so of course this is our response in a pregnancy crisis.

- **As the Evangelical Alliance in Northern Ireland we obviously come at this very openly from a point of view deeply shaped by the Christian faith.** We believe that rather than choosing between women and children we are required to care for both as far as possible. Many others of other faiths and none will agree with this approach and those who come from a no-faith position will still carry belief and value-systems into this debate which should be open to challenge and question as much as any other.

### A Policy Approach

We acknowledge that opinion will vary across society and to some degree within the Church on these issues. We seek to be **clear and consistent** in our policy approach for the wellbeing of everyone in our communities.

- **Human life should be protected from beginning to end.** We consistently oppose direct action to end a human life prematurely. Government and wider society should be extremely careful not to facilitate premature death medically, legally or culturally. From this consistent principle of life as a sacred gift not to be ended at our direction, we frame our opposition to assisted suicide and even murder. We make a clear distinction between palliative care, actions with double effects and the alleviating of suffering through medicine on the one hand and medicine being used to deliberately end a human life on the other.

- **Human dignity should be afforded from beginning to end.** We believe all human life should be afforded human dignity. This is why we care for those who have been displaced, abused,
raped, those who are in pregnancy crisis, orphaned, in care, disabled, those who have been trafficked, the sick and the elderly, the poor and homeless. Humanity has inherent value and dignity from the pre-born to the woman in a pregnancy crisis to the most elderly members of our society. Any devaluing or de-humanising of the most vulnerable members of our families and societies affects us all.

- **We believe that the consistency of protecting life and human dignity from beginning to end is rational and vital to robust legislation.** This consistent approach strikes the balance between individual freedoms and social responsibility. This is 'social justice' and the balancing of rights, relationships and responsibilities. This is not about people trying to protect their own beliefs or impose their views on to others. The principle of the State upholding human life and dignity for all is vital to a flourishing society.

> ‘The measure of progressive civilized society is how we treat our most vulnerable’
> President Harry S. Truman

**Specific to this consultation**

We would like to make the following points:-

1. Firstly, this is a devolved issue which should be decided by politicians in Northern Ireland, not Westminster, as has been reiterated by the British Government and parliamentarians from across the party political spectrum. It is acknowledged that the Northern Ireland Assembly is sadly, though temporarily, not sitting. However, it would be constitutionally inappropriate and profoundly unwise to interfere in a sensitive political issue in this sensitive political moment for Northern Ireland and would set a worrying precedent for other devolved assemblies.

2. Secondly, the law on abortion in Northern Ireland has been proven to save lives. Research conducted by ‘Both Lives Matter’ in 2017, which was independently scrutinised and upheld by the Advertising Standards Authority following a complaint made to them, has found that an estimated 100,000 individuals are alive today who would otherwise not be if Northern Ireland had followed England, Scotland and Wales in adopting the 1967 Abortion Act. This research is publicly available to be scrutinised. Claims that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland do not stop abortion are simply empirically baseless. The law does make a difference. I, and many others like me in Northern Ireland, do not want widespread access to abortion to be available. Abortion ends human life and is not beneficial to women.

3. Thirdly and finally, claims that Northern Ireland has to change its law on abortion as a consequence of human rights laws do not stand up to scrutiny. Admittedly, in non-binding comments made at the Supreme Court a number of justices indicated that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is incompatible with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.
This was because it does not allow for abortion on the grounds of life-limiting conditions where the child is likely to die before, during or shortly after birth and in cases involving sexual crime. However, a different panel of the Supreme Court could come to a different decision in a future case. In addition, even if a future court did uphold this ruling, the cases in question here only consider a tiny number of abortion cases in practice. Less than 2% of recorded abortions in England and Wales were granted on these grounds. This ruling simply does not provide a basis for widespread access to abortion on any grounds to be brought to Northern Ireland.

In addition, the argument is frequently made that the UN says that Northern Ireland’s abortion laws are not human rights compliant and that Northern Ireland should decriminalise abortion.

The truth, however, is that they are not referring to the view of the United Nations as a body, but to a report issued by one important but unelected committee; the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It might be believed that the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which defines the remit of the CEDAW Committee, sets out a right to abortion which Northern Ireland is failing to deliver. In truth, however, at no point does the Convention mention abortion.

When the law is being engineered to create a human right to end human life something has gone wrong. When, for every four children born alive in England and Wales, there is one abortion, surely all sides in this debate can agree the practice of abortion has gone far beyond the idea of it being ‘safe, legal and rare’ for the ‘hard cases’.

There is a danger that the Women’s and Equalities Committee accepts the destructive narrative that women can only be equal when they have an absolute right to abortion in any circumstance for any reason. This pitches a women against her unborn child and measures their freedom, equality and progress by their ability to end the life of their own child. This is a dangerous and destructive way to view women and humanity more widely. Rather than choosing a side, we’re asking you to stand with both. Many women, men and children see a better and more human way ahead which values the life, health and dignity of both as far as possible.

In conclusion, we would urge the Committee to respect the right of the people of Northern Ireland through their elected representatives to decide what the law on abortion should be. The law in Northern Ireland protects the life, health and dignity of both women and unborn children. We, and many others see huge value and a more hopeful, human way ahead in keeping it that way.

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