

## Methodist Church in Ireland

### Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill 2020

Dear Christine,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill 2020.

The Methodist Church has been concerned about the gap in Domestic Abuse legislation in Northern Ireland which has permitted the perpetrators of coercive and controlling behaviours within close relationships to act with impunity. We therefore welcome the legislative changes proposed in this Bill.

As a church, we are committed to raising awareness of domestic abuse in all its forms and believe that this legislation will help to underpin a more informed societal response. We are aware that there is a high incidence of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland but like other parts of the United Kingdom, the conviction rate is low. We recognize that the Bill seeks to remove some of the barriers to successful prosecution and we welcome that.

- **How the new legislation enhances existing legislation and addresses gaps etc.**  
As the “family” has changed and become much more fluid, it is genuinely challenging to describe all the possible relationships which could equate to a personal connection. Part1, chapter1, para 5 describes these possible relationships as well as can be imagined. Would it be possible to have a clause inserted to permit inclusion of a relationship not described in this paragraph?
- **Definition of the offence**  
The definition of the offence and of abusive behavior is clear. It is important to include the “reckless” condition at Chapter 1, para 1 (2) (ii), as it can be difficult to prove intent.
- **Any identified issues regarding investigation and prosecution**  
No issues identified but welcome the fact that the victim cannot be questioned by the alleged perpetrator and that trial by jury is not an option.
- **Whether the proposed penalties are appropriate**  
The range of penalties seems appropriate: the maximum penalty for aggravated domestic abuse at 14 yrs imprisonment reflects the seriousness of the offence and the life changing damage that a victim can experience.
- **Any other legislative or non-legislative approaches to tackle domestic violence**

A multi-agency approach has and will continue to be essential in tackling domestic violence, supporting victims and holding perpetrators to account for their crimes. Relationship education remains essential for young people so that they recognize the characteristics of healthy relationships and the character traits/ behaviours which often lead to abusive relationships.

As levels of domestic abuse appear to rise, it is essential that we understand the factors contributing to this situation and the strategies which might reverse it. To this end the Methodist Church recommends that research into this area is promoted and funded. Research areas could include;

- Factors that negatively or positively impact on the cycle of learned abusive behaviour
- Interventions which reduce re-offending.
- Role of pornography in sexual violence
- Long term outcomes for victims and children

A media campaign to raise awareness of this type of domestic abuse would be helpful after the legislation is enacted.

Yours Sincerely

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Lay Secretary of the Council for Social responsibility  
Methodist Church in Ireland