GENERAL PRESBYTERY OF THE
FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF ULSTER
GOVERNMENT AND MORALS COMMITTEE

Convenor:
Rev Gordon Dane

Secretary
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Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill — Written Evidence

Submitted by: The General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, Government and Morals Committee

Date: 11th June 2026

To: Committee for Finance, Northern Ireland Assembly

Preliminary Remarks

The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster submits this evidence in the fear of God and under the supreme authority of His Word, the Holy Scriptures. We affirm the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) as our subordinate standard, particularly its teaching that the civil magistrate hath authority under the second table of the moral law to uphold public righteousness.

We wish this submission to be **publicly attributed** and are content for it to be published in full.

Clause-by-Clause Analysis

Part 1: Non-Religious Belief Marriages (Clauses 1–7)

Theological Concern

The Bill seeks to place "belief marriages" on equal footing with religious marriages. We must state plainly: marriage is not a matter of private belief. It is a **creation ordinance** instituted by Almighty God before the Fall of man (Genesis 2:24), affirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:4–6), and defined exclusively as the union of one man and one woman for life.

The Smyth judgement, which underpins this legislation, proceeded from a flawed premise — namely, that human rights jurisprudence can redefine what God has established. The state did not create marriage; it cannot therefore redefine it. Its role is to **recognise and protect** the institution as given.

Specific Objections

1. **Equivalence is false.** A humanist ceremony solemnising a union on the basis of secular philosophy bears no resemblance to Christian marriage, which is a covenant made before God and pictures the union of Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22–33). To treat them as legally equivalent is to degrade the unique character of Christian marriage.
2. **Conscience protections are absent.** The Bill contains no explicit protections for registrars, church officers, or public servants who hold the biblical conviction that marriage is between one man and one woman. Without such safeguards, this legislation opens the door to compelled speech and conscience violations.
3. **"Future-proofing" is dangerous.** Clause 4 empowers authorities to impose additional requirements on religious bodies conducting marriages. We regard this as a legislative time-bomb. A future administration hostile to biblical Christianity could use these powers to compel churches to solemnise unions contrary to Scripture or face deregistration. **This must be expressly limited by primary legislation, not left to ministerial discretion.**

Proposed Amendments

- Insert a **conscience clause** protecting any person — registrar, celebrant, venue operator, or public servant — from being compelled to participate in, facilitate, or endorse any marriage or civil partnership contrary to their sincerely held religious belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman.
- Amend Clause 4 to require that any additional requirements imposed on religious bodies must be approved by **affirmative resolution of the Assembly**, not merely by departmental regulation, and must explicitly exclude any requirement that would compel a religious body to act contrary to its doctrinal standards.

Part 2: Minimum Age for Marriage (Clauses 8–12)

General Support

We support raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18. Scripture teaches that children are a heritage of the Lord (Psalm 127:3) and that parents bear responsibility before God for their protection and nurture. Marriage is a solemn covenant requiring maturity of judgement. We concur with the evidence that marriage under 18 carries significant risks of harm, and we support the criminal offence created by Clause 9 for those who cause a person under 18 to enter into marriage.

A Caution

However, we note that the Assembly's concern for protecting young people from premature marriage sits uneasily alongside policies that expose children to sexualised curricula, gender ideology, and medical interventions that permanently alter developing bodies. Consistency demands that if the Assembly considers a 16-year-old incapable of consenting to marriage, it must also consider that same 16-year-old incapable of consenting to irreversible medical procedures. We urge the Committee to reflect on this inconsistency.

Proposed Amendment

None required for this Part. We support its intent.

Broader Concerns Not Addressed by the Bill

Religious Liberty and the Trajectory of Legislation

We must speak candidly. This Bill does not arrive in a vacuum. It follows the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples and forms part of a trajectory in which biblical convictions are increasingly treated as a form of bigotry to be suppressed.

We draw the Committee's attention to several matters:

- **Preaching and hate speech.** Will ministers who preach from Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, or Leviticus 18 face investigation under hate crime legislation for proclaiming what the Bible teaches about human sexuality? The Committee must consider how this Bill interacts with existing and proposed hate speech provisions.
- **Parental rights.** Will Christian parents retain the right to withdraw their children from school instruction that contradicts biblical teaching on marriage, family, and human sexuality?
- **Charitable status.** Will churches that maintain the biblical definition of marriage face challenges to their charitable status on the ground that their beliefs do not promote "public benefit" as redefined by a secularising state?

These are not hypothetical concerns. They have materialised in other jurisdictions. Northern Ireland must not follow that path.

Constitutional and Theological Summary

The Free Presbyterian Church holds, with the Reformed confessions, that:

1. **Christ is King of the nations** (Psalm 2:10–12; Revelation 19:16). Civil government is not neutral. It is ordained by God (Romans 13:1–4) and will answer to Him for how it has used its authority.
2. **The moral law of God is the only perfect rule of righteousness** (Westminster Confession, Chapter 19). No human statute can make righteous what God has declared sinful, nor can any human rights framework override the law of nature and of nature's God.
3. **The church must be free to preach the whole counsel of God** (Acts 20:27) without state interference. We do not ask the state to preach our message. We ask only that it not silence us.
4. **Marriage is the first institution God gave to mankind**, preceding both church and state. The state's duty is to protect it, not to remodel it.

Conclusion

We urge the Committee to amend this Bill to include robust conscience protections and to limit ministerial powers over religious bodies. We further urge the Committee to consider the broader trajectory of legislation and to ensure that Northern Ireland remains a jurisdiction in which biblical Christians can live, work, and worship according to conscience without fear of legal penalty.

We make this submission with respect for the Committee and its members, with love for all our neighbours in this Province, and in the solemn conviction that we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Signed on behalf of the Government and Morals Committee,

Rev. David Gerald McLaughlin
General Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster