

The recent criminalising of gathered church worship in Ireland is disproportionate and exceeds the limits of government authority.

Since mid-March last year, churches in Dublin have been allowed to gather for worship only 14 weeks. We demonstrated over those weeks that we could operate very safely by putting in place various important measures. We took that seriously and have acted in good faith from the beginning. Yet after 42 weeks of gathered church worship being prohibited by the government, it then chose last week to officially criminalise such worship.

We are deeply disturbed and perplexed by this move, which we believe is disproportionate and exceeds the limits of government authority. While we appreciate the unprecedented difficulties government has faced, and thank God for the desire to promote peace and protect life, the introduction of this statutory instrument (SI 171/2021) has occurred without due consideration and debate in the Dáil regarding the gravity of such a law. It has criminalised religious freedoms that the government is obliged to protect. Archbishop Eamon Martin correctly describes these measures as draconian. We commend his clear statement on the matter and call for other church leaders across the denominations to add their voice.

We appeal to the government to understand that Christian worship is intrinsically corporate - an act of the gathered church. This lies at the very heart of how Christianity is practised. Some aspects of worship (such as baptism and communion) simply cannot be replicated online. Private, personal devotion at home does not constitute the church's worship. Therefore, to criminalise gathered worship is effectively to criminalise the practice of the Christian religion.

For the good of this nation and for the glory of God, we call again for freedom to worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ - our hope in life and death, and the only Lord of all.

Rev Alastair Dunlop, Howth & Malahide Presbyterian Church

Mark Smith - Lead Pastor - City Church Dublin

Kieron Lynch, Pastor, Immanuel Church Dublin.

Alan Gorman, Elder, South Hill Evangelical Church Blackrock

Len Carolan, Elder, Shankill Bible Church

Rev'd David Martin, Christ Church North Dublin, Director of Irish Church Missions

Pastor Robert Millar, Jamestown Rd Baptist Church, Finglas

Pat Mullen, Pastor, Grace Bible Fellowship

Jeff Hay, Pastor, Ballycullen Community Church

Richard McConnell, Pastor, Blackrock Community Church
George Morrison, Elder (retired), Grace Bible Fellowship
Rev Sam Mawhinney, Adelaide Rd Presbyterian Church
Peter Kenny, Assistant Pastor, Grosvenor Rd Baptist Church
Ed Neill, Lead Pastor, Grosvenor Rd Baptist Church
Rev Chris Kennedy, Dun Laoghaire Presbyterian Church
Cormac Walsh, Leader, North City Baptist Church