

Presbytery of Ballymena
Statement on H.M. Court of Appeal's Judgement
on the Ashers Baking Company Ltd Appeal
1st November 2016

At its stated meeting on Tuesday 1st November, 2016, the Presbytery of Ballymena resolved to place on public record its dismay at the Court of Appeal's ruling against Ashers Baking Company Ltd which has caused widespread alarm and concern, and its full prayerful support for the McArthur family in the God-honouring witness they have given to the Lord Jesus Christ throughout this difficult period in their lives.

Presbytery is deeply alarmed by this further erosion of the rights of freedom of speech and the reasonable public expression of deeply held religious convictions. We have very grave concerns that we are fast becoming a society of inequality and intolerance at the hands of those who have been given the responsibility of promoting equality and tolerance. Therefore, as a Presbytery we believe we must speak out against the inherent injustice of this decision on everyone's behalf, since it appears to favour one set of strongly held beliefs over another which is hugely detrimental to human society in general. As far as Presbytery is concerned, this ruling constitutes an invasion of the fundamental human rights of freedom of individual conscience and the reasonable expression of such rights.

Presbytery also shares the widespread concern regarding the actions of the Equality Commission in backing this case as well as with the mechanisms which are being employed to apply current legislation in this regard. In a modern democratic society Presbytery believes that anti-discrimination legislation is essential, but regrettably it is also convinced that the law as it currently stands is inadequate since it appears to have severe, unintended consequences. The current law needs revision so that it gives proper protection for freedom of conscience and its legitimate expression in all walks of life. Presbytery calls on the Equality Commission to facilitate this civic discussion and in so doing help address the prevalent current levels of disillusionment and lack of confidence shared by many about its role and work.

It is ironic that Bible believing Christians, who for many centuries have been in the vanguard as the champions of equality and the protection of human rights through anti-discrimination legislation, eg in the promotion and protection of women's rights, the abolition of slavery and the advancement of anti-racist legislation, etc, now find themselves increasingly discriminated against in a society which appears to tolerate anything but the reasonable practice of Christian faith in the public arena. By the same token we believe that minority voices must also be heard and their concerns and aspirations protected as well. Presbytery therefore strongly supports the statement issued on behalf of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland through its Council for Public Affairs, which states: *"Out of respect for the dignity and worth of every person, and in the interests of the common good, we want the law to protect everyone from discrimination whilst ensuring that freedom of conscience and expression are properly valued and respected."*

Presbytery also resolved to unreservedly condemn all acts of bullying, including those on the grounds of sexual orientation, as these are expressions of an equally unacceptable form of intolerance and contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. Presbytery affirms its belief that Christianity is the only true basis for human flourishing as it clearly teaches that everyone has been created by God, and for God, made in his own image and likeness with equal value and dignity. The gospel is the God-given, solid foundation for respect in society, freedom of thought and speech and genuine equality before the law regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or religion.

Joseph Andrews
(Clerk of Presbytery)

Daniel Kane
(Convener, Presbytery Social Witness Committee)