



Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2021

Dear Minister Swann,

We are writing to you as people from faith communities in Northern Ireland to ask you to take action on the commissioning of abortion services. **Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice** is an initiative started by people from Christian denominations in Northern Ireland and as a growing network, we are open to members of all religious communities whose faith has led them to support safe abortion access as a necessary part of society. We have observed with concern the delay in the commissioning process which has led to a recent intervention by the Secretary of State. Our shared position as faithful members of religious congregations is that full reproductive healthcare services should be commissioned without further delay. This is a position we have come to through reflecting on scripture, our own life experiences, the stories of women and girls still having to travel for abortion related care, the burden of stigma and shame unfairly placed on those in our communities who have had abortions, and the values that underpin our beliefs and faith practice.

We believe in the inherent dignity of every person, including the sacred gift of sexuality. We recognise that the **dignity of women** has not been equally valued in society and that religious doctrine and power has been misused to harm women and girls over many generations. We believe that it is time for faith communities to reject entrenched patterns of sexism and patriarchy, listen to the stories of women and minority genders that have often been silenced, and be led by their voices. We therefore call on you as health minister, and on all legislators and policy makers, to fulfil your obligations to women under the United Nations human rights convention and ensure that reproductive healthcare is made accessible for everyone who needs it. These human rights standards serve the same purpose as our calling as people of faith; to **uphold the dignity and rights of all people and to work for justice in an unequal world.**

We treasure the **freedom** to live according to our own religious beliefs and values and the liberty to exercise our **conscience** in communion with God and each other. We celebrate the diversity of views on abortion within and across our many faiths and denominations. We acknowledge that people of all faiths and none have abortions. There are few things more sacred than the choices we make about our bodies and families. We are, we know and we love women who have exercised their right to conscience and made these important moral decisions in the context of their own life circumstances. It is not in keeping with our values of religious liberty and conscience to deny others access to abortion services. We do not support the use of religious ideology by legislators who claim to have the authority to make pregnancy decisions on behalf of others.

As people of faith we seek to practice **compassion** and care for everyone facing complex pregnancy decisions and challenges. We are called to provide support and understanding for women, pregnant people and their families as they make the decisions that are right for

them. We are distressed by the stories of those from Northern Ireland who still have to travel for abortion services. A **compassionate** society does not turn its face away from people whose lives have led them to a crossroads, whose struggles we might never fully understand and who do not need the additional burden of travelling to access care. We want local services fully commissioned to provide people with the reproductive healthcare they deserve and which is in line with agreed international healthcare rights.

We believe in the moral vision of **Reproductive Justice** as it calls us to address all systems of oppression still at work in the world. We want everyone from every background to be able to choose if and when to have children. We want to build safe and sustainable communities where every family can raise their children with dignity and free from poverty, discrimination and violence. Removing barriers to reproductive healthcare is an important part of that wider vision. For too long accessing abortion in Northern Ireland has been an issue of inequality. Those without the resources, freedom and safety to travel have felt the greatest impact of the criminalisation of abortion and the absence of local services. Our NHS is a testament to this society's commitment to the health of all people and as health minister we remind you of your duty to ensure that this vision of equal access is fulfilled in practice. Safe, free, legal and local abortion services without barriers are long overdue.

We therefore urge you to join us in acknowledging the importance of reproductive healthcare and exercising the power you hold to make it accessible to the people who need it. The report by the Northern Ireland Abortion and Contraception Taskgroup sets out a practical vision for achieving best practice in this area of healthcare which is in keeping with the regulations that are already in place. We hope you will embrace the advice of these experienced healthcare providers, many of whom have courageously delivered services over the past year with no support while often facing public harassment at their workplaces. We want to highlight our support as people of faith, for their recommendations.

We pray for wisdom and courage for you as you undertake this important work,

**Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice**