

Media Ownership Consultation Responses
Broadcasting Policy Division
Department for Media, Culture and Sport
2 – 4 Cockspur Street,
London
SW1Y 5DH

**Northern Ireland Association of Christian Broadcasters
69A Belmont Road
Belfast BT4 2AA**

Tel/fax: 02890 655031

As an organisation we represent the interests of several Christian Broadcasters who supply broadcasting material to licenced radio stations in the UK. We are also in touch, through our contacts, with the views of many radio listeners, not only in Northern Ireland, but also in Ireland as a whole. They have carried out surveys in an effort to be responsive to their customers.

We welcome the commitment to remove the legislation which prevents religious bodies applying for digital radio licences.

We are seeking a level playing field; we wish to compete fairly with other broadcasters for the opportunity to be allocated a national terrestrial radio licence. This requires amendment of current UK legislation and codes regulating broadcasting.

The Northern Ireland Assembly debated the issue of freedom for Christian radio on 13th June 2000, and give it its *unanimous support!* To find out more please go to the Northern Ireland Assembly Hansard website:
www.ni-assembly.gov.uk/record/000613.htm

It is very rare that it is possible to get all sides of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland to agree on anything and register their support in their Assembly.

One of the reason why there was *not a single dissenting voice* in Northern Ireland, is that every member of the Assembly recognised that Ireland once had a Christian past. They were prepared to forget their differences on this occasion, because they know that Christianity can provide reconciliation and hope for people to resolve their differences and form a new united country, based on Irish Christian history and unity which dates back to the time of Saint Patrick.

It is a tragedy that reconciliation is being prevented from taking place, because of out of date regulations. We understand that in a pluralist society like Britain that not everyone can be expected to understand about God. However to say there is no God, or to ban Christian radio, can be fraught with problems. Consider what happened to the former Soviet Union and other communist countries that said, 'There is no God'. Their people have now said otherwise, and untold damage has been done to the respect for the governments. Economically it has been a disaster for them.

Since the introduction of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, religious organisations have been forbidden from owning national radio licences in the UK. Many Christian broadcasters are registered charities and need to keep their costs as low as possible. One way to do this, and to increase quality is to have a national Christian radio station. It is a loss to the broadcasting industry that Christian radio stations have been prevented from broadcasting nationally on terrestrial radio over the last decade. We therefore recommend that this second anomaly should be lifted as soon as possible.

Although the licencing of Christian Broadcasting is common throughout Europe and the rest of the Western world. Christian broadcasting is prohibited in countries like Saudi Arabia and Afganistan, as well as the UK. Nevertheless, the proposition seems to be a concern to some people in the UK. We have looked at some of the most commonly raised issues and attempted to present some answers.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Surely a shortage of frequencies means there are not enough frequencies available for a national religious radio station?
2. Won't lifting the restrictions on religious broadcasting allow cults to gain access to the airwaves?
3. What about fraudsters and dodgy US televangelists?
4. What's wrong with existing religious broadcasting?
5. Won't allowing more religious broadcasting just promote hatred between different religious groups?
6. Shouldn't radio and television be neutral as regards religion?
7. Surely not many people would be interested in a national Christian radio station?
8. Won't it just create Christian ghettos, inhibiting Christians from working in mainstream broadcasting?
9. Shouldn't Christians be putting money into high quality programming to try to get it on the mainstream?
10. What about religious groups exploiting the weak and vulnerable?

Surely a shortage of frequencies means there are not enough frequencies available for a national religious radio station?

Atheists aren't being told there is a shortage of frequencies, the legal bans only apply to religious bodies. This is straightforward discrimination against Christians. Everyone knows there is no shortage of the new local digital radio licences. They are plentiful, but the ban on religious groups still applies. United Christian Broadcasters has recently been refused an application form for an application form for a digital radio licence in Northern Ireland. Up to 200 are being made available around the UK but to date the rules have meant none of them can be a Christian Music station. In fact there is not a shortage of national frequencies either. United Christian Broadcasters brought a national medium wave frequency to the UK from the Russian Federation but Christian radio stations cannot apply for the necessary

licences due to the ban. It is a pity that despite the goodwill of neighbouring countries, that this facility cannot be used by our local broadcasting industry, and to supply employment.

Won't lifting the restrictions on religious broadcasting allow cults to gain access to the airwaves?

Of course there should be safeguards to keep disreputable groups out of broadcasting. The problem at the moment is that the so-called safeguards have hit the Church. Banning every religious group from holding most broadcasting licences is not a sensible way to deal with cults. The law should ban broadcasting by groups whose meetings are not open to the public, or groups which advocate breaking the criminal law.

What about fraudsters and dodgy US televangelists?

Britain is not America. The abuses that have occurred in the USA would never get past British broadcasting regulators. That is not the problem. The problem is that the UK regulations and legal bans are so draconian that they even apply to the broadcasting of Christian music. What we want is the freedom to have British Christian religious broadcasting.

Since religious broadcasting was legalised on local radio and satellite in 1990, there hasn't been a single example of this type of fraud. But there have been examples of secular television companies making fraudulent documentaries. There have also been many TV adverts which make false claims. If a television station was shut down every time a fraudulent advert was shown there would be no TV stations in this country.

Even the problem of crooked US televangelists should be kept in proportion. There are over 1600 Christian radio stations in the US and a large number of Christian television stations. The fact is that out of these, there have only been two high profile examples of US televangelists being convicted of fraud. This fact has not been reported by the BBC. UCB itself has appealed for money on air only twice in nine years. Our Managing Director doesn't even draw a salary from UCB. We want to create our own local style of religious broadcasting, rooted in the local church.

From our point of view the best way to protect Britain from cults and dodgy evangelists, is to allow the local Christian broadcasting industry to compete on a level playing field, and it is our experience that listeners and viewers would much rather enjoy local broadcasts.

A bigger danger is that with the globalisation and deregulation of broadcasting and telecommunications, the back door will be left wide open for poorer quality foreign radio stations to broadcast via satellite and broadband internet into the UK. A better option is to remove the unfair restrictions, and ordinary competition will improve the quality and provide much better local alternatives, which can be regulated.

What's wrong with existing religious broadcasting?

Over the years both the BBC and ITV have drastically cut the time allocated to religious broadcasting. ITV companies give an average of only 2 ¼ hours a week to religious broadcasting. There are no signs that the general situation will improve. There are also concerns about quality. Whilst some religious programmes have been excellent, many have not. Some religious programmes are perceived as being hostile to the Christian faith.

Some religious broadcasting trivialises the Christian faith or destroys the integrity and coherence of all faiths. Some appear little more than a multi-faith mish-mash blending Christianity with other religions, the New Age and witchcraft.

Won't allowing more religious broadcasting just promote hatred between different religious groups?

This hasn't happened so far. There's no reason why it should. The law already prevents abusive religious broadcasting and this law should be retained.

We have a culture of religious freedom in this country which has allowed different religious groups to coexist peacefully. This culture should be extended to broadcasting. Isn't it wrong to force religion down people's throats through the media? People have a choice whether or not they tune into religious channels. Nothing is forced down anyone's throat.

Shouldn't radio and television be neutral as regards religion?

It isn't and has never been. Broadcasting is never neutral. There are many examples which could be given of programmes hostile to the Christian faith: TV drama's which glamorise adultery, violence or dishonesty. Current affairs programmes which view morality as being a private matter. Religious documentary programmes made from a sceptical standpoint. Soaps which routinely portray Christians as bigoted, dishonest or even sinister and exploitative.

Until recently promoting the Christian faith was central to the aims of the BBC. Without public consultation these aims seem to have been abandoned.

We are not against the BBC carrying religious programming. We would rather there was competition to improve the programming both inside and outside the BBC.

Surely not many people would be interested in a national Christian radio station?

Wrong. We estimate that at least 300,000 people already tune in to Christian religious broadcasting in the UK on satellite (UCB, TWR), cable (Vision) and local radio (Premier in London). You can only listen to Christian religious broadcasting on a conventional radio in London. Everywhere else you need a satellite decoder & dish or a connection to a cable network. There are many specialist radio channels - pop, rock, classical, talk, news, sport - why not Christian music?

Won't it just create Christian ghettos, inhibiting Christians from working in mainstream broadcasting?

Not at all. Christians should be involved in both. At the moment Christian broadcasters are discriminated against both inside and outside mainstream channels. We want to end this. For example, evangelism is banned on BBC and ITV. This is wrong. In the past Billy Graham has had broadcasts on many occasions on UK television, but now his messages are banned or heavily censored. We want to restore Christian freedoms on the BBC and ITV as well as campaigning for the right to hold a national radio licence.

Year after year Christian religious broadcasters on the BBC and ITV have faced cutbacks in the time allowed for religious broadcasting. This will continue to be the case unless and until both channels face competition from Christian broadcasting.

Shouldn't Christians be putting money into high quality programming to try to get it on the mainstream?

There have been high quality independent productions before which have never made it onto the mainstream because of the bias against traditional Christianity. It's one thing to make good programming, but you still need somewhere to broadcast it. We need freedom to develop the market to support high quality programming, both inside and outside the mainstream.

What about religious groups exploiting the weak and vulnerable?

If religious broadcasting was de-regulated there would still need to be proper safeguards. No one disagrees with that. But it is wrong to assume that the weak, vulnerable and disabled are being helped by what is available at the moment. There is a lot of material on the radio and TV now that can exploit the weak and the vulnerable. Why should religious organisations be singled out?

The weak, vulnerable and disabled have spiritual needs like everyone else, but they cannot easily get to Church. Broadcasting on the mainstream channels no longer supplies the needs of the public. People should be able to listen to Christian family programming which promotes traditional values and ethical standards. It's time that things were changed.

Peter Boyd