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Dear Rt Hon Ms Tessa Jowell,

Please let me introduce myself, my name is Anne Boyd and I am writing to you on behalf of all the supporters of United Christian Broadcasters in Northern Ireland, represented by our Belfast office. This includes 50,000 on our mailing list and many more across the whole community who listen to our broadcasts on digital satellite, and the internet (www.ucb.co.uk).

After all the helpfulness of the former Broadcast Minister, Janet Anderson MP, we are very disappointed not to see the national ban against Christian radio lifted from analogue, digital and digital programme services in the White Paper. Here are our views, which have changed little over the last 10 years.

Existing legislation

We all understand that communications are changing and that digital media is revolutionising the information society and broadcasting. As a result of the Internet, personal computers, televisions and a new generation of mobile phones the choice of services is greater than ever before. The Rt Hon Stephen Byers, former Secretary of State for Trade & Industry and the Rt Hon Chris Smith, former Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport in their introduction to the Communications White Paper stated:

"We want to ensure the widest possible access to a choice of diverse communications services of the highest quality." ... "We want to include **every section of our society** in the benefits of these services, and use to the full, the opportunities now available for enhancing their diversity and quality. "

If every section of our society is to be included, where does this leave the Christian broadcaster and all the Christian listeners throughout the UK and Northern Ireland? Are they being catered for? Definitely not - because of the ban. The communications revolution has arrived and yet, because of a clause in the 1990 Broadcasting Act, Christians nationally, are discriminated against and banned to the realms of satellite.

In Northern Ireland, Christianity is the established religion. Our value system is based on biblical principles; our education system began because of a desire to teach people to read their bibles. Now, all faiths are being discriminated against,

and as a result, Christian music radio was also banned from access to the local digital multiplex for Northern Ireland. We welcome your proposal to remove the "anomaly" of this local digital ban but it appears that it will come too late for us here in Northern Ireland.

Protective regulatory codes were put in place in 1990, formulated as the fit and proper persons provisions for religious ownership and responsible but not exploitative provisions governing religious content. At this time, the Government used UCB as the example of responsible religious broadcasting.

Northern Ireland Assembly

When the Northern Ireland Assembly debated the ban against UCB on 13th June 2000, the result was a *unanimous* cross-party decision "that this Assembly calls upon the appropriate broadcasting licensing authorities to facilitate United Christian Broadcasters in use of unused AM frequencies". Please see the official Hansard report at the website: <http://www.ni-assembly.gov.uk/record/000613.htm> for further details.

This showed that all parties here were willing to agree on this matter of importance to all the people Northern Ireland. Point 4.9.2 states "Religious issues may also shade into matters of political controversy". In this case, this religious issue caused *political agreement*. As broadcasting is still in the hands of Westminster and not Stormont, unfortunately their unanimous support was not enough to get UCB a licence but hopefully this letter will not be ignored.

UCB broadcasts by satellite. In Northern Ireland, UCB is a friend to all, and has helped to reconcile and remove religious misunderstanding. This is different from your view expressed in the White Paper that religious broadcasting can cause offence. Your view is also contrary to the BBC's aims of religious broadcasting to "explain what the Christian faith is, to remove misunderstanding of it, and to demonstrate its relevance for today".

"The disqualification of religious bodies in Schedule 2 of the Broadcasting Act of 1990 prohibits ownership of a UK national radio licence by a Christian (or other religious) body."

We believe this is unfair, unjust and discriminatory. It prevents Christian radio stations like United Christian Broadcasters from broadcasting nationally throughout the UK and Northern Ireland. It appears synonymous with Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia where Christian broadcasting is also banned. At a time when Christian music radio is flourishing in Europe and the rest of the English-speaking world, the UK bans it nationally. How can people have confidence in a government that supports unfair legislation?

Digital Broadcasting

We welcome point 4.9.1 proposing to lift the ban against religious bodies owning local digital radio stations. You will be aware of the rate at which local digital

licences are being allocated and one cannot help asking why this ban is being removed after all the best local digital licences have been allocated? Christians were banned from even applying for our local digital licence here in Northern Ireland.

16,500 letters of support for a change in the law.

Prior to the general election the DCMS received 16,500 letters regarding a change in the law and they bear direct relevance to the proposals concerning religious broadcasting in this White Paper.

276,000 letters destroyed by Government officials in 1990

In 1990, United Christian Broadcasters collected 276,000 signatures asking for Christian broadcasting. This is a clear indicator to the government showing the national support that exists amongst the public for freedom for Christian Broadcasting. The Government have now confirmed in writing that these petitions delivered to the Home Office are destroyed and were never laid before Parliament. This is unbelievable that such a thing should happen. I sincerely hope that the 16,500 private letters of support sent to the government during the last term of office, have not suffered a similar fate. We want them to be taken into consideration as a cross-section of the views of the public, directly relevant to this White Paper.

Decrease in Religious Broadcasting Output

At a time when religious broadcasting is being increasingly excluded from the mainstream channels why can't a Christian station such as UCB be given a licence to broadcast on terrestrial radio for those who want it? If the letters written to the Government are anything to go by, then a significant proportion of the population want the law changed and access to Christian radio. We request that the ban on religious broadcasting should be completely removed to allow Christian radio across the UK and Northern Ireland.

Religious Content

Point 4.9.2 in the White Paper states

"There is a strong demand by some for religious content. But religious content has a particular capacity to offend those with different views and opinions, or, sometimes to exploit the susceptibilities of the vulnerable."

The 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) would not come out in *unanimous* support of Christian radio if they thought for one minute that it would in any way antagonise or be intolerant of differing religious views. Stations like UCB have never exploited the susceptibilities of the vulnerable. UCBs' respect for the idea of fairly regulated broadcasting has enabled the Christian broadcasters to hold satellite radio licences as part of the current licensing regime.

Wholesome programmes

United Christian Broadcasters produce programmes that encourage a belief in God, they promote basic family values, and they are cross-denominational. Their broadcasts make a tremendous positive contribution to society, at a time when family values are being eroded away. UCB represents hundreds of thousands of people drawn from mainstream churches, with a vision, adopted from Lord Reith, the first Director General of the BBC. His original godly vision for the BBC was for the "betterment of society."

It would be useful if those who draw up the regulations could try to encourage this type of broadcasting, and remove the barriers which prevent "free trade" in this area of the industry. Why must the UK often kick itself in the foot? We must be careful not to discourage local skills which could in time make a contribution to Britain's export trade. Imagine Europeans and Americans listening to broadcasts from Britain and Ireland. Why not?

Licensed stations are already using UCB programmes in Europe in countries like Denmark. A French radio station translates the "thought for the day" from a Belfast born writer, Bob Gass. His quarterly booklet is translated into 19 languages and 1,000,000 copies are produced quarterly, and circulation is increasing. We can imagine the success and employment that could be enjoyed if the regulatory barriers were lifted to our radio broadcasts.

In conclusion, the present legislation is discriminatory, unfair and unjust and we would like to see changes in the law to allow a level playing field for Christian broadcasting.

Yours faithfully,

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