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## **NEWS FOCUS - Senior Presbyterian cleric calls for abortion law to be relaxed**

**A senior Presbyterian minister has said that abortion should be a “matter of choice” for those in certain very difficult circumstances and has supported relaxing the current ban on abortion, reports Sam McBride.**

The Rev Lesley Carroll, a former convener of the Presbyterian Church and Society Committee, made clear that she was not in favour of a “blanket extension of the 1967 Act” but that there needed to be more discussion about the issue “with an emphasis on choice”.

The Rev Carroll’s views – which appear to be at variance of the official Presbyterian Church position – emerged as part of research by pro-choice members of the Belfast Feminist Network who have tried to clarify all 276 Assembly election candidates’s views on abortion. The

UUP allows its members a free vote on matters of conscience .

The Rev Carroll, who is deputy chief commissioner at the Equality Commission and is standing in North Belfast, told the group: “While I am not in favour of a blanket extension of the 1967 Act, I do think there needs to be more discussion with an emphasis again on choice and on the fact that we can draw lines where we want them to [sic]. Change won’t mean we will end up with something beyond where we want or need to go as a matter of consensus.”

In an interview with the News Letter, the Rev Carroll expanded on those comments.

She endorsed allowing for abortion in cases of fatal foetal abnormality, rape or incest and to have “a conversation” about moves to liberalise the law beyond those few areas, telling the News Letter: “It is a big issue and there will be people on both sides of that debate within the church [as well as in politics].

“For me, it is a matter of choice and allowing people in very difficult circumstances to make a choice. Their lives are not black and white to begin with – in the situation’s that they’re in –

so they're not making an easy black and white choice.

“So this for me is a matter of compassion, to allow mothers, in particular, to make that decision for themselves.”

She went on: “I would also want to be very clear that I believe [that there should be] stringent processes in place around that, so for example in the situation of fatal foetal abnormality we need to be absolutely certain that the information that parents receive is of the highest quality so that they are making the decision off the best evidence base that they can.

“And the same around the rape and incest issue – the window is tight, but to give the proper support, counselling, and time to those women as they come to that decision...beyond that, I am not anxious to extend the freedom for abortion or the freedom for choice, but I understand that there might be situations in which it might be at least possible to contemplate that.

“I want to have a conversation about that. I'm not in favour of the blanket extension of the 1967 Act.”

When asked if that meant that she did not believe that life begins at conception, she Rev

Carroll said: “These are very technical debates, but we are already in a situation where women can go and get the morning-after pill. So we’ve already made that judgement, if you like. Society has already made that judgement even by allowing the morning-after pill.”

The Rev Carroll also said that gay marriage was “one of the issues that I find most difficult” to decide on. She said that civil partnerships do not provide the same protections as marriage and said there were “inequalities that absolutely need to be addressed in a civic sense”.

However, she added: “Holy matrimony and civil marriage would not be the same thing. The churches also need to be protected”.

When asked how she would vote as things stand, the Rev Carroll said that she could not say but that she “might abstain because I have not concluded for myself [what should happen]”.

Two years ago, the Presbyterian Church restated its strongly anti-abortion position.

Speaking on behalf of the church, former moderator the Rev Dr Norman Hamilton said: “The Presbyterian Church in Ireland holds a strong pro-life position.”

The previous year, the church had welcomed a proposed change to the law which would have effectively blocked the private Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast from helping people to have abortions.

At the time, Dr Hamilton said that the church recognised that abortion should be allowed in “the most extreme cases” where “to proceed will have a catastrophic effect on the mental health or life of the mother”.

However, he added: “We uphold the sanctity of human life and do so from conception believing that the termination of human life at any stage within the womb should not be considered except under the most extreme circumstances.

“We have consistently resisted any attempt to undermine or oppose the current legal position in Northern Ireland believing it to protect children and care for mothers.”

First published in The News Letter 16/04/2016

April 18

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