



# SOCIAL ISSUES BULLETIN

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## SOCIAL ISSUES BULLETIN

*News and Reports from the Social Issues Team*

Issue 50 – July 2022

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# What does the Bible say about retirement?

by Roger Hitchings

‘You can’t do anything about growing old because it’s one of the most natural things in the world, but one thing you can control, though, is how you’ll live once you’re old enough to retire.’ (Adrian J Williams, *Retirement – the ultimate retirement planning guide*).

Retirement is a subject that most people in ministry cannot avoid. It is something we need to think about and approach in the best way possible. The first part of this two-part article will discuss some of the issues that have to be faced and what the Bible has to say on the matter. In the second part, I will suggest some practical approaches that ought to be followed.

## Growing old

There is general negativity in our society, and even in the church, about ageing and that often clouds the approach to retirement. I have often heard people say, ‘I don’t want to grow old’, as though there was an alternative. Of course, what people fear is the losses and limitations which may come as we age. But growing old itself is as natural as the earth revolving on its axis and going around the sun. Most working people in our nation will face retirement from employment at some time, and the same is true of most pastors. It is something to think about very carefully.

The idea of being able to enjoy as many as 20 years, or even more, without having to undertake paid work can have a great attraction. Retiring from paid employment and having control over how to use the time available is an experience that one may be looking forward to enjoying while their health lasts. Having said that, it must also be recognised that there are a significant number of people for whom the thought of retirement is unwelcome and unacceptable. This is not uncommon among pastors and Christian workers. But even if there is no intention to go down that road it is wise to think carefully about it. Sometimes circumstances can change and what was resisted becomes unavoidable.

The idea of retirement at a set age with some financial support is a fairly recent concept. Germany was the first country to introduce such arrangements. In 1889 the government provided support to those over 70 years of age. Life expectancy then was about 50 and so it was a very small proportion of the nation who benefitted. Nowadays a number of different approaches to retirement have developed and they vary considerably in terms of structure, age of commencement and expectation.

## A different view of retirement

We need to be clear about exactly what we mean by retirement. As has already been observed, it is a transition point when a person moves from activities and responsibilities that have formed the whole of their life and where much of life was directed in one way or another by other people to having the opportunity to organise life in a more personally directed way. In a number of ways, life changes and new challenges and possibilities begin to present themselves. Often in our culture these new ways of living centre around a very high degree of self-indulgence – ‘I have done my bit, and now I am just going to take it easy and enjoy myself.’ That is a bit of a caricature for many of us, although some really do take that approach at first. Of course, many retirees have better ambitions than that and develop plans which involve family, charitable work or volunteering, and other useful activities, including time spent on leisure and hobbies.

Sensible relaxation and leisure are part of the Bible’s wisdom (Mark 6:31). That is part of the Sabbath principle. Wisdom about the use of time and the importance of caring for oneself is vital, especially as physical and intellectual powers decline. But for Christian people, there has to be something more than a protracted period of profitable activity, and self-indulgence. I say ‘has to be’ because the Christian mindset is built around the concept of service to God and humanity (1

Peter 4:7-10). Indeed this is especially true about being called to leadership in the church of Jesus Christ. It always involves a call to service, and for many people who are in ministry, that call is life-long (1 Peter 5:1-4). But the whole of life is to bring glory to God, and retirement presents new opportunities to engage in seeking to do that.

Our final days have a value and preciousness that the culture in which we live does not generally recognise. According to Proverbs 9:11, God multiplies the days of the godly. In fact, there is an amazing promise found in Psalm 91:16, the Lord says of a person whose determination is to love God 'with long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation'. I say *amazing promise* because this verse is teaching that length of days are designed by God for our benefit so that we may look into and prove the wonder of salvation and work that out in practical ways. That is the radically distinctive view of the Bible. An illustration of this is found in the accounts of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2:25-38. These two elderly saints filled their later days with spiritual activity motivated by the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. They show us that later life does not mean the end of significance and meaning for our lives. In this light, however we approach retirement it should never be seen as being consigned to some sort of scrapheap nor should it be used as an excuse for self-indulgence.

*Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.  
And in Your book they all were written,  
The days fashioned for me,  
When as yet there were none of them. (Psalm 139:16)*

That is how the Psalmist views his whole existence. He also saw that every day was designed for him to know the goodness and mercy of God – 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life' (Psalm 23:6). So what applies to 'all our days' must apply equally to our final days, and so our retirement days which precede them. Each retirement day is as valuable and full of potential as the days when we engaged in ministry in a local church or in some missionary/Christian work. The circumstances, activities, and opportunities may be very different but under God, their preciousness and usefulness are no less. This applies even in the experience of physical and/or intellectual limitation, frailty, and disability.

These basic considerations should strongly influence our approach to retirement and significantly distinguish our attitude from that of the culture around us. Our main focus must surely be to use our time in the advancement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and to glorify God in everything. (For a fuller development of this thinking see *Rethinking Retirement* by John Piper, published by Crossway).

## **The Bible and retirement**

It is sometimes argued that retirement is scarcely mentioned in the Bible, and that is true if you are talking only about the word. Consequently, those who argue that Christians should never retire quote this fact and verses such as Colossians 4:17, 'take heed to the ministry ... that you may fulfil it', and Acts 20:24, 'that I may finish the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus'. But that approach seems to exclude the fact that spheres of service and circumstances may change while being faithful to and continuing in our calling. On the other hand, if we envisage retirement as meaning ceasing from all forms of ministry and literally 'putting our feet up' the Bible never considers that as being an option.

I would suggest that the Bible shows us rewarding and God honouring principles that should direct our approach to retirement. First of all, every part of life is to be useful and fruitful as Ephesians 2:10 and Psalm 92:12-15 both teach. Alongside that 'good works' are a part of normal Christian life and testimony and has no age constraint anywhere in the New Testament. So there are examples of godly older people achieving important things for God which abound throughout the Scriptures. If you look carefully there are at least thirty different accounts of older people serving in an effective way. Perhaps amongst the most surprising and beautiful is Jacob in Genesis 47-49. There we find

him in a totally transformed physical situation and approaching the end of his life. But in that new situation, we find that he blessed Pharaoh twice, then blessed Joseph's sons in a most remarkable way, and finally blessed his own twelve sons with deep spiritual insight and power. So in his final days, his usefulness can be summed up by acts of blessing to others. It is one illustration of how being useful and later life are married in the Bible's thinking.

Numbers 8:23-26 contains the only specific reference to retirement in Scripture, and it refers to the work of the Levites. At the age of 50, the Levites ceased their regular functions, but they still had a role which may be viewed as 'being useful'. After the age of 50, the Levites could continue to support their brethren but not engage in the work of the Tabernacle. Their role changed but they still had responsibilities and opportunities to serve.

It is instructive to note that David changed roles in his last days. This is set out in 1 Chronicles 23:1-2 and the following chapters. Before he died he appointed Solomon as king and took the opportunity to devote himself to the detailed arrangements for the worship in the Temple and for the preparations necessary for building it, including raising the funds. He also organised other aspects of the administration of the nation. In these final days of his life, he was enabled to give to Solomon the detailed plans for building the Temple that he had been given by the Spirit (1 Chronicles 28:12 & 19).

This reflects the whole Bible's emphasis on work and meaningful activity being part of the dignity of being human (Genesis 1:26-28). The New Testament enforces the role of work in everyone's life (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). This is vital to developing an understanding of retirement. Whatever form retirement takes there must be areas of service to be pursued which are appropriate to our physical, emotional, and intellectual condition. The roles we fulfil in later years may, and almost certainly will, change as years advance and powers reduce, but though employment may cease meaningful activity is to continue.

In the second part of this thinking on retirement (see page 21), I explore what this means specifically for pastors and how they are to accept and prepare for retirement. It is a practical piece, addressing many of the implications retiring from full-time ministry brings.

*Roger Hitchings worked for over 25 years with older people in Bristol and Birmingham. He then was a Pastor for 16 years in the East Midlands. He has spoken and written extensively on all aspects of later life.*

# Learning from Scotland's situation on state-influenced religion

*by Rev. Stephen Allison and Dr Carys Moseley*

State-influenced religion – how should churches respond? This is one of the major problems of our time, here in the United Kingdom and across the western world. Churches always face serious moral challenges and temptations as regards how to respond to the prevalent ideology of the state and the government of the day. Some churches willingly co-operate and even push state-influenced religion, at times to the detriment of other churches. A case in point is same-sex marriage and ‘conversion therapy’ bans, both recently endorsed by the Church of Scotland General Assembly as well as some other denominations in England.<sup>1</sup>

## Endorsing ‘conversion therapy’ ban risks criminalizing the faithful

Speaking up against a ban on ‘conversion therapy’ or ‘conversion practices’ is perhaps one of the most difficult issues in recent years for Christians to engage with. The reason for this is that the moment someone mentions conversion therapy we instantly think of some of the horrendous and abusive behaviour reported in the media such as electric shock treatments. However, by focusing on the more sensational elements around conversion therapy we can miss the bigger picture. Physical abuse and coercive conversion practices are already illegal. Accordingly, the question must be asked as to what any proposed ban on conversion practices is designed to prevent.

Within Scotland, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee’s report on the Petition to End Conversion Therapy has identified the legislation enacted in Victoria, Australia as one of the “best practice examples”.<sup>2</sup> This is concerning as the Victoria legislation seems to criminalise pastoral advice and prayer that upholds the Bible’s teaching on sexual ethics. The ban in Victoria is widely considered the most restrictive in the world so far. It is however sobering to realise that here in the UK there is now a government-sponsored Conversion Therapy Victims Helpline, run by GALOP the anti-LGBT hate crime charity.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee’s report notes that the ‘legislation should not pose any restrictions on ordinary religious teaching or the right of people to take part in prayer or pastoral care to discuss, explore or come to terms with their identity in a non-judgmental and non-directive way.’<sup>4</sup> While at first glance that seems reasonable the key words are ‘non-judgmental’ and ‘non-directive’. What does that mean in practice? Jayne Ozanne, a leading campaigner for the ban, said in relation to prayer: ‘when there is a pre-determined purpose I think that must be banned’<sup>5</sup>.

## The challenge to uphold the mind of Christ on creation

As Christians, we have pre-determined views of what is right and wrong based on God’s word, the Bible. If the test for whether you are engaging in conversion therapy is whether you have a pre-determined view on what is right and wrong then Christians will be caught by this ban and

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1 <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2022/articles/general-assembly-approves-scheme-to-conduct-same-sex-marriages> ; <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/church.of.scotland.general.assembly.backs.calls.for.ban.on.conversion.therapy/138658.htm>

2 Report on Petition PE1817: End Conversion Therapy, published 25 January 2022 <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnep.azureedge.net/published/EHRCJ/2022/1/25/8c18e05c-08ab-4c7d-992b-4b0467541d70/EHRCJS062022R1.pdf>

3 <https://christianconcern.com/comment/conversion-therapy-helpline-is-state-sanctioned-surveillance/>

4 Paragraph 79, Report on Petition PE1817

5 Paragraph 68, Report on Petition PE1817

criminalised for our normal church activities such as prayer, pastoral care and, even potentially, preaching in some circumstances. Accordingly, a ban on conversion therapy amounts to the state determining what are 'acceptable' religious beliefs and practices. This is a serious threat to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We might expect such a radical restriction of this freedom in a totalitarian state but not in a liberal democracy. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes the right 'in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching practice and observance.'<sup>6</sup> A broad ban on conversion practices which criminalises prayer and normal pastoral care is a serious infringement of this right but seems to be what is envisioned in the proposals for a ban.

Given that proposals for a ban on conversion therapy seem to involve the state defining what are 'acceptable' religious beliefs and practices it is deeply concerning that the Church of Scotland at their General Assembly have now endorsed the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK and committed themselves to advocating for a complete ban with no exemptions.<sup>7</sup> The Church of Scotland is now advocating for the criminalisation of religious beliefs and practice and given the mixed economy which exists within the Church of Scotland on issues of sexual ethics, could actually find themselves advocating for the criminalisation of some of their own ministers.

Let's take the example of the Memorandum of Understanding, which effectively normalises and perpetuates the rejection of embodiment as male or female in the mental health sector. The Memorandum prohibits counsellors and psychotherapists from preferring one 'gender identity' over any other.<sup>8</sup> Translated into ecclesiastical terms, this is to say that a Christian counsellor or a parish minister should not tell parishioners that if they are biologically male, they should only live as men, or the equivalent for women. Any church denomination or network that has endorsed the Memorandum has effectively endorsed ministers who are prepared to play along with cross-gender identification. The problem with this is that the Bible makes clear gender is God-given and cannot be changed. Even more importantly, it clashes with the fact that Jesus Christ affirmed the truth that God created human beings male and female in his teaching about marriage (Matt 19:3-9).

To recapitulate what was said above, this very significant move within the Church of Scotland, following that of some other denominations, means that faithful pastors are increasingly left at risk of prosecution for working on the basis of the truth of creation. It is deeply ironic that all this has happened during a time when not only numerous Christians but many of no particular faith, and some of other faiths, have been working sacrificially and at risk to their reputations and livelihoods to defend the truth of biology in public policy and legislation. It is at times observable how people of no faith feel they cannot trust churches when they endorse the whole gamut of LGBT ideology on the policy level.

## The importance of standing for Christian values

The situation may seem hopeless, but it is worth recalling an earlier example of good Christian influence in Scotland. Just before Christmas 2020 the Western Isles council voted to commend Christian materials for Relationships, Sexuality and Health and Parenthood lessons in schools instead of the inappropriate materials pushed by the Scottish Government.<sup>9</sup> Some brave Christians had been speaking up before this, for the Church of Scotland Presbytery of the Isle of Lewis in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Article 9 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*. See online: [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf)

7 [https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/93359/faith-impact-forum.pdf](https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0011/93359/faith-impact-forum.pdf)

8 <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/mou/>

9 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/28/western-isles-council-rejects-official-sex-ed-in-favour-of-catholic-teaching>

10 <https://christianconcern.com/comment/scottish-council-votes-to-commend-christian-sex-education-materials/>



The key to the pushback in the Western Isles of Scotland was that parents, teachers, pastors and church members actually looked at the relationships and sexuality education material that was coming into schools. They did not turn a blind eye nor expect somebody else to do the work. In so doing they were able to disprove the extreme progressive canard of 'bigotry' usually aimed at conservative Christians on such issues. A journalist at the Times in London tried the usual liberal challenge to the councillors.<sup>11</sup> Gordon Murray, leader of the SNP councillors in the Western Isles council, and a deacon in the Free Church of Scotland, was asked why did the councillors not endorse curriculum material that was being used 'everywhere else', as if its supposed use 'everywhere' was a moral justification for it. Murray replied thus:

*If everyone is doing it, does that mean it's right?...I looked at these materials and felt some were age-inappropriate. Western Islanders are very well-informed about these materials — are other parts of the country as well-informed?*

The Times had no response to this, simply because there was no suitable response. It is also significant that the SNP and the Scottish Government stayed silent in the face of the Western Isles council's stance. Surely if the new RSHP curriculum material was so wonderful it would be worth defending publicly?

In conclusion, the practical example of Christians in the Western Isles could well serve as an encouragement to other Christians in Scotland in the face of the religious endorsement of same-sex marriage and 'conversion therapy' bans. It is only by close scrutiny of the relevant policies that people can see how bad things really are. It is only then that the task of forging a united vision for the good of society, necessarily including resistance to all that is unrighteous and damaging in the current statist consensus, can be begun let alone accomplished. Churches are not morally bound to follow state-influenced religion in a fatalistic and ignorant know-nothing manner. The more people who have the courage to stand for a righteous vision, the more the so called ban on conversion therapy will be exposed as a direct attack on freedom of religion and belief.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/western-isles-council-snubs-official-sex-education-teaching-for-catholic-guide-xgm32wxjc>

# ‘Buffer Zones’ and freedom of speech

by Hannah McNicol

Compassion Scotland is a voluntary organisation made up of women that are campaigning against the implementation of censorship zones (normally called buffer zones) outside of abortion clinics. Buffer zones would criminalise both pro-life and pro-choice groups from gathering outside abortion clinics. Compassion Scotland seeks to defend the groups that wish to offer life-affirming resources to abortion-minded women and to defend freedom of expression. The following article was written for The Bulletin by one of Compassion’s spokeswomen.

## True Empathy

A huge reason that Compassion holds the position that we do is because buffer zones would criminalise attempts to offer help, support, and information to expectant mothers at what can be a time of crisis. A survey done by the BBC that was published on 14 March 2022 said: ‘15% of women in our survey told us they’d experienced pressure to terminate a pregnancy when they didn’t want to.’<sup>1</sup>

It is evident that if someone is coerced into doing something, they are not giving consent at all. That is what makes the statistic so shocking, it means that 15% of abortions in the UK are done without full consent. Pro-life vigils outside of abortion clinics are the last safeguard possible against coercion, by showing the alternative options available.

In addition, since there are already laws against harassment and intimidation, the only effect buffer zones would have is cutting off the last chance of help to women who are panicking about their pregnancy. The campaign *Be Here for Me* by Alina Dulgheriu demonstrates this well. Alina was booked in to have an abortion but did not truly want it. The reason she did not go through with the abortion was because people were offering real help and support outside the abortion clinic.<sup>2</sup>

Rachel Mackenzie runs a *Rachel’s Vineyard* in the Midlands, a charity dedicated to providing retreats for post-abortive women as well as their families. Rachel herself has had two abortions and her testimony of abortion regret is powerful. She describes an abortion-minded woman in a crisis pregnancy situation in the following way:

*She is in a very dark tunnel and the only light at the end of the tunnel is abortion, so she sprints towards that end of the tunnel and goes through with it. But as soon as she is out the other end and turns around, the tunnel behind her is bricked up and there is no going back because that child is now dead.*

This metaphor of a dark tunnel is so apt for our pro-death culture, it tells women that abortion is the only choice to make if you are unexpectedly pregnant and you want to have a happy life. Women are told that their career goals, social life, and autonomy are over if they do not have an abortion when they are pregnant in *unideal* conditions. Not only are children seen as impediments to happiness and fulfilment, but there is also social ostracisation that goes on because of unexpected pregnancies. Her partner and even her family may put pressure on her to abort the baby because the baby was not planned or wanted. This is why it is also important to us at Compassion Scotland to always talk in a positive way about parenthood, especially motherhood.

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1 Alys Harte and Rachel Stonehouse. (14 March 2022) Reproductive coercion: ‘I wasn’t allowed to take my pill’. BBC [online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-60646285> [Accessed 23 June 2022]

2 You can watch Alina’s message to MLAs online: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=509258460699661&ref=sharing> [Accessed 23 June 2022]

## Freedom of Speech

Buffer zones would amount to a breach of the right to assembly, the right to freedom of speech and the right to freedom of religion. These rights are of course fundamental to a society in which there is a lot of diversity of belief. A feature of buffer zones is that they would ban people from visibly praying outside abortion clinics. This obviously sets a worrying precedent for the future – the government would be able to tell people where they can and cannot pray.

In an interview, the Minister for Women's Health (who is in favour of buffer zones) said that there are legal complexities involved in the creation of buffer zones. That any infringement of human rights is required to be necessary and proportionate to withstand legal challenge. Compassion's research shows that buffer zones are neither necessary nor proportionate.

Through Freedom of Information (FIO) requests, Police Scotland have revealed there were no recorded crimes relating to vigil groups at 13 different hospitals and clinics across Scotland between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2021. We have found no evidence of harassment or intimidation.<sup>3</sup> The implementation of buffer zones is completely disproportionate when the evidence is examined.

As a group of women, we absolutely agree that no woman should ever face harassment or intimidation. Which is why we are thankful that our criminal law already criminalises threatening or abusive behaviour under section 3B of the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010. The existence of the breach of the peace offence also means that conduct which is alarming or disturbing to others can be prosecuted. These laws are sufficiently broad to ensure any harassment or intimidation is properly criminalised without the need to create a censorship zone on public land.

## Abortion Summit at the Scottish Parliament

As a result of pro-buffer zone campaigning, the Scottish Parliament decided to hold a summit on abortion on 27 June 2022. Member's legislation was presented by Gillian Mackay MSP (Green party). Among other things, this legislation favours jail time for being a pro-life presence outside an abortion clinic. There are a few groups, both pro and anti buffer zone that were invited to this (Compassion Scotland was not invited).

It is so important to oppose this legislation of censorship zones around abortion clinics because it would exacerbate the problem in our culture of no alternative narrative being offered to women with unplanned pregnancies. We as Compassion Scotland exist to represent those who offer a life-affirming narrative to women before they make a choice that they cannot take back.

If you would like to find out more about Compassion Scotland then visit their website: <https://www.compassionscotland.com/> or follow them on social media: @compassionscotland on Instagram and @compassionscot on Twitter.

*Hannah McNicol is a student of philosophy and French. She is a member of St. Andrews Free church, a committee member of Students for Life St. Andrews and a spokeswoman for Compassion Scotland.*

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<sup>3</sup> All the Freedom of Information requests Compassion Scotland have made can be accessed online: <https://www.compassionscotland.com/general-7> [Accessed 23 June 2022].

# Concerns about the Online Safety Bill

by Dave Greatorex

There are serious concerns that the Government's flagship Online Safety Bill will lead to religious liberty being restricted online. While it is aimed at tackling serious problems, the Bill puts free speech at risk.

The Bill applies to social media and search engines. It is rightly intended to make Big Tech companies like Google, Twitter and Meta – owners of Facebook and Instagram – take more responsibility for the content that can be accessed through their platforms. But the Government's approach is very dangerous. Among other things, it creates a category of 'legal but harmful' material that social media companies will be expected to police.

This is content deemed to be harmful to adults even though it breaks no laws. This begs the obvious question: who defines what is 'harmful'? It is likely to be highly subjective and inconsistent. People's definitions of harmful differ, and can often be matters of belief, taste and culture.

## Four dangers to free speech

There are four key dangers to highlight.

Firstly, the Bill gives extraordinary power to the Secretary of State. He or she will be able to decide which opinions are acceptable online by defining the 'legal but harmful to adults' category.

So far, the Government has not published what it intends to cover, though the suggestion has been that it will include matters like self-harm, harassment, eating disorders and racist hate.<sup>1</sup> But regardless of what the current Secretary of State, Nadine Dorries, decides to include, any of her successors will be able to change the definition through regulations. Such regulations receive minimal scrutiny, and are very rarely rejected by Parliament.

This power creates a ready-made tool for state censorship in the future, and there will be constant pressure from activists for restrictions on free speech. In our current culture, people routinely attribute harm to opinions they disagree with.

Secondly, Tech companies will go well beyond what's required. Silicon Valley billionaires have already shown themselves very willing to take down views they personally object to, and the Bill will legitimise such censorship.

Christians have already been victims of Big Tech bias. Peter Saunders, the former CEO of the Christian Medical Fellowship, had a video on transgenderism removed from YouTube several years ago for an alleged violation of YouTube's terms of service.<sup>2</sup> It was not hateful or abusive, but was simply consistent with the biblical position. A publication of US Christian organisation Focus on the Family was blocked from Twitter because a tweet described a transgender woman as 'a man who believes he is a woman'.

Roman Catholic billionaire and technology entrepreneur Peter Rex has said that 'social-media platforms increasingly censor religious believers who oppose abortion, assisted suicide and transgender ideology'.<sup>3</sup>

1 'World-first online safety laws introduced in Parliament', *UK Government*, 17 March 2022, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-first-online-safety-laws-introduced-in-parliament> as at 12 April 2022; 'New plans to protect people from anonymous trolls online', *UK Government*, 25 February 2022, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-plans-to-protect-people-from-anonymous-trolls-online> as at 12 April 2022

2 <https://www.cmf.org.uk/advocacy/sex-and-relationships/transsexuality/>

3 <https://www.christian.org.uk/news/tech-entrepreneur-silicon-valley-is-hostile-to-christian-belief/>

The Government has identified an existing problem with tech companies taking down content arbitrarily. But in this respect the Bill is a hindrance, not a help. It dangerously enshrines into law that it is appropriate for companies to censor legal content, deciding what should and shouldn't be allowed in crucial and controversial areas of debate. Companies will censor far more than they need to, not least in view of the very heavy fines that could be imposed if they are deemed to have failed to act.

What's more, because of the speed and scale necessary, this will be done by automated processes, not people. An expert in artificial intelligence who sent written evidence to the Committee wrote in his submission that:

*Softer targets for policing, such as legal but harmful content, will be automatically removed with filters that will be set to err on the side of caution. Their crude pattern matching based on human labelled training data, operating over billions of posts, will result in hundreds of millions of false positives to the detriment of diversity of opinion and free speech.<sup>4</sup>*

A third key problem is the Bill's weak freedom of expression safeguards. The Government has made great claims about the Bill's protections for free speech but sadly the reality doesn't live up to the hype.

The free speech duties are weak compared to the pro-censorship pressure that companies will be under. There is 'a duty to have regard to the importance of protecting users' right to freedom of expression within the law'. But a company could 'have regard' to free speech without it having a significant impact on its actions. This duty has no real weight behind it. It just means the importance of free speech must be taken into account. This will not be strong enough to counterbalance the way other substantial duties restrict free speech. The weakness of the clause is seen in the need to have a stronger protection when it comes to 'content of democratic importance', for example. If the free speech clause itself did the job, there would be no need for this additional safeguard.

Of course, the Bill must ensure that the criminal law applies on the internet. It must require internet companies to prevent illegal content appearing on their platforms. But the Bill goes beyond the criminal law by regulating what is legal yet deemed harmful. And as already mentioned, tech companies need no external pressure to censor views they don't agree with. As things stand, there will be less freedom of speech online than offline.

Offline, we have excellent free speech laws. What restrictions we have on public speech are usually necessary to protect the rights and freedoms of others. Free speech in the market square means that a person is free to say what they want within the law and others are equally free to put headphones on and ignore them. Free speech does not mean forcing others to listen. In many ways, social media platforms are the internet equivalent of the market square, and so free speech there must be equally protected.

To achieve this, the free speech duty must be drastically strengthened to create a presumption of free speech. Whatever you can say on the street you should be able to say online.

The fourth danger is Ofcom. The Bill turns Ofcom into the most powerful internet regulator in the Western world. The Government sees this as a good thing.

Ofcom's codes and guidance will determine how tech companies implement the duties, and it can impose fines of up to ten per cent of global revenue for breaches – billions of pounds for the largest companies.

There would be concerns about any regulator being given the kind of power the Bill gives to Ofcom. But there are particular reasons for believing that Ofcom's hands are not safe.

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4 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmpublic/OnlineSafetyBill/memo/OSB25.htm>

The regulator must have a robust understanding of free speech, especially on contentious issues of public debate. One of those at the moment is transgenderism.

Yet on this issue, Ofcom's Chief Executive, Dame Melanie Dawes, has said that broadcasters should 'steer their way through these debates without causing offence and without bringing inappropriate voices to the table'.<sup>5</sup> She seemed to accept that those who question radical gender ideology would be 'inappropriate voices' and likened them to racists. She said she has had discussions with controversial LGBT rights group Stonewall about how balanced trans debate should be conducted.

So there are serious questions over how well Ofcom would defend free speech.

## **Proposing a better bill which properly protects freedom of expression**

Having emphasised the dangers, it is also important to say that the Bill includes some welcome proposals. There is rightly a focus on protecting children, including through requiring age checks for pornography. Measures to stop children accessing pornography so easily are long overdue. And duties to allow social media users to verify their accounts and filter out non-verified user content will be important steps in tackling the scourge of anonymous online abuse. But these and various other good things in the Bill do not make up for the overarching concerns about free speech.

If something is so harmful that adults should not be exposed to it, this should be a matter for the criminal law. The Government should not be creating a nebulous 'legal but harmful' standard and then outsourcing the policing of that standard to Ofcom and tech firms.

The Online Safety Bill was debated in Parliament for the first time in April and has since been considered in greater detail by a committee of MPs. Some MPs have raised free speech issues, but there is clearly still a lot of work to do to convince the Government to properly protect freedom of expression.

We must pray that politicians will get into the detail of the Bill rather than the Government spin, and that it will be limited to tackling genuinely harmful activity and will protect free speech and religious liberty.

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5 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1419/html/>

# What does it mean to live in a secular society?

by Melvin Tinker<sup>1</sup>

When we hear the term ‘secular society’, what comes to mind? Maybe it is the sense that slowly but surely talk and thought about God are being squeezed out of the public arena, or in the words of Tony Blair’s advisor, Alistair Campbell, ‘We don’t do God’ anymore. Perhaps it is a term which has become synonymous with godlessness, moral confusion and open hostility towards the Christian faith. Or it could be that when the phrase is mentioned certain well known individuals spring to mind which for us embody the anti-god *zeitgeist* – Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris in academia or Stephen Fry and Daniel Radcliffe in the media. If that is the case, then there will be a tendency for us to see secularism and a secular culture as a threat which in turn will cause us to adopt a defensive posture, feeling we have to be apologetic for what we believe and maybe in our defensive become aggressive with others for what they believe or don’t believe. The upshot is that the secular society becomes a kind of gladiatorial arena involving combat between people of faith on the one hand and unbelievers on the other.

But suppose on closer inspection we begin to see things a little differently, with an understanding that secularity is our context in the West, which while embodying elements of human rebellion and sin, as well as the operation of the ‘principalities and powers’, nonetheless we see it also as providing opportunities for Gospel proclamation and, under God’s Spirit, Gospel transformation.

It is this possibility we shall explore as we ask, ‘What does it mean to live in a secular society?’

## What is a ‘secular society’?

In order to answer that question adequately, we need to get our thinking clear on exactly what we mean by ‘secular society’.

To do this we need to get a few definitions carefully tucked under our belts.

The first one is the term ‘secular’ which is derived from the Latin root ‘*saeculum*’, meaning the *present* age. So, in some ways the focus of the secular is on how we live in the ‘here and now’ without much reference to any transcendent realm or life beyond the grave.

This has led to two definitions of ‘secular’.<sup>2</sup>

First, there is the classic definition, whereby the ‘secular’ is to be distinguished from the ‘sacred’. Here the ‘secular’ refers to the domestic life, the work of butchers, bakers and candlestick makers, whereas the ‘sacred’ refers to the religious sphere occupied by monks, priests, and nuns. We can call this Secular (1) – the sacred/secular divide.

We then come to Secular (2), a modern understanding with which we are more familiar. This sees the need for society to be essentially areligious, to be an allegedly neutral, religious free public space.

Furthermore, associated with this is *secularism* which as a world view rejects in principle the existence of any transcendent or spiritual dimension and would seek to restrict, if not entirely

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1 This article was originally a presentation given at Christ Church Newland, Hull. After Melvin Tinker’s sudden passing in November 2021, it has been posthumously edited by Phil Tinker for this Bulletin. Before Melvin Tinker’s passing he recorded this talk as part of Christian Concern’s *Gospel Issues* series. The full 40-minute seminar can be watched online: <https://youtu.be/6VPYxqYxMKs>.

2 This taxonomy of secularism comes from Charles Taylor, as outlined in James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 20–23.

remove, the influence of religion from the affairs of society.

This brings us to another important term – *secularisation* which Os Guinness defines as ‘...the process through which, starting from the centre and moving outwards, successive sectors of society and culture have been freed from the decisive influence of religious ideas and institutions.’<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson shows how all three relate to each other: ‘In more popular parlance... all three words ‘secular,’ ‘secularisation,’ and ‘secularism’ – have to do with the squeezing of the religious to the periphery of life. More precisely, secularisation is the process that progressively removes religion from the public arena and reduces it to the private realm; secularism is the stance that endorses and promotes such a process.’<sup>4</sup>

Tied to Secular (2) is the idea that as cultures experience modernisation through technological advancement, religious belief and participation correspondingly decline. Not only so but over time, personal piety itself will eventually wither on the vine. This means that a truly secular society will be a less religious society. This has come to be known as the *Secularisation Thesis*. And so back in 1968 Peter Berger announced that by ‘...the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.’<sup>5</sup>

How would this happen? Well, one of the main driving forces in the secularising process is what Max Weber calls *rationalisation*. This simply means religious ideas becoming less and less meaningful and religious traditions becoming more and more marginal as they are replaced by *other* modes of thinking and traditions. With the advance of modernity, it is argued, less space is reserved for God. So, if you are ill you call a physician not a priest; if you want good crops you get a better fertiliser, you don’t offer sacrifices to appease an angry deity. Put simply, ‘superstitious’ religious thinking and behaving are replaced with rational/scientific ways of thinking and behaving.

One of the major features of this change in picturing the world is what is called *disenchantment*, where the ‘magic’ or ‘mystery’ of life is not just removed but unwanted.<sup>6</sup> The world is no longer, in the words of Gerald Manley Hopkins, ‘charged with the grandeur of God.’ The world is a given, a product of random natural forces, rather than a gift from a personal Creator God.

But here we are well into the 21st century and it is obvious that the prediction of Berger in 1968 simply hasn’t happened. The Secularisation Thesis has to all intents and purposes been discredited. It is simply not the case that as modernisation increases religious belief decreases. One of the greatest stumbling blocks to this thesis is, of course, the United States, probably the most modernised country in the world which is still one of the most religious countries with 36% attending church on a regular basis.<sup>7</sup>

Also, if this thesis were correct, you would expect to find that with increased modernisation there would be a decrease in *subjective* religious belief. Not so. The religious researcher Grace Davie writes: ‘What is clear is that most surveys of religious belief in northern Europe demonstrate continuing *high levels* of belief in God and some of the more general tenets of the Christian faith but rather low levels of church attendance.’<sup>8</sup> It is Grace Davie who coined the phrase ‘believing without belonging’ to describe those who would hold to some form of ‘belief’ without necessarily being part of an organised faith community.

We have likely come across this kind of response to the question ‘are you a religious person?’ –

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3 Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 51

4 D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 116

5 Peter Berger, ‘A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion’ (New York Times, April 25th, 1968).

6 Smith, How (Not) to Be Secular, 28–29.

7 Pew Research Centre, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services>, accessed 19/05/2022.

8 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 72.



‘No, but I like to think of myself as a spiritual person.’ It is not as simple as thinking that a secular society is equivalent to a non-religious, godless society, it is messier than that.

This is vividly exemplified by Steve Jobs. In some ways you would expect Steve Jobs to be the poster boy for the success of secularism, the onward and upward march of science and technology displacing the outmoded religious ways of thinking of the past. After all, he was the icon of Silicon Valley, the co-founder of Apple and chairman of Pixar. That is what you would naturally expect if the Secularisation Thesis were correct, but this is what we read in his biography of a scene taken towards the end of his life: ‘One sunny afternoon, when he wasn’t feeling well, Jobs sat in the garden behind his house and reflected on his death. He talked about his experiences in India almost four decades earlier, his study of Buddhism, and his views of reincarnation and spiritual transcendence. “I’m about fifty-fifty on believing in God,” he said. “For most of my life, I’ve felt there must be more to our existence than meets the eye.”’<sup>9</sup>

Just think about that, they are pretty good odds coming from someone like Steve Jobs, ‘50-50’ on believing in God! And so, the make-up of our secular society is not so cleared out of religious belief as the ardent secularist would have us believe. What is behind these dynamics?

### **Believability and the social imaginary**

In order to make our way to a clearer understanding of our situation as a secular society, I want to draw on Charles Taylor’s work *The Secular Age* through a popular unpacking of it by James K.A. Smith in his book, *How (not) to be Secular*.<sup>10</sup>

We can summarise Taylor’s opening question as this: ‘How is it that in the West we went from an age around 1500, where it was virtually impossible *not* to believe in God to an age in 2000 where, especially among the elite sectors of cultural influence (academia, the media) it is virtually impossible *to* believe in God?’<sup>11</sup> Taylor suggests it largely has to do with *believability*.<sup>12</sup> In 1500 London it would have been almost unimaginable that non-belief in God could be a default position. It was much easier to *believe* than it was not to believe. Today, by and large, it is easier to *disbelieve* than to believe. What has changed?

Taylor suggests that it is not so much thought-out beliefs, what we might call ‘world views’ such as humanism, Christianity, Buddhism, naturalism and so on which shape how we think about ourselves and the world, but what he calls the ‘social imaginary’.<sup>13</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer describes the social imaginary as that ‘Nest of background assumptions, often implicit, that lead people to feel things as right or wrong, correct or incorrect. It is another name for the root metaphor... that shapes a person’s perception of the world, undergirds one’s worldview, and funds one’s plausibility structure.’<sup>14</sup> He goes on, ‘People become secular not by taking classes in Secularity 101 but simply by participating in a society that no longer refers to God the way it used to. ‘God’ makes only rare appearances in contemporary literature, art, and television... Social imaginaries... are the metaphors and stories by which we live, the images and narratives that indirectly indoctrinate us.’<sup>15</sup>

Let’s take just one example of the way this works. If we could go back to the decade between

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9 Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (Simon & Schuster, 2011), 570-571.

10 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*.

11 See Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 18–19.

12 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 19.

13 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 26.

14 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 8.

15 Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 9.

1965 and 1975 and ask the man or woman in the street to describe marriage, what pictures might they refer to which would capture their idea of marriage? Maybe that of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, or Terry and June, or even into the late 70's Wendy Craig and Geoffrey Palmer in 'Butterflies'. For them marriage would be a covenant between heterosexual couples, involved in give and take, facing life together come what may and on the whole happy. But now if you were to Google 'White Heterosexual Couples' (which I did), what will you find? First what comes up is a picture of a white male gay couple, then a picture dealing with the fall in the rate of heterosexual marriages, followed by a picture of an older gay couple extolling that they are healthier and happier than gay singles, and then a picture of the white supremacist origins of heterosexual marriage. The social imaginary of what constitutes marriage has changed almost beyond recognition and is in the process of being *forced* to change from the previous imaginary of stability, the commitment of a male and female, forming the bedrock of society, the place in which children are conceived and nurtured (now portrayed negatively), to the equality, if not superiority of, gay marriage. I would suggest that now even as Christians we find it difficult to talk about marriage in a non-qualified way, without gay marriage at least being there in the background of our thoughts. And so, with this kind of change in perception, to even begin to argue the case for heterosexual marriage as being the only authentic form of marriage – what marriage is – will seem not only implausible, but downright prejudiced and bigoted, something to be contested.

We are dealing with what is *believable*. It is now *believable* that marriage now embraces a partnership between male and male, female and female, and soon multiple partners, and it is becoming *unbelievable* to see it as exclusively a God-given, covenantal relationship between a man and a woman.

Marriage is just one example of the radical change in beliefs which has taken place in the West, especially in the last hundred years or so, but we may think of a whole range of other issues: personhood, identity, the shift from virtues to values, sexuality, animal rights, the purpose of education, human rights and so on and so forth. And it is this notion of *believability* that Taylor suggests is a helpful tool to understand what constitutes a secular society.

## Christian living in a secular society

How, then, should Christians *live* in a secular society? Let me provide some headline suggestions.

There is an old proverb, 'If you want to know what water is like, don't ask a fish.' This is the problem many Christians face in terms of understanding the culture in which they live, move and have their being. When you are so immersed in something it is difficult find some vantage point which lies outside by which you can critically judge it.

But of course, there *is* a standpoint outside our culture by which our culture and all cultures can be critiqued and evaluated, a Word which transcends cultures and which brings the transcendent and eternal *into* cultures leading to personal and cultural transformation, namely, the Gospel. It is this which sets the imagination free, the higher reality of the Triune God at work in his world. John tells us that Word became Flesh, that is, the One who in the beginning was with God and was God. It was to a ruined, disgraced and rebellious human race with a poisoned imagination he came in order to redeem and restore. This involved him challenging and destroying the social imaginaries of man's making- what the Bible calls idolatries. The Gospel not only tells us that we *don't* live locked up in an immanent frame with each individual left to do what is right in his own eyes, but a transcendent one, with eternity in view ordered by a Creator to whom we are accountable. Furthermore, in the sending of the Holy Spirit, minds and hearts are renewed so that we can begin to live within a new 'social imaginary' which views all things under the headship and rule of Christ. And so, everything is recast and seen in this new light.

Kevin Vanhoozer poses this challenge to the church: 'If the church is to fulfil her holy vocation as a holy nation, she must pit this evangelical imagination against its secular counterpart. The church is a people set apart, both in its theological understanding of the whole (the plan of salvation centred

in the cross of Christ) and the practices that embody and enact that understanding (e.g. baptism and the Lord's Supper).' He goes on, 'There is a difference, for example, between preaching and marketing the Gospel. The latter is captive to a secular picture of how to change hearts and minds; the former is committed to the biblical understanding and practice of the ministry of the Word and Spirit.'<sup>16</sup>

The world's pictures and stories through which people live have to be challenged and replaced by those of the Bible. Think of how Jesus did this with the people of his own day locked into a false social imaginary who, for all their piety, tended to take on a pagan view of life as primarily consisting of what you eat and what you wear (the *saeculum*) leading to anxiety, and replacing it with a 'much more' with God as Father who out of the infinite fulness of his eternal goodness delights to provide for his children, attendant to every part of his creation with meticulous care urging us to always have eternity in view – the transcendent frame (Matthew 6:19-34).

### **Metaphors and spiritual means to reality**

Practically what does this mean?

First, we must allow the biblical metaphors to govern how we view the world, ourselves and, of course above all, God and his action in the world. Metaphors govern the way we think and act. Think for a moment about the way we think about the church. The truth is more often than not it is the way the world views it- a voluntary organisation, usually small and unimpressive, lying on the periphery of society, a religious 'Derby and Joan club'. We either go along with that and so put up with it, or we go along with it and try to change it so it conforms to what the world considers a bit more impressive – the mega church. In both cases it is the world's social imaginary we are operating with.

The Bible tells us something different, the church is a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9); not simply the agent of mission but the goal of mission: 'And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.' (Eph. 1:22-23). Jonathan Edwards held the belief that God created the world to 'procure a spouse for his Son',<sup>17</sup> and similarly Hugh of St. Victor centuries earlier said that both individual souls and the church as whole were to be prepared as a 'bridal chamber' for Christ. What difference do you think having those pictures in our minds, held by faith, will have when we meet together on a Sunday, as we seek to serve God and each other and face the taunts of the world? We are to see the church and the world as the Spirit sees them given to us by Scripture. Just read the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 1-3 to see how the ascended Lord Jesus corrects the social imaginaries of those churches with his own.

Secondly, we must enable our people to live out the reality and oppose the false 'realities' they are being bombarded with 24/7. God has given us the means by His Spirit to do this. Pastor-teachers are not only to expound the Word, but also the World, exposing the lies by the Truth. God has given us the sacraments which not only point to another world order: 'We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. But just as God communicates his presence through his audible Word in preaching, he also communicates his presence through his visible Word in the sacraments. This is what Calvin taught, 'The rule of the pious ought always to observe is, whenever they see the symbols instituted by the Lord, to think and feel surely persuade that the truth of the thing signified is also present.'<sup>18</sup> In prayer we enter into the very throne room of heaven, and by Christians neglecting the prayer

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16 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 38.

17 Jonathan Edwards, 'The Church's Marriage To Her Sons, And To Her God,' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Vol. 25, Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach (WJE Online, n.d.), 187.

18 John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), IV.xvii.10.

meeting they are not living out the truth, their social imaginary, and are barely different from their non-believing neighbours when personal pleasure takes priority over the hard delightful work of prayer.

The 1949 Ealing comedy, *Passport to Pimlico*, set after the Second World War tells the story of a shopkeeper sifting through the rubble of his bombed-out store and who discovers an ancient document which makes the small London Borough of Pimlico a realm of the defunct French Kingdom of Burgundy. Against the background of rationing, the shopkeepers of Pimlico declare themselves to be part of an independent nation, and so freeing themselves from Government restrictions. When other Londoners find out, they arrive in Pimlico in droves. The London authorities are not amused and fence off Pimlico, requiring people to leave or enter with a passport. In some ways that is what the church is: a nation in the midst of another nation and at the same time set apart with its own vision, its own way of life and ways of viewing things.

Sure, our faith may be contested in a secular society, this is where God has placed us at this point in history. But equally we can lovingly contest all the other faiths and 'isms' on offer, maybe at personal cost; not simply *arguing* for the cogency of our faith, but *demonstrating* it by our lives its life transforming power.

*Melvin Tinker (1955-2021) was vicar of St. John's Newland, Hull for 26 years and author of numerous books and articles.*

# The pastor and retirement

*by Roger Hitchings*

This article follows on from my previous writings on 'What does the Bible say about retirement' (see page 4). That first piece explained what we mean when we say 'retirement' and how the Bible helps us understand what retiring for the glory of God looks like. In this second part, we will focus on how pastors are to retire well and I will offer some practical suggestions along the way.

## Accepting retirement

The Levites retired at 50 – it was a fixed point in their lives (Numbers 8:23-26). The age at which they began their service varied from 30 to 25 to 20 at different times in the history of Israel. On the other hand, for Pastors, there is no fixed age for retirement, although some churches illogically prohibit men over 70 from functioning as Elders (probably based on Psalm 90:10, but that surely refers to something very different than how long a man may serve). I would suggest four considerations that may be applied in determining when we should make the transition into retirement.

### a. A consciousness that ministry ending

It is the experience of some men that they increasingly feel their ministry at the church where they are ministering has come to an end and due to other factors, it is time to cease full-time employment as a Pastor. Discussion with fellow leaders and possibly with the church shows agreement with that conclusion. It may well be, and often is, that in this situation other ministries are opening up which can more effectively be pursued.

### b. Reducing capacities

Alongside ministry ending, as we get older, our capacity for demanding physical work and effort reduces and physically, and maybe intellectually, we begin to experience increasing limitations. Often this is in the areas of concentration, weariness, reducing strength and perhaps memory. There may also be the development of other physical limitations such as hearing or eyesight. Such things come with advancing years and are perfectly normal. This progression of the years needs to be recognised and an honest assessment of personal capacities undertaken. There has to be a recognition of the impact of age. It is not spiritual to ignore physical signs and press on irrespectively. At the very least adjustments to responsibilities and programmes may need to be made to accommodate the reducing capacities. Barzillai is a beautiful example of this in 2 Samuel 19:32-35. He rejected the opportunity of returning with David to Jerusalem and the honour that would involve because of his advanced age. He simply recognised that all that was involved was beyond him due to his age. He knew his prime responsibility at his age and with increasing frailty was to prepare to die. The advance of the years will often be why someone retires from a settled ministry, even when the approach of death still appears to be some way off.

### c. The best interest of the congregation

Hebrews 13:7 & 17 and 1 Peter 5:1-4 emphasise and encapsulate the essence of caring and service that is central to pastoral ministry. There is surely, therefore, a duty on pastors in later years to recognise that there is a time when we must lay down the responsibilities of ministry even though we are deeply attached to them and find great satisfaction in them. The issue becomes the needs of the congregation and our capacity to meet them adequately.

### d. Evaluating ministry

It may be the role of caring and courageous Elders or fellow leaders to exercise discernment and to speak to the pastor with love and firmness. Pastors are human and can find it very difficult to make

a dispassionate assessment of their own ministry and its adequacy for the congregation. Years of effective and valued care for the flock can blind a man to his own reducing effectiveness. And love and sentiment amongst the congregation can give false support to continuation when the very best for the church is for the pastor to step down.

In addition, excessive love of the ministry and the role a pastor fulfils can seriously colour our evaluation of our own situation. It is not unknown for a congregation to begin to diminish because of growing dissatisfaction with the pastor, and for that pastor to convince himself and his fellow leaders that the causes of the departures are other things than himself. Those who leave the church may understandably temper their explanation for leaving to spare the pastor, especially when in the past they have gained many benefits from his ministry. No doubt there may be other circumstances at play which lead to people leaving, but too often they can be used by the pastor as an excuse to avoid facing the unwelcome reality. These are not common situations, but they are real ones that do happen, and they must be faced.

Of course, on the other hand, there are men who feel their inadequacy so acutely that they seriously devalue the impact of their ministry. Such men may feel like retiring almost every Monday morning!! Wise fellow leaders, and caring members of the congregation, are vital in reaching this decision. Deciding to retire may mean significant self-denial, but as in all aspects of Christian service, retirement involves sacrifices.

In saying these things I am simply suggesting that these considerations influence the end of a ministry. Physical losses and limitations, the best interests of the congregation, and perhaps a recognition that effectiveness and suitability are diminishing can assist thinking as we contemplate the possibility of retirement. No doubt there are other reasons that will arise in individual cases. For some the care of a wife or another member of the family may necessitate ceasing full-time ministry. For others, some changes in personal circumstances or other situations may arise which necessitate stepping down. What should always be remembered is that retirement is not a move into uselessness but a change of the sphere of usefulness. We strive for that until our final hour of life.

## **Preparing for retirement**

It is well accepted in industry that there is great value in making careful preparations for retirement. I would suggest that it is even more the case for pastors and Christian workers. There are not only personal reasons that apply to the one contemplating retirement, but also significant implications for the people in the church from which someone may be retiring.

In identifying the best time to retire, serious thought should be given to succession planning and deciding well in advance enables the church to look for someone to take over. As a part of this pre-planning, it is also important to develop an *Exit Strategy*. This may sound rather formal and calculated, but it is important to think in these terms. If we look at the Lord Jesus we see him doing something like this prior to his death. Of course, there is not a parallel, but his approach is certainly an example. Think of the three occasions when he spoke to the disciples about what would happen in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31, Mark 9:12, Luke 9:22) and then that glorious teaching in John 13-17. Careful preparation for leaving them was prominent in his thinking. That is the essence of an exit strategy. Let me suggest four areas that are vital in preparation.

### **a. Letting go graciously**

Over the time, whether months or years, between announcing the intention to retire and the actual retirement, ties have to be loosened. During a time of ministry deep ties are made with the people and also with fellow leaders, and so there needs to be a gentle process of getting people used to the fact of your departure or, at least, change of role. (Obviously this also applies to any occasion when a pastor leaves his church.) If someone else has been appointed to be the replacement, and maybe even begun their work in the church, it enables that new pastor to begin to develop his own

emphases.

Among the steps that may be considered are clear steps like phasing in changes in responsibilities as the incoming pastor progressively takes on duties the outgoing brother had done. One very practical element may be for the retiring pastor to progressively reduce his preaching role in the church. He may take more engagements outside the church. In this way, the congregation gets used to seeing him less often in the pulpit. Similarly the retiring pastor may begin to develop those interests and activities that he hopes to pursue in his retirement. Perhaps some changes may begin to be made that reflect the incoming pastor's emphases. In this way, the congregation gets used to the idea that changes will come, for they must.

The principal point is that these progressive changes are made with joy and a clear sense of thankfulness to God. A retiring pastor who presents an unhappy and even a slightly resentful disposition will cause sorrow and distress to the congregation and can undermine the acceptance by that congregation of the incoming pastor. Sadly these things do happen. A gracious spirit in the retiring man will help the people adapt to changes.

#### **b. Involving the whole church**

Of course, the changes that will be made will be discussed with the membership so that everyone is informed and involved. Returning to the picture of the Lord preparing to leave his disciples we find him keeping them well informed, speaking to them about what was to follow, and insisting that his going was entirely in their best interests. There is brilliant communication so that they knew what was happening. In a similar vein, we find Moses inaugurating Joshua well before he finished his leadership (Numbers 27:12-23). Moses then continued to be involved in a wide range of activities which included preparations for the new regime. The point being that the people knew what was happening as Moses prepared to leave them and Joshua prepared to take over.

#### **c. Avoiding pre-retirement grief**

The retirement of the pastor is about entering into new opportunities and activities for him, and for the congregation, it is about a new era in the life of the church. This process of separating from a group of people you have loved and cared for is emotional as well as practical. Loosening ties is a matter of the heart and the head. The anticipation of separation and change can produce moments of real sorrow that can amount to a grief experience so the heart has to be guarded (Proverbs 4:23). Repeated expressions of sorrow at departure by the retiring pastor can produce a variety of reactions in the people which can be troubling and even destructive. What happens in private is unavoidable and should be seen only by close family. In public there should be tempered emotion that acknowledges the years of affection and reflects thankfulness, and also expresses the hope of future meetings and joyful anticipation of a positive future for all involved.

#### **d. Deciding where to live**

Should you move home and church, or should you stay in the area where you have ended your ministry? There are vastly differing viewpoints on this. In the end, it depends on each pastor's personality, the needs and views of the incoming pastor, and the attitude of the church. Men have stayed in their church and ended up being a centre of dissent and trouble, while others have stayed and developed an excellent relationship with the incoming pastor and been an untold blessing to the congregation. In my experience, the former has outweighed the latter.

Indeed one godly pastor who I knew very well and respected very highly was adamant that the retiring pastor should move away from the area where he finally ministered. He called it the final sacrifice the pastor has to make for the flock he has lovingly shepherded. Personally, I tend to that view. But in the end, it is about being totally honest with oneself and doing what is best for the church in the short and long run. This is a matter for deep thought, earnest prayer, and careful discussion with others.

As I say there are conflicting arguments. Some men step down from being pastors but become functioning elders and do so very effectively. Others stay in the church but have no role, and then find they get people continuing to come to them with their problems, thus excluding the incoming pastor. Others stay in the church and manage not to become embroiled in people's problems or discussions about changes that have been made. There is no single template to follow. It boils down to personalities, the style of ministry the retiring man engaged in, the church's structure and values, the incoming pastor's approach and personality, and so on. Leaving the church also has a range of challenges. This is why there needs to be pre-planning and discussion.

One matter that is not often discussed, but needs to be born in mind, is that packing up a home after years of ministry can be a very emotionally draining experience. That is always the case when anyone moves home, but for a pastor who is retiring, there are so many extra sources of disquiet. Happy and blessed memories, sorrowful and sad incidents all come to mind and the enemy of our souls is not slow to take advantage of the situation to our detriment.

Part of the preparation for retirement is about preparing yourself for the challenges, and the unexpected joys and blessings that come with that transition point in life.

## **Practical implications**

We must turn now to a few of the issues that need to be addressed if retirement is decided upon. I do so on the basis of conversations I have had with fellow ministers over many years of observation, especially as I have taken a special interest in issues around ageing. It is not possible in a single article to deal with all that is involved but there are a few pointers that may be considered.

### **a. Financial arrangements**

Every situation is different and needs personal assessment. Many pastors now have pension provisions and churches are more aware than they were a few years ago of their responsibilities to their pastors in this area. There are Christian charities (some of whom are members of Affinity) which are designed to help pastors who have inadequate financial arrangements. Similarly, there are agencies who can help with advice on State Pensions, Benefits and Concessions that can be claimed. The larger church groupings, like FIEC and Grace Baptists, are able to signpost the best sources of help. On the non-Christian front AgeUK and Citizens Advice are good generalist organisations who can both advise themselves and signpost for more detailed advice.

In addition, it is never too early to think about *Powers of Attorney*, both for health and financial matters – Advanced Directives, and paying for long-term care. If you decide to do this it is important to get expert advice. There are solicitors who will do a highly professional job at a reasonable charge. It is important to look around and research the market. There is a temptation to leave these things until physical decline is really starting to have an effect on life. Sadly when that happens it can be more difficult to actually address the issues.

Beware of organisations who tout for business in this area. Many older people find themselves being defrauded by rogue companies. Use the well-known, the tried and tested. But always take good advice.

### **b. Relating to the last place of ministry**

If the decision is to continue in the church after retirement then there should be some gap between finishing ministry and becoming a part of the church so that the fact of retirement can be established in everyone's mind. But if you do move, how should you relate to the church from which you have retired? It is not always as simple as it appears. I think it was John Wesley who required that when a man left a circuit he should not return, even for funerals, for at least a year. Some recommend that it should not be for two years. A good brother I know retired from his church



and came back about a year and a half later to preach. As he stood at the door several people going out said 'now we realise what we have been missing'. He wished he had left returning a while longer. If there is any danger of such an outcome it is better to delay longer than to satisfy one's own desire to see people you love again. There is no standard answer, but there should be much thought and prayer before returning for the first time, after that it can become much easier.

### **c. Using time well**

It is our duty to use our days as well as we can (Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5) therefore it is important to develop good habits early in retirement. It is easy to waste time and justify it by convincing oneself that you need a while to recuperate. Drifting can become a destructive way of life. And then frustration and disappointment set in. It is one thing to take a holiday, or a more protracted period of recuperation, and another flopping around in an unplanned and unprofitable way.

Even before retiring an outline plan of what you want to do should be drawn up. For most men that will involve preaching, and alongside that will be new activities or long-established ones that are now brought to the forefront. Some aspects of what we anticipate doing in retirement may actually be formed in that period before retirement as I have already suggested. Involvement in a local church should have a prominent place. In our retirement, we should put into practice as church members the lessons we preached and taught during our pastoral ministry. Think how often you encouraged your congregation to attend the prayer meeting, and so make sure you are there as often as you can be. It is surprising to notice how many men, once they have retired, rarely attend their new church's midweek activities.

### **d. Accepting differing attitudes**

The pastor has a high level of respect and even deference in other churches where he is known. Retired pastors don't always get that and possibly rightly so. They are after all just ordinary Christians and members of a congregation. Having said that, there is an impact on us when we retire. 'I don't know who I am anymore', so said the wife of a retired pastor who missed the special roles she played in the churches where her husband served. It is important to remember that as your role changes in regard to the church from which you retired, so also your role in the wider church changes. Accepting the losses and serving as widely as you can is the answer. John the Baptist was highly successful when he preached and baptised before Jesus began his ministry. But then Jesus began his ministry and attracted even greater crowds. John's disciples found it difficult to cope with whilst John handled it brilliantly (John 3:22-30). There are valuable lessons to learn from such accounts.

It is important to note that the pastor's wife also has to accept all manner of changes when her husband retires. While she may have had her own area of employment outside the church she will often have fulfilled a significant role in the church. So she faces challenges and dangers and needs much support from her husband, friends and family.

### **e. Taking opportunities**

Retirement does present a wide range of opportunities. A pastor when he retires has developed skills and experience which can be used across a variety of activities. The wider Christian world needs the godly influence of older men. There are many Christian organisations that would benefit from the godly input a retiring pastor can make. For some, the pulpit can be replaced by the pen for the great blessing of the Church. There are opportunities to move in different directions, and as I have already said some of these should be prepared before retirement takes place. Again I say the local church to which you become attached will benefit so much from your humble and gracious input. No one owes you an opportunity, but everyone should welcome the contribution you make as a Spirit-filled man of maturity and love. And of course, the retired pastor can be used by the Lord to be an example of godliness throughout retirement and to death. We are to prove Philipians 1:6

and be like the Apostle in 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

## **What we are is more important than what we do**

Older men of God are invaluable to the Church of God. Pastors in retirement should focus on being that sort of person. What we are is more important than what we do. Indeed what we do is given quality by what we are. This article has been designed to give material for thought and prayer to those who may be approaching retirement age, or who are wise enough to look to retirement even though it may be a while away. The goal is to help pastors gain the maximum benefit from retirement and to make the best contribution to the kingdom of God that they can in retirement. May God be glorified in our later years as in our former years (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

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# Book Review: The Air We Breathe

by Graham Nicholls

**How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality**

**Glen Scrivener**

**The Good Book Company, 2022, 240 pages, £8.49**

Some people might think the values we hold, the instinctive responses that we have to injustice, pain and suffering are just there because they are there. It's as if morality just exists – there in the ether. No one created it, it just evolved by itself, and yet we seem to think it is an absolute. We reason that being a cannibal is ok for spiders and sharks but not for us. In particular, we assume our modern values of equality, diversity, human rights etc., are obvious, natural and universal. Media interviewers ask questions on the basis that truth matters and that there is some kind of value system to be judged against. Our friends at the pub all believe in right and wrong, and a set of universals that they argue about but probably can't argue for.

But those values in the air we breathe are there for a reason. They are there because of a person, a divine person, who put them there.

In this rigorously researched but easily accessible book Glen Scrivener takes us through bible texts and a vast swathe of history to show that our values not only come from the recent influences of Western Christianity, but their historical roots go back much further, in fact to the creation of the world and the order, justice and morality God set in place which flows from his character.

We may have distorted the discussion and shaped it around our idolatrous world views but still the imprint of the creator cannot be scratched out

Part of the genius of this book is it provides us with really intriguing historical insights which are set against the conversation going on in our culture right now, tapping into the debates around slavery, #metoo and *Black Lives Matter*.

Scrivener shows us that there is essentially no issue that we discuss and debate in politics or popular culture, no issue in the news or current campaign that does not trace its driving force from us being image-bearers. In the process, he convincingly demonstrates that the conversations we are having now are just the kind of moral dilemmas you would expect from moral agents created by God and in his likeness. For example, Scrivener helps us see that the current issue of equality is rooted in the special creation of human beings and that the ancient and modern creation myths are all about chaos, fighting and slavery.

Interesting to note that the random accident evolutionary model for the origins of our world, with its chaotic beginnings and the striving for survival, shares more with ancient Greek mythology than you might at first think. Science itself is only an observation of what God has ordered in creation. Even the notion that science actually works, the way the universe works, is discoverable and behaves consistently is all part of the ordering, not chaos, that God puts into his creation.

Scrivener then goes on to show that the concept of compassion as a virtue is rooted in the character of God and doesn't arise naturally from being evolved animals. And then again, the importance of consent – in particular in the area of sex – arises from the love of God and the dignity of human beings. He also walks us through the ideas of freedom, justice and human rights, showing that they only make sense if humans are special creations under God's authority.

All in all, this is a great book for Christians to read – you will be better equipped for conversations about our culture. The book is full of useful facts and stories and is also a fantastic resource to give away to friends and family to get them thinking about the God who made and shapes 'the air we breathe'.

# Update on Life Issues - June 2022

by John Ling

Previous editions of this update may be found on John Ling's personal website: [www.johnling.co.uk](http://www.johnling.co.uk)

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## Abortion

Friday 24 June 2022 – a landmark day. The Justices of the Supreme Court of America have today voted by 5 to 4 to overturn Roe v. Wade, the 1973 ruling that supposedly gave American women the constitutional right to abortion. While this judgement will not ban all US abortions, it is a mighty significant move in the right direction. The personal and political ramifications will continue but, above all, unborn human life in the USA now has a restored dignity and greater protection. Rejoice and give thanks!

### Abortion statistics, England and Wales: 2021

Tuesday 21 June, the first day of summer – a beautifully warm and bright morning. And then in the afternoon came the publication of the latest abortion statistics for England and Wales – horribly chilling and bleak. And they are the worst ever. The total figure is 214,869 abortions. The vast majority of these (214,256) were for residents of England and Wales. That is an average of 825 abortions every weekday – every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...<sup>1</sup>

As ever, most abortions (98%, 209,939) were performed under ground C, the so-called social clause. A further 1.6% (3,370 abortions) were carried out under ground E, the risk of serious handicap. This is an increase of 287 from the previous year. We are still no more compassionate towards the disabled.

In 2021, 89% of abortions were performed under 10 weeks gestation – an increase from 88% in 2020 and 78% in 2011. There were 276 abortions performed at 24 and more weeks. Why are early abortions better?

During 2021, 43% of women undergoing abortions had had one or more previously. This proportion has increased steadily from 36% in 2011. Is abortion a form of contraception?

The trend towards medical abortions continues – 87% of all abortions in 2021 were medically induced, up 2% from 2020. Some of this increase was due to the 'pills by post', 'DIY abortion' scheme introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking both medications (mifepristone and misoprostol) at home is now the most common procedure, accounting for 52% of all abortions in 2021.

During 2021, there were 88 selective abortions, an increase from 65 in 2020. These are usually performed for multiple pregnancies often caused by overzealous IVF. 80% of these selective terminations were performed under ground E.

These figures mock us – they are stark and irrefutable. What to do? What should we think, what do we say, how can we respond when faced with this increasing tragedy of human life destroyed in the womb? First, we educate ourselves. We need to be clear about the personal and societal

<sup>1</sup> All the data can be viewed online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2021/abortion-statistics-england-and-wales-2021>

devastation caused by abortion. Second, we speak out against this calamity and educate others. Third, we care. Abortion tells us that many women and girls need real help, and principled compassion in their lives. So we give of our time, money and energy probably by joining and supporting a pro-life organisation. Without such responses nothing much will change. Except it will get worse.

## **DIY abortions**

Are you familiar with the concept of a government U-turn? Here is an excellent example, but it is also an appalling case of political shenanigans.

In March 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK government introduced an emergency arrangement whereby the two pills required for an early medical abortion, up to 10 weeks of pregnancy, could be accessed by post. This so-called DIY abortion scheme was said to be needed because women could not travel to pill providers, such as doctor's surgeries, and take part in face-to-face appointments because of the national lockdown. So after a simple video or telephone consultation with a healthcare professional, the pills could be mailed to the approved patient.

These new rules were promised to be temporary. And so, in the not too distant future, women would have to revert to the old scheme of in-person medical supervision. After all, this is safer in determining medical suitability, proper informed consent, fraudulent access, whether coercion was involved, and so on. However, the battle lines of the temporaries versus the permanents were drawn.

Between November 2020 and February 2021, the government launched a public consultation. More than 600 medical professionals wrote an open letter to the prime minister and the equivalent heads of Wales and Scotland. The majority (70%) of 18,000 respondents to the public consultation called for the temporary scheme to end immediately. The outcome was that on 24 February 2022, the Minister for Vaccines and Public Health, Maggie Throup MP, stated that, 'The temporary approval will end at midnight on 29 August 2022.' So, a win for the temporaries? Not so fast. That decision was welcomed by many, but not by the abortion lobby. It pushed to make the pills by post permanent. And on 16 March, Baroness Sugg tabled an amendment to the Health and Care Bill seeking to overturn the government's decision, even though the issues had never been raised in the Lords. Furthermore, this amendment, voted on in the Lords during the early hours of the morning, without prior debate and scrutiny, was never the proper way to decide a controversial policy.

And then on 30 March 2022, MPs debated the issue, claimed that the old scheme would increase late abortions, and finally on a free vote, decided to make the temporary scheme an indefinitely permanent fixture in England by 215 votes to 188. Therein, a government U-turn, or two. The Welsh and Scottish governments have already acted to make the continuation of at home DIY abortions lawful.

## **The WHO and abortion worldwide**

On 9 March 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) published its new guidelines on abortion. The WHO is biased. It maintains that, 'Being able to obtain safe abortion is a crucial part of healthcare.' Of course there are unsafe abortions everywhere – the WHO reckons there are 25 million each year – but pressing for unlimited abortions everywhere under the guise of human rights and creating an abortion-minded world is not a rational or moral policy.

The pages of the Abortion Care Guideline are a terrible read. The opening Guideline Highlight sets the tone. It reads, 'The abortion care pathway. Comprehensive abortion care includes provision of information, abortion management (including induced abortion and care related to pregnancy loss), and post-abortion care. This guideline includes recommendations for different abortion indications,

and for different stages of the continuum of care (the “who”, “what”, “where” and “how”.)’

Then follows pages of details that underscore the fact that the WHO has little, if any, ethical framework to abortion. For example section 1.3 states, ‘Securing sexual and reproductive health including availability of safe abortion respects, protects and fulfils the right to health.’ Basically, the WHO wants to allow abortion under all circumstances. It calls on states to remove all legal time limits on abortion. It claims that laws preventing abortion at any point during pregnancy risk violating the rights of ‘women, girls or other pregnant persons’. It wants to limit medical professionals’ rights to refuse to take part in abortions.

This is all bad news. The WHO is a powerful, influential global organisation. Its Abortion Care Guideline is set to become the vade mecum of the world, at least, the developing world. It looks like a dystopian future.

## **Abortion in Guatemala**

Given an atlas, can you truthfully put a finger on the Republic of Guatemala? It may be famous for the ancient Maya civilisation, a recent bloody civil war and good coffee. But it also has a strong pro-life culture. In March 2022, its Congress approved a bill that will increase prison sentences from 3 years up to 10 years for women who have abortions. Heavier penalties will be imposed on doctors and others who assist women in ending pregnancies. Exceptions, like when the life of the mother is in danger, remain. The new legislation was passed by 101 votes versus 8 with 51 abstentions by absence. This is the opposite of the trend in most other Latin American countries, such as Colombia, Mexico and Argentina, which are busily expanding access to abortions.

In addition in March, Guatemala celebrated its national ‘Life and Family Day’. President Alejandro Giammattei declared, ‘This event is an invitation to unite as Guatemalans to protect life from conception until natural death.’ It is expected that he will soon sign the bill into law.

A question. Does this new Guatemalan legislation seem harsh? Why is that? Is it because we live in a so-called progressive society and have too easily adopted its pro-abortion patterns of thought and mores? Drifting with the tide is easier than swimming against it. Do we regard abortion, perhaps not exactly as a woman’s right, but often as the easiest way out of a sticky situation? Is the unborn child not really one of us? Are we against murder and infanticide, but are persuaded that abortion, taking the life of the unborn, is somehow different, perhaps because the victim is unseen? These are testing cross-examination questions.

## **IVF and ARTs**

### **Surrogacy and war**

Ukraine has long been the second most popular destination, after California, for commercial surrogacy. It is estimated that there are between 2,000 and 2,500 babies born each year to Ukrainian surrogates, mostly for foreign couples. There are at least 50 commercial surrogacy agencies in Ukraine. BioTexCom, one of the leading outfits in Kyiv, estimates that it arranges at least a thousand births each year. Ukraine’s popularity for surrogacy is due to its favourable legal framework and its significantly lower costs compared with California and elsewhere.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created many victims, including hundreds of surrogate mothers. Many have escaped, but many have remained in dangerous situations, sheltering in basements, unable to access medical assistance and essential drugs.

Like most surrogacy industries, the Ukrainian is dependent on cross-border travel and international intended parents (IPs) have frequently been unable to attend the birth of, or collect, their commissioned babies. Under Ukrainian law, IPs are regarded as the legal parents throughout the transaction and surrogates have no legal rights with respect to the baby when born. After the birth,

the IPs are named on the birth certificate as the parents, whereas in the UK, it is the birth mother's, the surrogate's, name that is registered.

Among the additional problems created by the war are the practical and legal issues of who is now responsible for the stranded children born to Ukrainian surrogates. Meanwhile, the husbands of Ukrainian surrogates are probably on the frontlines fighting the Russian aggressors. It is a parlous situation. War has added an additional dilemma to the already troublesome issue of surrogacy. Is surrogacy ever really a sensible option?

### **IVF – good or bad?**

We all like to choose – look at the following two studies, and their conflicting outcomes, and decide which you would choose. ART or natural? Never let it be said that these Updates are biased.

First, there is a recent study which concluded that adults conceived through assisted reproductive technology (ART), principally IVF, have a better quality of life during their adulthood compared with those who were naturally conceived. The work was reported as 'Does being conceived by assisted reproductive technology influence adult quality of life?' by Karin Hammarberg et al., and published online in *Human Fertility* (22 March, 2022).

The study looked at a group of 193 adults conceived through IVF treatment and 86 naturally-conceived adults at two separate time points – when they were between 18 and 28 years old and then again between the ages of 22 and 35. The methodology used consisted of the volunteers completing questionnaires.

The authors finally stated, 'In conclusion, when accounting for other factors present in young adulthood, being ART conceived appears to confer some advantages in quality of life, particularly in the Social relationships and Environment domains. In addition, and not surprisingly, this study found that, independently of the mode of conception, a more positive relationship with parents, less psychological distress, and a better family financial situation contributed to a better quality of life.'

Second, there is another recent study entitled, 'Conceived by Assisted Reproductive Technologies' by Penseé Wu et al., and published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* (Vol. 11, Issue 5, 1 March 2022). It showed that women who conceived using IVF are 2.5 times more likely to experience kidney injury and incur hospital costs on average of US\$6,722 higher when hospitalised, compared with women who conceived naturally.

The authors concluded, 'Pregnancies conceived by ART have higher risks of adverse obstetric outcomes and vascular complications compared with spontaneous conception. Clinicians should have detailed discussions on the associated complications of ART in women during prepregnancy counseling.' There are already numerous studies that have demonstrated that IVF can have adverse physical and biological effects on both the unborn and the born, as well as their mothers.

So, is IVF good or bad? What to conclude? Not much from these two studies. They are interesting, but they are apples and pears, about as diverse as possible – an Australian sociological piece and a UK-US scientific article. They were never designed to compare and contrast – they just happened to be published in journals during March 2022. To decide if IVF is good or bad what is needed is a meta-analysis, a systematic review of all the relevant literature, which for IVF would run into thousands and thousands of studies. And anyway what is meant by 'good' or 'bad'? It is far easier, and far more useful, to assess IVF from a bioethical perspective. And a sensible and practical conclusion can be found in my 2014 *Bioethical Issues* book, page 99, which states, 'All IVF is best avoided.'

### **IVF in China**

IVF in most of the world can be eye-wateringly expensive. In the high-income UK, with the exception of NHS-funded treatment, a typical IVF cycle can cost £5,000 and usually much more.

So it is a little surprising that low-income China, or at least Beijing, has begun offering to pay towards its citizens' fertility treatments.

You might ask, are there not too many people there already? After all, the population is reckoned to be about 1.4 billion. But demography tells a different story. China is facing a serious falling birth rate, despite the abandonment of its infamous one-child policy and the new policy allowing couples to have up to three children. In 2021, the number of births per woman in China was only 1.15, well below the 2.1 needed to maintain a stable population.

From last March, for couples subscribing to its public medical insurance scheme, the Chinese government has been contributing an estimated £3,000 towards the costs of 16 types of fertility procedures, such as IVF and intrauterine insemination (IUI). Moreover, there is no limit to the number of IVF cycles couples can have subsidised. A spokesman from the Beijing Perfect Family Hospital has said, 'Those who choose assisted reproductive technologies have a strong willingness to have a child. But the success rate of the technologies is limited. The services were previously not included under the public medical insurance scheme because they are costly.'

### **Donating doctors**

Lots can, and does, go wrong with IVF arrangements. Yet another Dutch doctor, the third in recent months, has been found to have used his own sperm to inseminate probably dozens of his women clients.

Jan Beek, an IVF doctor, who worked for 25 years at the Elisabethziekenhuis Hospital in Leiderdorp, secretly fathered at least 21 children. The hospital cannot contact others of his potential children because the relevant records have been destroyed. Beek died in 2019, long before his fertility deception was discovered. The scandal came to light last year after a DNA investigation found a match between Beek's DNA and 21 children whose mothers had received treatment at his clinic between 1973 and 1986. They had expected to be inseminated by sperm from their husbands or from anonymous donors, not their IVF doctor.

What is wrong with Dutch IVF doctors who also happen to be called Jan? Two others, Jan Wildschut and Jan Karbaat, clandestinely fathered at least 60 children between them from the 1970s to the 1990s. In October 2020, DNA tests confirmed that Jan Wildschut, a gynaecologist who worked in Zwolle and who died in 2009, was the biological father of 17 children. In 2019, it was discovered that Jan Karbaat, a doctor from Rotterdam, where he ran his private fertility clinic, fathered at least 49 children using his own sperm in IVF treatments unbeknown to his women patients.

The numbers of children fathered by these doctors varies depending on the sources quoted. But here is the big question – will there be more IVF doctors, Dutch or otherwise, who took part, or who are even now taking part, in such wicked deceptions? Of course there will.

## **Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide**

### **The campaign goes on**

Supporters of euthanasia and assisted suicide in the UK are continuing to press for legalisation. Their recent rallying point has been a private member's bill in the House of Lords tabled by Baroness Meacher in May 2021. Her Assisted Dying Bill, which would have enabled adults, who are terminally ill to end their own lives, did not make the Queen's Speech in May 2022 so it is unlikely to appear before the House of Commons in the current session. Nevertheless, Baroness Meacher now believes that there is enough support among MPs for it to pass into legislation there.

The leading campaign organisation on these issues, Dying in Dignity, has been busy rallying its supporters to sign the petition it has set up on the UK Government and Parliament site to 'legalise



assisted dying for terminally ill, mentally competent adults.’ At the 10,000 signature mark the government is obliged to reply. On 3 February, it responded, ‘The Government’s position is that any change to the law in this area is a matter for Parliament and an issue of conscience for individual parliamentarians rather than one for Government policy.’ Then, by mid-May, the petition hit the required 100,000 signatures for Parliament to consider it for a debate in the House of Commons. And so it has been confirmed that on the afternoon of Monday 4 July, there will be a Westminster Hall debate relating to assisted dying. It is in the name of Tonia Antoniazzi, the Labour MP for Gower.

Similar legislation has also been introduced into the Scottish Parliament by Liam McArthur MSP. The Consultation on the draft proposal was closed on 22 December 2021. No further details have been announced. Meanwhile, in November 2021, Jersey’s States Assembly became the first parliament in the British Isles ‘to decide “in principle” that assisted dying should be allowed and make arrangements for the provision of an assisted dying service.’ During March and April 2022, Islanders were asked to take part in the first phase of public engagement on the assisted dying proposals. The States Assembly debated more detailed proposals in November 2022. Following the preparation of the draft legislation, which will be debated in the States Assembly in May 2023, and, if the legislation is passed, then an assisted dying service will be implemented in Jersey from May 2023. This is a grisly timetable.

## **The Health and Care Act 2022**

Back in February 2022, you may have missed an important government announcement that will almost certainly benefit you and yours in the times ahead. The memo probably got buried in the news about Ukraine, Brexit and Covid-19. Anyway, here it is – dying people, at least those in England, will now have an explicit legal right to healthcare, including specialist palliative care. It is a powerful antidote to calls for legalising euthanasia and assisted suicide.

It comes because the UK government has pledged to back an amendment in the House of Lords tabled by Baroness Finlay. Several end-of-life charities have called this a ‘milestone’ moment that will help to resolve the current patchy postcode lottery of palliative care provision. Currently, it is estimated that around 215,000 people in the UK miss out on proper end-of-life care each year.

Baroness Ilora Finlay of Llandaff has been a long-term and tireless champion of palliative care, after all, among her many other duties, she is a professor of palliative medicine at the Cardiff University School of Medicine and vice president of Hospice UK. Concerning the government’s announcement, she said, ‘This change is incredibly important. For the first time, the NHS will be required to make sure that there are services to meet the palliative care needs of everyone for whom they have a responsibility in an area. People need help early, when they need it, seven days a week – disease does not respect the clock or the calendar.’

On 24 March 2022, following an agreement by both Houses of Parliament on the text of the Bill, it received Royal Assent on 28 April. The Bill is now an Act of Parliament, the Health and Care Act 2022.

There is much to do. There are about 450,000 deaths in England each year. And there are about 600 specialist palliative medicine consultants working there with a population of 55 million. That is about one consultant for every 100,000 people. Not a lot. It is also one consultant for every 1,000 deaths. Not a lot either. In addition, there are around 5,000 specialist palliative care nurses working for both the NHS and end-of-life charities. Still not a lot. And what about the palliative care needs of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland? Truly, there is much to do, but the Health and Care Act 2022 is a great start. We should be thankful.

## **Death in Canada**

What is wrong with Canadians? Why are they so bent on becoming the most permissive

euthanasia jurisdiction in the world? Next year, from March 2023, Canada will become one of the few countries in the world to allow its citizens, whose sole underlying condition is a mental illness, such as depression, bipolar disorder, personality disorders, schizophrenia, PTSD or any other mental affliction, to be eligible for death by its so-called medical aid in dying (MAiD) scheme.

How has it come to this? Back in 2015, Canada's high court ruled that an absolute prohibition on doctor-assisted dying violated the country's Charter. Moreover, a competent adult who suffered a 'grievous and irremediable' medical condition causing intolerable physical or psychological suffering had a constitutional right to a medically hastened death. That ruling led to Canada's MAiD law, Bill C-14, which allowed for assisted dying in cases where natural death was 'reasonably foreseeable'. Then in 2019, a Quebec Superior Court justice ruled the 'reasonably foreseeable' death restriction was unconstitutional and that people who were intolerably suffering, but not imminently dying, still had a constitutional right to be eligible for euthanasia.

In March 2021, Bill C-7 was passed that made changes to the eligibility criteria. The 'reasonably foreseeable' criterion was deleted. And on 17 March 2023, a two-year sunset clause will expire and MAiD will be expanded to competent adults whose sole underlying condition is a mental illness. Can you detect a slippery slope here?

Assessing the eligibility of candidates for euthanasia must be a gruesome occupation. At least for those patients with cancers, a diagnosis involves something that can be physically seen and touched. But how can a 'grievous and irremediable' mental illness be verified? Is not the truth plain that Canada will, in the near future, open up euthanasia for everyone? In a country where 'euthanasia' and 'assisted suicide' are euphemistically referred to as 'medical assistance in dying' (MAiD), surely anything dubious seems possible. What could be next? Why of course, MAiD for the poor, those who cannot afford much-needed therapy, medications and care. Wait for those floodgates to open. Why bother with robust legal boundaries when the criteria can be expanded year after year?

## **Genetic Technologies**

### **Parthenogenic mice**

A team of Chinese scientists have created a fertile mouse from an unfertilised ovum. It's a parthenote! It's a virgin birth! The work was described in an article entitled, 'Viable offspring derived from single unfertilized mammalian oocytes' by Yanchang Wei et al., and published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (22 March 2022).

In mammals, a new, genetically-unique life begins with the fusion of an ovum and a sperm to create a single cell called a zygote, a zygotic embryo. Parthenogenesis is the development of an embryo from a single unfertilized ovum. The offspring are clones, genetically identical to their mothers. The process occurs naturally in several species of aphids, fish, reptiles, mites and some bees. But never in mammals – until now – because of problems arising from genomic imprinting. What is this? The US National Human Genome Research Institute defines genomic imprinting as 'the process by which only one copy of a gene in an individual (either from their mother or their father) is expressed, while the other copy is suppressed.' Suffice to say it is like a spanner in the works if parthenogenesis is your goal.

Yanchang Wei and colleagues from the School of Medicine, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, overcame these hurdles and achieved parthenogenesis in mice by the targeted use of DNA methylation or demethylation to rewrite seven imprinting control regions so silencing genetic contributions from either the mother or the father, but not both. I know this is mind-stretchingly complex – hang in there! Using CRISPR technologies they were able to mimic the genes a male would have contributed during normal fertilisation. These modified parthenogenetic embryos were transferred into a surrogate mother resulting in the birth of viable full-term offspring. The research team began with 220 unfertilised ova but only one survived to adulthood yet was able to produce

offspring.

This is a significant step in the development of mammalian research. It is preliminary and therefore demands much more work if it is to have any applications in real-world agriculture or medicine. As the scientists concluded, 'These data demonstrate that parthenogenesis can be achieved by targeted epigenetic rewriting of multiple critical imprinting control regions.' Does it spell the end of men in human procreation? No, of course not! NB, so far it has been achieved in mice, not in humans.

### **He is out**

In November 2018, He Jiankui, the Chinese biophysicist, announced that he had created the world's first genetically-engineered human babies. It led to serious uproar among the scientific community and the general public. He had broken just about every rule in the genetic technologist's unwritten handbook. He was hauled before the Chinese authorities, sacked from his university employment and handed a three-year prison sentence and a hefty fine. There are now calls that He be made financially, morally and legally responsible for the health and wellbeing of the three children he genome-edited.

Various media outlets have reported that He was released from prison sometime in April. So far, he has refused to give press interviews – his future plans are therefore unknown. But what differences, three years on, will he notice in the world of genetic engineering? Certainly, his controversial foray has not stopped basic research on genetically engineering human embryos. But little research has been reported on the sort of research that He conducted, namely heritable human genome editing. Of course, no publications do not necessarily mean no experimentation. Moreover, pledged oversight has stalled. There was promised a global registry of such work – none has appeared. Global surveillance and restrictive measures were promised – none has appeared.

Yet there are reported experiments that are pushing the boundaries. For instance, in March, a biotech research team in New Jersey, USA, using surplus human embryos obtained from IVF clinics, demonstrated how CRISPR could delete an extra copy of a chromosome from a newly-fertilized ovum – a technique that might lead to treating or preventing chromosomal medical conditions such as Down's syndrome. This was reported as 'DNA Double Strand Breaks cause chromosome loss through sister chromatid tethering in human embryos' by Jenna Turocy et al., and published in bioRxiv on 22 March 2022. Other groups are exploring how to introduce heritable genetic changes via human sperm or ova. Even so, the consensus is that all of these methods are too risky and none is ready for human clinical trials.

### **CRISPR cats**

Cats can cause allergic reactions in about 15% of people. Tough if you visit friends with feline friends. Help is maybe at hand. All cats produce a protein known as Fel d 1, which is the apparent cause of the adverse reaction. Fel d 1 consists of two different subunits, and there are two genes – called CH1 and CH2 that encode each subunit.

InBio, or Indoor Biotechnologies, is a US company that has used CRISPR technology to delete the two genes of the Fel d 1 protein. The work used only in vitro cultures of cat cells. Nevertheless, InBio says it is the first step to creating hypoallergenic cats. However, it may take several years before allergen-free moggies are available from your local pet store.

## **Stem-cell Technologies**

### **James Thomson retires**

This is not an obituary notice, but a retirement notice. James Alexander Thomson is retiring from the University of Wisconsin-Madison this July. He is 63 years old. So what? Well, he is the man

who first isolated and cultured human embryonic stem cells. He is therefore the man who ignited one of the most vehement bioethical debates – should scientists be allowed to create and use embryonic stem cells, rather than ‘adult’ stem cells?

His landmark study appeared on 6 November 1998. It was entitled ‘Embryonic Stem Cell Lines Derived from Human Blastocysts’ by James Thomson et al., and published in *Science* (1998, 282: 1145-1147).

The crux of the matter was simple – the harvesting of embryonic stem cells results in the unavoidable destruction of human embryos. On the other hand, ‘adult’ stem cells are available from several bioethically-neutral sources, such as bone marrow, umbilical cord blood, milk teeth, eyes, adipose tissue and so on and they are relatively plentiful and easily collected.

Accordingly, Thomson’s 1998 paper sparked off a bioethical battle, a stem-cell war – embryonic v. ‘adult’. Thomson astutely recognized the existence of this bioethical conflict zone when he declared, ‘If human embryonic stem cell research does not make you at least a little bit uncomfortable, you have not thought about it enough.’ In the meantime, stem-cell science was marching on and successful medical treatments using ‘adult’ stem cells were multiplying whereas embryonic stem-cell remedies were few and far between.

Then in 2006, a biological bombshell exploded. Shinya Yamanaka of Kyoto University discovered how to induce ordinary, ‘adult’ somatic cells (not ‘adult’ stem cells) to revert to an embryo-like state. He cultured skin cells from adult mice and, using transcription factors, was able to ‘undifferentiate’ these somatic cells. Yamanaka called these new entities ‘induced pluripotent stem cells’ (iPS cells). This ‘reprogramming’ or ‘deprogramming’ has been likened to winding back the clock, taking adult cells back to their embryonic precursors from which they originated – the very reverse of the process of cell differentiation. Previously, this was thought to be an irreversible pathway, that is, the biological traffic went only one way from embryo to adult – we now know differently.

And so a new race was triggered and the bandwagon was rolling – could the same reprogramming occur with human somatic cells? The answer was, yes. In November 2007, two research groups, led separately by Thomson and Yamanaka, simultaneously reported the generation of iPS cells from human adult fibroblasts, that is, human skin cells. This was revolutionary science. Thomson’s contribution was entitled, ‘Induced pluripotent stem cell lines derived from human somatic cells’ by Junying Yu et al., and published in *Science* (2007, 318: 1917-1920).

It is hard to overstate the medical and bioethical implications of such reprogramming. In a nutshell, iPS cells are stem cells that can be made from an individual’s own somatic cells without the need for ova, cloning, or the subsequent destruction of an embryo. What is more, they appear to have most, if not all, of the biological properties of embryonic stem cells. And because iPS cells are ‘patient-specific’, they are genetically matched to, and therefore would not be rejected by, the patient, who would therefore not need any immunosuppressive drugs if these cells were used in regenerative treatments.

Yamanaka’s revolutionary work was rightly recognized and rewarded by his winning the 2012 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. The production of iPS cells was – and still is – a game-changing breakthrough that was destined to become the future of stem-cell research. James Thomson, commenting on the stem-cell bioethical war, stated that, ‘Human ES [embryonic stem] cells created this remarkable controversy, and iPS cells, while it’s not completely over, are sort of the beginning of the end for that controversy.’ In 2007, he further claimed that, ‘A decade from now, this [the adult v. embryonic stem-cell controversy] will be just a funny historical footnote.’

James Thomson’s work may have played second fiddle to that of Shinya Yamanaka, but the former undertook world-beating science, even if it was bioethically controversial and divisive. Looking back on his career and his pending departure from work, Thomson recently said, ‘I accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. People hang on too long and tend to kind of fade out. And I didn’t care to do

that.' Happy retirement, James.

### **Stem-cell treatments and the elderly**

Japan has the world's oldest population. It is therefore investing \$970 million in 'regenerative medicine', which includes the transplantation of induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS cells) to replace non-functioning cells in its elderly citizens. After all, iPS cell technology was devised by their very own Shinya Yamanaka.

Numerous small-scale trials have already been conducted in Japan for diseases like age-related macular degeneration, Parkinson's disease and arthritic disorders. For instance, in 2019, a Japanese stem-cell transplant treatment was approved for spinal-cord injuries. In 2020, a six-day-old infant with a liver disorder received an iPS treatment that enabled the child to survive until he was old enough for a liver transplant. iPS therapies also offer hope for treating intractable diseases like motor neurone disease (MND) and Alzheimer's.

An example of such sought-after success was reported in April, when a team of researchers at Osaka University announced the results of an experimental treatment involving four practically-blind patients suffering from corneal disease. The patients, who ranged in age from their 30s to 70s, received transplanted corneal epithelial cell sheets created from iPS cells grown in the laboratory. Three had their eyesight improved and all were free of side effects one year later.

'This could be a revolutionary treatment that could overcome the challenges that existing treatment has faced, such as a shortage of cornea donors or transplant rejection', so said Koji Nishida, an Osaka University professor of ophthalmology, at a news conference. Future plans at Osaka include a large-scale clinical trial in collaboration with biotech companies with the aim of making the novel procedure a widespread treatment. However, the required success and approval may be years away. Yet the application of bioethically-sound treatments is to be welcomed. It is the way forward.

### **Stem cells and Parkinson's treatment**

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder characterised by the loss of neurons which produce the neurotransmitter dopamine. When these neurons die, patients experience a lack of movement coordination due to the loss of dopamine in their brains. Drug treatments are available to replace dopamine, but their efficacy often wanes with time. A recent study has created dopamine-producing cells from induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS cells). When transplanted into rats with Parkinson's disease, they successfully alleviated the disease symptoms.

The work, conducted at the Arizona State University, has been reported as, 'Optimizing maturity and dose of iPSC-derived dopamine progenitor cell therapy for Parkinson's disease' by Benjamin Hillier et al., and published in Nature Regenerative Medicine (21 April 2022).

This was a proof-of-concept study. As the paper states, 'These data support the concept that human iPSC-derived D17 mDA progenitors [17-day differentiated, midbrain dopamine-producing cells] are suitable for clinical development with the aim of transplantation trials in patients with Parkinson's disease.' Indeed, its findings will soon be tested in a human clinical trial of patients with a specific type of Parkinson's disease caused by a mutation in the so-called Parkin gene. For many, such treatment, if successful, cannot come soon enough.

### **Stem cells and cancer treatments**

Glioblastoma are highly-malignant brain tumours that account for more than 60% of all tumours found in adult brains. Surgery can be effective in eliminating the primary tumour but recurrence is typically more than 90%. How could this rate be reduced? Moreover, glioblastoma creates difficulties with normal treatments because most drugs cannot cross the blood-brain barrier. A new type of post-surgery stem-cell therapy has been developed and tested in mice for the treatment of glioblastoma.

This study, conducted by scientists at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, is entitled, 'Target receptor identification and subsequent treatment of resected brain tumours with encapsulated and engineered allogeneic stem cells' by Deepak Bhere et al., and was published online in Nature Communications (19 May 2022).

The scientists collected circulating tumour cells that entered the bloodstream from the primary glioblastoma of patients and used these to identify receptor molecules expressed specifically on these glioblastoma cells, termed 'death receptors'. Then the team used mesenchymal stem cells (MSC) obtained from a healthy human donor and engineered them to express proteins that could bind to the 'death receptors' on glioblastoma cells. This elicited a cascade of reactions in glioblastoma cells, leading to their death. Finally, these engineered stem cells were packaged into a biodegradable hydrogel capsule, allowing them to pass through the blood-brain barrier.

This is a clever approach that could lead to personalised medicine based on the patient's specific tumour, but to ensure speedy treatment, it also employed pre-made allogenic stem cells, a sort of 'off-the-shelf' remedy. It may be possible to create a bank of stem cells derived from healthy donors that have been previously engineered to tackle different cancers – a pre-made bio-bank of fully-characterised stem cells.

Generally, with cell-based therapies, the patient's own cells are harvested, reprogrammed to target diseased cells or tissues, and then reintroduced into the patient's body. In patients with glioblastoma, however, the disease is so fast-moving that surgery must be performed within the first week after diagnosis, leaving little time to develop therapies using the patient's own cells. Hence, the need for pre-made stem cells, or this sort of 'off-the-shelf' remedy, developed using cells from healthy donors.

This stem-cell based therapy was tested in mice with primary or recurrent glioblastoma. The tumours were removed and the stem-cell based therapy administered. Mice that received the treatment were alive 90 days after surgery, whereas those that only had the surgical removal of the tumour survived for an average of only 55 days. Various doses of the therapy were administered, but no adverse effects of toxicity were detected in the mice.

This is exciting, but of course it is only 'in mice', not men. Nevertheless, the authors reckon that Phase I/II human clinical trials could begin within the next two years. And they hope that this stem-cell based therapy could be used to treat other solid tumours. Don't we all?

### **Stem-cell treatment failures**

Many stem-cell treatments are wonderful – some are diabolical. Some clinics produce amazing therapies – others are fraudulent. Unproven stem-cell treatments are everywhere. And the USA is among the worst affected. Surprisingly, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved only blood stem-cell transplantations for cancers and disorders of the blood and immune systems. Yet hundreds of US clinics are offering untested, undocumented stem-cell therapies. Indeed, scores have been implicated in deaths and injuries to their clients.

Of course, the USA population can be overeager for both medical and litigious procedures. Hence, stem-cell quacks and hungry attorneys make for an explosive combination. Take for example the long-running legal dispute between StemGenex, a US stem-cell treatment provider, and a group of its dissatisfied customers. The lawsuit started in 2016, when a group of its patients complained that the StemGenex claim of '100 percent consumer satisfaction' was misleading.

These former patients had sought treatments for a range of medical conditions including lupus, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injury. However, none had 'received any significant benefit' from StemGenex procedures, despite their costly treatments.

The StemGenex treatments involved removing adipose tissue cells from patients and treating them

to concentrate the stem cells. These were then tweaked according to the disease to be treated, before being injecting back into the patient. The clinic had claimed that the treatment was effective against a variety of conditions, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Moreover, the high patient satisfaction rate quoted by StemGenex was based on interviews conducted shortly after fat cell harvesting, namely, before the results of the treatment would be apparent.

This disgraceful episode of quackery has at last reached a settlement. A total of \$3.65 million will be paid by StemGenex to 1,063 of its former patients. That may bring about some financial satisfaction for the maltreated patients, but it maligns authentic stem-cell technologies and their dedicated medical practitioners.

And there is yet another distasteful aspect to this sad saga. The lawyers were the real winners. The financial settlement meant that each plaintiff received just \$1,936 from the compensation fund despite having paid around \$14,900 per treatment. The majority of the settlement disappeared in legal fees and expenses.

The moral of this story – if you ever consider using a stem-cell treatment be very, very cautious. Better be sceptical than ripped off. Do not believe a stem-cell company's hype. Research the scientific evidence. Ask a stem-cell expert. Ask two or three. Beware – there are stem-cell treatment fraudsters out there.

## Miscellaneous

### Mandy Allwood (1965 – 2021)

Mandy J Allwood was a rather ordinary girl. She was born in Warwick in 1965, the daughter of Brian Allwood, who owned an electrical company, and his wife Marion. She left school at 16 and worked for her father's business. In 1983, she met Simon Pugh, a plasterer from Solihull. They married in 1986 and had a son, Charlie, but the marriage was dissolved after she became involved with another suitor, Paul Hudson.

By 1995, Allwood had begun a serious relationship with Paul Hudson, who already had another family, and in December of that year Allwood suffered a miscarriage. She resolved to become pregnant again. By the following April, she had not conceived and was referred for fertility treatment. In August 1996, this rather ordinary woman became the world-famous Octomum. Mandy Allwood had managed to superovulate and conceive octuplets. She went against medical advice and had sexual intercourse while being treated in a private clinic in Birmingham with fertility drugs. Why a previously fertile woman, with a 5-year-old child, a previous abortion and a recent miscarriage, was recommended such treatment, especially in the absence of counselling with her partner, who apparently lived with another woman, was a mystery. Nevertheless, she insisted on keeping all of them. She seemed adamantly, but perhaps naively, pro-life. 'I know some people will call us irresponsible but, as far as I'm concerned, the more the merrier', she claimed.

Enter Max Clifford, the now-discredited PR consultant. If sex and money make the biggest headlines then here was the near-perfect story. Clifford sold the story of Octomum to the sleazy News of the World for an alleged six-figure sum. He also organised sponsorship deals with car, baby food and baby supplies' companies. He declared the more births the better because of the greater media interest. Around that time, I happened to be in London one day when the three of them rushed out of a media office and into a waiting taxi. They were, for a little while, celebrities.

What followed was most instructive. Much of the medical profession, rather than rise to the challenge, spoke only in terms of gloom and doom. Dr Thomas Stuttaford, a medical writer for The Times, declared, 'In medical eyes this pregnancy is a catastrophe.' The universally offered treatment was the barbaric selective reduction – 'kill six to save two'. Mandy Allwood refused. That is, she took advantage of that well-known liberal slogan, 'a woman's right to choose.' And then what happened? The pro-abortion press immediately rounded on her, often with near-hysterical spite.

On Monday 30 September, Allwood went into labour at 24 weeks. She was taken to King's College Hospital, London, where she lost three of her boys. The very next day one girl was stillborn in the morning, and that afternoon the remaining three boys and one girl all died. Seven were registered as live births and subsequent deaths while one was a miscarriage. 'I cradled each of them for two and a half hours as they died in my arms,' she recalled. 'It was horrible. When I felt the last one coming, I said, 'Please, God, let at least one of them live. But it wasn't to be. I was inconsolable.'

Much of the medical profession was aching to say, 'We told you so. You should have aborted six.' But the ends do not justify the means and it is simply wrong for doctors to kill their patients. Poor Mandy Allwood – she was devastated. She was a mother, who wanted, but suddenly lost, eight of her children. Undoubtedly she grieved, but her one consolation was that she did her best for them all and did not consent to killing any of them – for that she needed to experience no guilt.

She named the six boys Adam, Cassius, Donald, Kypros, Martyn and Nelson, and the two girls Layne and Kitali. They were buried in tiny white coffins decorated with butterflies. 'I have a treasure box which I keep next to my bed with their scan pictures and photos of them when they were born along with their birth certificates and teddy bears', she told The Sun newspaper 19 years later. After losing their octuplets Allwood and Hudson had three daughters – Color, Kitali and Rade.

Things then went downhill, again. In 2007, Allwood separated from Hudson and was arrested for drink-driving with her children in the back of the car – she lost custody of them. Two years later she was given an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) for playing loud music and upsetting her neighbours in Warwick. The money from selling her story had dried up. She admitted two counts of fraud. She sued Clifford, accusing him of deceit and in 2001 he was ordered to pay her £15,200. She became estranged from her family, spiralled into depression and alcoholism and had suicidal thoughts. Her name lives on in medical ethics books and she also appears in media law textbooks. Small recompense for fleeting fame.

She finally moved to Stratford-upon-Avon, where she was a regular at the Yard of Ale public house. In 2015, she told The Sun how she still felt phantom movements from her doomed pregnancy. 'Ever since I gave birth I have felt them kicking and moving every day,' she said.

Mandy Allwood started out as a rather ordinary girl, who became a rather ordinary woman, who was suddenly shot into global stardom and then ditched to fade into near oblivion. Hers was a sad and troubled life. Bioethically, it was a disaster. She died of cancer on 8 December 2021, aged 56.

## **DNA, the final blueprint**

It started in 1953 when James Watson and Francis Crick first described the three-dimensional structure of the double helix of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), the carrier of the genetic code. Then in 1990, efforts began to sequence it. By 2000, a huge team of international scientists working on the Human Genome Project 'cracked' this human genetic code, that is, they sequenced the 3.3 billion chemical 'letters' of our DNA. It was a first draft. A revised version was published in 2003, but that was only about 92% complete.

Now, after a 32-year quest, the final version has been delivered – the gaps have been filled. Technically, this has been a mammoth scientific achievement. It was only recently that the required sequencing technology has been available to decode that final, previously inaccessible, 8%. It allowed the scientists to move some sequences, decipher some repetitive segments, transfer other sections to their correct positions and to add more than 200 million missing 'letters'.

Evan Eichler, from the University of Washington School of Medicine and co-chairman of the Telomere to Telomere (T2T) consortium, which carried out the work, said, 'The complete blueprint is going to revolutionise the way we think about human genomic variation, disease and evolution.' It is reckoned that this ultimate version may help doctors better understand medical conditions, such as neuroblastoma, a cancer that mainly affects young children, schizophrenia, lung cancer and



some forms of muscular dystrophy and immunodeficiency.

This research, this seminal, historical study is published across six papers in *Science* (2022, 376: 44-53) by Sergey Nurk et al., under the title of 'The complete sequence of a human genome.'

So, have the sequencers finished their work? No! The demand now is to get similarly complete genome sequences from a greater diversity of people – so far the sequencing has relied on DNA from a very limited number of sources. The T2T consortium has already made a start by deciphering 70 more human genomes, with a goal of 350 from people of diverse ancestries. Eventually, it is said, 'We want every genome to be telomere to telomere.'

## **Deaths among the young**

What is the most common cause of death among children, adolescents and young adults aged between 1 and 24 in the United States? Well, if you are pro-life minded, you will say, and quite rightly, abortion. After all there are currently about 800,000 abortions performed every year across the USA.

The alternative answer is death by injuries of a physical nature. For more than 60 years, motor vehicle crashes have been the leading cause of injury-related deaths among these young people. But from around 2017, firearm-related injuries became the number one cause of death from injury. Why this crossover? Simple. Motor vehicle crashes have become increasingly safe – seat belts, speed restrictions, better constructed cars, and so on.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 2000 and 2020, the number of firearm-related deaths among children, adolescents, and young adults increased from 6,998 to a colossal 10,186. In 2000, motor vehicle-related injuries resulted in 13,049 deaths among young people. By 2020, that number had fallen to 8,234 motor vehicle traffic deaths – equivalent to a 40% decrease.

These data demonstrate that concerted governmental efforts to reduce road traffic crashes, especially those with fatal outcomes can be achieved. Now USA, what about a concerted effort with respect to firearm fatalities? We are horrified by the outcomes of your 'right to bear arms' and the regularity of news headlines reporting mass murders on your streets and in your schools and homes. Firearms, however, are one of the few products whose safety is not regulated by a designated US federal agency. Perhaps it should be. Perhaps it is now too late to retrofit such regulations. Yet undeniably something needs to be done. How cheap is human life?

## **The USA and Elsewhere**

### **Roe v. Wade**

Presently there is but one hot bioethical topic in the US – the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Since its introduction into US federal law in 1973, this case, which depended on a dubious constitutional right to privacy, created a sort of right for US women to abortion in the first three months of pregnancy, and limited rights in the second trimester. It has since been contentious and the target of the pro-life community. Now, almost 50 years on, it has been overturned. Even so, abortion in the US will not cease, but it will become more restricted and individual states will again be allowed to pass legislation to protect their unborn children.

Movement occurred on Monday 2 May, when a draft opinion on the case, written by Justice Samuel Alito, was leaked and published by the news outlet, Politico. The document, which had been circulated among the SCOTUS members on 10 February, suggests that the Court is ready to overturn *Roe*. Alito is quoted as writing, 'Roe was egregiously wrong from the start. Its reasoning was exceptionally weak, and the decision has had damaging consequences. And far from bringing about a national settlement of the abortion issue, [it has] enflamed debate and deepened division.'

Make no mistake – this is BIG law. Now that Roe has been overturned its implications will not only affect America but they will ricochet around the world. Abortion will never be the same again.

A rash of violence by radical abortion activists has broken out. Offices of pro-life groups in Wisconsin and Oregon have been firebombed. Numerous churches and pregnancy care centres across the country have been vandalised. In early June, an abortion activist was arrested near the home of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh after he threatened to assassinate the conservative justice. Then in mid-June, young women from the Rise Up 4 Abortion Rights group demonstrated in blood-soaked clothes right outside the home of US Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett in Virginia.

After killing 63 million unborn children by abortion – itself a typically violent and bloody procedure – perhaps we should not be surprised that abortion radicals have resorted to defending it by violence.

### **Elsewhere in America**

Washington DC may be the hub of all this abortion activity, but the action is nationwide. It may be that the loudest chanting of the pro-life activists and their ‘Roe v. Wade has got to go’ and their pro-choice counterparts shouting ‘abortion is healthcare’ is most apparent in the capital, but this is not only a Washington-centric affair.

For a start the stretch of Roe v. Wade is being determined against the backdrop of the contentious 2021 Texas Heartbeat Act and its ban on abortions after six weeks. Though challenged in lower courts, eventually, in January 2022, the SCOTUS intervened so that the Texas Heartbeat Act remains and the lives of thousands of unborn children have been spared.

Then there are numerous other states which are gearing up for a post-Roe situation. Already ‘trigger’ laws are on the books across the US so that abortion would become illegal in at least 22 states if Roe is quashed. And there are still states currently introducing anti-abortion laws. For instance, in late May, Oklahoma legislators passed a bill that would ban nearly all abortions, from the moment of fertilisation, across that state. The bill defines an unborn child as ‘a human fetus or embryo in any stage of gestation from fertilization until birth and fertilization is defined as the ‘fusion of a human spermatozoon with a human ovum’. Exceptions would be to save the life of the woman or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. It would be the nation’s strictest abortion law and would save an estimated 4,000 unborn lives a year. On 25 May, the Oklahoma governor, Kevin Stitt, signed it into law. The new legislation went into effect immediately and began protecting the unborn from abortion.

### **News from Hungary**

In March 2022, Katalin Novak, a 44-year-old former cabinet minister, was elected by the Hungarian parliament as its first female president. She is also both pro-life and pro-family. She has spoken of the importance of children in a society that promotes killing the unborn by abortion. In her victory speech, Novak drew attention to the importance of families – including her own – and said, ‘Having children was one of the most important decisions of our lives.’

In 2011, Hungary adopted a new Constitution. It includes Article II which protects human life from the moment of conception. It states, ‘Human dignity shall be inviolable. Every human being shall have the right to life and human dignity; embryonic and foetal life shall be subject to protection from the moment of conception.’

Katalin Novak faces a tough future attempting to uphold and implement that aspect of the Constitution. Hungary is a country where abortion has been widely practised legally since 1953, though now in diminishing numbers – currently about 20,000 per year – though such official government figures can often be huge underestimates. Come on Hungary, show the world what it means to be pro-life and pro-family.

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Affinity is a partnership of gospel churches, evangelical agencies and individual Christians committed to working together to advance the work of the gospel in the UK and Ireland and around the world.



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