



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on May 18, 2026

Irish Pastor Convicted, Fined for Preaching Near Abortion Facility

For the “crime” of preaching the Gospel near an abortion facility — despite not mentioning abortion in the slightest — a retired pastor was convicted of violating Northern Ireland’s “safe access zone” law and fined \$600.

“This is a very dark day for Christian freedom,” Clive Johnston [said](#) at a press conference following his May 7 conviction.

Johnston, a former president of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, was arrested in July 2024 for holding an outdoor church service near a hospital in Coleraine.



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This, prosecutors alleged, violated Northern Ireland’s [Abortion Services \(Safe Access Zones\) Act](#) of 2023. That law prohibits performing any “act” within 100 meters (328 feet) of a facility that performs abortions if said act could have the effect of “influencing,” “preventing or impeding access by,” or “causing harassment, alarm or distress to a protected person,” i.e., an abortion provider or seeker.

Similar laws across the United Kingdom have resulted in the arresting and, in some cases, fining of others who engaged in peaceful pro-life activity outside abortion facilities. Among them are [a pastor who held up a sign with a Bible verse on it](#), [a woman who hoisted a placard offering to speak with any interested parties](#), and [a man who prayed silently for his aborted son](#).

Bad Influence?

While Johnston had protested abortion in the past, in this case he was merely preaching a sermon based on John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

“We made no reference whatsoever to abortion,” Johnston said. “And yet the buffer-zone law is so broad that holding a Sunday service has been found to be a criminal offense. At 78 years [old], I find myself, for the first time, convicted of a crime.”

According to [Fox News](#):

Body camera footage of the ... incident shows a police officer approaching Johnston as he preached on the side of a road, warning him that he was in a clearly marked safe access zone and could not film or preach in the area.

“You can say to yourself, in the goodness of my heart, ‘I am coming here to preach the word of God,’” the officer says at one point. “However, if you are reckless, as to the effect that it could have on patients, staff or any protected person, then you may be committing an offense.”



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The officer suggested Johnston go inside the hospital's chaplaincy area if he wanted a "safe area" to give "religious guidance or comfort or help."

"But while you're out here in the safe access zone, any act in that area which may dissuade any protected person from availing services, harassment or cause them distress, is an offense," the officer added.

According to court records based on police body-camera footage, when ordered to leave or face arrest and possible prosecution, Johnson replied, "I am not moving." Ten minutes later, he left. But since the law required him to move "immediately," District Judge Peter King [found](#) him guilty on two counts and fined him 450 pounds (about \$600).

Provocative Preacher

Johnston admits his actions were intended to test the safe-access law. In fact, he had been in contact with the police prior to his service, and they had informed him that he was likely to be subjected to "enforcement action" if he proceeded with it.

During his press conference, he explained:

I knew it was an unusual place to hold an open-air service, but that was the point: There shouldn't be any public spaces in Northern Ireland where you can be prosecuted and convicted simply for preaching the Gospel.

If someone is out there causing trouble, stirring up violence, harassing or verbally attacking people, then, absolutely, go ahead and prosecute them. But I wasn't doing any of those things, as the police video shows and everyone involved in this case accepts.

Johnston also testified that he had erroneously believed no abortions would be taking place the day of his service. Had that been the case, it would have put the law to an even more interesting test: Is it illegal to preach (or, for that matter, to protest) outside an abortion facility even when doing so could not "influence" any "protected person"?

Extra-censory Perception

Ciarán Kelly, director of the Christian Institute, which supported Johnston's legal defense, called his conviction "creeping censorship."

"If the ruling is allowed to stand, it will represent a shocking restriction on religious liberty, on freedom of speech, and so we will be working with Clive ... to consider our options for appeal," he added.

Kentucky pastor Danny Davis, a friend of Johnston's, told [Kentucky Today](#) he was stunned by the outcome of the Irishman's trial.

"When I was talking with Clive, he felt like he would be found guilty and probably have to pay some sort of fine," Davis said. "For me personally, I thought it would get dismissed after they kept kicking it down the road, maybe over the embarrassment that this event happened. But that didn't happen. I was surprised when they found him guilty."

The less-shocked Johnston had this to say to Fox News: "My encouragement to fellow Christians is not to give in to fear or discouragement. We have good news to share. We must continue to respond with



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grace, peace, and courage — never with anger or hostility, but with firm conviction.”



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