# Belfast City Marathon’s Sunday switch sparks faith clashes but boosts participation



# A Sunday to Remember: The 2023 Belfast City Marathon and Its Controversies

As thousands flocked to participate in the Belfast City Marathon on Sunday, April 30, 2023, the event marked a significant change: it was the first time the marathon was held on a Sunday instead of the traditional May Day Bank Holiday Monday. This decision ignited a wave of controversy, particularly from religious groups who believed that the timing encroached upon the sanctity of the Sabbath. A banner hanging from the Martyrs Memorial Free Presbyterian Church on Ravenhill Road reminded participants and onlookers alike to "Remember the Sabbath Day," symbolising the discord between the marathon and certain community values.

The Caleb Foundation, an evangelical group, expressed explicit disapproval of the marathon's new schedule. Their chairman, Wallace Thompson, voiced his concerns, stating that he was "very saddened and perturbed" by the shift. The foundation argued that Sunday was not an appropriate day for such events and feared that the marathon's popularity would disrupt church services and exclude Christian runners who regard the day with particular reverence. In response, marathon organisers sought to mitigate tensions by engaging with local churches to address their concerns, highlighting the event's focus on inclusivity and its benefits for local charities.

Despite these controversies, the marathon itself proved to be a resounding success, attracting around 15,000 participants, including runners, wheelchair racers, relay teams, and walkers. The race began at the historic Stormont Estate and wound its way through various notable landmarks, concluding in Ormeau Park. Moroccan runner Mohammed Oumaarir took home the men’s title, completing the race in a time of 2:22:54, while Ethiopian Shewaye Woldemeskel secured the women's title with a time of 2:37:20. The increased participation, reported to be a 60% rise compared to previous years, seemed to validate the new Sunday schedule. As marathon chairman David Seaton put it, the decision to move the event to a Sunday was “totally vindicated” by the heightened interest.

However, the day was not without complications. The marathon coincided with an Orange Order parade, leading to potential disruptions as the two events intersected on Ormeau Road. The Parades Commission, which oversees such events, stated that it endeavours to balance competing rights and privileges, demonstrating the ongoing complexities of organising community events within the dynamic social landscape of Northern Ireland.

Road closures throughout Belfast compounded the day’s challenges, affecting traffic and accessibility in the city. Organisers had issued advance warnings to motorists, attempting to minimise disruption while ensuring that the marathon proceeded smoothly.

The Belfast City Marathon serves not just as a sporting event but as a microcosm of the ongoing dialogue about community values, inclusivity, and tradition. As participants crossed the finish line at Ormeau Park, the applause was not solely for their athletic achievements but also reflected a broader community grappling with the intersection of faith, culture, and celebration in contemporary life.

The discussions surrounding the marathon are likely to continue, but what remains clear is that the event has become an important part of Belfast's social fabric, prompting reflection on how best to honour both cultural heritage and modern athletic pursuits.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/fionola-meredith/give-it-a-rest-on-lecturing-people-on-what-they-should-or-shouldnt-do-on-sundays/a1352806054.html), [[2]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/religious-group-slams-sunday-belfast-city-marathon/38026355.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/religious-group-slams-sunday-belfast-city-marathon/38026355.html), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/athletics/48146037)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-04-30/thousands-take-part-in-belfast-city-marathon), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65401871), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/athletics/48146037)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/05/01/news/belfast_marathon_and_orange_order_parade_clash-3246534/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://belfastcitymarathon.com/news/General/Belfast-City-Marathon-Sunday-30th-April-Traffic-Advice)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/fionola-meredith/give-it-a-rest-on-lecturing-people-on-what-they-should-or-shouldnt-do-on-sundays/a1352806054.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/religious-group-slams-sunday-belfast-city-marathon/38026355.html> - An evangelical lobby group, the Caleb Foundation, criticized the Belfast City Marathon for being held on a Sunday for the first time. They expressed concerns that church services would be disrupted and that Christian runners who observe Sunday as a special day would be excluded. Wallace Thompson, chairman of the Caleb Foundation, stated that the change from the May Day Bank Holiday Monday to Sunday was 'very saddened and perturbed' by the decision. The marathon organizers responded by engaging with affected stakeholders to minimize disruption and emphasized the event's inclusivity and its role in raising funds for local charities.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2023-04-30/thousands-take-part-in-belfast-city-marathon> - Thousands of runners participated in the 41st Belfast City Marathon, which took place on Sunday, April 30, 2023. The race began at the Stormont Estate and traversed various parts of the city, passing landmarks such as City Hall and Parliament Buildings, before concluding at Ormeau Park. Moroccan runner Mohammed Oumaarir won the men's event with a time of 2:22:54, while Ethiopian Shewaye Woldemeskel secured the women's title in 2:37:20. The event also featured a wheelchair race, team relay, and walk, with road closures in place throughout the day.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65401871> - The 2023 Belfast City Marathon saw thousands of runners completing the 26.2-mile race, which started at the Stormont Estate and ended in Ormeau Park. The route passed through various parts of the city, including landmarks like City Hall and Parliament Buildings. Moroccan runner Mohammed Oumaarir won the men's event, while Ethiopian Shewaye Woldemeskel triumphed in the women's event. Commonwealth Games athlete Gladys Ganiel finished as the runner-up in the women's race with a time of 2:41:20, improving her previous year's performance by two minutes.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/athletics/48146037> - Organizers of the Belfast City Marathon reported a 60% increase in entries for the 2023 event, following its move from the traditional May Day Bank Holiday Monday to a Sunday. The marathon chairman, David Seaton, stated that the decision to change the event to a Sunday was 'totally vindicated' by the surge in participation. While some church groups expressed concerns about the date change, Seaton mentioned that most churches had cooperated, with some adjusting their services to accommodate the marathon schedule.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/05/01/news/belfast_marathon_and_orange_order_parade_clash-3246534/> - An Orange Order parade coincided with the Belfast City Marathon on Sunday, April 30, 2023, leading to potential disruptions. As many runners were making their way up Ormeau Road, a small band parade started moving down the same stretch of road in the opposite direction. The Parades Commission stated that it seeks to 'balance rights' after the simultaneous events. The marathon attracted around 15,000 participants, including runners, wheelchair racers, relay teams, and walkers.
7. <https://belfastcitymarathon.com/news/General/Belfast-City-Marathon-Sunday-30th-April-Traffic-Advice> - The organizers of the Belfast City Marathon issued traffic advice ahead of the event on Sunday, April 30, 2023. The 26.2-mile marathon route ran through all four areas of Belfast, starting at Stormont Estate and finishing in Ormeau Park. Motorists were advised to expect disruptions throughout the morning and early afternoon, with road closures starting from around 6 am until approximately 4 pm. Efforts were made to minimize disruptions, and once all runners had passed points on the route, roads were reopened as quickly as possible.