

General Synod 2022

Motion No.12

Proposer: Dr Simon Elliott

Check Against Delivery · Embargo Until Delivery

Your Grace, Mr President, I propose that the General Synod requests the Standing Committee to develop a Church of Ireland Policy on Welcome and Equality that prohibits discrimination.

There are three aspects of the proposed policy that I would like to speak about: whom it applies to, what types of discrimination it concerns, and where exemptions may be needed.

But first of all, why? Why is this policy needed?

In my opinion, relating to all people equally is central to our Christian faith. In the Old Testament and the New, we read again and again that welcoming a stranger can become an encounter with the divine. We are challenged to reach out to those who seem to be different from ourselves, or who have been marginalised by society. This policy is a modest statement of that radical welcome. It may be seen in the context of the Dignity in Church Life Charter, in which the Church of Ireland is committed to upholding the right of all equally to be treated with dignity and respect.

So let's look now at 'to whom' the policy will apply. This policy will prevent the church discriminating against employees, office-holders, volunteers and contractors. While employees are already protected by law against discrimination, the policy would be clear about such protection also extending to the clergy, as office-holders. But also to Select Vestry members, youth club leaders, the flower rota and the multitude of other volunteers who of course are due the same level of respect. And, treating our neighbour as ourselves, this policy also applies to contractors that we interact with in the delivery of services.

Moving on, what type of discrimination will be prohibited? This motion adopts the types stated in national equality law, where there is very close agreement between the two jurisdictions on this island. In Northern Ireland, the characteristics that are protected are race, sex, disability, age, gender assignment, marriage or civil partnership status, religious beliefs, political opinion and sexual orientation. In Republic of Ireland equality legislation, the grounds for discrimination are age, civil status, disability, family status, gender, membership of the Traveller Community, race, religion and sexual orientation.

As you can see, the motion lists nine protected categories that are the aggregate of the categories for the two jurisdictions just listed, minus 'religion'. Adopting the categories from legislation in this way is deliberate. It ensures a seamless overlap between the existing legal protection for employees and

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the policy's protection of non-employees. In addition, the categories from legislation are widely known and understood, making this new policy easily comprehensible to church members.

Society, including the church, has a lamentable history of discriminating against people in these categories. While the situation has improved, discrimination is still all too common today. Hate crimes are a very present problem in Irish society, and unfortunately we have seen recent examples of extreme violence, including gender-based violence. While the church can not solve these problems single-handedly, we surely have an important role to play in giving leadership.

We finally come to exemptions. No right is absolute. It is necessary to discriminate in certain circumstances in order to fulfil the church's mission. For example, retirement ages are specified for certain offices. Positive discrimination for gender balance is mandated on some committees. We also face constraints on modifying buildings to improve access, whether because of heritage-related planning controls or because of limited parochial funds. These are just some examples. Exemptions of this sort should be specified as precisely as possible by the Standing Committee when formulating the policy.

Of course, the aim is still to avoid discrimination. The over-arching message of this policy is that we should always be doing our best to welcome and include everyone equally. An equality policy is part of good charity governance. This policy will not introduce more bureaucracy; rather, it will remove ambiguity and simplify matters for Select Vestries.

A Eucharist service in the Book of Common Prayer reminds us that Christ "opened wide his arms upon the cross". I feel it is no exaggeration to say that the future of the church depends on extending a wide and genuine welcome to all. I therefore propose this motion on developing a Church of Ireland Policy on Welcome and Equality.