

## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

The Uniting Church in Australia is concerned that the revised Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 introduced to Parliament this week does not achieve the balance needed to protect the rights of all people.

The third and final draft of the bill was introduced to Parliament by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Thursday morning.

The national Assembly of the Uniting Church notes and welcomes improvements made to the proposed laws but, like many other civil society groups, remains concerned by significant elements.

“The Uniting Church is committed to the right of every person to a robust freedom of religion,” said Rev Sharon Hollis, President of the Uniting Church in Australia. “However, we maintain any permission given to individuals or religious organisations that allows them to discriminate on the basis of religious belief must be carefully balanced against the rights of people to be free from discrimination and live with dignity.”

“It is our view that the Religious Discrimination Bill does not achieve that balance.”

“The Uniting Church is concerned for vulnerable people and groups who are most likely to be adversely impacted by the legislation should it be passed into law in its current form.”

“We particularly fear that members of the LGBTIQ+ community, those of minority faiths, women, and people living with disability may be subject to additional discrimination under this legislation.”

Such discrimination could take many forms including in public statements and employment.

“We encourage the government to continue to consult and listen to the concerns of groups expressing their genuine fears about the proposed legislation.”

“In the Uniting Church we believe that all people are created in the image of God and are loved and valued by God. The ministry of Jesus emphasised welcoming all, especially people who were vulnerable and marginalised.”

“Our approach to religious freedom is that such freedoms are never to be self-serving, but rather ought to be directed toward the Church’s continuing commitment to seeking human flourishing and wholeness within a healthy, diverse society,” said Rev Hollis. “Any legislative provisions for religious freedom should be driven by an overriding focus on enabling and maintaining a society which encourages mutual respect and is free from discrimination that demeans and diminishes people’s dignity.”

UnitingCare Australia National Director Claerwen Little said, “As a provider of community services across Australia, including hospitals and aged care services, the Uniting Church is concerned certain provisions within this Bill could undermine our ability to ensure safe and inclusive workplaces and may act as a barrier to vulnerable people accessing essential services or seeking employment.”

“Uniting Church community service providers do not discriminate in the employment of staff or access to services. We do not seek additional powers in this regard and will not use them even if the Parliament passes the Bill,” Ms Little said.

The consistent position of the Uniting Church has been, and continues to be, that legislative provisions for religious freedom would best be made through the mechanism of a comprehensive Human Rights Act, within which the competing claims and values inherent in this discussion may be grounded in a holistic approach to human rights.

After the Bill is voted on in the House of Representatives, the bill will go to a Senate inquiry over summer. It will not be decided in Parliament until early next year, depending on election timing and when the Parliament resumes.

The Assembly will make a full response to any inquiry.

**MEDIA CONTACT: Rebecca Beisler 0450790218**