

Presenting Christ Credibly in the Public Square

The public affairs work of Evangelical Alliance in Northern Ireland is diverse ranging from the environment to human rights, equality to charities legislation, or from suicide to liquor licensing. But, whatever the topic, the principles of engagement remain the same: we seek to present Christ credibly as good news for spiritual and social transformation.

Getting Equal

In the last *Reach* we highlighted new equality legislation which was still at the consultation stage. *Getting Equal* asked for views on proposals to outlaw discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services. We expressed concern that the proposals could have serious implications for churches and faith organisations if appropriate exemptions were not introduced.

Through the consultation process we highlighted those concerns to local political parties, provided information to church leaders, submit a written response and spoke directly to those driving this policy. We met with Government officials along with the Churches Community Work Alliance and raised a number of issues. Officials took on board our views, particularly around the use of premises and the provision of services by the church to local communities.

Recent developments

Things have moved rapidly in recent weeks. Plans to introduce similar legislation to England and Wales have been postponed until April 2007 due to the huge amount of responses. However, officials in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have pressed on to meet their deadline of November 2006.

Consequently the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 were laid before the House of Commons and the House of Lords on Friday 24 November. The rushed nature of the consultation and the subsequent printing of the regulations has done little to allay fears that Government is using Northern Ireland as a testing ground to sneak controversial legislation through the back door.

Fear

Fear is being generated in some quarters that the new regulations will curb religious liberty and curtail freedom of speech. There have been suggestions that teachers could lose their jobs, ministers forced to perform blessing ceremonies for civil partnerships, and churches will no longer have a say in how the use of their premises.

Exemptions

However the legislation does contain a number of exemptions for churches and religious organisations to allow them to comply with the doctrine of the organisation or avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers.

Exemptions include:

- Ability to restrict membership
- Ability to restrict participation in activities
- Ability to restrict **use or disposal of premises** owned or controlled by an organisation
- Ability to restrict provision of goods, facilities or services provided by an organisation

These exemptions do not apply where the sole or main purpose of an organisation is commercial. However, in a bed and breakfast for example, a same sex couple could be refused a double room in line with the beliefs of the owners, provided the same standard applies to an unmarried heterosexual couple.

Ministers

There are also exemptions for ministers; they will not, for example, be in a position where they are forced to carry out civil partnership ceremonies.

Interestingly, some groups representing the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community asked that there be even stricter exemptions, or in one case, no exceptions to the legislation for religious organisations.

Education

Schools will not be allowed to deliberately deny a pupil any benefits or services on the ground of sexual orientation. However, the regulations do not cover the curriculum which is governed by guidance from the Department of Education and CCEA. New guidance on Relationship and Sexuality Education will be rolled out in Northern Ireland for school year 2007/08. It advises that differing views on homosexuality be treated with sensitivity and there is no suggestion that homosexuality will be taught as a norm in primary schools.

Harassment

Harassment has been included in the legislation. Someone who perceives that their dignity has been violated, or that an intimidating, degrading, offensive, hostile or humiliating environment has been created, would be able to take a case of harassment against the alleged offender. There are concerns that this clause will both curtail religious liberty *and* curb freedom of speech.

While it is possible that someone with malicious intent might try to use this clause to stop Christians from articulating publicly their belief that homosexual practice is wrong, we should be cautious. To what benefit is it to the Kingdom of God to be seen to be fighting for, what many will perceive, as the right to continue to be able to harass people? An alternative route is to seek the same protection against harassment for Christians perhaps through the proposed Single Equality Bill - protection which does not currently exist.

Presenting Christ Credibly

We continue to strive to engage with integrity and present Christ credibly in the public square. Yes, there may be times when we get it wrong or when things do not go entirely our way. But let us not forget that our God is bigger and more powerful than any law which this Government puts on the statute books and his modus operandi is not fear, but love.