

21 December 2012

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

RE: Inquiry on the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012.

I wish to express my concerns about this bill and the negative impact that it will have on freedom of religion. I am aware of cases in Canada and Great Britain where the normal and historical practice of religion has become an offence under similar legislation.

Of particular concern is the intent to make it an offence to cause offence. This is a direct threat to freedom of speech and hence freedom of religion. The simple act of proclaiming an aspect of our faith could be used to make a vexatious complaint.

Three examples come to mind that may be used as opportunities to make a complaint.

We produce and sponsor an annual community Christmas Carols. Placing our church logo and an invitation to our Christmas services in front of people, or placing evangelistic material in free gift bags that we hand out, or giving a short Christmas message about the claims of Jesus during the night may cause offence.

On the side of our church there is a large sign on which we display though provoking or witty messages to the community, these messages may cause offence.

We hold weekly church services during which a sermon is preached. The content of these sermons based upon passages of Scripture may cause offence to some.

In a democracy where freedom of religion is truly valued if a person takes offence then it is understood that we have the freedom to proclaim our faith and they have the freedom to not accept it. Under the proposed legislation we could find ourselves in the situation where we have committed a criminal act by declaring our faith, even if we have acted in a responsible and fair manner.

These examples and the requirement for exemptions from the Act to be reviewed every three years make it clear to me that this bill will not maintain freedom of religion and will result in a more segmented and confrontational society.

Yours Sincerely

Rev Stephen Thomas