



# **Uniting Church in Australia ASSEMBLY**

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**Appearance before Inquiry:**

**Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights**

**Religious Discrimination Bill 2021**

**January 2022**

## **Opening Remarks – Uniting Church in Australia Assembly**

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) Assembly is the national body of the Uniting Church in Australia.

The UCA is represented by Rev Sharon Hollis President of the Assembly, and Ms Claerwen Little, The National Director of UnitingCare Australia.

The Uniting Church is the third largest Christian Denomination in Australia. We are a very diverse Church, made up of:

- First Nations members through our Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities from across the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Latin America
- Members of the LGBTIQ community in Australia
- 53 schools
- 19 service providers of aged and community care within the UnitingCare Australia network. UnitingCare Australia is the national body for this network, and is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia. With over 1,600 sites, the network employs 50,000 staff and is supported by the work of over 30,000 volunteers.
- Our many regular church members from across Australia who bring a diverse range of views and opinions on many issues, but are joined together by our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

We have attempted to consult from across this diversity in the preparation of our current submissions and those we have made previously.

The UCA does not support the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 in its current form.

The Uniting Church in Australia commends efforts to strengthen legislative protections to prevent discrimination against people on the basis of their religious belief at the federal level. We have long believed that this would be best done through the development of a comprehensive Human Rights Act.

We believe there are certain provisions in this Bill that actually increase the likelihood of discrimination against people of minority faiths and also people from more vulnerable groups within society.

We have particular concerns that there is increased potential for discrimination of people within the LGBTIQ community, people living with disabilities and women.

We believe it does this by privileging powerful religious voices at the expense of minority and vulnerable voices in society, which seems to be the exact opposite of its purpose, and by providing what we see as extraordinary and excessive religious exceptions.

We are concerned such provisions could have the effect in the wider community of emboldening discrimination by providing an authorising environment for demeaning statements or actions. Rather than building harmony and tolerance it would have a corrosive effect on society.

Further, as a provider of education and community services across Australia, including hospitals and aged care services, we are concerned certain provisions within this Bill may act as a barrier to vulnerable people accessing essential services or people from minority groups seeking employment.

The presence of the UCA President, our National Director of community services, along with national leaders on Uniting Network indicates the seriousness with which we view this proposed legislation. We would be happy to draw on this breadth of experience and answer any questions.