

CHURCH groups fear proposed new laws will designate congregational sermons and conversations as political while strictly regulating how they can be funded under the threat of jail terms.

The *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill* and the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Bill* are part of a package of legislation introduced to federal parliament. The legislation is currently being considered by inquiries.

Uniting Church social justice advocate Dr Mark Zirnsak said the proposed laws could make statements of societal values, including those based on Christian beliefs, designated as politically partisan with a raft of potentially prohibitive regulations attached.

“This proposed legislation says that speaking on any issue publicly is the same as campaigning for a political party or candidate,” he said.

“This is not just about speaking up on issues like people seeking asylum or justice for Australia’s First Peoples. Conversations within the churches about the role of churches in society will be treated as political conversations that need to be regulated.”

It's suggested that sermons and conversations within the church will be regarded as 'political' and therefore must be regulated. Proclaiming our beliefs will be unacceptable. I see this as limiting 'freedom of speech' for all incorporated bodies and, for the churches, contrary to Jesus' stance. As he said to Pilate: *My kingdom is not from this world.* (John 18:36). We are pilgrims outside the mainstream cultures.

Jesus' way is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and he told us: *the kingdom of heaven is within you.* (Luke 17:21) Those who follow Jesus are bound by the civil law but only in a manner that is consistent with our faith. We cannot be bound in the proclamation of our beliefs. *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.* (Matthew 22:21)

Combined with new rules, purportedly designed to limit the influence of foreign donors, funding for ministry could potentially be drawn into a draconian set of registry requirements.

“Only Australian citizens and residents will be allowed to make donations to fund ministry and mission of the church,” Dr Zirnsak said.

“Each church member will be required to provide a statutory declaration that they are an Australian citizen or Australian resident before their giving can be used for mission or ministry.

“Donations from non-citizens or people who do not provide a statutory declaration

will be required to be kept separate and only spent on things that do not involve ministry or mission, such as property.

“Breaking these rules could see the person in charge of the church’s financial arrangements sent to prison for up to 10 years.”

If Southwell's interpretation is correct then the GWUC is faced with some very practical difficulties:

Will members and adherents be willing to formally declare they are Australian to allow them to contribute to mission and ministry? I doubt that I will sign up because I am part of a global gathering of the followers of Jesus and I don't need permission from the State to be involved in his mission and ministry.

There is evidently a problem with Open Plate donations: the donors cannot be identified even if they sign a Stat. Dec., so a significant portion of income could not be used for mission and ministry.

Where will GWUC stand with the COP program? The sources of income are unknown but are hypothecated with funds received from our Annual Fete. Nobody knows who bought what, nor who donated what. This complicates the granting of funds to COP projects for surely they all would be defined as mission and ministry.

Will the Commonwealth regulations define 'Mission' and 'Ministry'?

Dr Zirnsak said the legislation threatens to stifle advocacy and debate.

“Similar legislation by conservative governments in the UK and Canada was used to shut down the voices of community groups in conversations about how to create a better society in those countries,” he said.

The president of the Uniting Church in Australia, Stuart McMillan, said the proposed new electoral funding laws will “potentially damage the democratic process”. Mr McMillan has called on the legislation to be redrafted.

“Churches and other organisations advocating for the common good should

not be impeded in exercising our prophetic voice,” he said.

“These changes will make it harder to make heard the voices, issues and concerns of people in the communities we serve.”

Church community services arm UnitingCare Australia said a requirement to verify and record the residency status of anyone who donated more than \$250 per year would drastically affect their work.

“This would clearly mean a significant reduction in the fundraising capacity of ourselves and service agencies, therefore reducing vital services to those most in need,” Uniting Care national director Claerwen Little said.

How will these regulations fit or conflict with regulations created as an outcome of the proposed incorporation of the Synod of Victoria? Will they aim to limit the prophetic voice?

It is outrageous that non-declared Australians cannot donate more than the cost of a cup of coffee each week to mission and ministry. How will this affect the migrant people among us who are generous in mission and ministry but are not yet Australian citizens?