

**Speech by The Rt Revd Harold Miller,
Bishop of Down and Dromore**

**Seconding the Motion on Human Sexuality in the Context of
Christian Belief**

Church of Ireland General Synod

Saturday 12 May 2012

Archbishop and, if you would permit me also to address the members of Synod at this point, sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is an honour and a privilege to be seconding the Archbishop of Dublin's motion this morning. I know that you all feel the importance of this motion, because you are here in larger numbers than I have ever seen at the third day of a General Synod! And I also know that you will debate the motion with both seriousness and humility, seeking to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, at a very important time in the life of our beloved church.

It is important to say that, although proposed by the Archbishop of Dublin and seconded by myself, the essential contents of this motion have emerged from the corporate thinking of the bishops. They have been carefully crafted, with a balance in content and wording which has been through many stages and revisions. The bishops have taken very seriously their role in maintaining and furthering the unity of the church at a time when that has been threatened in the wider Anglican Communion. So the contents of this motion were not arrived at lightly.

If I were to focus on one phrase in the motion before you which holds it all together, it would be the phrase 'Safe place' at the very heart of the material. The Slieve Russell Conference gave us a kind of glimpse of what a 'safe place' might look like. There was truly respectful listening, there were relationships across a wide range of opinion, and a sense that it might even be possible for

the Church of Ireland to do something which has been well-nigh impossible in other parts of the communion: to find a way forward carefully and prayerfully together.

If this motion is all about creating a 'safe place', then the church needs to be experienced as a welcoming environment for people with same-sex attraction, indeed a welcoming environment for all who seek to learn and love the way of Christ. The motion recognizes that this has not always been so, and sets a standard for the future.

Also, if this motion is about creating a 'safe place', we must know where we are starting from. Our present position. Our 'moorings'. That is what the first section is seeking to do, in affirming our understanding of marriage and sexuality.

And, thirdly, if this motion is about affirming a 'safe place', it needs to find a way forward in holding a conversation, which is at least part of the idea of a Select Committee. After all, what problem in the Church of Ireland cannot be resolved by creating another committee!?

I wonder if you would also permit me to say something about the importance of *listening* in all of this. On Wednesday night, Mickey Harte, the wonderful Tyrone GAA manager, and father of Michalea McAreavey who was so tragically murdered on honeymoon in the Seychelles a year and a half ago, was speaking at a cross-community event in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast. He was just brilliant, and he spoke of the importance of listening to one another. He illustrated it by speaking of his mother who was, he said very fond of ceilidh-ing. I'd never heard the phrase, and assumed he was talking about dancing. But he wasn't. Ceilidh-ing is apparently, in parts of the country, a word for what happens when people come round to your home on a certain night of the week, just to pour their hearts out and be listened to. I personally have done a great deal of ceilidh-ing at the last two Lambeth Conferences, so much so that Liz and myself starred in the *Changing Attitude* Magazine as an example of those who came to the LGBT events to listen. Listening brings understanding. Sometimes even, listening, like love, suffers long! Listening accords respect and value to the other. It is absolutely vital to all we do and how we live.

Mickey Harte also emphasised (and I'm sure he didn't think he'd be quoted at the Church of Ireland General Synod), that listening does not mean that we must lay down our own views, and all of us realize that we come to this issue with our own views and opinions, formed over years, but we also realize that we need to find a starting point for a way forward, to begin the journey together. I suggest this motion is our starting-point, and the journey together will hopefully be both an interesting and productive one.

You will also see in the motion before you that the bishops have listened to the concerns expressed at and around the first day of this session of Synod. We have therefore both tidied up the motion, and, realizing that some were fearful, that, if it were presented as three separate motions a safe space might be created for one constituency but not for another, have rationalized it into one motion. I think that is very important for building up trust, and enabling us to be fully committed to one another in finding a way forward.

It is with great pleasure, and with real pleading that I ask you to pass this motion, and to create a 'safe place' for our ongoing conversations.