

Motion No.3

Proposer: The Revd Canon Lesley Robinson

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Archbishop,

‘Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!’ (1 Kings 8:27) ... the familiar words of King Solomon addressed to the Lord at the dedication of the First Temple.

I am aware that it is not the first time the issue of solemnising marriages in secular venues has come before Synod. Indeed in 2021 the Standing Committee amended the Marriage Regulations to allow for the solemnisation of marriage in places other than *a church or chapel of the Church of Ireland duly consecrated for public worship in exceptional circumstances where the prior approval of the relevant bishop has been obtained.*

However, every year at our Diocesan Synod, colleagues of mine lament over the opportunities of outreach on which we are missing out due to the general prohibition which remains in place. And having been on the Pioneer Ministry Hub in our United Dioceses since its inception, I am more convinced than ever that not being allowed to solemnise a marriage in a hotel or other secular wedding venue flies in the face of the spirit of Pioneer Ministry which seeks to reach those with little or no connection to church.

Couples choose secular wedding venues for many reasons – perhaps for the convenience of having everything in one place, or perhaps because of the lack of accessibility, comfort, parking or toilet facilities in many of our churches. While it is true that some couples may have no wish to have a religious ceremony, undoubtably there are others who would opt for a religious ceremony if it were an option in their chosen venue.

To be able to provide such an option could be a wonderful missional opportunity for clergy to bring God’s Word and Spirit into ceremonies and places and congregations currently off-limits, as if somehow God’s presence is confined to our beautiful church buildings.

‘Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!’

In our increasingly secular society, pastoral services in our churches such as baptisms, weddings and funerals are regularly frequented by people who are not regular worshippers, yet they provide a wonderful showcase for Christian liturgy and pastoral care and often result in

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positive spiritual experiences even for those who have come with little or no expectation of them. I have no reason to doubt that weddings performed in secular venues would have any less potential to be vehicles of Christian witness and outreach.

I want to be clear that what I am proposing is not about anything other than clergy potentially being allowed to marry couples whom we are currently permitted to marry in church under existing marriage regulations, in secular venues

I am therefore proposing the establishment of a working group to prayerfully and carefully consider over time all the pros and cons of this issue and report back to Synod in due course, thus avoiding what can sometimes be controversial knee-jerk reactions to issues when a vote is requested without time for due consideration.

Accordingly, I propose:

‘That the Standing Committee establish a working group (to include members of both the House of Bishops and the House of Representatives) to investigate the possibility of allowing Church of Ireland clergy to solemnise marriages in secular venues as part of the church's outreach, and that this Working Group brings its final report and recommendations to the General Synod of 2027 at the latest.’

Thank you.