

The General Synod today gave its backing to a call for the Church of England to speak out against racism and hate crime directed against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

The Church of England's national assembly heard from a member of the English Gypsy community before it began a debate on tackling discrimination and prejudice against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

The Bishop of Chelmsford, Stephen Cottrell, moving a motion before the General Synod, spoke of the 'evil' of all forms of racism – and how racism and prejudice against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities was still 'tragically' tolerated.

He cited research showing that nine out of 10 Gypsy and Traveller children had experienced racial abuse and findings from the Equality and Human Rights Commission that discrimination against these groups is still 'common, frequently overt and seen as justified.'

He said: "If one of us in any other situation today or later was to use racist language about some other person or group it is very likely in today's society that we would and rightly so be immediately called out but tragically, perversely, racism against Traveller and Roma and Gypsies is still tolerated."

He added: "This motion may be modest in its scope but it signals a change of heart and a new direction in our determination to combat racism in all its manifestations and to be clear that all people are made in the image of God, and that Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people deserve particular support," he said.

In the motion passed overwhelmingly by 265 votes in favour with one against, the General Synod voted to request every Church of England diocese appoints a chaplain to Gypsies, Travellers and Roma communities.

The motion also asks for the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council to evaluate the provision of sites for Gypsies and Travellers in wider housing policy and recommends Church bodies raise the need for this land.

Janie Codona, a member of the English Gypsy community, addressing the General Synod before the debate, spoke of discrimination she had first experienced aged only five years old. She said the discrimination against these groups 'never goes away'.

"We have experienced discrimination within the Gypsy and Traveller community every day and we have got so we don't even seem to notice it half the time," she said.

"We don't judge, we don't demand apologies, we don't say 'oh don't treat us that way' because we think' what is the good it is only going to happen again the next day.'

"But as time went on I realised that if we didn't stand up as a community and we didn't start saying enough is enough it would never end."

The full wording of the motion passed by the General Synod is:

That this Synod, mindful of the Church of England's commitment to combat racism in all its manifestations

- a. call upon the Church's leadership, including the Lords Spiritual, other bishops, senior staff, the Mission and Public Affairs Division and others, to speak out publicly against racism and hate crime directed against Gypsies, Irish Travellers and Roma, and urge the media to stop denigrating and victimising these communities;
- b. request every diocese to appoint a chaplain to Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, to provide pastoral care, harness the potential for church growth among these communities and help combat racism in the Church and wider communities;
- c. request the Mission and Public Affairs Council, in its forthcoming work on housing, to evaluate the importance of provision of sites for Gypsies and Travellers in wider housing policy, and recommend Church bodies to play their part in lobbying for and enabling land to be made available for such sites; and
- d. request the Lords Spiritual and staff of the National Church Institutions to meet with representatives from Her Majesty's Government and Loyal Opposition, as well as leaders from Local Government, including the Local Government Association, to co-ordinate and collaborate on shared plans to make traveller stopping points available across England, to develop community cohesion.

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