soce survivor statement

socesurvivors.com.au

to accompany the petition at:

change.org/endgaycures

calling for action on:

the ex-gay, ex-trans and conversion movement

sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE)

As survivors of the ex-gay, ex-trans and conversion movement and Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE), we present this petition calling for Australia’s elected representatives to intervene to curtail the ongoing and life-threatening operations of this movement. The tally of signatures for this petition was 42,200 on Tuesday 14 August, 2018 (www.change.org/EndGayCures).

This accompanying statement has been prepared by survivors, allies, advocates, organisations and community groups that support, advocate for, or are led by LGBTIQ+ people of faith. The statement provides a basis for understanding the ideology that drives the ex-gay movement.

Conversion therapy, ex-gay/ex-trans ideology, and Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) in Australia developed into a widespread movement between the early 1970s and mid 1980s. Churches and faith communities saw a need to provide a biblical response to people whose sexuality and gender identity did not fit within the accepted norms of the time.

The prevailing belief was that homosexuality was a perversion of the ‘natural order’ and a conscious choice that could be altered by prayer, personal effort, and re-forming ‘healthy’ habits, such as marrying someone of the opposite sex. In addition to this, some branches of the church also saw homosexuality as being the result of spiritual influence. These beliefs formed the basis of early Sexual Orientation Change Efforts.

In order to explain how people became same-sex attracted or trans, secular psychological reasoning was mis-appropriated by the church. The predominant
reasoning was that same-sex attracted and trans people had a sickness due to abuse or neglect and could, through therapy, find healing. This is best exemplified by Living Waters and Exodus, two major ex-gay organisations that are now defunct but that, at their peaks, influenced thousands of LGBTQ+ Australian Christians.

Therapeutic attempts to alter sexual orientation and gender identity have been thoroughly discredited by the psychological community for some time. In 2015, a report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Discrimination and violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, IV,D,38) included conversion therapy in its list of practices categorised as ‘torture and ill-treatment’.

Conversion (or ex-gay/ex-trans) therapy, refers to formal practices occurring in a therapeutic setting that target and attract LGBTQ+ people of faith in order to change their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender and sexual expression. LGBTQ+ people of faith may have participated willingly: many ex-gay groups have claimed they only exist to help those who express an independent desire to change. However, many participants report that they were coerced by parents, pastors, and/or the ideologies implicit within their religious group. They are also often internally driven by the fear of rejection and the desire to be ‘whole’. Viewing conversion therapy through the lens of ‘willing participation’ is thus extremely problematic. Equally problematic are attempts to counter the conversion therapy movement that do not bear in mind its theological origins.

**Core tenets of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement**

The ex-gay/conversion movement and SOCE are based on a set of interconnected assertions:

- All people are born with the potential of developing into heterosexual people whose gender identity reflects their sex assigned at birth.
- In people who are same-sex attracted, trans or gender diverse, this development has been halted or stunted due to one or several factors: abuse, neglect, inappropriate parenting dynamics, social influence, and even spiritual issues. This phenomenon is often labelled as ‘sexual brokenness’, particularly if a person has transitioned or had sexual experiences with people of the same sex.
- Through consistent long-term Christian discipleship; committed involvement in a ‘Bible-believing’ faith community; spiritual mentoring; the avoidance and suppression of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer influences; connection to an ex-gay/ex-trans support group, and/or ongoing conversion therapy/counselling, a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity can be restored.
- Same-sex attracted, trans and gender diverse people should live celibate lives or seek healing for their sexual brokenness. This is a core obligation in the faith practice of same-sex attracted, trans and gender diverse people. The pursuit of other spiritual or religious activities is noble, however the failure to pursue healing for one’s sexual brokenness is cause for significant concern or disciplinary action.
• As ‘sexual brokenness’ is a sign of deep dysfunction, same-sex attracted, trans and gender diverse people may not be suited to positions of authority within their faith community.

Goals of Formal Conversion Therapy

Formal ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion therapy generally employs individual or group counselling, pastoral care, or similar means to assist and encourage LGBTQ+ people to:

• live ‘healthy heterosexual’ lives through mixed-orientation marriage, or
• live ‘sexually pure’ lives through celibacy or abstinence, even while remaining same-sex attracted, bi+, trans, and/or gender diverse, or
• ultimately change their orientation, attraction, or gender identity.

Types of Conversion Practice

The ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion therapy movement is amorphic, encompassing a host of varied faith-based organisations and communities. Its main expressions are:

• counselling in secular, unregulated counselling services (to address childhood trauma or work towards ‘acceptable’ sexual/gender behaviours)
• pastoral care/counselling
• prayer ministry (including deliverance, the protestant term for ‘exorcism’)
• support groups
• conferences and rallies
• online interactive coursework and mentoring programs

There is no justification for accredited professions such as psychology or psychiatry – or even allied services such as counselling – to base their practice in theological frameworks. However, many of the above manifestations fall outside the jurisdiction of statutory regulatory bodies (such as AHPRA) that are authorised to make such assessments.

In recent years much attention has been given by media to these concrete expressions of ‘conversion therapy’, however little focus has been placed on:

• the ways that conversion therapy has been used to target lesbian, bi+ and trans individuals
• the widespread ideology that sustains the movement
• the broader array of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) that reach beyond formal therapeutic practices

Sexual Orientation Change Efforts

While most formal ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion organisations have closed down, the beliefs and ideology that formed the basis of the movement still exist in the form of non-therapeutic, underground activities regarded as Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE).
Many expressions of SOCE exist at the micro level, making them difficult to recognise, quantify, and regulate. The underlying ideology is firmly embedded in the everyday life of many faith communities as a collection of messages, beliefs and practices. For many people of faith, the idea that sexual orientation or gender identity can be ‘fixed’ is predicated on the notion that God created the universe with a specific order. This order denotes heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the intended order, meaning that LGBTQ+ people are broken, and that this brokenness is due to ‘sin’ (sin being explained using varying definitions and metaphors: inherent dysfunction, spiritual disconnection, immorality, wrongdoing, collective human guilt being some of these).

Hence, SOCE encompasses a range of techniques that seek to conform lesbian, gay, bi+, trans, gender-diverse, and queer people of faith to binary roles of straight women or straight men who identify with their gender assigned at birth.

While SOCE may not be unique to faith communities (e.g. there may be SOCE in wider cultural groups where deviation from sexual and gender norms is considered taboo), much of the ideology which drives Australian SOCE it has its genesis there.

Most expressions of SOCE have flown under the radar in recent media coverage of ‘conversion therapy’:

- Pastoral advice and recommendations of websites, gender-segregated retreats and conferences, books, and other resources.
- Informal prayer ministry (i.e. between peers or during prayer time after church services).
- Sermons or bible studies that talk about and reinforce ‘traditional gender roles’ and living as ‘men and women of God’ (i.e. men being strong, the head of the house, the bread-winner and sexually dominant, and women being submissive, motherly, bearing children, and purely romantic in nature within their sexual desire).
- Subtle and overt sermons or testimonials that encourage or promote orientation change. It should be noted that almost every global conversion therapy organisation has now folded, with the movement’s leaders renouncing and apologising for the hurt they have caused LGBTQ+ people of faith.
- An individual’s private efforts or attempts to incrementally change their own orientation or identity (via the reading of above-mentioned resources, private prayer time, self-denial or attempts at forming habits in opposition to their orientation or identity).
- Removal from positions of community leadership or influence in order to encourage the LGBTQ+ person to accomplish private ‘personal development’ work in the area of their sexuality or gender (or to discourage the perceived ‘promotion’ of homosexuality).
- A disowning from faith communities and families until such a time as the LGBTQ+ person expresses a change in orientation or demonstrates a rejection of their orientation or identity.
- Content related to any of the above in education, chaplaincy, sex-and-relationships education programs in schools, or tertiary counselling training courses.
While participants in SOCE may be directed and encouraged by faith leaders and counsellors, change attempts can become self-directed. The expressions of SOCE listed above are intertwined into the fabric of faith communities and conservative theology.

**Survivors**

Survivors of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and SOCE have endured and survived a system which dehumanised and shamed them, despite their sense of deep devotion and connection to their faith community.

Survivors of SOCE are diverse.

- Some survivors may still identify with and enjoy continued connection with the community in which they experienced SOCE while maintaining a firm position that SOCE are harmful and ineffective.
- Some survivors may have found encouragement in support groups and LGBTIQ+ affirming communities.
- Some survivors may have moved on from their faith entirely.

Survivors should be at the forefront of any conversation or communication about SOCE and the conversion movement, whether these conversations happen in the media or in the drafting of public policy.

LGBTIQ+ people of faith and their nominated allies are essential voices within this conversation as well, particularly in driving change from within faith communities and religious groups.

Much of the work of survivors in media and advocacy in recent years has sought to shift the focus away from less common expressions of the conversion movement toward the carnage that has been wrought upon LGBTIQ+ Australians by the ideology and messaging behind the movement. The petition that this letter accompanies calls for a national response – not just to conversion therapy, but to the movement and ideology. A ban on therapeutic expressions of the movement may be a first step toward reducing the impact of the movement, however there is a deeper need to comprehensively address the wider range of SOCE in Australia. Specifically, there is a need for our elected representatives to play their part in openly challenging the deadly ideology that has been allowed to proliferate in Australia’s diverse religious communities.

**Recommendations**

We call on Australia’s elected representatives to actively work towards curtailting the movement by pursuing strategies that seek to identify and counteract its influence in

- Primary and Secondary Education
- The community, charity and non-profit sectors
- Media
- Mental and public health
Several overseas jurisdictions have classified therapeutic expressions of the movement as fraudulent. These jurisdictions include Brazil, Ontario, the City of Vancouver, Ecuador, Malta, Spain, Taiwan, the Church of England, and 14 US states.

While several LGBTIQ+ affirming faith-based organisations are working to create positive change within Australia’s religious bodies, the conversion movement must also be addressed through a combination of legislation, regulation, investigation and community education in the following domains:

a) An inquiry into the extent and prevalence of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement in the experience of LGBTQ+ Australians. This should be national and broad enough to examine the influence of the core assertions of the movement, rather than being limited to strictly therapeutic contexts.

b) Regulatory enforcement of the directives of Australian peak psychological and health bodies that prohibit the use of conversion therapy by mental health professionals.

c) Greater powers for health complaints and consumer affairs authorities to support the sufficient investigation of all claims of conversion therapy activity.

d) A public health and awareness campaign to explicitly target those at risk of the movement’s influence and refute its key messages and assertions.

e) Protection of young Australians from SOCE and the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement’s practices and ideology. Exposure often comes through third parties entering Australian schools and must therefore be addressed through:

- Enforced standards for all chaplaincy, guidance counsellor and religious education programs.
- Training for all government funded youth and mental health services regarding how to engage with the survivors of the movement, as well as the ideology behind the movement.
- Awareness training for teachers in state education systems.

f) The counselling industry:

- Inclusion of compulsory content and clauses that systematically refute the ideology and practices associated with the conversion movement, with associated audit controls, in all tertiary courses that contain a counselling component.
- Implementation of licensing and standards for counsellors through a government regulator to prevent LGBTQ+ Australians from being exposed to conversion therapy.

g) Tighter regulation to prevent the broadcast and advertising of content related to conversion practices.

h) Funding for LGBTIQ+ and mental health organisations to:

- Boost public awareness and understanding of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and SOCE.
- Support survivors of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and SOCE.
We additionally call on Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Health Minister Greg Hunt to issue statements that clearly address the damaging ideology behind the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and Sexual Orientation Change Efforts.

We thank you for your consideration of this matter and encourage further questions relating to the survey and the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement.

This statement was prepared by:
Chris Csabs (Christopher Csabonyi, NSW), Nathan Despott (Vic), Bree Morel (Vic), Asha Brodel (Vic), Natalie Cooper (NSW)
Brave Network Melbourne
Equal Voices: National Advocacy Taskforce
MGA Counselling (Victoria)

Endorsed by:

Community Leaders
Rev. Dr John Mark Capper
Rev. Dr Robyn Whitaker, Lecturer in New Testament, University of Divinity
Rev. Andrew Boyle, Ormond Uniting Church, Victoria
Pastor Brad Chilcott, Activate Church, Bowden, South Australia
Pastor Rebecca Bauer, Melbourne Inclusive Church
Pastor Rod Begbie, Fitzroy North Community Church
Jason Ball, 2017 Young Australian of the Year for Victoria
Georgie Stone, 2018 Young Australian of the Year for Victoria
Rodney Croome AM, 2015 Australian of the Year for Tasmania
Anthony Venn-Brown
Dr Kerryn Phelps
Senator Janet Rice
Marc Fennell, Broadcaster
Shelley Argent OAM
Wayne Besen, Author, Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth
Benjamin Law, Author and Broadcaster
Sally Rugg, LGBTIQ activist
Geoffrey Ahern, Senior Mental Health Clinician and Educator
Dean Beck, Broadcaster/Journalist, Executive Producer, Inside Ex-gay: The Naked Truth
Ivan Hinton-Teoh, Just Equal
Nicole Conner, Writer, Blogger, Ex-minister
Ruby Mountford, President, Melbourne Bisexual Network
Jason Tuazon-McCheyne, Executive Director, The Equality Project
Jac Tomlins, Writer, Consultant and LGBTIQ Advocate
Jim Marjoram, Founder of Silent Gays
Nic Holas, Co-founder, The Institute of Many
Steff Fenton, Equal Voices
Michael Barnett
Ps Rob Buckingham
Delia Quigley
Prof. Emeritus Gary Bouma
Ron Smith

Organisations and Community Groups
Amnesty International Australia
Thorne Harbour Health (formerly VAC), Victoria
ACON, NSW
Rainbow Families Victoria
Metropolitan Community Church, Melbourne
Fitzroy North Community Church, Victoria
Activate Church, Bowden, South Australia
Melbourne Inclusive Church
St Cuthbert’s Anglican Church, Darlington, NSW
Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby
NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby
Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group
The Equality Project, Australia
Acceptance Melbourne Inc
Transforming Tasmania
Transcend Support
PFLAG NSW
PFLAG Brisbane
Melbourne Bisexual Network
Just Equal
Pride Cup Australia
Transgender Victoria
Diversity ACT
The Institute of Many
Ambassadors and Bridge Builders International (ABBI)
Australian Catholics for Equality
Queer Greens, Victoria
Queer Christians, Canberra
National Union of Students
Momentum, Charles Sturt University
Newcastle University Students’ Association
QUT Queer Collective
Rainbow Adelaide Crows