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Equality Bill

Submission for the protection of LGBTIQ+ people from attempts to reject, change or suppress their orientation and/or gender identity

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Affirmation

United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Article 1 states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people are human beings and as such are entitled to every right and privilege afforded to others. We all have the right to be treated equally, no matter what our sexual orientation or gender identity.

Ignorance, misinformation and lack of understanding have impacted the lives of LGBTQ people for decades, and has contributed to violence, discrimination and harm.

LGBTQ people have the right to live authentically, safely and free from discrimination and harm.

What is Conversion "Therapy"/Practice?

Several definitions have been offered. To summarise, these are common elements:

- First, it is based on the false **belief** that a non-heterosexual, transgender or queer identity is abnormal and the result of damaged development.
- Second, conversion "therapy" can involve a variety of **practices** including personal prayer, informal or formal spiritual counselling, by qualified or unqualified individuals, face to face or online formal programs and support groups.
- Third, the **goal** of these practices is to change, reject, eliminate or suppress a gay, lesbian or bisexual person's orientation/identity, or keep transgender individuals from transitioning from their birth gender.

Conversion "therapy" is always about conformity to a single belief about sex being only between man and woman within marriage and a binary belief about gender (God created male and female).

Conversion "therapy" core beliefs

- No-one is born gay/lesbian/bi/trans
- Being gay/lesbian/bi/trans is the result of wrong development, personal trauma or a choice
- Being gay/lesbian/bi/trans is unnatural/abnormal
- Acting on gay/lesbian/bisexual desires in sinful
- Same-sex relationships/marriage are against God's revealed order
- Conformity to heterosexuality and male/female genders provides happiness and fulfilment
- Rejection of heterosexuality and male/female genders will create a lesser life and problems

Background:

My interest and expertise in this area is two-fold. **Firstly**, my personal experience and **secondly**, my 22 years work with individual survivors and opposing the advocates and supporters of conversion "therapy".

I am a survivor

Born in 1951, my formative years and becoming conscious of my sexuality, were terrifying. Homosexuals were labelled perverts and deviates, criminalised and pathologized. In 1968, during my final year at high school, depression and an attempt to take my own life resulted in trips to a psychiatrist to help me find out why I wanted sex with men and to fix me. The following year, I became a "born again" Christian, hoping that somehow God would provide me with the changes I'd wanted from my trips to the psychiatrist.

The churches I was involved in at the time, never preached against homosexuality. Such disgusting things like that and masturbation were only mentioned in private and counselling sessions. In my search for answers, I read the advice of the famous Pentecostal preacher, David Wilkerson.¹

"Do you really want out? Are you sick of it all? Since you claim you have been on the verge of suicide, I think you may be very desperate. Desperation is the key that unlocks the door. Then you must learn to hate, despise, crucify and mortify your flesh. You must learn to look into a mirror and honestly say, "My body, my flesh, is worthless, worm-eaten, and full of decay and death!" Cultivate a shame for your nakedness. Go to the throne of God in prayer and ask for a divorce from the love of flesh that has enslaved you. All your power to bring your flesh under subjection will come through sincere, fervent prayer. Christ has the power to deliver you from the love of flesh. He alone can break the power of this sin in your life."

I learnt to hate every temptation, every failure, and my homosexuality.

In desperation, as a young Christian man of 21, I admitted myself into a residential facility in Sydney's south in 1972, which worked with drug addicts, prostitutes, and homosexuals.² It was early days for the Christian conversion "therapy" movement, as this was the second such program to be established in the entire world. Neither were aware of each other's existence initially. After 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses, the growing Charismatic and Pentecostal streams of Christianity took up the cause to "heal the homosexual". "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Luke 18:27.³

There was no terminology to describe what I was experiencing at the time. I was just seeking to rid myself of what I considered a sin, evil, and a curse; my homosexuality. I wanted to be an ex-homosexual, like an ex-drug addict or ex-alcoholic. A few years later, the term for the growing movement and practice was "ex-gay" and then later termed "conversion therapy". Of course, "conversion therapy" is 'misnomer as n' one gets "converted", and it's definitely not "therapy".

I thought the residential program was my last chance to change from gay to straight. The two-year investment out of my life was worth it if it meant I was free for the rest. I'd already spent two years praying daily for God to take "it" away, resisting temptations that came my way and eventually having "homosexual demons" cast out of me. All these promises of healing and deliverance left me disappointed and crushed when they hadn't worked. *Obviously the problem had to be with me and not God*, I thought.

The foundational beliefs of the program were that everyone is born heterosexual. People become homosexuals through lack of attachment to the same-sex parent, over devotion by the opposite-sex

¹ David Wilkerson was the founder of Teen Challenge and author of the bestseller "The Cross and the Switchblade" (1963). Teen Challenge began as a ministry to drug addicts, gangs and homosexuals in New York.

² Chapter 7, Rehab with a twist. A Life of Unlearning – a preacher's struggle with his homosexuality, church and faith (2016)

³ An oft quoted Bible verse in Charismatic and Pentecostal circles to encourage belief in the words of Jesus, have faith, and believe for a miracle. A miracle such as being turned from being a homosexual to becoming a "normal" heterosexual.

parent, or an outcome of same-sex sexual abuse for males and opposite-sex sexual abuse for females. You are flawed, broken etc, but God can heal, deliver you and set you free to be as He intended. The program included strong gender role conformity, which not only included daily activities but also strict dress standards. Prayer and Bible study were daily activities, along with an intense church weekly program. Living within the 24/7 monitored environment meant I was protected from outside temptations in "the world" so that I wouldn't "fall into sin". Within that two-year period, I would become transformed in my mind enough and strong enough in Christ's power to venture into the outside world and live a normal life as a husband and father. The end goal had been my focus since my conversion in 1969. I was desperate to be "normal".

The leadership was emotionally mentally abusive, and a series of events left me drained of motivation. Before the first 12 months were up, I left, believing and hoping that God and I could sort out my problem outside the oppressive environment of the residential community.

Fast forward from my residential "ex-gay" experience, over the next 20 years I married, had two lovely daughters and became one of Australia's most famous Pentecostal ministers, preaching to thousands weekly in the country's growing megachurches. I hadn't turned from gay to straight, I became what I refer to as a "situational heterosexual".⁴ My homosexuality never went away; it was a constant, private internal struggle.

At 40, I fell in love with a man. This was a huge reality check. The cloak of denial I'd wrapped myself in for over 20 years was taken away and I realised that the years of prayer, fasting, exorcisms and 16 years of marriage had achieved nothing. I realised my sexuality was not just about sex, but it was about love, intimacy, tenderness, affection and, for the first time in my life, I wanted it.

The scandal and public humiliation that followed were devastating. I resigned from the ministry and walked away from everything; family, friends, church, and faith believing that there was no compatibility with these and my newfound acceptance of self. Even though I had accepted my sexuality, deep down inside, I still considered I would probably go to hell.⁵

I buried my past experiences as they were too traumatic to think about and got on with my life. None of my new gay friends knew of my previous history. I was too ashamed to talk about it. I did however find resolution of faith and sexuality around seven years later.

The trauma of my experiences, including conversion "therapy", remained buried.⁶

⁴ Situational Heterosexuality - the most misunderstood concept in the 'ex-gay' Christian worlds (2010) <https://www.abbi.org.au/2010/04/situational-heterosexuality/>

⁵ I've found, working with thousands of conversion "therapy survivors", an ongoing belief that accepting their sexuality or gender identity means eternity in hell, is not uncommon. This unhealthy subconscious belief can contribute to mental health problems and self-destructive behaviours.

⁶ "In 2009, at the Mardi Gras Film Festival, I went to see the movie called "Save Me". It was about a young gay man who'd hit rock bottom and was in a Christian residential "ex-gay" program. It was challenging to sit for an hour and half watching my most traumatic experiences portrayed so realistically on the screen in front of me. At the end of the movie, my friend turned to me and said, "How was that?". I took a deep breath and burst into tears and ran out of the theatre, bumping into people as I went. Outside I collapsed against the building and sobbed uncontrollably for next ten minutes while my friends tried to make sense of what had impacted me so severely. It was at that moment, 37 years after the event, I was beginning to realise how deeply I'd been traumatised."

Conversion Therapy- "You obviously love your sin, more than you love God" I was told. (February 4th, 2021) <https://www.abbi.org.au/2021/02/conversion-therapy-ptsd/>

Two things to note

Many others' journeys may have been less, but the same insidious, foundational beliefs of the Christian residential program have remained the core beliefs of the LGBTQ Christian conversion movement for over five decades. This has been from the "change is possible" message, through the "rejection of a gay or transgender identity" phase to the more recent celibacy model. This can be clearly seen in Figure 1. Whatever the context the beliefs always harm.

It should also be noted that the core beliefs of the ex-gay/reparative/conversion "therapy" movement are the very same that ALL mental health organisations and practitioners, after three decades of failure, rejected in the early 70s. Yes..... theories rejected **half a century ago**.

Supporting conversion "therapy" survivors

Initially, most of us thought we were alone. It was in the late 90s, thanks to the internet, survivors began connecting. These were people who'd been a part of what were known as "ex-gay" ministries/organisations under the umbrella of Exodus in the US. ⁷

Yahoo survivor support group

I knew there were groups in the US that supported survivors, or "ex-ex-gays" as we called ourselves then, but nothing in Australia. Whilst I had been a closet "ex-gay"⁸, I always knew of the movement, and since my faith/sexuality resolution began monitoring their activities in Australia. In 2000, I founded an online Yahoo group to connect survivors called Exex-gay which **grew to over 400 members**. It was during the five years managing the group that I became intensely aware of not only the lives lost through suicide, but the suffering survivors had gone through and the ongoing and long-term mental health impacts of ex-gay/reparative/conversion "therapy".

A Life of Unlearning and an avalanche of responses from survivors

In 2004, my autobiography, *A Life of Unlearning*, was released. A story, such as mine, high-profile preacher, conversion "therapy" survivor, had never been told in Australia before. It became a bestseller and sold out twice. From day one, emails began to arrive in my inbox, often beginning with the words "your story is my story" and then the sender poured out their hearts about their own experiences. The vast majority of these readers had never told anyone before about their experiences. Now they had someone who would understand and listen. **I found myself often crying at the computer as I read another horrifying story of the way people had been treated by conversion "therapy" leaders, church leaders, Christian family, and friends.** I responded to every email and, with many, had an ongoing dialogue. The number I have engaged with is incalculable, but **over the last 18 years it's in the thousands.**

Freedom2b online support and chapter meetings

It became increasingly obvious that a support network was needed for these people. In 2005, I co-founded Freedom2b and managed it for 6 years. During that time, we saw it grow from a dozen in

⁷ Exodus International was founded in 1976 with a "change is possible" message. By 2006, Exodus International had over 250 local ministries in the United States and Canada and over 150 ministries in 17 other countries including Australia. In 2013 it closed down, with the president, Alan Chambers, saying that 99.9% of people he knew had never changed and apologised to the LGBTQ community for the devastation and harm that had been caused over its nearly four decades of operation. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/june/alan-chambers-apologizes-to-gay-community-exodus.html>

⁸ Closet "ex-gay" - A person who kept their struggles a secret and didn't promote themselves as a "former homosexual", the movement or organizations.

my lounge room to chapter meetings in several states, plus an active online forum of over 1,600 members and **350 people had shared their personal stories**.⁹ Many of these had been through formal conversion "therapy" programs whilst others had been impacted by the core beliefs of the movement.¹⁰

To summarise, over the last 20 years through the Yahoo group, readers of *A Life of Unlearning*, and Freedom2b, I have worked with an estimated **4,000 conversion "therapy" survivors** who've been through formal programs. Additionally, the number of people experiencing faith/sexuality conflict because of the beliefs that heterosexuality is God's design, normal, natural and marriage can only be between a man and a woman, that I've engaged with is immeasurable.

I believe that within Australia there probably is not another with as much experience in this area as myself and, therefore, can speak on the topic with a great deal of authority.

Compiling the data

As the floodgates of emails from readers of *A Life of Unlearning* began, it wasn't long before patterns emerged. Time and time again similar experiences were mentioned in these people's stories. I created an excel spreadsheet with columns of the common themes. I also went back over the stories from the yahoo group.

Below are the common themes that occurred in the conversion "therapy" stories of survivors who had been through formal programs. It also became clear that people from strong Christian contexts were similarly affected even though they had not been a part of a program.

- **Mental health issues** – such as depression, anxiety, stress were regularly mentioned.
- **Intense cognitive dissonance** – the acceptance or rejection of their sexual orientation had eternal consequences. The inner conflict was constant.
- **PTSD** – people experienced this at different levels. The most severe cases were where people a person were incapable of working and were on government benefits.
- **Self-destructive behaviours** – substance abuse, unsafe sex etc, fuelled by a sense of failure and self-loathing.
- **Obsessive behaviours and addictions** – for many, the closet and their sense of shame created behaviours they felt they could not control.
- **Fragmentation of self** – they had become two people. One was the good, Christian public self and the other the dark, gay bad self.
- **Poor self-esteem** – internalised homophobia continued to impact people even after they had come out.
- **Sense of purposelessness** – many had to leave or were forced to leave their faith communities, leaving them with a loss of purpose in their lives.
- **Loneliness, lack of belongingness** – the faith community had been like family, and many struggled to find their place in the LGBTQ community.
- **Relational and sexual difficulties** – the psychological harm created by attempts to change or suppress their orientation created problems with maintaining a relationship and/or physical intimacy.
- **Thoughts of suicide and attempts** were common.
- **Long-term impacts** – survivors can live with the harm for a long time. For others, the harm and trauma surfaces 20-30 years later in life.

⁹ <https://freedom2b.org/forums/our-community-g2/telling-our-stories-f13/>

¹⁰ Here is one example <https://freedom2b.org/forums/confused-and-trying-to-do-ex-gay-thing-t1357/>

Many of the above are covered in my presentation KILLING US, DRIVING US CRAZY given at the National LGBTQI Health Conference and included extracts from emails etc.¹¹

Extensive research and the history of harm

At the time, I was unaware of the extensive academic research conducted in this area for at least a decade.¹² Much had been published in respected mental health professional journals and publications. The alarm bells of the harm caused in attempting to change one's sexual orientation was reinforced with every new study. Because of the controversial nature of the movement, in 2007 the American Psychological Association set up a task force to review and report on sexual reorientation "therapies". The 2009 report¹³ a list of harms included:

- Decreased self-esteem and authenticity to others.
- Increased self-hatred and negative perceptions of homosexuality.
- Confusion, depression, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, social withdrawal, and suicidality.
- Anger at and a sense of betrayal by SOCE (sexual orientation change efforts) providers.
- An increase in substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviours.
- A feeling of being dehumanized and untrue to self.
- A loss of faith.
- A sense of having wasted time and resources. Interpreting SOCE failures as individual failures was also reported that individuals blamed themselves for the failure (i.e., weakness, and lack of effort, commitment, faith, or worthiness in god's eyes.

In 2012, the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a combined statement titled "*Therapies to change sexual orientation lack medical justification and threaten health*".¹⁴ In the statement PAHO Director Dr. Mirta Roses Periago said: "Since homosexuality is not a disorder or a disease, it does not require a cure. There is no medical indication for changing sexual orientation. Practices known as "reparative therapy" or "conversion therapy" represent **"a serious threat to the health and well-being—even the lives—of affected people."**¹⁵

In 2015, The Columbia Law School brought together a number of peer-reviewed studies published over the last 30 years that addressed the question of whether conversion therapy (CT) can alter sexual orientation without causing harm. Thirteen of those studies included primary research. Of those, **12 concluded that CT is ineffective and/or harmful, finding links to depression, suicidality, anxiety, social isolation and decreased capacity for intimacy**. Only one study concluded that sexual orientation change efforts could succeed—although only in a minority of its participants, and the

¹¹ KILLING US, DRIVING US CRAZY - The experience of LGBTI people from faith backgrounds (2018) <https://www.abbi.org.au/2018/04/lgbti-people-from-faith-backgrounds/>

¹² One of the first was Haldeman, D.C. (1991). Sexual orientation conversion therapy for gay men and lesbians: A scientific examination. In: Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy, eds. J.C. Gonsiorek & J.D. Weinrich. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 149-161.

¹³ American Psychological Association, Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. (2009). Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/therapeutic-resp.html>

¹⁴ "Therapies" to change sexual orientation lack medical justification and threaten health. 2019 https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6803:2012-therapies-change-sexual-orientation-lack-medical-justification-threaten-health&Itemid=1926&lang=en

¹⁵ "CURES" FOR AN ILLNESS THAT DOES NOT EXIST <https://www.paho.org/hq/dmdocuments/2012/Conversion-Therapies-EN.pdf>

study has several limitations: its entire sample self-identified as religious and it is based on self-reports, which can be biased and unreliable.¹⁶

Australia

I believe the first paper to be written on conversion "therapy" in Australia was in 2010 by a Baptist minister, Matt Glover, as a part of his theological studies. His 39-page paper *A Pastoral Response to the Homosexuality in the Church* focused very much on the ineffectiveness of Exodus International and the harm conversion "therapy" was causing. In his introduction, Glover states, "The following was written as part of my theological studies and in response to the pain and suffering I have seen in my journey with the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) community."

A few other Australian studies and papers followed. In 2018, Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International released "*Conversion Therapy in Australia - The state of the nation*".¹⁷ It was the first comprehensive (30-page) Australian report on the movement and gave an overview of the history, revealed the major players and highlighted some of the challenges for a potential ban on LGBTQ conversion practices. The paper also revealed that the **Australian Christian Counsellors Association** had recently updated their code of ethics to read "**Counsellors shall not do therapeutic interventions aimed at modifying or changing the sexual orientation of clients, as distinct from treating recognised sexual disorders**".¹⁸ This was incredibly significant, but it seems most people missed the significance. I've never seen it mentioned elsewhere.

This was followed later in the year by "*Preventing Harm, Promoting Justice: Responding to LGBT conversion therapy in Australia*" which revealed the lived experiences of 15 LGBT people who have struggled to reconcile their sexuality and transgender identities with the beliefs and practices of their religious community. The report, a joint initiative of La Trobe University, the Human Rights Law Centre and Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria, provided a comprehensive history of the conversion movement in Australia, together with legal analysis and recommendations for reform.¹⁹

The above academic work was followed in 2021 with *Healing Spiritual Harms: Supporting Recovery from LGBTQ+ Change and Suppression Practices*. The abstract clearly states the importance of the research project.

Psychological research has demonstrated that LGBTQ+ change and suppression efforts do not reorient a person's sexuality or gender identity and an increasing body of literature has documented the negative impacts that these pressures and attempts have on LGBTQ+ people's lives. Little formal research evidence exists regarding what supports are needed to enhance the recovery of people who have been harmed by LGBTQ+ change and suppression practices. This study investigated survivors' experiences of recovery through interviews with survivors and with mental health practitioners. It is the first such study internationally to include research with mental health practitioners and has a significantly more diverse cohort of survivor participants than previous studies. The report provides a detailed account of survivors' support needs. Its findings are intended to inform health practitioners and others

¹⁶What does the scholarly research say about whether conversion therapy can alter sexual orientation without causing harm? <http://whatwewknow.law.columbia.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-whether-conversion-therapy-can-alter-sexual-orientation-without-causing-harm/>

¹⁷ "Conversion Therapy in Australia - The state of the nation" A Venn-Brown Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International 2018 <https://www.abbi.org.au/2018/05/gay-conversion-therapy-in-australia/>

¹⁸ Christian Counsellors Association of Australia <https://ccaa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CCAA-CODE-OF-ETHICS-Nov-2020-1.pdf>

¹⁹ Jones, T, Brown, A, Carnie, L, Fletcher, G, & Leonard, W. Preventing Harm, Promoting Justice: Responding to LGBT Conversion Therapy in Australia. Melbourne: GLHV@ARCSHS and the Human Rights Law Centre, 2018. <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/release/report-on-lgbt-conversion-therapy-harms>

*working to meet the support needs of LGBTQA+ people who are recovering from the harms associated with LGBTQA+ change and suppression practices.*²⁰

After three decades of research one can conclude that;

- 1. no one changes their sexual orientation and,**
- 2. attempts to do so are harmful and sometimes devastating.**

This is why we need legislation to protect vulnerable LGBTQ people from the harms of these practices and the core beliefs.

Additionally, there is a global movement in this direction. As of June 2022, thirteen countries have bans on conversion therapy. In Australia, Queensland, Victoria and the ACT have legislation in place, with others moving in the same direction. The Victorian legislation is the most comprehensive.²¹ In 2020, the United Nations Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity called for a global ban on conversion therapy.²²

In 2014 New South Wales could have been the first state to ban these practices, once again initiated by Alex Greenwich. Opposition came from predictable sources of the time like Fred Nile and the Salt Shakers.²³ We lodged a 17-page submission supporting the ban.²⁴ Sadly, that push was unsuccessful.

New South Wales, now is the time.

Is LGBTQ celibacy an LGBTQ conversion practice?

If we are going to accept that LGBTQ conversion practices include suppression, then YES.
If we are going to accept that LGBTQ conversion practices are based on a series of unscientific core beliefs, then YES.

The celibacy message has become more mainstream, particularly in evangelical circles.²⁵ It's come about as the result of the failure of the "change is possible" message. It's interesting to note that in the very early days of Exodus, it nearly adopted the celibacy approach. Instead, it was agreed that their message would be to reject everything gay; thoughts, behaviours and identity and heterosexuality would be the goal. A goal that after four decades, most realised it had failed miserably. A goal that Alan Chambers finally admitted had caused destruction in the lives of thousands.²⁶

²⁰ Jones, T.W., Jones, T.M, Power, J., Despott, N., & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2021). Healing Spiritual Harms: Supporting Recovery from LGBTQA+ Change and Suppression Practices. Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University https://www.latrobe.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1201588/Healing-spiritual-harms-Supporting-recovery-from-LGBTQA-change-and-suppression-practices.pdf

²¹ Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020 <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/bills/change-or-suppression-conversion-practices-prohibition-bill-2020>

²² Global ban needed on bogus 'conversion therapy', argues UN rights expert. 21 June 2020 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066652>

²³ Only hours left to see ex-gay/reparative/conversion therapies banned in NSW 2014. <https://www.abbi.org.au/2014/02/ban-exgay-reparative-conversion-therapy/>

²⁴ Submission to the Committee on the Health Care Complaints Commission – Conversion Therapy 2014. <https://www.abbi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2014-Committee-on-the-Health-Care-Complaints-Commission-Anthony-Venn-Brown-submission-with-attachments.pdf>

²⁵ Sydney Anglican Diocese new ministry Living Faith (celibacy) has recently replaced Liberty Christian Ministries (change to heterosexuality) <https://www.livingfaith.online/home>

²⁶Exodus Head Alan Chambers' Full Apology to the LGBT Community | Our America with Lisa Ling | OWN 2013 <https://youtu.be/Ea10c6VXVx8?t=186>

At the 2018 Sydney Anglican Diocese Synod, resolution 31/18 stated that the church:

(c) recognises that psychological practices such as 'reparative therapy' or 'gay conversion therapy', which seek to re-orient sexual attraction to heterosexuality, have been highly ineffective for those who experience exclusive same-sex attraction, and have caused distress to many who have participated in such therapy,
(d) notes that the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Sydney does not practise, recommend or endorse 'gay conversion therapy'

The above statement "*that the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Sydney does not practise, recommend or endorse 'gay conversion therapy'*" is refreshing to hear. What wasn't mentioned was that since 1994, until its recent transition to Living Faith Online, the Sydney Anglican Diocese supported and promoted Liberty Christian Ministries and was fully engaged in the "change is possible" message.²⁷ There has never been an apology or acknowledgement that they had been the source that "caused distress to many".²⁸

I can respect that some religious people may choose to be celibate. Choosing celibacy personally differs greatly from hearing the message "this is your only choice". Jesus himself said that celibacy was a rare gift²⁹ and yet all LGBTQ people are told this is their only alternative.

To date, there is no specific research on the impact of a celibacy message on LGBTQ Christians. There are a number of personalities who have made celibacy their message and travel the world speaking about and promoting their books on the topic. The celibacy message is based on the same beliefs as the orientation change message. Except for one thing. One says your orientation will change, the other says you'll still be gay but can never act on it or have any relationship (see Figure 2). So, if celibacy is based on the same core harmful beliefs, will it not cause the same harm to LGBTQ people? Also, previous research shows that, even though one might not hear specific anti-gay messages in a church, the culture, the subconscious messages and the pressure to conform have the same negative impacts.

The "Same-Sex Attraction: A pastoral guide" was recommended to all ministers in Sydney Anglican Diocese at the 2019 synod. The brief paragraph below would definitely have a negative impact.

"Remember same-sex attraction, same-sex sexual temptation and same-sex sexual activity are different. Experiencing a disposition towards a certain sin is not the same as struggling with temptation or succumbing to sin."³⁰

Final thoughts

I will leave the complexities of law and legislation to those who have expertise in these areas, such as Equality Australia, HALC and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre. Below are some additional considerations as we move towards the presentation of the Equality Bill.

²⁷Self-destructive life ends in light, Sydney Anglicans, 25 November, 2005.

https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/self_destructive_life_ends_in_light

²⁸ Conversion Therapy in Australia - The state of the nation. We do/we don't/we do/we don't/we do cure gays ,2018

https://www.abbi.org.au/2018/05/gay-conversion-therapy-in-australia/#_Toc510272209

²⁹ Matthew 19:11-12

³⁰ Same-Sex Attraction: A pastoral guide October 2019

<https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/HumanSexualityPastoralGuidelines.Report2019.pdf>

Balancing rights

There will be some who will claim their right is more important. The right to freedom of religion or the right of the parent over the child are examples. What always needs to be remembered in these circumstances is that no one has the right to harm another human being. Protection and safety from harm are paramount. Legislation already exists to protect people from physical, emotional and psychological harm, but LGBTQ conversion practices need to be spelt out specifically. Legislation against these practices sends a clear message that these approaches to LGBTQ are unacceptable in Australia in the 21st century and LGBTQ people will not be treated as "abnormal", "broken" or needing to be "fixed".

Focusing on protection and harm

I believe the legislation should ensure that the focus is about protecting LGBTQ people from harm and not against certain groups or individuals.

Therapists and professionals

We would hope that medical and mental health professionals would not engage in LGBTQ conversion practices, but my experience says it does still happen. Age, culture and religion are the influences in these situations. Once legislation is passed, I would recommend that the governing bodies be contacted, made aware of the legislation, to ensure it is covered in their code of ethics and communicated to the members.

Migrant populations

Australia is a multi-cultural society and NSW has many migrant communities. Some of these communities come from countries that have not progressed with LGBTQ rights and are conservative in their approach to sexuality and gender issues. I would recommend that a campaign to inform and educate be initiated with people who are members of those communities, and of course that everything is always in their own language.

Safe reporting

LGBTQ individuals who have experienced conversion "therapy" at whatever level, are rarely in a place personally to report incidences. Sometimes it can take years before they feel comfortable reporting the harm they experienced. Legislation should consider that others can report on their behalf whilst ensuring they are supported and not being coerced.

Considering the variety of contexts

LGBTQ conversion practices can happen in a variety of places. These are, but not limited to religious and state schools, churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, homes, youth groups, practitioners' premises, camps, retreats. When forming legislation, it would be helpful to be cognisant of this.

Sent overseas

Over the years, I have been told a number of stories from LGBTQ people whose parents sent them overseas for "treatment" at facilities or to an organisation or individual who promised to "cure" their child. Legislation should ensure this does not occur and the child or young person is protected from harm.

Internet

I have often warned of the dangers of the internet re conversion "therapy".³¹ I have known of at least two young men who attempted suicide whilst involved with online conversion "therapy" organisations in the United States. I organised for one of them to tell his story to the media in the hope it would raise awareness. Timothy is not his real name.

"My mentor was a man in Ohio, who was middle-aged. He had apparently completed the course which qualified him to be a counsellor to me and a mentor throughout the program. I only knew his first name and email address and he would email me every day making sure I was doing the work and reading the bible and giving me tips on how to overcome temptation."

Things escalated quickly at the end of each day when the mentor asked his pupil what would become a series of increasingly invasive questions.

"(He) asked the same questions — Have you masturbated? Have you thought about men? Have you sinned? — and required that I go into detail in my response. I felt strange disclosing these things to a random man that I had never met. I didn't know who else was seeing my responses. The content was very shaming."

Timothy's shame turned to suicidal thoughts and eventually an attempt to take his own life.

"I was not making any progress and thought that I never would. Suicide seemed to me like less of a sin than homosexuality," he said.

"It made me feel disgusted with myself, as if I was sick and outside of God's love because I could never fulfil what they wanted of me. I couldn't change who I was."

"I was so densely full of anger and hatred and pain and I finally couldn't take it anymore and it all came up and exploded out."

"He said only when sitting in a mental health ward with bandages on his arms did he realise that his mind had been poisoned."³²

There are many websites that promote the conversion "therapy" beliefs and offer help. One of those is the Restored Hope Network³³ which has conferences, online resources and has member ministries³⁴. Restored Hope Network is the organisation that vowed to carry on the "ministry" after Exodus International closed in 2013.

Some of these organisations have cleverly changed the wording³⁵ on their sites in the hope that they won't be detected as conversion "therapy" organisations or practitioners. It does mean that it is

³¹ Submission to the Committee on the Health Care Complaints Commission – Conversion Therapy 2014. <https://www.abbi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2014-Committee-on-the-Health-Care-Complaints-Commission-Anthony-Venn-Brown-submission-with-attachments.pdf>

³² ROHAN SMITH, "Gay conversion therapy still thriving online despite condemnation of ex-gay ministries," 28 May, 2015, <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/true-stories/gay-conversion-therapy-still-thriving-online-despite-condemnation-of-exgay-ministries/news-story/135833e1074eba4ac673122c9dce0ee3>

³³ <https://www.restoredhopenetwork.org/>

³⁴ <https://www.restoredhopenetwork.org/ministry-finder>

³⁵ The phrase same sex attraction or unwanted same sex attraction instead of homosexuality. <http://www.renewministries.com.au/>

more challenging for "strugglers" to find them on searches, but their existence still creates the potential for harm.

Imagine for a moment a young LGBTQ person who is in a family, church or school that is non-affirming³⁶ or even anti-gay and they are secretly looking for help to change. The pressure to conform or please can be great. And they find Living Hope in the US who has testimonies and resources that say you can changeand even better still....they have an online forum³⁷. The family might never know what is causing the young person to spiral into depression. The outcome could be devastating for this young person as it was for those mentioned above who have survived to tell the story. It could have been worse.

Conversion "therapy" sites should be either blocked or taken down. Facebook has removed organisations promoting conversion "therapy".

A final word from Matt

As a Facebook user, I get friend requests. Sometimes these are from people I don't know and we don't have any friends in common. The obvious dodgy ones I delete. The others I ask why they want to connect. I'm glad I take the time to do that, as I have had some incredible responses. Matt's reply has been the most moving and horrifying.

I just wanted you to know that you are an inspiration to me.

Between 14 and 30 I tried to get rid of the gay. I did informal programs with my pastors and read AWFUL workbooks. Then I did a six week camp at Love Wins a program of Exodus International. When I turned thirty, I realised the futility of those efforts. Around 32 to 33 I became happy that I was gay. I'm 34 now. Half of my life does seem wasted.

Reading A Life of Unlearning assisted my mental health and acceptance for myself in a tangible way. I used to be on six antipsychotic drugs and now I'm only on one mild antidepressant. Thank you. It truly did help. I've always been taught that God hates me.

I made a lot of friends in conversion therapy. Out of forty, only six are still alive (one died naturally, the rest suicide.) Your book gave me hope and let me see a truer Christ.

Matt - Pennsylvania

If anyone doubts the important of this legislation, they should read Matt's reply to me. Personally, I would love to stop receiving heart-wrenching emails or hearing stories of harm.

³⁶ Welcoming, accepting, affirming – don't get stuck, 2017. <https://www.abbi.org.au/2017/03/welcoming-accepting-affirming/>

³⁷ <https://www.livehope.org/forums/>

Should you require further information or have any questions please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely

Anthony Venn-Brown OAM (he/him)

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Honoured to be voted one of the 25 Most Influential Gay & Lesbian Australians (2007 & 2009), winner of 2015 ACON's Health and Wellbeing Award and awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to the LGBTIQ community (2020).

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Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International is committed to ending the unnecessary suffering caused by ignorance and misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity. Our mission is to create understanding, acceptance and a better world for LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer) people. We do this by empowering community members, providing education and resources, building bridges with Christian leaders, organisations and churches, and utilising media/social networking opportunities.

Figure 1:

LGBTQ Conversion Practices Over Time

Ex-gay/reparative/conversion therapy/practices timeline				
When	1950s-1960s	1970s-1980s	1990s-2000s	2010-2020s
Terminology	Pervert, deviate, inverts, sexual psychopaths	Homosexual, abomination	Sexually and relationally broken, unwanted same-sex attraction, reparative therapy	Sexually and relationally broken, unwanted same-sex attraction, gender incongruence
Cause	Poor parenting, strong mother, distant father, mixing with the wrong people, converted	Poor parenting, strong mother, distant father sexual abuse, it's a choice	Poor parenting, sexual abuse, trauma, improper development	Poor parenting, sexual abuse, trauma, improper development, identity conflict
Practitioner	Doctors, surgeons, mental health professionals	Ex-gay ministry leaders, pastors, church leaders, deliverance ministries	Ex-gay ministry leaders, pastors, church leaders, Christian therapists, spiritual healers	Pastors, church leaders, support group leaders, Christian therapists, spiritual healers
Treatments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobotomies • Electric shock • Aversion therapy • Psychoanalysis • Psychiatry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion • Exorcism • Prayer • Fasting • Programs • Support groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inner healing • Counselling • Therapy • Prayer • Fasting • Programs • Support groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Discipleship • Personal prayer • Accountability • Same gender non-sexual relationships • Self-discipline
Goal	Heterosexuality, healing, being "normal"	Heterosexuality, God's plan/order, "normal"	Healing leads to heterosexuality	Celibacy or mixed orientation marriage

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-  Changes have not been instantaneous. There have always been overlaps as the movement has evolved in the western world. In many Christian circles in Africa, they are still in column 2 (70s-80s).
-  These practices are often mentioned in media articles as conversion therapy. They were never called conversion therapy and are no longer practiced in western countries
-  In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental illness from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)
-  Based on the belief that a non-heterosexual orientation and transgenderism are the result of some form of brokenness, against divine order and can be changed by the power of God, the Christian church took up the cause.
-  Terminology, practitioners and treatments have changed over the decades but the fundamental beliefs that has driven them hasn't. This means that people who still believe that a non-heterosexual orientation and gender variance are the result of external factors, are half a century behind current understanding.

<https://www.abbi.org.au/2021/06/conversion-therapy-timeline/>

Figure 2:

Old “Ex-gay” message	New celibacy message
Homosexuality is abnormal/unnatural	Homosexuality is abnormal/unnatural
Homosexuality is against God’s chosen order. Adam and Eve.	Homosexuality is against God’s chosen order. Adam and Eve
Homosexuality is caused by improper development or sexual abuse.	Homosexuality is caused by improper development or sexual abuse.
God can heal your brokenness	God can heal your brokenness
Homosexuality can be cured through prayer, faith, spiritual counselling, “therapy”, willpower or combination.	You will struggle with “unwanted same-sex attraction”. Support groups, accountability, prayer, faith, willpower or combination.
You can become a “situational heterosexual” in a mixed orientation marriage.	You must remain celibate. You can never fall in love, have a relationship or lifelong partner.

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<https://www.abbi.org.au/2015/03/is-celibacy-the-new-ex-gay/>