

Tim Wilson
Human Rights Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission
Level 3, 175 Pitt Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

3 February 2015

SOGII Rights Consultation- Submission
(this submission may be made public)

This submission discusses the rights of LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds in Australia. It opposes harmful conversion therapies, particularly for minors. Attention is paid to the role of government in minimising harm to LGBTI youth in this regard, and to the role of Freedom2b in providing a safe space for LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds.

Recent decades have seen myriad social and political changes in Australia which have helped allow many LGBTI people to thrive where previously they lived in secret and in fear. However, a significant sphere of oppression and shame still exists in conservative Christian churches and religious organisations throughout Australia.

freedom2b

freedom2b is a network of LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds. *freedom2b*'s mission is:

*To save lives, prevent harm and empower LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds through reconciliation of their sexuality and/or gender identity, and their faith.*¹

freedom2b provides a safe space for LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds to explore matters of faith and sexuality in a non-judgemental, loving environment with their LGBTI peers. Chapter meetings are held regularly in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, involving guest speakers on a range of topics, as well as time for discussion and sharing together over a meal or a drink.

freedom2b has a strong focus on suicide and self harm-prevention. Many *freedom2b* members have experienced personally the despair of mental illness. Many have a history of self-harm and/or suicide attempts. Several have experienced the heartbreak of losing dear friends or loved ones to suicide. We recognise that mental illness continues to be a pressing concern among LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds. *freedom2b* seeks to address this problem in part through the maintenance of online forums which provide a safe and anonymous space for LGBTI people to share their stories and receive support from our community.² These forums are a particularly important support for isolated young people and for people in rural and remote areas of Australia.

¹ <http://www.freedom2b.org/about/mission/>

² <http://www.freedom2b.org/forums/>

Conversion therapies

A significant driver of mental illness among LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds, and a deep concern of freedom2b's members, is the practice of so-called "conversion therapies/programs".³

An extension of the idea that any sexual orientation or expression other than monogamous heterosexuality is deviant and sinful, conversion therapies are pseudo-psychological programs which have the express aim of changing and/or suppressing the sexual orientation of LGBTI individuals, ideally leaving them with a heterosexual orientation. These therapies have typically been run by para-church organisations with close affiliations to conservative churches.

Conversion programs are often aimed at vulnerable LGBTI young people coming to terms with their sexuality for the first time. Many are minors. Others are young adults. And some come to conversion therapy later in life. The programs are totally ineffective. They do not result in changed sexual orientation. This is the personal testimony of many freedom2b members. But it is also the testimony of a significant number of former leaders of organisations which have promoted such therapies.⁴

The deleterious effects of these programs are significant and persist well beyond the end of therapy. They have been well-documented by others, and there is not space to detail them here.⁵ Many LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds already harbour feelings of isolation and despair as a result of growing up in churches where they have been made to feel deeply ashamed of their sexuality. It is particularly devastating to come to the realisation that the people we trusted to act in love were the very people who, through these therapies, stole our joy, our hope, and sadly, in some cases, our very lives.

Organisations engaging in conversion therapy are falling out of favour in many Christian circles around the world. In 2013, the largest organisation in the United States promoting conversion therapy, Exodus International, ceased operations. Their President at the time, Alan Chambers, spoke movingly in apology to the individuals who had been deeply hurt by the organisation's activities:

*I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatised parents...*⁶

In spite of these developments, a number of organisations facilitating conversion therapy continue to operate in Australia with the support of Christian leaders from a number of church traditions.⁷ This is of deep concern to *freedom2b* and its members.

³ Also known as "reparative therapy", "ex-gay therapy", or "sexual orientation change efforts" (SOCE)

⁴ <http://www.nclrights.org/former-ex-gay-leaders-unite-in-opposition-to-conversion-therapy/>

⁵ For a list of organisations which have researched the negative mental health impacts of conversion therapies, see <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.smh.com.au/world/we-were-wrong-admits-gay-cure-group-20130621-2ooat.html>

⁷ A list of some of these organisations operating in Australia can be found through the Exodus Global Alliance. This list may not be exhaustive- <http://www.exodusglobalalliance.org/regionalcontactsc876.php>

The role of government in Australia

Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory, states:

*States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse... while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.*⁸

It is well-recognised, both by mental health practitioners and by survivors of such programs, that conversion therapies aimed at minors constitute a direct and serious threat to the mental health and well-being of LGBTI youths.⁹ These programs may be considered a form of mental violence against children, many of whom find themselves undergoing such therapies under significant duress.

The seriousness of this matter has been recognised by state legislatures in California, New Jersey and Washington D.C., where legislation banning the use of conversion therapies on minors has been passed. Similar legislation is being considered or debated in at least 9 other American states.¹⁰

In October 2013, the NSW parliament passed a motion stating that conversion therapies are harmful, and that *"there is no scientific research to substantiate the claims that medical and psychological treatment can change a person's sexual orientation."*¹¹

In spite of this positive move, governments in Australia are failing to protect young people who are at risk of abuse in these programs. Steps should be taken immediately to move towards more comprehensive legislative protection for minors who find themselves in such precarious circumstances. In many instances, LGBTI young people themselves are not aware of alternatives. Many exist in spaces where any questioning of the doctrine of the sin of sexual deviancy places them at risk of exclusion and isolation from their families and communities. There is an important role for government in protecting these young people from further abuse in conversion programs.

Conclusion

freedom2b, its leaders and its members look forward to continuing our support of LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds. We remain particularly concerned about the mental health impacts of conversion therapy in Australia. We are encouraged by the motion passed in the NSW parliament in 2013. However, we believe there is a further role for governments in banning, through specific legislation, the use of these therapies for minors. This would be a welcome development in the effort to advance the human rights of LGBTI youth in Australia.

For further information about *freedom2b* or this submission, please contact:

David James, Secretary – *freedom2b* E: secretary@freedom2b.org M: 0407 914 451

⁸ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

⁹ <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://mic.com/articles/97958>

¹¹ <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20131024008>