



SOGICE survivor statement

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calling for action on:

the LGBTQA+ conversion movement

also known as *sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts (SOGICE)* and the *ex-gay* or *ex-trans movements*

As survivors of the LGBTQA+ conversion movement (sometimes known as the ex-gay or ex-trans movement) and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE), we present this Statement calling for Australia's elected representatives to intervene to curtail the ongoing and life-threatening practices employed by this movement. The Statement is accompanied by an online petition. The tally of signatures for this petition was 62,000 on Saturday 19 October, 2019 (www.change.org/EndGayCures).

This Statement has been prepared by survivors, allies, advocates, organisations and community groups that support, advocate for, or are led by LGBTQA+ people of faith. The Statement provides a basis for understanding the ideology that drives the conversion movement.

History of the LGBTQA+ conversion movement

The conversion movement's widespread operations commenced in Australia 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 their religious culture.

The prevailing belief was that same-sex attraction (or 'homosexuality') or any gender identity or expression that diverged from cisgender was a perversion of the 'natural order' and ultimately a choice that could be altered by prayer, personal effort, and re-forming 'healthy' habits, such as celibacy or even marrying someone of the opposite

sex. In addition to this, some branches of the church also saw same-sex attraction as being the result of spiritual influence. These beliefs formed the basis of early conversion ideology.

In order to explain *how* people became same-sex attracted or trans, secular psychological reasoning was mis-appropriated by religious leaders, groups and organisations. The predominant reasoning was that same-sex attracted and trans people had a disorder or sickness due to abuse, neglect or other forms of harm, and could, through therapy, find healing. This is best exemplified by Living Waters and Exodus, two major conversion organisations that are now defunct but that, at their peaks, influenced thousands of LGBTQA+ 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) practices' refers to both formal therapeutic and informal practices occurring in a range of settings that target and attract LGBTQA+ people of faith in order to change or suppress their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender and sexual expression. LGBTQA+ people of faith may have participated willingly: many formal conversion programs 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 community. They are also often internally driven by the fear of rejection and the desire to be 'whole'. Viewing conversion practices through the lens of 'willing participation' is thus extremely problematic. Equally problematic are attempts to counter the conversion movement that do not bear in mind its theological origins.

Conversion ideology

Conversion practices and SOGICE are based on a set of interconnected assertions that together form *conversion ideology*.

- With almost no exceptions, humans 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 (including demonic influence). This phenomenon is often labelled as 'sexual brokenness' or a disorder, particularly if a person has transitioned or had sexual experiences with people of the same sex.
- 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 brokenness is cause for significant concern or disciplinary action.

- 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, queer or asexual influences; connection to an ex-gay/ex-trans support group, and/or ongoing conversion practices, a person will either:
 - Experience a change in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, or
 - Overcome the causes or drivers behind their same-sex attraction or trans identity and remain celibate
- 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 practices

Formal ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion practices generally employ individual or group counselling, pastoral care, or similar means to assist and encourage LGBTQA+ 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
- de-transition or not affirm their gender identity

Types of conversion practices

The ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion 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. Instances of conversion practices being employed by psychologists and psychiatrists are therefore extremely rare and not the focus of survivor self-advocates. Most of the manifestations listed above fall outside the jurisdiction of statutory regulatory bodies (such as AHPRA).

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

- the ways that conversion practices have been used to target lesbian, bi+ and trans individuals

- the widespread ideology that sustains the movement
- the broader array of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE) that reach beyond formal therapeutic practices
- the very early exposure of trans and gender diverse people to conversion ideology and practices from within the home by (usually conservative religious) family members and moving on to practices outside of the family.

Conversion ideology and practices in communities

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 conversion practices.

Many expressions of the conversion movement exist at the micro level, making them difficult to recognise, quantify, and regulate. Conversion ideology is firmly embedded in the everyday life of many faith communities as a collection of messages and beliefs. 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 LGBTQA+ 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, conversion practices encompass 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. Trans people who are straight would be viewed through such a lens as experiencing brokenness of both gender and sexuality.

While SOGICE may not be unique to faith communities, particularly as there may be SOGICE in wider cultural groups where deviation from sexual and gender norms is considered taboo, much of the ideology which drives Australian SOGICE has its genesis there. Furthermore, while the language of SOGICE looks different depending on the specific religious or faith community, the underlying ideology of 'brokenness' is remarkably consistent.

Most expressions of SOGICE have flown under the radar in recent media coverage of 'gay conversion therapy', particularly as 'therapy' that focuses on 'gay' people is only a very small part of the LGBTQA+ conversion movement. Expressions include, but are not limited to:

- 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 practices organisation has now closed, with the movement's leaders renouncing and apologising for the hurt they have caused LGBTQA+ 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 LGBTQA+ 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 LGBTQA+ 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.
- Enforced traditional gender behavior within the family accompanied by punitive and abusive consequences within family structures.

While participants in SOGICE may be directed and encouraged by faith leaders and counsellors, change attempts can become self-directed. The expressions of SOGICE listed above are intertwined into the fabric of faith communities and conservative theology, though it is the opinion of Australia's leading survivor self-advocate bodies and many Australian denominational and religious leaders that conversion ideology is not theologically sound nor should it be labelled as a 'core tenet' of any denomination or religious tradition.

Survivors

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

Survivors of SOGICE are diverse.

- Some survivors may still identify with and enjoy continued connection with the community in which they experienced SOGICE while maintaining a firm position that SOGICE 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 SOGICE and the conversion movement, whether these conversations happen in the media or in the drafting of public policy.

LGBTQA+ 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 LGBTQA+ Australians by the ideology and messaging behind the movement. The petition that this letter accompanies calls for a national response – not just to narrow definitions of conversion ‘therapy’, but to the movement and ideology. Legislative responses to the conversion movement must comprehensively address the wide range of SOGICE in Australia, including referrals and the communication of conversion ideology. Specifically, there is a need for our elected representatives to play their part in openly challenging the deadly conversion 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 curtailing the movement by pursuing strategies that seek to identify and counteract its influence in

- Primary and Secondary Education
- Religious family structures
- 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. Survivors must be equal partners in defining the movement. Attempts to define the movement led by non-survivors consistently result in definitions and interventions that inadequately address the scope, complexity, breadth, motivations and ideology behind the movement. Experienced self-advocates can more accurately describe the diverse expressions of the LGBTQA+ movement and redirect third parties to diverse groups of survivors, including trans and gender diverse people, ace/aro people, bi+ people, women, and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. While the term ‘gay conversion therapy’ is often used in media and in other countries, organised Australian survivor groups prefer ‘LGBTQA+ conversion practices’ or ‘the LGBTQA+ conversion movement’ as these terms more accurately represent their experiences.
- b. An inquiry into the extent and prevalence of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement in the experience of LGBTIQ+ 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.

- c. Regulatory and legislative enforcement of the directives of Australian peak psychological and health bodies that prohibit the use of conversion practices by mental health professionals, including social workers, unregistered and registered health professionals, teachers and more. These bodies include the Australian Psychological Society (APS) and Australia New Zealand Psychiatric Association (ANZPA). Activities must include any attempts to change, suppress, cure, heal or repair the sexual orientation or gender identity of children or adults.
- d. Greater powers for health complaints and consumer affairs authorities to support the sufficient investigation of all claims of conversion practices.
- e. A public health and awareness campaign to explicitly target those at risk of the movement's influence and refute its key messages and assertions.
- f. Modification of legislation to classify as vilification the assertion that trans, gender diverse, and same-sex attracted Australians are inherently disordered.
- g. Protection of young Australians from SOGICE 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:
 - i. Enforced standards for all chaplaincy, guidance counsellor and religious education programs.
 - ii. 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.
 - iii. Awareness training for teachers in state education systems.
 - iv. Training to be undertaken by school chaplains that addresses the potential harm caused by conversion practices to same-sex attracted and gender questioning young people.
- h. The counselling industry:
 - i. 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.
 - ii. Implementation of licensing and standards for counsellors through a government regulator to protect LGBTIQ+ Australians from conversion practices.
- i. Tighter regulation to prevent the broadcast and advertising of conversion movement events and content such as radio shows, television programs and conferences. The Federal Government should work with relevant federal agencies and the States to ensure that classifications and ratings for ex-gay and ex-trans publications (television, books, online content) reflect the negative impact on the psychological health of individuals that can be caused by this content. A very large number of titles are still available for sale to Australian consumers.
- j. Funding for LGBTIQ+ and mental health organisations to:
 - i. Boost public awareness and understanding of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and SOCE.
 - ii. Support survivors of the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and SOGICE.
- k. Australian Governments must issue statements that clearly address and condemn the damaging ideology behind the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts.

- l. Creation of an offence that criminalises any attempt to remove a person from Australia for the purposes of conversion practices.
- m. The broader LGBTIQ+ community should be consulted in determining the scope and appropriateness of civil penalties for practitioners and referrers. Legislation that criminalises referral to conversion activities may impact a very large number of Australian faith communities and has not traditionally been recommended by LGBTIQ+ conversion survivors.
- n. Applied research into specific faith and culturally diverse communities to develop culturally appropriate, evidence-based interventions that will raise awareness about the harm caused by conversion practices and support the development of best practice spiritual care for LGBTQ+ people.

We additionally call on the Prime Minister and Health Minister to issue statements that clearly address the damaging ideology behind the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts.

We encourage questions relating to the ex-gay/ex-trans/conversion movement from government, politicians, policy professionals, academics, and media.

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Steff Fenton, Equal Voices
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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