

**Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International's submission to the  
VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND  
COMMUNITY SAFETY  
Conversion Practices - Legislative Option to Implement a Ban**

**Preamble:**

Legislation against so called 'conversion therapy' is relatively new. The first place this happened was in the state of California in 2012. Since that time there has been a growing momentum which has been implemented in other US states, counties and cities. This encouraged other countries to follow suit. A number are now in the process of drafting legislation.

It seems, from my observation, that very few people, who have tried to emulate the US success, have not realised that in North America mental health professionals are licenced by the state and therefore it is easier for the state to take action on this.

Another observation is that a number of voices were crying out BAN, BAN, BAN but were unaware of the complexities and nuances involved in creating this within the Australian context. Sadly, often the sensationalist reporting in the media, referring to medical interventions of the past, have given people a warped view of what we are actually talking about today. Some of the challenges ahead of banning in Australia were highlighted in our May 2018 report [Gay Conversion Therapy in Australia](#).<sup>1</sup>

We very much appreciate the Victorian Government approach taking the time to consider all the stakeholders in a consultative approach and ensure all voices are heard and a balanced, realistic approach formulated.

**Background:**

My experience in this area is quite extensive not only personally but also with 'ex-gay' practices, organisations and especially survivors.

- 1968 - at the age of 17, I was seeing a psychiatrist as a depressed teenager who had attempted suicide because of my same sex experiences which, according to society, meant I was a pervert and deviate.
- 1969 - became a 'born again' Christian in the evangelical branch of Christianity believing that God could not only forgive but also had the power to overcome my 'sin'.
- 1971 – moved into the Charismatic/Pentecostal stream of Christianity seeking greater power from God because of my failures. Went through several weeks of

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<sup>1</sup> I have attached our 2018 [Gay Conversion Therapy in Australia Report](#) as it will be referred to in this submission. The various subject headings have links in them which take you directly to the relevant section in the document.

exorcisms as I was told, and believed, my continued failures were because of demonic spirits that possessed me.

- 1972 – admitted myself into a residential program, one of the first in the world and one of the few that has ever existed in Australia, to transform me into a heterosexual man.
- 1974 – believing I had enough control over temptations, I married and within several years had two children
- 1978-1991 – a popular preacher within Australia’s Pentecostal Churches
- 1991 – fell in love with a man, a national scandal and resigned from the ministry
- 1992 – walked away from everything to live openly gay but with trauma and many unresolved issues including my Christian belief system. I call this the ‘ex-ex-gay closet’.
- 1999 – found personal resolution of my faith and my sexuality
- 2000 – founded an online group of ‘ex-gay’ survivors that grew to 400
- 2004 – released my autobiography and immediately was overwhelmed with emails from readers who usually began with the words ‘your story is my story’ as up to this point none of them had anyone they felt they could trust telling their stories to. I have no way of actually putting a number on the survivor stories I’ve heard but it has been several thousand since the first edition.
- 2005 – commenced Freedom2b, a support network for LGBT people from Christian backgrounds. Of the 1000 stories individuals posted on the site, many had gone through form of religious sexual reorientation practices.
- Since 2000 I’ve monitored ‘ex-gay’ organisations and individuals in Australia and overseas, consistently written articles debunking false claims and challenging the myths of the ‘change is possible’ message within Christian contexts.

My approach has always been with the understanding that the real enemy is ignorance.

***‘The enemy is not individuals, churches, ‘ex-gay’ organisations or political parties; the enemy is ignorance. Change is created by focusing our energies on overcoming the latter instead of attacking the former.’***

I’ve sort to overcome ignorance and misinformation with facts and the truth. Along with changes in the ‘ex-gay world globally, I believe this approach has met with significant success with most of the organisations promoting change in Australia have either closed down or moved to a celibacy model.

## **Terminology and Definition**

I think there are some important considerations re terminology. This has been something I’ve laboured with myself as terminology has changed over the years. It was easy when they called themselves ‘ex-gay’; we could call ourselves ‘ex-ex-gays’. It should be noted that initially the vast majority of people involved in the movement both ‘ex-gays’ and ‘ex-gay survivors’ were males. The ratio of gay men to lesbians, from my observation was about 9:1. No one talked about the bisexual experience as valid. Transgender and gender diverse stories and people were rarely, if ever, mentioned. I’m grateful that we are now hearing

those voices. Of recent times, there has been an insensitive and cruel attack on the transgender community by conservative Christian groups here in Australia and overseas.

In my attempts to find an appropriate term I've journeyed with the movement from 'ex-gay' to 'reparative therapy' to 'unwanted same-sex-attraction' to 'gay conversion therapy' to 'gay religious conversion therapy'.<sup>2</sup> None of these have been completely adequate for a number of reasons. Firstly, they don't acknowledge the experience of transgender and gender diverse individuals and secondly the word 'therapy' was misleading. Although it should be noted that in the late 80s and early 90s the 'ex-gay' movement attempted to move into 'therapeutic', pseudo-scientific model. Essentially this was based on the previous debunked theories about the causes of homosexuality in the 50s and 60s.

I like the recently developed term of LGBTQA conversion practices/movement/organisations. Considering that many of the existing groups and the individuals promoting 'God's plan is male and female – not gay or transgender' believe in a 'conversion' experience, the word itself will be problematic in some uneducated circles as is the acronym LGBTQA.

Having said all that, I don't think we have a viable solution to the ideal terminology, but it is important, I believe, to be aware of the different audiences we are speaking into.

I've never felt totally comfortable with the term 'ban' although that is the direction we are heading. I think talking about making certain practices 'illegal' is more helpful and even better to speak about 'protection' instead of 'banning'. The Born Perfect campaign in the US uses this terminology wherever it can but the media likes 'ban' in headlines for dramatic effect.

In the current HCC definition, the word 'suppress' is used. Whilst this is definitely a part of the ideology we are trying to counteract, we need to remember that in Christian circles straight individuals are also expected to 'suppress' their sexual feelings. Sex, to these people, can only be expressed within the confines of marriage between a man and a woman. If we are talking about same-sex feelings/desires and a person's desire to transition or express their gender in a preferred manner specifically, I think that needs to be made clear.

The celibacy message of 'you can never act on your same sex orientation physically or romantically' is just as harmful on the individual as the 'change is possible' message; it is based on the same belief system.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of the transgender experience as well, the term 'conversion' could be confusing. For the transgender person the damaging ideology is that they should not 'convert' or as we would say 'transition' and they should accept the gender they were assigned at birth.

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Don't get confused' in attached report

<sup>3</sup> See 'How celibacy became the new ex-gay' <https://www.abbi.org.au/2017/08/how-celibacy-became-the-new-ex-gay/>

## **Who do you think should be banned from providing conversion practices?**

### **What practices should be banned?**

Legislation is important. There is no clearer message about the inappropriateness of the belief that LGBTQ are somehow sick, broken or disordered, than making it illegal to treat people as such. Medical and psychological practices that have previously treated individuals as such have been debunked, are harmful and should be relegated to history.

All mental health registering bodies should be held accountable for practices within their professions to ensure their members, firstly know what the organisations stand is and secondly should be ensuring that the code of ethics are complied with. Of course, most of these are national bodies but to practice in Victoria they need to follow state law.

The attached report on gay conversion therapy in Australia, began with the announcement that the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia (CCAA) had actually done the above officially<sup>4</sup>. Personally, I thought this was ground-breaking and newsworthy, but I'm still mystified as to why no one wanted to report on it. Maybe it was because it didn't fit into the narrative being created that all Christians hate the gays. I think the CCAA should have been applauded and all similar organisations should do the same.

Legislation should include any licensed or registered therapist who is working with clients to 'overcome' their same sex desires or treating a transgender or gender fluid person as disordered. All medical and mental health professional bodies should have a policy statement that backs up the legislation and educate their members. Chaplains, school counsellors who are offering advice to young people should also be held accountable. This should be happening particularly with any religious organisation that receives government funding. The legislation should also cover health care providers.

### **Who should the ban protect?**

I think the legislation should most definitely include minors. We have laws to protect minors from the harms of cigarette smoking and alcohol and people who provide these to minors are penalised. I don't see any difference between what has just been mentioned and LGBT conversion practices.

Other vulnerable groups should be included such as those with mental health issues and disabilities.

I did like the fact that the LaTrobe highlighted children being taken out of the country to receive 'treatment' in the parent's less enlightened countries of origin and this should be illegal. I know of several examples where this happened. One of those was a middle eastern

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<sup>4</sup> See opening of attached report and also Back to the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia in the same report.

Christian mother who sent her 18 year old son to one of the famous 'therapists' in California because she couldn't find anyone here.

Children should be protected from abusive situations as well. I know of one young man in WA who was beaten and locked up for some time by his religious uncle. This was the uncle's home-grown treatment of his nephew's homosexuality. He'd been sent to the country and handed over the uncle by the religious parents.

Knowing that those experiencing these practices are vulnerable and not in a place where they are empowered to resist or stand up for themselves<sup>5</sup>, I believe provision should be made for concerned friends, family or community members to report what they believe is happening so it can be investigated.

### **Regulation: through what legal method should we apply the ban?**

I think a combination of both civil regulatory schemes and civil law will be the best approach. I think I have covered that above. Criminal law should come into play in situations where appropriate.

### **Religious freedom: how should we balance the human rights affected by a ban?**

This is a very challenging area as there are many religious beliefs that many of us would consider illogical or stupid. I don't believe in a personal devil. I don't believe that women should submit to their husband. I don't believe in demonic possession. I think that others have the right to believe these things if they choose, except where they cause harm.

I believe the way to tackle this is through education and not legislation. The proposed Religious Freedom Bill is demonstrating how challenging this area can be. A public education plan focusing on the positives would be more helpful. Highlighting the Christian groups and organisations that are affirming is important. Individuals stories are also useful.

I think we also need to remember that the 'gay and trans is not good' beliefs are prevalent in some religious circles and are consistently being presented in the public space.

YouTube is just one example where any young teen searching for answers can find videos of people preaching against homosexuality or individuals claiming they were once gay and now they are straight.

One can also find numerous books on any online bookseller promoting the same philosophies and testimonies.

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<sup>5</sup> See attached report The Ex-gay Closet and Coming Out of the Ex-gay Closet

Thirdly the internet provides an abundance of websites<sup>6</sup> with information, resources, forums and testimonies for the Christian or Muslim parent or troubled individual to access.

To tackle churches outdated beliefs on sexuality and gender identity without targeting the above three, it would appear to be targeting specific churches which would create an unnecessary battle. Freedom of speech is still a priced value in our democratic society. Sadly some in our community are quick to label any view different to theirs as hate speech. Having a different belief or opinion e.g. 'I believe that marriage is between a man and woman' is not hate speech, it's an ill-informed opinion.

In closing, I'd like to highlight the need for the correct tone to be used as we move forward in our conversations about legislating against practices that are harmful to LGBT youth. In the segment of Christianity that I was previously involved in there exists a narrative about 'The Gay Agenda'.<sup>7</sup> Of course, our agenda is acceptance and equality. The myth of 'The Gay Agenda' has been around since the 1980s, that the intention is to destroy all signs of religion, convert more people to homosexuality and undermine the entire moral fabric of society.

It concerns me that the way some in our community engage in social media etc only reinforces this myth, that the LGBT community is intend on destroying religion and want to take away all their rights. I think particularly of the young gay, lesbian and trans 13 year old who has yet to come to know they are loved by God just as they are. I believe we always need to keep them in mind and ensure the way we communicate does not hinder their journey to self-acceptance. If not, it may take them decades to come to a wholesome realisation of who they are, or they may become another of those suicide statistics before they had a chance to blossom.

Sincerely

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Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International's mission is to create understanding and acceptance for LGBTI people, empower community members and build bridges with religious organisations and leaders.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Gay conversion therapy still thriving online' <https://www.abbi.org.au/2015/05/gay-conversion-therapy-3/>

<sup>7</sup> The Homosexual Manifesto <https://www.abbi.org.au/2013/05/bradlee-dean/>