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To Whom it May Concern

Conversion Practices : Law Reform Options for Tasmania Consultation

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to this important consultation.

Background:

My experience in this area is extensive. A complete timeline of that is available online¹.

To summarise, my experience of LGBTQ conversion practices is both personal and professional, and covers over 50 years in Australia and overseas.

- I was one of the first in the world to experience a Christian "ex-gay" residential program (1972)²
- After resolving my personal faith/sexuality conflict, I founded a yahoo support group for "ex-gay"³ survivors in 2000. It grew to 400 people and functioned for 5 years.
- When the first edition of my autobiography, *A Life of Unlearning*, was released in 2004, I was inundated with emails from readers. Many emails began with the words "*your story is my story*"⁴ and I continued to engage with the writers either via email or face to face. This still continues today with readers of the third edition.
- Over the last 20 years, I have worked with over 4,000 people who have been impacted by religiously based conversion practices (survivors).
- During those 20 years I also have written extensively about the LGBTQ conversion movement and our site contains the largest selection of information and materials on the subject in Australia.

I doubt that there is anyone else in Australia who has worked with more survivors, so I believe I speak with some authority about the harm caused by the outdated belief that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are disordered, need fixing, or should reject or suppress their real identity.

¹ <https://www.abbi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Anthony-Venn-Brown-Author-conversion-therapy-bio-2018.pdf>

² <http://thequesttocurequeers.com/chapter-1-help-me/>

³ At that time trans and gender diverse people were rarely a part of the programs or their stories told. "Ex-gay" was the preferred term.

⁴ A story of faith/sexuality conflict that for many, included formal programs but all being involved in what we would now call "conversion practices".

The Tasmania Law Reform Institute (TLRI) should be commended for the very thorough and comprehensive approach to the issue. The *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conversion Practices*, Issues Paper No. 31⁵ also is of the highest standard and Dr Brendan Gogarty, Dr Martin Clark and team are to be congratulated on the excellent publication.

It is important that all states have protections in place for LGBTQ people when the federal government has not taken responsibility for this.⁶ There has been value though in the various states such as Victoria, Queensland and the Australia Capital Territory tackling legislation. Whilst some have been critical of recent legislation, every time the issue has been raised and legislation passed a strong message is sent that LGBTQ people should always be treated with dignity and respect and these conversion and suppression practices are no longer acceptable in an enlightened society. Lessons have been learned in each of these contexts as I note you have drawn from, as well as legislation that has been passed in other countries.

I do feel it is important to ensure:

1. All stakeholders are given the opportunity to give input and feedback, including those from faith groups; both pro-LGBTQ and those who are non-affirming.
2. Time is taken with the process as there are a number of complexities and nuances around sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) conversion practices that need to be taken into consideration.
3. The voices of survivors are given their rightful hearing.
4. The rights of individuals are taken into consideration and balanced accordingly. This is not always a simple task considering the rights of children, parents, individuals and freedom of religion, which takes prominence and when.
5. The legislation should be focused on harm and the severity of that harm and adjusted accordingly.

I note in your approach that you are taking all these into consideration.

Having worked in this space for the last 20 years, I have been able to observe things that others new to this might not be aware of. One thing in particular, has been the evolution of advocacy. Initially, we were very focused on the organisations and individuals who were out there in the public space boldly preaching a "change is possible" message. The most well-known of these would have been Exodus International, which was the umbrella organisation for these ministries globally. As most people would be aware, that organisation closed down in 2013 and an apology issued from the President, Alan Chambers, for the harm the organisation and message had caused.⁷ I had the privilege of engaging with Alan leading up to this and being one of two LGBT people invited into the conference to hear those historic words. "*We have decided to close Exodus down and this is our last conference*".⁸

⁵ https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1415669/tlri-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-conversion-practices-issues-paper-2020.pdf

⁶ Scott Morrison says gay conversion therapy 'not an issue for me' <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/scott-morrison-says-gay-conversion-therapy-not-an-issue-for-me>

⁷ Head of Exodus ministry issues apology to gay community <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-xpm-2013-jun-19-la-me-ln-ministry-apology-20130619-story.html>

⁸ EXODUS INTERNATIONAL – A BEHIND THE SCENES ACCOUNT OF THE EXODUS CLOSURE Part 4 The bombshell and the aftermath <https://www.abbi.org.au/2014/08/exodus-international-closes-behind-the-scenes-no4/>

For those of us who'd spent years opposing the "change is possible" message, it was a great win; almost unbelievable. But many of us also realised the battle was far from over.

My approach has always been *"The enemy is not individuals, churches, conversion 'therapy' 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 focused on overcoming ignorance and misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity and deconstructing the "ex-gay" myth.

That approach had some level of success, as one by one we saw over 40 of these organisations in Australia close down.⁹ As I have often pointed out this was only the beginning of ending the harm¹⁰. At a survivor's conference in Florida in 2009 I highlighted this to fellow anti-ex-gay activists. *"My belief is that ex-gay ministries are often not the cause but are more like the symptom of a much bigger problem. The real enemy is ignorance. That is, the ignorance that exists in Christian circles about sexual orientation. When the director of Exodus, Alan Chambers, claims that Exodus gets over 400,000 calls and emails annually from people saying they hate being homosexual, we have to ask the questions 'Is Exodus the cause or only responding to something far deeper?'. Did these peoples' journey begin because of Exodus, or just where these tortured people end up? Exodus offers hope for the 'problem' in subtly disguised messages of 'change'."*

The organisations had been the symptoms, not the cause. The cause that lay at the root of the harm was the outdated belief that homosexuality was disordered/unnatural/abnormal, a sin, and dysfunctional development that can and must be changed, healed or suppressed. And the same goes for any transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary identity. It is the impacts of these outdated beliefs that the new legislation is addressing.

It has become abundantly clear that one does not have to have been through a formal program to have suffered harm. There are an increasing number of voices now, from people who have experienced harm, and still are, because of the treatment in their communities of faith. Wherever you have a strong fundamental, sacred text based group or religion, then the outdated beliefs about sexuality and gender conformity are prevalent. These beliefs are the foundation of SOGI conversion practices in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It should be mentioned that not all people who confess to be a part of these religions subscribe to anti-LGBTQ beliefs or practices.

Initially, in the 1990s, the evidence of harm was anecdotal, as survivors who were still around to tell their stories told of the abuse, pain, trauma and wasted years engulfed in and dedicated to the LGBTQ conversion movement.¹¹ We now have over two decades of well documented, robust academic research which all tell us the same thing.¹² It can even be life-threatening¹³. Even the Sydney Anglican Diocese has acknowledged the harm. At the 2018 Sydney Synod, a resolution on pastoral care for church members who were same-sex attracted was adopted which included a statement that it *"recognises that psychological practices such as 'reparative therapy' or 'gay conversion therapy', which seek to re-orient sexual attraction to heterosexuality, have been highly*

⁹ EX-GAY AWAY <https://web.archive.org/web/20120725004227/http://gaynewsnetwork.com.au/feature/ft-national/7904-ex-gay-away.html>

¹⁰ Australia's Ex-gay World – the clock is ticking <https://www.abbi.org.au/2009/11/australias-ex-gay-world/>

¹¹ "Conversion therapy survivors – testimonials not found on 'ex-gay' organisations' sites," *Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International*, May 3rd, 2012, 2012, <https://www.abbi.org.au/2012/05/conversion-therapy-survivors-2/>.

¹² <https://www.abbi.org.au/research/>

¹³ Gay Religious Suicide – why we can never count the cost <https://www.abbi.org.au/2015/09/lgbt-religious-suicide/>

ineffective for those who experience exclusive same-sex attraction, and have caused distress to many who have participated in such therapy,"¹⁴

Another important development that has often been overlooked, was the change in the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia's Code of Ethics. I highlighted this in our 2018 report *Conversion Therapy in Australia - The state of the nation*. **8.8 Counsellors shall not do therapeutic interventions aimed at modifying or changing the sexual orientation of clients, as distinct from treating recognised sexual disorders.**¹⁵

The more recent stories and harmful outcomes from survivors who have not been through formal programs, match those from previous years.

When we look at the evolution of SOGI conversion practices over the last five decades, the recent shift to celibacy and "unwanted same sex attraction" should also be mentioned. The harm over time is the same, as it is built on the same beliefs as the "change is possible" message.

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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As previously mentioned, I have written extensively on this topic. I offer a few of these articles to give more depth and as resources to what has been covered in this submission.

- **Conversion Therapy in Australia - The state of the nation** is a complete overview and history of the movement in Australia.
- **Beyond Egypt closes** – lessons learned from the rise and demise of a conversion "therapy" organisation gives an insight into LGBTQ conversion practices and terminology.
- **What is gay conversion therapy?** (and what it is not). Get clear on what we are talking about.
- **How, when and why Hillsong banned 'ex-gay' (conversion therapy) referrals.** Some history and unfinished business.

¹⁴ "2nd Ordinary Session of the 51st Synod -Anglican Church of Australia Diocese of Sydney", (Sydney, 2018).

¹⁵ <https://ccaa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CCAA-CODE-OF-ETHICS-Nov-2020-1.pdf>

- **Sexual orientation change efforts within religious contexts: A personal account of the battle to heal homosexuals.** Sensoria – A Journal of Mind, Brain, and Culture

Considering:

- What we know and understand about sexual orientation and gender identity;
- The knowledge gained through the thousands of voices of individuals who've testified about the harm the beliefs and practices have produced in their lives;
- The sound academic work now available in this area that consistently evidences the harm;
- All mental health professional organisations have opposed SOGI conversion practices;

Why would we not seek legislation that will protect vulnerable LGBTQ people from beliefs and practices that have reeked so much devastation in individual lives, their relationships and families?

Should you require further information or clarification on anything in this submission please don't hesitate to contact me.

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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).

W:www.abbi.org.au

Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International's mission is to create understanding and acceptance for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) people, empower community members and build bridges with religious organisations and leaders

