

Public Submission for Tasmania Law Reform Institute Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conversion Practices

1.0 Introduction

I am Rev. Dr. Wes Bredenhof. I have served as the pastor of the Launceston Free Reformed Church since September 2015. Previous to that, I served two churches in Canada. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Alberta (1996), a Master of Divinity degree from the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (2000), and a Doctor of Theology degree from Reformation International Theological Seminary (2010).

I am called to be a preacher of the good news of Jesus Christ. My calling is to show love to everyone I can by first explaining the serious trouble all of us are in. I am like a medical doctor who explains the disease so the patient can understand the need for treatment and be persuaded to take it. The serious trouble we all face is that we are all under God's just judgment for our rebellion against him. God is infinitely majestic and if you rebel against infinite majesty, the appropriate penalty is infinite too. However, in his mercy and love, God has provided a way for this judgment to be averted. God sent his Son Jesus Christ to live and die in the place of anyone who would turn from their rebellion and believe in him. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life in the place of all who trust in him. Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross to take the punishment of all who have faith in him. Jesus rose from the dead, proving that God accepted the sacrifice he made. There is now a way to eternal life and my calling is to show that way to everyone I can. Because I love God and I love people, I preach Jesus Christ as the Saviour of rebels like me. This is what is most important to me and to the church I serve. I have prepared this submission because this is what is most important.

Recently I was involved as an expert witness at a case before the State Administrative Tribunal of Western Australia. The case involves a couple from another Free Reformed Church [REDACTED] who were denied the opportunity to be respite foster carers for children ages 0-5 because of their religious beliefs on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). I prepared a report for this matter testifying to the religious beliefs of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. This report is attached to this submission as Appendix 1. I attach it in order to demonstrate that there are Bible-believing Christians in Tasmania who have the potential to be affected by any proposed legislation regarding SOGI conversion practices. This report also demonstrates that our beliefs are historic Christian teachings based on what the Bible says.

I also respectfully provide this submission to alert you to the fact that Christian churches like ours will not change our practices. Our ultimate commitment is to God and our ultimate authority is the Bible as God's inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word. Because we believe what the Bible says, we do respect those in authority over us. The Bible teaches us to pray for those who rule over us (1 Timothy 2:1-2). The Bible teaches us to submit to our government (Romans 13:1). We do all this gladly. However, if there is a conflict between what God teaches in the Bible and what the state legislates, we will always follow what the Bible teaches. We cannot compromise on that. Because we love God who first loved us through Jesus Christ, we will be steadfastly faithful to God and to the Bible.

2.0 Background and Terms of Reference

I note that the inquiry was initiated by peak Tasmanian LGBTQA+ stakeholder bodies and representatives. This appears to have slanted the inquiry in a particular direction, one that is only sympathetic to LGBTQA+ concerns. The Terms of Reference bear this out. It is assumed from the start that all SOGI conversion practices (as defined by the working definition) are to be viewed as harmful. The rest of the Issues Paper is consistent with that assumption, making it almost a foregone conclusion that Tasmania must do something about SOGI conversion practices.

3.0 Inquiry Process

The Issues Paper was prepared by research staff guided by an independent Expert Advisory Group. I note that this includes “a member of a community of faith” (p.xiii). In the Acknowledgements (p.xiv), the Expert Advisory Group is thanked by name. [REDACTED]

Whatever the case may be, I gladly raise my hand to be involved in any future work in this area. If the TLRI would care to understand the concerns of Bible-believing Christians and how they may be affected by prospective legislation, I would certainly be willing to have such a conversation. The TLRI should act in good faith and genuinely aim to be as inclusive as possible. That would mean not excluding sincere Bible-believing Christians.

4.0 List of Questions

I have read the entire Issues Paper as background to the questions asked for this consultation. Some of the questions assume from the outset that all SOGI conversion practices (as defined by the working definition) are harmful. These questions (by design?) exclude Bible-believing Christians and are, therefore, impossible for me to answer. I will only answer four of the questions.

4.1 Question 1

After considering the background and working definition (see [1.3.23] on page 13), in your opinion, what are and are not ‘sexual orientation and gender identity conversion practices’?

In my view, the definition of SOGI conversion practices, for the purpose of this consultation, should be narrowly limited to extreme acts that would normally be described as torture – such as non-consensual electroshock or aversion therapy. However, it should then be proven that such practices take place in Tasmania – the Issues Paper acknowledges in 2.3.1 that there is no data on this question.

Additionally, I would ask the TLRI to give consideration to reviewing 1.2.8 of the Issues Paper. In particular, the Paper speaks of “false claims” and “false publications.” Does preaching from a Bible passage addressing SOGI constitute a “false claim”? Does asking a parishioner to read a Bible passage addressing SOGI involve a “false publication”? The TLRI ought to recognize that the Bible does speak about these things, for example, in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Will a consequence of SOGI conversion practice legislation be that the Bible is considered to be a “false publication” which ought somehow to be proscribed? That seems to be the direction of the Issues Paper.

Moreover, the presupposition behind 1.2.8 needs to be justified. The presupposition is that there are false claims and there are true claims. The language of the Issues Paper is not even provisional about such claims, but rather appears to be grounded on absolute certainty. However, by what objective standard are we to determine which claims are true and which are false? The Issues Paper seems to presuppose further that science is the objective standard by which truth is determined and distinguished from falsehood. Science appears to be the ultimate authority for the Issues Paper. In Christian terms, we would say that science is “the Bible” here. However, what do you do when your “Bible” contradicts itself or needs to be constantly updated? How would you be able to have absolute certainty about what is true or false with such a “Bible”? In the nature of the case, there is scientific research calling into question some of the claims in the Issues Paper. In 2016, the journal *The New Atlantis* published an extensive review of social scientific research regarding SOGI issues.¹ There is no unanimous scientific consensus on these issues. So how can the Issues Paper so boldly insist that some claims are false while implying that others are true? Such absolute claims require a transcendent objective standard.

Finally, in this section of the Issues Paper, there is no discussion about the inherent nature of sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, are these concepts rooted in biology, are they social constructs, or something else altogether? More to the point, are they inherently fixed or can they change? If they can change, what factors might be involved? Are allowances made for changes in any direction?

4.2 Question 3

Have you been involved in or offered, or are you aware of, any forms of SOGI conversion practices in Tasmania? If so, what were the effects on you, or the person exposed to them?

As evidenced in Appendix  1, our church preaches and teaches what the Bible says, including what it says about sexual orientation and gender identity. We do this out of our ultimate commitment to God, our love for him, and out of love for the people around us. We counsel accordingly. We pray publicly and privately accordingly. According to the working definition the Issues Paper provides, we **are** involved in SOGI conversion practices. We make no apologies for that. Moreover, as stated above, this is non-negotiable for our church since we believe what the Bible says. For us to do otherwise would be unloving and disingenuous.

¹ <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/introduction-sexuality-and-gender>

4.3 Question 4

Do you think that Tasmanian law should be changed to address SOGI conversion practices? If so, should this be through comprehensive reform, amendment or both (a hybrid)?

No, not if it will prevent people who want to seek Christian, Bible-based help with their sexual orientation and gender identity from getting the help they desire. Human dignity is most honoured when individuals are allowed choice as to the assistance they want.

Also, Tasmanian law should not be changed if it will conflict with the sincerely held religious beliefs and practices of people like me and the members of my church.

4.4 Question 9

Are there any other matters that you consider relevant to this Inquiry and would like to raise?

The federal government has indicated its intention to introduce a Religious Discrimination Bill. Surely it would be reasonable for Tasmania to wait and see what this bill entails and how it may impact SOGI conversion practice legislation.

Also, I believe it would be reasonable for the TLRI to engage in more comprehensive community consultation before moving forward. TLRI especially needs to understand the concerns of Tasmanian Christians around religious freedom. I am confident many pastors and churches would be willing to discuss this with the TLRI. Such a reasonable step could go a long way towards preventing unnecessary legal conflicts in the future.

There may also be far-reaching unintended consequences for such legislation, especially as regards parents and Christian schools:

Appendix 1  was submitted as an expert witness report in a case involving a Christian couple who wished to be foster parents. Their religious beliefs as they relate to SOGI resulted in ██████████ determining they were not fit even to be respite foster carers for children ages 0-5. The WA State Government intervened in the hearing and supported ██████████'s position. The couple involved have their own natural children. Would not consistency demand that ██████████ and the WA State Government hold that this couple are not fit to have any children in their care? I would urge the TLRI to give careful consideration to the consequences of any proposed SOGI conversion legislation – will this require the government to remove children from the homes of Christian parents who hold to what the Bible teaches about SOGI? Will this result in a new “stolen generation”?

While it is not operated or governed by our church, members of our church community operate a Christian school in Launceston. This Christian school is also unreservedly committed to what the Bible teaches about SOGI. The children who attend this school are taught accordingly, because their parents want their children to be taught in a way which corresponds with their Christian faith. In fact, the parents have all made public vows to this effect – this is taken very seriously in our community. There are several similar Christian

schools throughout Tasmania. The TLRI ought to give careful consideration to the consequences of any proposed SOGI conversion legislation as they relate to Christian education. Will it continue to be lawful for Christian parents to have their children educated in a context where the teachings of the Bible about everything are communicated and honoured? Or is this legislation going to have the consequence, intended or otherwise, of destroying Christian education which follows the teachings of the Bible?

Finally, I would urge the TLRI to give due consideration to the recent *Bell v. Tavistock* case, decided by the High Court in the United Kingdom. This case illustrates the harm that may occur when children and young people are pushed towards gender transitioning. Furthermore, it opens up the question of whether a government adopting SOGI conversion legislation might be held liable under similar circumstances.

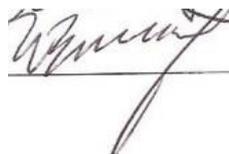
5.0 Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to discussions around this potential legislation.

Let me conclude by reassuring you that my concern and that of my church community is not to oppress or injure anyone. We are not motivated by hatred or animus – quite the opposite. Rather, we sincerely believe that following what the Bible teaches leads to human flourishing. This is a genuinely held religious belief. There are many examples of individuals who identified as gay or lesbian, but, when they became Christians, they found a different identity which gave them joy and peace. They identified with Jesus Christ. They became disciples of Jesus, committed to following him as Lord in every area of their lives. You can research some of their stories for yourself: [REDACTED]. They did not become Christians because of some extreme form of SOGI conversion practice (like electroshock therapy). It happened just because someone talked about the Bible with them and prayed with them – and the Holy Spirit worked through that to change their lives. That is simply what we aim to do in our church. In other words, we strive to carry on in the historic Christian tradition as Reformed Christians have done for centuries.

If you so desire, I would welcome the opportunity to add to this submission in person or in writing.

Submitted respectfully this 17th day of December, 2020



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