

The Hon. Daniel Andrews. MP
Premier of Victoria
Parliament House.
Spring St.,
East Melbourne.
Victoria. 3002

Dated 29 Jan 2021.

Dear Premier.

This letter is written on behalf of the Interfaith Communities of Victoria, whose signatures can be found below, to voice our strong and unequivocal opposition to the current draft of the **Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020**, passed in the Legislative Assembly on Thursday December 10 2020.

While we in no way support coercive and harmful practises that force someone to attempt to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, we are united in support of the human rights of any Victorian to have the freedom of choice to seek assistance to adhere to their religious convictions on matters of gender and sexuality. The Bill legislates ideological constructs around sexual orientation and gender identity. The Bill, therefore, overreaches by imposing constraints on the individual freedom of choice, parental rights and responsibilities, and the ability for religious leaders to offer support, prayer, and resources to same sex attracted and gender dysphoric individuals seeking faith-based assistance to adhere to religiously sanctioned constructs of gender and sexuality.

The rushed nature with which this Bill was introduced and passed in the Legislative Assembly does not provide any assurances or clarity to a significant part of the various religious communities who lacked proper consultation in this process. While it was claimed that consultation with communities took place in 2019, through Engage Victoria, the few who were consulted noted that the survey used was biased in its construction. Additionally, the subsequent summary report compiled from this 'consultation' failed to report on the contrary materials that were presented to the survey.

Summary of Key Concerns

The *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill* will take away the right to religious freedom, expression, and choice on issues of sexuality and gender identity.

- 1) The Bill changes previous legal definitions of "gender" and "sexuality" and replaces them with contentious ideological constructions. Many people of faith oppose these constructions. Our deeply held and unchanging beliefs are firmly rooted in each religious community's' respective Holy Books and Oral Traditions which provide contrary constructs to those imposed by the Bill.
- 2) The Bill seeks to force same-sex attracted and gender dysphoric individuals within religious communities to adopt such contentious constructs and definitions despite not identifying with or accepting these definitions. To prohibit and criminalise any religious leader's responsibility to support an adherent responding to teachings of their faith's doctrine on sexuality and gender, is a significant overreach by the government into religious lives in our communities.

This will conversely cause mental harm and great distress to those individuals as it forces these unwanted constructs onto them and strips them of any legal rights to seek comfort and assistance with professional counsellors or religious bodies.

- 3) The Bill criminalises informal conversation, counselling/therapy, and pastoral care to individuals experiencing same sex attractions or gender dysphoria:

Under Division 1, clause 5, sub-clause 3, the Bill enforces a blanket ban on vaguely defined "change or suppression practices" which expressly includes **consenting** religious interaction, including prayer for an individual and the provision of religious advice on the personal situations of same sex attracted or gender dysphoric individuals.

Religious organisations, parents and families, faith-based schools, ministries, and other individuals will face scrutiny, investigation, censorship, significant jail terms and large fines for exercising their religious duty to teach or advise individuals who request support to maintain adherence to religious constructs of sexuality and gender.

- 4) Under Clause 5(1) of the Bill, it specifically includes a practice that occurs “**whether with or without the person’s consent**”. This has surpassed the definition of coercive practice to where it denies same sex attracted or gender dysphoric adults of their human rights to seek ethical forms of therapy, religious pastoral or spiritual assistance or any other formal or informal guidance to help them live in accordance with their faith.

Contrary to what is commonly portrayed through Main Stream Media and LGBT lobbying groups, religious communities have indeed benefitted many individuals who have sought help and support in this area. There are many testimonies freely available to attest to this fact. To ignore these voices and prevent this support being accessible would be to deny individuals the opportunity to explore their sexuality and gender within their religious framework as they so desire. This is unacceptable in a pluralistic liberal democracy that claims it celebrates diversity.

- 5) Under Clause 64 of the Bill, it is made clear that any “change or suppression practice [within a family context] can constitute a form of family violence.”

This specifically criminalises parental conversations with their children should that conversation in any way be seen to oppose a child’s expressed sexual orientation or gender identity. The Bill criminalises any effort by the parents to seek ethical, formal or informal assistance, religious or otherwise, to provide counselling or advice to their children experiencing same sex attractions or gender dysphoria that does not necessarily adopt the affirmative approach. This significantly encroaches on the rights of parents and seeks to force them to adopt treatments that are experimental rather than based on any long-term scientific data. [Refer to the recent UK High Court ruling on the Tavistock Gender Clinic.]

- 6) Conversion and Suppression practices under the Bill (COS) also include, by virtue of clause 5(4), practices or conduct “directed towards a person remotely (including online)”, not just those conducted in person. This also further broadens the potential application of the provisions. For example, online activity (such as on social media, websites or blogs) by parents, teachers, counsellors, pastors and religious leaders may also be captured.

- 7) Part 3 of the Bill establishes a “civil response scheme” (**Scheme**) within the Commission. The new functions and powers given to the Commission under the Scheme will enable it to pursue, investigate, sanction, re-educate, punish and suppress religious communities, organisations and individuals who teach and practice their religious sexual ethics.

The Commission will also receive and investigate complaints about COS practices. Concerningly, the Bill has a very low bar for allowing the Commission to receive and investigate reports. For example, sections 17(1)(b), 21 and 24 make it clear that the Commission may receive reports “from any person”, even those who are not affected by the relevant COS practices. These complainants can make anonymous reports and there are very strict secrecy provisions in the Bill that can be used to obscure these investigations from public scrutiny.

Such provisions pose significant additional risks to ordinary Victorian residents, including:

- **Religious Leaders** who counsel a same sex attracted or gender dysphoric member of their congregation who wishes to abide by their religious convictions is at risk of a complaint even if the person asked for help.
- **Teachers** at a religious school who promote the religious teaching of celibacy and abstention from sexual conduct except in marriage between a man and a woman may be guilty of COS practices and face police investigation or being dragged before the Commission.

- **Counsellors** who counsel fellow religious adherents in accordance with orthodox religious teaching on sexuality are at risk of complaints.
 - **Parents** who struggle with a child's sudden presentation of gender confusion and who oppose chemical and surgical practices to transition appearance to the opposite gender, could be made criminals and face jail time.
- 8) The Bill provides no statute of limitations. As such it puts religious leaders and institutions in a position where they can be accused, decades after the event, when the accused may well have no recollection of the claimed event and are unable to fairly defend themselves.

The Victorian government claims to support the rights and freedoms of all Victorians. However, this Bill is an unprecedented attack on the religious freedoms of a vast number of Victorians.

We seek to have the government understand that the millennia of teachings of our Religious Books and Oral Traditions, in this case in the matter of sexuality and gender, are not negotiable. Should the Bill in its current form pass into law, undesirable tension between religious communities and the state will inevitably eventuate. This Bill in its current form is causing considerable angst amongst our communities and should it be passed into law unamended the government should expect that it will affect how our respective congregants will vote at coming elections, our expectation being that many of them will direct their votes away from MP's who support this legislation with the aim of electing MP's who will have this legislation removed from our laws.

Our concerns are not limited to those that we have highlighted here. There are many more, but these alone already make the Bill totally unacceptable to the religious community.

As a united group of faith leaders expressing our concerns as listed above, we implore the Victorian government to suspend the passage of this Bill immediately, that a public enquiry be initiated, all faith communities be consulted and the necessary amendments to the Bill be made. This will ensure that the Bill strikes a balance between ensuring safety from aversive and coercion practices for LGBT Victorians, whilst ensuring freedom of religion, autonomy, and parental rights for all Victorians without compromise.

Signed:

Victorian Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Pr Graeme Christian, President & Pr Craig Gillis, Conference Secretary



Associated Christian Ministries
 Peter Owen, Chairman



PO Box 5082 Wonga Park 3115
 Mobile: 0416 928 805
www.acm.org.au

Sheikh Muhammad SALEEM
 Board of Imams Victoria, Secretary



Christian Reformed Churches of Australia – Maroondah Classis
Pastor Chris Pretorius, Chairman of Classis



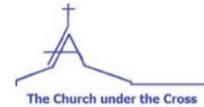
CRC Churches International
Pastor Phil Cayzer, National Church Planting Director



Crossways Baptist Church
Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor



Dandenong Christian Reformed Church
Rev Ronald Henry Nauta, Minister



Youth Alive Victoria
Dave Edgar, Director



Presbyterian Church of Victoria
Rev Philip Mercer, Moderator



Ethos: Evangelical Alliance Centre for Christianity & Society
Rev'd Dr Gordon Preece, Director



Vedic Global (Hindu)
Rakesh Raizada, FFIN, GAICD, Secretary, public officer and CEO



Women of Wyndham (Hindu)
Rakesh Raizada, FFIN, GAICD, Adviser, Women of Wyndham (WOW)



Melbourne Catholic Lawyers' Association
Christina Warren, President



Australian Christian Churches
Matt Heins, State President



Coptic Orthodox Church – Melbourne
Father ABANOUB Attalla, Senior priest

Catholic Women’s League Victoria and Wagga Wagga
Anna Krohn & Executive



Australian Association of Christian Schools.
Vanessa Cheng, Executive Officer



Christian Schools Australia
MARK SPENCER, Director of Public Policy



Russian Orthodox Church
Very Rev Dr Michael Protopopov OAM, Chancellor of the Russian Orthodox Church in Australia

Pakistani Cultural Society of Tasmania
Syed Mustafa Kazmi, Chairperson



CMDFA
Professor John Whitehall, National Chair
David Brown, Chief Operations Officer



Australian Catholic Medical Association
Dr. Eamonn Mathieson, Chair



Institute for Judaism and Civilization
Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen, Director



Casey City Church
Kevin Manning, Executive Pastor



Melton Interfaith NW
Mr David Cowan, President



Dandenong Church of Christ
Gabriel Hingley, Pastor



Maronite Catholic Diocese of Australia

Most Reverend Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia



Serbian Orthodox Church
Metropolitanate of Australia and New Zealand
The Right Reverend Bishop + **SILUAN**



York Street Church of Christ
Tim Walter, **SENIOR PASTOR**



The Potters House Church Dandenong
Luke Haagensen, Pastor



International Network of Churches
Craig Anderson, Member of National Executive

