



GUIDELINE FOR SALVATIONISTS:

Conversion Therapies

Developed by the: Australia Moral and Social Issues Council



The Issue

'Gay conversion' or 'reparative' therapies vary widely in content and practice but are all designed to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. In recent years, these therapies have been widely discredited. A large body of evidence shows that they don't work and that they cause serious harm to those involved. Every professional health body in Australia is opposed to conversion therapy, including the Australian Psychological Society (APS),¹ but it has continued to receive support from some parts of the Christian church, including elements within The Salvation Army.

In response to the growing evidence about the harms caused by these practices, governments both in Australia and internationally have been examining and implementing legislative options for banning their use.² This guideline examines the social, ethical and theological dimensions of this issue for Salvationists.

1. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-27/harmful-gay-conversion-therapy-should-be-banned-rights-group/6651078>

2. See for instance George, M.A. Expressive Ends: Understanding Conversion Therapy Bans. *Alabama Law Review*, 68:3, 793-853

Australian Social and Political Context

Concerns about the psychological harms caused by 'gay conversion therapies' have existed for decades. A detailed study from La Trobe University³ and the Human Rights Law Centre⁴ was released in late 2018 outlining physical and mental harm associated with 'gay conversion therapies'. It called on governments, the health sector and faith communities to stop harmful practices directed at people "experiencing conflict between their gender identity or sexual orientation and their beliefs"⁵.

States and Territories in Australia are considering how to approach such therapies. In August 2020 Queensland amended the Public Health Act 2005 (QLD)⁶ making it an offense for health service providers⁷ to perform conversion therapy. The Australian Capital Territory passed the Sexuality and Gender Identity Conversion Practices Act 202 (ACT)⁸. This Act includes health providers and religious organisations.

3. <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/research/research-focus-areas/transforming-human-societies/current-activities/human-rights-gender-and-sexuality>

4. <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/moves-to-tackle-ex-gay-conversion-therapy>

5. <https://www.hrlc.org.au/reports-news-commentary/preventing-harm>

6. <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/news/what-queensland-and-act-bans-conversion-therapy-mean-lgbtqi-australians>

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In Victoria, gay conversion therapies have been a criminal offense since February 2021. In March 2024, a bill was introduced to The New South Wales Government with the intention of also banning gay conversion therapy⁹. The Western Australia Government announced it would move to criminalise conversion therapies in December 2022¹⁰, however no law has been introduced to reinforce this.

While there are varying views in the Liberal and National parties, the weight of evidence and direction of Australian social trends has already shifted significantly in the direction of an acceptance of same-sex relationships and firmly against any form of discrimination and prejudice on the basis of sexuality, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity.

7. Health service providers are defined in section 8 of the Health Ombudsman Act 2013 (Qld), and includes doctors, nurses, psychologists, counsellors, naturopaths and social workers

8. https://www.legislation.act.gov.au/View/a/2020-49/current/PDF/2020-49.PDF?t__blank

9. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/act/chris-underwent-gay-conversion-therapy-in-a-canberra-church-now-the-act-will-ban-it-20180516-p4zflj.html>

10. <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/McGowan-Labor-Government/Government-to-ban-LGBTIQAs-2B-conversion-practices-in-WA-20221201>



Salvationists will continue to oppose vilification of, or discrimination against, anyone on the grounds of sexuality or gender.

Statement of Position

The Salvation Army has long held that a disposition towards homosexuality is not in itself blameworthy nor is the disposition seen as rectifiable at will. The Army is sensitive to the complex social, emotional and spiritual needs of all people including those with homosexual inclinations. We oppose vilification of, or discrimination against anyone on the grounds of sexual orientation. No person is excluded from membership, fellowship or service in the Army solely on the basis of sexual disposition.

Given the position that same-sex attraction is not 'rectifiable at will', and that Salvationists want to be sensitive to people's 'social, emotional and spiritual needs', there is no basis for referral to, or engagement in, any form of gay conversion therapy. The Salvation Army recognises the emotional, psychological, social and spiritual harms that these therapies have caused and will stand against their use in every circumstance.

Biblical and Theological Background

Perhaps more than ever, Salvationists are deeply divided on the subject of human sexuality. How we read and interpret the Bible, take into account emerging understandings in the fields of health and social sciences or respect the diversity of human experience are all contested ideas. While these debates form part of the background to the issue at hand, the overwhelming evidence of harms caused by conversion therapies means that we don't have to wait for wider resolutions before moving forwards. However, some of the biblical themes that we may want to consider include:

LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR

Jesus resisted legalistic interpretations of scripture, summing up our obligations



in the dual commandment to love God and our neighbours. (Mk 12:30-31) As this love is to be known by its fruit (Gal 5:22), any action that causes harm to a person fails the test of love. The damage now widely understood as the main product of conversion therapies cannot be justified in the light of love.

FREEDOM FROM THE LAW

The apostle Paul spoke out strongly against leaders in the church who were forcing gentile converts to undergo circumcision in order to meet the social and sexual ethics of the Jewish law. For Paul, such practices invalidated the work of Jesus (Gal 5:2). While Paul's views about human sexuality can be difficult to understand from a 21st century perspective, he repeatedly emphasises the idea of freedom in Christ as transcending legalistic practices that might harm another person. (Gal 5:1)

Practical Responses

- Salvationists will continue to oppose vilification of, or discrimination against, anyone on the grounds of sexuality or gender. This includes attempts to change another person's sexual orientation or gender identity and includes actions which deny a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Salvationists will not act, directly or indirectly, to encourage, refer to, or engage with any form of gay conversion or reparative therapies or practices.
- Salvationists will demonstrate sensitivity to the complex social, emotional and spiritual needs of all people, remembering that their first duty is to show love and grace in the manner of Jesus.



References

NEWS

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AUSTRALIA

Australian Psychological Society

Position Statement on the Use of Therapies that Attempt to Change Sexual Orientation

<https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/What-we-do/advocacy/Position-Statements/use-of-psychological-practice-sexual-orientation>

GLHV@ARCSHS, La Trobe University & Human Rights Law Centre

Preventing Harm. Promoting Justice - Responding to LGBT conversion therapy in Australia.
<https://www.hrlc.org.au/reports/preventing-harm>

UNITED KINGDOM

The National Health Service (NHS) brought together 14 signatory organisations including the UK Council for Psychotherapy, Association of Christian Counsellors, Royal College of GPs and Royal College of Psychiatrists (see also https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PSO2_2014.pdf) to end the practice of conversion therapy in the UK. The organisations signed an MoU (<http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/news/memorandum-of-understanding>), which acknowledges that “efforts to try to change or alter sexual orientation through psychological therapies are unethical and potentially harmful”.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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