



Email on 8th December 2020

Dear Pastor, leader, church member,

## **Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020**

Last week, via the BUV Bulletin, we made you aware of the [Change or Suppression \(Conversion\) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020](#) which was introduced into Victorian Parliament in late November. We mentioned that the Bill is designed to address the negative impact of 'gay conversion' therapy. The Bill follows recent legislation in Queensland and the ACT for a similar purpose; but this Bill is by far the most comprehensive.

At the heart of the Bill is the protection of vulnerable people from outdated conversion practices that may have been used in years gone by, for which we have no argument. We oppose those practices and pray that those individuals who have been harmed through this, may find peace and healing. It is the surrounding details that are causing some concern for faith leaders in Victoria. The concern relates to the issue of the perception of ambiguity in this Bill and details that are not answered and/or deliberately left open to interpretation.

We mentioned last week that the BUV Support Hub Leadership Team (in conjunction with the BUV's honorary legal advisor) were reviewing the Bill and its implications for faith leaders around freedom of religion. This process has been undertaken and we would like to say a few things about the Bill that may help you when, or if, you contact your local MP to ascertain clarity.

But firstly, let me share a verse of Scripture that might be helpful as you wrestle with this Bill and your views on the issue.

*It's best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it.* (Ecclesiastes 7:18, The Message).

So, as the scripture above suggests, let's have a look at 2 perspectives on the Bill.

1. One perspective is that the Bill has arisen from the experiences of survivors of conversion or suppression practices sometimes offered within churches or by church leaders. Even though

many of these conversion therapies were offered with good intentions, the end result has often been serious psychological and spiritual harm. Pastors may not be fully aware of the damage that has been done when counselling people to change their sexuality, but statistics around suicide and self-harm in the LGBT community indicate that these practices have been profoundly harmful. None of us want the church to be an instrument of harm in the community, nor in the lives of vulnerable people.

The Victorian Attorney-General Jill Hennessy has been clear that this Bill is not designed to disallow freedom of speech in sermons or to prevent a church leader from articulating what they believe to be the teachings of the Christian faith. For example, [in her recent speech to the Victorian parliament on Nov 26th](#) she stated, that the new legislation would NOT capture conduct where "a person goes to a religious leader seeking advice on their feelings of same-sex attraction, and the religious leader only informs this person that they consider such feelings to be contrary to the teachings of their faith".

The legislation creates 4 criminal offenses. These relate to:

- the advertising of conversion/suppression therapies
- sending a person out of Victoria to participate in conversion/suppression therapies
- engaging in conversion practices that result in injury to another person
- engaging in conversion practices that result in serious injury to another person

The Bill relates to conduct directed at an individual (ie, not to the general expression of one's ideas or beliefs). It relates to conduct aiming to change or suppress an individual's sexuality or gender identity, not to general statements about doctrine or scripture.

Based on these facts, it would seem that this Bill is not a threat to religious freedom but indeed an expression of Christian love to a vulnerable group in our community.

2. On the other hand, while agreeing that Christians need to be at the forefront of protecting the most vulnerable in our society and that no reasonable person supports abusive therapies to change a person's sexuality, some are suggesting this Bill leaves Christians in a vulnerable position themselves and it challenges some fundamental aspects of faith. A counter argument to the one above could look like this:

As followers of Christ, we are called to love God, and love others. Sometimes, we disagree about what that means, and sometimes, it's hard to work out what that means. But when we look back in history, we see that Christians have never treated their faith as private, for themselves only. They have a long track record of serving others in the community, and in fact, it was Christians that established some of the first schools, hospitals and charities in history as an outworking of their faith.

When we talk about religious freedom, it is not something that we want or need just for us. It is something we need because we believe it is important for Christians to be able to respond freely to the call of God on their lives. Indeed, as Baptists we believe it is a fundamental right for all religious groups to be able to practice their religion without prejudice. We also believe that as Christians, we have something to offer the community. So, it is in that context there are potential concerns with this Bill.

At first glance, the Bill sounds like a good idea. No-one wants to see practices that cause harm to others. But on a closer examination, it looks like the intent of the Bill is to outlaw expression of the view that homosexuality is sinful, and some other views related to gender identity and sexuality. Where that expression results in injury to another person, there are some significant penalties, including imprisonment.

As you can see from the two perspectives posed above, there are different ways we can look at this Bill. At the very least the Bill is causing some confusion and is ambiguous in some parts. In addition, as Baptists, we value the distinctive of individual church autonomy and as a result, our Union has diverse membership with churches representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Therefore, opinion on this issue may range across our union of churches.

The idea of brokenness or sin and how that relates to human sexuality is a complex issue that will not be solved by throwing stones at those we disagree with, nor by passing legislation. They are issues we must wrestle with by digging deep into the Scriptures, listening deeply to peoples lived experiences and processing how to apply love and compassion to all people, especially the most vulnerable, even when we disagree.

**The recommendation from the BUV Support Hub is that you:**

- **Read and pray** about this and discern what God is saying - you may also be interested to read the following article that appeared in Saturday's Age:  
<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/gay-conversion-legislation-puts-andrews-on-a-collision-course-with-churches-20201204-p56ks6.html>
- **Pray particularly for The Heads of the Victorian churches meeting tomorrow** (Wednesday 9th December) where we will discuss this Bill.
- **Contact your local MP** and seek clarity on the issues of how the Bill protects the vulnerable while at the same time does not diminish freedom of conscience, religion and free speech.
- **Explore with your MP** the reasons related to not accepting adult consent to engage in prayer around sexuality.

The Bill is due to go back to Parliament this week (Thursday 10th December), so unfortunately time is of the essence, and we encourage you to make contact with your local MPs as quickly as possible.

God bless,

Rev Daniel Bullock (Director of Mission and Ministries) & the BUV Support Hub Leadership Team.

