



welcoming LGBTQ+ people, same-sex couples and families,
in all areas of the Church's life, ministry and leadership
PO Box 6173 North Ryde NSW 2113

14 December 2022

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: religionbills@aph.gov.au

Dear Joint Committee Members,

Re: OPENING STATEMENT

Thank you for the opportunity to be witness at your hearing today.

Uniting Network Australia is the network for LGBTQ+ people, their families, friends, and allies within the Uniting Church in Australia. We are an independent network within the Uniting Church. We work with the Uniting Church and various councils within the Church, where we advocate and provide advice within and outside the Church on behalf of LGBTQ+ members. It is important to state that we do not represent or speak on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Our ministry and advocacy for LGBTQ+ people and communities are based on our Christian faith and the life of Jesus Christ and try to act and respond accordingly.

We are a group of volunteers and do not have any employees and receive no funding from the Uniting Church to undertake our research, social, community or pastoral work nor our national conference 'Daring'. In making our submissions we have not had access to lawyers, human rights specialists, and the like. However, we have corresponded with other LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in Australia. We are not lawyers or legislation drafting experts but provide our evidence to the Committee from our lived experiences.

The following are the key points of our submission.

- We have long preferred the establishment of a Bill of Human Rights; we understand that Australia is the only Western democracy without such a framework.
- In the absence of a Bill of Human Rights, we support the need for a bill to protect people from discrimination based on their faith.
- We recommend that the bills not proceed and there be further consultation and new bills drafted to be consistent with other anti-discrimination bills and to focus on protecting people of faith in Australia.
- We are of the view that bills in the current frame will reduce social cohesion.

- We are of the view there is a stronger need for a full-time LGBTIQ+ Human Rights Commissioner over a Religious Commissioner based on the historical levels of discrimination that LGBTIQ+ community has suffered relative to communities of faith (with some notable exceptions). The Ruddock Inquiry considered the need for a Religious Commission and rejected the concept.
- That any future bills consider all United Nations International Covenants and statements or resolutions, for example, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provide rights to the child to be 'free from religion' and also other resolutions of the United Nations, such as A/HRC/RES/32/2 which '*Strongly deplores acts of violence and discrimination, in all regions of the world, committed against individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.*'

Whilst we focus on the risks to the LGBTIQ+ community, we see the same risk from these bills for women, people with disabilities, people of other religions from the discriminated person, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people of other races or ethnicity from the discriminated person, as examples.

The first openly gay person in the Senate of the Australian Parliament, Senator Brian Greig, in his first speech to the Senate made comments that should haunt the Committee as it considers these bills.

'As a nation, Australia maintains appalling laws against gay and lesbian people. We live under a regime of apartheid. It is an apartheid not based on the colour of our skin, but on the colour of our sexuality. Homophobia is nothing less than sexual racism. But homosexuality is not a behaviour to be regulated. It is an identity to be respected. We are people, first and foremost. We work, we have lives, we love and we have relationships. We are family.'

We would add that there are many LGBTIQ+ people that have faith and/or spirituality, across all faiths, not limited to Christianity, and include Islam, Buddhism, Hindus, Sikhs, as well as of no faith.

Many LGBTIQ+ people of faith and formerly of faith, who have been harmed through various forms of conversion practices, run by religious organisations that at best lead to long term mental health issues, at worst suicide.

Finally, as one of the major LGBTIQ+ people of faith organisations, we have been disappointed that:

- We have never been included in the consultations by the Federal Government,
- The only follow up we had from the Attorney General's office was in our view abusive in nature,
- The ongoing number of submissions and debates continues to add to the 'repetitive and cumulative trauma' for the LGBTIQ+ people in Australia, and LGBTIQ+ people of faith have increased levels of trauma, and
- The short time frame to prepare and submit submissions, as well as the short notice to attend and prepare for this hearing when we are all volunteers adds to the stress.



+++

Next page for a high level background on the Witnesses

Witnesses

Jason Masters (He/Him/His) is one of the Co-Convenors of Uniting Network Australia and also Uniting Network NSW/ACT. He is a confirmed member at Eastwood Uniting Church in Sydney where he is a Council Member and an Eastwood Uniting representative on the Sydney Central Coast Presbytery. He is a Director of 'Treasury and Investment' for the Uniting Church NSW/ACT and the associated company trading as Uniting Financial Services.

More broadly, Jason is a businessperson, consultant, and company director. He is on the board of a NSW Local Health District, formerly a Board Member of the Medical Council of NSW (the NSW equivalent of the Medical Board of Australia and co-regulator with the NSW Health Complaints Commission), Chairs the Audit and Risk Committee for another NSW Health Network, was the Administrator (Rookwood General) or CEO (Southern Metropolitan) for major NSW Crown Land Cemeteries, the Chair of the Australian Online Giving Foundation, which is part of an international corporate giving program network, amongst other appointments.

He is gay, coming out late in life, with two young adult children both at university and has lived experience as a person with disabilities.

Elliot Nicholas (He/Him/His) is a member of the Geelong East congregation of the Uniting Church and the son of two Uniting Church Ministers. In 2021 he completed his VCE at Newcomb Secondary High School in Victoria, where he was the Valedictorian, School Vice-Captain, and a leader in establishing the LGBTIQ Team in the school to support LGBTIQ+ students.

His earlier high school education was at a Christian School in Tasmania where he experienced forms of discrimination.

In 2021 Elliot was the Youth Mayor for Geelong City Council.

Elliot is a transgender man progressing through his transition.

