

Equal Voices is a national organisation that was formed in 2017 to represent LGBTIQ+ people and their allies from Christian faith backgrounds, and that seeks to advocate for their full acceptance and inclusion within their communities of faith, whether worship communities or faith-based educational communities (schools and colleges).

I am here to give evidence on behalf of Equal Voices members. Like the majority of our members, I am a Christian believer and an active member of my faith community, which in my case is a parish church belonging to a major Protestant denomination. I've been closely involved in my faith community for my whole life and it's an important part of who I am.

Many of our members have experienced serious abuse within our faith communities and contexts, and it is these personal experiences of abuse and harm which we wish to bring to the attention of the Committee today. As LGBTIQ+ Christians, our members embody the human cost of the approach to questions of religious freedom taken by this Bill and associated Bills.

Our members have been forced to leave the Christian schools where they were students or teachers, have been exposed to newly formulated Church policies that mandate psychologically damaging approaches to their sexuality or gender identity, are targeted for intrusive and spiritually abusive practices that cause demonstrable harm, and are routinely excluded from the services we wish to offer to our faith communities.

In my own previous employment at a Christian school, I witnessed one young Christian student make two suicide attempts on campus, as a result of being told by other students that he "should just kill himself now because God hated him and he was going to hell anyway". The students who bullied him were allowed to continue this for some weeks as they defended themselves to the school executive by saying "But I was just telling him what the Bible says". It was only when I copied multiple staff members into screenshots of documentation that the behaviour was dealt with at all, and as a consequence I lost my job at the school.

Another student in my classroom was told by a member of the school executive "You disgust me", and I found him shaking and sobbing in my office saying "I don't know how to be different from who I am".

Since joining Equal Voices four years ago I have heard numerous similar stories from young people, across a range of faith-based school types from GPS church schools to parent-controlled christian schools. The tragic reality is that faith-based schools where LGBTQ students feel safe and supported are the exception rather than the rule.

You will also have seen media coverage of the cases of Christian teachers like Steph Lentz, Hugo Walker, Genevieve Doyle and Karen Pack, who despite being fine educators and much loved by their students lost their jobs on account of their sexuality. The psychological damage some Christian teachers have suffered as a

result of these experiences of rejection and exclusion has been severe and in some cases debilitating.

Other teachers, like Rachel Colvin and myself, lost our jobs merely for advocating for our LGBTQ students, or defending our freedom of conscience to privately hold to a different understanding of Christian sexual ethics - a contested area with a wide range of traditionally held views - from the view held by the school board.

In our submission we also make reference to the experiences of trans and gender diverse people in our faith communities, and the harmful effects of church and school policies which fly in the face of medical and psychiatric advice. In some cases - like that of the Reverend Josephine Inkpin, the chair of Equal Voices - institutional hostility has driven trans people of faith to have to leave their own denominations and communities in order to survive and flourish.

Our members' experiences of abuse are a significant driver of our desire to see real safeguards for people of faith in Australia, so that we are all able to live out our religious convictions without experiencing harm in the places where we seek acceptance and safety.

We have seen (not least in the Royal Commission) how easily that safety can be lost - and how easily the true religious values of church institutions are lost - when leaders exercise power without scrutiny and accountability. As survivors of these abuses of institutional power, we take significant personal risks to make our leaders aware of the human cost of their policies. We already face an uphill battle to be heard. This bill as framed would have a chilling and even silencing effect on our internal advocacy efforts.

LGBTIQ+ people are to be found in every faith community, and have particular need for understanding and support in contexts where they have historically been misunderstood, abused, and scapegoated. We don't just cease to exist because a particular religious faction refuses to acknowledge us. And we refuse to stop existing simply because the institution would prefer us not to exist. We contend that we do belong in our faith communities, and that we have much to offer in service of God and of our religion.

We advocate for meaningful protections for **all** people of faith, and we oppose the framing in this Bill, because we believe it would entrench the religious privileges of the already powerful; that it ignores the historic and current abuses of power which result when religious leaders operate in a culture of impunity; and that it fails at the very point of ensuring protection for the ordinary person of faith to live out their faith without fear.