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## Content Warning for Proposal 40 Preventing Harm from Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE)

The following proposal is written in response to so-called “conversion therapy” practices aimed at LGBTQA+ people, this proposal will refer to these as “SOGICE practices”, as guided by the community of survivors.

Due to the highly sensitive nature of this topic, Assembly members are invited to consider when and how they engage with this proposal’s material, particularly for those who may find discussion of any of the following painful or difficult:

- Summary of SOGICE ideology and extent of practices.
- Discussion of the harms of SOGICE ideology/practice.
- Discussion of the use of prayer/pastoral care without free, prior, informed consent.
- In particular, two extended case studies written by SOGICE survivors.

These two case studies are included to help Assembly members understand and discern the extent to which these harmful practices exist in UCA settings. Their respective sections of the rationale are provided with consent under the pseudonyms ‘Olivia’ and ‘Lucy’. The case studies are not to be used as a discussion tool on the floor of the Assembly meeting itself.

Assembly members are encouraged to consider what they can do in response to material they find distressing. This includes making informed decisions about when, how, and to what extent they engage with this proposal. A similar content warning will be provided prior to this proposal’s discussion at Assembly. In addition, members are encouraged to reach out to any of these services in the event they require support. Members are reminded that Chaplains are also available at the Assembly should they need support.

<b>QLife</b>	1800 184 527	<a href="http://qlife.org.au">qlife.org.au</a>
<b>Lifeline</b>	13 11 14	<a href="http://lifeline.org.au">lifeline.org.au</a>
<b>1800 Respect</b>	1800 737 732	<a href="http://800respect.org.au">800respect.org.au</a>
<b>Queerspace</b>	(03) 9663 6733	<a href="http://queerspace.org.au">queerspace.org.au</a>
<b>ACON</b>	(02) 9206 2000	<a href="http://acon.org.au">acon.org.au</a>
<b>Say It Loud</b>		<a href="http://sayitoutloud.org.au">sayitoutloud.org.au</a>



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## Member Proposal

### Proposal 40 Preventing Harm from Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE)

That the Assembly resolve to:

1. **Affirm the Uniting Church Statement, Dignity in Humanity, which states that 'every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God's children'.**
2. **Affirm that prayer and pastoral care are long-held Christian practices that will continue to be offered to support and uphold people, including LGBTIQ+ people, and agree that these Christian practices should not be used to harm or condemn any people including LGBTIQ+ people.**
3. **Recognise that sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts (SOGICE) are harmful to people's mental health and wellbeing.**
4. **Request the Assembly Standing Committee to develop a process to provide a national resource for congregations, agencies, and individuals to learn how they can help prevent harm from SOGICE ideology and practice.**

Proposer: Mark Brisbane

Seconder: Nicole Mugford

#### Rationale:

##### Why is this important for the church at this time?

The Uniting Church in Australia statement Our Vision for a Just Australia describes some of our most important aspirations for the time we are in. It speaks of a world where "We live together in a society where all are equal and free to exercise our rights equally, regardless of faith, cultural background, race, ability, age, sexual orientation and gender identity. We defend those rights for all." It goes on to further express a hope that "A person's sexual orientation and gender identity does not impact on their ability to live, work and contribute to society."

The Uniting Church has discussed matters of sexuality and faith for many years. There has been much progress and growth in our understanding of human sexuality, celebration of diversity in leadership, and inclusion in important Christian traditions.

We know that these have been difficult discussions that have generated much hurt across the broad diversity of our church. We recognise that the church is not always a safe space for LGBTIQ+ people, and in many places, this continues to be the case.

In the President's recent pastoral response to the debate surrounding the Religious Discrimination bill, she wrote, "We believe every person is entitled to dignity, compassion and respect, and that the community flourishes when all people are included and accorded



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the dignity and respect they deserve. I note with sadness not all LGBTIQA+ people feel fully welcome and safe across the Uniting Church. I encourage members of the Uniting Church and people of faith to offer prayer and support to those around them who are feeling particularly vulnerable because of the political and public debate taking place.”

This proposal seeks to address one aspect of safety that is long overdue. Reconciling our aspirations for a safe church where all are welcome as they are, and the particular harms caused by so-called ‘conversion therapy’.

### **LGBTQA+ ‘Conversion Therapy’**

There exists within some parts of Christianity an ideology and practice, sometimes known as ‘Conversion Therapy’, that encourages efforts to attempt, directly and indirectly, to change a person’s sexuality or gender identity so that they might conform to a particular understanding of ‘natural order’.

“The prevailing belief was that same-sex attraction (or ‘homosexuality’) or any gender identity or expression that diverged from cisgender<sup>1</sup> was a perversion of the ‘natural order’ and ultimately a choice that could be altered by prayer, personal effort, and re-forming ‘healthy’ habits, such as celibacy or even marrying someone of the opposite sex.”<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, this practice has caused serious, ongoing and sometimes tragic harm to those affected. ‘Gay Conversion’, ‘Conversion Therapy’ and other such terms refer to attempts to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity and includes such practices as: counselling in secular, unregulated counselling services (to address childhood trauma understood to be a cause of ‘wrong’, ‘unnatural’ or ‘sinful’ sexuality or gender identity, or work towards ‘acceptable’ sexual/gender behaviours); pastoral care /counselling; prayer ministry (including deliverance, the protestant term for ‘exorcism’); support groups; conferences and rallies; and online interactive coursework and mentoring programs.<sup>3</sup>

Most organisations that were established for this direct purpose have disbanded and issued apologies to those they harmed.<sup>4</sup> While the more overt ‘ministries’ have been disbanded, there are still people engaging in more subtle versions of the same activities, hence the need to prevent further harm from occurring.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Cisgender - denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.” Oxford Languages

<sup>2</sup> <http://socesurvivors.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Survivor-Statement-A4-Doc-v1-2-Digital.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://socesurvivors.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Survivor-Statement-A4-Doc-v1-2-Digital.pdf> pg3

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/john-paulk-former-christian-ex-gay-spokesman-recants-and-apologizes/2013/04/26/57c2d9c0-aeb3-11e2-b59e-adb43da03a8a\\_story.html?itid=lk\\_inline\\_manual\\_38](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/john-paulk-former-christian-ex-gay-spokesman-recants-and-apologizes/2013/04/26/57c2d9c0-aeb3-11e2-b59e-adb43da03a8a_story.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_38)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/09/06/ex-gay-christianity-movement-is-making-quiet-comeback-effects-lgbtq-youth-could-be-devastating/>



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Numerous professional bodies have rejected the practices associated with 'conversion therapy' including the Australian Psychological Society<sup>6</sup> and the Australian Medical Association<sup>7</sup>. According to a Human Rights Law Centre Report:

"Psychological research has produced overwhelming clinical evidence that practices aimed at the reorientation of LGBT people do not work and are both harmful and unethical. All Australian health authorities, including the Christian Counsellors Association of Australia, now 'strongly oppose any form of mental health practice that treats homosexuality as a disorder, or seeks to change a person's sexual orientation'."<sup>8</sup>

### Case Study – "Olivia"

Olivia (pseudonym) shared this story in their own words.

*Conversion practices makes you feel less than. The messages that are taught is that you are broken and damaged and disordered and that you are less than normal. I was taught these messages in my UCA youth group growing up. I was about 12 when a senior youth member came out as gay and then was removed from leadership in the children's ministry to prevent the risks associated with him interacting with children and then was publicly prayed over week after week at youth group until he stopped showing up. I thought I was a perfect Christian girl, I wasn't interested in boys, however I did ask too many questions about what happens if you wanted to kiss girls. What happened next was my youth group leaders telling me that if I wanted to kiss girls, I would need to make a choice between being a Christian or being gay because it wasn't right and you couldn't be both. I loved the church and my faith was important to me so I picked God. In year 11, in youth small groups when talking about relationships, I was questioned why I was single and one of my youth friends suggested it was because I liked thinking about kissing girls. My leaders took me aside for mentoring conversations fortnightly where we talked about the brokenness in my life that caused me to think these broken and sinful things. I was told it was because I had grown up in situation of a split family with domestic and family violence and abuse that I didn't have a strong male view of love. These leaders were more concerned with my possible same sex attraction than the abuse and violence I was faced with. In these mentoring conversations, I was told I needed to act more like a girl, I needed to wear dresses, and I needed to consider some of the eligible guys in the youth group. I pushed aside my questions about sexuality and jumped into youth leadership post high school. I was so fearful that one day I would be perceived as a danger to young people, because that's what I was told was a thing if I was gay. I lead youth groups and ministry where young people*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/news-and-media/Media-releases/2019/APS-calls-for-Australia-wide-ban-on-gay-conversion>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human\\_rights/samesex/inquiry/submissions/314.doc](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human_rights/samesex/inquiry/submissions/314.doc) (See 6.10)

<sup>8</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580025f66b8f5b2dabbe4291/t/5bd78764eef1a1ba57990efe/1540851637658/LGBT+conversion+therapy+in+Australia+v2.pdf>



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*would talk about their sexuality and I would tell them that they could only remain in the church if they suppressed their desires and didn't act on their feelings, because that was what I thought I had to say. I wrestled with the tension of my sexuality and identity for many years, but there came a point in my life, where I just couldn't live like this anymore. I needed to be honest to myself and discover for myself if I was broken or if the world was bigger than I thought. Theological study saved me in many ways. I began to realise I could enquire for myself the matters of faith and see where that fit. Conversion practices aren't just a particular theology or specific therapy, its most common in Australia in informal religious settings. That's where I experienced conversion practices, and it caused me to suppress who I was for a long time. There is still a small voice in my head that tells me that I'm broken and everything I am is disordered and disgusting, but the internalised homophobia is getting smaller as I'm beginning to own who I am and how I relate to God, the church, ministry, others and myself.*

## Listening to Survivors

As a church called into God's reconciling love, it is imperative that we listen to, learn from and walk alongside those for whom we are seeking justice. The SOGICE Survivor Statement is 'written by survivors of the LGBTQA+ Conversion movement and their allies, and endorsed by advocates, organisations and community groups that support, or are led by, LGBTQA+ people of faith'<sup>9</sup> and is the respected survivor voice on these issues. The statement has two parts –

1. **Discussion** – outlining the history of the LGBTQA+ conversion movement, the various practices of the movement, the ideology that underpins almost all LGBTQA+ conversion practices, and the rationale for the recommendations of survivors.
2. **Recommendations** – outlining recommendations for addressing the LGBTQA+ conversion movement, preventing further harm, and supporting survivors.

We recommend members of Assembly read the statement to gain further understanding of the issues. The statement can be found at <http://socesurvivors.com.au/>

## A note on the acronym LGBTQA+

As guided by the principles in the SOGICE Survivors statement, we have left out the Intersex community (I) when referring to the harmful conversion practises and ideology. Although Intersex people have been affected by the sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts, "medical and surgical interventions that contravene the rights and bodily autonomy of intersex infants, children and adults are not generally labelled as conversion practices in SOGICE advocacy globally. This is because the ideology and issues of consent that underpin all conversion practices...are somewhat different to the problematic medical justifications and issues of consent that are often present in surgical interventions."<sup>10</sup>

## Case Study – Lucy

<sup>9</sup><http://socesurvivors.com.au/>

<sup>10</sup> SOGICE Survivors Statement, <http://socesurvivors.com.au/> pg4



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Lucy (pseudonym) shared this story in their own words to the Social Justice Commission.

*In 2019 I attended a non-denominational Christian camp targeted at young adults in Perth. I was invited to contribute through my connection with the Uniting Church. One of the break-out sessions had a guest speaker talking about 'ministry to LGBTIQ people'. As a queer Christian I was interested in the content and being able to share my experience. I was shocked and disturbed to discover that the guest speaker was a proponent of gay conversion practices and ideology. He claimed to be conducting a "ministry of love" for people on the fringes of society by going to queer bars and venues and befriending people he met. That might be fine except his motivation was to convince them that they should no longer be gay or to "support them out of the gay lifestyle". He shared how he would engage with people under the guise of a "bible study" and then once he had established a connection and gained trust, would start to convince them of his views.*

*He said many disturbing things to give the impression that being gay and the "gay lifestyle" was sinful, harmful and unhealthy. I can't remember all of it but I wrote down some of his comments at the time which contained various inaccurate and hurtful generalisations and accusations. These included the suggestions that were either explicitly stated or clearly implied: that gay people do not want to be, and are unable to be, monogamous; that they are bad parents; that the poor mental health and high suicide rates among LGBTIQ people is a result of their bad "lifestyle"; that child abuse is linked to becoming LGBTIQ, etc.*

*He used his position of authority to share this misinformation that he claimed was based on fact and science, but he was unable to cite sources that were not widely (and rightly) discredited. I was deeply upset and offended by the way he spoke and his insinuation that my identity and sexuality was wrong, sinful and harmful.*

*I was also very concerned for other young people hearing this content. While the views he shared were incredibly hurtful and offensive, I have a background of affirming theology to rely on and a community of people to support me through this experience. Despite this, it did still greatly affect me. I worry for young people without that background and affirming community who would be hearing these words from a person of authority. I fear that people could take them to heart, believing his words to be true and believing that who they are is wrong. He claimed that he was "called by God to minister to gay people" and continued to claim his views were based on science and theology, which would be extremely damaging and difficult for a young person to hear and believe about themselves.*

## **Prayer and Pastoral Care**

It goes without saying that prayer and pastoral care are long held practices, integral to our faith as Christians. However, it is important to understand the difference between appropriate and harmful prayer and pastoral care. The SOGICE statement delineates between these healthy, affirming practices and their misuse in the hands of conversion practitioners:



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“There are a number of factors that distinguish pastoral care when it is being employed as a conversion practice – as opposed to a legitimate form of spiritual care or guidance – and therefore identify it as being in scope of a government intervention into conversion practices. The experience of many survivors has demonstrated that conversion practices occur in pastoral care when:

- i. conversion ideology defines or frames conversation, advice, recommendations or practices that occur in the pastoral care relationship; and when either or both of the following occur:
  - ii. the person in a pastoral care role is in a position of authority or leadership, creating an imbalanced power dynamic;
  - iii. the practices and pastoral care occur in a recurrent or semi-regular manner.
- Conversion practices can occur in a pastoral care relationship wherever pastoral care or spiritual guidance is offered, within formal religious gatherings, informal community groups such as clubs or support groups, as well school and university chaplaincy.”

This proposal seeks to highlight the importance of prayer and pastoral care, especially for those who have requested them. This includes for LGBTQA+ community members already facing exclusion within the church. But we must also recognise the ways in which prayer and pastoral care have been tragically misused against these community members, especially in contexts without free, prior and informed consent.

### **Encouraging Self-Reflection**

The Uniting Church is not immune to SOGICE practices, which can present themselves in many forms. We send a powerful message to survivors by formally recognising the harm they faced. But to prevent further harm, we must also look inward, examining our own practices to ensure we commit to addressing SOGICE ideology and practice in our own communities. Therefore this proposal recommends that the Assembly provide a national resource for congregations, agencies and individuals to help recognise and prevent SOGICE practices before they occur.

States and territories differ in their approach to SOGICE legislation, and Synods may be better positioned to engage in these particulars. Our hope is that this national resource would help congregations, agencies, and individuals to understand the impacts of their local legislation, informing their advocacy to prevent further harm.

Many people from LGBTIQA+ communities associate the church with condemnation and trauma. This is a clear opportunity for a church to stand in solidarity with these marginalised communities, to reflect on our own shortcomings and offer an alternative message of support and love.