



Seventh-day Adventist Church

AUSTRALIAN UNION CONFERENCE

Inquiry into the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Removing Discrimination Against Students) Bill 2018

21 January 2019

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary

About the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its Education System

Seventh-day Adventists are a values-based community of believers, representing more than 60,000 members in Australia and around 20 million globally, who are committed to making a positive difference in communities in Australia and throughout the world. The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates the largest Protestant education system in the world, with more than 1.6 million students globally, including over 14,000 students in primary and secondary education in Australia.

Adventist Education has operated in Australia for more than 120 years. Seventh-day Adventist schools continue to maintain and operate an open enrolment policy that accepts students from all walks of life, providing they are willing to respect the tenets, doctrines and principles of our faith. Adventist schools attract students from all faiths and those of no faith at all and, in many cases, provide a safe refuge with strong pastoral care for those who have been bullied, victimised and ostracised in other schools.

In addition to operating a substantial school system, the church also operates a substantive Aged Care system, Disaster and Relief organisation (ADRA) as well as Avondale College of Higher Education, Sydney Adventist Hospital and a range of other entities.

We respect the rights of people to believe and act according to their conscience while being constructive citizens. There is a genuine challenge when seeking to establish balancing provisions, as it is often the case that one person's freedom ends at the point where someone else's freedom begins. We request that the principle of freedom of religion, and the related freedoms of conscience, speech and association, be mutually respected by people of all persuasions as we work together for a harmonious society.

Values based on Christian scripture define our norms. Jesus embodied these values perfectly in his life on earth and set an example for each of us to follow. We believe these values challenge us to strive to be ethical and responsible citizens and provide a standard to guide decisions and practices in a world changed by modern technology and challenged by ethical dilemmas. Although as individuals and as a community we can and do fall short of this ideal in practice, we accept the challenge of living according to these ideals even when they differ from socially-accepted norms and result in marginalisation.

These values and convictions were demonstrated by Seventh-day Adventists in history. They are seen compassionately in the work of the famous Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels of the Owen Stanley Ranges (Kokoda Trail) who risked their lives to save soldiers (and Australia) from the Japanese invasion. These values were also demonstrated in the life of Desmond Doss, the hero of the acclaimed movie *Hacksaw Ridge*, who, because of conscience and conviction that was out of step with the norms of his time, went beyond the call of duty and risked his life to save people. These values continue to be demonstrated by people, individually and corporately, from both the global north and the global south, in national and international development and relief projects to all people without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender or socio-economic status.

We recognise that not all people will choose this value system. Sometimes it can challenge a number of socially-accepted norms. However, we also note that as time has passed, a number of practices based on these values have become socially acceptable. The emphasis on proactively adopting a wholistic lifestyle is now well recognised. This lifestyle includes dedicating regular time for personal and corporate spirituality, the freedom of forgiveness, drug-free living, a healthy diet, the dignity of work, regular exercise and community service. These practices build resilient people who can remain positive in the face of the complexities and pressures of modern life.

We do not have, or wish to have, the right to force these values on other people. Choice and conscience are part of our values. However, we do expect the right to model and advocate these values in all aspects of our organisation — churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, aged care and charities — as we work together for a harmonious, tolerant and peace-loving multicultural society in Australia and the world.

Related Submissions

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia has partnered with a range of organisations and endorses and supports the following submissions:

Freedom for Faith, as led by representatives of a range of churches including the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Christian Schools Australia jointly with Adventist Schools Australia

These submissions more fully express the views and the concerns of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, however, the short submission below speaks to some of the church's specific concerns.

Key Points

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been a keen advocate of religious freedom and freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and freedom of association since its inception in 1863, and were a founding member of the International Religious Liberty Association established in 1893 and has had a long history of advocating not only on behalf of its own members, but for anyone whose ability to exercise to these core human rights has been compromised.

The church remains concerned, based on developments both domestically and internationally, that the right to freedom of religion or belief is being eroded due to the increasing focus on being free from discrimination. Unfortunately the desire to be free from discrimination is in fact creating more discrimination due to decreasing levels of societal tolerance.

On the face of it, what the bill introduces seems reasonable, and the principle of removing discrimination against students sits comfortably with the church's beliefs, doctrines and tenets of faith. Having said that, the church remains concerned at the unintended consequences that may arise from the proposed bill. The possibility that the terms 'detriment' and 'benefit' could be interpreted broadly may cause issues for Adventist schools when upholding our beliefs in the classrooms.

Beyond the direct risk to the church's school system, there are unintended consequences, including the potential flow-on impact on our ability to recruit and retain in employment staff who are willing to operate in harmony with the beliefs, doctrines and tenets of the church.

The church is also concerned at the potential of such changes to the Sex Discrimination Act having a wider application to other activities of the church, including 'classes' and 'groups' operated by local congregations designed to communicate biblical teachings, principles and values in harmony with the tenets and beliefs of the church. In addition to the risk to local congregations there is also the risk that the same issues will impact the tertiary educational institutions of the church in Australia.

In response to these matters, the church believes that the bill does not adequately address the competing rights that are at play in this discussion. It is our contention that positive protections should be enacted that protect the rights of faith-based organisations whilst removing any unfair discriminations that might exist.

The faith-based schooling sector, inclusive of Adventist schools, by the very evidence of its growing enrolment base, is meeting a very real and genuine need within Australia by providing a values and faith-based educational experience. These schools complement the education provided by government schools and parents are confirming their value by enrolling their children in them. It is therefore essential that the Government, through an appropriate legislative framework that includes positive protections, allows these schools to continue to espouse the values, ethos, beliefs and doctrines that have enabled them to become the desired institutions that they are. This diversity in the educational

landscape of Australia enriches the fabric of our society. On the contrary, despite suggestions otherwise, there is no evidence to verify the claims that LGBTIQ+ students are being expelled from Christian or other faith-based schools.

It is recognised that the committee has a difficult task ahead, however, it is important that these matters are considered carefully and clear recommendations are made for the good of Australian society at large, and not just the interests of one social, political or interest group over another. The recommendations made in this submission along with the related papers provide for such positive protections to ensure that Australia continues to be a harmonious, peaceful multicultural society.

For further discussion on this submission, please contact:

Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia

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