



Conversion Practices

Guidance for people working in religious communities



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata
Human Rights Commission

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Introduction



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission has received requests from religious communities for support and information on the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, which makes conversion practices unlawful in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Some want to understand the new legal requirements. Others want to make their communities affirming spaces where conversion practices would be unthinkable.

In this document we use the term religious community to refer to a group of people who share the same religious faith – whether this is an organised religion or an informal faith group.

Accepting and affirming

Using terms preferred by the LGBTQIA+ community shows respect, fosters inclusivity, breaks down stereotypes, and builds trust which will lead to a more supportive environment for everyone. We use the term ‘accepting’ to mean religious communities where LGBTQIA+ people are welcome as themselves with no pressure to hide or change their identity.

Beyond accepting, some religious communities identify as ‘affirming and inclusive’, which means actively integrating LGBTQIA+ people into all parts of their community, including leadership. There are a range of practices and behaviours (policy and non-policy) that can support LGBTQIA+ people to be and feel safe in religious spaces. More terms are included in the Glossary section of the document.

What are conversion practices?

Conversion practices are actions taken towards an individual with the intention of changing or suppressing their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. They are sometimes referred to as ‘conversion therapy’.

These practices are typically directed at members of the LGBTQIA+, takatāpui Māori and MVPFAFF+ Pasifika communities. They reflect a belief system, known as conversion ideology, which asserts that being part of these communities is wrong and can be changed.ⁱ

Harmed caused by conversion practices

Even though conversion practices occasionally appear to provide short term results they inevitably fail and **cause significant harm**. Evidence, internationally and in Aotearoa, shows survivors of conversion practices experience mental distress, withdrawal and isolation, negative career impacts, physical health symptoms, and suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts.ⁱⁱ

Research published in Aotearoa in 2023 found young people experiencing conversion practices:

- had increased frequency of non-suicidal self-injury
- had double the risk of planning suicide
- had triple the risk of attempting suicide.ⁱⁱⁱ

The level of harm increases significantly if the suggestion to take part in conversion practices comes from a religious leader or family member.^{iv} Transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse people in Aotearoa have higher exposure to conversion practices.

People who have experienced conversion practices have often faced, and will continue to face, abusive relationships within their community, PTSD, major traumatic incidents and a harmful accumulation of smaller traumas.^v

Conversion practices have been declared harmful in Aotearoa and internationally by:

- New Zealand Psychological Society^{vi}
- the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)^{vii}
- the NZ College of Clinical Psychologists^{viii}
- the New Zealand Association of Counsellors^{ix} and other clinical peak bodies.

Further, leaders of Exodus International, once the largest ‘ex-gay’ group formed in 1976 have publicly acknowledged the harm their work caused, and apologised^x, as have many of their former leaders and member organisations. After admitting their programmes did not change people they dissolved in 2013.

Survivors of conversion practices want faith leaders to know that while it may appear possible for some individuals to temporarily suppress a part of who they are, it cannot be sustained and is always harmful in the end. This is why it is important to engage with the evidence and not rely on anecdotal reports of people claiming to having successfully ‘changed’.

Examples of conversion practices

Conversion practices include but are not limited to:

- using shame, coercion or other tactics to give someone an aversion to same-sex attractions or to encourage gender-conforming behaviour
- encouraging someone to believe their sexuality or gender is defective or disordered
- performing a ritual, such as an exorcism or prayer-based practice to change or suppress someone's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.^{xi}

Often conversion practices are difficult to recognise because they are disguised as non-threatening, for example as a group study, mentoring and counselling or as camps and courses. They can be formal and informal, and include practices directed by others or self-imposed.^{xii}

What conversion practices are not

It is not a conversion practice to do any of the **following providing there is no intention to change or suppress an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression:**

- a religious leader preaching to or praying for their congregation
- a religious leader praying for or providing pastoral care for an individual
- a parent or guardian respectfully discussing sexuality or gender with their child – including offering advice and guidance or expressing a belief or religious principle
- a medical practitioner delaying hormone treatment to allow for the development of a plan for gender affirming healthcare, or for activities, such as counselling. Practitioners need to act within legal, professional and ethical standards and exercise reasonable professional judgement.

It is also not a conversion practice to:

- assist someone who is undergoing, or considering undergoing, a gender transition
- assist someone to express their gender or identity
- provide acceptance, support or understanding to an individual.

Conversion practices in religious communities

Religious communities are the most common setting for conversion practices in Aotearoa.

The practices can take different forms including study groups, counselling, having an accountability partner, prayer, mentoring, working through books or online content, or informal conversations. In some communities, conversion practices are in programmes that use words like healing ministry, recovery, brokenness, reparative therapy, purity or spiritual accountability.

If done with the intention of changing or suppressing someone's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, then telling them to participate in spiritual activities to stop them from being 'different' can amount to a conversion practice. It may also be considered a conversion practice when an LGBTQIA+ person's whānau or family tries to change or suppress these aspects of their identity.

Beyond religious settings, conversion practices can happen in medical and mental healthcare settings, for example by delaying or withholding gender-affirming healthcare. Knowingly referring someone to an unsupportive medical or mental healthcare practice may also be a conversion practice.

Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022



The Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022 (the Act) prohibits any action to change or suppress a person's sexuality or gender. It is unlawful to perform a conversion practice, to arrange for a conversion practice to be performed, or to advertise a conversion practice. In addition to conversion practices being unlawful some are a criminal offence.

It is a criminal offence to:

- perform a conversion practice on someone under 18-years-old, or someone who lacks the capacity to understand the nature, and foresee the consequences, of decisions relating to their health or welfare^{xiii}
- perform a conversion practice on a person of any age where that causes serious harm.^{xiv}

Conversion practices are still unlawful even when a person seeks them out for themselves. Consent from

someone undergoing a conversion practice is not a defence to providing them.^{xv} In cases where a person has sought conversion practices for themselves, they are not party to the offence – which means they cannot be prosecuted.^{xvi}

The Act also amends the Human Rights Act 1993 so that conversion practices are within scope of the civil redress pathway and other functions of the Commission^{xvii} which means it can:

- provide support and information to survivors and to those who are consciously or unconsciously contributing to conversion practices
- help to mediate and resolve disputes related to conversion practices
- help to work out if something may be an offence and provide support for next steps such as reporting.

Conversion practices and human rights



Conversion practices are a human rights violation because they breach:

- The Human Rights Act 1993 (the right not to be discriminated against based on sexual orientation)
- The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (section 14, freedom of expression; section 19, freedom from discrimination)
- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (the right to identity, the right to protection against destruction of culture, and the right to future manifestations of culture)
- The Code of Health & Disability Services Consumers' Rights (Right 2, services free from coercion; Right 4, services of an appropriate standard; Right 6, to be fully informed; Right 7, to give informed consent).
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi (see below)

What about freedom to religion?

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion. This right remains protected

under the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, as well as the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, the Human Rights Act 1993, and various international human rights conventions that refer to the right to religion.

However, human rights approaches accept that rights need to be balanced and, in some cases, may be partly restricted so all people can exercise their rights. Freedom of religious expression needs to be balanced with the right of LGBTQIA+ people to be free from discrimination and harm. Taking a human rights approach means focusing on promoting inclusivity in a way that respects and protects each individual's rights.

For example, in a discussion about balancing human rights you can consider whether someone's participation in a religious community, such as an LGBTQIA+ person, could be prioritised over someone's else's objection to their participation. This may be a choice your community is considering as part of a journey to being more accepting of LGBTQIA+ people.

Takatāpui and a Tiriti-led inclusive society



Takatāpui is a term used by some Māori that identify with a minority sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. The term has been reclaimed and expanded from its original meaning, which was “intimate companion of the same sex”.^{xviii}

Takatāpui were traditionally accepted and valued members of hapū (extended family). However, this acceptance changed with the impact of colonisation and the introduction of Christianity. Today, memories of takatāpui preserved in pūrākau (traditional narratives), waiata (songs) and carvings are being rediscovered and shared.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi protected self-determination for Māori and religious and spiritual equality for all, including takatāpui Māori, as follows:

- Article 2 provides tino rangatiratanga to iwi and the right to exercise authority over taonga
- Article 3 provides equality of access to protection by the Crown

- Article 4 (oral) guaranteed freedom of religious and spiritual customs, which should have protected the ongoing roles of takatāpui in the spiritual life of the community.^{xix}

Alongside takatāpui Māori, Pacific peoples and several ethnic communities have also historically embraced diverse genders and sexualities. MVPFAFF+ identities are indigenous identities across the Pacific that have unique histories and places in society.

Article 4 rights (the oral Article of Te Tiriti) apply to all peoples within Aotearoa and are also supported in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA). New Zealand laws offer specific protection to these communities, for example by protecting their rights as minorities to enjoy their culture (article 20 NZBORA).

What is conversion ideology?



Conversion practices are a result of **conversion ideology** which is:

- the belief that all people are heterosexual
- the belief that anyone who is not heterosexual has experienced some damage, neglect, abuse or other inappropriate influence that affected their ‘development’. This can result in LGBTQIA+ identities being treated as an illness and even ‘contagious’
- the belief it is possible to stop fully or partially being LGBTQIA+ through spiritual, psychological or other intervention
- the belief that change would be positive for the individual, family or community, or that it is a condition for being fully accepted, affirmed and included
- the belief that being LGBTQIA+ clashes with a given faith, culture, community or family value set
- the belief that LGBTQIA+ people are present in certain settings for malevolent reasons such as ‘recruiting’ to a group which has ‘chosen’ to be this way.

Any one of these beliefs constitute conversion ideology. While they do not amount to a conversion practice, when multiple beliefs exist within a community, LGBTQIA+ people, including those concealing their identity, are at risk.

Conversion ideology is supported by people teaching beliefs as fact and discouraging people from testing beliefs and other views presented by people in authority. Young people are particularly at risk in indoctrinating environments because they are learning ideas that will affect how they organise and interpret information throughout their life.

Many survivors of conversion practices have said the damage done is lifelong with deeply engrained thought patterns, self-critical thinking, and trauma.

Reconciliation of religion and LGBTQIA+ identities is possible and common



Many Christian and other religious communities in Aotearoa and internationally welcome and affirm LGBTQIA+ people and actively reject conversion ideologies and conversion practices.

Over time the Christian church, globally and locally, has reviewed traditional interpretations of scripture which have led to discrimination against people, for example the oppression of women or the enslavement of people. Scientific evidence for the natural existence of LGBTQIA+ people is unequivocal.

Religion as part of wellbeing

Some survivors of conversion practices choose to continue their religious practice. This usually involves finding a new religious community that allows them to safely reconcile their faith, or a version of spirituality that works for them, with their LGBTQIA+ identity.

Recovery from conversion practices can involve someone struggling with their identity and sense of belonging. An affirming religion or faith can be central to protecting and supporting wellbeing by providing hope, resilience, community and affirmation of identity.

How to welcome and protect people



Steps to welcome LGBTQIA+ people in your community

Address conversion ideology. Examine your religious community and consider how its teachings, practices and assumptions might support conversion ideology. See the resources section for support and guidance on how to do this and what steps to take next.

Educate yourself and spread awareness. Support and advocacy can significantly improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ people in religious communities. You can lead in your community by doing your own research to understand LGBTQIA+ people and the discrimination they commonly face. Share this with your peers and in your community. It is important that LGBTQIA+ individuals within your community are not expected to educate or debate with those who are questioning or have opposing views. There are professionals who can be paid to deliver education.

Consider ways to show your space is safe for LGBTQIA+ people. LGBTQIA+ people are likely to have anxiety or fear in religious spaces and insecurities about their place in the community. There are a range of steps you can take to create an accepting and inclusive environment. Clear information about your community's accepting stance is a simple first step that can reassure those who may be experiencing anxiety.

Disclosures of conversion practices

If someone discloses they are trying to change their sexual orientation or gender identity or that someone else is trying to change it, it's important to listen actively and provide validation and support for their LGBTQIA+ identity. Give them the information that conversion practices don't work, are harmful and are now unlawful.

Have a clear written policy and procedure to follow in instances of disclosure. This will help to ensure everyone's safety and can be easily referred to when knowledge is limited. Creating these policies and procedures collaboratively with people in your religious community can also help to build compassion and capability. See the end of this document for resources.

Pastoral care for survivors

Conversion practices affect survivors' mental health, both during the practices and immediately after. Be prepared to offer tailored pastoral care to survivors.

It must be noted that pastoral care has been used as a channel for conversion practices in some settings. Because of this, there is a need to provide care that genuinely affirms people as LGBTQIA+. This means protecting and supporting their identity as well as meeting their spiritual and mental health needs in a way that affirms their experience and the harm caused.

Shame is often a significant factor in a survivor's story. When conversion practices are happening, a person may feel shame about their identity or about not being able to change. Even after exiting conversion practices, a survivor may feel shame for participating especially if they also had a role in performing conversion practices on themselves or others. As with all pastoral care for people affected by shame, survivors need gentle aroha and kōrero whakamana (uplifting words).

Make sure you are open with survivors about what you can and cannot do and why. As much as possible have conversations on an equal footing. It may also be better to meet at a neutral venue rather than a pastoral office or church building.

Survivors may feel nervous or unsafe opening up about their experience to someone who represents a religious institution given the potential negative associations with their experience. Approach the situation with empathy and respect for the survivor's experiences and boundaries.

Survivors may or may not wish to maintain a connection with their religious community. You can represent a supportive version of a religious community which can be healing for the survivor.

Professional mental health support

Recovery from conversion practices is seldom linear and will likely continue throughout an individual's life. Access to an LGBTQIA+ accepting counsellor or psychologist has been shown to be a key factor in recovery for survivors.^{xx}

Pastoral carers without relevant qualifications and experience in affirming support for LGBTQIA+ people should raise the importance of referral to another service by offering to help them find a suitable and affirming counsellor or practice. It is unlikely a faith-based counsellor will be appropriate.

Support also needs to be culturally competent and responsive. Many survivors have experienced mental health professionals who are uncomfortable talking about religious beliefs or cultural practices they are not familiar with, or who have assumed they will leave their religion or culture. Having someone who is educated and open to gently talking about spirituality and culture can be valuable to a person's recovery.

Glossary

Gender affirmation is an umbrella term for a range of actions and possibilities involved in living, surviving, and thriving as your authentic gendered self. What this looks like for each individual trans person is unique and based on what is personally affirming for them, what feels safe to do, and what is accessible and available. It may include changing a name or pronoun, wearing different clothes or cutting/growing hair, engaging in speech and language therapy, taking gender-affirming hormones, or having surgery(s).

Gender conforming refers to an individual or a behaviour that is consistent with the gender expectations of a society. Gender conformity can include dress, work, childcare or leisure activities. For example, in most societies it is gender conforming to expect women to be responsible for most household duties and childcare.

Gender expression refers to a person's physical presentation of gender – including dress, hairstyles, accessories and cosmetics – and mannerisms, speech, behavioural patterns, names and personal references. Gender expression may or may not conform to a person's gender identity.

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at their birth. This includes their sense of their body and other expressions of gender including dress, speech and mannerisms.

Gender transition is similar to gender affirmation in that it is used to describe steps that may be taken towards one's true gender. While many people use this term, for others it positions trans experiences narrowly and solely through the lens of medical intervention.

LGBTQIA+ is an acronym of different identities including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual. The plus is used to include other terms not listed. The LGBTQIA+ community is also sometimes called the 'rainbow community'. We do not use that term in this document because some religious communities have told us the rainbow for them is a symbol of God's promises.

There are many examples of identities that reach beyond the Eurocentric acronym of LGBTQIA+ across South Asian regions. These include Hijra (a thriving 'third gender'), Aravani, Thirunangaigal, Khwajasara, Kothi, Thirunambigal, Jogappa, Jogatha, Nachchi, and Shiva Shakti.^{xxi}

MVPPAFF+ is an acronym to describe Pasifika identities; Mahu (Hawai'i and Tahiti), Vaka sa lewa lewa (Fiji), Palopa (Papua New Guinea) Fa'afafine (Samoa) Akava'ine (Rarotonga), Fakaleiti (Tonga), Fakafifine (Niue). The abbreviation is gaining increasing use to signify the existence of different Pacific cultures that have a strong presence in Aotearoa.

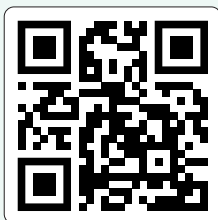
Takatāpui is used by some Māori that identify with a minority sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. The term has been reclaimed and expanded from its original meaning, which was "intimate companion of the same sex".

Sexual orientation refers to each person's capacity for emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, people of the same or different gender or more than one gender.

Sexuality refers to a person's sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people.

More definitions can be found in the [InsideOut Terminology Handbook](#) or [Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission website](#).

Resources



Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission to make a complaint or seek guidance about conversion practices contact the Commission free on 0800 496 877 to leave a message for a case advisor or email infoline@hrc.co.nz. You can also find information, guidelines and resources on our website at www.tikatangata.org.nz including specific guides for different settings.



Diverse Church is a network of LGBTQIA+ friendly churches across Aotearoa. Their aim is to promote these churches and help LGBTQIA+ people find safe and meaningful faith spaces. <https://diversechurch.co.nz/>



AlreadyEnough is a hub of information and resources to support LGBTQIA+ people in faith spaces or with faith questions, and for allies and faith communities wanting to move towards affirming LGBTQIA+ people. <https://www.alreadyenough.co.nz/>



Join This Chariot is a resource published by InsideOUT NZ to help faith-based schools affirm their LGBTQIA+ students. <https://insideout.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Join-this-Chariot.pdf>



The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa Territory submission to the Justice Select Committee on the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Bill contains a thoroughly considered position in support of the LGBTQIA+ community. https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/sites/default/files/files/%5Bfile_field%3Atype%5D/submission_to_conversion_practices_prohibition_legislation_bill_-_the_salvation_army_-_aug_2021_-_final.pdf



The Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa Territory gives some practical suggestions for responding to conversion practices including how to pray for a person questioning their sexuality. https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/sites/default/files/uploads/2020/Oct/guideline_for_salvationists-gay_conversion_therapies.pdf

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Endnotes

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- ii Fenaughty, et al., 2023; Veale, et al., 2021; RANZCP, 2019; United Nations, 2020
- iii Fenaughty, et al., 2023
- iv Fenaughty, et al., 2023
- v Jones, et al., 2022
- vi New Zealand Psychological Society, n.d.
- vii RANZCP, 2019
- viii NZCCP, 2021
- ix NZAC, 2020
- x Jones, 2013
- xi Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 5 (2)
- xii Jones, et al., 2022
- xiii Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 8(1)
- xiv Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 9(1)
- xv Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 10
- xvi Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 11
- xvii Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, Section 14
- xviii Rainbow Youth Inc & Tīwhanawhana Trust, 2017-2022
- xix Reese, 2022
- xx Jones, et al., 2021
- xxi Adhikaar Aotearoa, 2022