

[REDACTED]

To whom it may concern,

Authors Note: I use terms in the letter such as ‘same-sex attraction’ and ‘singleness’ that I explain in more detail in a section at the bottom of the letter.

From Jan 2019 to May 2021 I experienced significant discrimination as a result of my sexual orientation as a teacher at [REDACTED] is an independent Christian School in [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. I explain my experience of discrimination after the section about my key conclusions re: law changes.

Key conclusion regarding law changes

One significant take-away from my story, relevant to the proposed law changes, is to consider how relatively young people are when they enter workplaces. Queer teens growing up in conservative faith environments are often on a long journey of thinking and processing – well into their 20’s and 30’s. Many queer Christians I know ‘came out’ around 30, or are still largely closeted. These moments of openness and vulnerability need to be encouraged by safe spaces, in families, workplaces and communities. Religious educational institutions who want to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation often don’t realise that those people are already within their staff/student body. The needs, thinking or theology of their queer staff/students might change in the time that they work/study in those spaces. They should not have to deal with the stress of losing their job (or changing school), at a time when they could be facing many other stresses from a conservative family, conservative church community, relationship break-downs etc. I know multiple semi-closeted gay men for whom their workplace requires them to be ‘single and celibate’. However, they also ‘accidently’ hook-up with men when they’re feeling ‘spiritually weak’. This level of compartmentalisation is a recipe for poor mental health in my unprofessional opinion (not a psychologist), and the work place is essentially acting as form or financial coercion to keep their ‘hook-up problem’ secret.

Often these religious educational institutions don’t know or understand the impact they have in closeting students and staff. They can’t see the negative outcomes they are producing as a result of their current discriminatory practices. If religious educational institutions were honest, they’d probably prefer not to have closeted male chaplains who are secretly hooking up with guys on the weekend. They also benefited from my teaching skillset and values for as long as I coped with their unsafe environment – and then lost that benefit. The discriminatory exceptions many religious educational institutions fight to retain are not actually benefitting them. They’re often just too blind to the current negative outcomes they achieve for their queer students/staff and for themselves.

Priorities of conservative religious workplaces around diverse sexuality should be honesty, integration and listening. These are important values for religious institutions. They should avoid exclusion (for the sake of purity/holiness) or control (over lifestyle/activities/relationships). These simply lead to secrecy, isolation and compartmentalisation.

My experience of discrimination in a Religious Educational Institution

At the commencement of my employment at [REDACTED] I signed a code of conduct [REDACTED], that included a commitment to heterosexual marriage, and required abstinence from homosexual activities. Failure to comply with this code was grounds for termination. I've included the relevant sections [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Termination of Service

[REDACTED]

I currently identify as a gay Christian, and also identified as a gay Christian when I commenced my employment. In the sphere of queer faith, there are various expressions on queerness. During the time of my employment, I had no plans to have sex outside of marriage, and was not seeking a marriage or long-term relationship. I focused on contentment in all situations, and felt singleness suited my circumstances at the time (and I am grateful for a strong sense of contentment in singleness, even now as I currently have a boyfriend/partner). So when I signed this code of conduct I did so in good faith, and didn't break this code for the duration of my employment.

Various factors went into my decision to join the school.

- I was a new teacher [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] offered me a classroom teaching role and a permanent position. I felt that it was a good opportunity to build my experience.
- I am a Christian and I understand that all school communities and Christian communities will have a mix of values that we agree with and disagree with (I did not agree with the belief that marriage is only between a man and a woman).
- I saw other positive aspect of Christian community present, with a high focus on student wellbeing, a bush-tucker garden developed in consultation with local elders, acceptance of refugee communities and interesting teaching approaches for social justice (e.g. refugee simulations).

I was quickly acknowledged as an asset to the school as a competent teacher. I excelled in our professional learning seminars, contributed to extra-curricular activities, such as choreographing

the school musical and developed positive working relationships with my stage team and the deputy principal, [REDACTED].

However, due to the code of conduct that I signed, I was also observing to notice the level of safety to be open about my sexual orientation. After about a year, near the end of 2019, I decided to discuss my sexual orientation with the deputy principal [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I explained that I was gay. After an initial discussion about why I use the label gay (as opposed to his preferred label, Same-Sex Attracted), he was happy with my lifestyle choices and Christian character – and saw no reason it should impact my employment at the school. We also discussed some of my concerns about incidents in the school that I felt would contribute to an unsafe environment for students with diverse orientation and gender identity.

I had noticed:

1. An internal video for the secondary school where the school chaplain [REDACTED] as an example of a Christian speaking the ‘gospel truth’ in the public sphere re: his defence of Israel Falou’s comment. I felt that video would signal to any queer students that the school was not a safe space to discuss their experiences.
2. During a morning staff meeting, [REDACTED] raised an incident where a year 4 boy had been discussing his crushes on other year 4 boys and [REDACTED] described the student as “disgusting”. Other staff members echoed such comments later in staffrooms calling the student ‘messed up’. I explained to [REDACTED] that this was unacceptable language. He explained that he was disgusted, not because they were ‘gay crushes’ but because he was so young. I explained that he was sexualising queerness, and that we consider crushes between boys and girls in year 4 as normal and maybe even ‘cute’.
3. Many casual transphobic and homophobic comments from staff, such as comments about Drag Queen Story Hour sexualising kids - or comparing a family member ‘coming out’ as ‘bad news’ on par with child abuse. I didn’t, and could not, keep a record of every negative comment or insinuation about queerness that I heard from staff.

Most significantly from this meeting, we discussed my ‘openness’ with the rest of the school community. I wanted to be open, at least with staff, so I could more easily address concerns, and deal with simple relational situations more honestly (such as teachers trying to set me up with women). Openness is more conducive to health.

However, [REDACTED] advised me that due to the conservative theological positions of many of the staff and the school principal (who might not like anyone identifying as ‘gay’ or ‘same-sex attracted’) AND due to the culturally conservative backgrounds of the school families, it would be more prudent to remain secretive about my sexual orientation.

I had signed a code of conduct that required me to not undertake any homosexual activities. I kept that code. I had not signed a code of conduct that required me to ‘present as straight’ or face concerns from other conservative staff members or families without the support of the executive of the school.

This is a strange theological/practical position of the school, because I was living the lifestyle expected of conservative Christians experiencing same-sex attraction, but [REDACTED] felt the school community would prefer to pretend like people like me didn’t exist.

There are significant negative emotional and social outcomes of being ‘closeted’, and I found that working in an environment that required me to be ‘closeted’ to avoid raising concerns of staff and families, had seriously negative impacts on my own mental health.

I ended up resigning from my permanent appointment in 2021, ‘freely’ and with the support of [REDACTED]. I resigned primarily because of the psychological strain of being a closeted gay Christian teacher at the school. I resigned mid-term 2, and did not return to any classroom until the beginning of 2022 [REDACTED] because I needed to mentally (and physically) recover from the build-up of stress over the 2.5 years of working in such an unsafe environment.

At [REDACTED], I immediately let the principal know that I was gay, and that I expected to be allowed to be as open as I wanted to be, and to be able to report any incidents of discrimination from other staff members. We also have a positive working relationship.

I still have a positive relationship with [REDACTED], despite him being a leader in a workplace which discriminated against me because of my sexual orientation to great negative effect on my mental health. We still catch up and discuss reading pedagogy, theology and justice.

As a final note, I’d like to comment on this provision:

“... can continue to build a community of faith by giving preference, in good faith, to persons of the same religion as the educational institution in the selection of staff.”

Many of the conservative evangelical communities I have been a part of in my life (including [REDACTED]), have a rhetoric that ‘marriage being defined as heterosexual’ is a ‘core gospel belief’. In other words, if you don’t believe that marriage is only between a man and women then you are ‘not a Christian’. My concern with this provision is that ‘gay Christians’ will get labelled as ‘not-Christians’ or ‘apostates’ or in the language of the [REDACTED] code of conduct [REDACTED]. I suspect that this provision will provide religious educational institutions too much leeway to discriminate and they will find more creative and subtle ways to discriminate. I think the ‘in good faith’ aspect needs to be very clear and defined.

For me, I had the extra unwritten expectation that I would ‘present as straight’, that was nowhere to be found in the code of conduct.

I’m happy to be contacted to discuss any of the topics I raised in more detail.

Kind Regards,

[REDACTED]

Queerness in modern conservative Sydney-based Christian spaces

This is just some notes on queerness in modern conservative (evangelical) Christian communities as I have observed over my lifetime [REDACTED]. I spent much of that time as a closeted or semi-closeted gay Christian – who remained single. These ideas are skewed to observations around experiences of gay Christian men.

In the faith spaces of previous generations, gay relationship and identity were viewed as chosen moral failings. More recently, many Christian faith spaces broadly accepted that gay men and

lesbians didn't choose their attracted, and expected that queer people would 'change' their orientation to heterosexual. This was commonly known as 'conversion therapy' and exists today still as a subset of queer/faith belief, known as Side X. There are Christian traditions who have come to affirm gay relationships such as large portions of the Uniting Church and many Anglican churches around Australia (these groups are sometimes known as 'Side A'). These traditions have been widely rejected as abandoning the gospel, by many conservative evangelical churches e.g. the Sydney Anglican Diocese, The Baptists, the Presbyterians, all the FIEC independent churches.

The teaching regarding queerness in these conservative evangelical traditions is something like "you can be gay, as long as you don't act on it. We're not expecting you to change orientation". These ideas have a group name – Side B. They use phrases like 'I'm a gay Christian pursuing single celibacy', or 'I identify as Same-Sex Attracted' (because being gay is not my whole identity), or "My identity is in Christ, not in my sexuality". Churches will still accept you if you are gay, but if you're 'acting' on your gayness you might need to be rebuked, and probably won't be accepted as a voluntary 'community group leader' even if you had been in that role previously. Churches will often be proud of their gay members who are choose to live the 'righteous' path of single celibacy (this kind of pride and celebration has a coercive element all of its own).

I was most closely aligned with Side B during my teenage years, but during my 20's did not really have a 'side', despite staying single. I was glad when gay Christian friends found partners or got married, and I felt that it was queer voices that were the most important voices to listen to within church spaces to make theological determinations about queerness. I have met many 'Side B' queer Christians – and spent a few years connecting with a group of 'Side B' gay Christian men through a Sydney based ministry called [REDACTED]

'Side B' consists of range of queer Christians, many of whom I'd describe as problematic, but some of whom I'd describe as healthy. On the problematic side are the gay Christian men (including chaplains and pastors and husbands with wives) who aspire to single-celibacy, but 'fall short' and end up hooking up with men (through grindr etc). They often feel like they are drowning in shame and repentance. I'm all for a sex-positive approach to gay experience – but the compartmentalising involved with these lifestyles is quite damaging compared to more open and transparent approach to the gay hook-up scene. Also problematic are 'Side B Christians' who marry heterosexually without first telling their partner about their orientation (and probably even the ones who do tell their partner first). There are those who have strong loneliness, poor mental health or a strong desire for a romantic partner, but who feel unable to pursue these desires, or act to change their circumstances because of their theological convictions (or the convictions of their church/family).

Among the healthy 'Side B Christians' are those gay Christians who have a genuine contentment being single. Many Christians believe that sex is reserved for people who are married, and so it is not unusual to find single people in churches who are not having sex (gay or straight – usually straight women). I sometime speculate if these people might identify as demi-sexual or asexual, if these more 'secular' terms were common and accepted terms of their community. I think that 'healthy' Side B Christians can commonly accept and celebrate other Christians making different choices (such as pursuing a gay relationship). If they feel the need to condemn gay Christians in relationships – then I often suspect they also internally condemn themselves to prevent themselves from pursuing a relationship.

I would say, however, that the skills of caring for your own social, emotional and mental needs without the help of a romantic partner, can be great and freeing – and some ‘Side B gay Christians’ develop these healthy skills out of their freedom or conviction, and are living fulfilling and healthy lifestyles. And it should be noted that many gay and straight people have long periods of healthy and freely chosen singleness (or singleness because they can’t find a partner) for various reasons and isn’t always a sign of ‘suppression’.