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1. Religious schools and LGBT discrimination

In the lead up to Christmas 2018, the media became obsessed with the rights of LGBT students and teachers including the expulsion and exclusion of LGBT students and dismissal and non-employment of LGBT teachers. These concerns came from three sources:

1. The leaked text and recommendations from the Ruddock *Religious Freedom Review* retaining existing exemptions for religious schools.
2. The defence of the NO vote on same sex marriage by religious groups and their reaction to the success of the YES vote.
3. A letter from a group of Anglican school principals widely interpreted as anti LGBT.

The Ruddock Review

The Ruddock Review came about because of increasing concern amongst religious groups that growing antireligious secularism is eroding the freedom of religion rights currently enjoyed under Australian law. There was always going to be tension between those wanting to maintain existing provisions and those wanting change.

When completed, the Review was presented to the Australian Government and then sections leaked to the press and without knowing all the recommendations and associated discussion, some of the more contentious parts were highlighted in the media. The focus quickly became the maintenance of existing provisions within the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 that allow religious schools to exclude or expel students and to dismiss or refuse employment based on sexual orientation. The community outcry was focused on religious schools discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation and that such discrimination violated basic human rights.

The key point is in Recommendations 5 and 7 which allows this discrimination *on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status provided that, among other things: The discrimination is founded in the precepts of the religion.* (More about this shortly.)

The Prime Minister, in his press conference, emphasized that these provisions already existed and that the Government would consider the Review in due course, but had no intention to change existing law. Unfortunately, this added fuel to the antireligious fires being lit under

the review and caused general community concern that such provisions promoted homophobia leading to discrimination against LGBT students and teachers.

The YES vote

The discussion of the Ruddock Review occurred just after the YES vote for same sex marriage. The conservatives and most religious groups had hoped that the NO case would win the day but increasingly in the lead up to the vote, polls showed that the YES vote would win. Sydney Anglicans became so concerned about this that the Archbishop agreed to contribute one million dollars to the NO vote. This was not supported by all Anglicans, some believing that these funds could be better allocated to the spread of the Gospel or the support of those in need. Nor did many Christians like the content, tone and innuendo of the NO vote advertisements. These, and other NO case actions, took their toll on the community reinforcing negativity towards religious groups and it partly explains why the Ruddock Review recommendations had so much negative traction in the community. Having removed marriage discrimination, secular interests were not about to have religious discrimination in schools promoted.

Anglican school principals' letter

While it was well intended to support the rights of religious schools to have enrolment and employment freedom and not to be subject to secular dictates that cut across their core values and beliefs, this letter was widely viewed as an endorsement of discrimination allowing exclusion or expulsion of students and dismissal and non employment of LGBT people.

Some Anglican principals did not sign the letter and after substantial protest from school alumni, other principals backtracked when they understood how the letter was being read and interpreted. In response the Anglican Archbishop said *Let's be very clear. Anglican schools in Sydney do not expel students for being gay. It is an absurd proposition and it is certainly not something we asked for in our submission to the Ruddock Review. We would gladly support any amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 which would clarify this.* (SMH 15/10/18) While this statement settled the fears of many regarding Anglican students, the Archbishop does not speak for other religious schools and left the matter of teachers open by saying *Anglican schools, if they are going to remain Anglican, must be able to employ staff who support the Christian values of the school.* (More about this too shortly.) The letter from the principals said *while schools would not expel gay students or staff in practice, they wanted to preserve the right to employ people who "support the ethos of the school.* (SMH 2/11/18)

So, we wait for the Government to consider the review and possibly enact legislation, but given the controversy that might arise, it would be a brave person to predict any action before the next election.

“Precepts of religion”

The Sex Discrimination Act 1984 allows for schools to discrimination *on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status provided that: The discrimination is founded in the precepts of the religion.*

Precepts are general rules intended to regulate behaviour or thought. Its synonyms are: principle, rule, tenet, canon, code, doctrine, guideline. (Various dictionaries). In this regard, what precepts would a school claim to discriminate against a person on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status? Focusing on Christianity, what are the precepts we operate from: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*³¹ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* *There is no commandment greater than these.* (Mark 12:30-31)

Jesus explained who our neighbour is in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Paul outlines the quality of this love in 1Corinthians 13 and Jesus demonstrates its fullness in his sacrificial death on the cross. What precepts would a school wish to call upon to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or relational status?

But it is not this simple. There may be lifestyles that justify discrimination and exclusion from teaching - paedophilia, promiscuity, illicit drug dealing, criminal convictions for violence or sexual assault. However, these exclusions apply across the whole community to people of every sexual orientation, gender identity and relationship status. As in government schools, not anyone can be a teacher and discrimination is required to maintain teacher quality. The key issue here is, what might Christian schools claim in addition to other types of schools as precepts and should these be protected as is currently the case with the Sex Discrimination Act or by new legislation protecting or providing for wider religious freedom?

“The Christian values of the school”

Teachers

A number of Christians, including the Anglican archbishop, have argued that Christian schools must be able to employ teachers who support the Christian values or ethos of the school. While not explicit, it is assumed that values include Christian beliefs and practices held in common. A person not expressing these values could be considered unsuitable for a position. If schools can discriminate on the basis of the “the Christian values of the school”, then does this lead to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and relationship status? It will depend on the beliefs about sexuality that underpin these values. How might this use of “the Christian values of the school” operate with LGBT teachers who claim Christ as Lord?

Students

In 2016, I wrote in [The Challenge of LGBT students](#) about how schools include these students. The article recommended inclusive welfare policies, especially in Christian schools where these students were at greater risk because of negative views based on evangelical reformed beliefs. Research indicated that: *Attempting to address the sexuality of these students with negative teaching, threats, coercion, ridicule or even Biblical teaching that emphasises a strong judgemental and intransigent position can result in them losing their identity and their faith.* (Wood and Conley 2014). And this is without considering other student behaviours towards these students. At the time, this article caused a lot of concern to some TCF members who read it wrongly as an endorsement of LGBT lifestyles. Now nearly three years on, the issue has been highlighted within the general community and will continue to create discussion. It is hoped that more religious schools will make definitive statements about their precepts and values that encourage inclusion of LGBT students and that welfare policies based on love and not judgement will follow, reducing homophobia and the harassment of these students.

What do Christians believe about sexual orientation, gender identity and relationship status?

The short answer is that beliefs vary across Christian groups depending on their interpretation of the scriptures and traditions that underpin their beliefs. Sexual orientation remains a mine field to explore. Some Christians have a liberal interpretation of scripture and others traditional and scripture-based positions are far more judgemental.

In one recommended text *Kingdom Ethics* (2003) the traditional reformed evangelical position, held by Sydney Anglicans, is that homosexual behaviours are prohibited by scripture (sinful) and gay and lesbian people, acknowledging these sexual orientations exist, should practice celibacy. It is interesting to note that one of the authors, David Gushee, has since written a book *Changing our mind* (2015) where he outlines a case for homosexuality referring to all the key scriptural passages. There is much discussion still to be had about Christian beliefs and values in relation to sexuality and the whole church will have to face these issues not only schools.

With these diverse beliefs informing “the Christian values of the school”, many Christian schools will continue to have an interest in a person’s sexual orientation seeking assurances that intending applicants meet their “values” criteria.

Perhaps the greater challenge is gender identity especially where a person has or wishes to change gender. How is this matter related to the “the Christian values of the school” should they seek enrolment or employment?

It is a clear that many Christian groups believe that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. Does that mean that Christians applying for positions who do not accept this position will be excluded as not meeting “the Christian values of the school”?

While assurances have been forthcoming from Anglican and some other religious schools about the acceptance of LGBT students and their continued enrolment, there have been no such assurances about teachers. In fact, “the Christian values of the school” argument would seem to indicate that current discrimination exemptions are to be pursued in any legislative changes. As the church in general works through the scriptures to inform its beliefs and values, LGBT people will continue to be a challenge, especially those who also identify as Christians.

John Gore

Joldersma C W Doing justice today: A welcoming embrace for LGBT students in Christian schools, International Journal of Christianity and Education Vol. 20, No. 1, March 2016

Gushee D *Changing our mind*, David Crumm Media 2015

Stassen G H and Gushee D *Kingdom Ethics*, p 307f InterVarsity Press (2003)

Wood A W and Conley AH Loss of religious or spiritual identities among the LGBT population Counselling and values 59(1): P. 95-111. (2014)

Disclaimer: The views expressed in articles and letters published in <i>TCF News</i> are not necessarily those of TCF NSW.

2. Opportunity to teach overseas

An opportunity exists to teach children of cross-cultural workers serving in SE Asia. An English teacher is needed to start at the beginning of September 2019. (One TCF member is doing this in his retirement!) Contact TCF office for details.

3. TCF dinner with Eddie Woo

When:	Saturday 23 rd March 2019
Where:	Castle Hill Baptist Church, Showground Rd, Castle Hill.
Time:	6.15pm for 6.30pm
Speaker:	Eddie Woo, Head Teacher, Mathematics, Cherrybrook Technology High School.
Topic:	How does faith affect my teaching?
Cost:	\$35 per head.
RSVP:	7 th March 2019. Application form below

Eddie Woo profile:

Known for: Online mathematics lessons.

Author: *Woo's Wonderful World of Mathematics*. (Published September, 2018)

Television: *Teenage Boss*, ABC Australian Story

Awards: NSW Premier's Prize for Innovation in Science and Mathematics (2015)
Choose Maths Awards (2016)
Uni Of Sydney Young Alumni Award, Outstanding Achievement (2017)
Commonwealth Bank Teaching award (2018)
Australian Local Hero (2018)

Woo gave the Australia Day address in NSW in 2018, the first time a teacher has done so.

He is married with three children and enjoys playing the guitar.

Woo identifies as a Christian, stating, "We talk about the fact that the universe is designed in this way and you can find all of these patterns; do you think that that's a coincidence? One of the things I love to point out is we call the universe the cosmos which means ordered and structured and designed, as opposed to chaos, and the reason why we can find these mathematical principles is because there was a designer. We didn't just spring into being. It has immense beauty." Source: Wikipedia

Reply Form for TCF Dinner

Name: _____

Address: _____

Contact phone no: _____

Dietary requirements: _____

Names of other people I will be bringing:

Total number attending at \$35 per head: _____

Payment by:

☐ Cheque enclosed, made payable to TCF of NSW.

☐ Direct deposit to Westpac Bank BSB: 032-373 Account: 128812

(Please put your name as the reference).

☐ Mastercard / Visa (circle which one)

Card No _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

Expiry date: _ _ / _ _ Print name on card: _____

Signature: _____

Copy and email to or print and post to:

TCFNSW

PO Box 3813 Marsfield NSW 2122

Ph 0490 148 249.

Email: tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au

Web www.tcfofnsw.org.au

