

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

End Conversion Therapy/Practices Virtual Engagement Session in private with the Committee and Individuals with lived experiences

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Participant – R

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Can you tell us about your experiences of conversion practices?

My first experience started when I was 11/12. 'Conversion therapy' in this country is an insidious practice – subtle and harmful. In this country it tends to be in a religious setting/environment. 'conversion therapy' is an umbrella term for any sort of practice or attempt to change, cure and / or suppress someone's sexuality or gender identity, often gaslighting you at the same. At 11/12 I did not have the language to know I was gay. I had school ground teasing. But that was the only word for gay that I knew. I was too young to understand. At that age I wasn't interested in having girlfriends or boyfriends. I was just interested in being a kid.

A lot of the times when it starts you are not aware of what is going on. For me, it started as a child. It took me until this past year to even begin to understand that the experiences I had were a form of conversion therapy, even although there has been years of waves of shame and discoveries. During the pandemic I was able to take a step back and begin to unpack and understand the experiences that I went through. I was in the fortunate position to have a friend in church who was also gay. So, we went through it together. We had each other to rely on. But our experiences were different. She was sent away to a centre under the guise of other issues but ended up undergoing conversion therapy whilst there – this was in another country (England). I have a guilt mentality because I felt as if her experience was more extreme, and I didn't see what I went through as the same thing. But I have come to understand that her experience doesn't make mine any less, as conversion therapy takes many different forms. All of which are psychologically damaging, and wrong.

It started at a young age. It was predatory on their part. Because of the behaviours and actions as adults, with a clear imbalance of power with me being a literal child and minor. I feel like they had almost "seen" and assumed that I was gay, and because I was a little kid they tried to change me before I realised it myself. It started gradually but as mid to late teenage years it became more blatant. It started to become more intense and more physical. It involved touching - not in a sexual sense - but in terms of intense prayer. Multiple adults pushing down on you and trying to cast out demons of homosexuality. I was told on a regular basis that I was an Abomination and at risk of becoming a paedophile. There was one very intrusive and intense incident when I was told I must have been abused by a close family member. That never happened to me, but when I said that never happened I was told that I was and had to dig deeper and that I must be suppressing it as that was the only

way I could be gay and that I just could not remember it. I was 15/16. That was shocking to be told that I must have been abused.

This happened in the early 2000's. I have no idea if this still happens in church life. That fear has always existed in me. I always wanted to become a teacher, but I never ever went into that profession because I was scared people would see me as a predator – if you're told enough times you're a danger to children, that does something to you, and I was a child myself when that started. (emotional upset). I have nieces and nephews. I am distant with them as I have always held back because of those same fears, I struggle as I feel people will not trust me around kids. That has been really hard for me. (Very upset).

This is why it is so important that this has to end. I recently had a conversation with my parents, and they didn't know this was going on – literally under their noses. I really struggle because for the most part, I believe the people did it with good intentions. But despite all the good intentions, the damage has still been done and isn't any less harmful. In some ways I feel like that can be worse, because you can still have a fondness for those purporting it. It's confusing. It has stolen joy, stopped me going down certain route. I was the problem – my faith constantly in question. They brought "ex gay" people into the church to "show" it was possible. Why is this not working for me? I tried to avoid relationships, They tell you celibacy is your only option and to devote yourself to God.

FM – I agree we need to end this. What is we are trying to end? It is very subtle cultural level.

Language is important. Campaigns. In England 'Ban' Conversion Therapy and here 'End' Conversion Therapy. If you Ban it implies it will always be there, but with potential repercussions. I want to *End* it completely. Of course this may take time, and may never truly happen, but has to be the goal. Through education, cultural change. Because of things like the TIE Campaign, for example, in schools kids now know LGBT+ is normal. I wish I was aware at the time what I went through was 'conversion therapy'. But there was no campaign. Maybe if there was an awareness of it, a poster in a café for example, That might have showed me a route for help. I am not interested in pinning the church against queer people. I feel the only way it will change is to come from a genuine place of heart. I like to believe it. But it has robbed me of 23 years of my life. We need to bring people with us, education, awareness and support for people who are going through it. We need to work together.

FM - Today what you have done is an absolute credit and it will help others. You have played a big role in that. Making it a better place for individuals.