

Guideline for Salvationists: Gay Conversion Therapies

The Issue

‘Gay conversion’ or ‘reparative’ therapies vary widely in content and practice but are all designed to change a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. In recent years, these therapies have been widely discredited. A large body of evidence shows that they don’t work and that they cause serious harm to those involved, including poor mental health¹ and suicidality².

A range of professional associations in New Zealand have declared conversion therapies to be harmful, ineffective, and unethical. These include the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers³, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists⁴, and New Zealand Association of Counsellors⁵. Furthermore, the Psychological Society, College of Clinical Psychologists, and Psychologists Board have codes of ethics that suggest conversion therapy does not constitute ethical practice.⁶

In response to the growing evidence about the harms caused by these practices, governments both in New Zealand and internationally have been examining and implementing legislative options for banning their use.⁷ The Human Rights Commission already identifies under our current legislation that “(a)s a member of the LGBTQI+ community, you have the right to not be subject to any forms of therapy that are carried out in an attempt to change your sexual orientation or gender identity.”⁸ The Commission has said it “would support the Government to consider any moves to end the practice of gay conversion therapy”.⁹

This guideline examines the social, ethical and theological dimensions of this issue for Salvationists.

Statement of Position

While it is currently under revision, The Salvation Army’s position on human sexuality (originally written in the 1990s) said that:

A disposition towards homosexuality is not in itself blameworthy nor is the disposition seen as rectifiable at will. The Army is sensitive to the complex social, emotional and spiritual needs of all people including those with homosexual

¹ <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Conversion-Therapy-LGBT-Youth-Jan-2018.pdf>, citing a range of academic sources

² Ibid., citing Sandy E. James et al., National Centre for Transgender Equality, The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (2016)

³ <https://anzasw.nz/anzasw-statement-on-the-practice-of-gay-conversion-therapy-in-aotearoa-nz/>

⁴ <https://www.ranzcp.org/news-policy/policy-submissions-reports/document-library/sexual-orientation-change-efforts>

⁵ <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/GE1807/S00019/one-great-step-for-lgbtqi-acceptance-now-its-nzs-turn.htm>

⁶ <https://www.equaljusticeproject.co.nz/blog/2018/08/legislate-away-the-hate-the-future-of-conversion-therapy-in-new-zealand>

⁷ See for instance George, M.A. Expressive Ends: Understanding Conversion Therapy Bans, Alabama Law Review, 68:3, 793-853

⁸ <https://www.hrc.co.nz/your-rights/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/faqs/>

⁹ <http://www.craccum.co.nz/?p=2647>

inclinations. We oppose vilification of, or discrimination against anyone on the grounds of sexual orientation. No person is excluded from membership, fellowship or service in the Army solely on the basis of sexual disposition.

Given the position that same-sex attraction is not 'rectifiable at will', and that Salvationists want to be sensitive to people's 'social, emotional and spiritual needs', there is no basis for referral to, or engagement in, any form of gay conversion therapy. The Salvation Army recognises the emotional, psychological, social and spiritual harms that these therapies have caused and will stand against their use in every circumstance.

Biblical and Theological Background

Perhaps more than ever, Salvationists are deeply divided on the subject of human sexuality. How we read and interpret the Bible, take into account emerging understandings in the fields of health and social sciences or respect the diversity of human experience are all contested ideas.

While these debates form part of the background to the issue at hand, the overwhelming evidence of harm caused by conversion therapies means that we don't have to wait for wider resolutions before moving forwards. The fundamental issue is not one of sexuality, but of a practice that is both ineffective with regard to its purported aims, and that does significant harm.

However, some of the theological and biblical themes that we may want to consider include the character of God, the call to love our neighbour, and God's plans for creation.

God is love

One of the primary attributes of God is love. God's love has no limits (1 Chronicles 16.34) and is for the whosoever (John 3.16). God deals fairly and justly with all people equally (Rom 2.11). God's love is much more than merely tolerating people; this comprehensive love allows people freedom to make their own choices (Galatians 5.13, Revelation 3.20) and to follow their own gods (Micah 4.5) without it being diminished.

Believers are called to be like God and therefore to be living examples of his love in action in the world. Specifically, believers are told to "Accept one another... just as Christ accepted [them]" (Romans 15.7a), and to be "sympathetic, love one another, [and] be compassionate and humble" in their dealings with others (1 Peter 3.8). They are instructed to clothe themselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3.12,14).

Further, Jesus resisted legalistic interpretations of scripture, summing up our obligations in the dual commandment to love God and our neighbours. (Mark 12:30-31) As this love is to be known by its fruit (Galatians 5:22), any action that causes harm to a person fails the test of love. The damage now widely understood as the main product of conversion therapies cannot be justified in the light of an orientation of love.

Therefore, knowingly approving of conversion therapy (or any other thing), which is known to bring harm, is not consistent with the love God that expects believers to extend to others.

God's purpose for creation

God's purpose for creation is "shalom". "Shalom" is defined as "whole" or "entire"¹⁰. It conveys "unity and harmony – something that is complete and sound"¹¹. It means "health, well-being and fulfillment"¹² in all areas of life. This was the state of creation in Genesis 1-2 before sin entered it, but when sin entered creation, relationships were broken and wholeness was lost. God's goal for creation from Genesis 3 onwards was, and still is, to restore "shalom".

Therefore, working to bring wholeness to people is working with God to achieve his purposes for creation. Approving of methods which have been proven to bring pain and brokenness is counter to God's purposes.

Practical Responses

- Salvationists will continue to oppose vilification of, or discrimination against, anyone on the grounds of sexuality or gender. This includes attempts to change another person's sexual orientation or gender identity and includes actions which deny a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Salvationists will not act, directly or indirectly, to encourage, refer to, or engage with any form of gay conversion or reparative therapies or practices. This includes formal or organisational approaches to such practices, but also less formal approaches, such as those that might be labelled 'pray away the gay'.

In response to the question, 'Then what do I do if someone wrestling with their sexual identity wants prayer?', Salvationists are encouraged to help people explore their identity – for instance, by praying that God will affirm their authentic identity and speak into their search for who they were made to be; or by pastorally exploring what it is that has led them to conclude that they need to change. Salvationists will not pray for a specific outcome with regards to someone's sexuality.

- Salvationists will demonstrate sensitivity to the complex social, emotional and spiritual needs of all people, remembering that their first duty is to show love and grace in the manner of Jesus.

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¹⁰ "Shalom", Blue Letter Bible, accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/gen/1/1/s_1001

¹¹ Larry Richards, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 479

¹² Richards, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*, 479