

Victorian Government Preliminary Multifaith Roundtable on LGBTI Youth in Victoria

13 October 2016

Discussion Report

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Foreword from the Victorian Multicultural Commission Chair

Support from faith and community leaders can make a huge difference in the lives of young people working to resolve their gender and/or sexual identity with their cultural or faith background.

Given the significant risks to health and well-being that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) young people experience, extra support is crucial to help them feel valued and included in their communities.

I am proud to have been a part of the Victorian Government's Preliminary Multifaith Roundtable on LGBTI Youth in Victoria.

Eager to capture voices from a range of faith communities, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Department of Premier and Cabinet invited faith leaders to come together and share their experiences of working with young LGBTI people in their communities. By creating a respectful environment to express thoughts, opinions and ideas, we were able to identify common ground and to better understand the challenges faced by leaders engaged in pastoral work with young LGBTI people.

I am encouraged by the strong investment that participants made to the discussion and the opportunity the event provided for reflection, collaboration and commitment to shared values. I would like to thank participants for their time and the insights they brought to share from their faith traditions and communities.

The Commission is committed to working closely with Victoria's faith and culturally diverse communities to ensure all Victorians feel a sense of belonging and worth. We look forward to working further with faith leaders to create an inclusive, cohesive Victoria where everyone is accepted and welcome in their community.



Helen Kapalos
Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission

Foreword from the Victorian Commissioner for Gender & Sexuality

We have come together as multifaith people to have honest and heartfelt conversations about how we can support LGBTI people, particularly our young people. We're all on the journey to deepen our understanding on ways to be more inclusive of LGBTI people.

I was delighted to be a part of the Victorian Government's Preliminary Multifaith Roundtable on LGBTI Youth in Victoria, and to work together with colleagues within the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Victorian Multicultural Commission. It was a wonderful opportunity to bring faith leaders together to share stories and insights of working with LGBTI young people across our multifaith communities.

No one deserves to be harmed, or treated unfairly for any reason. The impact of faith disconnection or discrimination for LGBTI people is sobering. Research has shown that exposure to ex-gay conversion therapy has links to depression, anxiety, drug use, homelessness and suicide, with young people particularly vulnerable to these risks.¹

There is a very real need to respond to the risk of self-harm and suicide for our young people. We must focus on creating safe and inclusive places for LGBTI young people. Some conversations can be hard, however I have been greatly inspired by the courage, compassion and commitment of faith leaders who have joined us, and look forward to the changes that we create together.



Rowena Allen
Commissioner for Gender and Sexuality

¹ Human Rights Campaign (2016), The Lies and Dangers of Efforts to Change Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity.

Introduction

On 13 October 2016, 35 faith and community leaders participated in a Victorian Government Preliminary Multifaith Roundtable on LGBTI Youth hosted by the Institute for Religion, Politics and Society at the Australian Catholic University.

The Roundtable was a joint initiative between the Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division and the Equality Branch of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It brought together leaders from a diverse range of faiths and cultural backgrounds to discuss the acceptance of LGBTI youth in faith communities, and the links between social inclusion and mental health and wellbeing.

The conversation was guided by research from Deakin University on the significant challenges LGBTI youth in faith communities experience in reconciling issues of identity regarding sexuality and faith.

Following a brief overview of the research, faith and community leaders were allocated a place at one of six roundtables comprised of at least one LGBTI person of faith and representatives from a diversity of religious groups.

Participants were asked to address the following five questions:

1. What can faith communities do to reduce the stress LGBTI young people feel?
2. What can faith leaders do to work toward a more positive reception and acceptance of LGBTI people in their places of worship and communities?
3. What can faith leaders do to improve the knowledge about LGBTI young people among other members of their communities?
4. What can faith leaders do when they encounter a young person challenged by their sexuality? What strategies and resources are there to support their spiritual and psychological needs?
5. What is the role of the Victorian Government in the points above?

This document provides a summary of the roundtable discussions on how to improve social inclusion and mental health outcomes for LGBTI youth in Victoria's faith communities.

What can faith communities do to reduce the stress LGBTI young people feel?

Listening and acknowledging people who identify as LGBTI

- Participants felt it was crucial to talk about LGBTI issues and make people feel welcome in faith communities. Some communities have difficulty accepting LGBTI people and may have varying levels of acceptance across lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex identities. Acceptance and education are closely linked, along with the framing of support for LGBTI people as a social justice issue and a duty of care issue for faith leaders.
- Participants discussed the importance of creating a safe space for young people to talk, including the development of a space outside and separate from the place of worship.
- Faith communities need to ask young people what they need in order to feel welcome and supported. Faith communities need to hear from young people themselves to understand the stresses they face in reconciling issues of faith and sexuality, and concerns around coming out to their families and friends.
- Fear of judgment and rejection causes multiple stresses for young people. Lack of recognition and invisibility makes it difficult for young people to identify as valued members of the community.
- Participants acknowledged that many faith communities are only just learning how to speak about LGBTI issues. It is important that members of faith communities learn how to speak publically and knowledgeably about the issues that matter to LGBTI young people and advocate on their behalf.

The importance of language

- Language is critical in the way we think about and shape the world. Participants identified that the term LGBTI may not resonate with some multicultural communities and may be perceived as a 'western construct'. For this reason, other forms of terminology may help to foster acceptance and understanding across diverse communities.
- Participants discussed the prevalence of gendered language in religious communities and felt that communities should be encouraged to use more inclusive language. Participants acknowledged that many communities would like to be more inclusive in this regard but lack knowledge and confidence.

Adopting a holistic approach

- Some multifaith initiatives that provide support to LGBTI young people offer positive examples of inclusion that members of religious communities should be made aware of. Positive messaging and demonstrated actions of support should have a visible presence in faith communities.
- Faith communities need to acknowledge the strong role that families play in fostering levels of acceptance and inclusion for young LGBTI people. Encouraging families to play an active role in education and helping them to support their LGBTI family member is crucial. It is also useful to acknowledge the role of additional supports, e.g., the Centre for Multicultural Youth in a mediation and advocacy role.

- Participants discussed the role of online support, which is often a first source of information for LGBTI young people. Faith communities could develop a welcoming online presence via statements of support, information and links to other resources, for example, a Facebook page in support of LGBTI members, e.g., one participant spoke of a website run by the Anglican Church that provides details of gay-friendly parishes in Australia.

Encouraging a top down approach

- Participants acknowledged that while progressive leaders have the opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of LGBTI young people of faith, there must be support from faith hierarchies. Support needs to come from the top to influence change in religious communities.

What can faith leaders do to work toward a more positive reception and acceptance of LGBTI people in their places of worship and communities?

Framing support for LGBTI young people

- Participants strongly supported the framing of LGBTI issues from a social justice perspective; focusing on social inclusion and anti-discrimination as key to changing attitudes across all faiths. Participants suggested moving the conversation away from theological discussions towards mental health and well-being and the safety of LGBTI young people. Framing the issue in this context increases its accessibility to more conservative members of faith communities.
- Participants acknowledged the role of religion in historically challenging racism, discrimination and oppression of minorities. Support for LGBTI young people can be framed as adherence to religious values around equality, compassion and non-judgment.
- It is important to note the role of allies in faith communities and the influence they can have in improving levels of acceptance and inclusion.

Acknowledgement of LGBTI young people

- Participants felt that encouraging faith leaders to use the term LGBTI in their sermons would be a good start and that acknowledgement of LGBTI people is critical. Participants discussed the significant damage that can come from what is not said and acknowledged that even the most well-meaning sermons can be damaging. For this reason it is crucial that faith leaders listen to young people and learn how their messages are being interpreted.

Creating safe and neutral spaces

- Faith leaders need to facilitate conversations about difference in safe spaces and work to actively mediate discussions. This is important for the safety of all participants.
- Participants felt that finding common ground in a neutral space is important to facilitate understanding. Reference was made to the 'Heaven Bent' anthology which explores religion, spirituality and LGBTI issues by focusing on commonality, shared experiences and respect for one another's journeys.
- Faith leaders should also use opportunities to mix faith groups with LGBTI groups to increase understanding.

Visibility

- Participants discussed the importance of "making visible what is invisible" by including visual symbols of support in places of worship, e.g., candles and the rainbow flag. Symbols provide a welcoming environment for young LGBTI people and send a strong statement to other members of the community.

- Participants also identified the importance of creating a visible presence of support outside places of worship. It is crucial for faith leaders to have a visible presence in communities “away from the pulpit” in order to model inclusive attitudes in all places where communities interact.
- Participants suggested faith leaders could encourage people who identify as LGBTI to lead a sermon or take an active role in their community. However it is important to note that this may be confronting for some communities and safety protocols must be acknowledged.
- Faith leaders can increase their visibility as LGBTI allies/advocates by fostering ties with LGBTI groups outside their own religious communities. Attendance at multifaith LGBTI events, the Midsumma Festival etc. are useful ways to model inclusive practice and reach out to LGBTI young people outside formal places of worship.

Inclusion

- Participants felt it was important that faith leaders move beyond the tokenistic and provide strong messages of inclusiveness through word and action. The need for visible allies who champion acceptance and inclusiveness is vital.
- Participants felt the full participation of LGBTI young people in rites of passage is an important demonstration of inclusiveness.
- Some participants discussed formal structures in faith communities that support inclusion of LGBTI people, e.g., LGBTI reference groups, training and information sessions on LGBTI issues. These initiatives have been successful and have helped to give LGBTI members a voice in their communities.

Emphasising the difference between theological and social issues

- Participants felt that faith leaders should challenge interpretations of scripture that promote homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. This can be done by encouraging new understandings around religious texts.
- Faith leaders have an opportunity to normalise conversations to change the underlying culture in religious communities. It is useful for leaders to maintain an awareness of language and the supportive and non-supportive attitudes in both the community and in the broader denomination. For example, one participant spoke about LGBTI acceptance within the Victorian Jewish community and identified the different groups within the Jewish faith ranging from progressive to ultra-orthodox. The more orthodox members struggle to recognise LGBTI individuals whilst the progressive members participate in Pride parades and commitment ceremonies.
- Participants discussed the current political climate in Australia, the strong influence of the religious right and mainstream media, and the opportunities that faith leaders have to counteract negative messaging and to make positive statements in support of LGBTI people. Participants suggested sermons that emphasise compassion and universal acceptance of difference are also useful tools to foster attitudinal change in religious communities. Faith leaders need to acknowledge that fear and rejection from family and community take a lifetime to heal. One participant suggested an acknowledgement of love is necessary for healing to take place.

What can faith leaders do to improve the knowledge about LGBTI young people among other members of their communities?

Champions of change

- Participants discussed the impact of generational differences in faith communities and strongly supported the role of allies to act as champions for LGBTI young people. Similarly, young people themselves may also act as champions with the provision of adequate support and care. Some participants felt this role is particularly suited to young women.
- Participants discussed the development of a narrative to challenge perceptions of promiscuity and the lack of “everyday” LGBTI role models in multicultural communities. Public relations training could be used to help focus on personal stories.
- Participants spoke of the role of faith leaders to incorporate support for LGBTI young people into training and coursework, e.g. training for community leaders. This approach helps to normalize the experiences of LGBTI young people. Finding ways to express stories in creative ways, through video, drama and spoken word, are useful ways in which champions can help communities ‘walk in the shoes’ of LGBTI people.

Working with families

- Participants felt that children in schools are generally more accepting of LGBTI young people and that parents often present a larger challenge, particularly those driven by faith and cultural views. They may not listen to their children, but they can be influenced by community and faith leaders.
- Participants spoke of the negative responses from parents that some LGBTI young people have encountered when coming out. This inhibits, and often prevents, young people from engaging in further conversation. Faith leaders are in a position to initiate and support conversations with families as a starting point towards acceptance. LGBTI young people need their parents to be educated and informed through supportive conversations in the community. Faith leaders have a responsibility to support families and to respond in a positive manner.
- Faith leaders can encourage families to talk and/or write about LGBTI issues and experiences and to engage in respectful dialogue.

Consistent messaging

- Participants suggested the focus should be on “small wins” and effecting gradual change. Messaging across faiths will differ; a “one size fits all” approach will not be effective.
- Participants suggested adopting gender-neutral language in relation to deities and the family unit and ensuring consistent messaging in sermons, public forums and social media. Fact sheets in pews and other public places can be useful educational supports.
- Participants reiterated the focus of messaging should be on anti-discriminatory and social justice elements of LGBTI inclusion, rather than trying to work through theological arguments. It is important that messaging consistently rejects all forms of violence, including expulsion from families and faith communities.

What can faith leaders do when they encounter a young person challenged by their sexuality? What strategies and resources are there to support their spiritual and psychological needs?

Information and training for leaders

- Participants highlighted the importance of responding positively to LGBTI young people who seek support from within faith communities. The value of listening and responding positively to young people cannot be stressed enough.
- Information and training on LGBTI issues will help leaders formulate informed responses.
- Participants suggested that some youth workers lack knowledge and confidence in responding to LGBTI young people in a spiritual or religious context. It is important to build the capacity of youth workers to respond positively rather than make automatic referrals.

Referrals to services

- One participant discussed the Uniting Church's policy to refer individuals to mental health professionals if they reach out for pastoral care. There is a universal acknowledgement within the Church that pastoral care is a supportive and protective element, however it must be accompanied by professional mental health care.
- Participants noted the limitations of faith leaders and pastoral carers in providing adequate care to young people without professional mental health training. It is crucial that leaders familiarise themselves with existing services and make responsible referrals. It is important to have referral information available for organisations skilled in supporting LGBTI youth, e.g., Minus 18, Switchboard etc.
- It is particularly important that young people are assisted to find resolution in theological issues and LGBTI identity in a sensitive, confidential space. Participants felt that the development of a register of psychologists and mental health professionals who are 'faith-literate' would be very helpful. This information could be shared through interfaith networks to assist all faith communities.

What is the role of the Victorian Government in the points above?

Leadership

- Participants highlighted the strong leadership shown by the Victorian Government. The LGBTI Multicultural Grants program has been an important symbol of acceptance to the wider community. The Minister for Multicultural Affairs has championed this issue which is viewed by participants as positive and important.
- While the majority of participants commended the Victorian Government's work to bring LGBTI issues to the fore in multicultural and faith communities, some felt it would be best served by providing a neutral space for conversations around religion, and sexual and gender identity. This would counteract the perception in some communities that the Victorian Government is taking a directive approach on LGBTI issues, for example the controversy around the Equal Opportunity Amendment (Religious Exemptions) Amendment Bill 2016.
- Participants felt that local government statements in support of LGBTI acceptance and inclusion is important. One participant cited the work of Ballarat Council in facilitating community conversations around LGBTI inclusion.
- Participants discussed the important symbolism of public events, e.g., the Orlando memorial in Federation Square. Some suggested there should be regular events in this space and funding to support public displays of solidarity.
- Support for faith leaders who are working with LGBTI young people is paramount. Participants suggested the development of a network supported by the Victorian Government that brings together religious leaders and provides them with interfaith support, noting that many leaders work in isolation and carry their advocacy "on their own shoulders". Government facilitation of a peer support network would be highly advantageous to share learning and recognise the important work of faith leaders in this space.

Increased funding for LGBTI acceptance in faith communities

- Supporting faith communities in what they are already doing to support LGBTI communities sends a very important message. Participants acknowledged the significance of the LGBTI Multicultural Grants program and suggested expanding the program to include and prioritise initiatives in faith communities.
- Some participants were supportive of the Victorian Government setting expectations around LGBTI inclusion in faith communities through the adoption of key performance indicators in funding agreements.
- Participants suggested that funding is required for training on LGBTI issues for faith leaders, lay people and staff of faith organisations (including media and PR training to help raise public awareness of issues).

- Participants felt that funding to develop multicultural and multifaith parent support groups such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) would be useful. One participant advised that multicultural communities could benefit from the support as there is a reluctance to take issues outside the family.

Sharing best practice

- Participants discussed the importance of recognising the efforts of faith communities and sharing best practice examples through interfaith and multifaith networks. There are many “unsung heroes” working with LGBTI young people; many of whom work in a voluntary capacity. Recognition of their good work is crucial in order to encourage others to follow their lead.
- Participants discussed the grants process and the importance of sharing successful outcomes and best practice stories with the wider community.

Public messaging

- Participants felt that public discussions around religion, sexuality and gender identity need to be more prevalent. The power of the equality message can counteract practices in some communities that are harmful to LGBTI people, e.g., gay conversion therapy and the practice of sending LGBTI people “back home to get married”.
- The Victorian Government has an important role in messaging and focusing on the good news. Participants discussed the importance of positive messaging around the national Safe Schools program, to counteract negative media attention.
- Participants spoke of the Victorian Government’s role in encouraging the use of symbols and visual cues that support diverse understandings of family. The use of rainbow families in media and publications is an area where government could model inclusive practice. Some participants spoke of how personally meaningful it is for them to walk into a religious organization or a health facility and see the rainbow flag on display.

Conclusion

Recent efforts by the Victorian Government to increase acceptance of LGBTI Victorians and raise awareness of the impact of discrimination and marginalised were commended by Roundtable participants. Participants were supportive of the LGBTI Multicultural Grants Program, the role of Victoria's first Gender and Sexuality Commissioner, and initiatives coordinated by DPC Equality Branch to promote inclusive practice in service delivery.

The Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division and DPC Equality Branch are committed to building on the success of the Roundtable to develop further initiatives to increase support for LGBTI people in faith communities. These will specifically focus on:

- increasing community awareness about the needs of LGBTI youth in faith communities;
- recognising current efforts by faith communities to address discrimination and promote inclusive practices;
- supporting initiatives that aim to reduce or prevent discrimination, vilification and marginalisation of LGBTI youth;
- supporting initiatives that provide safe spaces for LGBTI people to worship and explore faith and spirituality; and
- creating opportunities for interfaith support between faith leaders who work with LGBTI youth.

Messages of Support from Faith Leaders

I wanted to share with you how great it was to attend the roundtable last month. It was such a welcoming and respectful environment and great to be amongst such a diverse and passionate group of people.

Following this event it has been helpful to reflect and meet with key leaders within our own organisation to discuss similar questions discussed at the forum and begin to focus on how we welcome and show acceptance towards LGBTIQ young people and people of all ages. Since this event we have had the opportunity of supporting young gay leaders and this event has assisted us in thinking how best

Roundtable participant



This is a subject of equality that I feel most strongly about, and since I know that not all religious people see it as I do, I really want to have my strong support as a religious leader recorded.

Each of us reflect aspects of God... So whether someone feels themselves to be gay or lesbian or heterosexual or bisexual or transgender or uncertain or agender, they are reflecting aspects of God in themselves.

Great damage has been done by imposing 'society's wishes' on those who don't conform or feel comfortable to be themselves. Today, we must embrace all human beings, and encourage and support all to be free to express themselves as they wish, with the simple proviso that it does not cause harm to others."

Roundtable invitee



Thank you for inviting me to participate in this first and very important discussion on how we can better include and take care of our young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

The occasion was respectful and warm and provided a useful opportunity to learn from the work other faith leaders are doing to support young people. I look forward to future discussions to further this important work.

Roundtable participant