

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
Westminster  
London  
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15 March 2021

**Proposals to end conversion therapy risk criminalising everyday church activities**

Dear Prime Minister,

The Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest body representing the UK's two million evangelical Christians. Our membership includes more than 3,500 churches across the UK, tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations and charities. We have been contacted by a range of members expressing concern at the Government's position on conversion therapy.

We are deeply concerned at some of the practices that have been carried out which are categorised as conversion therapy, but also by the government's lack of clarity on the issue.

We recognise the role the church has sadly played historically in perpetuating stigma, discrimination and harm towards people because of their sexuality. We oppose abusive practices and the use of electro-shock treatment and corrective rape are clearly wrong and should be ended. However, such practices should already be banned or illegal and as such should be dealt with under existing policies and laws. Where such abusive practices are not illegal, we would welcome efforts to clarify or strengthen the law.

We note that the government has committed to end conversion therapy but has failed to offer a definition of it or set out clearly what is meant by this commitment. That is why, until this point, the Evangelical Alliance has not engaged publicly in this debate. However, recent high-profile campaigns and debates, including in parliament, have made it clear that many lobbying for change are seeking an expansive definition that would be highly problematic and which we could not support.<sup>1</sup> Proposals, as currently discussed, could have the consequence of restricting individual freedom and impinging on essential religious liberty - potentially criminalising Christians and common church activities. We would encourage the government to exercise caution.

It is vital in our society that individuals have significant freedom to explore and decide for themselves how their identity and practices relate to their sexuality. As a consequence, we oppose coercive practices that try to change someone's sexuality or gender identity against their will.

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<sup>1</sup>Ban Conversion Therapy definition: "Any form of counselling or persuading someone to change their sexual orientation or behaviour so as to conform with a heteronormative lifestyle or their gender identity should be illegal, no matter the reason, religious or otherwise – whatever the person's age." <https://www.banconversiontherapy.com/the-letter>

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However, this also means we defend people's freedom to choose how they respond to their sexual attraction. To be clear, this means that if someone is attracted to people of the same sex, they should be free to pursue support to help them live in a way that they choose. For evangelical Christians, the teaching of the Bible is clear that sexual activity is restricted to monogamous marriage between one man and one woman. For Christians who hold to this biblical teaching, it is essential that those who experience same sex attraction are free to pursue and receive support to help them live in accordance with their beliefs.

Proposals to end conversion therapy must not prevent people from seeking and receiving support to live chaste lives. Language that suggests a ban would cover 'suppressing' or 'repressing' sexuality would be a substantive block on supporting those that do not wish to act on their sexual attraction. Ironically, those calling for a ban are promoting policies that would discriminate against someone based on their sexuality - preventing someone who is gay from accessing counselling available to a straight person. Similar concerns have been expressed in relation to those who present with distress or confusion around gender identity. The growing number of people de-transitioning and the recent case of *Bell v Tavistock* in the High Court have only served to highlight the issue.

Proposals to end conversion therapy not only put at risk the individual freedom of people who are attracted to those of the same sex, but they also place religious freedom in jeopardy. This is not a concern restricted to specific practices, organisations or ministries that provide services to people experiencing same sex attraction – although it will affect them. This will threaten the everyday practices of churches, church leaders, and Christians across the UK. An expansive definition of conversion therapy, and a ban along such lines, would place church leaders at risk of prosecution when they preach on biblical texts relating to marriage and sexuality. It would place ministry leaders at risk of arrest for encouraging young people to maintain chastity until marriage. And it would criminalise a member of a church who prays with another member when they ask for prayer to resist temptation as they are attracted to someone of the same sex but do not wish to act on it.

We were encouraged by comments from Kemi Badenoch MP last week that "the government does not intend to prevent LGBT people from seeking spiritual support from their faith leader in the exploration of their sexual orientation."<sup>2</sup> However, those lobbying for change have challenged this statement and are lobbying for changes that would prevent Christians and those of other faiths from practicing their beliefs.

Recent interventions in the media have suggested that proponents of a ban want it to explicitly include religious or spiritual settings. This is a direct threat to religious liberty. During the passage of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, it was recognised that many religious institutions have deeply held beliefs disagreeing with marriage and sexual relationships between people of the same sex. UK and European Court of Human Rights judgments have agreed that this is a religious belief that requires recognition and protection against discrimination.

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<sup>2</sup><https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2677/documents/26594/default/>

We acknowledge the significant challenges faced by the Government and are grateful for the recognition that any policy response to conversion therapy should not stop people from receiving spiritual support. However, great care will be required to protect freedom of choice for individuals and religious liberty of churches and Christians as policies are brought forward. We need clarity on what is already currently prohibited and proper assessment to ensure there are no unintended consequences to any new legislation.

We welcome any opportunities to discuss how policy proposals will affect evangelical churches and Christians in the UK.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Lynas

UK director, Evangelical Alliance

Cc

Rt Hon Liz Truss, Minister for Women and Equalities  
Kemi Badenoch MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Government Equalities Office  
Lord Greenhalgh, Minister for Faith

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