
BRIEFING:

'Conversion therapy', charities and schools

February 2024

Introduction

The National Secular Society works to end so-called 'conversion therapy': a harmful, pseudo-medical practice promoted by some religious groups.

Conversion therapy is based on an assumption that being LGBT is a disorder that can be 'cured', or is caused by evil forces which can be 'banished' via prayer or exorcisms. These assumptions usually stem from orthodox religious teachings about sexuality and gender roles.

Conversion therapy is known by many other names, including 'reparative therapy', 'change orientated therapy', and 'conversion practices'. It can include prayer, 'laying on of hands', exorcisms, and pseudo-psychiatric 'talking therapy'. More extreme examples have entailed 'corrective rape' and electric shock aversion 'therapy'.

All reputable health and psychological organisations, including the NHS, consider conversion therapy to be ineffective, unethical and harmful.

According to the 2018 National Faith & Sexuality Survey by the Ozanne Foundation, of those respondents with experience of attempting to change their sexual orientation, well over half had suffered from mental health issues as a result. Nearly a third of those who suffered mental health issues had attempted suicide.¹

¹ ozanne.foundation/faith-sexuality-survey-2018/

² <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2021/01/new-islamic-charitys-website-says-same-sex-attraction-is-a-disease>

Conversion therapy harms society as well as individuals because it perpetuates negative attitudes towards LGBT people.

How does charity law enable 'conversion therapy'?

"It's a disease. And this disease needs to be cured." Sermon on homosexuality published by Ghamidi Centre of Islamic Communication, charity no. 1192764²

'The advancement of religion' is a recognised charitable purpose in law. This means any organisation which demonstrates it 'advances' a religion can easily register as a charity, and gain all the tax benefits and public trust which this status provides. Despite the requirement for all charities to serve a public benefit, the National Secular Society has found numerous examples of religious charities that do not appear to serve any recognisable public benefit – and many which cause harm.

"...male homosexuals descend on an 'ever increasing' path of perversion." Website of Christadelphian Advancement Trust, no. 1080393³

Sadly, too many charities registered under 'the advancement of religion' promote anti-LGBT ideology which fuels the demand for conversion therapy. People in conservative religious communities often pursue conversion therapy out of fear they will be sent to Hell,

³ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2019/11/christadelphian-charities-condoning-violence-and-promoting-misogyny>

or receive other 'divine punishment', if they fail to suppress their LGBT identity. This fear comes directly from the teachings of the institutions at the heart of these communities – many of which are registered charities.

“In Britain, the flagrant promoting of the heinous sin of sodomy puts our land in a particularly grave and solemn situation before God.” Website of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, SC003545⁴

Worse still, some charities have directly promoted or carried out conversion therapy. These include:

Core Issues Trust (registered charity no. 105095): A charity registered in Northern Ireland which advocates what it calls 'change orientated therapy'⁵ for people 'seeking to leave homosexual behaviours and feelings'. A January 2024 undercover investigation into Core Issues Trust left the investigator feeling "depressed" and "shaken". It took her three months to mentally recover⁶.

Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG, 1043985): A 2023 BBC *Panorama* exposé found evidence of this charity performing exorcisms or 'strong prayers' on children. This included a former member who said UCKG subjected him to 'strong prayers' every week for four years after he told the Church, aged 13, he was gay. He was allegedly informed his homosexuality was a result of demonic possession and shown a video in which a boy is told he would die from HIV without the Church's help⁷.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries International (MFMM, 1100416): An investigation by the *Liverpool Echo* in 2017 revealed that an MFMM church was practising an extreme form of 'conversion therapy' involving a three-day starvation programme.⁸

Winners Chapel International (1134421): In 2018, ITV News obtained video evidence of a pastor at a Winners Chapel church offering "complete mind reorientation" for gay people.⁹

⁴ <https://www.fpchurch.org.uk/publications/the-free-presbyterian-magazine/1998-to-2003/march-1999/article-heaven-provoking-legislation-199/>

⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220810032746/https://www.core-issues.org/change-oriented-therapy>

⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ban-conversion-therapy-first-person-psd5njl8q>

⁷ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2023/12/nss-investigate-charity-accused-of-exorcism-and-conversion-therapy>

Can't charity regulators stop charities promoting 'conversion therapy' and anti-LGBT hate?

Charity regulators appear unwilling or unable to penalise or deregister charities promoting conversion therapy or anti-LGBT ideology.

In 2021, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland refused to act on Core Issues Trust, saying its is "not the role of the commission to adopt a position on the charity's conduct in this matter"¹⁰.

And in 2022, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) refused to intervene on East Kilbride Christadelphian Ecclesia after the charity posted a series of viciously homophobic memes on Facebook. OSCR said the views expressed by the charity "are in accordance with their religious beliefs"¹¹.

The failure of charity regulators to hold these charities to account suggests 'the advancement of religion' charitable purpose is charities a 'free pass' to promote anti-LGBT hate and conversion therapy – under the cloak of religion.

Do faith schools contribute to the problem?

“...the Church is aware of the special problems of homosexuals and would stress in this regard the love of Jesus for all. We are all created by God and the possibility of repentance and forgiveness for sexual sins is open to all.” All Saints Catholic School and Technology College, Dagenham

Faith schools are permitted to teach relationships and sex education (RSE) according to the tenets of their faith. Because most organised religions condemn homosexuality, this allows faith schools, including those

⁸ www.liverpooecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/echo-goes-undercover-gay-cure-13468107

⁹ www.itv.com/news/2018-11-12/an-itv-news-undercover-investigation-exposes-the-uk-church-that-claims-you-dont-have-to-be-gay/

¹⁰ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2021/03/regulator-decides-not-to-act-against-conversion-therapy-charity>

¹¹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2022/06/regulator-fails-to-act-on-religious-charitys-homophobic-anti-vax-memes>

funded by the state, to teach stigmatising ideas about LGBT people.

Our research in 2018 found many examples of state-funded secondary schools that state in their RSE policies that same-sex relationships are morally wrong¹². Telling this to LGBT children may cause them to seek conversion therapy out of shame, guilt and fear.

There were even suggestions that some schools may actively 'guide' LGBT children not to act on their feelings:

“Such families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives.” St John’s Catholic Comprehensive School, Kent, quoting Pope Francis

What does the NSS recommend?

1. We agree with all reputable medical and psychological experts that conversion therapy is ineffective, harmful and unethical. **Society should work towards ending the practice.**
2. **Organisations which promote ‘conversion therapy’, or anti-LGBT ideology which fuels conversion therapy, should no longer be eligible for registered charity status.** This includes religious charities.
3. **The charitable purpose of ‘advancement of religion’ should be reviewed**, with a view to its removal from the list of charitable purposes if it enables the promotion of anti-LGBT bigotry or other harmful ideology. Religious charities which provide a genuine public benefit without causing harm can register under one of the other charitable purposes.
4. **Schools should no longer be permitted to teach stigmatising ideas about LGBT people.** This means faith schools can no longer teach that same-sex relationships are sinful.

For more information about our campaign to protect LGBT rights from religious imposition, please visit www.secularism.org.uk/lgbt.

The National Secular Society (NSS) is a non-profit organisation campaigning for the separation of religion and state, and equal respect for everyone’s human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs.

¹² <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/unsafe-sex-report-april-2018.pdf>