

Paper 14

Emergency resolution: Conversion therapy

Mission Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Discussion and decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Assembly Executive resolves: a) to support and adopt the definition of conversion therapy set out in the ‘Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK’ b) that the practice of conversion therapy is unethical and potentially harmful c) to call on all church members and ministers to refuse to offer or participate in offering conversion therapy in any form d) that no conversion therapy can take place in the name of the United Reformed Church e) to express support for proposals to ban conversion therapy, and urge that current proposals be strengthened to ensure greater protection for potential subjects of conversion therapy.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This paper seeks to enable the URC to express a view on conversion therapy and proposes that a ban on the practice should be supported.
Main points	The UK government is consulting on proposals to ban so-called conversion therapy. Religious settings are one of the contexts in which such practices are likely to take place. This resolution asks the Assembly Executive to clarify the URC position in order that an informed response may be made to the government’s consultation.
Consultation has taken place with...	Secretary for Church and Society General Secretariat.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
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External (e.g. ecumenical)	None.
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1. The UK Government is currently consulting on proposals to ban so-called ‘conversion therapy’ – sometimes called ‘reparative therapy’ or ‘gay cure therapy’ - practices which aim to change, modify or suppress a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. This emergency resolution seeks to enable the URC to express a view on conversion therapy and proposes that a comprehensive ban on the practice should be supported.
2. Religious settings are one of the contexts in which practices that could be labelled as conversion therapy are most likely to take place. There is significant evidence of how damaging this has been to some people’s lives (see, for instance, case studies cited in conversion therapy: an evidence assessment and qualitative study - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)). We therefore think it would be valuable to clarify the URC’s position on conversion therapy.
3. While there has been a lot of debate about what constitutes conversion therapy, the definition set out in the ‘Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK’ (2019) has recently been widely adopted by organisations including NHS England and the Association of Christian Counsellors. This defines conversion therapy as follows: “‘Conversion therapy’ is an umbrella term for a therapeutic approach, or any model or individual viewpoint that demonstrates an assumption that any sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently preferable to any other, and which attempts to bring about a change of sexual orientation or gender identity, or seeks to suppress an individual’s expression of sexual orientation or gender identity on that basis.”
4. It goes on to say that “the practice of conversion therapy, whether in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity, is unethical and potentially harmful.” (see www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/mou/)
5. We propose that the URC adopt this understanding of conversion therapy. Our ecumenical partners in the Methodist Church and the Church of England have adopted similar positions.
6. In the Safeguarding Policy adopted by General Assembly in 2021, the URC committed to act “to promote and protect the well-being and human rights of individuals”, including through creating and maintaining a safe and caring environment for all people, and seeking to prevent abuse in any form from occurring. We believe that any form of conversion therapy, as defined above, would run counter to these commitments.
7. In relation to the government’s current proposals, the consultation states that its “policy approach ... will not impact everyday religious practice. ... parents will remain able to raise their children with the values of their faith, and simply expressing the teachings of a religion will not constitute conversion therapy”. However, in seeking to strike a balance between religious freedom and protection of potential targets of conversion therapy, we think greater attention needs to be paid to issues of power, conditioning and consent in the context of faith formation. We therefore believe the proposals, while welcome, need strengthening.