

## I can make a change, a rose by any other name: LGBTIQ and Faith Leadership

**The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) consulted with 'less visible' faith leaders innovating within their separate faiths to provide pastoral care to people of diverse sexuality and gender in Victoria. While tensions between faith, ethnicity and sexuality have broad consequences for social cohesion, the emotional intelligence in our policy analysis matters too. Moving outside of a security framework gave these leaders the space to be themselves and share important insights.**

*"Lately all the flowers seem to be so plain",* sang the late American R&B singer songwriter Teena Marie with fellow singer Gerald Levert for their 2005 R&B song *A Rose By Any Other Name*. In a more optimistic way, they paid tribute to William Shakespeare's doomed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, a play about discrimination between rival families, faiths, and ideologies which keep two young lovers apart. A frequently performed play today, its story of ill-fated lovers, whose deaths bring together their feuding families, is as pertinent in contemporary Victoria as it was in the 1590s; or in 2005 when Marie - known as the Ivory Queen for crossing R&B's unspoken racial/musical divide – penned a lighter song inspired by a love that could not be destroyed – *in the literary sense*. Yet emotions remain conspicuously absent in policy consultations on faith, ethnicity and sexuality, and we remain restrained by the restricted effects of security narratives in multicultural policy.

It would be a failure to exclude the concept of 'love' when discussing institutions and belief systems that strive to use love, forgiveness, peace, sharing and human development to build social cohesion and well-being among all people. As policy writers and advocates, we also acknowledge that culture and emotion play a significant role in public, institutional and religious policies and rhetoric that may affect the safety of people of diverse sexuality and gender as well as the social cohesion of families and communities across Victoria.

ECCV's August, 2016 faith leaders' roundtable evolved over several months of discussions with faith and community leaders, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) community, and culturally diverse people of faith who also identify with 'diverse sexuality and gender' (DSG). The post-Orlando shooting and gay marriage debate had created conditions where consultation on multicultural DSG experiences often became ensnared between opposing media, religious, and community and government agendas.

ECCV support people of diverse sexuality and gender wanting to maintain both their faith and cultural identity without being excluded from public discussion over their faith and sexuality by both progressive and orthodox arguments. We found that this exclusion has the potential to maintain a uniformity of tone in public discussion that buries lived experiences, instead of voicing them in a healthy and respectful way. Adjusting our lens for people of multicultural diverse sexuality and gender is important if we want to hear what they have to say.

The roundtable discussion began by rejecting areas where some consultations get stuck. ECCV established our 'baseline' for policy consultation as the rejection of all forms of violence towards multicultural people of diverse sexuality and gender; as well as their expulsion from faith communities and their families based on their sexuality. It is vital to show the voices of faith leaders currently delivering genuine pastoral care under challenging faith hierarchies, sometimes at great personal cost. We found the faith leaders who attended our roundtable were generous in their frankness, humour, intellect and good will toward other faiths.

In the following conversation, roundtable participants were asked how they managed to deliver pastoral care to people of diverse sexuality and gender from diverse ethnicities and faiths who desire to remain within their faith community and practice while connected to their families. We asked them how they coped with the pressure of community criticism, institutional exclusion and stress on their decisions, and also threats to their own lives or those of their DSG congregation. Why don't they just accept the status quo and the privileges that come with their role as faith leaders in major faiths? What drives them on? What gives them strength?

Unlike previous social cohesion policy briefs, the topic and participants brought a degree of expertise and experience unique to Victoria. Therefore, this paper only, ECCV is publishing the majority of our edited transcript.

## Key Consultation Insights

### Key points

A small group of five key individuals from the Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions, and with a history of supporting diversity, met with ECCV staff to discuss two main themes.

Firstly, how they have adapted their pastoral activities to support people of diverse sexuality and gender (DSG) across all age groups within the restrictions of religious dogma and doctrine? Secondly, how those activities impact on the perceptions of individual faith leaders and other people they come in contact with. Also in attendance was a representative of Victoria Police accompanying a person under their protection.

For the purpose of this paper the full edited transcript is presented to highlight the emotional, theological and policy complexity facing faith leaders on this issue.

Participants are represented by the generic term "Faith Leader" and the names of certain ministries have been withheld. Ethnicities have also been changed.

**Faith Leader 1:** I am an Imam. I have been active as an Imam in Melbourne since 2000 just after I finished my VCE Year 12. In fact I started in year 11 and 12 at my high school. When I started at that time I had memorised two thirds of the Koran. So instantly you are pushed forward in the Imam role. I started a support group for LGBTI plus Muslims called Marhaba . We started the group in Nov 2013 and it's growing around the country and we have people even in New Zealand contacting us.

**Faith Leader 2:** What does that word mean?

**Faith Leader 1:** Marhaba means welcome.

**VicPol:** I'm not really involved in the religious life I'm here as a support person. I'm from Victoria Police. I'm with our LGBTIQ Liaison. I've been doing that role since 2008 fulltime. My role is basically to engage with the LGBTI community and show that Victoria Police is an entity where you can report as an LGBTI person and actually get a good response and so I go out and do a lot of presentations, attend community events and

promote what we do. And I also do training to support LGBTIQ Police members as well.

**Faith Leader 2:** I am a senior Rabbi. I am the fourth person to hold this office at one of Australia's oldest and largest progressive synagogues. A major part of my mission is to ensure that we remain on the leading edge of social justice and social change. We often joke about it; in fact I often speak about, cautioning our congregation not to become orthodox in our liberalism. That our parent's liberalism isn't necessarily our liberalism and we see how that changes from generation to generation.

### **A wedding by any other name**

**Faith Leader 2:** I think the part that I found most jarring was I have twice had my marriage license suspended for officiating at same sex commitment ceremonies. So someone informed a relevant government department, or complained to a government department, that I referred to that as a "wedding" and thus breached the Marriage Act and needed to do re-training. I am incredibly controlled in my language. It's part of my training and I know that I would never do such a thing, but it shows the challenge that exists within my community. How we thoroughly enjoy being left of centre, it's a very comfortable place to be, at least for us.

### **Recovering from damage**

**Faith Leader 4:** I'm a parish priest at a Melbourne church. I've been there just over 5 years. The parish has a long history of helping poor and disadvantaged people for over a hundred years. In terms of being a safe place in the Anglican Communion for gay and lesbian people, or the GLBTIQ community. It goes back about 40 plus years. In the 1980s that parish has had a significant pastoral ministry to guys who had HIV/AIDS much to the chagrin of the hierarchy of the church. Some of my people would say it gave the parish its soul.

Parishioners got trained to be carers and all that sort of thing. In a sense because that whole picture has changed so much now since I've been there it's like what is the present issue. It's somehow about recovering, as far as we can, the image of the church. For it to be a good place to be in terms of spiritual adherence and growth. A refuge from very damaging things that often comes out of the statements and mouths of some of those who hold high positions in the church-

**Faith Leader 2:** -and scripture too

**Faith Leader 4:** (laughs) - and yes, I mean it depends on which scripture you focus on. Well I'd like to talk about some of these other scriptures in which there is less of a contention and an openness which actually incorporates people instead of putting them outside. We hold a mass as part of the Midsumma Festival each year, in which I get someone to speak about the experience of faith and being gay.

In terms of my own position I decided in the early 2000s to "come out" as it were in the church. I was asked to second a motion commending study materials on homosexuality at the Diocesan Synod. I procrastinated for about a month and I thought, well, if I'm going to speak about this do I speak about it in the third person as if it doesn't affect me or do I bring some of my experiences as someone who is affected by these things. So I did that in one of those carefully calibrated speeches one gives. It was one of those occasions where I have strong memories of it. Just recently some of it has been revisited to me, with people telling me that there was a lack of enthusiasm to report that speech.

### **The desire to silence**

**Faith Leader 4:** I know and was surprised when the local Anglican newspaper reported that speech. That was interesting because behind the scenes, in institutions, there is that desire to silence, to rub out if you like. So the congregation I have is about 37% gay or lesbian self-identified which is quite large for an ordinary congregation. And one which doesn't like to emphasize not so much that it's a gay place, loosely used, but it's a place where everyone can feel welcomed. I think, to keep it out of being "the ghetto" if you like, into a community which really is authentic is a good thing. So that's who I am.

### **Our church is inclusive**

**Faith Leader 3:** I'm a Reverend from the Metropolitan Community Church in Melbourne. Our church is inclusive. It was started in America 47 years ago specifically for the GLBTIQ community and so we've always been seen as a gay church I suppose but we've always, we've never shied away from that. It's what we exist for and for the straight community as well of course. We probably have about 85% gay and 15% straight people in our church. Our church has been going for 42 years here in Melbourne.

My involvement, I've been there for eight years, and I've been the Minister there for four years. Yes, we're a bit like you, our challenge is to convince the GLBTIQ community that we Christians aren't against GLBTIQ

people (laughs) we want to be part of the GLBTI community and supportive and one of those things you mentioned before about scripture, it seems is to revisit scripture and challenge traditional teaching and also look at inclusive scripture. So that's something that we really spend a lot of time doing. Our goal is to get more involved in other sections of the GLBTI community so that we can show that in our view God's love is for everybody.

**ECCV:** Thanks everyone. There's two parts of what I thought we would chat about today. One of them is that, you all come from really different traditions, but you're all what I call 'in the field' (laughs) and within your churches there's like, a doctrine element, and you have to work with that, but I'm wondering how you work with what you're given not just in terms of the doctrine of your church; but in your daily work in terms of people coming to you for spiritual guidance, to mark the milestones in their lives. And how you help them do that in terms of the LGBTIQ community or diverse sexuality and gender. How do you handle that?

### Rites of passage

**Faith Leader 2:** For us there is an ease and a difficulty. I'll start with the ease. The predominant language of our literature is Hebrew, although we do have a certain amount of English in our worship. Hebrew is a language which has gender construct – or masculine and feminine. We had an experience that I think I shared with you, where we had to craft a baby-naming for a young girl who was born to two fathers. One was a Jewish-Australian who grew up with post Holocaust family migrants. Children of post-holocaust family migrants have a strong cultural and historical identity that comes with many of the survivors, but not really a religious identity, because the question of God in the Holocaust is multigenerational. His partner, a person of Central-African origin, didn't have a faith tradition, or a strong faith identity but had a strong connection to his African identity.

They decided to have a child. They didn't decide to have a recognition of their relationship in the form of a commitment ceremony or the like, which was really interesting. But the commitment that they made is actually very similar to inter-faith couples throughout our congregation in that we challenge people to make an identity. To make a choice as parents. What is the faith tradition that you're going to raise your child by?

This postmodern construct, I would suggest, is saying that mum's this or dad's that. We're going to give you a taste of both and allow you to make a choice when

you know. I find that very destructive. My experience with young people is that it's very confusing. I don't think that one's better than the other, but I think as parents, people are often given the choice. The responsibility to make choices for their children until they're able to make their own choices.

And so these two men came to see me and they explained that they were about to welcome a child into the world. I learnt very quickly a lot about surrogacy and about egg donation and that they had an egg donor from North America who had a similar genetic history to the Central African father. I had a surrogate from South-East Asia and a European Australian Jew as the sperm donor. The child gets born dealing with the various legislative issues that are required to bring that child into this country which is another whole issue. Not the subject of our conversation today. They came to see me and I asked if their intention was to raise their child within the Jewish context, within the Jewish community. The Jewish family, and the Jewish extended family, which is the stronger immediate family is more supportive. And so they wanted us to officiate at a rite of passage.

That's easy. Our tradition says this is how we welcome boys, how we welcome girls. Thankfully in 2016 we are looking at ways of matching those welcomes so that there's no gender focus or a gender priority. My biggest issue was language. There is no Hebrew word to describe "her fathers". It is impossible in the laws of Hebrew grammar to conjugate the words "her fathers". Because one has 'a father'. We can do 'her parents', but that's a different word to fathers.

And what resulted from that was a series of conversations with an institute which exists in modern day Israel, which is the Institute for the Hebrew language and they try to figure out how to make up new words. The great example was they had to figure out what the Hebrew word for computer was and so it is a conjugation of the word "thinking". It is a 'passive thinker'. That's the Hebrew word for a computer designed by a committee.

They gave me a rule on conjugation of "her fathers" and I got to write a piece of liturgy using Hebrew conjugation which I don't think the world has seen before. I'm sure that our colleagues have done this elsewhere in the world. Most of them probably would have just used the word "parent". But I felt that wasn't celebrating the uniqueness of this child and their story. Here's a child that has been brought into the community by her fathers and will be raised by her

fathers. That needed to be liturgically celebrated. An interesting challenge.

And that being said, you know, someone who has been sitting in the pews for over 60 years came up to me after services and said that she “didn’t really understand what happened there.... Where was the mum? And I explained to her “the mums” were watching because we stream our service live. One was in North America and one in South-East Asia. So we had an egg donor and a surrogate, both international. All four participating, whether physically present or digitally present in the naming ceremony.

### **The best sleep in 8 years**

**ECCV:** Has anyone else got a similar story or just an experience of how they adapt?

**Faith Leader 1:** Well it’s a bit different from what he just said, but what I found challenging within the Muslim faith is to provide a platform for the LGBTI community generally, to provide a platform has been challenging but very fulfilling at the same time. One example I remember I do pastoral care at the hospital and Tuesday, one morning, I arrived and we did the handover and my boss said that there was an elderly couple that came on Monday looking for me. Naturally I asked are they patients? No. Do they have any relatives in the hospital who are patients? No.

Do they know me? No. Anyway I started my rounds and I was at a ward visiting a patient and my boss called me on the mobile and said the couple are here waiting for you. So I went there and it was an interesting experience. They talked about two children, two sons that they had. And the father was talking about the younger one. One was 38 years old and other was 33. And they asked for a copy of the Koran. Heavy Egyptian accent so I thought they may ask for a Arabic Koran and they said no, we want an English one. A very odd experience but something I felt, with the eldest son, nothing that they said but I just had this feeling that the son was gay. The eldest son.

Anyway they left. They came Wednesday again I did the rounds, the father came this time. And it was one of the most emotional days of my life because he came, the father, on his own on Wednesday and he said brother do you have time? So we went to the park and we sat there for about an hour and a half and he was talking about his business and cars and I said is there something you want to tell me. And he started becoming very emotional. This is a man who is probably my father’s age and in his 70s, very

emotional. He said oh my son he’s gay. So they found out apparently that their son was gay eight years before and they just blocked him out.

The eldest son. I said give him a call. What’s the worst thing can happen after eight years, he is going to tell you where to go or he says I’m a father for you, you’ll be there. So he said I would like to do it with my wife. And the wife came, they lived just around the corner from the park, and they were sitting outside with me in this cafeteria and they called the son and they were on the phone for about 45 minutes on the speaker.

This elderly Egyptian couple were crying, loudly, people walking past. And I didn’t understand what they were saying they were talking in their language. So it took for whatever reason. They probably heard my story they heard about the group and it was interesting for me it stayed with them, they came Monday, Tuesday Wednesday, just to have that healing with their own child, and I went back and they arranged to meet with him on the weekend and he was coming to visit them and I went back to my boss and said, tonight it will be the best sleep these parents will have in eight years’ time.

### **Get a girl from the village**

**Faith Leader 1:** The opposition from the leadership has been there from the beginning but it has not deterred me. Providing the platform has been easy just by being there. So that’s what I found. It has been challenging from a community perspective but from a community perspective it has been very fulfilling. The story of this elderly couple and their son. The youth especially who have issues with mental health and self-harm, addiction or some that reject the faith because of family pressures or the ones that get married.

I was talking to this young chap, Lebanese, whose father found out that he was in a gay relationship 12 years ago and he said I will fix this and the solution was to go to Lebanon to get a girl from the village and he was telling me that he has to take a pill. I said what do you mean, I don’t understand? And he said sexually he is leading this double life with two children and a wife but the control is so [strong]. I said you have locked four people including yourself in this jail. But he said what I can do, father owns the house that he’s living in, he opened a kebab shop in his town, so the financial control is difficult to break away from.

**ECCV1:** Thank you for those stories. We come across those stories. Very emotionally moved by that story myself I don’t know why. I don’t know why I’m so moved by that one. We hear a lot of stories in general

in migrant communities where parents and guardians and older siblings are challenged by really confronting things by younger people in the family and some adults and the solution tends to be, in multicultural communities, send them back home to get married back there, and that somehow covers everything and sometimes they send them away for support and they never ever hear from them again. Heavens knows where it leads to.

**ECCV:** Cutting people off is something in all the faiths isn't it? I think that's one of the things we're trying to raise. We're starting at that level. We're not trying to be overly ambitious, but to get agreement from everyone that violence is really bad and we don't begin a conversation unless you repudiate it. And also that everyone can agree that cutting off your loved ones is a really bad thing to do. Even from an orthodox point of view.

**Faith Leader 2:** I think everyone can agree on that.

**ECCV:** I think there's uncertainty about that in what I call the big four banks, you know, in the religions. And the perception isn't that and so we're exploring that.

**ECCV2:** You mentioned that financial control was quite extreme in that case, and they had children. What's it like for the girl? The Lebanese girl who came over, what's her life like?

**Faith Leader 1:** I speak with this guy almost on a daily business at night time. And sometimes the mentality frustrates me. One of the things he said was, I'm waiting for her to initiate the discussion to go our separate ways. Now that I found a bit frustrating because this is a young girl who was taken out of her village in Lebanon. She came out here with two kids. It's just to re-educate the people. I haven't spoken to his wife but I try to make him question some of the ideas that he has about what a family is and the injustice that is being done even at home because, he said, even the kids know. I said of course. Children, I have a daughter, and children are very smart they know when something is not quite right at home. The damage that this does by him, one of my friends at Latrobe University, she calls the damage that this type of parent relations does to a child, interference. She says the damage is like being involved in a severe car accident where you have to go through rehab, but children cope and it always manifests as they grow if it's not addressed.

### **Gender fluidity is complex**

**ECCV:** The other half of the rites of passage is how you negotiate your relationships in terms of your job, your

vocation. How you manage yourself in that hierarchy and the relationships there. And how challenging it is for you personally to be there for these people to give pastoral care. Your personal feelings.

**Faith Leader 2:** I sometimes struggle with how to be an effective support, particularly for young people who are identifying as "gender fluid". The names that people refer to in a religious context is as a son or daughter of their parents. Or if they choose the faith there is the son and daughter of Abraham and Sarah. When we can't refer to them in that way, the effort to be egalitarian is horribly compromised and they appear different and we amplify that difference in language, which very unintentionally can be painful. So for me it's not that all of our bathrooms in the entire building are gender friendly, we took care of those operational things, those value based statements of operational logistics as early as we could. The women of the congregation loved it because it just opened up more bathrooms. *(Everyone laughs)*

We have a member of our community who had a bar mitzvah, the coming of age of a man at age 13. Do we redo a certificate? Do we redo a ritual? Do we do a naming ritual that celebrates her true self? I'm interested in recognizing her true and whole self. We don't have a solution and I just pray that we're not doing any harm to anyone. There are so many possibilities of them being harmed in that process.

**Faith Leader 4:** And part of that is because a lot of people have great difficulty with ambiguity or fluidity. We want it to be seen in one sense, some clarity and for some people it isn't clear, and allowing a scope for that to take its form.

**ECCV:** There seems to be more awareness in the media about young people with gender fluidity. I'm so surprised by the number of stories that I'm seeing on television. And they're talking to the parents and so there is an awareness that there wasn't before.

**Faith Leader 2:** We have an independent school with 800 students, kindergarten to year 12. We had to rewrite our uniform policy for when we have students who are in transition and one day they're in another. Which day do they get the detention on? Because wearing a school uniform properly is still a school value and even in this very remarkably liberal community we're struggling knowing what the just, right, Godly thing to do is. My senior school administrator is coming to me and saying Rabbi, I feel like we've got to give someone a detention at some point *(general laughter)*. It's crazy at the tram stop. They're right, from their perspective, in terms of

school pride which is an important value, respecting oneself. Those are important values.

### **You're not welcome. You're not worthy**

**Faith Leader 4:** I don't know. I would imagine there would be the same sort of issues but I'm not in that field so I can't really comment. I want to shift focus a little. The main issue I face is around extreme hurt; about the upholding of certain so called teachings or dogmatic positions which are said to come from scripture is an enormous pain. My frustration in a sense, with the hierarchy, is that they don't see the damage that is done to people, by the constant repeating of those things saying, you're not welcome, you're not welcome, you're not worthy. That seeps into the soul very deeply. If I ever write a book called 'The Crap Things People Say', (*general laughter*) then 'time heals all wounds' would be one of them.

**ECCV1:** Do you find when that happens to younger people that, well, that when it happens to them in their youth it seems to damage them? When you're young it seems to really, really, the hurt stays with young people when they have a really bad experience.

**Faith Leader 4:** Yes, and they'll give up on it very quickly. In my experience in the years I've been in my parish, I've had a number of people who have reconnected with the church. Well if I put my theological hat on, God has drawn them back to a relationship in there, and it's often that they've had this negative relationship in the past where they've actually given up on it. But it doesn't go away. That faith doesn't go away but it's been very damaged. And the healing process I think is long and we have to be patient in that healing process. Even I who am reasonably intelligent and reasonably at peace with it all, if those things are said, I still get upset. It's the wounds that are in there.

It's also how we can actually speak 'out of that' [pain]. Sometimes it's very painful and sometimes we can really engage at a level where it's a source of considerable strength and authenticity. I'm just acknowledging it still happens with older people because I had a cleric say to me, I'm not going to say anything in the public sphere because it could be bad for young people. But there are also older people, because you hear these things again and again. You have to, people say you ignore it and it goes away. I'm not so sure. You have to put out a new-

### **Scriptures and homosexuality**

**Faith Leader 4:** - a new narrative and that's where, you said something about the scripture. I'm always asked

to engage on the basis of five bloody texts. Hold on. From a Christian perspective, you can say, well that's not where I'm going to start. I'm going to start with Jesus Christ. Of course there may also be tensions about some of those texts from the Hebrew scriptures-

**Faith Leader 2:** -absolutely

**Faith Leader 4:** -that's where I start. It's not just that he [Jesus] didn't say anything, but, there are deeper things from a faith perspective. That's where we start being drawn into relationship and it's got nothing to do with, you know, their gender and homosexuality as a term, it is so recent. (*everyone nods*)

**Faith Leader 2:** I think there are also, for me there are number of different audiences. I look at people who have experienced a life of institutional rejection. Who see our entity as the representation of institutional rejection and then develop a vitriol. An antagonistic vitriol towards that which we have been, which is not necessarily that which we are.

**Faith Leader 4:** -yes

**Faith Leader 2:** -it's often the loudest opponents from within the gay community that are in the most pain, and are in the most need of our pastoral and spiritual support but haven't yet arrived at a place where they are prepared to have that conversation. The challenge is to be open and to be welcoming and provide that caring ear which is sometimes very difficult because the vitriol is – horrible. I really look forward to a time when we can have that conversation. Our Pride Shabbat is a good start but it's not enough – it is still seen by too many as token.

**ECCV1:** It's interesting what you brought up. It's the issue of tokenism, you see because you're involved in the real issues, the real community that becomes tokenistic. It's a bit like in the ethnic and multicultural community, all that sort of diversity stuff when actually people are not getting jobs and that.

**Faith Leader 2:** We don't have an openly gay religious leader in this entire country

**ECCV1:** -because?

**Faith Leader 2:** Because they have either never applied to be here, or have never been hired. It is a bit of a case of the chicken and the egg as Rabbi's are hired and fired by their congregations and sent out from headquarters.

## Gender equality is overdue

**Faith Leader 2:** I just don't think we have got to this point yet. We're only 27 years into having female Rabbis in Australia whereas Regina Jonas was ordained in Germany in 1935. I suspect conservative Melbourne is still playing catch up and we've got some way to go. We definitely need to make a public statement about the fact that we're welcoming. That being said, I also don't want to suggest we introduce affirmative action.

**ECCV1:** So that's the opposite of tokenism?

**Faith Leader 2:** But there's a perception of tokenism. Someone walks in. One thing to have the rainbow flag on the door as a sign to say, come on in. Just a sticker below the door is a strong, powerful statement. That's a different thing to them seeing someone in the pews or to see someone leading the service.

**ECCV1:** That would be the ultimate to have someone leading the service.

**Faith Leader 1:** I had a box outside for people who wanted to ask questions they were uncomfortable to ask face to face so I would arrive earlier to just read through the questions. One morning when I was sitting in the office going through these questions, this man, who was a scientist, came to the office and said brother I want to take my daughter overseas to India to get her circumcised – or 'FGM'. A close relative went through this and what it does to a young girl is terrible, and this man was sitting across from me and wanted me to bless him and pray for him. So I said I'm not in fact going to pray for you or bless you. I'm going to report you if you take this action and I said, regardless I'm going to report you. He was very defensive and got angry. But you know to ascribe it to a scriptural perspective or to justify it based on scripture; you have that extreme as well when it comes to female issues.

**ECCV:** If you could pick some of the adjectives to describe the type of opposition to what you want to do within your faiths, what would be some of the adjectives that you would use. So, even though if you're a gay accepting church, there must be some barriers you could describe?

**Faith Leader 3:** The biggest barrier for us is the Orthodox Christian Church. They treat us, as in gay people, in a hateful manner. And so you're trying to reach out to our community and say, why should we listen to you because you treat us appallingly, because most Christian churches just do.

**ECCV:** In what circumstances then, would you be reaching out to those mainstream churches or

orthodox churches? Could you describe some situations where you would do that?

**Faith Leader 3:** There's actually a group called BRAVE, which is very apt because the people within Brave go into churches that we know are very anti-GLBTI. Very antagonistic toward our community and they will actually form relationships with people in that congregation as openly gay people to try and- that's the only way we can show churches that we are serious about our faith, that we are practising Christians if you like, but we are also gay - that we are no different. The only way is to have the relationship.

**ECCV:** Are they put at risk? By having the word Brave, obviously there is a perception that there is something you have to be brave about.

**Faith Leader 3:** Well you do.

**ECCV:** What are those things?

**Faith Leader 3:** There's not really, these days, a concern about physical violence for us, but there certainly is a lot of abuse. You have to be very strong emotionally. You have to have a very strong support system so that you go away and not feel that you're less of a person than the person you've spoken to that is saying that you are less of a person.

**ECCV:** When you say abuse what does that mean?

**Faith Leader 3:** People just telling us, as we've said, over and over again, you can't be gay and Christian, you can't be so therefore, you can't have a relationship with God because God doesn't love you as a gay person.

## The double whammy in the gay community

**Faith Leader 4:** And you know it's like a *double whammy* because, from some in the gay community, you get kicked around because you're 'selling out', by ascribing to Christianity because it's done so much damage. Then they cite these terrible things. I was shown the door by one guy who said 'how can you possibly live with that.' As you were saying about the vitriol, and its every bit as damaging and we're doing it to our own, or however you want to say it.

**Faith Leader 3:** Yes. I mean we sort of joke in our church you have to come out as Christian people to gay people and you have to come out as gay people to Christian people. You're in a minority in a minority and you have to be incredibly strong in your faith to continue.

## A funeral in a gay pub for a Muslim boy

**ECCV:** I know you have formed a support group with Muslim LGBTIQ. Listening to how they describe the form of threat or abuse, is that the same in a Muslim faith context, do people feel that abuse? How would you describe that?

**Faith Leader 1:** Well, an Orthodox Muslim solution to be lesbian, gay, transgender is death – that is your repentance. I had heard of two young Muslim boys [in Sydney] that were HIV positive and were rejected, ostracised by their family, and community, and went on a destructive path of drug addiction so eventually they died. No mosque would do the final funeral services for them. So I went for that reason and one of the two boys who died his partner was Catholic but went through trauma from the Catholic Church as well. He said, look, I went there, I did the proceedings funeral the washing and so forth. He said we want to have a funeral service, and he decided to have it at a gay pub and I said, ‘look I’ll come.’

I walked in there and there were about 200 people in there and it was an event exclusive just for this young person. I asked everyone to hold hands, and 200 people formed this circle and we prayed together and we mentioned the names of and also some of the good things that they had experienced from this young person. Interestingly this partner came and said, look, he was emotional as he said, this is the first time God has touched me. So I thought to myself and I hear this quite often in my community as well, youth coming and saying you have given us hope. I’m thinking, what was going on before?

The damage, the trauma that is experienced from an Islamic perspective is irreversible. I’m finding ways of managing it but it is irreversible.

## Carrying the burden for change

**ECCV:** Do you think there’s a willingness within the Muslim faith leadership to try to learn how to speak about this better?

**Faith Leader 1:** Well I’m very excited about our times, although if you look around the world and it’s depressing at times. Sometimes I don’t want to watch TV. There is this new discussion going on at the ICV – that’s the Islamic Council of Victoria - about the LGBT issue and there is this event and it’s promising because it had to take for Orlando to happen in order for this type of discussion to take place.

I’m happy that the discussion is going on, but I am focusing my energy elsewhere which is the group and

finding support networks for youth to transition safely. You know, the discussion and debates I mean, I know some [religious leaders] who won’t pass by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot. They won’t go past it. For me, I just don’t have the energy anymore to have such discussions.

**Faith Leader 2:** I think, and I don’t know what your relationship is to your orthodox faith traditions but few orthodox colleagues of mine in Australia will even sit on the same panel as me, let alone discuss these issues. For them, my practise is not a conventional expression of Judaism. I have become something other’.

**ECCV:** You pay a very personal price for having these principles.

**Faith Leader 2:** I don’t consider them a price (*laughs*). Our God, collectively, will resolve it with him later (*everyone laughs*). It doesn’t affect me and my life. So if given the opportunity to sit on a panel like that, which wouldn’t happen, they probably wouldn’t do it. They may perhaps invite one of my lay leaders.

People talking is really, really important, and there’s a very broad spectrum in terms of this conversation. Because I’m there in the things I’m trying to actively engage in daily, means that these people don’t always want to talk. So then I need to take myself out of it, and create space for them to have that conversation. Some people get a lot of media if nobody expects it of people ‘right of centre’. I think that there are individuals that have benefited from that and we have to celebrate that.

**ECCV:** We have the last 10 minutes and we can run a bit over that but I thought, one of the other learnings is that I met you all and I thought, wow, these are amazing people. I hadn’t done a lot with faith, I’m a lapsed Catholic, as well..., but then it was great meeting you all, and I remembered I came back after seeing you all and said to my boss, you know, “faith leaders, faith leaders”, what the hell’s a faith leader? (*Everyone laughs loudly*).

In your work, you’re all constantly innovating, constantly applying amazing skills like your theological understandings. I feel you all are perhaps more advanced than anything I have read from your respective faith communities on this issue because you’re thinking on the run, and the implications are for real people’s lives. That’s very significant. So for the last few minutes what do you feel you need personally to keep on the path that you’ve chosen, emotionally, financially, physically, spiritually, politically?

**Faith Leader 4:** I'm jumping in. I'm particularly grateful to meet the other faith groups. Being on the edge, I kind of put myself more on the edge, not being part of the hierarchies. I used to be part of all these councils and committees and have given all that the flick, progressively, but occasionally I will write to the Archbishop.

And so I get very animated and upset about things which is very interesting. Anyway, I've worked through all that (*general laughter*). Anyway, I wrote to the Archbishop because they wanted some conscience vote, over conducting same sex marriage, and he thanked me for my letter. In it I said, you're really not speaking for all of us. Some of us, our conscience would say the exact opposite and we are still Bible-believing. That's one of the terms that is thrown around by the 'reactionary Christians', rather than 'orthodox', because I think I would be orthodox as well. Not in the sense of you know - (*Everyone laughs*)

**Faith Leader 2:** I've started using the term fundamentalist which sometimes terrifies people (*Everyone laughs loudly*).

**Faith Leader 4:** Because there are certain matters where I can be conservative as well. So that's being conservative in a positive thing rather than a reactionary way. But anyway, language is such a complex thing. This has been very encouraging today-

**Faith Leader 3:** -yes

**Faith Leader 4:** -because in a sense, each of us are leaders, but we're not the ones with the lights around us.

**ECCV1:** It was interesting what you said about being conservative. Who's the real conservative?

**Faith Leader 4:** Well exactly. Well I mean I think some of that, drawing us back to reconciliation between the child and parents, for example, is a conservative thing because, you know, its bringing you know, [God] back into relationships.

### Physical safety in the digital world

**Faith Leader 2:** Our issue is unique and unfortunate. Our biggest issue is actually physical safety. We, as a liberal welcoming faith institution, are regrettably the most vulnerable target within the Jewish community. We are a target to those who see Judaism as a threat or concern for the modern world and because we are so diverse, or have more ready access to our community and our facilities. Because of the positions that we take we are the victims of a certain amount of 360 degree vitriol in terms of the digital world.

**ECCV:** I know you get trolling.

**Faith Leader 2:** I have some real big fans (*laughs*). It's a real problem for me. You briefly used the story of one of your team and I don't know the story, but it's a real problem for me that we turn people away at the door because you can't even get into my synagogue without a security clearance which requires intervention from Victoria Police.

**ECCV:** Really?

**Faith Leader 2:** Yes and that obstacle is just so difficult for people to get over. That gets in the way of really good work-

**ECCV1:** -of compassion, and it should be about compassion.

**Faith Leader 2:** But I can't change it. I can't say open the doors and come on in. I see my wife as a great example. She no longer opens the mail at home. We have to be careful into not crossing the line to be, you know, stupid in our faith.

**ECCV1:** Are people aware of John Spong, and his interpretation of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lott and that sort of thing, which is a more reasonable, more realistic interpretation? (*Everyone nods*)

**ECCV:** I'm not but that's ok (*General laughter*)

**Faith Leader 2:** I had a young person interpret the Leviticus text at his bar mitzvah, where he made a great case for supporting same sex marriage. Because he placed the text within its entire context and he outlined it as being a discussion about the concept of what is a just and unjust war, and that one of the most definitive ways to subjugate a defeated soldier is to force them into a sexual act in the same way you would-

**ECCV1:** -it is the ultimate humiliation and domination-

**Faith Leader 2:** -it is the ultimate and that forceful act, that forceful act, is the antithesis of what is seen as rightful and just action and then she turns around and says, it has nothing to do with a living relationship. It has nothing to do with two people, with intimacy. It has nothing to do with God's love and blessing of those things. And I just sat there and watched a very young person engage in an extraordinary form of exogenesis.

**ECCV1:** And that is what is being condemned in those scriptures. It's that violence that's being condemned in scripture, not the gay relationship. They've overlaid that.

**Faith Leader 2:** My great enjoyment studying in Middle America. When you're driving across the American plains, and you drive across the water and you see chapter and verse, I just don't have your gift. I don't know my chapters and my verses. So when they put their chapters and verses up suddenly my wife's sitting next to me trying to get it on Google: what's that? (*Everybody laughs*). Because we're not supposed to take these texts out of context. I can open today's newspaper and pick random lines and verse that'll tell me to hate anyone.

**ECCV1:** And when it came to Jesus, I don't recall that Jesus ever had a position on this. It wasn't even an issue.

**Faith Leader 4:** Of course not. No, and I think because it's not there, it is not the crux of that, what is there about it in any case. It's about bringing any one of the people he encountered into a relationship with him and therefore, The Father. That's what it's all about. It ain't about, do you measure up. Are you this moral person oh let me check, oh height right, what colour right, you know the usual thing, who's in, who's out. Who's got it. Who hasn't? Which I think is a mockery of where God kind of really relates to us, which is in the mess and where we're all confused. Hurt. And unfortunately a lot of the debate in relation to people of faith, in the public sphere, is that kind of shrivelled version of what it's about. Shrivelled down to a hard line position.

### **A new generation can make the change**

**Faith Leader 2:** The biggest difference we found was stopping to refer to deity, to 'genderise' deity. It's a perfect translation of the traditional text and when God is translated as "the Eternal" rather than as "the Lord", with Lord being a very masculine term, when God is used rather than "He", than "he said" it's far more effective and you begin, yes I know it'll take forty years, for the people who use slavery in Egypt to die. And a new generation to rise up. We have to start somewhere else. It's literally just the beginning and that's the very big change. We find ourselves stumbling over our own language, even the most well-intentioned of us. And language can be destructive. It can blow people up and pull them down-

**Faith Leader 4:** -and very quickly. That's another one of those things for my book. Sticks and stones will never harm me is actually not always true. Words will always matter.

**ECCV:** I'll be bringing this meeting to a close now. Thank you everyone for this interesting discussion.

## **Future Directions**

ECCV advocates the following:

- Open forums and public comment on respectful public recognition on faith and sexuality.
- Condemnation of hate and vitriol against people for either their diverse sexuality and gender or their faith practice.
- Safe spaces for LGBTI people to worship, to work and to socialise together.
- Recognise the success stories for Safe Schools.
- Recognise positive stories about rites of passage in spirituality.
- Recognise current efforts by faith communities to address discrimination and to increase gender equity and diversity in their congregations.
- Create opportunities for inter-faith support between faith leaders with experience in delivering pastoral care for culturally diverse LGBTIQ people.

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### **About ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs**

ECCV is the peak advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria and consults with communities when their voices are not heard in the policy process. ECCV's social cohesion policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on social cohesion issues. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members, leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We post our briefs online within three weeks. The briefs are a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 42 years of consultation with multicultural Victorians.

To receive future ECCV Social Cohesion Policy Briefs please subscribe by emailing [eccv@eccv.org.au](mailto:eccv@eccv.org.au) with the subject 'Subscribe to Social Cohesion PB'.

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