

Standing up for religious freedom

Across all areas of society, Catholics run organisations with an open and inclusive commitment to all people in their care.

Our excellence in the provision of services including education is recognised by many – evident in the large numbers of students attending Catholic schools and educational institutions.

What makes these schools unique and distinct is the holistic way faith is taught – as a coherent body of teachings, permeating all aspects of life. Our faith is taught not just in the few hours of religious education classes each week, but is part of the very make-up and fabric of each school.

Unfortunately, in yet another move to restrict religious freedom, the Victorian Government is seeking to change the current approach, which is working well.

Currently, Catholic organisations, including our schools can freely hire those who share our religious beliefs, values and ethos. Incredibly, the Victorian Government has introduced legislation seeking to change this. If it passes, the *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021* will affect religious organisations all across Victoria, who will be limited in their ability to employ staff, run their schools and provide other services that adhere to their faith, values and ethos.

Strangely, other organisations like political parties will not have the same restrictions placed on them. In other words, the Government will impose on the staffing of faith organisations but not on the staffing of political organisations. Why the imbalance?

Under the new legislation, religious bodies and educational institutes will no longer be able to employ staff who hold the same religious beliefs and values unless they can prove that it is an 'inherent requirement' of the job. The Government has given the example that in a school, the only roles where religious beliefs might be an 'inherent requirement' of the job include positions of senior leadership (e.g., a principal) or religious education teachers. However, what the Government fails to understand is that faith is holistic, it affects the way we see the world and conduct our lives. Just as we don't live our faith for only a couple of hours on Sunday while we attend Mass, nor do teachers and staff in our schools teach and pass on the faith only through set religious education classes. Likewise, it is entirely reasonable and fair that religious bodies should be able to preference those who share their beliefs and values in their own private employment matters.

In a healthy pluralist democracy, the role or importance of faith in a faith-based organisation cannot be relegated to a bureaucrat or a secular court. This is another sad example of religious faith and the freedom of religious organisations being unfairly targeted.

As people of faith, it is our right and responsibility to make our views known about this matter.

The *Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021* is currently before our Parliament and will be debated before Christmas. I encourage all people of faith and goodwill, to stand up for religious freedom and ask our parliamentarians to oppose the Bill, particularly the introduction of an 'inherent requirement' test.

How to stand up for religious freedom

1. Contact your local Members of Parliament in Victoria

Writing to Members of Parliament (MPs) is an effective way to communicate with them about this Bill. A short letter (emailed or mailed) respectfully expressing concerns with the legislation will help them understand what is important to people of faith.

Each Victorian has one MP representing their local **district** and six MPs who represent their wider **region**. If you're unsure who to write to, you can find out which district/region you are part of and the contact details of the MPs representing you here: www.parliament.vic.gov.au/about/electorates

2. Contact your federal Members of Parliament

Writing to federal Members of Parliament to tell them about what is happening here in Victoria is also vitally important, because religious freedom legislation is potentially being considered on a federal level. You can write to them to share your concern and ask them to act to protect the religious freedom of all Australians.

Each Victorian has one local MP representing their geographic **area** and twelve Senators who represent their **state**.

Details of your local federal Member of Parliament can be found here: www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Members Simply scroll down to 'Search Members' and type in your postcode to find your MP.

Details of Victorian Senators can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3BNVYAI>

3. Share your concerns with others

You are also encouraged to tell your family, friends and those in your local community about your concerns and ask them to become active too.

4. Get active on social media

You may also like to become active on social media – particularly by sharing your concerns with your Members of Parliament via their social media pages.