



Additional questions – Ms Sheryl Sarkoezy, Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW

1. Referring to your evidence in the middle of page 45 of Hansard you said “ ... our congregation members do express those sorts of concerns about the way they engage in the workplace and about the way they engage with their employer, about what they are required to wear or about what their employer might expect them to say or do about different issues that come up in our society.”, without identifying any particular individuals, can you elaborate on this statement?

Dear Elaine

Thank you for your email, and for the Committee's request to elaborate on a comment that I made when giving evidence on 6 November.

My statement in evidence was that congregation members have expressed concerns about the way they engage in the workplace. These concerns are about how they engage with their employer regarding what they might be required to wear, about what they might be expected to say or do about different issues that come up in our society.

In elaborating, I can offer a few examples that are typical of the concerns that we hear from congregation members in the Presbyterian Church in NSW regarding engagement in the workplace, and in schools. I would suggest that these concerns are shared by members of other Christian denominations.

1. A worker was asked to sign a new contract that included a provision that the worker felt was, in effect, a requirement to affirm same-sex marriage. The worker was more than willing to work with people in same-sex relationships, and with people who affirm same-sex marriage, and to obey the requirements of anti-discrimination legislation. But he did not want to be forced to affirm same-sex marriage, or to be denied the opportunity to speak about a Christian understanding of marriage. Further, he feared that if he did not sign the new contract he would lose his job. The worker sought counsel from his pastor, and also from a solicitor. The worker was able to resolve the matter with his employer, but nevertheless experienced a period of stress that seems unreasonable.

2. A worker is employed for an organisation that regularly has morning tea events to celebrate community events or to support various causes. He didn't want to attend a morning tea to celebrate the Gay Mardi Gras in Sydney, because he felt that would conflict with his religious beliefs about sexuality and marriage. But he was worried that if he didn't attend he would be overlooked when it comes to inclusion on special projects, or when it comes to promotion in the organisation. He attended the event, and remained silent on his beliefs, but is now concerned that his coworkers will think he is someone who is willing to compromise his ethics.

3. A young employee was expected to attend a work function where the theme was to be dressed in drag. He didn't want to dress in drag because of his understanding of what the Bible teaches about how men and women should present themselves in public. But he was worried about the impact on his future career if he refused to dress up, or if he declined to attend. Would he be marked as a "Christian wowser", and be excluded from future social events, or be overlooked for career development? The young man did attend the event, but refused to dress in drag. He feels compromised for attending, but also feels he had no real choice in the matter.

4. A young Christian woman believes, as a matter of ethics informed by the Bible, that abortion is wrong. She shared her views with her co-workers at a social event. Since then she has been openly laughed at for holding this view, both in the workplace and at work social events. She expects to be excluded from future workplace conversations about matters of ethics.

5. A teenage girl brought home a note about her school's Wear It Purple Day events. The note communicated the school's expectation that the students would all wear purple clothing instead of school uniform, and also that they participate in WIPD activities during class time. The student did not want to participate in these events, and didn't want to wear purple to school, because it was in conflict with her Christian views about sexuality. She feared that if she wore school uniform (the only alternative to wearing purple) she would be singled out by the other students, and some staff, as

being an uncooperative and “hateful” person. The student chose not to attend school on WIPD, and has since moved to a different school.

These are real-life examples of experiences that are not unusual for Christians in the workplace, or Christian students who attend State schools. Christians look at cases in the news (for example, the Folau case) and wonder if that could be them, should they speak openly about their Christian views on matters of ethics. Many of them feel they must remain silent, and those who do speak up know that they may be at risk of adverse treatment from employers and co-workers. The “safety-net” of employment law may well exist, but the cost is often perceived as too great.

The proposed legislation on religious freedom will go a long way to remedying this situation.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to respond in more detail to the Committee’s questions.

Warm regards

Sheryl Sarkoezy