

Leaders bat for ACT parents

■ Marilyn Rodrigues

CHRISTIAN LEADERS in the ACT have defended the rights of parents, warning that a ban on so-called conversion therapy in the territory would also come with serious consequences for children and health providers.

The Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Christopher Prowse, and the Anglican Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Mark Short, led a delegation representing Christian churches and schools at a meeting with key staffers from the ACT chief minister's office on 21 August to discuss their concerns regarding the Sexuality and Gender Identity Conversion Practices Bill 2020.

Chief among them is the distinct possibility the bill will infringe on the rights and autonomy of parents in seeking treatment options for children experiencing gender dysphoria, and also possibly limit the kinds of care that long-respected health and welfare providers can offer.

They warned the proposed law is a "rushed and defective" legislative response to the suffering experienced by many young people experi-



Speaking up for parents: Archbishop Christopher Prowse of Canberra-Goulburn.

encing gender dysphoria and their families.

The extreme bill, if passed, would make it an offence to provide counselling or therapy that has the purpose of changing or suppressing an individual's stated gender identity or sexual orientation.

However it means a parent, guardian, teacher, or mental health professional who at-

tempted a cautious approach to a child's desire to transition such as counselling, psychotherapy, evaluation of other health or social issues or waiting until puberty has passed before assisting him or her to change gender would be charged and risk a fine of up to \$24,000, 12 months' imprisonment or both.

"The irony is that children

are legally not permitted to be tattooed, buy cigarettes or alcohol, drive a car, gamble, have elective surgery without adult consent and so on, yet this proposed legislation would legally permit under 18-year-olds to pursue radical means of gender transitioning free from parental control," wrote the archbishop in a letter to Chief Minister Andrew

Barr following the meeting. Not only does it potentially add to the suffering of young people experiencing gender confusion, it would also severely curtail parental rights as well as potentially hinder the ability of faith-based organisations to support families and individuals in need, he added.

The church leaders agreed that the dignity of young people considering gender transitioning "is to be respected at all times".

However, the Church "stands alongside the growing numbers of professionals from the medical and psychological sciences who are voicing grave concerns about the proposed legislation" the archbishop wrote.

The archdiocese's vicar general Father Tony Percy told *The Catholic Weekly* that there were grey areas in the bill which need to be clarified, including the definition of a conversion practice.

"This bill offers protection for those who help young people to transition but nothing to those who are saying 'watch and wait,' he said.

"This is such a big decision and it's a serious problem."

A growing number of

young people experiencing gender dysphoria are seeking treatment at gender clinics including puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and even surgical procedures.

In June Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt asked his state and territory counterparts to review the approach of gender clinics, and ensure there was "strong and balanced counselling and safeguards" for children under 18 seeking treatment.

His call came after more than 70 health and medical practitioners wrote to him asking him to inquire into more cautious alternatives to hormonal and surgical pathways.

This month Queensland passed a ban on 'conversion therapy' which will see a health practitioner that does not encourage or affirm a person's decision to undergo a gender transition or pursue same-sex sexual activity face penalties of up to 18 months in prison.

Announcing the move the state's deputy premier and health minister Steven Miles said "an ideology that treats LGBTIQ people as broken or damaged has no place in our community".