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Dear Sir or Madam,

To answer the question, “Could the Act’s operation and effectiveness be improved? If so, how?” I submit the following concerns.

While the protection of individuals from coercion and genuine harm is essential, the current operation of this Act has already produced serious consequences for fundamental freedoms. Any move to expand investigation or enforcement powers would further erode freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of speech in Victoria.

The Act, as it stands, creates legal uncertainty for ordinary people of faith. Practices such as voluntary prayer, pastoral counselling, and the teaching of traditional Christian beliefs regarding gender and sexuality are now surrounded by ambiguity and fear. Even when conversations are consensual and sought by the individual, many faith leaders and parents feel legally exposed.

This is not a theoretical concern. The chilling effect is real. Faith communities are increasingly hesitant to provide spiritual guidance, not because they wish to cause harm, but because the boundaries of lawful expression are unclear.

If the Act’s operation and effectiveness are to be improved, this must include clear and explicit protections that

- Safeguard voluntary prayer and pastoral conversations between consenting adults
- Protect the right of parents to raise and counsel their children in accordance with their faith convictions
- Ensure that religious leaders can teach and preach sincerely held beliefs without fear of investigation where no coercion or harm exists
- Clearly distinguish between abusive coercive conduct and consensual religious guidance

Without these protections, the Act risks punishing belief itself rather than preventing harm. That would represent a serious departure from Australia’s longstanding commitment to pluralism and democratic freedom.

Improvement should not mean broader enforcement. It should mean clearer limits, stronger safeguards for lawful religious expression, and a firm commitment to protecting both vulnerable individuals and fundamental freedoms.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

