Submission to:

Senate Standing Committee on Legal & Constitutional Affairs

on the

Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012

Graham Douglas-Meyer

Dear Senators,

I am a 49 year-old man who is very happy to have survived to this age.

On a number of occasions, throughout the last 39 years, I have been in the position of either contemplating or taking action to take my own life.

This may sound dramatic. However, this is the inevitable outcome of the considerable torment both internal and external that I have experienced over these years. The cause of this torment was not of my own initiation; I never did anything that would either cause, or initiate such treatment. Instead, this persecution arose simply because I existed.

There were no adults, or authorities I could turn to, to be able to seek assistance, or solace. When I did actually confide in someone I was raised to trust I received either scorn, or was palmed off with a platitude requiring me to either "Man-up," or to simply "accept that it was my lot in life."

I was brought up in a "good" Irish Catholic home. I took part in my faith community as a regular reader in church and as an altar server; both from the age of 11. I would always take myself to church, even on Sundays when the rest of my family did not attend. I grew up thoroughly indoctrinated by my faith and the Catholic traditions of my forebears.

Arriving in Australia in 1973, at the age of 10 ½ I had always maintained a good group of friends and for the most part, like any other child, I enjoyed going to school.

However, upon enrolling at Lynwood Primary School in February 1974 my world was shattered. Coming from England and with my family up bringing I was a well-mannered and

well-spoken child. As a result I became the target of abuse by the more "goonish" members of my peer group. From that day I was labeled as "Poofter Kid." I'd never encountered the term to this point and when I finally found out what it meant I was both mortified and felt shame for the first time in my young life.

The bullying changed very quickly from verbal to physical abuse. Any other student who dared to attempt friendship with me swiftly became a target of the very same bullies and in most cases their voices joined the chorus of abusers. I was a social outcast, the isolation caused teachers to cast me as a loner; a lone-wolf; they were either blind to, or simply chose to ignore, what was happening before their very eyes.

As a Christian I took this to be my cross to bear in life and I prayed for those who abused me. However, over time this also became wearing. The original goons, who were a year older than I was, moved on to the local high school. But, the damage to my reputation and social standing was already done and even the following year the bullying continued.

Upon arrival at High school the original tormentors were ready and waiting to continue their campaign of vilification, slander and defamation. Their audience had increased because the school had drawn from a number of feeder schools. What should have been my opportunity to expand my social network, was perverted by the now growing group of thugs, who used their brawn to ensure that; anyone who showed any interest in making my acquaintance was brow beaten, or physically threatened, should they initially reject these idiots.

When the move to change schools, in Geraldton, came I was thrown from the frying pan into the fire. The boy that the principal chose, to orient into the school, was himself the victim of the same kind of abuse that I had faced in my previous school. That year was a horror that eventually saw me being sexually abused by another bully under the supervision of a female teacher who simply chose to ignore what was happening.

It was during these sensitive teen years that I discovered that I was oriented sexually to my own sex. I had no attraction, whatsoever, to the opposite sex. With my background and with the torment that I had received and continued to receive over the following years I grew in shame and to despise whom I was. I could find no solace; I fought against my orientation at every turn and eventually turned to thoughts of and then acting out those suicidal ideations.

After leaving school the physical abuse ceased, for some time. Upon entering the workforce I discovered a much bigger world than the school environment permits many young people to envisage. I still discovered that there was one part of who I was that needed to remain hidden. A part of me that even I despised still. I spent the next 10 -15 years in different programmes and courses to try and "heal" my sexuality. I was led to believe that I had something seriously wrong with me. I was still socially unacceptable.

Needless to say that I was never healed, it is impossible to change something that is as intrinsic to your being as eye, hair, or skin colour; or, as in my case my sexuality. Until I came to my own personal place of acceptance I was unable to move forward; hamstrung by a false set of limitations that need never have been there in the first place.

I gained a degree in Communication and Cultural studies; majoring in English and Literature and eventually trained as a High School Teacher. Even in the process of attaining my teaching qualification, through Notre Dame Australia I faced prejudice and discrimination, whilst on practicum, from the supervising teacher, who was more interested in the fact that I wore a

coat, scarf and hat while on duty, during the middle of winter; than in my teaching ability (which, she acknowledged to my university supervisors, she could not fault.) I was neither open, nor overt, about my sexuality; choosing to keep my private life private. The university ensured that I was well treated and placed me in a much safer place to finish my practicum.

When I eventually entered the teaching workforce, the following year, I was placed in a small country town and chose to ensure that my privacy be maintained. Unfortunately when you are forced into cramped shared accommodation the keeping of secrets is eventually futile. Yet, even though my sexuality was not generally a topic of discussion assumptions were made and used against me. Statements made by my supervisor and his wife (also teaching at the same school) to discredit me, were eventually, proved to be fraudulent and both of them were removed from service.

One of the biggest problems at that time was the inappropriate law governing gay teachers at that time, in WA. Many GLBTI teachers lived in fear of being "found-out" and run out of town, or out of a school.

I faced a further 6 years of persecution from either deputy principals, or for the most part Heads of Department (HOD) who were prejudiced against Gay people. In my final year teaching I faced a constructed dismissal by a HOD who would phone me up at home to tell me "You know people are talking about you!" speculation around my suspected HIV status was, in his mind, the topic de jour. The fact that I had recently received a positive diagnosis and was working through that, as well as my full teaching load, even though I had not disclosed to anyone; created sufficient stress and its subsequent effects on my overall mental and physical health to the point that I was brought before the department's doctor and informed that if I didn't disclose, what was wrong with me, there would be no further assistance and that refusal would require me to resign.

This seven-year period provided it's own opportunities to contemplate and once again required great strength and courage to stop me from acting out suicidal impulses.

This history is important for you as a Senate committee to know, before you decide on your recommendations to the government about the proposed Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012. Even though there have been changes to Federal laws that should protect GLBTI people and also HIV positive people from discrimination many people face similar acts of discrimination as well as violent acts of both verbal and physical vilification every day in this country; particularly our youth, who at the most vulnerable stage of their lives are dependent on at least someone, if not the government, to provided them with protections for simply being who they are.

Sexuality and Health status should never be acceptable grounds for someone to deny someone a job if they have all of the qualifications and experience required. In the case of religious institutions, unless a person is giving religious instruction, particularly if they are the most qualified for the position, their sexuality should not be permitted to be a barrier to employment.

It should not be acceptable for organisations like the ACL and their followers to peddle in half-truths and outright lies about GLBTI people and expect to be able to do that with impunity. We don't accept that kind of activity on the basis of race and should therefore not accept it on the basis of sexuality, or HIV status.

If we want a better Australia then we need the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012 to provide protection against unjustifiable acts of discrimination and vilification that includes sexuality.

Kind regards
Graham Douglas-Meyer