

The furore surrounding Wallabies star Israel Folau may spark a renewed battle over the freedom of religious beliefs, according to a leading public relations and crisis communications strategist.

Managing Director of Mercer PR, Lyall Mercer, who deals with many faith-based organisations and churches across Australia and internationally, says Christian leaders are very concerned about the social activism of major companies and the wider ramifications this may have.

“Christian organisations feel the goalposts have moved since the same sex marriage (SSM) vote and that the right of Christians to express their faith and take a position they believe to be biblical, is under threat.”

Mr Mercer said that while Folau’s response to a question on social media was “unwise” and offensive to some, it reflected a core doctrine that is taught by churches across the world.

“What Israel said is not remarkable given almost all sexual acts outside of marriage between a man and a woman are considered a sin based on the interpretation of scripture by many churches, notwithstanding that some Christians today have a different view of homosexuality.”

He said many Christians and church leaders, if asked the same question that was put to Folau, would have given the same answer, and therein lies the challenge.

“Churches, ministries and faith-based organisations are watching corporate Australia starting to aggressively rally behind causes and issues and threatening to withhold funding, and they see this as an unacceptable attack on religious freedom and the beliefs Christians have held for thousands of years.

Mercer PR has seen a significant increase in Christian organisations wanting crisis communications planning advice since the start of the SSM debate.

“They are fearful that there will soon be pressure on churches to stop teaching some of their traditional doctrines, or threats of funding cuts to Christian schools and charities because they adhere to traditional and mainstream Christian beliefs.”

Companies should also be careful, according to Mr Mercer, because of the polarising effect of social activism.

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