

House Passes Hate Crimes Bill

✖ **April 30, 2009** – A federal hate crimes bill that some Christian leaders fear will criminalize preaching against homosexuality passed in the U.S. House Wednesday by a 249-175 vote.

H.R. 1913, or the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, adds sexual orientation, gender and gender identity to the list of classes protected under federal hate crimes law. Currently, race, religion, color and national origin are the only protected classes. The House bill would also provide federal assistance to states and local jurisdictions to prosecute hate crimes.

Groups such as the American Family Association and Focus on the Family Action already are urging action against the Senate version of the bill, which Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., introduced on Tuesday.

While condemning violence against homosexuals, Christian leaders said the hate crimes bill would inhibit pastors from condemning homosexual behavior. They point to hate crime laws in England, Sweden and Canada, where Christians have been prosecuted for calling homosexuality sinful.

“Ultimately, a pastor’s sermon concerning religious beliefs and teachings on homosexuality and gender-confused behaviors could be considered to cause violence and will be punished or at least investigated,” Andrea Lafferty, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), said in an e-mail alert issued while the bill was still being considered by the House Judiciary Committee.

“Once the legal framework is in place, political pressure will be placed on prosecutors to investigate pastors or other

religious leaders who quote the Bible or express their long-held beliefs on the morality and appropriateness of homosexuality and other sexual behaviors," she added.

Although bill supporters said the measure criminalizes only violence against homosexuals, Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, who opposed the measure, agreed that the legislation could infringe on religious freedom.

"This unconstitutional bill aims to protect new classes of people based on 'gender identity' and 'sexual orientation,'" King said in a statement before the vote. "These are classifications of people that are based on their inner feelings-their thoughts. Punishing 'thought crimes' will infringe on freedom of speech and religious expression, rights endowed to all Americans in the Constitution."

TVC and other pro-family groups urged Christians to call their representatives and lobby against the bill. However, several conservative Christian leaders on Wednesday announced their support for the bill, saying it was moral and necessary.

"I would think that the followers of Jesus would be first in line to protect any group from hate crimes," said Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter, who is on the 25-member advisory council of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. "He was the one who intervened against religious violence aimed at the woman caught in the act of adultery. He protected her while not condoning her behavior. This bill protects both the rights of conservative religious people to voice passionately their interpretations of their Scriptures and protects their fellow citizens from physical attack. I strongly endorse this bill."

Hunter's view was echoed by Christian leaders such as David P. Gushee, professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University;

the Rev. Derrick Harkins, pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; and Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a Christian social justice organization.