

Former Gays Join in Spiritual Fight to Help Put Down Toxic California Bill

Churches and ministries across California are rising up to fight a state bill that would limit how they minister to people who are struggling with same-sex attraction.

For Christian ministries, it's a battle for freedom of conscience and religious liberty. For the bill's supporters, it's a way to protect consumers.

AB2943 considers sexual orientation change efforts to be harmful and fraudulent. It outlaws advertising for such efforts and any business transaction that seeks to change sexual orientation, including behavior and gender expression.

This dramatic move could not only ban counseling but also church conferences and ministry events where a nominal fee is charged. It also outlaws efforts to simply reduce sexual or romantic attraction towards individuals of the same sex.

Perhaps those most concerned about the bill are those who have struggled with same-sex attraction and found freedom in Christ.

Ken Williams and Elizabeth Woning minister at Bethel Church in Redding, California. They describe themselves as "once gay" and know personally that change is possible.

Williams fought a desire for men and his own depression for 20 years. For him, counseling and books on change were invaluable.

"I would never have made it without the ability to go find a counselor that was going to tell me, 'Hey, Jesus cares about this issue,'" he remembers.

Today, the two lead Equipped to Love, a ministry that helps those struggling with their sexuality to find redemption and wholeness in the gospel. Both Williams and Woning see a person's identity in Christ as the key to their sexual struggles.

"I try to get their focus off 'OK, change my sexual desire,'" says Williams, "because I don't feel like I have control over that. Neither do they feel that they have control over that. But what we do know is always available is the presence of the Lord."

Woning says those struggling with homosexuality often experience much pain and shame around the confusion they feel. She believes those who seek the Lord often begin to understand why they experience a desire for the same sex.

"The Lord's able to highlight, 'ok, these are the main reasons why you're attracted or why you have this response,'" she says, 'and it's the desire behind the desire. The sexual desire is not the thing. We have sexualized something that's underneath that and that's where the therapy comes in,'" she explains.

The Impact on Ministry

Both Williams and Woning believe AB2943 has the potential to upend their ministry and others that in any way charge to help people with sexual orientation. They are fighting for the freedom to offer counseling, church conferences and books and other materials to those seeking change.

"We couldn't sit by and watch life and freedom and joy being taken away from a very important people group in society," says Williams. "Jesus died for everybody and He certainly died for those who are in pain."

The Impact on Christian Education

At William Jessup University, a Christian college outside of

Sacramento, president John Jackson also opposes AB2943.

"We have psychology classes. We have biblical counseling classes. We have regular conversations about human sexuality, about sexual orientation," says Jackson. "This bill as currently written might prohibit the sale of books and resources, might actually prevent coursework that addresses these issues because students pay tuition."

The bill's sponsor, California Assemblyman Evan Low (D-Silicon Valley), was unavailable for an on-camera interview with CBN News. He has said publicly that the bill "does not ban Bibles nor does it ban the basic sales of books." However, broad language in the bill referring to "goods or services" indicates otherwise.

The Motivation Behind the Bill

Low serves as chair of the California Legislative LGBT Caucus and says he's motivated by the pain and suffering experienced by those who've gone to counseling in an effort to change their sexual orientation. "This legislation finally creates accountability for those who claim to provide therapy but are in fact peddling an unfounded and destructive practice," he said.

However, there's no conclusive research that proves or disproves the effectiveness of therapy in changing sexual orientation. Some research has shown that people can change their orientation but also that they're not always able to do this.

In the California legislature, lawmakers are moving quickly to pass AB2943. The assembly passed it last month and the state senate is now considering it.

California lawmakers have pushed against religious liberty for years. In 2016, they tried to pass a bill that would have stripped financial aid from students attending Christian

colleges with traditional views on sexuality.

Pastors Respond

Now, with this latest bill, the church appears to be waking up. Five hundred ministers have organized against it and 100 traveled to Sacramento last week. Bishop Ed Smith came from Zoe Christian Fellowship in Whittier. He says his church regularly ministers to those seeking to move away from same-sex attraction.

“Our approach is teaching the Word,” he said. “If they want more personal counseling there’s professionals we can refer them to, that help them in those areas. This bill would limit us from doing that.”

State senator Mike Morrell says he’s never seen so many pastors in the Capitol. “For me this is an encouragement,” he said. “It leads me to believe God is on the move. He hasn’t forgotten California nor has He given up on California.”

“I’m really happy that the church is beginning to say, ‘We have a voice, we have an opportunity,’” Jackson says. “We want to speak life. We want to speak hope.”

If the bill becomes law, Jackson and others are ready to fight it. For Williams and Woning, it could mean the beginning of a very different era.

“Therapy is not a problem for the Lord,” Woning says. “If it gets banned He moves on. He’s going to bring freedom one way or the other. The question for me really is how much of a squeeze is secular culture going to put on the church? How invasive can they be?”

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