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FOREIGN MISSION TO T&T TO ‘COMBAT ACCEPTANCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY’ BOOSTS LOCAL WORK ON SEXUAL RIGHTS

Evangelical Christian groups from the US helped Ugandans draft a stunning piece of legislation that became international news last year – it set the death penalty for certain homosexual acts, and jail for family members for not turning in gay people. Now an American anti-gay Christian ministry, His Way Out, has begun similar evangelizing and training work in the Caribbean. They are hoping to spread a gospel to young people and those responsible for their care that they can pray away young people’s sexual orientation and make them “ex-gays”.

They’ve set their sights on Trinidad & Tobago for an October 22nd to 29th visit because “it is time to combat what seems to be a growing acceptance of homosexuality in Trinidad”, according to their website www.hiswayout.com.

CAISO, Trinidad & Tobago’s Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation, takes credit. “We’re the story why they’re coming here. We’re as flattered as we are troubled,” said Luke Sinnette, a social worker with Friends for Life, a 14-year-old NGO in the coalition. “Over the brief year of our existence, CAISO and our nation’s leaders, like the Chief Justice and Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar, have helped forge this promising nation-building conversation about how people, whatever their sexual orientation, are included in the rights and protections of citizenship. That’s a democratic, progressive vision we should be proud of as a nation, and reject crazy foreigners coming to sow prejudice or intolerance in the hearts of young citizens.”

Children’s Authority board member Maria Dillon-Remy, a paediatrician who is medical director of the Scarborough Hospital, and gastroenterologist Judith Henry-Porter are among local professionals who have invited Phillip Lee, 60-year-old director of His Way Out Ministries (HWOM) to speak to young people in schools and to those responsible for counselling them medically and spiritually.

“Each and every venue...planned has been and continues to be promoted under the banner of Sexual Health”, the group’s website says. Lee, a gay man who says he led a lavishly sexual life in the 1970s and 80s, offers penitent abstinence, prayer and the promise of conversion to vulnerable young people wrestling with their sexual identity and those who care about them. This message is inconsistent with current medical and psychological science on sexual orientation. The group is scheduled to present what is billed as a three-hour “factual” “sexual health seminar” at Naparima Girls High School on October 23rd, hold other youth-targeted activities at St. George’s College and the University of the West Indies, make a visit to Tobago, and conduct a number of religious and press activities.

In keeping with their practice elsewhere of visible meetings with state officials, they have announced a meeting October 25th with Louis LeeSing, Mayor of Port of Spain.

“We value the fact we live in an open society,” said 20-year-old Brandon O’Brien, “so our goal isn’t to shut them or their odd ideas out. But, as young people, we want to make sure their toxic gospel doesn’t go unanswered. And that people understand the harm that their message does to young people’s healthy development.” O’Brien and other young people, with the support of the

National Youth Council, organized and participated in a televised debate on sexual orientation and rights this August at the Malick Youth Facility. He and a group of friends who have taken on the role of being “allies” to gay and lesbian people are organizing other young people to head to the HWOM sexual health seminar Saturday “to share alternative, local views about inclusion and what young people need for our healthy sexual development”. O’Brien called attention to a series of recent suicides of teenagers in the US in response to anti-gay bullying, as well as a depraved attack by young people on gay men in New York. “This is happening in their own country. They couldn’t be more out of timing. They are coming to bring that for us.”

CAISO has written a slew of national and school officials they see as “gatekeeper[s] responsible for the health and development of young people in a nation we all belong to, and are committed to building”, urging that young people be ensured HWOM’s messages under the framework of “sexual health” are accurate and don’t “undermine HFLE [health and family life education] standards and our national HIV-related goals to mitigate stigma and discrimination” or the “painstaking partnerships we have forged with faith communities in moving forward” these goals. The coalition, which has advocated with the US Embassy to improve the accuracy of the information on sexual orientation in the US State Department’s annual human rights reports, has also drawn the attention of the Embassy to the visit as a form of “US export of homophobia”.

But CAISO also believes the visit has already had positive consequences for its work. “Threats to our values of inclusion and non-discrimination by groups like His Way Out can actually help advance our work,” said Colin Robinson, who signed the letter to officials. “Let’s start with the fact that anti-gay people are bringing a gay man to a country that has an immigration law banning him. It helps demonstrate the hypocrisy and irrelevance of the law, and I hope His Way Out’s local hosts and everyone he meets with will join us in calling for its repeal.”

Robinson also pointed out that several mainstream organizations have used the visit as an opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to healthy sexual development, free from shame and stigma, for young people of all sexual orientations, and plan to strengthen their work educating young people and their parents. “We can look forward to the Family Planning Association, and international public health groups taking welcome new steps to educate the public, even during HWOM’s visit. And we’ve strengthened our relationships with groups like ASPIRE that have been fighting this fight for so long. But, most of all, the visit has helped recruit young adults as new volunteers for CAISO, including some amazing young heterosexuals who are outraged, and committed to working harder to defend gay people from abuse.”

“We are writing you because we were once young people struggling mightily with sexual feelings and identities within ourselves that the world around us told us were condemned and pathological...surrounded by adults who did us harm every day,” CAISO’s letter to Ministers Anil Roberts, Tim Gopeesingh and Therese Baptiste-Cornelis, among others, reads. “The pathway for most of us to mental health and a productive adulthood at peace with our sexual orientation or gender identity often involved validation by an important adult who told us we were good and valuable and worthy – or one who stepped in and protected us from someone else’s abuse. We are appealing to you to be one of those important adults for Trinidad & Tobago’s young people in the coming weeks.”

Background information: <http://wp.me/pzQIW-Dpa>