

Christian homophobes are spreading their hate in South Africa

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Christina Engela writes from South Africa

The fundamentalist assault on equality, tolerance and Constitutional protection of human rights in South Africa comes mainly from evangelical churches based in this country, but which often have close ties to local and foreign church groups or societies which share a common intolerant fundamentalist view on matters such as abortion, gay rights and theocracy.

Prime examples of such hate groups in South Africa are Christian Action Network, which is based in Cape Town and whose figurehead, "Dr" Peter Hammond, is involved with radical US religious right groups such as the ICCP (International Church Council Project), which consists of a main committee, and smaller committees which include foreign leaders of churches from around the world. The ICCP is tied into the US Religious Right through its leaders.

The International Church Council Project (ICCP) An American body replete with names like Dr. Jay Grimstead, D.Min., Found. Dir. Coalition on Revival, Dr. R.J. Rushdoony, Ph.D., President, Council of Chalcedon on its board (now deceased and replaced by his son) - along with Peter Hammond of CAN in little old South Africa. These people are leading figures in what is known as the "Great Commission Church Movement" This shows me that the US Religious Right has been pulling the puppet strings right here in South Africa for at least 20 years now.

Closer examination of this group's website shows that it has "targeted" 80 countries around the world to "transform" into evangelical Christian theonomies. Noting that Uganda is on its list and the state of the country - and those around it which are also on the list, I think they are achieving their goals.

The scary part for me is that South Africa is on their list too.

The Christian Action Network has worked closely with political parties such as the ACDP (African Christian Democratic Party) which has vehemently opposed gay rights since its founding in 1993 and the decriminalization of homosexuality in South Africa. In fact, the CAN and ACDP have consistently attacked the human rights and civil rights and dignity of the pink community at every available opportunity and also actively campaigned against every single struggle for equality here, ranging from discrimination against blood donors to adoption and marriage equality. These groups have often supported each other very closely, as evidenced by their newsletters and articles. In fact, even by its Election Manifesto, it is clear that the ACDP intends to campaign to change the SA Constitution to remove marriage equality - at the very least.

Although the ACDP is small, it holds 3 seats in Parliament, having lost half its seats in the 2009 election - but many of its religious policies are aligned directly with the conservative "moral regeneration" drive which the ANC is adopting. Even if they have no real political clout on their own, they can throw their weight behind conservative policies and help sway the balance towards

conservative decision making.

Closely associated to CAN and the ACDP, is the pastor Erroll Naidoo from "His People" Church in Greenpoint, Cape Town, and who is listed as an editor at the CAN's fundamentalist Christian magazine "Joy!" along with Hammond, and who now heads up a US religious right clone body called the "Family Policy Institute", which receives support from the Family Research Council in the USA. FPI's mission statement is "objective of making the restoration of marriage and the family the cornerstone of South African social policy". Naidoo has for years been advocating his "Christian" hatred of the pink community in speeches, sermons, newsletters and press releases - many made as a representative of CAN or one of its affiliates.

His favorite target in the past decade have been Pride festivals and marches - most notably the Pink Loerie Mardi Gras in Knysna, about which he has spread numerous distortions such as claims of "exploitation of children" and "public sex-acts" and applied pressure to the town municipality to get the annual event banned. Indeed, Naidoo's rants and antics in the press have become an expected feature of the build-up to the event, with people in attendance waiting to see what will happen next.

In his newsletters and even in the "Joy!" magazine, Naidoo reports on his travels to the USA to meet with his mentors at the Family Research Council (Sept 2008). He also sends out regular newsletters to his supporters to ask for funding and continue creating the impression that this country is under threat from "evil" and forces that seek to oppress the "persecuted church", along the lines of the liturgy expressed by Peter Hammond.

Naidoo and the FPI are currently engaged in fighting the proposed legislation that will legalize prostitution for the term of the World Cup soccer series in South Africa, and to institute harsher laws on sex-workers. I have no doubt in my mind that once this matter is settled, they will focus on the issue of gay rights again. The FPI is situated near the Parliament building in Cape Town and features a "Parliament Watch" function to keep "Christians" posted on matters which supposedly "affect them".

The FPI states one of its goals is the "restoration" of marriage on the lines of their faith - along with ensuring freedom of religion. At the same time, this is a paradox as their assault on marriage equality is entirely faith based and therefore detrimental to the religious freedom of others. The FPI is a very, very political body, as evidenced by its newsletters, with its attention focused firmly on promoting and entrenching fundamentalist ideology in politics and government, constantly trying to meet with and influence government officials and politicians.

Tied to the Family Research Council is its former stable-mate - Focus on the Family, which has offices in Durban, and which pushes the "ex-gay" industry here, having presented "Love Won Out" courses in Durban and Johannesburg and promoting other affiliate programs such as "the Truth Project", "No Apologies" and abstinence-only HIV "education". Recently, Rob Parsons, the leader of the UK branch of FOTF visited South Africa to speak on "the family", and James Dobson is still heard daily on community radio stations, despite protests from people who do not wish to listen to a bigot even if he isn't speaking on gay rights.

If one examines the structure and history of groups such as Christian Action Network, which ties together so many groups and churches in a largely informal support network - it is obvious how this rise in fundamentalism has taken place. Over the years, evangelicals have visited South Africa, often on invitation, and pushed their agendas here. As in Uganda, they have sent assistance in the form of "missionaries" and "church planting" to literally "transform" the way people think and feel - and as you may know, Uganda also changed what was a fairly liberal

constitution to bow to fundamentalist pressure.

Another fundamentalist gaining popularity in South Africa is Angus Buchan, a Zimbabwean ex-patriot farmer who regularly preaches to crowds of thousands, mainly straight white males and who hammers a very evangelical religious and patriarchal agenda. He is also critical of gay rights and pushes the belief that homosexuality is a sin, dangerous and can be "prayed away". He is frighteningly popular with evangelicals here, popularly known as "Oom Angus" (or "Uncle Angus"). He hosts "Mighty Men" weekends on his potato farm, wrote a book several years ago which was made into a movie called "Faith Like Potatoes" and is known to critics as "the Potato Prophet".

Buchan's conservative patriarchal message has found a fan in another evangelical network in SA, namely the Africa Enterprise of Michael Cassidy, who was a leading figure in the battle to oppose marriage equality in 2005-6, along with Erroll Naidoo. Cassidy is tied into several anti human rights initiatives, such as NIRSA, SACLA, which declared war on the gay community to "reclaim marriage" after the landmark ruling.

Co-leader of the SACLA, group with Michael Cassidy, was Methodist Bishop Mvume Dandala, who was also head of the AACC in Uganda until last year when he stood for Presidential Candidate for ANC breakaway party COPE in last year's elections. During his considerable time in Uganda he is on record for making many statements on HIV treatment - but never once for speaking out on the rampant homophobia and prejudice in that country. The pink community opposed his selection because of this factor, and also because as a clergyman entering a high political office, he threatened the separation of church and state. He still represents COPE in Parliament.

Then there is the Rhema cult. It is what is being called today a "super-church" which brings in millions in earnings a year, and its charismatic leader - pastor Ray Mccauley, appears on Rhema's own TV channel and is quoted by many other Christians who are seemingly unperturbed by his hypocrisy and bigotry.

He is currently leading a group called NILC (National Interfaith Leaders Coalition) also called "Zuma's God Squad" alluding to the support it receives from the President and the ANC. This group recently made headlines for laying out its plans to "revive morality" in the country and to remove gay rights from the Constitution. Zuma himself has been reported in the media in 2006 for calling gay marriage "a disgrace to the nation and to God" and of course, just prior to the elections which won him the presidency last year, he was in the Rhema cult delivering a speech in which he invited conservatives to "come talk to the government" about things that bother them, such as marriage equality and abortion.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT INFLUENCING GOVERNMENT

The NILC contains as leading members no less than 4 ANC MP's, including the ANC Chief Whip of Parliament. The NILC was slated recently for issuing emails from government addresses, and for making use of government resources such as offices - and the ANC and NILC regularly post joint press releases on "moral" issues. The SA Council of Churches (SACC) for many years the established religious representative body in SA, recently expressed concern that it has been replaced without any consultation, by the NILC.

Living in South Africa, it is clear to me that the religious right is slowly mobilizing and gaining momentum and has its eyes focused on the SA Constitution. People in key posts in the SA Human Rights Council, Constitutional Court and in numerous other public posts are being "redeployed". There is a growing fear that the underpinnings of the Constitution are being chipped away.

Newspapers are speculating whether the President has been rewarding his cadres for supporting his rise to power, by placing them in key posts, but personally I am concerned that this may facilitate changes to the Constitution in line with "moral regeneration" policies.

Let's not forget SA's refusal to sign the UN Declaration to Decriminalize Homosexuality in December 2008 and its complete failure to condemn the Ugandan Bill currently threatening to impose death on millions of GLBTI Ugandans.

This week it was announced that Jon Qwelane, a homophobic journalist and supporter of President Zuma, is to be the new SA Ambassador to Uganda. Qwelane is still facing charges in the Equality Court for an article from 2008 in which he attacked the pink community and encouraged politicians to rewrite the Constitution to remove gay rights, calling the need for these rights "ridiculous". What the government was thinking in appointing such a person as ambassador to a country contemplating instituting state-sponsored genocide against the pink community, only they will know.

Coupled with apparent apathy in the pink community and disinterest in politics, this makes the threat of fundamentalists in the political arena that much more real and potent. Many people in the community are not even aware which political parties are pro gay rights, or that there are in fact any parties which are pro gay rights. When they hear about moves made by conservatives, the most noticeable reaction is shock, followed by an expression of disinterest in politics. Those willing to pay attention and to get involved in defending the human and civil rights of their own community are definitely in the minority - which in my personal view is a recipe for disaster. "