

Social Issues

Anti-Change Agents

By Matt Kaufman

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When Ken Williams was 17, he felt suicidal. He was plagued by homosexual desires that he didn't want and which conflicted with his Christian faith.

Now, 31 years later, Williams has a wife and four children. He's a pastor at Bethel Church in Redding, Calif. He's also co-leader of Equipped to Love, a ministry to help take people from sexual brokenness to wholeness.



"I'm very fulfilled in life," Williams says. "I've experienced the Gospel changing me in dramatic ways—in ways you're not 'supposed' to be able to change."

But under a bill that nearly became law this summer—and may be back next year in some form—ministries like Equipped to Love could be effectively shut down in California.

Assembly Bill 2943 sought to amend the state's Consumer Legal Remedies Act, which outlaws "unfair or deceptive acts or practices," by adding "sexual orientation change efforts" (SOCE) to the list. That means "any practices that seek to change an individual's sexual orientation. This includes efforts to change behaviors or gender expressions, or to eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attractions or feelings toward individuals of the same sex."

The proposed law would have come into play whenever a financial transaction was involved, however small. It could be a fee for a counselor, of course. Or to attend a conference, or to pay a speaker. Or a lot of things.

"It put an aggrieved plaintiff—someone with an ax to grind—in the driver's seat to go after counselors, religious organizations and ministries," says Matt Sharp, senior counsel at the Alliance Defending Freedom. "That's a scary proposition. It means the law could be as broad as someone can convince a judge to make it."

But the fundamental problem wasn't the breadth of the bill, Sharp stresses. It's the principle.

"AB 2943 essentially tells all Californians that certain counseling goals are now off-limits," he says. "That's what this boils down to: The state taking away the freedom of individuals to pursue their personal life choices."

AB 2943 came within a hair of passage, winning strong support at every stage of the legislative process.

But in a move that stunned the faith community, on Aug. 31—the last day of the legislative session—lead sponsor Evan Low unexpectedly pulled the bill.

"I knew this was an emotionally charged issue, so I spent the past few months traveling up and down the state meeting with a wide variety of faith leaders," he wrote in a statement released on his website. "I was heartened by the conversations.

"With a hopeful eye toward the future, I share with you that, despite the support the bill received in the Assembly and Senate, I will not be sending AB 2943 to the governor this year."

Williams was amazed.

"We are so grateful that Assemblyman Low heard the concerns of the once-gay community and of California pastors and withdrew AB2943. We look forward to future dialogue," he told *Citizen*. "Hopefully other California politicians will follow his lead and protect the rights and options of those questioning their sexual identity."

The State of California vs. the Gospel of Jesus Christ

It's well known that what happens in California doesn't stay in California. For good or ill, the Golden State often is a trendsetter both culturally and politically. That's been especially true where homosexuality is concerned.

In 2012, California became the first state to ban licensed counselors from offering SOCE—sometimes called "conversion therapy"—for minors. Thirteen other states have followed suit so far, as has the District of Columbia.

Since then, LGBT groups have been seeking to use California as a launching pad to ban SOCE for all ages—and in all places. The Trevor Project, an activist group based in West Hollywood, announced a 50-state strategy to pass therapy bans nationwide. Equality California retweeted a quote on Aug. 6: "Until conversion therapy is illegal everywhere, there will still be work to do to ensure equality for all Americans."

California legislators—who've been told that SOCE only leads to misery, and sometimes suicide—

have been largely open to that goal, says Jonathan Keller, president of the California Family Council (CFC), Focus on the Family's public-policy partner in the state.

"In their minds, they're doing something good to protect people," Keller says. "They think 'conversion therapy' is harmful, scary, bad. That's what they've been told by the (legislature's) LGBT Caucus."

They couldn't be more wrong, says Elizabeth Woning, co-leader of Equipped to Love.

"This isn't protecting LGBT people," she says. "It's really a dramatic infringement of their rights."

Woning—who lived as a lesbian in her 20s and 30s—now has a new life, including a husband. And she doesn't want the state declaring stories like hers can't happen.

"The Bible promises the Gospel has power enough to set us free," she says. "The state is saying the Gospel is powerless and irrelevant and churches need to get with the program."

Williams agrees.

"It's a lie that you can't find fulfillment and joy after you leave homosexuality—that all you can do is repress parts of yourself and white-knuckle your way through," he says.

"That's not what Elizabeth and I and many of our friends experience. Yes, there are some people who seek change, don't find it and are miserable. But for many of us, that's not the story at all."

Sharing Their Stories

When AB 2943 was introduced this year, it seemed likely to sail through due to the power of the LGBT lobby.

"These groups—the Human Rights Campaign, Equality California, the Transgender Law Center—demand total loyalty to their agenda," Keller says. "They're uncompromising."

"Last year, every bill they introduced passed—no exceptions," adds Greg Burt, CFC's director of capitol engagement. "Even conservative legislators rarely stand up and speak out against them."

At first, that's just how things went. The bill passed the Assembly easily (50-18) in April before moving to the Senate—generally considered the more left-wing chamber.

But grassroots opposition had been picking up. Groups like CFC were lobbying hard and rallying supporters with help from national allies. "Focus on the Family sent out an email alert which got nearly 20,000 people to respond through our web site," Keller says. "The response was

incredible."

Church members were speaking out in numbers too large to ignore. One legislator heard from 3,000 members of a single church. (See "Out of His Comfort Zone," page 14).

And people were showing up in Sacramento to meet with their lawmakers. People like Williams, Woning and others who shared their own stories of transformation and healing—both in public testimony and in private meetings.

"We weren't sharing an ideology," Woning says. "We were sharing what God has done in our lives."

"They made an impression," Burt tells *Citizen*. "They carried a spirit of love and compassion. They didn't show the 'angry Christian' attitude the other side accuses us of having."

For Williams, the high point came on June 11, when hundreds of people from a variety of church bodies—many wearing T-shirts bearing the word "Changed"—gathered at the Capitol.

"We were literally standing shoulder to shoulder alongside Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Spirit-filled Pentecostals—all of us sharing the same message," Williams says. "It was amazing."

The next day, several hundred spoke in a Senate Judiciary Committee meeting, each stepping up to the microphone with a simple statement—their name, and "I oppose AB 2943."

While that didn't stop the committee from approving the bill (5-2), its easy passage on the floor wasn't looking like a slam-dunk. Once widely expected to come to a vote before the Senate recessed for a month in the summer, AB 2943 didn't make the deadline.

"That last day (July 6), we were sitting in the gallery expecting it to come up," Burt says. "And then it just didn't."

Shaky Ground

When the Senate resumed, it passed AB 2943 on Aug. 16. But due to language changes, the bill had to pass the Assembly a second time before the legislature adjourned Aug. 31.

That didn't happen. And Keller is thrilled.

"This shows that Christians in California still have a voice if they're willing to use it," he says. "Progressive legislators have supermajorities in both chambers, but some of them are still sensitive to Christians' concerns when we speak up."

There's another factor those legislators might have considered—and should have, if they didn't. If

AB 2943 had been signed into law, a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling suggests it could have landed on shaky ground.

This June, the Court overturned another California law—one requiring pro-life pregnancy centers to provide information on getting abortions. While they were at it, the justices had some things to say about restrictions on SOCE counseling.

In *NIFLA v. Becerra*, California cited lower-court rulings upholding state laws restricting SOCE counseling for minors to argue that "professional speech" by state-licensed individuals or organizations had far less First Amendment protection than other kinds.

The Supreme Court didn't buy it.

"This Court has not recognized 'professional speech' as a separate category of speech," the justices wrote. "Speech is not unprotected merely because it is uttered by 'professionals,' " and restricting it "poses the inherent risk that the government seeks not to advance a legitimate regulatory goal, but to suppress unpopular ideas or information."

That sent a strong signal of how the justices would rule if laws involving minors—much less adults—came before them.

"This cuts the legs out from under AB 2943," Sharp tells *Citizen*. "If the state can't subject professional speech to more restrictions when dealing with minors, then if anything it's far more unacceptable when the client is an adult."

Whether such a bill ends up before politicians or judges, those who've resisted it say they couldn't stay silent. Williams—who wanted to focus his energies on ministry, not lobbying—says the state forced his hand.

"On one level, this is exactly what I don't want to be doing," he says. "The last thing I want is to be political over a heart matter. It's such a tender place for people. But by the same token, their freedom to find help is at stake if we don't speak up."

But the controversy had some silver linings along the way.

"In a strange way, I'm glad the bill was introduced," Woning says. "More people are telling their stories. They're getting bolder to declare the Gospel's power to change lives."

And even better, "They're finding each other," Williams says. "They're finding community, because now they know better how many people like them are out there."

For More Information:

To stay abreast of California's legislative events, visit the California Family Council's website, **californiafamily.org** (<https://californiafamily.org/>). For stories of transformation from Williams, Woning and many others, visit **[oncegay.com](https://www.oncegay.com/)** (<https://www.oncegay.com/>).

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