



USA: Homophobia at 'Hell Houses'

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The US **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** (NGLTF) has scarily unveiled an anti-gay programme which includes "Hell Houses," a religious alternatives to traditional haunted houses that are designed to scare people into a "sin-free life."

Instead of spooking youth with ghosts and monsters, Hell House tour guides direct "sinners" through rooms where violent scenes of damnation for a variety of "sins" are performed, including scenes where a teenage lesbian is brought to hell after committing suicide and a gay man dying of AIDS is taunted by a demon who screams that the man will be separated from God forever in hell.

The religious leaders who support Hell Houses believe that by scaring youth into "good" behaviour they are saving their souls.

However, a report from the NGLTF entitled *Hell House: Literally Demonising Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*, includes examples of the tragic impact of the message that "homosexuals" are going to hell can have on youth.

It includes the story of Bobby Griffith, a gay teen who wrote in his journal that he was afraid he was going to hell and who eventually committed suicide. Research cited in the report indicates that higher rates of suicide among gay and lesbian youth can be attributed in part to anti-LGBT messages that make them feel that something is fundamentally wrong with who they are.

Hell Houses first appeared in the 1970s at the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, and they have been gaining popularity since 1996, when the Reverend Keenan Roberts, an evangelical Christian pastor in Colorado, began selling "Hell House kits" to churches worldwide.

Roberts estimates that these kits, which cost \$299 each, have been distributed to 800 churches across the United States and 18 countries. Some churches report that their Hell Houses receive up to 12,000 visitors per year and are run by casts and crews of 300 student volunteers.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the NGLTF, highlighted the danger of these houses, "The Hell House phenomenon is yet another example of the dangerous and extreme tactics used by the religious right to indoctrinate youth with lies and misinformation about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people."

"Church leaders who sponsor Hell Houses should be ashamed of contributing to the climate of anti-gay harassment and violence that mercilessly threatens the safety and well-being of LGBT youth on a daily basis."

The full research paper on the 'Hell Houses' from the NGLTF is available to view on the link below.

Related links:

www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/Homophobia_Hell_House.pdf