



New Report Reveals How Right Wing Fuels Homophobia With Halloween ‘Hell Houses’

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“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.” — Matt Foreman, Executive Director, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

In a report released this week titled "Homophobia at 'Hell House': Literally Demonizing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth", the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute** estimates that this Halloween season, 1.6 million people, many of them children as young as 10 years old, will go to "Hell Houses," religious alternatives to traditional haunted houses that are designed to scare youth into a "sin-free life."

Instead of spooking youth with ghosts and monsters, Hell House tour guides direct them 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 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," said **Matt Foreman**, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "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."

Through summarizing the latest research on the epidemic of harassment and violence that threatens lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth, the report reveals how Hell House scenes that expose impressionable youth to the literal demonization of their lesbian and gay peers contribute to this problem. The report also focuses on the impact Hell Houses have on Christian youth who may be struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"One of the most disturbing aspects of the Hell House phenomenon is how it reinforces a key finding of a study published in the *Journal of Psychology*, namely that a strong belief in Satan is directly related to intolerance of gay men and lesbians," said **Sarah Kennedy**, Vaid Fellow at the Task Force Policy Institute and co-author of the report. "No wonder a recent national survey of LGBT youth conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network found that more than 80 percent experienced verbal harassment and 43 percent experienced physical harassment or violence over the past year."

The religious leaders who support Hell Houses believe that by scaring youth into "good" behavior they are saving their souls. However, the report includes examples of the tragic impact of the message that "homosexuals" are going to hell can have on youth, including 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 Rev. **Jerry Falwell's** Liberty University, and they have been gaining popularity since 1996, when the Rev. **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.

Members of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable respond to the Hell House phenomenon

"I sincerely hope that this misguided, pernicious and manipulative phenomenon goes to an early grave. Such crass commercialization of ideological differences, such blatant manipulation of a children's holiday to commit spiritual violence is beyond the pale. I urge religious leaders to denounce these programs and advise their communities to support alternative and safe Halloween activities for their children, such as 'trick or treat for UNICEF.'" — Dr. **Mary Hunt**, Co-Director, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual

"The danger of the Hell House phenomenon is threefold: It literally endangers the lives of LGBT youth, it falsely denies God's creative hand in shaping and forming us with a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities and it perpetuates the lie that one cannot be Christian and LGBT. How can our fellow brothers and sisters who name themselves Christians and followers of Jesus, who preached gracious love and real justice, live in ways that bring about death, shame and hatred? Hell Houses are the purview of false prophecy, lies and death-dealing." — Rev. **Rebecca Voelkel**, Program Director, Institute for Welcoming Resources

"Have the churches that sponsor Hell Houses forgotten that the New Testament teaches us to 'love your neighbor as yourself?' Have they forgotten that Jesus taught that we must love and include everyone? Cloaking hate in Christian language does not mean that it is not hateful or harmful. Religious leaders know that sexual difference is a blessed part of our endowment. These Hell Houses are fear-based education at their worst; their homophobic and anti-choice messages must be exposed." — Rev. **Debra W. Haffner**, Director, Religious Institute on Sexuality, Morality and Healing

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up. We do this by training activists, organizing broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and by building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge.

Read the report at www.theTaskForce.org.