

PRESS RELEASE

Speaking Out Against Silence: On Grace Bible Church and Homophobia

South Africa, 26 January 2017

We are deeply troubled by the comments of Pastor Dag Heward-Mills' sermon last Sunday at Grace Bible Church in Pimville, Soweto. His sermon, in which he called homosexuality unnatural, is indicative of a deeper conflict between constitutional values and views expressed across many different religious institutions in the country today. South Africa exists in a time where legislatively, bigotry, intolerance and hate are condemned and disavowed, but where the lived realities of marginalised groups stand in stark contrast with the ideals of equality and dignity for all. The comments by Pastor Heward-Mills feed into the undercurrent of violence and discrimination against same-sex couples in particular.

The separation between public and private is a crucial separation to maintain in the struggle for equality. Arguments supporting Pastor Heward-Mills' utterances as free speech need to take into account the public context in which he made them, and the telling applause that followed from the community – a community made up of nurses, teachers, doctors, judges, social workers, and families. In a country struggling with wide-spread homophobia and transphobia, denial of services, and ostracisation based on an individual's sexual orientation, we cannot afford to be casual in our response to Pastor Heward-Mills' sermon. South Africa has the troubling trend of overlooking infringements on human rights on the basis of 'conscience', or belief, even for public servants, such as is the case with Section 6 of the Civil Union Act. This trend introduces and maintains an apartheid around issues of sexual orientation, in an effort to appease religious groups. South Africa would not tolerate similar behaviour, policies, or public utterances with regards to any of the other prohibited grounds for discrimination as defined in the Bill of Rights, such as race – even in a church.

In June 2016 the country watched in disbelief while Sodwana Bay Guest House owner, Andre Slade, tried to defend his racist remarks using Bible verses, saying the Bible advocated segregation of black and white people. He also compared what he saw as differences in biology; pseudoscience similar to Pastor Heward-Mills' false assertion that homosexuality does not exist in nature. People's interpretations of religious texts are indeed their own prerogative, within their private domain. The problem is when those interpretations are clearly bigoted and discriminatory, and voiced in the public domain.

South Africa needs to have an honest internal reflection on how it can continue to ask the LGBTI community, or any other marginalised group, to leave their inherent dignity and equality at the doors of religious establishments, and why certain institutions and policies seem to be above the highest law in the land – our constitution.

Please contact Jabulani Chen Pereira or Joshua Sehoole at Iranti-org

Tel +27-11 339 1476 Tel +27-11 339 1468 getinfo@iranti-org.co.za

Website: www.iranti-org.co.za