



July 24, 2001

Volume 15 Issue 08

Anti-gay ad ruling sparks concern over freedom of religion

Christian ordered to pay restitution for anti-gay ad

CW Staff

— Saskatoon, SK —

Christians face the proverbial gag order when it comes to expressing biblical points of view on homosexuality.

"Evangelicals are publicly vilified by homosexual activists as being 'homophobic and 'close-minded' without being concerned that human rights commissions will silence their intolerance," says Glenn Penner of Voice of the Martyrs Canada, which deals mainly with freedom of religion issues in communist countries.

"Increasingly in Canada, it seems, God can be

gagged, His Word silenced, and His people told to keep their beliefs confined to their homes and places of worship."

Now the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission says even quoting the Bible teeters on the brink of promoting hate literature towards gays.

Valerie Watson, a one-woman board of inquiry commissioned by the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, ruled June 20 that both the Saskatoon StarPhoenix newspaper and Regina resident Hugh Owens must pay \$1,500 to each of three homosexual activists upset by a controversial ad.

Owens placed the ad on June 30, 1997, to coincide with Gay Pride Week. As well as quoting four Bible passages (Rom 1:26-32, Lev 18:22, Lev 21:13 and 1 Cor 6:9) which condemn homosexuality, a red circle with a slash over it was superimposed over a mathematical equal sign and two stick-figure men holding hands.

Watson said the symbol "may not... communicate hate" and that "Owens believed that he was publicly expressing his honestly held religious belief as it related to his interpretation of the Bible and its discussion of homosexuality."

However, she added, "when combined with passages from the Bible, the Board finds... the advertisement would expose or tend to expose homosexuals to hatred or ridicule." The three activists had "their dignity affronted" and "suffered in respect of their feelings and self-respect."

Penner admits Owens probably went over the line

Anti-gay ad ruling marks concern over freedom of religion in expressing his viewpoint.

"What makes the ruling so disturbing, however, is that the adjudicator concluded it was the Bible verses that pushed the advertisement over the line that separates questionable judgement from intolerance," he says.

Janet Epp Buckingham, legal counsel for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, agrees. Watson did not deal with the ramifications of the decision, especially in the light of other freedom of religion cases such as the Trinity Western University ruling in May, or define when a verse could be classified as hateful.

"She ignored the fact that there are many Bible believing Christians in Canada who would be really concerned about an open-ended decision that an advertisement that includes Bible verses could be hate literature," she says. "It puts a chill on people making public proclamations of scripture whether written or oral."

"Owens would have been safe had he not made references to the Bible," says Ian Hunter, professor emeritus at the University of Western Ontario Law School, in a Globe and Mail column. "In human rights circles, the Bible is increasingly regarded as an insidious form of hate literature.... Freedom of speech, press and religion all yield to a complainant's hurt feelings."

Owens plans to appeal the decision.