Stop the Witch Hunting, Homophobic Evangelical Tour of Australia and Pacific Region

Collaborative Report
by Freethought Groups based in Australia

Progressive Atheists Inc.
http://progressiveatheists.org

Sydney Atheists Inc.
http://www.sydneyatheists.org

Humanist Society of WA
http://www.meetup.com/Humanist-Society-of-WA/

UWA Atheists & Skeptics Society
http://uass.asn.au

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1. Introduction

On hearing of an upcoming Evangelical Tour of the Pacific region by Pastor Enoch Adeboye and his church, Leo Igwe (acclaimed Nigerian human rights activist and humanist) took it upon himself to alert his contacts in the region.

Boycott the Pacific tour of a homophobic Nigerian pastor
Oct 12th, 2013 | By Leo Igwe


The purpose of Pastor Enoch Adeboye’s trip was to establish more *Redeemed Christian Church of God* churches across the pacific region. Adeboye’s promotion of witch hunting and homophobic views are well known in Africa. This report provides a timeline, a list of outcomes and a brief conclusion.
2. Initial Investigation

Following Leo Igwe’s initial contact in early October 2013, Mal Vickers of the Victorian Skeptics contacted several key people in Victoria to alert them to Adeboye’s visit and to initiate action. Mal researched ways to petition Adeboye’s visa into Australia.

Andrew Rawlings (the then president of Progressive Atheists Inc.), was moved by Leo Igwe’s request to boycott the tour and began a campaign to stop the evangelical tour. An email was sent to the Progressive Atheists committee, the New Zealand Association of Rationalists & Humanists, media contacts and bloggers in the LGBTQIA community.

Conversations with freethought leaders gave rise to concerns about giving the tour publicity. These concerns led to some groups withdrawing their participation. Others decided that action was warranted. The Progressive Atheists went on to thoroughly research Adeboye and his Church, and take action to stop the tour.
3. Facebook Group: “Stop the Evangelical Tour of Australia and Pacific”

In order to attract supporters and activists who could contribute to a boycott of the Evangelical Tour of this region, the Progressive Atheists set up a Facebook group.

Leo Igwe kindly furnished the Facebook group with many articles, news stories, video clips and other related material. He and other organisers answered many supporters’ questions and provided updates.

The group now has 169 members and has been very active in the campaign for providing information, promoting the petition, assisting action in different countries in the Pacific region and organising protests in Sydney and Perth.

As well as supporters from around the world, the group includes members from Australia, PNG, Fiji and New Zealand. The Fijian based Facebook page, Oceania Pride, also promoted action to protest the tour.

Oceania Pride
https://www.facebook.com/OceaniaPride/posts/674891372532312

Of the countries that the tour visited, no contacts were found from the Solomon Islands and limited action was able to be taken in Papua New Guinea (PNG) due to the laws of that country and fears for the safety and well-being of protestors. In both PNG and the Solomon Islands, male to male sex is illegal.

Pacific Legal Environments for Men who have Sex with Men and Transgender People

Contacts in the other countries around the Pacific were not properly developed and supported, partly due to time constraints and partly due to a lack of contacts known in certain countries (Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea). Freethinking groups in Australia are encouraged to develop and strengthen connections with sister groups in those countries.

Offshoots from the ‘Stop the Evangelical Tour…’ group list below, are currently being discussed; such as a new group proposed to address and report hate speech on Facebook. The group is still active, accepting new members every day, and may be useful in the future to gain support for new campaigns of this nature.

Facebook Group: Stop the Evangelical Tour of Australia and Pacific
https://www.facebook.com/groups/stopevangelicaltour
4. Petition: “Stop Witch Hunting & Homophobic Evangelical Tour of Australia”

Based on the many links and resources provided by Leo Igwe, the Progressive Atheists drafted a petition to stop Adeboye from entering Australia. This petition was then edited and formatted by group members from the Progressive Atheists and the Humanist Society of WA. The Petition was launched and shared via the Progressive Atheists website, Facebook, Twitter and email.

The Progressive Atheists were advised to address the petition to the Australian High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa, where visa applications are processed.

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STOP WITCH HUNTING & HOMOPHOBIC EVANGELICAL TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

TO: 1. FEDERAL MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, 2. AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION AND 3. AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION IN PRETORIA.

We urge the Commonwealth of Australia to withhold or cancel any visa granted to Enoch Adeboye of Nigeria as a matter of urgency.

Mr Adeboye has already clearly demonstrated vilification towards segments of the LGBTQIA community and others whom he identifies as witches.

There is a significant risk that, while in Australia, he will vilify and incite discord in the Australian community, or in a segment of our community.

Furthermore, his preaching espouses beliefs that represent a danger to a segment of the Australian community and that have resulted in torture and death in other countries.

http://www.communityrun.org/petitions/stop-homophobic-evangelical-s-tour-of-australia

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The Petition was based on the Australian visa requirement listed on Fact Sheet 79 - The Character Requirement:

“The character test - A person will not pass the character test where: ... there is a significant risk that the person will ... vilify a segment of the Australian community, or incite discord in the Australian community or in a segment of that community, or represent a danger to the Australian community or a segment of that community.”

The petition was organised through Communityrun.org - an offshoot of GetUp. Support and advice were provided by one of the CommunityRun Team, who was very supportive of our cause.

This petition collected 992 signatures within a few weeks and numerous comments from signatories defending the human rights of those accused as witches and the LGBTQIA community.

A former Progressive Atheists committee member took charge of managing the petition. The petition was both sent via email and printed & posted to the Minister for Immigration, the Department of Immigration and the High Commission in Pretoria.

Three emails were sent to petition signatories informing them of our progress. The first email was to inform of the letter of rejection from the High Commission:


The second email was to inform of protests planned for events in Sydney and Perth. The final email was to thank signatories for their support and invite them to keep in touch for action in the future on similar matters.

Unfortunately, we were not able to stop Adeboye’s entry to Australia. We received two letters of response - the first from Victoria Lenton, the First Secretary (Immigration), the Principal Migration Officer, the Australian High Commission in Pretoria, and a second response from Scott Kelly on behalf of Kevin Thronburn (Department of Immigration and Border Security - A/g Director, Character and People Trafficking Section, dated 3/12/13).

Response from Victoria Lenton: Australian High Commission - Pretoria:

Both letters outlined that there was no perceived significant risk to the community. However, the letter from Kevin Thronburn does say that, “the Department will carefully review all controversial visitor cases and, when the statutory elements are met, consider visa refusal or cancellation as appropriate. Should a person’s visa be cancelled while onshore, they will be liable for removal from Australia.”

One could argue that there was insufficient time in which to mobilise and maintain a momentum for the petition. However, the relevant Australian government department responses indicate that there was not enough evidence that Adeboye’s visit fell under the ‘vilification’ act. On the up side, the fact that Adeboye was given entry to Australia is a win for freedom of speech & democracy, and gave us the chance to exercise our right to protest.
5. Promotion & Media Coverage

The petition was published and shared by many individual and group supporters, as well as on Facebook through freethought, secular and LGBTQIA networks. Atheist Alliance International was contacted and assisted to promote the petition to the atheist community globally.

Various online publications such as Freethinker UK, Gaystarnews, ModernGhana, Saharareporters, Patheos, Starobserver, Vanguard Nigeria, OutinPerth, Diversity ACT, and high profile bloggers in the freethought community such as The Stirrer, VicSkeptics, Token Skeptic and Groupsects also contributed to promoting this campaign.

Twitter was also used to promote the campaign and the petition. The Progressive Atheists Inc. posted tweets that were retweeted by followers; this assisted to promote the petition and raise awareness to a growing number of followers. Tweets directed to Adeboye and the RCCG church led to more evidence provided by fellow tweeters.

Progressive Atheists: @PastorEAAdeboye @RCCG_ADEBOYE We oppose witch hunting and LGBTQI hate speech. We welcome your thoughts on Christian compassion...

https://twitter.com/ProgAtheistsInc/status/404407936820076545

In New Zealand, a morning TV show interviewed an LGTB representative on his opposition to Adeboye’s visit and he was able to bring Adeboye’s tour to the attention of a much wider audience.

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Anti-gay pastor arrives to preach in NZ
3 News | By Adrien Taylor | Thursday 14 Nov 2013


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HOMOPHOBIC PREACHER FLYS IN ON PRIVATE JET BUT FAILS TO DRAW A BIG CROWD
Q News | By Rod Gardiner | November 16th 2013

Additional ideas that were not achieved this time around due to time constraints included:

- to organise rallies that followed the tour in each location
- to highlight and question the benefits of the proliferation of foreign imported churches into the Pacific region
- to befriend those immigrants from Nigeria and welcome them into freethought groups*
- to translate freethought literature / leaflets into Nigerian Languages*
- to invite Pastor Adeboye to have a public debate with a prominent freethinker

*Note: many of those attending these conferences were new immigrants from Nigeria
Once Pastor Enoch Adeboye had entered Australia the focus moved towards protesting The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) events. There wasn’t time to arrange protests in Canberra and Melbourne as these events were held very early on in the tour. The Sydney and Perth events were at the end of the tour. Subsequently, Sydney Atheists Inc. were able to organise a protest in Sydney, and the Humanists of WA worked with the UWA Atheist & Skeptic Society to organise a protest in Perth.

Members from Progressive Atheists Inc., the Humanist Society of WA and the UWA Atheist & Skeptic Society worked closely together in order to create a flyer to be distributed at these protests.

Page one of the flyer

Page two of the flyer

The flyer was created with the help of around 10 individuals, all working hard on researching content, formatting and getting the right message across. Due to deadlines, we had very little time to review the flyer and most of the work was done within a 24 hour time frame. Those collaborating on the flyer tag teamed, with some working through the night!

For Australian freethought groups, getting to know all the concerns about Adeboye and his church took a while to filter through. Additional evidence of links with witchcraft and faith healing emerged after the tour had finished.


https://twitter.com/ProgAtheistsInc/status/404407936820076545

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RCCG Victory House, New Zealand shared a link. 4 October
Do you know anyone with Cancer? Seriously, they will get healed if you bring them to the “Let the Wind Blow Conference” | Click on http://letthewindblow.co.nz/ to find out more.

RCCG Victory House, New Zealand shared a link. 16 October
Do you know anyone on the wheelchair? Bring them over to “Let the Wind Blow Conference” and God will heal them | Click on http://letthewindblow.co.nz/ to find out more.


For the flyers, the aim was to provide facts, clear evidence, express our concerns and encourage consideration for the well-being of all. Given the short amount of time to design and create this flyer, those involved did a tremendous job in coming up with the final product.
7. Sydney Protest

Sydney Atheists then Vice President, Morgan Storey, contacted Rooty Hill RSL, Rooty Hill Novatel and Blacktown City Council to inform them of the pastor’s visit and his stance on homophobia, and that we would be protesting the upcoming even on Saturday, 23rd November. Sydney Atheists also requested that Blacktown City Council publicly condemn the pastor’s homophobic stance. No response was received to any of the emails.

The Sydney protest took place on Saturday, 23rd November at Rooty hill RSL - not the Novatel as was advertised. This was only discovered by a Sydney Atheist member on the way there, via a phone call to the hotel.

Rooty Hill RSL Club
55 Sherbrooke St, Rooty Hill, NSW 2766

The RHRGroup, (Rooty Hill RSL Club Ltd) Executive Management

Chief Executive Officer- Richard Errington
General Manager Strategy and Marketing- Ian Lowe
General Manager Property & Business Services- Robert Hunter
General Manager Human Resources- Judith Peake
General Manager Finance- Dennis Aktypis
General Manager Novotel Sydney Rooty Hill- Mark Maybury
General Manager Gaming & Compliance- Peter Ehlen


Most of the Sydney Atheist members met up near what is now known to be the back entrance to the RSL. Sydney Atheist members met up and the group proceeded to the main entrance, where they began handing out flyers to anyone who was walking into this entrance. They received some questions from attendees on their stances, and on their Sydney Atheists “good without God” shirts; all was done with the utmost civility.

After around 5 minutes, a security guard that was travelling with Adeboye came out to tell the Sydney Atheists to leave, and that they had no right to be there. Morgan calmly explained that the group had the right to protest as it was a free country. The security guard left and the group continued to hand out the flyers.

After another 5 minutes, Adeboye’s security guard came back out with a security guard for the RSL who told us to leave. Morgan responded that it was a peaceful protest and that they had every right to be there. Morgan asked the RSL security guard to get his manager as this would be a PR nightmare should it make it to the
press that Rooty Hill RSL was supporting a homophobic minister over free speech. The “personnel manager” quickly turned up and repeated the same thing - that the protestors were on private property and had to leave. Morgan informed her that this entire incident would be documented and written up, possibly going to whichever media outlet would like to review it, and this didn’t faze the “personnel manager”.

As there was no public property within sight of the entrance, so Sydney Atheists packed up and left.
8. Perth Protest

The Perth protest took place on Sunday, 24th November at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre. Those in attendance included members of the Humanist Society of WA (HSWA), UWA Atheist & Skeptic Society (UWASS) and a couple of others who were new to those groups. Editor, Graeme Watson, of LGBTQ publication, OutInPerth, also attended the protest to take pictures and do some investigative journalism.

The event was originally scheduled to be held at the Perth Hyatt. During the organisation phase, a protestor from Perth contacted the CEO of the Hyatt, Mark Hoplamazian, to advise him of Adeboye’s plans to speak at one of his hotels. Also in that week, one protestor advised the WA Police of our plans to protest this event.

A few days prior to the scheduled event, an email was received advising that the Hyatt had cancelled Adeboye and that the WA Police were unaware if or where the event had been rescheduled. A UWASS student discovered the new venue a day or two prior to the event. The strategy had to then be amended due to the size of the new venue and its multiple entry points.

Half an hour prior to the protest, the group assembled at a point near the venue; flyers were handed out and an HSWA committee member gave a briefing regarding the WA Criminal Code and the rights of protestors, with an emphasis on peaceful protest, avoidance of confrontation, vacating the premises immediately if asked, staying with a partner at all times, and providing details to regroup afterwards at a designated meeting point.

The group split up into pairs and went to their designated entry points. The group assigned the task of entering the building managed to get some brief video footage of the foyer in front of the room Adeboye was speaking in, but were asked to leave the building within minutes.

Roughly 100-200 flyers were given out to those who attended the conference. Protestors decided not to use placards, but to hand out flyers and talk to the patrons as they entered the building. Towards the end of the protest, a group of 4-5 church leaders approached a pair of protestors and proceeded to question them for about 10 mins; the other pairs then finished up and came together to join in the debate. This discussion took place on public property, outside the building.

The church leaders ignored the accusations of homophobia and categorically denied the witchcraft accusations. The protestors were accused of being racist and asked why they did not target other evangelical churches, as opposed to singling out this one with a base in Nigeria. Of course, there was no racial motivation behind this protest. The concerns raised by protestors were about the dangers of promoting a belief in witches, and false or misleading statements causing harm to the LGBTQI community.
The protestors urged the church leaders to research Adeboye, citing Leo Igwe as an expert. One of the church leaders immediately labelled Leo Igwe as a 'persona non grata'. The debate was heated but civil, ending with threats by the church leaders of 'big trouble' and a phone call to the police if protestors did not vacate the premises. The protestors then left the premises.

At the debriefing, every protestors confirmed that none of the patrons they spoke to knew anything about the witchcraft accusations. When the subject of homophobia was broached, protestors found that patrons avoided the subject and walked away.
9. Conclusion

Discussions at the start of this campaign gave rise to concerns about giving the tour publicity to the favour of RCCG church and Pastor Adeboye. This led to reservations about pushing for mainstream media coverage of the tour. On the other hand, many felt that to do nothing was to remain complicit in the harms that had already been caused - the endorsement of labelling and causing harm to so called ‘witches’, false and misleading claims regarding homosexuality and claims of faith healing.

In retrospect, concerns of giving publicity to the RCCG Church do not outweigh our obligation to challenge and protest these violations of human rights and social justice. Free of these concerns, much more could have been done to contact mainstream media and promote our grave concerns about the church. In solidarity with others around the world, we will continue to expose and condemn such acts via nonviolent protest.

The protests in Sydney and Perth were both reasoned and nonviolent. Many flyers were given out and protestors managed to talk to a number of attendees. Our aims to raise awareness were met. We endeavour to continue to strengthen ties between the freethought, LGBTQIA, secular and media communities through the Facebook group. This may provide opportunities in the future to continue with this type of activism.

This most recent campaign has furthered the cooperation and working relationships that are developing between freethought groups around Australia and overseas. Many of those participating had not met in person, but continue to work together on the trust of a worldview encompassing shared values and goals. By uniting and continuing to strengthen our ties, the global freethought community has the best chance of protecting the human rights and well-being of all human beings.
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