

# Perspectives from the Front Lines of Therapy Ban Conflicts: An Interview with Peter Sprigg and Greg Burt

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Battles continue to be fought in municipal, state, and federal jurisdictions over the rights of clients to receive and therapists and other counselors to provide change-allowing care for individuals with unwanted same-sex attractions. In order to shed further light on what is occurring in the political trenches, I interviewed two men who have years of experience engaging politicians and the public in the defense of these rights. Peter Sprigg is a Senior Fellow for Policy Studies with the Family Research Council based in Washington, D.C. Greg Burt is the Director of Capitol Engagement for the California Family Council in Sacramento, California. In the interview, I pose several questions designed to learn about these men personally and professionally, as well as to gain insight on how they perceive the present and future of this conflict.

*Keywords:* therapy bans, political engagement, public relations

**Could you tell us a little about your background (e.g., where you grew up, formative experiences, faith history, current family)?**

***Sprigg:*** My family moved quite a bit when I was growing up—I lived in New York, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, where I graduated from high school. I became interested in politics at an early age and got my bachelor's degree from Drew University

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(NJ) in Political Science and Economics. After graduation I worked in government, including as a staffer for a Congressman, and ran for local office. My defeat in that race started me on a period of soul-searching that culminated in my committing my life to Christ at a Billy Graham Crusade in Boston (even though I had grown up in the church).

I then went into full-time ministry with the Covenant Players, a Christian drama ministry, and had the opportunity to perform and do drama workshops in churches, schools, prisons, nursing homes, etc.—not only in the U.S., but in Australia, Papua New Guinea, and German-speaking Europe (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland). I met my wife in Covenant Players, and we married about halfway through the ten years I spent in that ministry.

I left CP to go to seminary, receiving my Master of Divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I then spent four years as pastor of Clifton Park Center Baptist Church in Clifton Park, New York (outside Albany). We have one child, a son who was born the week I graduated from seminary. He just graduated from college this year!

**Burt:** I was raised in a devout Christian family in Orange County, California, as the oldest of three. My father taught math for thirty-plus years at the same public high school I graduated from in Mission Viejo, while my stay-at-home mom devoted her life to providing a stable and loving home environment. Church was a big part of our lives. My parents sang in the choir every Sunday at our Baptist church, and camps and youth group involvement were a must. But it was my parents' decision to become missionaries with Youth with a Mission for a year when I was fourteen that had the most profound spiritual impact on my formative years. We traveled all over Asia. Smuggled Bibles into China. Presented the Gospel in

dozens of venues from tribal villages in Thailand to shopping malls in Singapore. That experience left me dissatisfied with pursuing an ordinary life in American suburbia and showed me a sold-out, fully devoted Christian faith that believed God could use anyone to change the world. Since graduating high school, I've trained, traveled, and worked in over a dozen countries and all over the U.S. I currently live in the Sacramento area with my wife of twenty-one years, with our three children ages eighteen, sixteen, and eleven.

**Please describe your current position and how you came to be doing this work.**

**Sprigg:** After a few years as a pastor, I began to believe pastoral ministry was not the best fit for my interests and skills. I desired to do more writing and also to become involved in the “culture wars.” (Although quite liberal when I was young, I had gradually grown more politically conservative!)

One night I was looking at the Family Research Council website and clicked on a button for “Job Opportunities.” There was a job posted called “Senior Director for Culture Studies.” I read the job description and said, “That’s what I want to do with my life!” When I applied I considered it a long shot—but I got the job. My title has changed a few times, and I am now Senior Fellow for Policy Studies. I refer to this as my fourth career (after politician, actor, and pastor) and my third ministry.

**Burt:** That’s a long story. After graduate school, with degrees in journalism and public policy, I got married, moved to Colorado, and got a job as a reporter at a small-town newspaper outside of Denver. I covered local crime, city politics, government corruption, the Columbine High School massacre, as well as stories about vegetable farming and high school wrestling. Yet with the birth of

my own children and the need for better pay, I had to leave the journalism profession and eventually landed a job running district offices for strong Christian members of Congress. After several years, a lost election and a crashed economy brought me back to California where I landed a job working for a member of the California Senate in Orange County. That led to another move north several years later to the state capitol where I became the Communication Director for Assemblywoman Shannon Grove. After term limits removed her from office, I got my current position working at the state capitol for the California Family Council.

My official title, Director of Capitol Engagement, describes the main goals of my position. First, I use my past experience and training to help other like-minded individuals and organizations to engage in the public policy debates happening at the state capitol. That means coordinating committee testimony, rallies, press conferences, letter writing, and phone calling campaigns for and against legislation. It also means encouraging the Christian community to engage in policy debates, by writing articles about legislation and making myself available for radio, TV, and newspaper interviews in order to advocate for issues related to the biblical view of life, liberty, and the family.

**How long have you been doing this work, and what are the biggest changes you have seen over those years?**

*Sprigg:* I've now been at FRC for eighteen years, since 2001 (I arrived just a few weeks before 9/11). I have worked primarily on LGBT issues that whole time and have seen many changes—most not for the better! When I came to FRC, *no* state had same-sex marriage and no library had ever had “Drag Queen Story Hour.” The transgender movement was still seen as a fringe

movement and shunned as too radical by some LGB activists.

I also like to remind people, though, that the marriage amendment movement (from roughly 1996–2012) was one of the most successful grass-roots political movements in American history, amending the constitutions of thirty states to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Sadly, those efforts were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015.

*Burt:* I have always tried to advocate for biblical values in every job I've had, either through my actions or what I communicated. Some jobs only allowed me to advocate for these values behind the scenes or indirectly. My job working for California Family Council over the last three years, in contrast, puts me at the end of the spear on issues of faith and values. Many times, because the press in Sacramento has few people to turn to, I'm the one doing the TV, radio, and newspaper interviews on hot button social topics. I work hard at organizing other Christian leaders and organizations to testify against bills or talk to the press, but we need many more people willing and eager to do this.

One of my biggest struggles is convincing other Christians and those with traditional values to enter the public arena to debate issues of religious liberty, morality, and policy surrounding LGBT issues. As the California culture has grown more hostile to biblical values, many Christians leaders have backed away from speaking about beliefs the culture finds offensive. Self-censorship and silence are our biggest problems. Churches are far more inclined to limit their cultural involvement to projects that get them admired as opposed to cultural engagement that lead to public protest. As a result, many churches shy away from anything that hints of politics or public policy because those are the topics that get people upset.

Now, this isn't universal. Pastor groups such as Church United and Awake America are organizations that encourage pastors to meet their legislators, collectively speak out on issues of morality, and teach their congregations to apply their faith to every aspect of their lives, including politics. But these pastors are in the minority here in California.

**Are there still reasonable people on both sides of the political spectrum who are able to seek consensus solutions or has the societal polarization made this next to impossible?**

*Sprigg:* On LGBT issues, the polarization has made it very hard to find consensus. I have sometimes suggested that the greatest potential for common ground is with a "libertarian" approach, whereby conservatives make no effort to reimpose legal limits on the behavior of LGBT people, while LGBT people make no effort to impose legal limits on those who disapprove of their behavior—such as wedding vendors who don't want to participate in same-sex ceremonies and clients and therapists who want to seek sexual orientation change. Unfortunately, most LGBT activists seem committed to a more aggressive approach.

*Burt:* It is becoming harder and harder to get politicians to sit down on the more controversial issues of the day and come to a consensus of some kind. Many politicians might be reasonable behind closed doors, but if they want to retain their seats, they need to please the well-financed advocacy organizations that supported their candidacy. Planned Parenthood, the California Teachers Union, Equality California, and the ACLU are four of the biggest, most influential, and well-financed organizations at the California State Capitol. All of them are united in supporting legislation that advocates for a

leftist social agenda regarding abortion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and parental rights. No politician wants any of these organizations to come after them. If you are seen working with the minority party on some middle-of-the-road policies, you will upset these well-heeled organizations.

The other problem involves a lack of common beliefs between the major political parties. There used to be agreement on the importance of religious freedom, free speech, parental rights, father and mother-led families, and the benefits of a free market. That isn't true anymore, at least in California. Consequently, it is hard to find consensus solutions when there are fewer consensus values to unite around.

**What do Alliance members and supporters need to know in order to understand what is going on in state and federal politics as pertains to therapy bans?**

*Sprigg:* Well, Alliance members and supporters probably see the situation more clearly than most! But the general public needs to know that the claims made by therapy opponents—that science and research have proven that sexual orientation change efforts are never effective and always or usually harmful—are simply false. And it doesn't matter what kind of illusion of authority (such as by the APA's) or how many degrees the person making the claim has—the evidence (other than anecdotal) simply does not exist. It's really somewhat terrifying how much traction such blatant lies have gained, even among Christians and Republicans. It's Orwellian.

*Burt:* They need to know LGBT activist organizations are dead set in their commitment to outlawing all forms of sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts. If the freedom to counsel the sexually

hurting is going to survive, Alliance members must fight for it. The time for laying low and not drawing too much attention to yourselves is over. The other side will not be content to let you practice your profession in private. Don't give in to the temptation to silence yourselves. The information professional counselors have would be devastating to the other side if the public only knew about it. The Alliance, and what it stands for, needs to be as well-known as the ACLU. You need to stand with confidence in the public square just like they do. We need you to find a way into the public debates about homosexuality and gender identity. The press should know who your organization is and know someone at the organization is eager to talk with them.

**What do you see as the end game for those seeking to ban so called “conversion therapy”?**

*Sprigg:* The interesting thing is that SOCE or SAFE-T has no effect at all on people who embrace an LGBT identity—because it's not *for* them! That's what convinces me that these bans are not really about the therapy, but about ideology. The real problem is not that people are being harmed by this therapy (they aren't). And the problem is not that the therapy does not succeed—I think LGBT activists are more concerned that it does! What concerns them is the mere existence within society of people (whether therapists, clients, or ordinary citizens) who consider it in any way undesirable to be “gay.” That's what they want to stamp out—the belief, by anyone, that any aspect of homosexuality (attractions, behaviors, or identity) may be undesirable.

*Burt:* Banning SOCE and GICE therapy is not the endgame. Ultimately LGBT activists want to transform what society believes about sexual behavior and gender identity. They seek to remove any negative stigma

around transgenderism and same-sex romantic relationships. LGBT activists and state LGBT-identified legislators have given up trying to persuade people to believe as they do. The gloves are off and they are now willing to use government power to force or manipulate people to affirm their views on sexual orientation and gender. If that doesn't work, they will make it very painful to advocate any views contrary to theirs in public. I think they will go so far as criminally labeling any non-affirming parent or non-affirming counselor or pastors as an abuser.

Licensed counselors are standing in the way of this transformation. These educated professionals lend credibility to a viewpoint that says sexual orientation is not fixed at birth and can change for motivated clients. We have to somehow persuade these activists that this effort to force their views on others is not going to work. Sadly, so far, the strategy is working well. We have to convince the public that these tactics threaten everyone's freedom.

**In 2015 I read how legislators in Washington State successfully thwarted a therapy ban bill by themselves proposing an amendment that banned the abusive aversive techniques to change sexual orientation but protected therapists' speech and client goals. Since that time I and others in the Alliance have argued opponents of therapy bans should add this approach to their toolbox, which gives politicians who support us cover without losing anything, since none of the aversive practices typically mentioned to justify these ban bills have been used in professional psychology for decades. Clifford Rosky, University of Utah law professor and Equality Utah's therapy ban point person, recently admitted as much following a similar effort by ban opponents which thwarted a therapy ban**

**bill in Utah last spring. Why did it take so long for this approach to get on the radar of traditional family groups, religious liberty law groups, and supportive politicians? Do you think this approach will be a game changer, or at least help us change the conversation surrounding these bills?**

*Sprigg:* One reason there may be a reluctance to use an approach like this is that it shouldn't be necessary. In an ideal world, legislators would not even be considering laws to interfere with the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client, or wasting their time passing laws to outlaw things that do not exist. And it concedes, to some extent, the premise that sexual orientation change efforts can be harmful.

However, I have no problem using this approach if it is the most effective way of defeating a more sweeping therapy ban. It does help to neutralize the worst of the horror stories that are sometimes alleged.

*Burt:* I love this strategy because it exposes the lie that all change efforts are the same. The LGBT activists have been very effective at promoting the counseling horror stories, with very little critique from our side. Where are our voices in this public debate? How many times are Alliance members quoted on stories related to the conversion therapy bans? We have to combat their stories with our stories. We have to be just as aggressive in getting our narrative out as they are. The problem isn't just that the media is against our narrative; it's that generally the media only hears one narrative. Where are the passionate professionals on our side sending out statements and offering their expertise on every story about these issues? I suspect our side isn't actively engaging the press as they should. The Alliance needs to find a way around this.

Part of the problem is that you don't have anyone like me willing to speak and get your narrative into public conscience using the media. I don't mean me specifically. I mean someone who's job can't be threatened by entering into this debate. I can't be punished financially by the LGBT activists, because I'm supported by donation dollars from like-minded people. I know many professional counselors with practices they need to keep afloat, who are much more vulnerable to attack than I am. Activists might go after your clients. They can go after your license. They can even go after your personal reputation in a way that would ruin your career. None of that can happen to me, so I'm much harder to silence.

So while this legislative strategy is good, it must be combined with the same strategy to convince the public to be on your side. A politician has a hard time doing the right thing when the public is completely against him.

**What do you see as the likely outcome for the nationally orchestrated effort to ban change-allowing therapies for a) minors and b) adults?**

*Sprigg:* We have already seen the evolution of the campaign against sexual reorientation therapy, which began with bills purported to protect children (especially from coercion); progressed to efforts to prevent "fraud" (in the JONAH lawsuit and California's failed AB 2943); and will, if it continues, culminate in an effort to outlaw such care outright, whether for children or adults, paid or unpaid, religious or non-religious, because of the alleged "harm" it causes.

However, in a recent U.S. Supreme Court case which upheld the free speech rights of pro-life pregnancy centers, the court made a negative reference to lower court cases that upheld the initial therapy bans. That gave me a great deal of hope that in the end, the

current conservative Supreme Court might strike down therapy bans as unconstitutional.

**Burt:** It is hard to see into the future. I'm hoping and praying plans to ban change-allowing therapies backfire. I hope the public wakes up and realizes these bans violate the fundamental right of individuals to pursue happiness according to their own values and religious faith. Americans should be outraged the government thinks it has the right to dictate the type of advice a person can seek from a counselor. They need to understand that a government with the power to ban counseling you want can ban almost anything, including other ideas or expressed opinions it deems harmful.

I'm also hoping the Supreme Court reins in these bans by emphatically declaring counselors have the same free speech rights as everyone else, and no government official can censor professional speech just because those words make some people feel bad.

**How should people involved in public work like yours conduct themselves? What lessons have you learned in this regard?**

**Sprigg:** Because those of us who oppose the socio-political goals of the LGBT movement are routinely labelled as "hateful," it is important for us to bend over backwards not to live up to that stereotype. We must emphasize that we desire the best for same-sex attracted people—the disagreement is over how to bring that about. And I always emphasize the distinction between attractions, behaviors, and identity. It is important to acknowledge that people do not "choose" their attractions, and what we disapprove of are same-sex sexual behaviors—not "who people are." Some other tips: stick to the point at issue, and don't use jokes or irony—they don't go over well.

**Burt:** I'm still learning the best way to conduct myself. I seek to follow Jesus's example, knowing what an impact he had on the world with only three years of public ministry. I know I still have a way to go to live up to that standard, but here are some principles and practices I would advise others use when working in the public eye: Be clear in your communication. Don't leave people guessing what you believe. Speak with confidence or don't speak at all. Don't be intimidated that you are standing alone. Look to the heroes of the past who stood up and confronted ideas the majority despised. Have a long-term view. Real change takes time. Speak the truth in love but speak the truth. Address your opponents' questions and criticism. Be open to being wrong and correct your misspoken facts. Never lie or exaggerate to get the public on your side. Pray God gives you a heart of compassion for those who oppose you. In short, I try to follow Apostle Paul's description of the marks of a true Christian in Romans 12:9–21.

**What can Alliance therapists and allies do to best support your work?**

**Sprigg:** Tell the truth. Don't let critics silence you. And continue to educate people about scientific truth and the reality of what happens in therapy. Alliance members and conferences have been my most reliable source of information about the realities of same-sex sexuality.

**Burt:** Educate elected officials, the media, and opinion leaders on the facts regarding sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts. Find creative ways to get your ideas into the public consciousness. Don't let bad ideas or incorrect information regarding change allowing counseling to get promoted anywhere without a response from your organization. Reach out to every reporter who writes a biased story about "conversion

therapy” and talk to their editors too. Be relentless. Educate those sympathetic to your side so they have the confidence to defend your ideas and the clients you serve. Find fabulous spokespeople for your organization who are ready to do TV, radio, and newspaper interviews at a moment’s notice, as well as be available to testify against bills in Sacramento. Be willing to speak at school board meetings to warn the public regarding the dangers of gender identity and explicit

sex education lessons for elementary school children. Our culture needs to hear from professionals more than ever on these topics.

Currently, the public has the impression that professional licensed counselors and psychologists all agree with LGBT perspective on gender and sexual orientation. If your organization wants to support my work, please help change this perception.

