

Freedom 2 b[e] 2010 Report



Connection - Support - Information - Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

On Friday the 30th September 2005, in Anthony Venn-Brown's lounge room in Surry Hills, 12 people from similar backgrounds and experiences met together for the first time. Each person had contacted Anthony after reading his autobiography 'A Life of Unlearning' and the common thread was that everyone had walked a journey to resolve the perceived conflict between their faith and sexuality. For each person this had been a difficult, and at times, torturous journey; some were still resolving their sexuality and others sorting out issues faith and beliefs. And so Freedom 2 b[e] was launched and its main thrust has been to reach out to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical backgrounds to offer connection, support and information. Freedom 2 b[e] reaches out to people both within churches and also those who have left, assisting them on their journey to resolution of their faith and /or their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Since its formation Freedom 2 b[e]'s credibility and influence has grown substantially. Freedom 2 b[e] is a name that has become increasingly known with the Australian LGBT and religious communities.

This is the first written report and therefore covers more than the last 12 months.

BOARD MEMBERS

Current board members include Anthony Venn-Brown (Co-convenor), Linda Cropley (Co-convenor), Dr Alan Hough (Public Officer), Peter Tilley (Secretary), Jeremy Kinross (Treasurer), Michelle Kolev and James Nevien (Fund Development).

Previous board members have included Phill Wall (Co-founder), Sue Kentlyn (Board Member & Co-convenor), Terese Hutchison (Board Member), Paul Svenson (Secretary/Treasurer), and for a brief time Bec Apted (Board Member) and Des Penny (Board member).

PATRONS

We are honoured to have the Hon. Michael Kirby and the Rev Dorothy McRae McMahon as patrons. Having such well respected names has contributed to Freedom 2 b[e]'s credibility. It is comforting to know that should we need to call on them for advice or assistance, they are only a phone call or email away.

CHAPLAIN

Attitudes and beliefs about LGBT people are changing within many Christian denominations. The Rev Dr Rowland Croucher is a highly respected Christian statesman whose background includes pastoring the largest Baptist Church in Australia and working with World Vision. Rowland and Freedom 2 b[e] have developed a strong relationship over the last few years and Rowland has contributed greatly to raising the conversation about sexuality within the Christian church to a more enlightened and respectful dialogue. This has been through his own writings and publishing articles written by Anthony Venn-Brown on his highly successful website [John Mark Ministries](#).

We were thrilled when Rowland wanted to add to the work of Freedom 2 b[e] by suggesting he become our chaplain. Rowland is semi-retired and continues his ministry through his website, working with ministers and their wives, and speaking at conferences. Rowland's currently has a fairly demanding schedule but is always willing to give advice and assistance with specific people referred to him by Anthony. Since his engagement with us Rowland is now meeting with LGBT people and people from Freedom 2 b[e] on a regular basis and spoken at the Melbourne Chapter meeting.

CHAPTER MEETINGS

All leaders in Freedom 2 b[e] affirm their agreement with our mission statement, follow leadership guidelines, and are aware of our target groups.

The formula established at the Sydney chapter has proven to be an effective way of working with these groups by providing a safe space, facilitating opportunities to meet like minded people and receiving relevant information.

Sydney Freedom 2 b[e] has continued to grow with 30 to 40 people regularly attending the monthly meetings and at most we have people attending for the first time. Initially this was an older group, but about two years ago we had influx of young people which precipitated the commencement of a youth group. The Sydney chapter is a vibrant group that has developed a good sense of community. Many who came to us initially were closeted and afraid to come out to family and friends. Within a relatively short time this changed, and the vast majority have had a positive experience coming out. Others have found our meetings to be a place of emotional and psychological healing.

Sadly there are fewer women in the Sydney group than men. We miss our sisters. Observing other LGBT groups and meetings it is not uncommon to have an imbalance of gender representation, so maybe we are just reflecting a community norm. We will continue to increase our sensitivity to the needs of our lesbian sisters and can hopefully encourage greater representation. We currently have a lesbian couple and a straight female regularly attending, which are very supportive. Hopefully in the future we will reach a critical mass where females feel even more comfortable.

It has been wonderful to have the free use of the ACON premises over the last four years and we are very appreciative of this support. Considering that quite a number of people have little or no contact with the LGBT community or have never actually been into Darlinghurst, attending a meeting in the heart of the 'gay ghetto' can be quite daunting. Once inside the building we do all we can to make them feel welcome. The posters and explicit safe sex messages liberally placed around the premises though can be quite confronting for someone from a church background. A more neutral venue might be of greater benefit to first timers.

Freedom 2 b[e] Sydney Youth for 18 to 30 year olds has been operating for over 12 months. Ben Gresham is the Sydney youth co-ordinator and has arranged several events in a bi-monthly basis which have proved very successful. Most of the youth attend the regular monthly chapter meetings at some time, but the youth group, because of its social nature, attracts others who have not as yet connected with us. Ben attends Hillsong and is one of the few who have come out in that church. Because Ben is out and openly promotes a more informed understanding of sexuality and gender identity through his blog and other media opportunities, he is regularly approached by young people who are coming to terms with their sexuality.

Melbourne Freedom 2 b[e] has been operating for approximately three years under the leadership of Linda Cropley and Michelle Kolev. Initially the numbers were small but Linda and Michelle persisted. Their persistence, support by Anthony Venn-Brown, and some special events have boosted the numbers substantially; meetings now regularly get around 20-30 attending. Critical mass has been reached and we are confident that the Melbourne Chapter will continue to have an impact. There is a good cross section of people who attend, and meetings are held in the VICAIDS building.

Freedom 2 b[e] Melbourne Youth for 18 to 30 year olds is having its first event towards the end of the year. The leadership has been taken on by Duane McKibben. We are expecting that, like Sydney, this will prove an effective way of reaching young people closeted in churches and those who no longer attend.

Brisbane Freedom 2 b[e] has been launched and relaunched but is not currently operating. We need someone to take on leadership in Brisbane, as we do in other capital cities.

EVENTS

- 1) **Walking Between Worlds** Photographic Exhibition was put on (Mardi Gras 2009) by Freedom 2 b[e] member Iain Wallace and the exhibition featured a number of stories of other members. The exhibition had a highly successful launch, visited by senior High School students and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Business Association held a special event at the gallery. The exhibition was opened by Freedom 2 b[e] patron, the Hon. Michael Kirby. Some people were moved to tears by the stories and images. It was unfortunate that this powerful exhibition was not included in the Mardi Gras cultural program, which would have given it greater exposure.
- 2) **Anniversary Dinners** have been held every year in Sydney. Last year, due the generous sponsorship of Des Penny and his company Proteus, we were able to hold the event at the Rydges Hotel at World Square. The event was attended by 80 people with some flying up from Melbourne to attend. The Hon. Michael Kirby has agreed to be our guest speaker for the 5 year anniversary dinner on Friday 6 May 2011.
- 3) **Mardi Gras Parade.** Freedom 2 b[e] has participated in the parade since 2007. In 2009 our theme was ['Homosexuality is not a Choice'](#) with signs that reflected the positive choices we have made e.g., 'I Choose to Love

Myself". This year, 2010, our theme was '[Celebrating Ex-gay Survivors](#)' which raised awareness of the dangers of 'ex-gay therapies' as well as the positive message of resolution many of us have found. Each year the number of marchers increases. This year nearly 80 marched, with good representation from Melbourne, others from Queensland and Western Australia, along with heterosexual supporters. For first timers, marching is always an incredibly empowering experience. It would also be good for Freedom 2 b[e] to eventually have a stall at Fair Day as well.

Shane Cathcart has become our Sydney Events co-ordinator

- 4) **A Different Conversation Conferences [Sydney](#) and [Melbourne](#).** The objective of these conferences was to bring evangelical ministers and Christian leaders together and provide a safe space for them to discuss and learn about issues of sexuality and gender identity. Whilst this was not a Freedom 2 b[e] initiative, Anthony Venn-Brown was involved behind the scenes assisting Pastor Mike Hercock ([100 Revs](#)) with selection and connection with relevant speakers for the Sydney conference (Mardi Gras 2010) and a number of Freedom 2 b[e] people attended and shared their stories. At the Melbourne conference (October 2010) Freedom 2 b[e] was more involved in planning and presenting. Anthony Venn-Brown used some stories from the Freedom 2 b[e] forum to demonstrate '[The Tragic Outcomes of Ignorance](#)'. These conferences have proven to be effective bridge building spaces and enable us to create greater awareness about the important work of Freedom 2 b[e].

WEBSITE, FORUM, FACEBOOK

We are grateful to Phill Wall for building our inaugural forum, Aaron Jones for building the original website and that these were hosted for several years with the generous support of Anthony Goodwin and Aaron Jones. The new website is currently being hosted free of charge by Digital Pacific.

Our website and forum were integrated and updated in time for a launch at our anniversary dinner 2009. Chris Knight has made the site more professional and functional which has made has increased the impact of our work. We now have the capacity to create events, add photos and videos. We are very grateful for the many hours Chris has given voluntarily.

We have also set up Facebook pages and groups for various areas and Freedom 2 b[e] has also become a Twitterer. Whilst these remain small at the moment have the potential to grow and reach more people.

Forum Moderators

Initially Maggie was our main moderator along with Anthony. Maggie suffers from muscular dystrophy and as she is unable to work, she gave many hours moderating the forum; almost like a fulltime job. After a couple of years however, Maggie needed a break. Meg in Qld began helping out, then had a break because of health reasons, but is back on board again. Our current moderators, Ann Maree Billings, Peter Tilley and Meg Britton, are doing a wonderful job ensuring the forum is dynamic and a safe space for all participants. Regular users of the internet often comment on the contrast of our site to others in that Freedom 2 b[e] is always respectful and incredibly supportive.

Freedom 2 b[e]'s Online Community

Our website and online community have become a life line for many people particularly those closeted in churches and struggling as well as people in remote areas. Some have commented it has literally saved their lives when they were in periods of depression and considering [suicide](#).

- Freedom 2 b[e] now features as number one or on the first page of a number of Google search criteria.
- 855 registered users
- Over 12,000 posts
- 900 topics
- Over 187 individual stories in the [Telling Our Stories](#) section
- 4,000 visits per month

The table below demonstrates that monthly traffic on the forum has increased substantially (almost 700% in 12 months).

	November 2009	May 2010	October 2010
Visits	764	3,568	4,559
Absolute Unique Visitors	378	1,546	2,201
New Visits	43.46%	37.72%	43.72%
Time on Site	00:01:02	00:05:33	00:05:10
Average Pageviews	1.47	5.29	4.63
Pageviews	1,121	18,884	21,089

STRATEGIC PLANNING DAY

We held a strategic planning day July 31st this year with about 16 people representing New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and the day managed by, Sallie Saunders a professional facilitator who donated her services. Some of the basics such as vision, mission, values etc were fine tuned. The day was spent looking at our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and our top priorities moving forward.

Working groups were set up for:

- Youth Development
- Fundraising
- Media, events and public relations
- Bridge Building (churches and GLBT communities)
- Meet & Greet
- Writing Group

Youth development and fundraising groups have met since the strategic planning day others are yet to become active.

A strategic plan has been finalised and is currently being implemented by the board.

SPECIAL MENTIONS

It has been wonderful to see several Freedom 2 b[e] members, who have come out since their connection with us and are now doing significant things within and for the LGBT community.

- [Ben Gresham](#) has done several media interviews ([TV](#), [Radio](#), [Print](#)) and was invited to attend a national suicide awareness conference.
- [Scott Williams](#) has co-founded [Wear it Purple](#), a national day to create awareness about bullying and LGBT teen suicide. Scott was regularly visiting our forum for two years before he connected with us.
- [Bryan](#), a 16 year old living with his missionary parents in Asia, came onto our forum in 2008. Whilst there have been a few ups and downs Bryan has been well supported by our online community. Bryan is now studying at a Christian University in Canada and has been involved in setting up [Mosaic](#), a support group for LGBTQ students at Trinity Western University.
- Alex Pittaway has been involved in queer activism in politics and universities.

I doubt the influence these young men are having, would be a reality without them initially finding the safe space of Freedom 2 b[e] to resolve issues of faith and sexuality which in turn has created a passion for change and enabled them to transition into becoming a part of the LGBT community.

I would like to also make special mention and thanks to [Dr Alan Hough](#) (co-founders Phil Wall's partner of 10 years) who is a Senior Research Fellow Faculty of Business, Accountancy with the Australian. Centre for Philanthropy Nonprofit Studies at Queensland University of Technology. Alan's has held several board positions, his knowledge and experience has been invaluable to ensure that Freedom 2 b[e] is a professionally run organisation and meets all regulatory and compliance requirements.

LOOKING AHEAD

Some things are very clear.

1. There is an enormous amount of work to do.
2. Freedom 2 b[e] can have an substantial impact on individual lives as well as creating a better world for LGBT in Christian circles in the future
3. Currently we are only scratching the surface

Reaching those who needs us the most

Considering that those who are at greatest risk and who need to connect with Freedom 2 b[e] are those closeted and locked in a church culture, one of our greatest challenges is to create awareness of our existence and connect with these people at risk.

Volunteers

We are very grateful for those who have volunteered which has contributed to our growth this far. We have a strong pool of talent amongst those who connect with Freedom 2 b[e]. Inspiring and motivating others to contribute their time and talents to maintaining and developing the life- saving work we do will remain a focus.

Finance

Initially the expenses incurred by Freedom 2 b[e] were covered by a few individuals on the board. There are now a small number of people supporting our work on a regular basis. We are very grateful to all our supporters.

Most people involved with Freedom 2 b[e] come from church backgrounds and were or are regular financial givers. A focus for the board is securing the financial support necessary to sustain the organization.

Research

Gaining government funding seems unviable at this time as there is no quantitative research on our particular demographic. Freedom 2 b[e]'s Convenor Anthony Venn-Brown, has spent a considerable amount of time raising awareness that our demographic is possibly one of the highest risk groups in the LGBT community in 6 specific areas. This has been done through networking, circulating his document, '[What are we doing for LGBT people of faith and religion?](#)' and speaking at the National LGBT Health Conferences. There are currently about ten people who are doing research in this area and Anthony has been encouraging the researchers to link to one another and create a network.

Global Needs

Freedom 2 b[e] is currently predominantly Australian. There are an enormous number of people in the US and also the UK who would access our forum if they knew of our existence. In South America, Africa and Eastern Europe there is substantial growth in Pentecostal churches. We need to reach out to these areas. Recent anti-gay church activities in Uganda and also in parts of Eastern Europe demonstrate the need to have a global focus. Whilst there are other gay Christian groups in Australia and overseas, Freedom 2 b[e] offers something unique in that we have no religious agenda but support people in whatever choices they make. Once Freedom 2 b[e] is well established in Australia it would be good to consider the possibility of setting up organisations in other countries.

Leadership

It is essential for the future growth that strong, committed leadership is developed. Investing in developing our current and future leaders is vital.

Convenor

The outcomes achieved by Freedom 2 b[e] would not have been possible without the contribution of our Convenor, Anthony Venn- Brown, who has been voluntarily giving up to 40 hours per week to the organisation and the LGBT community since 2005. Anthony's work includes support for individuals and administration and promotion of the organisation as a whole. Anthony is self-employed, and his contributions have been at the expense of his business and thus his personal income. After five years, this is no longer sustainable. The Freedom 2 b[e] board is committed to funding the administrative costs of the organization, including the time invested by Anthony.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT

You are receiving this report because of your past support and involvement with Freedom 2 b[e]. Thank you. As we look forward, the question remains... how would you like to support this work? What level of financial investment will you make to ensure that the aims of the organisation are met? Let this report be a call to action.

If you align with the purposes and impact we are making, consider your financial commitment.

If not us, then who?

Anthony Venn-Brown

Co-founder and Convenor

[Freedom 2 b\[e\]](#)

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