


Letter of support for Berrien Springs LGBTQ+ youth

Update on 1/4/23- we are extending the deadline to 1/7. Please feel free to sign even after the deadline as we will continue to update the letter as we go!

Faith and community leaders - Thank you for your interest in signing the below letter in support of Berrien Springs LGBTQ+ youth and the larger community.

In partnership with [OutCenter](#) Southwest Michigan, MOASH's MY Faith Youth Advisory Council is supporting LGBTQ+ youth in Berrien County who are currently at risk. An "ex-gay" group called Coming Out Ministries (COM) is attempting to purchase an office space in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Students at Andrews University, situated directly across the street from the proposed office space, have organized [this statement](#) expressing their concerns about COM and their effort to create a local chapter in the county. . They have clearly demonstrated the **harm** that COM would cause LGBTQ+ students and youth if they successfully purchase this space and start their program here.

[Our letter](#) expresses support for these students and joins the many concerned community members



who are resisting **further harm** caused by COM's hateful messaging. We are requesting signatures by January 2 for distribution on January 4th.

Here are the ways you can support us in this effort:

1. Sign [this letter](#) as an individual who cares for LGBT+ youth. The letter will be sent to our press and public official contacts across the State of Michigan.
2. If you have permission from your congregation to sign on behalf of that organization, sign on now! Time is of the essence! We will send to our contacts and you and your congregation can also send to your local press contacts and other groups.
3. Share with your sibling congregations and ask them to also sign on.
4. Send any press contacts/ media contacts that you want MOASH to send this to by the January 2 in order for us to include your press contacts in our media push on January 4th.
5. If you are from Berrien Springs or otherwise have a personal connection to this issue and would like to be further involved, please reach out to Han (they/them) at hannah.mathers@moash.org who can connect you.
6. When we have the finished statement with signatures, we will share it with you and ask that you share it with your own connections, press contacts, and/or organization newsletters.

We organized this letter because we know that ostracisation by one's community and hiding one's queerness is detrimental to one's health. **We know**

that God loves queer people as they are, and that one can be both queer and religious. As you will see laid out in the letter, we know that youth who are fed messages that aim to ostracize them from their faith communities are at a higher risk for mental health concerns and suicidality. Let us consider battling this harmful, wrongful messaging perpetuated by [Coming Out Ministries](#) and others like it our important, holy work!

For any questions or media requests, reach out to MaryJo Schnell (she/her) at maryjoschnell@outcenter.org or Han Mathers (they/them) at hannah.mathers@moash.org.

Our letter below:

We are writing this letter today to bring to your attention a very urgent matter: **the lives of LGBTQ+ youth are being put at risk in Berrien Springs, Michigan.**

We are Michigan-based faith and community leaders **who love and care for LGBT+ young people.** An Arkansas-based group, Coming Out Ministries (COM), is attempting to establish a program in Berrien Springs (1). COM, an organization associated with Christianity, aims to share stories of people who have “freed themselves” from their “sexual impurity” and therefore regained their “intimacy” with God (2). Communicating that hiding one's queerness is the only way to have a relationship with God, or be Christian, **is life-threatening for LGBT+ youth and directly contradicts the loving message of**

freedom of choice in the Bible. Queer Christian people across the globe viscerally know and assert that these identities do not clash. For Queer Christians, **the Bible guides loving, affirming messaging that not only demonstrates God's acceptance of LGBT+ people but also centers queerness as a gift to our communities and our faith communities (3).**

It is an established fact that LGBT+ people face higher rates of mental health issues and suicidality because of family isolation, discrimination, and systemic homophobia/transphobia (4). In a recent study in Berrien County, 21-22% of students in 9th and 11th grade identified as part of the LGBT community. Of those students, more than 48% of students said they had seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months. That equals over 800 lives of young folks in Berrien County(5).

Allowing COM to open an office space in Berrien Springs will most certainly increase the risks for this already at-risk population. We must speak out. Let us not allow for further harm from an organization like COM. **Let us stand as one, letting everyone, especially these young people know they do not have to deny their queerness to be close to God.** We know that access to faith communities can be life-saving for young people, and especially for LGBT+ youth (6).

Students at Andrews University (AU), a Christian university located directly across the street from the proposed COM location, are pushing back on the purchasing of the office space. A [letter](#) organized by AU students, cited concerns include COM posting messaging directly targeting LGBT+ students and COM accessing student information

students and COM accessing student information to reach out and “minister” to them using their ex-gay rhetoric (7).

We join in solidarity with these students and appreciate their work to protect their community from furthering the life-threatening ostracisation that LGBT+ people experience.

Those of us who are affirming faith leaders *know* God cherishes Queer people. We *know* access to affirming communities is lifesaving, and we *know* that LGBT+ youth deserve to live happy, healthy, safe lives. Many of us are queer ourselves. Many of us are queer Christians, queer people of faith, and/or know, love, and look to queer people of faith for guidance in our lives. **If we assert we are in the interest of caring for our youth’s well-being, let us see it as our work to fight the wrongful use of Biblical messaging to ostracize, separate, shame, and prevent people, especially LGBT people, from accessing our loving God and faith communities.** It is indeed our work, and it is holy work.

Therefore, we, the undersigned, are in solidarity with the youth of Berrien County, and Andrews University students as they resist COM’s purchase of the building directly across from their university. **We sign this letter in an effort to create a future where our LGBT+ youth and all people are here, proud, loved, and have access to affirming communities.**

1. <https://comingoutministries.org/newsletter/com-newsletter-november-2023>
2. <https://comingoutministries.org/mission>
3. <https://www.queertheology.com/>.
4. Aranmolate R, Bogan DR, Hoard T, Mawson AR (2017) Suicide Risk Factors among LGBTQ Youth:

Review. JSM Schizophr 2(2): 1011.

5. <https://www.spectrumhealthlakeland.org/population-health/get-facts/community-health-needsassessment/2022---2024-chna>).

6. Gandy, M. E., Natale, A. P., & Levy, D. L. (2021). "We shared a heartbeat": Protective functions of faith communities in the lives of LGBTQ+ people. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 8(2), 98–111. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000225>).

7. <https://www.andrews.edu/life/student-movement/issues/2023-12-01/ideas-coming-out-ministries-berrien.html>

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* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email

Are you signing on as an individual, an org/
place of worship, or both?

Organization/ place of worship only

Individual Only

Both

Personal Name Signature (include any titles you'd like added):

Your answer

Do you have permission to sign this letter on behalf of your organization?

Yes

No

I'm not signing as an organization

Organization Name:

Your answer

Organization link:

Your answer

If you are signing on as an organization/ place of worship, please include a contact person here:

Your answer

Please provide contact person's email or phone number:

Your answer

Are you from the Berrien Springs area?

Yes

No

Do you have any personal connection to Coming out Ministries, Andrews University, or any other relation/ connection that you would like to share? This is helpful information for future organizing around this issue. Thank you!

Your answer

Would you like us to be in contact about future organizing around this issue?

Yes

No

Is there any information you'd like to share with us?

Your answer

Send me a copy of my responses.

Submit

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