

OUT AND COWED

US “ex-Gay” ministries claim to “heal” homosexuals. DAVID L RATTIGAN tries to keep an open mind as he investigates similar exit counselling in the UK...

I ONLY had to say three syllables, and yet the simplest words turned out to be the hardest. *Mom. I’m. Gay.*

They were difficult words because I had grown up evangelical, and survived well into my twenties convinced that I could never be openly gay. By the time I was 12, it was more than apparent to me that the feelings I had for other boys were not shared by my school friends. However, I had learned that “the Bible said homosexuality was wrong”, and made up my mind never to act on my gay feelings. And so began 15 years of hiding from the world, scared that people – especially Christians – would find out my dark secret.

In tears one day, I confessed to my pastor. “These things aren’t set in stone,” he told me, although to a 15-year-old who had already experienced years of sexual attraction to other boys, they were hollow words. I knew it wasn’t a passing phase. After our conversation, the pastor never breathed a word on the subject again.

In the intervening years, I have always wondered, *What if?* What if I had been like my friend Gary from Bible College, who spent his young life fighting severe depression and made several suicide attempts over his inner struggle with homosexuality? On the other hand, perhaps it was fortunate the pastor swept the issue under the carpet – for what if I had ended up like my friend Daniel, a Pentecostal elder pressured into marriage by a church and pastor who convinced him he could “change”? What if like him I had left a broken wife and children behind when it all fell apart years later?

“God make me straight,” I used to pray nightly. It’s what every dissatisfied gay Christian wants more than anything. I would wake up the next day and sometimes get as far as lunchtime thinking maybe that was the day I’d wake up healed. But always it would end in disillusionment, the same feelings coming back, and I knew I wasn’t changed inside.

I am no longer evangelical, and I am now openly gay. I’ve been fortunate not to have been permanently wounded by some of the extreme ways in which Christians – of which I still count myself one – have treated homosexuals. I’m at peace with my sexuality; and yet I have friends who are dreadfully uneasy with their own. In the marketplace of ministries and groups and therapies and programmes, what are churches offering them?

For more than 30 years, one popular conservative approach has promised hope to struggling Christians and told them: “Actually, God *can* make you straight”. Meet the ex-gay movement.

IN THE BEGINNING

The ex-gay movement began in the early 1970s in California when a straight pastor, Kent Philpott, formed Love in Action, the first “ex-gay” ministry.¹ John Evans was one of a handful of founding members, a homosexual who had just left a long-term gay relationship in the belief that it was wrong. His story was one of six published in *The Third Sex?*, Philpott’s book claiming testimonies of gay people who successfully changed their orientation in response to the call of Christ.²

Just a few years later, Exodus was formed, a coalition of ex-gay ministries, and now the world’s biggest ex-gay organisation. Exodus promoted and still promotes the idea that God can and will heal the homosexual, citing testimonies of ex-gays who have turned away from homosexuality and embraced heterosexuality. Here’s how Exodus put it most recently:

Christ offers a healing alternative to those with homosexual tendencies. Exodus upholds redemption for the homosexual person as the process whereby sin's power is broken, and the individual is freed to know and experience true identity as discovered in Christ and His Church. That process entails the freedom to grow into heterosexuality.³

Under their ministry, the homosexual receives “a growing capacity to turn away from temptations, a reconciling of one’s identity with Jesus Christ, being transformed into His image. This enables growth towards Godly heterosexuality.”

But here’s the question that should cause everyone to approach the ex-gay philosophy with caution, even those who agree with the basic tenet that homosexual behaviour is wrong: Where is the evidence reparative therapy actually works? Disturbingly, while no reputable study exists affirming the success of ex-gay therapy, the history of the ex-gay movement is littered with stories that deny the rhetoric.

John Evans, a co-founder of Love in Action, denounced the organisation and returned to being openly gay after his best friend committed suicide, despairing of ever changing his orientation. Gary Cooper and Michael Bussee, key organizers of Exodus’s flagship conference in 1976, eventually left their wives to live together as a gay couple. John Paulk, the poster-boy of Exodus’s major advertising campaign in the late 1990s, was caught (and photographed) chatting up men in a Washington gay bar.⁴

And in the UK in 2000, evangelical leader Jeremy Marks admitted that in twenty years of ex-gay ministry, he had yet to see anyone actually change their orientation.⁵ Courage, up to that time Britain’s leading ex-gay ministry, announced it was now affirming same-sex relationships.

LOVE IN ACTION

¹ John Evans, “The History of Love in Action”, www.waynebesen.com

² Kent Philpott, *The Third Sex? Six Homosexuals Tell Their Stories* (Logos International, 1973)

³ www.exodusglobalalliance.org

⁴ These and others are documented by Wayne Besen in *Anything but Straight* (Harrington Park Press, 2003)

⁵ See “The Gay and Narrow Way”, *Third Way*, (April 2002)

Zach was a 16-year-old high school kid from Memphis, Tennessee. A typical teenager in every way except one – he was gay. Last year he decided to “come out” to his parents, and in doing so, triggered a tide of protests against the ex-gay movement and reparative therapy.⁶ Zach’s parents enrolled him in Love in Action’s residential ex-gay programme, Refuge. Here’s what Zach wrote on his blog the day his parents announced he would be attending LIA:

They tell me that there is something psychologically wrong with me, and they “raised me wrong.” I’m a big screw up to them, who isn’t on the path God wants me to be on.⁷

Zach described his feelings on entering the programme:

I’m not a suicidal person... really I’m not. I think it’s stupid - really. But... I can’t help it, no I’m not going to commit suicide, all I can think about is killing my mother and myself. It’s so horrible. This is what it’s doing to me... I have this horrible feeling all of the time... I wish this on no person.

What was it Zach was being subjected to that was the cause of so much anguish? David Akinsanya is a British journalist who experienced the same programme first-hand for the BBC documentary *Sad to Be Gay*, filmed just a few months before Zach’s enrollment.

It was a devastatingly intense experience for David, whose tearful response to the pressures of life at Refuge was shown on TV for all to see. “It takes a lot for me to cry,” he confesses. “But there were bullying tactics. They know it’s going to have a bad effect. They even make you sign something on your way out to make sure you’re not suicidal, ‘cause some people leave there and they attempt suicide.”

At LIA, participants are subject to rigorous discipline and a regime of individual and group therapy, involving an often-distressing level of soul-bearing and self-scrutiny, usually centred around the issues perceived to be at the root of homosexual behaviour – dysfunctional upbringing and damaged relationships.

David admitted he had learned some useful things at LIA, such as that he didn’t need to have sex to feel loved; he had a choice. But he was also disturbed at the misinformation being pumped into the minds of vulnerable participants, some of whom were, like Zach, forced into the programme by distraught parents eager to help their gay child escape the “homosexual lifestyle”. His anger reached a head when he was preached to by a paedophile. “I was livid,” David exclaimed, describing his incredulity that a child molester was being thrown into the pool along with gays and lesbians, as if they were two sides of the same coin.

CROSSING CONTINENTS

Where the ex-gay movement in America is bold and brash, with a big media presence and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns, ministries on this side of the Atlantic tend to exhibit a more low-key approach.

⁶ Alex Williams, “Gay Teenager Stirs a Storm”, New York Times (17 July 2005)

⁷ These quotes are from Zach’s blog (an online personal journal) at www.myspace.com. The webpage still exists, but the entries concerning LIA have since been deleted.

True Freedom Trust is the UK's leading evangelical ministry to gays and lesbians. "We don't call ourselves ex-gay," said Martin Hallett, who co-founded the ministry in the 1970s with the late Canon Roy Barker. "It's a stupid term. I think the people who tend to use it sometimes have a self-image problem, as if they're desperate to disassociate themselves from their homosexual feelings."

Where Love in Action denies there is such a thing as "gay",⁸ and Exodus admits some people are gay but promises "growth into heterosexuality",⁹ TFT appears to do neither. In fact, just last year TFT severed its affiliation with Exodus Global Alliance, disconcerted over the rhetoric coming from North America. The media soundbites promising a change of orientation were beginning to worry them.

"We found it very difficult to identify with what was coming from over there, with what they're saying publicly," Hallett told me. "There's a tendency to set people up for disillusionment. Exodus should have learned from that by now."

TFT broke off from Exodus when Hallett got fed up having to defend his ministry in light of what was coming across the Atlantic. "It didn't seem worthwhile continually distancing myself."

Hallett firmly believes that homosexual behaviour is not an option for the Christian, and yet I am struck by how candid and *comfortable* he seems with his own sexuality. There's no pretence as he talks about his own preferences and struggles. There's no attempt to gloss over his gay orientation. And there's no hostility as he talks about other Christians he knows who have chosen gay relationships over celibacy.

This is a gentle surprise to me. I suppose part of me thought Hallett would be easy to demonise, but against my expectations, he is unassuming and down-to-earth. If I disagree with the doctrine that gay Christians must opt for celibacy, I can at least appreciate TFT's unwillingness to offer false hope of a "cure" for homosexuality. After the triumphalistic claims of Exodus and Love in Action, Hallett's candor was refreshing.

I'm tempted to think TFT wasn't always this down-to-earth. One article in the organisation's literature refers to "an important writer and research psychologist Dr Elizabeth Moberly",¹⁰ whose influential book *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* bolstered the ex-gay movement on both sides of the Atlantic, despite containing no original research or case studies.¹¹ Nevertheless, Moberly's theory that an individual's homosexuality could be traced back to a distant father became the chief prop behind Christian reparative therapy in the 1980s.

Hallett acknowledges this view is "a bit simplistic". TFT doesn't seem so much about promoting one particular theory about homosexuality or one particular strategy as about providing a network of support, encouragement and friendship to gay Christians trying to live celibate lives.

⁸ John J Smid, "Exploring the Homosexual Myth", www.loveinaction.org

⁹ www.exodusglobalalliance.org

¹⁰ Stefan Cantore, "Ministering to people struggling with homosexual feelings/behaviour", www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk/testimonies/021.html

¹¹ Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (James Clark & Company, 1983)

Unexpectedly, I find myself encouraged that my college friend Gary has found support through True Freedom Trust. As much as I wish he would have the confidence to pursue a healthy gay relationship rather than strive for celibacy, I can at least be assured that TFT are not promising him miraculous cures, teaching him to pretend he has no feelings, or trying to push him into a potentially disastrous straight marriage.

STRAIGHT PROMISES?

Ironically, one need not venture far from True Freedom Trust's head office on the Wirral to find a church that does promise gays a straight life. Just across the other side of the Mersey, one church is turning gay people heterosexual, with "several" formerly gay members currently "preparing for marriage", according to the head of LIFE ministries. While the group is not affiliated with Exodus, they are members of the Evangelical Alliance.

"We don't promote celibacy, because it doesn't work," says Pastor Jeff boldly.¹² "People come through the programme and typically within two to three years they've successfully changed and often they're getting married."

He elaborates: Simply living with a homosexual orientation and trying to be celibate is not something the church encourages. The church offers a permanent solution – a cure for the orientation itself.

Homosexuality is "inherently disordered", he tells me, "a disordering of desires", and there is no reason why a homosexual orientation should be considered fixed. Jeff himself went through a "phase" of homosexuality as a young man, and is now married with a family.

He is at pains to stress that his church is not "a marriage machine", however. Marriage "might not be for everyone. We deal with people on an individual basis." Yet he is unapologetic that the total reversal of homosexual orientation is the expected outcome.

The ministry began six years ago after a visit from Ron and Joanne Highley, the founders of New York's leading ex-gay ministry 25 years ago. Joanne was a lesbian for 10 years until she was delivered at the age of 23. The Highleys were unequivocal that a gay orientation could be totally overcome. "There is complete freedom from homosexuality, from both the desires and the activity."¹³

Up to 40 people, mostly male church members, are enrolled in the LIFE programme, during which they attend weekly group meetings as well as one-to-one counseling sessions. Participants work through different phases of their psychological development, beginning with parental influence, and going right up to adolescence when "voluntary responses" contribute to the problem with homosexuality.

"We don't promise *miraculous* deliverance," stresses Jeff. Do they promise healing? "We're pro-active."

¹² As the church's ex-gay ministry is unpublicised and largely in-church, I have not used the pastor's real name

¹³ www.life-ministry.com

I am skeptical about this. How many of these married couples will still be together in five years time? Ten years time? What will happen to their families and their children? What will happen to those who have been promised heterosexuality when they realise their feelings never really changed?

Elizabeth attended the same church, but was never part of the LIFE ministry. Nevertheless, she remembers the hurt of being treated by fellow Christians as if her lesbianism were an ailment. "People I told treated it like a disease and wanted to pray over me to get rid of the illness."

"When I found out who I was, it felt like a light had been switched on," she says. "I was so much happier. It just felt like those people in church would have preferred if I had stayed as the person in intense physical and mental pain rather than being happy and in love. It felt so twisted."

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My foray into the world of gay and ex-gay ministries has been a fascinating exploration, but a tricky course to navigate. In one ear I can hear the Christian community chiding me for my cynicism about the ex-gay movement. In the other ear I can hear the gay community asking why I've not been tough enough on conservative Christians.

I imagine a new scene, similar to that one almost a year ago when I finally spilled the terrible secret I had locked inside for years. But this time when I sit down face-to-face with my mother, the words are different: *Mom. I'm. Cured.*

Would she believe me? Or would a parent see through the pretence?

I'm trying to picture a church that reflects the love of an eternal parent, God the Father. What is He thinking as he looks into the eyes of his gay and lesbian children in the ex-gay movement? Theological debates aside, could Christians together look at the dubious promises of the ex-gay movement and ask, *Why the pretence?*

ENDS

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