

On the Impossibility of Turning into a Giraffe

by Whittier Strong

The photograph on the cover was used in the 1960s as part of a standard medical practice. The clinician asked the patient to view the photograph, and then administered an electrical shock, as a means of curing homosexuality.

Though the scientific community declassified homosexuality as an illness in the 1970s, this treatment is still used by therapists and clinics who function outside the aegis and accountability of professional organizations like the American Psychiatric Association. Many of these practitioners have operated within Exodus International, an umbrella organization whose members purport to assist clients in overcoming “same-sex attraction”.

Other methods include individual and group therapy, residential treatment, Bible-study and prayer groups, and exorcism.

Desires in Conflict

It all began with a book.

Paperback. The cover: burgundy, with blue print in white boxes. On the spine: *Desires In Conflict* by Joe Dallas. On the back: Mr. Dallas's photo and glowing testimonials for the book, mostly coming from an organization I'd never heard of before, Exodus International, of which Dallas was president. Inside: the process of how to overcome homosexual desires, in 250 pages.

I had spotted the book in the college bookstore just a couple of weeks after arriving for my freshman year. Finally, there was someone in the world who not only related to what I was going through, but told me how to conquer it. Somehow, I was going to read this book and unlock the power I needed to live a proper Christian life.

Obtaining the book wasn't easy. None of the students could spot me with it. I had promised the dean of students not to tell anyone about my problem, because, as she put it, some of the students wouldn't be able to handle it. As a Christian, I had to put others' interests first—even if it meant suffering alone.

On Thursdays I had a gap in my class schedule during which most of my classmates were sitting before our professors, learning how to become good preachers and youth ministers. That was my chance.

It took me ten minutes to get from the front of the bookstore and across the forty feet, past the textbooks and Bibles and Precious Moments figurines and T-shirts emblazoned with slogans like "Jesus Is Like Diet Coke—He's the Real Thing!", all the way to the back shelf. Another twenty lingering over the book, talking myself out of and into buying it. Thirty seconds to the register, never once making eye contact with Janna, the pretty blonde thirtysomething who was the

store's only sales staff, then stuffing the book under my shirt upon completion of sale.

Walking out of the store and through the hall that connected the school's classrooms, offices, and chapel. Running past the impossibly huge mulberry tree and the swing. Racing past the women's dorms. Down the hill, flying past married-student housing, where I (and so many of my classmates) hoped to live before graduation. Airborne into the men's dorm. Warp speed up three flights of stairs, down the hall, into Room **305**.

I stuffed the book in a drawer I would only open on weekends, when my roommate and nearly everyone else on campus went home to visit their families. I would study the process of abandoning my same-sex attraction and living a heterosexual life when I was all alone in my room, all alone on campus. All alone in the world.

I should have kept my diary in that same drawer. Had I done so, I wouldn't have accidentally left it in the dorm lounge the following fall. Then again, I should have written my name on the cover of the spiral-bound notebook that contained my most intimate thoughts, so that it would have been returned to me without question. The contents wouldn't have been perused to determine the owner. My residence director wouldn't have known about my crush on the dormmate with whom I met once a week to study the Bible and pray together. The two of us wouldn't have been sent before an ad hoc disciplinary committee and told that, in order for us to remain in school, we had to quit being friends "for a while" and I would have to begin therapy to turn into a heterosexual.

The Genesis of Exodus

“I...heard counselors taking calls from gay callers, and they were just doing a terrible job, praying the demons would come out of them... And I thought, oh boy, if they’re going to counsel gay callers, they at least need to have a little bit of understanding about gay people.”

Locked in a Case



Michael Bussee was born and raised in Riverside, California, the middle of three children. He knew even at age 6 that he was attracted to males, though he could not put a word to his feelings.

When Michael was 12, someone on the playground called him a “homo”, which sent him off to the library to look up the word and research it. “There were about five books, they were all in a locked case, I asked the librarian special permission to see them, and all of them agreed that it was a disorder, and a couple of the books said it might be possible to cure it.” He did not come from a religious family; even so, he felt compelled to fight his desires, regardless of the fact that he knew of no one with whom he could act upon them.

His senior year of high school, Michael began attending a Bible study, and became a Christian later that year. He enrolled at nearby Cal State-Fullerton to study cultural anthropology. He had planned to study psychology or counseling in graduate school, so his dormmate recommended he volunteer for the 24-hour hotline at Melodyland, a megachurch in Anaheim.

From Exit to Exodus

Shortly after Michael joined the hotline team, he realized that the volunteers were completely unprepared to handle the calls they received from those reporting struggles with homosexuality. He asked the pastoral staff of Melodyland if he could start a Bible study for gay church members, as the church already had numerous supports for those often marginalized in the church, like drug addicts and divorcés. He also offered to train the hotline counselors in how to assist gay callers.

These efforts culminated in the formation of a full-fledged ministry in 1974. Calling itself EXIT—Ex-gay Intervention Team—the ministry produced tapes, brochures, and a newsletter. It is believed they coined the term “ex-gay”. “That was basically more a statement of faith than it was that we’d actually changed our orientation.” They began sending these materials to hotline callers and other interested parties.

As news of the work spread, EXIT came in contact with similar ministries around the country. They decided to meet, and in September 1976, gathered at Melodyland for their first conference. By the end of the conference, they chose a new name for their alliance—Exodus.

Stepping Out

The new organization made their headquarters at Melodyland. Michael remained with Exodus for three years, focusing on training Melodyland hotline counselors and creating training materials for other ministries. At this time, Exodus was a loose and unstructured alliance, a model they maintained throughout their existence. Its methods and structure changed

very little over the course of the three years—and this was not all that wasn't changing.

Michael says that the members of the Melodyland Bible study were not converting to heterosexuality, despite the support network to help them do so, and many fell into depression and suicidal ideation. His involvement with Exodus ebbed. "I don't even remember where the conferences were in '78 and '79. But I didn't go. By that time I had met Gary [Cooper, another co-founder of Exodus] and we were starting to form a relationship and I was beginning to realize that the changing wasn't happening... I was also married and my marriage was suffering, so in '79 we finally just decided to leave." Michael informed the ministry director he hadn't changed orientation, and he and Gary quietly left both Melodyland and Exodus.

Riding the Tide

But in Michael's absence, Exodus transformed into a much different organization. It forged an alliance with the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), which brought into Exodus the idea of reparative therapy—clinical treatments borrowed from psychology with the intent to cure homosexuality. Frank Worthen, head of an early Exodus affiliate, worked to spread the message overseas, thus transforming the organization into Exodus International. It later allied with Focus on the Family, a highly influential organization within evangelicalism, allowing Exodus's message of the power to change orientation to spread to the rank and file of American Christians.

Exodus International also rode a tide of growing politicization within evangelicalism during the 1980s and 1990s, which encouraged conservative Christians to push

for anti-gay legislation and to vote for anti-gay politicians. Through all of this Michael was largely unaware of Exodus's goings-on.

Points of Contact

In 1991, Michael and Gary were asked to participate in a documentary called *One Nation Under God*, which looked into the growing ex-gay movement. By this point, Gary was dying of AIDS and wanted to take the opportunity to tell the truth—that it wasn't possible to change orientation—before it was too late. The documentary was released in 1993, one year after Gary died.

Michael still had no direct contact with the organization he left in 1979. All that changed in 2006, when Exodus International published cruel remarks about Gary and Michael. He called the organization to express his ire, and was put in contact with Exodus president Alan Chambers.

"[Chambers] was very friendly. I said, 'Are you guys still using that term "ex-gay"?' And he said, 'No, I think you should retire it and see that it's never used again.' I thought, 'Wow, that's different.' I said, 'Why are you guys involved in politics and why are you involved with NARTH, and what the hell has happened over the past few years?'" Michael continued to phone and e-mail Chambers in the coming years, pressuring him to admit that people weren't changing orientation.

Today Michael lives in Riverside with his partner of four years, Scott. (The day of my interview with Michael, they applied for a marriage license.) Michael's relationships with his ex-wife and daughter are "tense". He has retired from counseling, and spends much of his time managing Ex-Ex-Gay, a Facebook group he created for ex-gay survivors.

THE NIGHTMARE

by:
Whit

So, what brings you in today?

Well, I— my church says — and there's this Bible verse, and I've always felt different...

It's okay. You can say it. You're SAFE here.

I need to turn into a GIRAFFE.

Well, you came to the right place. We SPECIALIZE in turning people into giraffes.

Really? What do I need to do?

Lamentations of a Survivor

“[S]ome phrases were used about ‘learning the power of positive female touch’ and that is some stuff that freaked me out. As an abuse survivor, I had no idea what that meant, but I wasn't interested in finding out.”

“There is no life before Exodus for me”



Gail Dickert first came under the influence of ex-gay ideology at an early age.

“There is no life before Exodus for me, because I was introduced to

their teachings at 12 years old... I grew up Catholic and then United Methodist under both of my parents. But at age 12, I was introduced to a charismatic church, where the leaders familiarized me with teachings of reparative therapy”

Until 17, Gail’s exposure to Exodus’s ideology was through the trickle-down effect the organization’s teachings had on evangelical and charismatic churches. Then she began reading literature from the Exodus imprint, and placed herself in a more formal relationship with the staff of her church to help her overcome her homosexual attractions.

Upon graduating high school, Gail enrolled in Cincinnati Bible College (now Cincinnati Christian University) in Ohio. Here, she joined two groups to assist her conversion to heterosexuality. The first was an

“accountability group”—an informal group of students who met to share their spiritual struggles and to encourage each other to grow in their faith. These students, who did not share Gail’s struggle with homosexuality, encouraged her simply to pray and to read the Bible more.

Prodigal

The second group Gail joined was an Exodus affiliate called Prodigal Ministries. The ministry leaders were straightforward in their goals. “I was told I may never ‘really’ be healed, but that by staying close to the leaders and others like me, I would be able to resist any temptations and serve God and maybe find a man to marry.”

Prodigal Ministries, like the student accountability group, emphasized prayer and Bible study, but added a new layer specific to the experience of same-sex attraction: blaming one’s parents for one’s orientation.

Gail believes there are multiple reasons why Prodigal Ministries, as well as other Exodus affiliates, focus on blaming parents for homosexuality. “I think it’s because of the faith-based nature of such therapies. If they can’t blame the parents, they would have to blame God... [B]laming the parents creates a sense of lifelong unraveling and conflict. Because we can always revisit that wound, and revisiting wounds was a classic theme in any meetings.”

In Gail’s case, Prodigal leaders also blamed her homosexuality on her history as an abuse survivor. They claimed that as long as she had homosexual desires, her abuser would have power over her. When she would ask why there were abuse survivors who did not have same-sex attractions, they never gave a straightforward answer.

In the middle of her time with Prodigal Ministries, Gail left Cincinnati for an internship in Las Vegas. There, she worked with a Christian counselor who treated her with a technique called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing [EMDR]. The technique was designed to treat trauma survivors. Gail says, “I highly doubt that the creator of it [EMDR] would approve of it being used to de-gay me.”

Gail returned to Cincinnati and resumed her visits to Prodigal Ministries. But one fateful visit proved to be her last.

A Kiss, A Touch

One evening, Gail reported to the group that, not only had she kissed a woman a few days prior, but she found it enjoyable and natural, as well. The group reacted in shock and disgust. They prayed over her. Then a woman stood “in front of the doorway, upon the leader's request, so that I didn't leave until we had prayed and I was shown positive female touch.” The leader had said in prior meetings that one method to overcome homosexual desires was to let “a ‘safe’ former lesbian ‘hold you’ ... I have heard of other survivors experiencing this ‘hold’ therapy through Exodus affiliates.”

Gail broke through the human barricade and never returned to Prodigal Ministries. She says that her logic and reason kicked in that night, and has since forged a new life for herself.

A Woman of Words

It has been twelve years since Gail escaped the Prodigal meeting. She currently serves as executive director of a preschool in Washington, DC. Outside of work, she is a spoken-word artist and has written two books, *Coming Out of the Closet without*

Coming Apart at the Seams and *Enlightened-ish*. Her blog, homospirituality.com, explores both her activism in the ex-gay survivor movement and her spiritual life and practice. She is also co-facilitator for Beyond Ex-Gay, an online resource for ex-gay survivors.

Gail advocates for freedom in spirituality, which she explores broadly in her life. “I practice many forms of spirituality, as they benefit me—Native American spirituality the most, but Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and metaphysical spirituality all take turns as well.” However, she maintains that ex-gay ministries are dangerous cults and must be dealt with accordingly. Only by breaking free and embracing their sexuality can clients find peace. “I believe that defining ourselves by any particular spirituality is actually much more harmful than defining ourselves by our sexuality. Because one is taught and is a choice, and the other is, well, natural.”

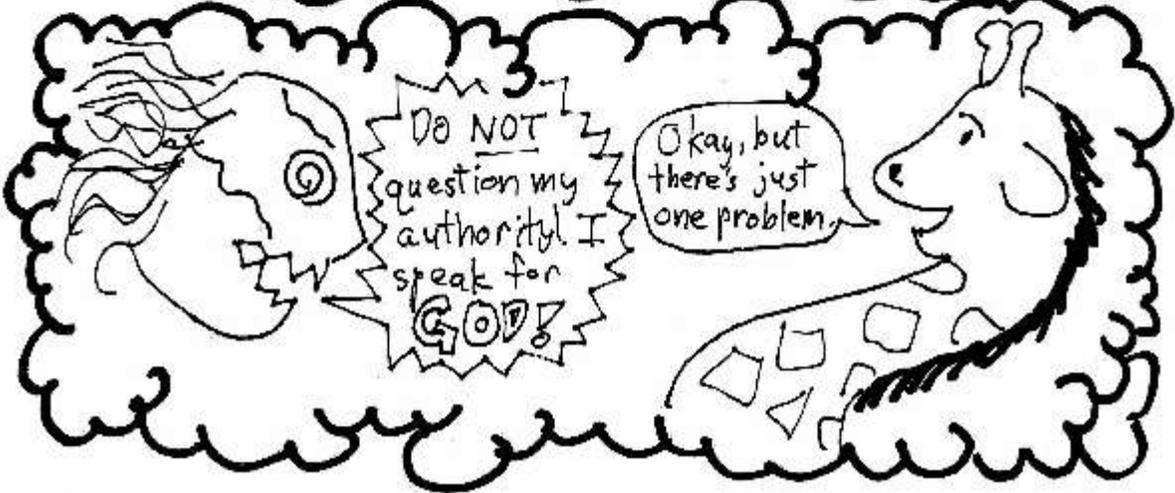
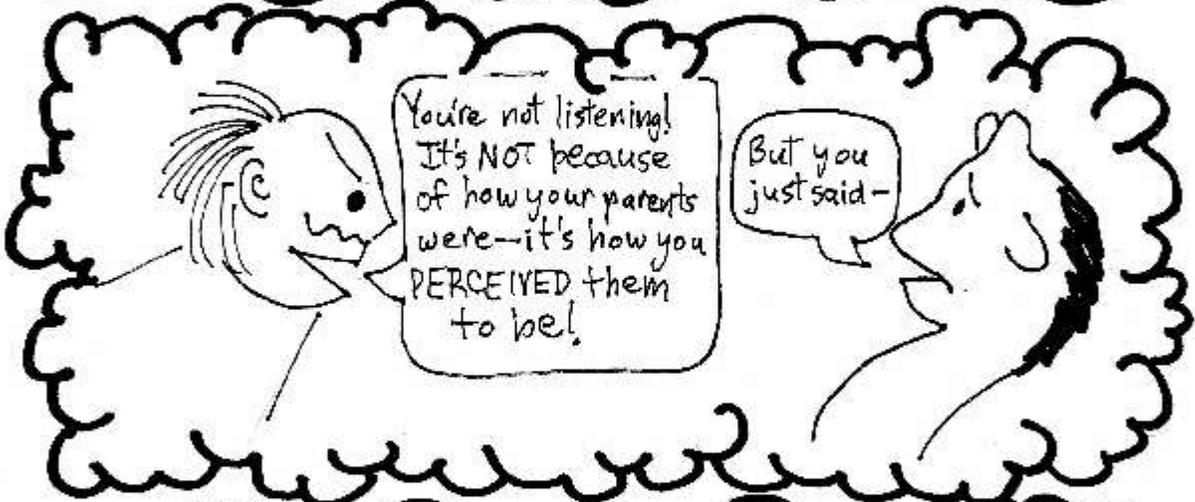
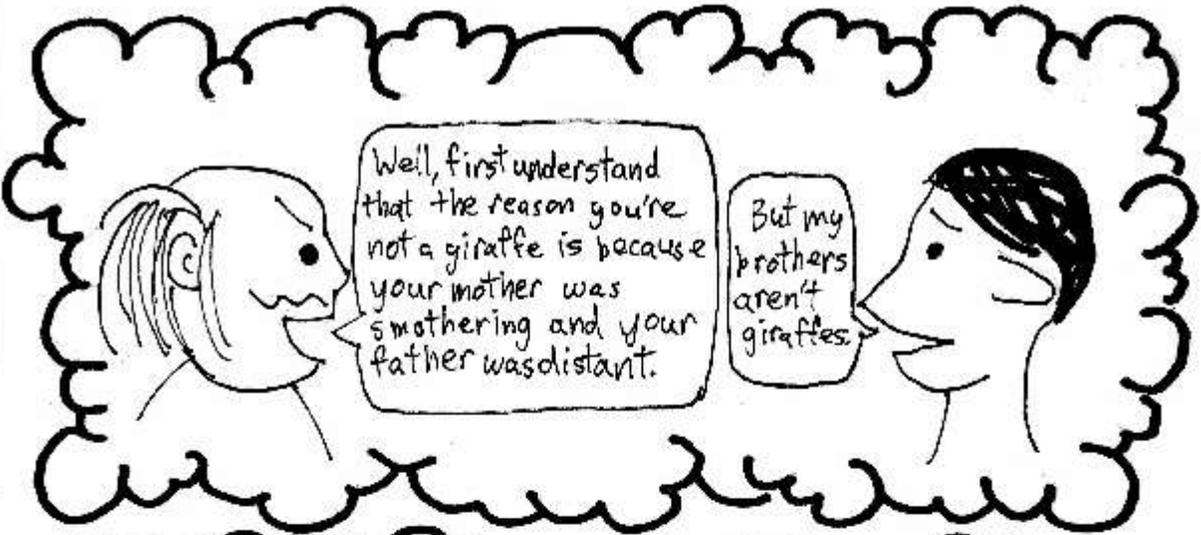
In May 2013, Beyond-Ex Gay released the results of a comprehensive survey of ex-gay survivors. The following is a sample of comments from survey participants:

“My reparative therapy counselor initiated ‘holding therapy’ with me, which progressed into intimate physical activity between us.”

“I was told it was a response to childhood abuses that happened even if I did not remember them.”

“Self-hatred, isolation, depression, and flashbacks continue to be mental health issues.”

“The financial cost of ex-gay ministry is not what I paid during the experience, but the thousands of dollars I have spent for therapy to get over the experience.”



The Children Are Free

It all started with a book.

On the front cover, a glorious sun peering through the clouds. Title: *The Children Are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-sex Relationships*. One of the authors, Jeff Miner, ministered at a “gay church” in Indianapolis, just an hour north. One hundred slim pages that would transform my life forever.

A half-hour from the sidewalk to the front door of the Indiana University GLBT Student Center, a whole fifty feet, terrified that one of the many college students from my church would see me. Another half-hour through the building to the back, when at last my guilt-ridden eyes met those of director Doug Bauder.

He invited me, trembling, into his office, and offered a cup of water for my fear-parched throat. After I settled down, we talked about my life’s journey—how my Bible-college career crumbled as I succumbed to the pressure of the closet, and how I moved back to my hometown, whereupon I transferred to the university to study philosophy. He related well, having grown up in the Moravian Church in North Carolina, even marrying and becoming a pastor before embracing the reality of his homosexuality. Now partnered with a man, he had reconciled the statements “I am a Christian” and “I am gay”. Doug then lent me *The Children Are Free* to aid me in my journey, and lined up counseling sessions at the center.

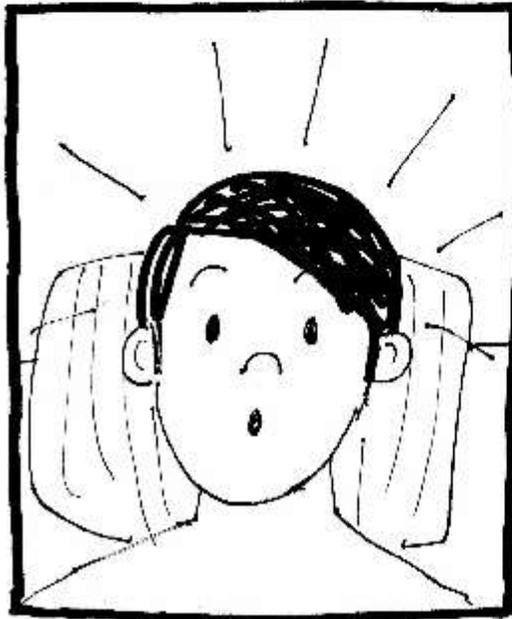
For a while, I lived a paradox. Whilst I met once a week at the GLBT Student Center with a heterosexual female Chinese Buddhist graduate student for counseling, I simultaneously continued my every-other-week sessions with the minister of pastoral counseling at my church. My intellect, breaking free of evangelicalism’s “faith first” ideology, demanded that I hear out both arguments to determine which withstood scrutiny. I discovered in *The Children Are Free* a new

theology, one that promised me more than second-class citizenship (at best) in the kingdom of heaven. I learnt of the concerted effort throughout history to mistranslate words, and to misapply condemnations of temple prostitution to loving relationships. And a plain reading of the healing of the centurion's slave indicated there was something more than a master/slave relationship there.

I offered my pastor/counselor a hypothetical scenario: I would continue attending the church, but renounce both the claim that I was turning into a heterosexual and the need to do so—yet I would remain celibate and would not date. He told me that, were this the case, the church would be compelled both to welcome me and to condemn my course of action. I sat there, thinking of all the nudge-and-wink premarital (heterosexual) sex and alcoholism in the congregation that I was expected to tolerate, and replied that the sort of unequal relationship he suggested was unlivable. It was the last I set foot in that church.

Ultimately I settled into a gay-friendly Lutheran congregation, not knowing at first it was where Doug worshipped. I relocated to Minnesota six months thereafter, and since then have sojourned from Lutheranism to Quakerism to Unitarian-Universalism to atheism, ever in the pursuit of truth, always seeking the path of integrity and the ability to live with myself.

For ten years I tried to turn into a heterosexual—or a giraffe, which was just as likely and just as necessary. I can never regain that lost decade, but I learnt how to be who I am, which is of infinitely greater value.



Revelations

“I no longer see homosexuality as an addiction. But we were in the mindset of homosexual behavior as sin. Therefore we believed that the sin of homosexual behavior could be overcome, people could gain victory over that kind of behavior, just like alcohol, or drugs.”

Love In Action



At the age of 19, John Smid married his first wife and together had two daughters. But at 24, he divorced his wife and came out as a gay man. By age 30, he changed his views once again, embarking on a journey to renounce homosexuality and pursue a heterosexual life. He married his second wife and began a career under the aegis of Exodus.

In 1987, John assumed his first role in Love In Action, an Exodus affiliate, as a house leader. “Up until 2000, clients would come to the ministry for up to two or three years. They would go to group teachings and meetings several evenings a week while working a regular full time job during the day. They would live in one of the LIA [Love In Action] houses with others who were in the program. In 2000 we changed the program to be a three month daytime program. The clients didn’t work a job but instead attended groups and events during the daytime five days a week...It was designed very similarly to a chemical dependency rehab program.”

And like a rehab program, Love In Action residents had many rules to abide by. “No

FI’s (False Images). This included anything that connected to gay behavior, and also no secular music or entertainment, books, etc. Very stringent control over times and schedules. We had a list of group norms for all of the group activities that had to be followed. No contact with outsiders until the counselor approved the contact to resume.”

John rose through the ranks of Love In Action, becoming director in 1990, a role he served in for 18 years. His status within Exodus International improved as well—he was on the board of directors from 1990 to 1995 and again from 2002 to 2008.

Looking back, John says that, despite his place of prestige and honor in evangelical circles, his private life was much darker. “...I had been living in deeply rooted shame for thirty years. I had been impacted by legalism in my faith and had lost myself.” That inner conflict ultimately shook the core of his life, his ministry, and Exodus itself.

In the Public Eye

Love In Action came to national attention in 2005 thanks to a young client named Zach Stark. Stark, who was 16 at the time, posted a video to MySpace in which he voiced his fears of entering a program called Refuge “Refuge was a day program we developed for underage minors. It was a two-week program with groups and writing projects to help a teen talk about their homosexuality and to help them see the dangers in following it to acting upon it. If their two weeks was successful and the client wanted to extend it we would go another six weeks with them.”

Surprisingly, Zach acclimated to the program and completed it. According to John, “Zach did all of his assignments and didn’t appear to hate being in the program so

he extended to eight weeks... Refuge clients got a lot of personal attention, allowed to talk freely about their lives, and had others alongside them in the program. The program itself wasn't that horrible. But today, I believe the context of the program was deeply flawed... [W]e were doing something terribly wrong."

A Crack in the Armor

As the video went viral, protestors gathered outside Love In Action headquarters in Memphis. One of the protestors, Morgan Fox, began holding discussions with John. "He was a man of deep integrity, kindness, and authentic. I had to take notice of him since he was a gay man that blew my internal stereotypes."

This relationship revolutionized both Love In Action and John himself. "Due to my growing trust in Morgan, I became honest about how I saw the Refuge program's flaws. It allowed me the opportunity to talk that through with him... After the protest, our staff became disjointed and started to split. The internal problems got bigger and bigger and I couldn't find a solution to resolve them. In 2007 I took a sabbatical of five weeks because I had to get away. During the time off I knew I had to leave." As to his own life, "I think [my friendship with Morgan] began to crack the armor some."

"The True Me"

After resigning from Love In Action in spring 2008, John met two gay Christians, Michael Bussee and Todd Ferrell. "These two men impacted me as much or more than Morgan Fox. I discovered gay men of faith who had reconciled their sexuality and their belief in God."

Bussee and Ferrell aided John in coming to terms with his sexuality. "I knew I was attracted to men throughout my ex-gay years. But I was trying as hard as I could to keep this suppressed and to be faithful to my marriage. I was following and obeying all that I taught was right."

However, change didn't happen overnight. John gave the matter much thought, and his continued interactions with gay Christians evolved his opinions. "In 2011 I began to see gay people totally differently and found a love and respect for gay people. I began to encourage them in their faith. But in 2012, it became very personal for me. I came out again, as a gay man. I became honest with myself."

"As I rediscovered the true me... I realized I had used ministry and marriage to cover up the deeply rooted shame... I decided to no longer wound [my wife] or myself through a marriage that was not much more than compatible roommates." Now reconciled with his now-ex-wife and grown daughters, John maintains relationships with both fellow gay Christians and Exodus leaders, and in the process has discovered peace, reconciliation, and hope.

Beyond Ex-Gay Survey Statistics

22.4 Mean age at which participants began ex-gay therapy

6 years 10 months Mean duration in ex-gay therapy

47 Percentage of participants who said ex-gay therapy "harmed a lot" or "devastated my life"

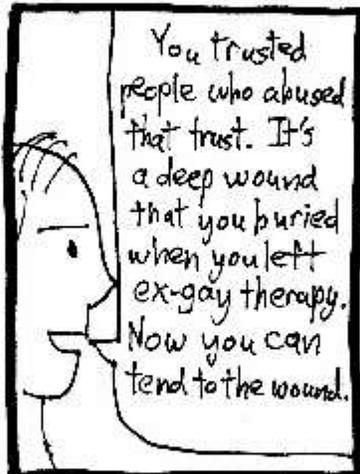
27 Percentage of participants who say they still feel the harmful effects of ex-gay therapy "a lot" or "all the time"

Following the economic collapse of 2007, donations to Exodus International nosedived, and the value of their new facility in Orlando evaporated. Public opinion regarding homosexuality also shifted dramatically. Massachusetts first legalized same-sex civil marriage in 2003, and by late 2013, thirteen states and the District of Columbia followed suit.

In January 2012, Exodus president Alan Chambers made a surprise appearance at the Gay Christian Network annual conference in Orlando, where he confessed that 99.9% of clients don't change orientation and that he believed there would be gay Christians in heaven. These remarks brought about a schism in Exodus. Several leaders left the organization for its alleged abandonment of Christian virtues and formed Restored Hope Network. The new organization held its second national conference in June 2013 and had about 100 attendees.

In April 2013, journalist Lisa Ling filmed a follow-up to her 2010 documentary, *Pray the Gay Away?*, as a response to criticisms that the previous feature treated Alan Chambers and Exodus too softly, and didn't include the stories of self-proclaimed "ex-gay survivors" as rebuttal. In the new feature, *God and Gays*, Chambers issued a formal apology community for the harmful effects of Exodus's work. This time, ex-gay survivors, including Michael Bussee and Gail Dickert, confronted Chambers, sharing their stories of abuse and calling him to account for the damage his organization had wrought.

On June 19, 2013, one day before the Ling feature aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network, Alan Chambers announced at the annual Exodus International conference that the organization was shutting its doors, and that he was launching a new initiative. Called Speak. Love., its mission statement is, "We serve in our pluralistic culture by hosting thoughtful and safe conversations about faith, gender, and sexuality; and partnering with others to establish trust, reduce fear, and inspire hope." Many ex-gay survivors, amongst them Bussee and Dickert, remain skeptical of Speak. Love.'s intent.



Bibliography and Credits

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5-6

Profile: Bussee, Michael. Skype interview. 2 July 2013.

Photo: Courtesy of Michael Bussee

8-9

Profile: Dickert, Gail. Instant-messaging interview. 9 June 2013.

Photo: Courtesy of Gail Dickert.

Survey quotes: Rix, Jallen. "400 Ex-Gay Survivors Document Harm of Reparative Therapy." *Beyond Ex-Gay*. Beyond Ex-Gay. n.d. Web. 17 July 2013.

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Photo: Courtesy of John Smid.

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Note: The information in the essays on pages 2 and 16 either came from my interview with Michael Bussee (see above) or is common knowledge within the ex-gay survivor community. Readers who wish to learn more about the history of ex-gay ministries and the ex-gay survivor movement may consult the following sites: beyondexgay.com, truthwinsout.org, boxturtlebulletin.com.