

In 1973, self-described “former homosexuals” Frank Worthen and John Evans joined with Christian counselor Kent Philpott to establish the first evangelical ministry to “reform” homosexuals, Love in Action.¹ Three years later, at the first national, “ex-gay” conference, attended by over 60 ministry workers, ministry leaders formed a coalition of reorientation ministries in order to amplify the message that gay people could experience “freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.”² This new interdenominational parachurch umbrella organization became the most influential evangelical ex-gay organization with over 250 ministry affiliates in North America at its peak in early 2000s.³

Beginning with Love in Action in 1973, ex-gay ministries asserted that “change is possible” for same-sex attraction Christians through a combination of personal choice, supernatural intervention, and intensive conversion therapy: a form of faith-based psychotherapy focused on systematically addressing what were thought to be the formative issues — for example, childhood sexual trauma or a lack of healthy bonding with a same-gender parent — that underlay same sex attraction. In 1991, David, an aspiring “overcomer,” wrote about what he learned at Hope Ministries in the late 1980s: “Low self-esteem leads to gender emptiness, which leads to gender attraction, which leads to sexual attraction, reinforcement, and homosexual identification.” As the ex-gay leader explained the stages of development and maladjustment,

¹ Tom Waidzunus, *The Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-Gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 78. In 1976, Love in Action inaugurated the nation’s first “ex-gay” residential ministry.

² Christine M. Robinson and Sue E. Spivey, “Exodus International,” World Religions and Spirituality Project, May 24, 2020, <https://wrludreels.org/2020/05/24/exodus-international/>. This umbrella organizations was named Exodus because heterosexual ministry leader Robbi Kenney felt that “homosexuals finding freedom reminds me of the children of Israel leaving the bondage of Egypt and moving towards the Promised Land” (Ibid).

³ Ibid. In this essay, “evangelical” denotes a Protestant who subscribes to the necessity of conversion, the centrality of the Bible, the saving work of Jesus on the cross, and the importance of sharing the gospel and doing good deeds. This formulation is known as Bebbington’s Quadrilateral. This work refers to the dominant strain of theologically conservative evangelicalism. Starting in the 1980s, white evangelicals became intertwined with a certain brand of conservative Republican politics for many, though by no means all, self-identified evangelicals. A small minority of Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians identified and continue to identify as evangelical. However, this work addresses the dominant manifestation relevant to same-sex attraction in Christianity—Protestant evangelicalism.

David wrote that he wanted to scream, “‘Yes! Yes!’ for I could identify the feelings of each of the stages he was describing.” Reflecting on this time in his life, he added, “the most important message I needed to hear was, I wasn’t born this way, therefore change is possible.”⁴ Like David, most ex-gays were (at least initially) hopeful that by persisting in their “program of healing,” they could become heterosexual. For many ex-gays this meant that conversion therapy held the key to eventually accessing what they understood to be a normal, healthy family life, something their gayness was thought to preclude.

Along with describing the causes of homosexuality, ex-gay ministries and authors laid out steps to partner with God in re-heterosexualization. In *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women* (1993), ex-gay evangelical Bob Davies and heterosexual Christian counselor Lori Rentzel explained that “healing” comes through processing past woundedness, which serves to reorient one’s affections toward Christ. People struggling with same sex desire, they explained, must learn to obey God, engage in spiritual warfare, bring their thoughts captive, identify triggers, sever ties with the past, and break addictive patterns.⁵ Specifically, ex-gay spiritual and psychological interventions and strategies included pastoral counseling, spiritual warfare/exorcism, healing prayer, fasting, “12 stepping” via Homosexuals Anonymous, group therapy, live-in discipleship programs, scripture memorization, “pursuing godly role models,” gender conformity, and forming healthy same sex friendships.⁶

⁴ William Consiglio, *Homosexual No More: Practical Strategies for Christians Overcoming Homosexuality*, (Illinois: SP Publications, Inc., 1991), 189.

⁵ Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 67-83. The phrase “bring thoughts captive” refers to 2 Corinthians 10:5. Evangelicals have commonly interpreted this passage as a command to take control of their thoughts, bringing them in line with what is true and good.

⁶ *Ibid*, 98- 106. In addition, Davies and Rentzel recommended that anyone seeking deliverance from homosexual desire should regularly do the following: read their Bible and pray, listen to Christian music, read Christian books and magazines, and watch uplifting Christian videos (*Ibid*, 90-92). They also wrote about the importance of “pursuing godly role models,” “embracing our gender identity,” and forming healthy same sex friendships (*Ibid*, 98-106).

Most ex-gay ministries asserted that being gay was an acquired identity, neither natural nor innate. Naturally, an acquired identity — based in trauma and distorted coping responses — could be corrected. In fact, the true and essential intrinsic identity of every human, ex-gay leaders taught, was rooted in being a “born again” children of God, not in sexual attraction.⁷ “Our identity in Christ is not defined by the things that tempt us, explained Davies.”⁸ In other words, same-sex attracted people could reject their “gay identity” as false, affirming instead their status as “new creations” in Christ.⁹ Identification with Christ trumped any and all other components of the self. As ex-gay author Mario Bergner wrote about his identity after conversion: “No longer was my identity that of a homosexual. I was now free to embark, to cross over, onto the glorious road of identification with Christ.”¹⁰ Ex-gay ministries reinforced the common evangelical belief that “gay” and “Christian” were mutually exclusive descriptors.

Longing to become “normal,” desiring to offer hope to others, and feeling communal pressure to successfully reorient their sexuality, ex-gays shared their testimonies of spiritual and sexual conversion. From the 1980s to 2000s, numerous churches, Christian universities, parachurch ministries, and Christian media organizations amplified these stories of deliverance via magazine articles, newsletters, memoirs, self-help books, cassette tapes, church presentations, conferences, radio interviews, and advertisements. Ex-gay ministries and the broader evangelical establishment framed these testimonies as living proof that an identity rooted in Christ provided the power to overcome homosexuality. These stories persuaded many who heard them, drawing more same-sex attracted people to seek out reorientation ministries.

⁷ A “born again” Christian refers to someone who believes they have undergone a spiritual rebirth after praying to Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and accepting salvation.

⁸ Davies and Rentzel, *Coming Out of Homosexuality*, 95.

⁹ This language references 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV): “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

¹⁰ Mario Bergner, *Setting Love in Order: Hope and Healing for the Homosexual* (Grand Rapids: Hamewith Books, 1995), 31.

However, what exactly it meant to be ex-gay was opaque. The label ex-gay contained ontological, spiritual, and practical significance. It reflected both a new (or renewed) core identity, a divine deliverance, and an intentional change in behavior. It meant both the miraculous intervention of God and a daily choice to turn away from “homosexual desires” and toward “holiness”. Despite the fact that some ex-gays acknowledged that they were choosing to modify their behaviors and had not yet experienced a full reorientation of affections/desires, declarations like that of ex-gay leader Jeff Konrad, “I don’t have to be gay and you don’t have to be either,” implying the ability to choose and experience complete orientation change, were what most people gay and straight alike heard and remembered.¹¹

The ex-gay movement reached its zenith in the late 1990s and 2000s. Love Won Out Conferences (Focus on the Family) and Freedom Conferences (Exodus International) attracted ex-gay attendees from around the world. The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), an influential secular non-profit founded in 1992, conducted research in defense of orientation change and supported therapists who provided conversion or reparative therapy. Wealthy evangelicals funded ex-gay ad campaigns in national publications including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and other prominent national newspapers.¹² Mainstream magazines and talk shows, recognizing the public’s curiosity about ex-gays, ran features on the movement and its prominent figures.

However, during this period, the movement was also under tremendous stress. Opposition to the pathologizing of homosexuality continued grow within various professional organizations.

¹¹ Jeff Konrad, *You Don’t Have To Be Gay: Hope and Freedom For Males Struggling With Homosexuality or For Those Who Know of Someone Who Is* (Hawaii: Pacific Publishing House, 1987), 15.

¹² For example, one 1998 ad run in the *New York Times* featured prominent ex-gay spokesperson Anne Paulk along with the following caption: “wife, mother, and former lesbian.” The tag line read: “I’m living proof that Truth can set you free.” John Paulk and Anne Paulk, *Love Won Out: How God’s Love Helped Two People Leave Homosexuality and Find Each Other* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 95.

In 1998, the American Psychological Association published a position statement declaring official opposition to conversion therapy.¹³ Nevertheless, some mental health experts continued to believe that homosexuality was a treatable mental disorder.

In addition, from the movement's inception, stories of ex-gays who fell in love and voluntarily left or were expelled from ministry for moral lapses disrupted the orientation change narrative. For example, Michael Bussee (an Exodus founder) and Gary Cooper (an Exodus leader) fell in love with each other and left the organization in 1979.¹⁴ In 1990, Darlene Bogle, a regular Exodus International spokesperson and teacher, fell in love with a woman who had attended one of her sessions.¹⁵ When their budding relationship was discovered, Darlene was expelled from Exodus.¹⁶ Scandals like these indicated to some evangelicals that perhaps change was not always as possible as they had been led to believe.

Furthermore, many gay people who left the movement considered their involvement in ex-gay ministries to be a source of significant trauma. Some publicly exposed spiritual, emotional, and sometimes sexual abuse at the hands of ex-gay ministry workers, calling themselves "ex-ex-gay."¹⁷ For instance, in 1993, John Evans, co-founder of Love in Action, publicly repudiated the movement after his friend, who had sunk into despair over his lack of

¹³ Waidzuans, 93.

¹⁴ Cooper and Bussee were life partners until Cooper's death in 1991.

¹⁵ Darlene Bogle, "My Exodus from Exodus," *Beyond Ex-Gay*, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://beyondexgay.com/narratives/darlene.html>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As people left the ex-gay movement, they resolved the tension between their sexual orientation and their religious convictions in a variety of different ways. Some remained evangelical and embraced celibacy. Some migrated to liberal mainline denominations where they could practice their faith as an out gay person. Others accepted their sexuality and subsequently lost or rejected their Christian faith. A few embraced their sexual orientation and continued to believe in God but no longer practiced their faith in a religious community. A few who had married remained with their opposite sex spouse though most of these marriages ended in divorce. Some continued to identify as ex-gay and work in or attend ex-gay ministries. Anne Paulk, John Paulk's ex-wife, serves as Executive Director of Restored Hope Network and continues to refer to herself as an ex-lesbian.

sexual orientation change, committed suicide. Stories like these of the harm done to people and families undermined the ex-gay movement.¹⁸

As promises of orientation change grew increasingly untenable, many ex-gay leaders shifted the way they framed their ministries. In *God's Grace and the Homosexual Next Door* (2006), Exodus Vice-President Mike Goeke, who had lived as a gay man for a time before returning to his wife and children, acknowledged that “unrealistic expectations easily breed and grow doubt.”¹⁹ He added that forming an identity in Christ and living a life of holiness — not becoming heterosexual — should be the goal of the same-sex attracted Christian.²⁰

During the 2000s, scientific research continued to undermine the ex-gay movement's promise of orientation change. In 2007, Mark Yarhouse and evangelical psychologist Stanton Jones published a study which indicated that while some ex-gays saw changes in their self-reported identity and behaviors, changes in attractions were negligible.²¹ This research prompted more ex-gay ministries to change the way they framed change, shifting their focus to sexual orientation management. In 2009, the APA issued a report stating that there is “no evidence for the efficacy” of sexual orientation change attempts, adding that such efforts are “potentially harmful.”²²

¹⁸ Ex-ex-gay activism took off in the 2000s via internet communities like *Beyond Ex-gay*, founded by self-described “ex-gay survivors” (“The History of Beyond Ex-Gay,” *Beyond Ex-Gay*, accessed March 15, 2021, <http://beyondegay.com/history.html>.)

¹⁹ Mike Goeke, “Is Change Possible?” In *God's Grace and the Homosexual Next Door*, ed. Alan Chambers (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 68.

²⁰ Goeke, 69-76.

²¹ Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 368-370. Though this initial study was not peer reviewed, it received widespread praise. Surprisingly, it was funded by Exodus International. In 2013, Jones and Yarhouse published a peer-reviewed version of this work titled “A Longitudinal Study of Attempted Religiously Mediated Sexual Orientation Change,” in *The Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*.

²² American Psychological Association, *Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2009). In the wake of this report, California and New Jersey banned conversion therapy for minors (Waidzunus, 4).

Alan Chambers, who served as President of Exodus for over a decade, signaled the demise of the ex-gay movement at the 2012 Gay Christian Network Conference, declaring: “The majority of people that I have met, and I would say the majority, meaning 99.9% of them, have not experienced a change in their orientation.”²³ Soon after, Chambers issued an apology to the LGBTQ community for the harm caused by ministries like Exodus and for the “shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn’t change.”²⁴ Exodus International officially ceased operation in 2013.

The evangelical ex-gay movement was fatally undermined by the lack of successful orientation change. Nevertheless, several smaller umbrella organizations, such as Restored Hope Network and Hope for Wholeness took its place.²⁵ However, the movement, as such, was dead.

²³ Alan Chambers quoted in Warren Throckmorton, “Alan Chambers: 99.9% Have Not Experienced a Change in Their Orientation,” January 9, 2012, <https://www.wthrockmorton.com/2012/01/09/alan-chambers-99-9-have-not-experienced-a-change-in-their-orientation/>.

²⁴ Ibid. See Chambers’ *My Exodus: From Fear to Grace* for a detailed account of his ideological transformation. Alan Chambers, now a clothier, remains married to Leslie, his wife of 23 years, despite continuing to be primarily attracted to the same sex.

²⁵ Post-Exodus, ex-gay ministries—now existing on the fringes of American evangelicalism—are usually associated with fundamentalist or Pentecostal denominations. Pentecostalism is an evangelical movement that emphasizes experiencing God personally through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and healing prayer.

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