

# Op-ed: Ex-Gay Isn't Exactly Over

Is the 'new' Exodus International a kinder, gentler 'ex-gay' ministry?



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In the past few days, many have celebrated the headline “Exodus International Closes Down.” And we should rightfully thank Alan Chambers for his confession that “ex-gay therapy” does not work and for his apology for the “pain and hurt” it has cost so many of us. I saw Alan issue his apology at the last Exodus conference. He was sincere and contrite. Even if you don’t trust Alan’s motives, you have to admit that his confession and apology are a giant step forward in undermining the credibility of those who continue to hold out the false promises made by the ex-gay movement.

On the other hand, we should not allow ourselves to believe that the ex-gay movement died with the closure of Exodus. Quite the contrary. Alan’s apology has motivated ex-gay loyalists to hunker down and commit to riding out the storm, reorganizing, and eventually reemerging with an even more militant dedication to their belief that that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people can and must be “cured.”

The Exodus (ex-gay) faithful are now uniting under a new name, the Restored Hope Network, currently being organized by Anne Paulk. She admits proudly that this will be an ex-gay ministry. In her online testimony she describes the network’s “cure” for us in these words: “Jesus got hold of me and that was the end of my homosexuality.” Paulk is one of several ex-gays who participated in a national ad campaign and what was probably the highest moment of visibility for their movement, appearing on the cover of *Newsweek* with her (now openly gay) husband, John, in 1998.

The board of this old nightmare in new trappings includes the same laundry list of fundamentalist leaders whose names are associated with decades of biblical misuse, scientific ignorance, and harm to LGBT people: Matt Barber, Robert Gagnon, Joseph Nicolosi, Leanne Payne, Janet Parshall, Mat Staver, and 11 other megachurch pastors and right-wing organizers. The terrible suffering caused by Exodus and the failure of its ex-gay therapies flows directly and indirectly out of the false teachings of these fundamentalist Christian leaders.

These hard-core ex-gay promoters really believe that those who “give in” to their “temptations” will find “their lives ruined and their souls damned.” My worst fear is that the more than 250 ex-gay ministries located in the U.S. and 17 other countries that were once associated with Exodus will simply sign up with the Hope Restored Network instead of following Alan Chambers’s example.

Let's not kid ourselves. These local ex-gay ministries know that their therapies do not work and that they personally are responsible for suffering and even death. One need only look at the suicide rates among LGBT youth rejected by their families, communities, and houses of worship to see the impact.

The real difference between Paulk's Restored Hope Network and Chambers's new Reduce Fear organization is their ultimate goal for LGBT people. The old word "cure" is out. "Change" is in. Consider the Restored Hope Network as the hard-core "changers" who are committed to the failed methods of Exodus and Reduce Fear as the soft-core "changers" who practice "change lite."

At the recent Exodus Freedom Conference, Chambers's own testimony inadvertently described "change lite." The first step for the soft-core "changers" is to admit that that they cannot "cure" you, that no matter how hard you try your feelings will still exist.

Chambers also admitted quite openly that he still "struggles" with his desires, and in deciding not to "act on those desires," he describes the second step toward soft-core change. Alan and the other soft-core changers don't describe same-sex attraction or sexuality as sin (that's the hard-core way), but they do cling to the old notion that the only sexual relationships in keeping with God's plan for are those between one man with one woman.

It's very likely that Chambers's Reduce Fear ministry will offer loving counsel to those who struggle against their sexual orientation. It is also likely that it will help churches organize small groups for dialogue (not unlike Alcoholics Anonymous's group meetings) and publish new materials for soft-core change that emphasize mercy and not judgment.

But just beneath that loving, nonjudgmental surface there remains, whether spoken or not, the belief that change is still the ideal outcome. Which makes this all the more insidious and dangerous. Chambers's change will not call for LGBT people to become heterosexual but for sexually active individuals to become self-accepting but celibate lesbian or gay persons.

For those who choose not to remain celibate or fail at celibacy, the group will hold up as an example Chambers's loving relationship with his wife, Leslie. Soft-core changers will teach that sexually active lesbian or gay people should enter into "traditional" opposite-sex marriages or into a relationship with an opposite-sex fellow "struggler." This sounds a lot like the apostle Paul's unfortunate advice that "if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (I Cor. 7:9).

Here's the problem. Alan Chambers and Anne Paulk are different only in degree. As long as change is involved in a ministry, it remains an ex-gay ministry. Hard-core change demands that our natural sexual orientation be cured or at least denied. Soft-core change asks gently and lovingly (although it does not demand) that we live unnatural lives by refusing to be the people we were created to be.

Alan and Leslie Chambers are obviously in love. It is perfectly appropriate for Alan to decide that being married to a heterosexual woman is worth holding his homosexuality in

check. But it is not perfectly appropriate for him to set himself up as an example on which to build an entire ministry.

If his Reduce Fear ministry would say, "It's OK to accept your homosexuality as a gift from God. It's OK to be in a loving same-sex relationship. If that's your decision, Reduce Fear will support you in every way," then it could also say, "But if you decide to struggle against your orientation in order to stay in a loving relationship with a heterosexual spouse, we will support you in that decision as well."

As long as Alan Chambers even implies that not accepting your sexual orientation is the better way, he has not ended his ex-gay ministry. He has just reorganized it as a kinder, gentler form of Exodus. I'm afraid that one day he will have to confess that his new kinder, gentler change methods didn't work either and apologize again for the suffering and death he and his ministry have caused.

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