

Statement on Sexual Orientation and Conversion Therapies

by Mark Pope, Ed.D.

First, let me present my qualifications to speak on these matters. I am a Professor of Counseling and Family Therapy at the University of Missouri – St. Louis. I am a Fellow of both the American Psychological Association and American Counseling Association and a past-president of the American Counseling Association. I am a licensed psychologist in Missouri and Illinois and a licensed professional counselor in Missouri. As the author of five books, dozens of chapters in books as well as articles in professional journals, and a presenter at over 100 symposia at professional meetings of psychologists and professional counselors – many of these on issues related to sexual orientation, I have been invited here to speak briefly to you regarding the upcoming “Love Won Out” Conference to be held in St. Louis on February 25, 2006.

I think that it is very important to differentiate between the organizers of this conference (“Love Won Out”) and the attendees. I want to acknowledge that over the years thousands of gay Christians (this is a Christian conference) have found themselves struggling with the issue of whether God accepts them just as they are, or if a change in sexual orientation is required for salvation. The apparent contradiction between faith and sexuality has taken a high toll on many sincere Christians who have spent considerable time, energy, and money trying to change, often with no favorable results. Outward behavior may be modified, but the same-sex attractions remain. The attendees, whether they are those who are questioning their sexual orientation or their family and friends who love them, are hurting and seeking truth. Unfortunately, they will not find it at this conference.

The organizers of this conference state that homosexuality is both “preventable and treatable.” They are trying to confuse science with religion. Like the anti-evolution religious fanatics who created “creation science” as cover for their theological beliefs, the practitioners of so-called “conversion or reparative therapies” have little if any data to support their claims.

They try to cloak themselves in the language of science (“prevention and treatment”) to give credence to their message. But you can’t prevent or treat something that isn’t a disease (Bayer, 1981; Haldeman, 1994).

The claims of these “ex-gay” ministries has been repeatedly repudiated by authoritative and credible scientific groups. Not one such professional society supports their work. The American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Counseling Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Health Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics – all have issued strongly worded admonitions combating the idea that homosexuality 1) is a disease, 2) can be effectively treated, and 3) even needs to be treated. The

main approach to counseling with gay and lesbian people is help them accept and love themselves (Pope & Barret, 2002).

Even before 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association eliminated homosexuality as a mental disorder (Bayer, 1981), repeated studies by top mental health researchers confirmed it was virtually impossible to change someone's sexual orientation, even through behavioral therapy measures such as electric shock treatments and pain therapy (aversive conditioning), hypnosis, psychotropic medications, clinical/religious individual and group therapy, and others had been employed (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Spitzer, 2003).

The American Psychological Association passed a 1997 resolution stating that "that there is no sound evidence on the efficacy of 'reparative therapy', which seeks to 'cure' homosexuals"

In response to a similar "ex-gay" advertising campaign that we are experiencing here in St. Louis, the American Psychiatric Association also released a December 1998 position statement. "The potential risks of 'reparative therapy' are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior, since therapist alignment with societal prejudices against homosexuality may reinforce self-hatred already experienced by the patient."

Furthermore, none of these ex-gay groups followup with any of the participants in their therapy, eliminating any statistics on their success ratio.

Several founders of "ex-gay" ministries, including Exodus International, one of the sponsoring organizations for this "Love Won Out" conference, have since renounced their behavior, and denounced the ministries and their methods (Besen, 2003).

Jeffrey G. Ford, M.A., a licensed psychotherapist, was formerly the director of Outpost, a Minnesota-based ex-gay ministry. After years of traumatically forcing others, already unfairly stigmatized by society, through his program, Ford quit his job, came out of the closet, and debunked Outpost.

"In a society that denies basic human rights and allows the heterosexual majority power to determine our validity," Ford stated, "it is understandable that people would want to escape that kind of persecution. It saddens me deeply to watch as people deny their true nature and strive to find love and acceptance by conforming to the conditions and demands of those who hate and fear that very part of them that is the core of their being. ... In the five years I was directly involved with the change movement, I do not believe that I saw one genuine change or shift in sexual orientation."

The organizers of this ex-gay conference will not provide you with data about their success rate in changing an individual's sexual orientation. And they will not tell you the story of the founders of their group (Exodus International) -- Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, who began the prominent "ex-gay" ministry in the mid-1970s,

eventually they left their jobs as co-chairs of Exodus International, divorced their respective wives, and celebrated their own gay marriage ceremony. Until Cooper's untimely death in 1991, they were among the "ex-gay" movement's most vocal opponents. Their ex-wives now run Exodus.

Dr. John Money (1990), a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University who has conducted decades of research on the origins of sexual orientation in human beings said: "The concept of voluntary choice is as much in error (as applied to sexual orientation) as in its application to handedness or to native language. You do not choose your native language as a preference, even though you are born without it. You assimilate it into a brain pre-natally made ready to receive a native language from those who constitute your primate troop and who speak that language to you and listen to you when you speak it. Once assimilated through the ears into the brain, a native language becomes securely locked in -- as securely as if it has been phylogenetically preordained to be locked in pre-natally by a process of genetic pre-determinism or by the determinism of fetal hormonal or other brain chemistries. So also with sexual status or orientation, which, whatever its genesis, also may become assimilated and locked into the brain as mono sexually homosexual or heterosexual or as bisexually a mixture of both" (pp. 43-44).

Sexual orientation is more like a trait than a state, more like a person's rather immutable personality than just simply a behavior. "It's like being left-handed and having someone try to change 'those poor left-handed people to the true and correct trait of humanity: right-handed.' We know that, when that has been attempted, it just seems to cause more problems than it solves. Sure, you can learn this new behavior. Sure, you are more acceptable outwardly to society, but now you get these little unconscious tremors that you never had before and can't now figure out where they came from" (Pope, 2005) It never feels natural. You might get real good at it, but you always want to go back to what's natural for you – being left handed. It's an identity, it's a trait, it's a personality characteristic, it's core.

What the organizers of this conference are really trying to do with this type of conference is to prevent people from discovering who they really are, because the organizers of this conference are, at their core, anti-science, anti-sex, and anti-freedom. They really do want people to suffer, as they think that suffering is good for you and that you will be a better person if you suffer.

They think that all things are possible through faith in Jesus. Note "possible." But they won't talk about the statistical probability of a person changing their sexual orientation, giving up their same-sex attraction and fully adopting the mantle of a fully functioning heterosexually-oriented person.

The damage they are doing to all gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (especially young people) and those who love them is huge. By giving them false hope, they create more pain and suffering for those whom they claim to want to help.

And even worse outcomes have been documented.

Dr. Ariel Shidlo and Dr. Michael Schroeder in a 2003 article published in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* surveyed 202 individuals who had participated in sexual orientation conversion interventions. They found that only 4% of those individuals were able to successfully “manage their homosexual behavior,” with over 74% of the group experiencing “significant long-term (psychological) damage from the conversion therapy” (p. 254). They blamed themselves for not being able to change and reported feeling worse than when they originally sought conversion therapy.

After months or even years in conversion therapies, these former ex-gays report that such therapy was not only ineffective in changing their same-sex attractions, but in many cases it did considerable harm to their mental and emotional health. "I've seen too many people come out of it suicidal... they say you have to be a certain way and, if you're not, you're going to Hell. How do you reconcile that?" (Roberts, 1995). Most Christians would find it hard to believe that the ex-gay ministries they support often produce mental and emotional suffering for the individuals involved, but the psychological trauma endured by ex-gays is increasingly being documented in studies, articles, and films.

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