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Evangelical ministry for gay 'cure' closes, apologizes

Kate Simmons | Jun. 26, 2013

Exodus International -- the evangelical Christian ministry that offered a "cure" for homosexuality and shut its doors last week after 37 years -- will be remembered by some as the only community of support they've ever had. To others, it will be remembered as a nightmare of broken promises and unfulfilled expectations.

Exodus was a support group for Christians struggling with sexual orientation, but it also embraced the idea that gays and lesbians could become straight through prayer and counseling.

Exodus president Alan Chambers released a statement [1] June 19 apologizing to the gay community for the suffering inflicted by the organization.

For nearly four decades, Exodus was a leading proponent for reparative therapies as a "cure" for homosexuality. Chambers, who once presented himself as a success case for Exodus' methods, said in his apology that even though he lives happily with his wife and children, he still fights homosexual attraction.

"I conveniently omitted my ongoing same-sex attractions ... they brought me tremendous shame and I hid them in hopes they would go away," Chambers said in his June 19 statement. "I accept these feelings as parts of my life that will likely always be there."

Despite struggling for years to overcome same-sex attractions, the inability do so led many members, including Chambers, to experience additional shame and false hope perpetuated by Exodus' promise to cure them, Chambers said in a June 21 interview with *NCR*.

In an effort to bring resolution, board members have chosen to close Exodus, emancipating themselves from the associations of hurt, pain and oppression that continue to be affiliated with the institution, board member Tony Moore said in a June 20 interview with *NCR*.

The intention of the new organization is to host "safe conversations about gender and sexuality, while partnering with others to reduce fear, inspire hope, and cultivate human flourishing," Chambers said in his statement.

Those conversations cannot take place when arguments and divisions over issues of sexual orientation take precedent -- arguments that usually originate from a place of fear, Chambers told *NCR*.

"What we want to do is not react out of fear but respond in ways that promote peace and respect our fellow man whether we completely agree or not," he said.

Along with advocating that Christians speak up for bully and suicide prevention, member Julie Rodgers said she hopes to see the new organization adopt a different approach to the entire conversation.

"For a long time Exodus' mission was to point people toward Christ and equip the church to really turn gay people into heterosexuals," Rodgers said in a June 21 interview with *NCR*. "I hope this new message is going to be one that creates a safe place within the church and within Christian organizations for people to be really

honest and really real about their questions and about their process -- where they can come and find a safe place of support."

After beginning to participate with Exodus when she was 17 years old, Rodgers spent almost a decade in prayer, trying to overcome her same-sex attractions. Despite ardent intention, she said those attractions have not gone away.

After coming to terms with her sexual orientation, Rodgers approached Chambers about the misplaced focus of the organization. She said Exodus provided a supportive community for her to rely on while going through incredibly painful self-exploration. She said has seen that support overshadowed by the organization's endorsement of reparative therapies.

"The focus was misplaced by concentrating so much on the change of attraction," Rodgers said. "I believe we can promise people that Christ is going to blow them away with how he transforms their hearts and minds and lives, but the Gospel doesn't necessarily promise a change in our circumstances ... especially something like an orientation that we can't necessarily control."

Because of similar personal revelations, other Exodus members supported a change in mission.

Moore came to Exodus after experiencing childhood sexual abuse and feeling tormented by same-sex attractions. He said he came hoping for a quick fix.

"I was expecting some magic formula that was going to change me from gay to straight," Moore told *NCR*.

Instead, Moore found a community of people who were all experiencing distress over the same problems he was confronting -- problems he previously was too ashamed to talk about.

"What they really did for me was offer me a place that I could talk for the first time in my life about what I was experiencing," Moore said. "The openness and the chance to have community with other people who shared my experiences was something I never had before and I was really thankful for that."

Exodus has shut its doors, but some of its members want to see a new organization emerge. The new organization will not offer false hope for a "cure," Moore said, but would be a place where Christians struggling with their faith and sexuality can find a safe place to be in community together.

"Rather than focusing on changing a person's sexuality, our focus has to be on creating a relationship between people and Christ," Moore said. "Different churches have different views on who is welcome to the Communion table. When we say, 'Open the door wide,' I mean that everybody is welcome to come and hear the Gospel and participate in the community of believers."

Chambers echoes this idea. "It's my hope that we will be able to create something where [the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community will] feel comfortable to come and be a part," he said.

It would be, he said, a bridge in the discourse between the church and the LGBT community.

"We in the church have really embraced a culture-war mentality -- everything has been about fighting against people and policies. It's time for us to lay down our weapons and to really engage with our fellow human beings across the spectrum and the divide that exists between us," Chambers said. "I think we can work together with people with whom we might disagree with on any number of issues and work toward the common good."

Speaking about his own intentions for the new organization, of which he will remain president, Chambers said despite his beliefs about biblical conviction, he is not out to change anyone's beliefs.

"So often in the church, how we interpret scripture is wielded like a sword [and] frankly, takes a lot of victims," Chambers said. "I think we need to be very careful, as people of faith, when we share our opinions -- no matter what they are -- with people who are vulnerable and people who are listening and who oftentimes feel very marginalized by the church."

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