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Ex-gay? No way, the experts agree

COMMUNITY VIEW

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Despite all scientific evidence to the contrary, many religious conservatives insist that gay people can and must become heterosexual, since they think homosexuality is a sinful choice rather than a human variant.

Ex-gay "reparative therapy" or "conversion therapy" proponents assert that counseling, prayer and sometimes aversion therapy, exorcisms, fasting and lipstick-application seminars for lesbians are sufficient for flipping sexual orientation.

The scientific community, however, resoundingly agrees that sexual orientation cannot be changed, and such "therapies" may in fact be harmful.

The American Medical Association stated, "Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is ... due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment. For this reason, aversion therapy ... is no longer recommended."

The American Academy of Pediatrics warned, "Therapy directed at specifically changing sexual orientation is contraindicated, since it can provoke guilt and anxiety while having little or no potential for achieving changes in orientation."

The American Psychiatric Association went further: "There is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of 'reparative therapy' as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation." And again, "The potential risks of 'reparative therapy' are great, including depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior."

The American Psychological Association agreed: "Medical and mental health professionals also now know that sexual orientation is not a choice and cannot be altered. Groups who try to change the sexual orientation of people through so-called 'conversion therapy' are misguided and run the risk of causing a great deal of psychological harm to those they say they are trying to help."

The "ex-gay ministries" answer these bristling position papers by carefully parsing their definition of success. Rather than sexual orientation transformation resulting in, say, heterosexual marriage, they define success as the ability to resist homosexual urges. Critics see this as temporary suppression of one's sexuality, nothing more.

Also, these groups curiously keep no long-term follow-up records to scientifically validate their success rates, relying only upon anecdotal evidence. That has been problematic, though, as many founders, successive leaders and clients of these organizations have first claimed to be sexually reoriented and then reverted to homosexuality. Such persons often denounce "conversion therapy" as quackery.

But there is evidence that "ex-gay" proponents are becoming even more extremist.

Exodus International, the largest of these groups, was represented by its president, Alan Chambers,

and a board member, Don Schmierer, at an anti-gay hate conference in Uganda this month. The conference promoted such human-rights abuses as forced "ex-gay therapy," life imprisonment for people convicted of homosexuality and the creation of an organization designed to "wipe out" homosexuality in Uganda through police action, forced re-education, life imprisonment and vigilantism. The conference also featured one Scott Lively, who blamed both the Holocaust and the 1994 Rwandan genocide on gays.

Neither Exodus International representative spoke up at the conference to protest any of the recommendations, nor did they denounce the Holocaust revisionist.

Another increasingly shrill and extremist proponent is James Dobson, co-founder of Focus on the Family, a conservative religious ministry. Over the years, Dobson has become obsessed with gay people and believes that one can simply "pray away the gay."

But according to "ex-gay" watchdog group Truth Wins Out, "In the past year alone, Dobson has conflated, purposely misconstrued or cherry-picked research from at least six esteemed academic scholars, who have publicly condemned him for misusing their work." In October 2004, he actually told the *The Daily Oklahoman*, "Homosexuals are not monogamous. They want to destroy the institution of marriage. It will destroy marriage. It will destroy the Earth."

Yikes! Not only are they unscientific, these people are downright scary.

I would especially implore the parents of gay kids everywhere to heed the advice of respected, science-based professionals and avoid exposing your child to the psychologically dangerous "reparative therapies."

Your child may differ from you, but is not broken and does not need repair.
