

Critic Ignores the Whole Truth About Ex-Gays

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"The founder of every ex-gay ministry in America has proved to be an extraordinary failure. The two founders of Exodus International, [the world's largest 'ex-gay' organization], divorced their wives to move in together."

– Wayne Besen, as quoted in an October 8, 2004 article by Natalie Troyer of the *Washington Times*.

The article containing the above quote was entitled, "Film Depicts Gay Reorientation" and discussed the recent documentary *I Do Exist* which explores the lives of people who have changed from gay to straight. However, columnist Wayne Besen, a gay man and ex-gay critic, staked out a different perspective.

He made two claims in this quote: first, that all ex-gay ministry founders have reverted to a homosexual life, and more specifically, that the founders of Exodus International left their wives and became homosexual partners.

The Facts

Are these claims accurate? Let me cut to the chase. Mostly, they are not true. In fact, after investigating the matter, I found that of the original board members of Exodus International, only one reverted to homosexuality. Furthermore, one of the two men referred to by Mr. Besen was never in leadership with Exodus. Here are the details.

Exodus International is a distinctly religious organization offering services and referrals to people who are in conflict with their sexual feelings and Christian beliefs. However, detractors often say that the message of Exodus is compromised due to the failure of the co-founders of the organization to remain heterosexual. In a recent *Cleveland Plain Dealer* article, also on the subject of sexual orientation change, Mr. Besen claimed that Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper were the co-founders of Exodus International. He noted again that the men became gay partners.

The second claim is true. As documented in the 1993 film *One Nation Under God*, the two men did indeed leave their families in 1979 and engaged in a commitment ceremony in 1982.

However, the first claim is false. Mr. Cooper and Mr. Bussee were not the co-founders of Exodus International.

Why do Mr. Besen and others (including the abovementioned film, *One Nation Under God*) claim they were? While I cannot judge motivation, it appears to be a deliberate effort to discredit the concept of sexual orientation change. Concerning Gary Cooper, in no way can he be considered a founder of the organization. Mr. Cooper, who

died of complications from HIV/AIDS in 1989, was a volunteer with Mr. Bussee's ministry, called Exit (Ex-gay Intervention Team) based in Anaheim, CA. By all accounts, he was never on the Exodus Board.

Mr. Bussee however, did help arrange a meeting of ex-gay leaders that eventually came to be considered the first Exodus conference. According to Exodus incorporator Ron Dennis, Mr. Bussee was one of the people who saw the need for a collegial relationship between independent ex-gay ministries.

The original board of Exodus included five formerly gay identified people, including Mr. Bussee. The incorporators of the group included Frank Worthen, Ron Dennis and Greg Reid. None of these men have returned to homosexuality and two of the three are still in ex-gay ministry. One other original board member, although still straight, requested his name not be included in this article. Let's do the math: four out of five of the original board have not returned to a gay identity.

The Majority Have Not Reverted to a Gay Identity

The truth is that some people who were ex-gay ministry leaders or participants have reverted to a gay or lesbian identity. Ex-ex-gays exist. However, the majority of people who began with Exodus have not returned to a gay identity. Speaking of Exodus, Mr. Besen and those detractors who say all ex-gay leaders are "extraordinary failures" are simply ignoring the whole truth.

Just so this is clear, let's re-cap. Gary Cooper was not one of the co-founders of Exodus. Michael Bussee was on the original board. The men were involved in an ex-gay ministry in Anaheim, were married, left their wives and children and returned to a public gay identity. Of the five formerly gay men on the original board of Exodus International, four have not reverted to homosexuality. Frank Worthen and Ron Dennis continue to lead ex-gay organizations. The other two original board members were rumored to have returned to a gay identity but according to both men, this is not true. Thus, 80% of the original Exodus board members are still ex-gay after 30 years.

What is the importance of these observations? Given the longevity of change that most people involved with Exodus and other ministries report, it is an important contribution to our understanding of sexual orientation and human nature overall to give attention to the whole truth. Although critics-for-a-living such as Mr. Besen may not be able to change their thinking, others may not be so closed minded. ■