

THE “EX-GAY” MOVEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

Therapy and Ministry
in the Exodus Network

BY JANDIRA QUEIROZ, FERNANDO D’ELIO *and* DAVID MAAS

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PREFACE

IN OCTOBER 2010, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, HOSTED 4,000 GLOBAL EVANGELICAL leaders from 198 countries for the “Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization,” the biggest gathering of global evangelical leaders in modern history. Endorsed by U.S. evangelist Billy Graham and Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren,¹ Lausanne mingled all sorts of evangelicals, conservative, moderate and Rightist, from all around the world for a rare convening.

Among them were members of Exodus Global Alliance – a network of ex-gay groups that believes that LGBTQ people can be helped to become heterosexuals.

But Exodus representatives did not just attend the Conference. They led sessions on sexuality. Their homophobic view that LGBTQ people are in need of being converted from their sinful ways was featured in this keystone event of the mainstream evangelical world.

Michael Goeke, a pastor of counseling at Stonegate Fellowship and an Exodus Global Alliance official, presented two papers, including “Homosexuality and the Church: Why the Church Must Speak into the Lives of Those Impacted by Homosexuality.”² The head of Exodus Brazil, Willy Torresin de Oliveir, (covered in this report) presented a paper entitled “God’s Work to Redeem and Transform People Involved in Homosexuality.”³ The director of Exodus Global Alliance, Canada, Bryan Kliewer, spoke about “Sexuality: Creation, Brokenness, Truth and Grace.”⁴

All of these presentations conveyed Exodus Global Alliance teachings about homosexuality as scientific truths. Bryan Kliewer cited Elizabeth Moberly’s 1983 *Psychogenesis and Therapy: A New Christian Ethic*, in claiming that some psychologists agree that:

*Homosexuality is a deficit in the child’s ability to relate to parents of the same sex that is carried over to adult members of the same sex in general. Put another way, the problem with an adult homosexual is not that they want same-sex love. It is that their childhood needs for same-sex love from their same-sex parent have never been met and they are trying to meet them now with relationships to other adults of the same sex that include sexual activity as a mistaken method to receive love.*⁵

It is shocking that the Lausanne Congress, a respected gathering once associated with such mainstream evangelicals as Billy Graham, provided Exodus Global Alliance with an opportunity to sell its discredited ideas to evangelical leaders across the globe. No doubt organizers knew it could be controversial. One journalist learned from Goeke that organizers deliberately left the sessions on homosexuality off the schedule “to avoid pre-conference publicity.” She continued, “And despite not having been in anyone’s initial plans, Goeke said each of their daily sessions were full.”⁶

It is part of a worldwide push that is shaping the global South’s positions on human sexuality. There we can hear evangelicals claim that homosexuality can be healed. Despite the American Psychiatric Association’s decision to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, U.S. conservative groups insist that same-sex attraction is a “mental disorder” or sexual brokenness that can be straightened by powerful prayers and counseling. These methods have proven to be dangerous to LGBTQ persons, so much so that even the executive director of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, has repudiated the idea that gays can be “cured.”

As this report demonstrates, Chambers’ rejection of this position does not indicate the end of its influence either among ex-gay ministries in the United States or among Exodus itself and its affiliates across the globe. While the Chambers shift—and the ensuing split of the Restored Hope Network from the U.S.-based Exodus International—seem to signal trouble for the ex-gay movement, the movement’s

embrace by mainstream evangelical networks such as Lausanne suggests that ex-gay ministries will continue apace. And that's dangerous. Exodus Global Alliance Christianizes homophobia, making it sound very compassionate and welcoming. Behind such messages, however, is the belief that LGBTQ persons are sinners who are in need of therapy and grace from Christian neighbors.⁷ Sadly, this seems to be the position shared by far too many evangelical leaders – from Uganda to Brazil.

In March 2009, for example, the Ugandan group Family Life Network hosted its now infamous “Exposing the International Homosexual Agenda” conference. Although hosted by Stephen Langa of Uganda, all speakers were from the United States, representing anti-gay groups – Abiding Truth Ministries, headed by Scott Lively, Exodus International Board of Directors member Don Schmierer, and Caleb Lee Brundidge, who is associated with pseudo-psychologist Richard Cohen’s International Healing Foundation. Under their influence, Uganda drafted its draconian Anti-Homosexuality Bill, which would execute gays.⁸

As international pressure grew, these U.S. Rightists distanced themselves from the bill. “I feel duped,” is what Mr. Schmierer told the *New York Times* in 2010. He nevertheless agreed to having told his “audiences how homosexuals could be converted into heterosexuals.”⁹ As did Mr. Brundidge, and finally, Mr. Lively. Their claims that gays can and should be healed is repeated by such Ugandan anti-gay pastors as Archbishop Henry Orombi (who was Chair of the Cape Town 2010 Africa Host Committee of the Lausanne Congress), Martin Ssempe, and politicians like David Bahati, the sponsor of Uganda’s “Kill the-Gays Bill.” At best, some evangelicals view gays as broken sinners in constant need of Christian sympathy. At worst, the assessment that LGBTQ people are sinners is employed to justify the punishment of gays who are unwilling to accept the remedies offered by organizations such as Exodus.

Exodus’ claims are also insidious by alleging to be compassionate. The ugly positions held by Ugandan anti-gay activist Martin Ssempe and U.S. Holocaust revisionist Scott Lively can be easily dismissed with scorn in the United States. Yet many evangelical leaders are convinced that Christian therapy can make gays straight. Based on this belief, some advocate policies that outlaw homosexuality and even enable forced therapy.

Now that Exodus positions are endorsed by international evangelical leaders in the Lausanne movement, human rights defenders in the Global South have a mile to climb, especially in nations where evangelical influence is growing. In this regard, Latin American human rights defenders and their allies should confront Exodus with scientific data. Chambers’ change of position is not enough –there is a need for a well-coordinated approach to counter the influence of Exodus across the globe. I hope this study will contribute to that.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	7
INTRODUCTION	9
THE RISE OF THE EXODUS COMPLEX AND ITS GROWING LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES IN LATIN AMERICA	12
Living Water/Agua Vivas: The Ex-Gay Ministry with Ties on Two Continents	12
Exodus Brasil: A Belief in Grace.....	14
Exodus Latin America: A Commitment to “Therapeutic Methods”	16
WHAT NEXT?	18
ENDNOTES.....	19
ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN JANUARY 2012, EXODUS International Executive Director Alan Chambers shook the Christian ex-gay movement when he announced he no longer believes there is a “cure” for homosexuality and that his organization would no longer promote false hope through promoting “reparative therapy,” a discredited approach based on a pseudoscientific view of homosexuality as emerging from family dysfunction. Instead, Exodus would minister to “people struggling with same sex attraction,” or SSA, as the ex-gay movement terms it, to avoid expressing their sexuality without claiming support can change it.

In the United States, his announcement prompted a split in Exodus International, a network of ex-gay Christian ministries founded in 1976 to “convert... LGBTQ people to heterosexuality through ‘submission to Jesus Christ,’” and frequently conversion therapy. Exodus members and organizations still committed to a “cure” broke off to form the Restored Hope Network.

However, “change is possible” continues to be an Exodus catchphrase—that of Exodus Global Alliance. This network is made up of regional Exodus offshoots launched in the 1980s and 1990s that came together in 1997 (named Exodus Global Alliance in 2004). But a close look at Exodus Latin America, founded in 1994 and now based in Mexico, and its spinoff, Exodus Brasil founded in 2002, finds a divided movement. While both offshoots remain under the umbrella of Exodus Global and are united in its belief that homosexuality is a sin, they are divided on whether it is “curable” by psychological or religious means.

In field work in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, including conferences held by Exodus groups, along with the founding conference of the Restored Hope Network in the United States, we found Exodus Brasil focuses on Jesus as the only means to any “cure”; its director, Willy Torresin de Oliveira, spoke disparagingly of ex-gay therapy as trying to operate outside of God, and saw Chambers’ controversial announcement as in line with his organization’s perspective.

In contrast, Exodus Latin America continues to heavily promote discredited ex-gay psychology, despite a spokesperson’s claim that they no

longer promote so-called “reparative” therapy, a form of harmful “conversion therapy,” that blames inadequate bonding with a strong father figure for homosexuality.

We also found Living Waters/Aguas Vivas, a key ex-gay ministry promoting a cure, still actively networked through Exodus Latin America. Living Waters/Aguas Vivas is a 20-step program based in Andrew Comiskey’s Desert Stream Ministries that trains churchpeople in their approach throughout North and South America. Comiskey himself took the lead in organizing the Restored Hope Network’s split from Exodus International in the United States following Chambers’ remarks and he serves as president of the new group. He is slated to play a prominent role in Exodus Latin America’s “Living Waters” training in July 2013.

Exodus Latin America’s manifestly misleading claim rejecting reparative therapy might relate to the increasing need of the Latin American ex-gay psychology movement to operate under the radar. In response to the demands of LGBTQ and human

rights movements on increasingly progressive governments in the region, we found antidiscrimination laws and psychological association policies in multiple Latin American countries that target the ex-gay movement to a much greater extent than in the

United States. That includes Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. These ex-gay ministries may provide cover for pseudo-psychological religious counseling free from the restrictions of licensed psychologists as conversion therapy comes increasingly under attack by professional associations and even some governments in Latin America.

Although the government has turned against the ex-gay movement in a handful of Latin American countries, the struggle continues to rage in one of the largest: Brazil. In Brazil, the Federal Council of Psychology restricts conversion therapy and is shutting down its practitioners. Yet a battle is raging in the legislature as a growing caucus of religious conservatives seeks to reverse the regulation, and the human rights community asserts ex-gay ministries based in churches should also be shut down for promulgating hate speech.

Cracking ex-gay therapy’s pseudoscientific veneer and forcing it to retreat to the conservative religious sphere would be a victory for the LGBTQ community. However, while Exodus may currently

“Change is possible,”
remains an Exodus
slogan – an Exodus
Global Alliance one.

be in a time of turmoil, and the ex-gay movement faces challenges in the United States and in Latin America, the Christian Right's ability to adapt suggests continued reason to be wary of the ex-gay therapy and ministry complex in its various expressions. In contrast with conversion therapy, asserting the right to "choose" support from Christ in rejecting unwanted same-sex attraction poses a more slippery approach to conversion that can be shielded by religious liberty claims.

Furthermore, as recently as 2010, leaders of

the Exodus Global Alliance, including the Exodus Brasil director, were invited to speak at the "Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization," the biggest international gathering of evangelicals in world history, considered to be a moderate body whose approval gives mainstream sanction. Exodus Global Alliance materials about ex-gay therapy continue to exist on the conference website. Rev. Dr. Kapya Kaoma, PRA's religion and sexuality researcher and an Episcopal priest, explains the importance of this in his preface to the report.

BRAZILIAN EX-EX-GAY LEADER SPEAKS OUT

What happens with ex-ex-gay people? Generally, people involved in [the] "gay cure," "reversion," therapy, whatever, get to the point where they insist on remaining in church. They keep going, they feel guilty, but they don't quit attending church. They just don't talk about it anymore. They don't talk about their relationships, temptations, sins anymore, because they're tired of exposing themselves and trying to get at what God wants. But some of them get married and have children. Deep inside, they feel uncomfortable—they are still gay.

While some of them act like that, there are others who stay to try to change the way the church sees homosexuality. There are other people who have migrated to the so-called inclusive churches, where they will be able to live their identities and love without constraint...Other people have migrated to other religions, such as African-Brazilian religions, Buddhism, spiritism, and met people far better than they used to see every day, or every Sunday, in homophobic churches.

And last but not least, many gays and lesbians, as well as straights, have woken up from those dogmas and become skeptical, agnostic, atheists, which can be an extreme relief... if not related to resentment. I include myself here. As an atheist now I've found out that life is much more beautiful ... than I used to think.

I'm confident that people who leave those ex-gay ministries will need psychological assistance to be able to deal with the consequences of delusion and disappointment. However, care must be taken. Psychologists who impose their religious dogma onto their patients will be as harmful as those preachers of hatred. One must seek professional help. I mean scientific and humanistically proven professional help.

Anyway, however difficult it might be, freedom is priceless. It's worth living free from self-hatred and frustrating dogmas.

—Sergio Viula, Brazilian ex-ex-gay leader, Movement for Healthy Sexuality¹⁰

INTRODUCTION

IN JANUARY 2012, THE CHRISTIAN EX-GAY movement worldwide was hit by a bombshell. Alan Chambers, executive director of the prominent ex-gay group in the United States, Exodus International, announced at the pro-LGBTQ Gay Christian Network Conference that he rejected the movement's belief that so-called reparative therapy can make gay people straight. He told the audience that "99.9 percent of Exodus participants have not experienced a change in their orientation," and for this reason, the organization would no longer condone "reparative" therapy, because it offers false hope and could be harmful. Chambers further stated that he believes there is no cure for homosexuality.¹¹ Around the same time, he pulled all reparative and other conversion therapy books from Exodus International's online bookstore. Exodus International no longer champions marriage as the goal of its work with LGBTQ people, or, as the ex-gay movement terms it, "people struggling with same sex attraction," or SSA. Instead, the U.S.-based Exodus will provide support in the struggle against expressing homosexuality without claiming that it can change it.

Some saw it coming. Under Chambers' leadership, Exodus had canceled its sponsorship of the 2010 "Day of Truth," an event that counters the pro-LGBTQ Day of Silence by asking high schoolers to wear t-shirts promoting "the biblical truth for sexuality." When gay teenager Tyler Clementi committed suicide in 2010 in New Jersey, Chambers told CNN that "all the recent attention to bullying helped them realize that they need to equip kids to live out biblical tolerance and grace."¹²

In reaction to this betrayal of the movement's principles, member organizations and individuals, including Exodus International founder Frank Worthen, split off and formed the Restored Hope Network in 2012 as an organization that continued to adhere to the belief in conversion therapy.

But "change is possible," remains an Exodus slogan – an Exodus Global Alliance one. Since its founding in the 1970s, Exodus has grown far beyond its U.S. starting point, exporting its ideology around the world. In 1997 it launched an umbrella group to bring together the emerging Exodus networks worldwide, taking on the current name in 2004. Exodus Global Alliance continues to tell LGBTQ people that "liberation from homosexuality" and "reorientation of same sex attraction is

possible." Under "What We Believe," the website reads:

This is a process, which begins with motivation to, and self-determination to change based upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We facilitate resources for this process through our member ministries, other established networks and the Church. The key outcome of this is measured by a growing capacity to turn away from temptations, a reconciling of one's identity with Jesus Christ, being transformed into His image. This enables growth towards Godly heterosexuality. Exodus recognizes that lifelong and healthy marriages as well as a Godly single life are good indicators of this transformation.¹³

Exodus Latin America emerged over the 1980s through the leadership of Esly Carvalho, a Brazilian psychologist, who, according to timelines published by Exodus Global and Exodus Latin America, connected with Exodus International founder Frank Worthen in 1981 after reading an interview with Worthen in *Christianity Today*. Carvalho brought conversion therapy – and Exodus – to Latin America.¹⁴ In 1994, she received permission from Exodus International in North America to form Exodus Latin America, and in 1998, the network opened an office in Quito, Ecuador.¹⁵ In 2002 under Executive Director Oscar Galindo, the offices moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico. Galindo and Exodus Latin America help bring speakers from U.S.-based ex-gay ministries to Latin America.¹⁶

Exodus Brasil spun off in 2002, led by Willy Torresin de Oliveira, who, Exodus reports, joined the movement after translating for an ex-gay speaker at an Exodus Latin America conference in Brazil in 1989.¹⁷

Because of the strong ties among ministries across the hemispheres, Political Research Associates attended Exodus Brasil and Exodus Latin America conferences to see how the split is reverberating through the South America networks. We also attended the founding conference of the Restored Hope Network, a U.S. spinoff launched in the spring of 2012 to challenge Exodus International following Chambers' betrayal of the movement.

We found a movement that remains united in its belief that homosexuality is a sin, but divided on whether it is "curable." In brief, we found that Exodus Brasil was sympathetic to Chambers'

position and Exodus International's support of ex-gay missions and church support groups, while skeptical of reparative or "conversion" therapy's reliance on psychology rather than a direct relationship with Jesus to handle so-called unwanted homosexuality. However, Exodus Latin America remains firmly wedded to the quasi-psychological framework and a belief in a "cure."

But therapeutic approaches by Christian mental health professionals are under siege in parts of Latin America as professional associations and government agencies in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere view antigay therapy as hate speech. In countries like Argentina, Ecuador, and Costa Rica, Exodus and affiliated ex-gay ministries are careful in their public pronouncements as their endeavors are increasingly labeled as discriminatory hate speech. The Pan-American Health Organization, this hemisphere's regional office of the World Health Organization, also condemned the practice in a May 2012 statement (see box). This pressure may explain why Exodus Latin America told us it no longer promotes reparative therapy despite its clear embrace of pseudo-psychological approaches to "curing" homosexuals.

Meanwhile, Living Waters/Aguas Vivas, a network of ex-gay ministries operating in Latin America launched by the U.S.-based Desert Stream Ministries, split from Exodus International and joined the Restored Hope Network at its founding conference in September 2012. Desert Stream's founding director, Andrew Comiskey, is president of the new Restored Hope Network. Through submission to Jesus Christ and a "20-lesson program," Living Waters/Agua Vivas, now based in Grandview, Missouri, combines psychological claims and biblical teaching to heal "sexual and relational brokenness," in which it includes homosexuality. While not formally trained psychologists, practitioners in their ex-gay ministry embrace quasi-psychological interpretations of the injuries that supposedly produce homosexuality. Aguas Vivas remains networked through Exodus Latin America and is one example of the common linkages between ex-gay ministries here and in Latin America. Even if conversion therapy undergoes a retreat because of political pressure, these types of ministries may remain important popularizers of a psychological view of the origins of

"same-sex attraction" in trauma or family dysfunction and a "cure" in Jesus Christ.

CONVERSION AND REPARATIVE THERAPY

"Conversion therapy" emerged in the 1970s as a distinct psychotherapeutic or counseling approach aimed at curing homosexual desires, and today is linked largely with conservative Christian practitioners. "Reparative therapy" is the type of conversion therapy that views homosexuality as emerging among men seeking emotional and physical ties to other men because they failed to connect with a father figure as a child. It aims at channeling that drive into "healthy" male bonding. Other conversion therapists blame child sexual abuse, mothering practices, or even biology.¹⁹ As the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has noted, the approach persists in viewing homosexuality

as a mental illness even though the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973.²⁰ The rise of Exodus and the so-called "ex-gay" movement parallels the

rise of conversion therapy, but it is only one way conservative Christians try to "cure" homosexuality. Ex-gay ministries and their support groups are the other.²¹

This form of therapy is an industry composed of people who hold socially conservative religious beliefs and are networked through Exodus and, in the United States, the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), which is currently fighting California's ban on conversion therapy for minors. In the United States, mainstream counselors, LGBTQ activists, and allies have challenged conversion therapy's blend of psychology and right-wing Christian teaching that homosexuality is a sin as unscientific, while in parts of Latin America (and Canada), practitioners are retreating from public view under the influence of laws outlawing hateful promotion of homophobia.

The American Psychological Association warns that homosexuality is not a disorder, but that trying to "cure" it can lead to "intimacy avoidance, sexual dysfunction, depression, and suicide."²² Indeed, the "treatment" can be very aggressive, going far beyond talk therapy to so-called aversion therapy and even exorcism. According to the International Society of Psychiatric-Mental Health

We found a movement that remains united in its belief that homosexuality is a sin, but divided on whether it is "curable."

EXODUS INTERNATIONAL

In 1998, Political Research Associates published *Calculated Compassion: How the Ex-Gay Movement Serves the Right's Attack on Democracy*.¹⁸ The report looked at the growing adoption of ex-gay rhetoric as a “kinder, gentler” face to the Christian Right’s anti-LGBTQ agenda, focused on homosexuality as a “choice” that a person could seek help in changing.

The report, created in conjunction with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Equal Partners in Faith, advised: “The ex-gay movement is an international network that claims gay men and lesbians can be ‘converted to heterosexuality through ‘submission to Jesus Christ’ or through secular ‘reparative therapy.’” The report said that an in-depth review of ex-gay literature found most authors admit that same-sex attraction will diminish but still occur. However, on the surface, many ex-gay organizations and leaders tout a cure and are invested in defending its legitimacy.

The report looked in particular at the “most prominent organization in the movement...the Seattle-based Exodus International, an ex-gay referral network of ministries founded in 1976 that now claims more than 100 ministries in the US, Canada, and 20 other countries.” Exodus International has a history of controversy: Just two years after its founding, two of its founders fell in love with each other and left, entering the talk show circuit in the early 1990s to denounce ex-gay ministries as a fraud that could not change sexual orientation.

Nurses, which condemns the practices,

The treatments may include: individual and group therapy; behavior therapies involving electrical shocks to the hands, torso and genitals while exposing the client to homoerotic images; covert sensitization – which involves imagining erotic circumstances and pairing this with something frightening or revolting or administering emetics; performing exorcism; subjecting the individual to isolation and restraints; and engaging in other therapies designed to modify gender behavior to be

more hetero-congruent (sports training and coaching for males and cosmetics application for females).²³

Conversion therapy—clinically termed Sexual Orientation Change Efforts—has been rejected by the American Psychological Association, the Pan American and World Health Organizations (PAHO), the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, among others.²⁴ In 2012, PAHO Director Dr. Mirta Roses Periago warned that “reparative therapy” and “conversion therapy” represent “a serious threat to the health and well-being—even the lives—of affected people.”²⁵

THE RISE OF THE EXODUS COMPLEX AND ITS GROWING LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES IN LATIN AMERICA

THE SOUTH AMERICAN POLITICAL environment has shifted over the last decade and a half, as more progressive governments and policies have replaced right-wing, repressive ones. The Roman Catholic Church remains the dominant religion but evangelicalism is growing rapidly. And the growing LGBTQ-rights movement is challenging so-called conversion therapies just like its North American cousin. Uruguay recognizes same-sex civil unions and adoption rights, Colombia's Supreme Court ordered full LGBTQ rights by 2013, Mexico City voted to legalize marriage equality in 2009 (although it remains outlawed elsewhere in that country), and Argentina became the first Latin American country to pass marriage equality in 2010.

The Pan-American Health Organization, the hemisphere's regional office of the World Health Organization, issued a formal condemnation of ex-gay therapy and recommendations in May 2012 and countries like Argentina and Ecuador passed laws targeting ex-gay therapy. In 2008, Ecuador barred discrimination based on sexual orientation in its constitution and shut down 30 ex-gay therapy clinics claiming to cure homosexuality in 2011 (though reportedly as many as 200 more may still operate). Argentina's 2011 Mental Health Act barred treatment of homosexuality as a disease or curable.²⁶ Psychologist associations are more visibly taking action against ex-gay therapy: in 2012, Peru's medical association warned its members against treating homosexuality, a move echoed by psychologists in Costa Rica a year later, citing PAHO.²⁷ Even a majority of Latin American evangelical leaders support accepting homosexuality, in contrast to other areas of the world.²⁸

Still, the continent is far from homogeneous. In Brazil, the Latin American giant and home to its own countrywide Exodus network, the Federal Council of Psychology issued Resolution 001/99 in 2009 prohibiting psychologists from offering a cure or therapies that would reverse homosexuality.²⁹ However, Brazil's political climate

includes more active and influential conservative evangelicals than Argentina, for instance, including a growing percentage of Congress. Members of the evangelical caucus have introduced a bill to overturn this regulation, arguing it is a form of censorship that limits freedom of expression and the psychologist's freedom of exercising his or her profession. The conservative evangelical Social Christian Party has secured the presidency, vice-presidency, and two-thirds of the seats of the Human Rights and Minorities Commission of the House of Deputies, giving it power to advance

that proposal and block the anti-homophobia bill that would make discriminatory speech against LGBTQ people illegal (its passage has been a goal of the LGBTQ movement for almost a dozen years).³⁰

The Christian psychologist Rozangela

Justino publicly censored by the Federal Council for advertising reparative therapy, took the creative route of enrolling in postgraduate training at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, assumed the title of expert in Human Rights, and currently offers her services as a parliamentarian advisor to congress members.³¹ Another Christian psychologist, Marisa Lobo, is currently "struggling" to keep her freedom of expression to say that she is Christian inside her clinic. The Council determined that she must remove any reference to her Christianity from media promotion of her psychological services. She appealed the decision, and her case is still in the courts.³²

LIVING WATER/AGUAS VIVAS: THE EX-GAY MINISTRY WITH TIES ON TWO CONTINENTS

The Exodus Global alliance page about Latin America features a quote from Mauricio Montión, founder and director of Ministerio Restauración (Restoration Ministry) in Argentina, saying, "Through ministries like Exodus, Jesus is raising up a healing army and enabling them to stand to proclaim and live out the truth of God's purpose for our sexuality."³³

Montión, the former Aguas Vivas director in Argentina, tells a typical ex-gay story of shame and substance abuse, which continued until 1992 when he met two U.S. evangelicals in Argentina

Evangelical Leaders' Views on Homosexuality, 2011²⁸

	Society Should Accept	Society Should Discourage	No Answer
All Leaders	13	84	4
Central/South America	51	45	4
Europe	23	72	4
North America	9	87	5
Asia/Pacific	4	94	3
Mideast/North Africa	2	89	9
Sub-Saharan Africa	2	96	3

Source: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life

and envied their sense of peace. Still struggling, in 1995 he came across two books by Andrew Comiskey, founding director of Desert Stream Ministries, a U.S. group that runs the Living Waters/Aguas Vivas ex-gay transition program, which he credits with changing his life. Living Waters/Aguas Vivas says it helps individuals pursue “relational and sexual wholeness” and emerge from, not only same sex attraction, but also other sexual “addictions” like masturbation, promiscuity, and pornography. It is self help, albeit from a conservative Christian standpoint. It also aims to heal “the effects of sexual abuse, codependency, self-hatred, or the inability to love others well.”³⁴ Living Waters/Aguas Vivas lists representatives across Latin American in countries including Bolivia, Chile, and Venezuela.³⁵

In “How Jesus Heals the Homosexual,” Comiskey writes,

I had loving parents who were nevertheless a bit detached from me. That left me hungry emotionally, and vulnerable to false ways of getting my needs met. This was especially true of my father. I had not a good connection with him, and that contributed to a great hunger for masculine love and affirmation. In my culture, one can readily embrace the homosexual world as a way of finding masculine love. It is a perverse and idolatrous world that promises in vain to take away one's deep desire for love.

*That was true for me. I began to hunger for more. There, in the gay world, I began to realize that another human being could not satisfy me. It had to come from God.*³⁶

In September 1998, Montión traveled to the United States to train with Comiskey, acquired the tools to start his own ministry, and returned to Argentina to found Ministerio Restauración in 2002. Since then, Ministerio Restauración has trained many leaders in Argentina and expanded to other parts of Latin America. Comiskey made frequent trips to Argentina to conduct seminars and international trainings, keeping the links between Desert Stream-Aguas Vivas and Restoration Ministry strong.

In Montión's home country of Argentina, the ex-gay movement receives support from ACIERA (Alianza Cristiana de Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina), a conservative evangelical association that opposes LGBTQ rights and publicly displays the seals and logos of U.S.-based networks like Exodus and Living Waters/Aguas Vivas on its website. This display of their connections to U.S. power centers may also be intended to add prestige to their initiatives.

But the Argentinean government under the presidency of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and, before her, that of her husband, Nestor Kirchner, made human rights, including gay rights, one of their primary political goals. This helped Argentina become the first Latin American nation—and

tenth in the world—to recognize same-sex marriage and fueled the passage of the 2011 Mental Health Act barring the treatment of sexual orientation or identity as a disease. On Comiskey's visits in October 2008, Fundación Integra, an affiliate of NARTH (National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality), and Exodus Global Alliance were denounced before the Justice Ministry's National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI). Rev. Victor Bracuto, of the Metropolitan Community Church, now Director of Sexual Diversity Office in Argentina's Ministry of Social Action, charged that Integra discriminated against him by organizing a conference (where both Comiskey and Montión were promoted as speakers) that had amongst its purposes to "heal/cure homosexuality." The Ministry ruled that that conference engaged in illegal discrimination because it implied that gays are ill.³⁷

Upon receiving the news that the Justice Ministry found in his favor in July 2009, Bracuto commented, "We are witnessing a historical development, not only in Argentina, but perhaps also in Latin America and the world." Ministerio Restauración and the NARTH-aligned Integra Foundation continue holding workshops, seminars, and conferences, careful to avoid explicitly saying they are curing homosexuality, not only in Argentina but in other countries as well. Ministerio Restauración's August 2012 workshop on sexuality won the denunciation of the LGBTQ Argentinean Federation and All Out. Meanwhile, the president of Integra, Esteban Borghetti, who authored the book *Homosexuality and Youth*, continues to offer such workshops as "Sexual Education for Children and Same-Sex Attraction."

After the schism caused by Exodus International rejecting conversion therapy, Comiskey became president of the Restored Hope Network that formed in protest, taking Desert Stream/Aguas Vivas with him. Desert Stream/Aguas Vivas remain networked with Exodus Latin America/Global Alliance. However, the close relationship between Montión and Comiskey had already transformed in April 2011 when Comiskey was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church. Although he asserts this was not the cause of the break, Montión chose no longer to serve under

Comiskey's leadership.³⁸ A Ministerio Restauración spokesperson told us that, since January 2012, Montión and his ministry have been independent of Desert Streams, Aguas Vivas, and Exodus. The Desert Stream website does not list a representative in Argentina, though the Exodus Latin America website still refers to the ministry (along with Fundación Integra) as its representative in Argentina.

EXODUS BRASIL: A BELIEF IN GRACE

Exodus Global Alliance has two regional networks in Latin America: Exodus Latin America, based in Mexico, and Exodus Brasil, formed as a separate region in 2002. In promoting Brazil's importance, Global Exodus writes, "It should be no surprise to find that a country that has Carnival in Rio also has a large number of people who struggle with homosexuality. An estimated 4 million homosexual men and women live in Brazil."

To minister to this community, Exodus Brasil held its most recent national conference on October 12-14, 2012, in Osasco, a city close to São Paulo, home to the world's largest pride parade.⁴⁰ About 400 people gathered

**"Through ministries like Exodus, Jesus is raising up a healing army and enabling them to stand to proclaim and live out the truth of God's purpose for our sexuality."
—Maurice Montión**

at the Evangelical Church of Vila Yara, a wealthy neighborhood surrounded by many mainline Protestant and evangelical churches. The event aimed to present what it called a Biblical vision of human sexuality and to offer hope to "people living in homosexuality, those who love people in this situation or religious leaders seeking for support to start such a ministry in their churches."

Alan Chambers, the executive director of Exodus International, was to be the special guest speaker, but the invitation was suspended in order to avoid controversy after the schism in the U.S. Exodus. Willy Torresin de Oliveira, Exodus Brasil's president, told PRA that he supported keeping the invitation to Chambers open as "a healthy controversy." In addition, Torresin was more concerned with the idea of "grace" than with psychology, and he saw Chambers as aligned with that concept.

"Conversion therapy," from Torresin's point of view, puts humans rather than God at the center, and as a form of psychology is fundamentally humanist, homocentric, and legalist, not Christian.

THE RESTORED HOPE NETWORK

In the spring of 2012, a group of ministries once affiliated with Exodus International broke away to launch the Restored Hope Network after Exodus International director Alan Chambers denounced reparative therapy. The break was led by Exodus founder Frank Worthen of New Hope Ministries; Andrew and Annette Comiskey of Desert Stream Ministries; Anne Paulk, former manager of the Homosexuality and Gender Department at Focus on the Family, and the founder of that organization's Love Won Out conference; Stephen Black of First Stones Ministries; and others.

PRA attended Restored Hope's founding conference in Sacramento from September 21-23, 2012, which attracted ex-gays, advocates, and ministry representatives from across the U.S. as well as Latin American allies such as members of the Aguas Vivas network. The new board treasurer of Restored Hope, Jason Thompson, is executive director of the Portland Fellowship, another former Exodus member, which has a relationship with an ex-gay ministry in Ecuador called Camino de Salida (A Way Out).

For the attendees, the original cause of Exodus is still righteous. As Dr. Robert Gagnon, a member of the founding committee and board who teaches at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, explained in his often sarcastic and charismatic address, sexual sin is set apart from other sins because of its powerful, all-consuming capture of the body, and the pleasure that ensues from it. The Bible states explicitly that homosexuality is a sin, he said in an extensive analysis of scripture, but that one's (heterosexual) spouse is the "person God uses to shape Jesus in you." Thus heterosexual marriage is essential as the vehicle through which people become like Jesus.

Exodus Founder Frank Worthen repeated the old Exodus teaching that one needs "a total cutoff" from the gay lifestyle in order to become heterosexual. He promoted a right-wing Christian version of a 12-step program where you find fellowship in conquering your addiction, and gay friends are "destructive friends" you need to stay away from.³⁹

All those interviewed expressed a sense of betrayal at Chambers' comments. In a statement echoed by many, Kristin Tremba of Exchange Ministries in Orlando, Florida, said that Exodus International was a "top-heavy organization" that had become "centralized and controlled by one personality."

Those attending showed great concern about California's ban on reparative therapy for minors, Senate Bill 1172, signed into law soon after the conference (but currently facing a legal challenge). This was an egregious restriction on free speech, from one speaker's point of view, which rejected their belief that change is possible.

Rev. Stephen Black of First Stone Ministries, vice president of Restored Hope Ministries, spoke in colorful rhetoric of an "army of ex-homosexuals" rising up during the End Times. We are in these End Times now, he told those assembled, whether that means the last 50 or 100 years. Comiskey, the network's new president, echoed the sentiments about the "army that God wants."

Those who defend reparative therapy's ability to transform people and bring them to the kingdom of God are out of step with those who embrace Jesus without psychological counseling. Homosexuality cannot be cured by any human effort apart from one's willingness to totally surrender to God. When someone claims to be "recovered" because he or she doesn't act or live in homosexuality anymore, this is not the point for God, he told PRA. Instead, real

grace comes when someone is living totally without sin, as Jesus lived, and has won God's acceptance.

Torresin said that Exodus Brasil has never been as attached to psychology as Exodus International in the United States because Brazilian psychology has always been "progay" (a characterization not necessarily embraced by the profession).⁴¹ "Psychology in the U.S. has become much more progay recently, but in Brazil it has always been

liberal. So even some Christian psychologists have been assuming the idea that grace means loving and welcoming homosexuals.” Torresin rejects this conception of grace, adding that “sheltering homosexuals is the same as strengthening in them a fake identity.”

But Torresin did say that psychotherapy may be a useful tool for people wanting to get out of a “gay lifestyle” and into a “Christian lifestyle,” helping change how they live rather than providing a “cure.” He revealed that there are many Christian psychologists/therapists doing “good work” quietly in Brazil, so the Federal Council of Psychology can’t “persecute” them under its ban on ex-gay therapy.

Even if Torresin spoke skeptically about reparative therapy, that doesn’t mean that Exodus Brasil did not offer discredited psychological views of homosexuality as a problem. Rev. David Ricker, from the ABBA ministry of Belém do Pará, argued in his workshop on youth and sexuality that young people become homosexual when a family lacks structure.

Although the original program for the Congress published on Exodus Brasil’s website included a workshop about public policies, the workshop didn’t take place nor did other sessions discuss policy matters. The national legislature is debating

two bills that should be of importance to the ex-gay movement: an “antihomophobia” bill that could silence some ex-gay ministries, if it manages to get through a committee dominated by conservative evangelicals, and a proposal to repeal the psychological association’s ban on ex-gay therapy.

EXODUS LATIN AMERICA: A COMMITMENT TO “THERAPEUTIC METHODS”

In a statement released in July 2012, Exodus Latin America said that the U.S. arm’s repudiation of a cure violates the doctrinal foundations of Exodus Global Alliance.⁴²

Though a spokesman told us that the network no longer promotes reparative therapy—leaving that to the Latin American affiliate of NARTH, Renacer (“Rebirth”), Exodus Latin America’s Congress in Mexico City on November 8-10, 2012 tied its program to both “the love of Jesus Christ” and “therapeutic methods” as a way out of homosexuality, aligning it with the Restored Hope Network and against Exodus International’s position.⁴³ This raises the question as to whether the official public denial is simply intended to ward off legal backlash.

Called “First Journey of Integral-Sexual Resto-

PAHO: CHALLENGING REPARATIVE THERAPY IN THE AMERICAS

In its May 2012 statement challenging reparative therapy, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), which serves as this hemisphere’s regional office of the World Health Organization, recommended the following actions by government, media, health professionals and organizations:⁴⁶

- “Conversion” or “reparative” therapies and the clinics offering them should be denounced and subject to adequate sanctions.
- Public institutions responsible for training health professionals should include courses on human sexuality and sexual health in their curricula, with a focus on respect for diversity and the elimination of attitudes of pathologization, rejection, and hate toward non-heterosexual persons.
- Professional associations should disseminate documents and resolutions by national and international institutions and agencies that call for the de-psychopathologization of sexual diversity and the prevention of interventions aimed at changing sexual orientation.
- In the media, homophobia in any of its manifestations and expressed by any person should be exposed as a public health problem and a threat to human dignity and human rights.
- Civil society organizations can develop mechanisms of civil vigilance to detect violations of the human rights of non-heterosexual persons and report them to the relevant authorities. They can also help to identify and report people and institutions involved in the administration of “reparative” or “conversion therapies.”

ration,” the Congress was aimed at pastors, leaders and churches in general. There were representatives of a handful of countries and from a diverse range of churches and ministries.

In contrast to Exodus Brasil, this program was far more centered on a psychological view of homosexuality as emerging from family dysfunction, leading to sexual sin, sexual abuse, sexual addiction and family crisis. Ex-gay people testifying would mention the absence of paternal authority as leading to their life of “same-sex attraction.” Only two speakers were not Mexican, but they were the only ones given a platform twice: Felipe Kirk Bullington, a pastoral counselor from the United States, and Robson Dias, a Brazilian family therapist with a degree from the South American Theological Seminary, founded by post-graduates from the right-wing Fuller Theological Seminary in California.

At a session offering “practical advice to overcome sexual sin,” Oscar Rivas argued that it is not

possible to build the new habits needed to rid one’s self of sexual sin without the presence of a strong father figure. He said,

The problem with compulsions is that the

person doesn’t know what limits are, never learnt. So someone will say “I don’t have limits because in my home my parents always let me do whatever I wanted” or “because in my home the one who took care

of my education was the mother,” and the mother does not have the capacity to imprint enough discipline over kids. Because since we were children we learn that the mother represents emotions and the father is reason.

Long-term and in-depth therapy can take on these cases of compulsion that lead to sexual brokenness, Rivas claimed.

Willy Torresin de Oliveira, Exodus Brasil’s president, told PRA that he supported keeping the invitation to Chambers open as “a healthy controversy.”

EXODUS LATIN AMERICA BOOKS FOR SALE

Works by prominent Latin American authors mixed with those by U.S. luminaries of the ex-gay movement at the Exodus Latin America conference book sale, including:

Popular works by Exodus Latin America founder Esly Carvalho, including *When Someone Homosexual Seeks Help* and *Abuse and Domestic Violence*.

The Spanish translation of *The Heart of Female Same-Sex Attraction: A Comprehensive Counseling Resource* by Janelle Hallman, Executive Director of Desert Hope Ministries in Westminster, Colorado.

Joseph and Linda Nicolosi’s *Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*. Joseph Nicolosi is a co-founder and former director of NARTH and runs his own ex-gay therapy practice, Thomas Aquinas Psychological Clinic, in Encino California.

Mexican Eduardo Cadena launched his new book, *I’m Ex-Gay, What Should I Do Now?*, offering tips on how men finding their way out of homosexuality can enter a new lifestyle.

Reaching Gay Youth, by D. J. Thompson

Overcoming Pornography, by Bob Davies

Someone I Love is Gay: How Family and Friends Can Respond, by Anita Worthen & Bob Davies

An array of other books by authors including Exodus (and Restored Hope) founder Frank Worthen, former Exodus International director Bob Davies, and former Love in Action International director Lori Kentzel.

WHAT NEXT?

IN LATIN AMERICA, THE LGBTQ RIGHTS movement and its allies are aggressively using antidiscrimination laws and professional regulation to curb claims by conservative evangelicals that conversion from homosexuality is sanctified, worthy and possible. In the United States, conversion therapy is on the defensive in both legislatures and the courts, thanks to such advocacy groups as Truth Wins Out. And Soulforce and other LGBTQ groups challenge homophobia and “ex-gay” formulations among evangelicals. But the U.S. ministries seem to benefit from First Amendment protection in the United States even when borrowing quasi-psychological interpretations of the role of family dysfunction in creating homosexuality and in asserting strong patriarchal authority as part of the solution.

In Latin America, even as Brazil conversion therapists fight against the government shutting down their work, ex-gay ministries continue, albeit without broadcasting that they are offering a “cure.” Exodus Latin America promotes a heavily psychologized form of mission work that circulates discredited canards about homosexuality stemming from family dysfunction. So even while reparative and conversion therapy are on the defensive, many of their harmful interpretations remain strong in church groups around the hemisphere.

“Ex-gay” missionary ties between the U.S. Christian Right and Latin America remain strong, and the aggressive Exodus Latin America remains closely tied to Aguas Vivas. Exodus Latin America is promoting the First Living Waters Training organized by Desert Streams in July 2013, with Andrew Comiskey as the key speaker.⁴⁴

Cracking ex-gay therapy’s pseudoscientific veneer and forcing it to retreat to the religious sphere would be a victory for the LGBTQ community. However, while Exodus may currently be in a time of turmoil, and the ex-gay movement faces challenges in the United States and in Latin America, the Christian Right’s ability to adapt suggests continued reason to be wary of the ex-gay therapy and ministry complex in its various expressions.

In contrast with conversion therapy, asserting the right to “choose” support from Christ in rejecting unwanted same-sex attraction poses a more slippery approach to conversion that can be shielded by religious liberty claims.

Furthermore, while the Exodus network comprises a major segment of the Latin America ex-gay movement, other players are actively spreading their mission from the United States to Latin America including the NARTH offshoot Renacer; the International Healing Foundation; and Setting Captives Free’s Puerta de Esperanza.

This suggests that cross-border solidarity among those challenging ex-gay ministries is vital and worth additional investment. U.S. advocates can publicize the Latin America tours and visits of U.S. ex-gay ministries peddling harmful approaches that don’t pass legal muster in the countries they are visiting. They can challenge Exodus Latin America for brokering those visits. And they can challenge companies that benefit from the ex-gay groups. Such was the case in 2011 when AllOut.org’s online campaign led PayPal to cut ties with four organizations that spread hatred and discrimination.⁴⁵

Human rights advocates in both hemispheres are fielding the claims of conservative Christian counselors that government regulation of their “treatment” of LGBTQ people violates their religious liberty, as in Brazil. While the psychological profession worldwide asserts the right to regulate its practitioners, this is a potentially potent argument for defending quasi-psychological ex-gay arguments within ministries. There is a danger that these ministries will continue to peddle harmful psychological approaches with a Christian veneer in the name of religious liberty even as ex-gay therapy is discredited and shut down.

While the legal structures of various countries vary, advocates navigating religious liberty claims can learn from each other across borders and continue to expose the true foundations of these approaches so that cries of religious liberty do not shroud and justify an active homophobia.⁴⁷

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