

Sexual orientation change efforts within religious contexts: A personal account of the battle to heal homosexuals

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Abstract

Societies where ignorance and misinformation about sexuality and gender identity abounds have been breeding grounds for much harm to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and to the community as a whole. Within the context of the Christian faith, the greatest harm has occurred to those LGBT individuals who have submitted themselves to ex-gay / reparative / conversion 'therapies' (i.e., SOCE; Sexual Orientation Change Efforts) and organisations. The practice of seeking to turn homosexual to heterosexual has predominately existed within Christianity, but not exclusively. Programs have operated and still exist in association with Jewish¹, and more recently Islamic² religious communities. This article is a personal account from a former evangelist that details the 'life cycle' of SOCEs in Australia and the author's personal experience with an ex-gay program.

Keywords: *SOCE; ex-gay; reparative therapy; conversion therapy; sexual orientation change; sexual orientation change efforts.*

Background

Historically, gay men and lesbians faced threat of death and imprisonment until the mid 1900s. This is still the case in many countries of the world. Forty-two of the fifty-two Commonwealth countries have laws that make any homosexual practice punishable with a gaol sentence (Carter, 2013, August 20). Ten countries in the world still have the death penalty (Rupar, 2014).

There have been huge advances in many Western countries including complete equality (same-sex marriage) in some, while in Russia, India and Africa, regressive steps in legislation have occurred. If one were to look at a global map that pulsed in red for the areas where it is most dangerous to be LGBT, the Middle East, Africa, parts of Asia, the Caribbean, and parts of South America and Eastern Europe would light up. The conflict in these places is often culturally based but in the vast majority, religion plays the biggest role.

¹ <http://jonahweb.org/>

² <http://gaymuslims.org/2007/05/01/our-message-for-you/>

Mental Health World

Homosexuality has been viewed on a spectrum as anything from abnormal or dysfunctional through to perverted and evil. Homosexuality was officially classified as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-1) in 1952 where it was designated a "sociopathic personality disturbance". Viewing homosexuality as a mental illness was not controversial at this time as it coincided with prevailing societal attitudes. The DSM-II, published in 1968, listed homosexuality as a sexual deviation. Although sexual deviations were no longer categorized as a sociopathic personality disturbance, a prevailing view developed, that as gay and lesbian people were abnormal and dysfunctional, they could be cured.

I have no bias against homosexuals; for me they are sick people requiring medical help . . . Still, though I have no bias, I would say: Homosexuals are essentially disagreeable people, regardless of their pleasant or unpleasant outward manner . . . [their] shell is a mixture of superciliousness, fake aggression, and whimpering. Like all psychic masochists, they are subservient when confronted with a stronger person, merciless when in power, unscrupulous about trampling on a weaker person (Bergler, 1956, pp. 28-29).

Psychologists and psychiatrists theorised that the root cause of the homosexual disorder was environmental and caused by the individual's upbringing, relationships, and at times, sexual abuse.

The best inter-parental relationships, meaning those least likely to produce homosexuality, [are where the] father dominates but does not minimize mother (Bieber et al., 1962, p. 158).

Some of the more horrifying attempts to treat and cure gay men and women included lobotomies and aversion therapies such as electric shock treatment and being injected with vomit inducing drugs. No one is recorded as ever being 'cured' of homosexuality, nor did they change their sexual orientation, but thousands of lives were damaged or

destroyed by well-meaning, well-educated professionals.

A skewed perception occurred because mental health professionals and researchers worked with gay people tormented about their sexual orientation and desperate to become 'normal', which was not a true reflection of the overall LGBT population. In the history of psychiatric research, no work had been done on a homosexual population that were not either in therapy, prison, a mental hospital, or the disciplinary barracks of the armed services.

A light appeared in the mid 1950s with Dr Evelyn Hooker's landmark research where sixty homosexual and heterosexual men not in therapy were interviewed using well-established psychological tests (Hooker, 1956). These profiles were submitted to three experts in the field of assessment to see if any differences in mental health could be established. The experts could not differentiate between the mental health and adjustment of the two groups. The profiles of both gay and straight men were identical. Dr Hooker's paper was presented in 1956 and this, along with further studies (e.g., Hooker, 1957, 1961, 1965), contributed to a change in the attitudes of the psychological community towards homosexuality (Milar, 2011).

In the 1960s a new sense of identity began to surface for some gay and lesbian people. Out of a climate of discrimination and oppression they became more assertive and began to reject societal perceptions and prejudices. The Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York on June 28th, 1969 were the flashpoint and often referred to as the 'Rosa Parks moment'³ for gay rights. For the first time, lesbians, gay men and drag queens at the Stonewall Inn fought back against the police who'd regularly harassed, arrested and imprisoned them.

From 1970 onwards, gay activists also began targeting mental health professional bodies like the American Psychiatric Association (APA), accusing them of being the opposite of what they claimed: not helpers and healers but sadists and oppressors. Eventually, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Today, in some conservative Christian circles this event is referred to as a "conspiracy" and part of the "gay agenda" to normalize homosexuality.

In 1973, gay activists persuaded the APA to remove homosexuality from its list of

psychiatric illnesses and reclassify it as normal behaviour (Spitzer, 1973). This change was made, not because of scientific data, but because radicals planned a systematic effort to disrupt the annual meetings of the APA. One prominent psychiatrist said it was the first time in psychiatric history that a scientific society ignored scientific evidence and yielded to the demands of a militant group:

Through this action, the radical gay movement let it be known that its agenda would proceed (1) regardless of research, science and dialogue and (2) that intimidation would be one of its weapons to achieve its agenda, no matter what (Lutzer, 2004).

Christianity takes up the Role of Healer

Negative beliefs about homosexuality were deeply entrenched within the religious world; being gay was a sin, perversion and abomination.

If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.
(Leviticus 20:13 KJV)

The growth of the Jesus Movement⁴ in the US and also the Charismatic movement globally influenced attitudes amongst Evangelical, Pentecostal and fundamentalist Christians who believed that God's power was supreme and could overcome any sin (Stetzer, 2013, October 18). By this, they meant that the supernatural power of a supernatural and divine being could infuse the believer and change their sexual orientation. These believers understood the Bible to be the inspired inerrant Word of God. They interpreted Biblical passages like the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis (19: 1-38), two verses in Leviticus (18:22, 20:13) and Romans (1: 26-27) as clearly denouncing homosexuality as a sin, yet failed to contextualise these words properly in their historical or cultural settings.

With the introduction of new translations of the Bible, many younger generation Christians were no longer studying King James Versions of the Bible, written in 17th century English, but in more contemporary vernacular. These versions used the word 'homosexual' instead of 'effeminate' and included 'abusers of themselves with mankind' (1 Corinthians 6:9), in the list of people who would not inherit the "Kingdom of God" (eternal life in heaven). No longer were references to homosexuality veiled in the Old Testament Genesis stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and Leviticus

³<http://www.thestonewallinnnyc.com/StonewallInnNYC/HISTORY.html>

⁴<http://www.hollywoodfreepaper.org/portal.php?id=2>

“man shall not lie with a man as with a woman” (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13) but now matched up with New Testament writings as well.

- The Revised Standard Version (1946) New Testament was the first to use the word 'homosexuals'
- The Amplified Version (1965) 'nor those who participate in homosexuality',
- The Good News Bible (1966) 'adulterers or homosexual perverts'
- The New American Standard Version (1971) 'nor effeminate, nor homosexuals'
- The Living Bible (1971) 'adulterers or homosexuals'

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6: 9-11, NASB version).

The Birth and Growth of Christian SOCE

Within this climate, sexual orientation change efforts (i.e., SOCE; ex-gay, reparative or conversion 'therapies', etc.) and related organisations appeared and flourished. Where mental health professionals had given up trying to cure gay men and women from their sexual orientation, many in the Christian church believed that it was only God who could heal the homosexual. Interpreting scriptures such as, 'Such *were* some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.' (1 Corinthians 6:11), these organisations, believed that sexual reorientation was possible.

Love in Action, America's first residential 'ex-gay' program, was founded in 1973⁵. In 1976, a conference, bringing together individuals and groups was held in a church called Melodyland in Anaheim, California. It was at this gathering that the ex-gay umbrella organisation, Exodus International, was founded. The first residential program in the world, for healing homosexuals, however, was in Sydney, Australia.

Before Love in Action and Exodus were founded, a small Charismatic Church community was growing in the southern suburbs of Sydney in the late 1960s. Enid Crowther, the leader, had been

working with people in the prison system. Local Christians gathered and mixed with people who were sharing personal life testimonies of how they had left crime, prostitution and drug addiction. Some of these people were also same-sex-attracted. A large home, Moombara House, was purchased at Lilli Pilli in 1968 and it became the centre for the church's community and rehabilitation work. Bundeena House was also purchased and the church later became known as Bundeena Christian Community.

Moombara believed that people's dysfunctions, including homosexuality, were caused by unhealthy family relationships and detrimental or traumatic personal experiences. Individuals could become whole and healed of these dysfunctional behaviours through a combination of supernatural intervention of God's power and also a transformation of the individual's mind through Bible reading and resisting gay thoughts and temptations. Like most mental health professionals at that time, Moombara believed that the cause of homosexuality was poor family relationships or non-healthy sexual experiences. For males the cause could be a strong mother and weak father, and for females, sexual abuse or rape.

Since my conversion in 1969, I had been struggling to overcome my homosexual orientation. This included much prayer, believing and even exorcisms whilst attending a bible college in New Zealand (Venn-Brown, 2014, Chapter 5). As my spiritual life had become a roller coaster pattern of feeling free, failure, shame, condemnation, repentance, feeling free once again, I put myself into the residential program at Moombara in 1972. I had already spoken to Joyce (pseudonym), one of the pastors at Moombara, the year before, just after my weeks of exorcisms, when she visited the Bible College I was attending in New Zealand. She spoke knowledgeably about homosexuality and gay and lesbian people she had worked with. There was no doubt in her mind that people like myself could become free, but that exorcisms were not the magic answer I hoped they would be. I would still have much work to do. Twelve months later, after many ups and downs, devastated and demoralised, I sat opposite Joyce, in her office at Moombara, for the introduction to my journey from gay to straight.

“Joyce interrupted my thoughts; ‘To be rehabilitated permanently from homosexuality will take at least twelve months, possibly two years’; My heart sank.

Joyce laid down the rules I was to live by for the next twelve weeks of full-time rehab. ‘We’ve found’, Joyce added, ‘that homosexual men like bikini underwear.’ No bikini

⁵<http://www.exodusglobalalliance.org/howwegotstartedc88.php>

underwear was to be worn as it was too sexual. Y-fronts only. (That wouldn't go down well today with the popularity of Calvin Klein among gay men.) I was not to be alone at any time—if Patrick wasn't with me, someone else would be assigned to look after me. I was to be up promptly at 6 o'clock in the morning, so I didn't lie in bed and masturbate. Another downfall of the homosexual. While in the shower Patrick or one of the other counsellors would be standing by to make sure I didn't masturbate. I would work hard all day so that when I went to bed at night, I'd fall asleep immediately. Guess why? So I wouldn't masturbate. I was beginning to get the picture; Joyce's bluntness was embarrassing.

I spent the first week adapting to the structure of the daily program. After breakfast I began the day by listening to tapes of the Bible, which I listened to while I read the same verses from the Bible in front of me. This double reinforcement—the aural and the visual—was to reprogram and renew my mind. The rest of the day I was allocated chores including gardening and maintenance work around the properties—always male chores that would help me become a normal man. Never cooking—I was told that homosexuals loved to cook.”

(Venn-Brown, 2014, Chapter 7)

At that time, I remember how devastating it was to face the reality that I would have to invest so much time and energy into ridding myself of this terrible curse, but I knew I could never serve God with this impurity. God wanted his people to live holy lives and homosexuality was an abomination, or as I believed then, I was an abomination.

Christian SOCE organisations began to appear in North America and other parts of the world⁶. By 2002, over thirty individual ministries in Australia and New Zealand were offering help to people 'struggling with homosexuality'. As an umbrella organisation, Exodus International grew to become the world's largest and most influential 'change is possible' organisation with over 250 local ministries in the United States and Canada and over 150 ministries in 17 other countries⁷.

⁶<http://www.oocities.org/exgaylinks/links.html#Table%20of%20Contents>

⁷The Exodus International website was shut down the night of June 19 2014 when Alan Chambers announced the organisation was closing down. Therefore, original source material is no longer available.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exodus_International

The Evolution of the 'Ex-gay' Movement and Message

The message of the ex-gay / reparative / conversion ministries did not remain consistent over the years. It evolved through several stages.

Phase 1

In the initial growth of 'ex-gay' ministries, miraculous cures from homosexuality to heterosexuality were offered. This could occur through a prayer of confession and repentance, much prayer until one's faith was strong enough to "overcome" the sexual orientation or to have the demon of homosexuality exorcised. Over time, it became evident that these methods were not producing lasting results, no matter how much prayer, faith and believing, fasts, or demons were cast out. This belief created the 'Pray the gay away' phrase often used mockingly by SOCE opponents. Claims of healing were made and ex-gay people entered heterosexual marriages. Emotional and behavioural changes were evident for some, however orientation remained the same.

Phase 2

When ex-gay/reparative/conversion ministries realised that the magic wand approach was not effective in achieving the goal of heterosexuality, various forms of therapy (often called reparative therapy) were introduced. These were based on defunct theories about the causes of homosexuality such as it being the result of a dominant mother and emotionally distant father, or sexual abuse. Prayer, inner healing, masculinising men and feminising women, same-sex 'healthy' bonding and other interventions promised that the same sex attraction would diminish and a person's wholesome heterosexuality would surface. The sexually reoriented person could then marry, or marriage along the healing/reparative journey was seen as part of their healing. Exodus International finally renounced their reparative therapy model in 2012 (Condon, 2012, June 26).

Phase 3

A recent admission by most SOCE proponents has been that the same sex attraction will never go away and that the person will spend their lives 'struggling', even if they enter a heterosexual marriage.

Homosexuality in this instance is not seen as an orientation issue but one of temptation. Another option recently proposed is that of the gay person suppressing his/her same-sex-attraction and choosing celibacy (Boorstein, 2014). For the celibate same-sex-attracted person, their acceptance of their orientation has brought some level of resolution, however it is a choice motivated by an interpretation of Scripture that their sexual

orientation is wrong. A life of celibacy is one of the penalties of being a part of fallen creation (sinful human). Being told they can never act on their natural feelings as a heterosexual Christian can put them in a lesser class. They can never fall in love or engage in a relationship, even if it is a committed monogamous one.

Whilst talking about the phases of the SOCE movement, changes in wording and terminology are illustrative of the shifts in perception. For the first twenty years, ex-gays and attempting ex-gays used terms like 'freedom from homosexuality', 'struggling with homosexuality' or having a 'homosexual problem'. It was not uncommon for people to label themselves 'former homosexuals' as Alan Chambers and a number of others did when they wrote to the president of Uganda about the Kill the Gays bill (Wasswa, 2013, January 3: See Anderson & Holland, 2015). It is difficult to pin point exactly when the shift in terminology happened or who introduced it, but around the mid to late 90s the term 'unwanted same sex attraction' became the preferred term. Possibly it was introduced because 'same-sex-attraction' was becoming a more popular term in academia instead of the term same-sex-orientation. The switch in terminology was a godsend for the SOCE proponents as it was a nicer/softer description for people wanting to rid themselves of their homosexuality. People in religiously based SOCE programs began to describe themselves as 'struggling with unwanted same sex attraction', 'suffering from unwanted same sex attraction' or 'overcoming same sex attraction'.

For SOCE participants, using the phrase 'same sex attraction' was also a way of distancing themselves from the term 'same sex orientation' that had previously been more popular in academia. Having unwanted same sex attractions could be perceived as being more about feelings, thoughts or emotions than behaviour or who you are oriented to fall in love with. Also, the change to 'unwanted same sex attraction' was a way for ex-gay organisations to have the pressure taken off them from pro-gay groups, for example, they could say, *'but we only work with people who have unwanted same sex attractions'*.

The more recent philosophy in the ex-gay world is encapsulated in the words of an ex-gay ministry leader I heard speak in a workshop at the final Exodus International conference in 2013.

Gay is a cultural identity to be rejected. Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice. Same sex attraction is a feeling (unknown conference attendant; cited in Venn-Brown, 2014, August 10).

More recently, terms like 'sexual brokenness' or 'relational brokenness' are used to describe the same thing. Once again, this kind of terminology is an attempt to make the message more palatable to the seeker of help and as a defence to those opposing SOCE work. Even though terminology and approaches may have changed, the underlying message remains the same - 'homosexuals are broken people and God can fix them'.

Interestingly the phrase 'unwanted same sex attractions' is also recently being used on Islamic websites and forums⁸.

SOCE Participants

No Christian person wakes up one day and says, "I have same sex attractions. I'll head off the nearest ex-gay organisation immediately". Allow me to illustrate this point through this example.

Imagine a 17-year-old male church member. He has a Christian family, his life revolves around church and his friends are also Christians. He may even go to a Christian school. What has he heard about homosexuality and gay people?

- "It's an abomination"
- "God hates their 'sin', but loves the sinner"
- "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"
- "Homosexuals have an agenda to destroy God's blueprint for society by destroying the traditional family model"
- "All homosexuals live a debauched 'lifestyle' of endless sexual encounters, drugs, nightclubs and dancing".

He begins to become aware of his attraction to the same gender. That means he 'might' be gay. He may have experimented. He might have gone online and found gay porn. He is tormented and experiences great shame, to the point that he daren't tell anyone. It's his dark secret, but not with God. He prays with every bit of faith he can muster for God to change him but it doesn't go away. He asks for forgiveness and promises God it will never happen again. He pleads and bargains with God saying things like *"If you deliver me from this then I will dedicate my whole life to your service"*, but still nothing changes. The gay self is the dark self that must be destroyed. A pattern of self-hatred and self-loathing is now being established (internalised homophobia).

⁸For an active example at time of press, see <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/topic/234998031-muslims-same-sex-gay-homosexual-attraction/>

Because he hasn't been able to overcome this himself, in desperation he looks elsewhere for answers. He discovers that there are Christian organisations that help people like him with 'unwanted same sex attractions'. He plucks up the courage to make contact via email or a phone call. Or even more dangerous, he finds an online course that promises "Freedom from the bondage of homosexuality"⁹ They tell him they can help. In fact, they tell him that they also used to be gay but now they are married and have children¹⁰. And not only them but also thousands have (Venn-Brown, 2013, August 1). The problem that arises now is that the struggle becomes an even stronger focus for him and cognitive dissonance increases. The conflict between faith and sexuality is now paramount and must be resolved.

I have used the scenario of a young man above but people of many different ages submit to SOCE. The people who seek SOCE are commonly:

- Those with sexual addictions.
- Christians who have experienced same-sex sexual abuse/molestation.
- Gay men and lesbians in heterosexual marriages.
- Gay and lesbian people who have had bad experiences in the 'gay scene' or relationships.
- People pressured by family or culture.

Over the last four decades, there have been numerous approaches to healing gay and lesbian Christians. Groups and practitioners may use one methodology or a combination of many. Examples of some of the methodologies used include: one-on-one counselling, personal prayer, inner healing, support groups, exorcisms, masculinisation or feminisation, and online courses and forums.

The Devastation Caused by SOCE

Since 2000, I have had considerable experience with SOCE participants and what have come to be known as ex-gay survivors (people who have previously been involved with SOCE but now have accepted their same-sex-orientation). In 2000, I commenced Australia's only online support group for ex-gay survivors. As the group grew to over 400 people, it gave me an insight into the experience of others and that mine was not unique.

What became increasingly obvious were the common impacts on those who had submitted

⁹<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/gay-conversion-therapy-still-thriving-online-despite-condemnation-of-ex-gay-ministries/story-fnq2o7dd-1227373417284>

¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ke5vIKg8oc>

themselves to any form of SOCE. Not only was their SOCE psychologically damaging but for many these people the impacts had lingered after the event, sometimes for years. There were some who were permanently traumatised to the point that they were unable to function normally and were receiving government assistance for their resultant inability to work because of mental health issues.

It is a decade long story from the age of 18 to 29 through several ex-gay programs here in Australia, I am now 46. The real damage surfaced after I left the church; the break happened because my parents had me committed to a psychiatric hospital for fear that I was going to kill myself. I have battled alcoholism and severe post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2011 I was deemed totally and permanently disabled as a result of ongoing psychological trauma and have had to give up my career in the Public Service. I am now on a disability pension paid by my superannuation fund. When I slept I had the worst nightmares and when I was awake I suffered flashbacks that were debilitating. Not just from the church experience but also from the destructive path my life took when I left the church.

Overcoming the self-hatred, fear and anger has proven to be very difficult. I have started to experience periods of peace but it has taken 17 years and a truckload of counselling and medication.

~Craig

Whilst LGBT people from faith backgrounds have struggles reconciling the perceived conflict between their faith and sexuality, those who have actively sought help from Christian SOCE organisations have been the most damaged. Paul Martin, a Brisbane psychologist, who himself went through SOCE in the early 1990s, has treated many former reparative therapy participants (Martin, 2012, October 6).

I've worked with maximum-security prisoners, yet the people who've been through ex-gay programs are some of the most psychologically damaged people I've seen in my life. I have a client who went through 35 years of these programs. One of the most crushing moments was when he said, in tears, 'I've just realised that I've never known what it's like to love or be loved.' (as cited in Lallo & Swan, 2012, April 8)

When the first edition of my autobiography, 'A Life of Unlearning', was released, it accelerated my understanding about the faith/sexuality conflict. This opened a floodgate of responses from readers whose emails frequently commenced with the

words "your story is my story". By far the vast majority of these people had never spoken to anyone else about their experiences. This once again brought me in contact with more closeted ex-gay survivors. I say closeted, as even though they had now accepted their sexuality there was such a deep sense of failure and shame attached to their SOCE experience they were only now finding someone safe to share it with who could relate.

It became obvious that a support network was needed for this group of people from Christian backgrounds, where they could connect with others with similar background and experiences. LGBT people of faith and religion experience the usual issues of resolving their sexuality or gender identity, coming out, finding their place in the community and learning what it means to live authentically in a predominately-straight world, however, they often experience these things with greater intensity and also have additional issues to deal with. In 2005, I co-founded Freedom2b¹¹, which has become Australia's largest support network for LGBT people from Christian backgrounds. The majority of people who connected with the online forums and chapter meetings were from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical backgrounds. It is within these expressions of Christianity that SOCE organisations and practices have flourished. Once again, the interactions with individuals confirmed the key issues faced by those who had been involved in SOCE being;

1. **Intense cognitive dissonance:** the acceptance or rejection of sexual orientation has eternal consequences (heaven or hell). Self-acceptance may result in rejection by family and friends.
2. **Suicidality:** Most of the emails I received or stories shared in online forums of ex-gay survivors mentioned depression, which led to thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Some had attempted more than once. Tragically, SOCE survivors have taken their lives because of the impacts of SOCE. Every now and then one of these is highlighted in the media like Damien Christie (see Stark, 2013, April 14) in Australia. More recently Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teenager, made worldwide news when her suicide note blamed her Christian parents and their attempts to change her as the cause (Fox, 2015, January 8). The true toll of how many have taken their lives can never be estimated (Venn-Brown, 2012, April 10).
3. **Mental health issues.** The dissonance created by the perceived conflict of faith and sexuality causes anxiety, stress and depression.
4. **Self-destructive behaviours.** When people leave SOCE programs they are often left with additional feelings of failure and shame. Self-hatred and loathing can lead people into a self-destruct mode of substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices.
5. **Obsessive behaviours and addictions.** Unhealthy behaviours can develop when people suppress or deny their sexual orientation.
6. **Trauma and grief.** These are common experiences of ex-gay survivors. Extricating oneself from the religion can be traumatic and the loss of family, friends and faith devastating. This trauma and grief often lies unacknowledged and buried.
7. **Internalised homophobia.** Even after coming out, years of negative conditioning and self-hatred continue to have impact.
8. **Loss of purpose and self-esteem.** The new gay identity, initially, may not be as profound as the previous Christian identity.
9. **Inability to connect.** Leaving the church means entire social network is lost and the new LGBT world can be difficult to negotiate.
10. **Higher risk of HIV & STI infection.** People from church backgrounds rarely have access to safe-sex education, because they are expected to remain virgins until marriage.

The Current State of SOCE

Exodus International closed down in June 2013 and its president, Alan Chambers, apologised to the LGBT community for the harm they had caused (CBN News, 2013, June 23). Over the last decade, over two-thirds of Australian ex-gay organisations have ceased to exist (Venn-Brown, 2012, July 21). The largest and longest running organisation, Living Waters, closed its doors in April last year, 2014 (Busby, 2014, March 20). This now leaves only a handful of organisations in Australia including Liberty Christian Ministries¹², Beyond Egypt, and Liberty Inc.¹³. Even though links are provided to numerous ministries in Australia, over fifty percent of the links are broken or the websites since shut down. With the growth of the gay Christian movement and more churches and

¹¹<http://www.freedom2b.org/>

¹²<http://www.libertychristianministries.org.au/>

¹³<http://www.libertyinc.org.au/>

denominations becoming gay affirming, I have every confidence that these organisations' days are well and truly numbered.

A breakaway group of ex-gay leaders and organisations formed Restored Hope Network (RHN)¹⁴ in 2012 because Exodus International was already taking a softer approach. Like the remnants of the group left in Australia, they have declared an undying commitment to the 'change is possible' message. But of course the longer they hold on to these out-dated beliefs, the further behind and extreme they become (Venn-Brown, 2014, August 28).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will highlight these areas for growth.

Ignorance and misinformation in churches.

In Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic Churches the belief that homosexuality is a sin and that God has the power to transform LGBT persons to a 'normal' sexual orientation is still strongly held. Whilst there are no formal SOCE organisations or programs, the philosophy and practices continue within local churches. Until these churches become completely affirming, LGBT youth are at risk. If a young gay or lesbian person goes to their pastor or youth leader and says 'I think I'm gay', the response would be no different than if they had gone to a SOCE practitioner. There is an enormous amount of work to do with churches and church leaders to bring them up to date on sexuality and gender identity before LGBT people will be treated with equality and respect.

Research in the areas of faith and sexuality is extremely limited.

LGBT people from faith backgrounds are one of the highest risk groups in our community, only superseded by transgender. Whilst there are substantial bodies of work on suicide, depression and other challenges faced by LGBT people there is very little that compares faith and non-faith individuals.

'Writing Themselves In 3 (WTi3; Hillier et al., 2010) surveyed 3134 same sex attracted and gender questioning young people aged between 14 and 21 years and found that those who mentioned religion compared to those of non-faith background were:

- more likely to feel bad about their same sex attraction;

- more likely to have experienced social exclusion or had to tolerate homophobic language from friends;
- more likely to report homophobic abuse in the home;
- more likely to report feeling unsafe at home;
- more likely to not be supported by their mother, father, brother, teacher or student welfare coordinator/counsellor, when disclosing their same sex attraction; and
- more likely to report thoughts of self-harm and suicide, or to carry out self-harm.

A review of 850 research papers concluded that people with religious involvement and belief system have better mental health outcomes (Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo Neto, & Koenig, 2006). They have higher levels of psychological wellbeing such as life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and higher morale, as well as lower levels of depression and suicide. For gay or lesbian people (in the closet or their sexuality/belief system is unresolved) it is the exact opposite. WTi3 research also demonstrates that the very places where Christian young people should feel safest (in their churches, Christian homes, schools and with friends) are actually places of harm.

In carrying out research with people of faith, consideration must be given to vocabulary and attached meanings. An evangelical believer may not see themselves as "religious" however, they may say they were "Christian" or had a faith. Others might consider themselves "Christian" as cultural identity thing that has nothing to do with their beliefs or behaviour. For those not from a faith background or who have only existed in one breed of Christianity (e.g. Catholic, Pentecostal, Evangelical), it is difficult to understand these nuances.

The LGBT community accepting and embracing people of faith

During the long history of the LGBT community's battle for equality, the most hostile opposition has come from the religious world; particularly right wing conservative Christians and their political organisations. There is an understandable resistance in the LGBT community and at times intense hatred towards Christians and religion because of this. However, where does this leave the LGBT person who has successfully integrated their faith and sexuality or gender identity?

For decades it has been assumed that one cannot be a Christian/religious/spiritual and gay. The two were mutually exclusive and the term 'gay Christian' was considered an oxymoron. In 1968,

¹⁴<http://www.restoredhopenetwork.org/>

Rev Troy Perry dared to reject that belief, and a year before Stonewall, met in a lounge room in Los Angeles with several other Christians and birthed the Metropolitan Community Church¹⁵. The gay Christian movement, once non-existent, has grown exponentially (Google 'gay Christian') and the number of denominations and individual churches that welcome and affirm LGBT people grows annually. There was a time when one would walk into a gay bookstore and never find a book on being gay and Christian but now religion/spirituality is strong genre in LGBT literature and it has been exciting to see books appearing about being a gay/queer Muslim.

Within the LGBT community there are those who have preached the exact same message that conservative churches do. 'Take your pick' they say. 'It's one or the other. You can't be both gay and a Christian'. This is not helpful, especially to young LGBT people growing up in a faith community. The either/or message needs to be rejected irrespective of whoever is preaching it. LGBT people from faith backgrounds will continue to be an emerging group within the LGBT community. For many it is like a second coming out. Coming out of the closet about their faith to gay friends and community can be as daunting as it was coming out to their Christian family and friends about their sexuality.

Educating mental health professionals and community workers

If mental health professionals and LGBT community workers are not from faith backgrounds then it can be difficult to appreciate the nuances, complexities and impacts faith has on an LGBT individual. Though the issues of faith and sexuality are inextricably entwined they are also two distinct issues. 'Walking Between Worlds'¹⁶ is a seminar I created to enable therapists, counsellors, chaplains, LGBT people and youth workers to gain a greater understanding and thus able to work more insightfully with their LGBT/faith clients.

The challenge of Islam, global hotspots and cultural issues

Enormous strides have been made in the Western world with Christianity and LGBT acceptance and equality. Where the Christian Church's beliefs and ideas on homosexuality might have been fifty years ago, Islam is now. The abhorrence of homosexuality is deeply rooted in most Islamic communities as it once was with all Christians. While this is illegal in Australia, young people in other countries have been publicly stoned

to death (e.g., Waleed, 2014, November 26) or hung (e.g., Osborne, 2005, August 3) because they are gay.

Life for young LGBT people in Muslim families can be extremely difficult in Australia and other Western countries. Accepting being gay or lesbian could mean leaving family, culture and religion behind to live openly. Sometimes it can be life-threatening (Marr, 2012, April 13). The Arabic Council of Australia is doing ground-breaking work in this area but it is just beginning (e.g., Arab Council Australia, 2011).

The importation of evangelical Christianity into foreign countries brings another challenge. Uganda has been the most horrific example of the detrimental impacts of western Christian thinking on the progress of LGBT rights. It was Ugandan Christian ministers who helped introduce and support the Kill the Gays Bill (Wasswa, 2013, January 3) into parliament. The intense anti-gay attitudes had been further inflamed by the intervention of conservative Western evangelicals like Scott Lively and others (Gittleman, 2010, January 3). In Oceania, a heavily missionized area, Christianity has become entwined with culture, so now this adds another layer to work through and unravel for LGBT equality.

It will be a matter of time before SOCE practitioners and practices are completely eradicated from places like Australia, the UK and Northern America, however this is only one step in the long march to ensure all LGBT people can live happy, peaceful, well-adjusted lives.

All mental health professional bodies have position statements on SOCE and the dangers of all forms of reparative therapy¹⁷.

¹⁵<http://mccchurch.org/>

¹⁶<http://www.abbi.org.au/services/service-provider-workshop/>

¹⁷<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy>

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Author Profile

In a former life Anthony was a high profile preacher in Australia's mega churches and married with children. He'd spent 22 years trying to rid himself of his homosexuality believing it was sin and that God could heal him. All this changed in 1991 when he fell in love with a man. He resigned from the ministry and walked away from everything knowing he could no longer exist in a religious culture that opposed all that he was. In 2004 his life took another dramatic turn when his autobiography, *A Life of Unlearning*, was released. He established a national support network for LGBT people from Christian backgrounds and recently founded Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International where he takes an ambassadorial approach building bridges with the LGBT community and the church. Anthony has been twice voted one of the 25 most influential gay and lesbian Australians.

"A Life of Unlearning - a preachers struggle with his homosexuality, church and faith" is available on [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).