

# A JOURNEY TO EXODUS – A BEHIND THE SCENES, FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF THE EXODUS CLOSURE



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## **PART 1 ARRIVAL.....A FEW THANK YOU'S HELPED**

This time, twelve months ago I was alone, weeping in a hotel room in West Hollywood.

I sobbed deeply, as if grief had overcome me. It began while I was watching the [DVD](#) of the only session I missed during the previous four days of the Exodus conference. I wasn't just weeping over the devastating story told by Robert and Linda who had lost their gay son Ryan. but for the endless stories I have been hearing now from LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people for nearly two decades. It had happened numerous times as people shared with me the tragic outcomes, theirs, and others' ignorance had created in their lives. There is nothing more tragic than a suicide. A life lost, young or old, when it could have been so much better for them.

I thought I'd toughened up or become de-sensitized to the pain, but no, it was rising overwhelmingly in me again, triggering memories of my own darkness and struggle. Twenty years after I had left my time in one of the world's first ex-gay programs, believing *one day* I would be straight, I was facing a chilling reality. In 1991, in the darkness I stood on the cliff edge, knowing what I had to face the following day, wavering, should I walk back home or walk off the cliff? .

Another twenty years now after that bleak night I was questioning, was I a true survivor a victim or casualty of the ex-gay "Change is Possible" message?

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## ARRIVING AT THE EXODUS CONFERENCE

To say it felt weird, walking onto the Concordia University campus in Irvine CA to attend the Exodus conference "True Stories" on the 20th of June, would be an understatement.

The last time I was in Irvine was 2007, as the only Australian, to attend the first Ex-gay Survivors Conference. The Survivors conference was held at the Irvine University campus to coincide with the Exodus "Freedom" Conference, only kilometres away, where 1,000 had gathered to hear the message preached "Freedom from Homosexuality".

Now here I was, exactly six years later, at the Exodus Freedom Conference; the 'enemy' camp as it were. .

Something didn't seem right. Not many people around and poor signage made it difficult to find the separate registration area. Too much about the next four days was unknown to me so I'd chosen to stay in a nearby hotel to escape if I had to. Attending the conference meetings and workshops was going to be challenging enough without staying in that environment 24 hours a day.

I knew I had limited time to get registration sorted out as preceding emails warned me of tight security and without registration, no one, and I mean no one was getting into the auditorium for the first crucial meeting. Where was the slick, well-oiled, American razzmatazz of the big ex-gay machine and the 1,000's attending I had read and heard so much about? Maybe it had been a clever branding exercise and Exodus didn't have the millions of dollars people claimed. The university campus was deserted for the summer break, adding to the eerie feeling. Occasional passers-by smiled and said hello. No-one I saw seemed very excited. Possibly the recent developments were already having an impact.

At least there would be one other person attending I knew. My friend Jim Burroway from Box Turtle Bulletin had also been granted permission to attend. As far as I knew we were the only two gay advocates there. Everyone else was from the "other side".

The person I was really waiting to finally meet face to face, was Alan Chambers: the president of Exodus International.

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## BUT WHAT WAS ANTHONY VENN-BROWN DOING AT THE EXODUS CONFERENCE?

The person who has publicly stated his goal is to see all ex-gay programs close in Australia and worked consistently to de-construct the ex-gay "Change is Possible" myth frequently promoted by ex-gay/reparative/conversion leaders and organisations.

Alan Manning Chambers (AMC) and I began communicating three years earlier in 2010.

As the name implies, Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International philosophy is to reach out and build bridges where we can. Dialogue always creates better outcomes than attacking. *"It's better to have a long conversation than a raging debate"* to quote Alan Chambers tweet of February 2013. I agreed and retweeted.

I can't disclose all that is in the email communications over three years,. I learnt very early, doing bridge building, about the need for confidentiality and providing a safe space for those we are dialoguing with. It's not an option, it's essential. I gave Alan my word I would not disclose the content of our discussions without his consent. He often said go ahead.

### **The AMC/AVB journey began in October 2010.**

At this time, Exodus withdrew its support from the Day of Truth, held the same day as the Day of Silence. On the Day of Silence, founded in 1996, students take **"a vow of silence to bring attention to anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment in their schools,"**. In 2005, a number of ultra conservative groups, including Exodus International, banded together to create a counter

campaign called The Day of Truth. The Day of Truth **“was established to counter the promotion of homosexual behaviour and to express an opposing viewpoint from a Christian perspective”**.

After a spate of well publicized gay youth suicides in 2010, Exodus pulled out of the Day of Truth and Alan's statement on the Exodus International website read. *"All the recent attention to bullying helped us realize that we need to equip kids to live out biblical tolerance and grace while treating their neighbours as they'd like to be treated, whether they agree with them or not."*

I sent Alan an email expressing my gratitude and re-enforcing why their new decision was important.

After my personal background introduction I wrote

*"I've just read a report that Exodus is not supporting the Day of Truth to counteract the Day of Silence.....in light of the recent revelations of gay youth suicide. Of course what many of us know is that this is not a spike in suicides they have been going on for decades. What is really sad is that it has taken so long to mobilise people to change this tragedy.*

*I wanted to say thank you for that.....and the acknowledgement of the potential for further harm.*

*Whilst we may hold differing views there is a higher purpose we are all called to.....love.*

*Some have used Exodus and its message to justify and promote hate.....and reject those they should love.*

*So thanks for taking this recent step.....it will literally save lives".*

I knew that there would have been an avalanche of emails pouring into Exodus and wondered if I would even get a response. It was refreshing to get a brief, but courteous reply from Alan himself, considering other Christian leaders and organisations had chosen to ignore several polite emails instead.

From that point, every time Alan or Exodus said or did something positive, I sent an email expressing my appreciation. And there were several opportunities to do that.

In 2011 Exodus quietly removed articles about homosexuality being demonic possession and that exorcisms were one way of freeing a person from their same-sex-attractions. (This is still believed by Exodus Global Alliance. Exodus Global Alliance is a loose affiliation of ex-gay ministries around the world that was separate to the much larger and more influential North American Exodus International)

## **PART 2 TIME FOR A SECRET MISSION**

**In January 2012 Alan Chambers did three unthinkable things.**

**Firstly**, he attended the Gay Christian Network annual conference in Orlando.

**Secondly**, during a panel discussion, he stated *"The majority of people that I have met, and I would say the majority **meaning 99.9%** of them have not experienced a change in their orientation or have gotten to a place where they could say that they could never be tempted or are not tempted in some way or experience some level of same-sex attraction."*

**Lastly** he said *" I honestly trust Justin Lee (founder of the Gay Christian Network), and I honestly like him, and I honestly believe that he loves Jesus and that **we are brothers in Christ and that we will spend eternity together** ... and because of that, the thing that brought me here first and foremost is: We're Christians, all of us. We may have diverging viewpoints ... but the thing that brings us together, the thing that causes us to even want to have this dialogue, or need to have this dialogue, is the fact that we all love Jesus. We all serve him. We serve the very same God and believe very different things"*

OMG. Alan Chambers publicly stating you can be both **Christian AND gay**. What next? That was worth a thank you email.

In July 2012 reparative therapies were denounced both publicly by Alan at their annual conference and also by a position statement on their website. This immediately distanced Exodus from the extreme groups like The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), their teachings and practices. Once again an email saying thanks and why was sent.

Every time I sent an email I got a response personally from Alan. **Believe me, I know when I'm getting a standard cut and paste reply from a PA.**

Predictably, every step Alan and Exodus took caused huge controversy. On one side people in the LGBT community continued to attack him and on the other, Christian conservatives were just as vehement accusing him of weakness, deception and apostasy, amongst other things. The comments sections of media articles and social media posts became cesspools of toxic conflict. One side being called **bigots, haters, homophobes** whilst the other fired back with **perverts, sodomites, abominations**. And they were the decent words. Some people were just plain vile....on both sides. I didn't bother wasting my time investing in the online confrontations. I've learnt a thing or two over the years.

*The enemy is not individuals, churches, 'ex-gay' organisations or political parties; **the enemy is ignorance**. Change is created by focusing our energies on overcoming the latter instead of attacking the former.*

To some, in the LGBT community, I tried to remind them that Alan was on a journey. **I could see it, why couldn't they?** How could they forget so easily the time it can take for people of faith to resolve the issue of their sexuality? Just as there is no instant "cure" for homosexuality **there is no one step process for anyone to go from anti-gay to gay affirming**. It's a process of several stages. If it took me 28 years, surely I could give Alan a little grace. It seemed everyone wanted Alan to be where they were at **RIGHT NOW**, ignoring the fact that each steps taken so far, had been significant. **Ground-breaking in fact**. Some of us could see the writing on the wall.

Occasionally I'd forward Alan one of the many emails I'd received from an individual's who'd shared their horrific ex-gay journey and ongoing implications with me. This is what is happening, I'd remind him.

By January 2013 our email conversations were getting warmer, friendlier, and more natural. **Humour often became a part of our conversations**. I was enjoying the dialogue. Alan said the same.

**Then something happened.**

I had an overwhelming sense that I should attend the Exodus conference in six months time. **A strange feeling considering the work I'd been doing for years**. What would be the purpose of going there? But it was the same feeling I had in 2007. "I have no idea how I'm going to get to the ex-gay survivors conference", I thought, "but I **MUST** go". That time proved to be not only monumental but also strategic long-term. It was at that conference I met so many fellow "myth-busting" colleagues that I still have contact with today; some have become friends.

I emailed Alan and told him what I was feeling about coming to the conference. How would he feel about that?

He emailed back saying **"I would love for you to come to the conference. I think it will be a year like no other---I don't know what that means other than it isn't turning out to look like it used to look. You must decide whether God wants you to join us. Please let me know how that turns out. Praying. Alan"**

Now all I had to do was raise the money to go.

One thing I knew from experience was that **this must be kept a secret**. "Why?" you may ask. One reason was that I knew some ex-gay survivors would feel betrayed by me attending. I am well aware

of the triggers and I didn't want to cause them any more hurt. Trying to explain why I was going would have been difficult anyway. I wasn't completely sure myself.

I also knew some would attack me for deciding to attend. The other more obvious reason was that if it got out that Anthony Venn-Brown was going to the Exodus conference right wing Christian conservatives and ex-gay leaders would launch a campaign against me as they have in the past. This would not only be unnecessarily distracting for me and also cause Alan more drama. **One of Australia's ex-gay leaders had attended the previous year.** Even though he'd been writing disparagingly of Alan and Exodus, I knew he particularly would not be happy.

So I launched The Secret Mission to raise the funds. Donations came in from all over the world. Not only people's generosity amazed me but their trust in me was truly humbling.

A straight Pentecostal woman with lesbian sister wrote, *"I would like to contribute \$100 to the secret program, whatever it is. If you are heading it up then I know I can trust it is worthwhile to contribute to"*. Within weeks, the money to take me firstly to speak at the Amplify Conference in Hong Kong, then over to the US, came in.

### PART 3 FINALLY MEETING ALAN CHAMBERS FACE TO FACE

I saw Alan Chambers in the distance as I walked down to the auditorium. He was at the entrance. A brave move I thought for someone so prominent. Most high profile preachers/speakers slip quietly into the auditorium after the service has commenced or through a back door. That way, they avoid people trying to bail them up for a conversation. Not sure if I wanted to be one of those annoying people who "just want to come and say Hi", I held back. What the heck, I've flown from the other side of the world.

Hugging a stranger might be a little awkward but in this case, Alan didn't feel like a stranger anymore. So in usual fashion, I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a hug. It's a very Pentecostal thing to do and I do it with all my gay friends and sons-in-law anyway. **Just be yourself I thought.**

Alan could have resisted the warm public display of affection and put a stiff arm out in front to keep me at a distance.... others have..... but he didn't. There was a little awkwardness though. I mean, Alan Chambers, with same-sex-attractions, hugging an openly gay man like me wouldn't look right. We shouldn't/couldn't/didn't linger. Alan looked around.

*"Leslie"* he called in a voice that everyone could hear, *"this is Anthony Venn-Brown, my favourite Australian gay activist"*. Oh my, am I destined forever to correct the label "activist". Within minutes I'd been labelled. I was hoping to be less conspicuous. **How is that going to pan out for me for the next four days.**

Leslie was lovely. Warm and friendly, but I could see she had a lot on her mind being a major organiser at the conference. I'd read a couple of her articles before and already had an admiration for her and a respect for their "mixed orientation marriage".

The other person I needed to connect with at this stage was my friend Jim Burroway (Box Turtle Bulletin), the only other openly proud gay person I knew would be there. I felt we had both been afforded a great deal of trust being invited into the Exodus space; particularly considering what was about to happen. I moved into the auditorium. As far back as possible would be the wisest thing. Jim obviously had the same idea.

Alan was right when he said in his email **"I think it will be a year like no other"**. Numbers were down. Looked like about 250 – 300 people maximum compared to the 1,000 of previous years. Interesting atmosphere as well. The day before the conference, Alan had released a formal apology to the LGBTQ community. Everyone at the conference would have known about it. It was on every major news network and had set the internet abuzz. You'd have to be living in a cave to not have known. **Imagine how unsettling this would have been for young and old alike who had come from all over the US with their struggles of "unwanted-same-sex-attraction". They'd come looking for hope and encouragement only to read hours before Alan's words, essentially saying 'we were wrong':**

*"Please know that I am deeply sorry. I am sorry for the pain and hurt many of you have experienced. I am sorry that some of you spent years working through the shame and guilt you felt when your attractions didn't change. I am sorry we promoted sexual orientation change efforts and reparative theories about sexual orientation that stigmatized parents. I am sorry that there were times I didn't stand up to people publicly "on my side" who called you names like sodomite—or worse. I am sorry that I, knowing some of you so well, failed to share publicly that the gay and lesbian people I know were every bit as capable of being amazing parents as the straight people that I know. I am sorry that when I celebrated a person coming to Christ and surrendering their sexuality to Him that I callously celebrated the end of relationships that broke your heart. I am sorry that I have communicated that you and your families are less than me and mine."*

How do you deal with that when you have believed, up till now, everything Alan has said and Exodus has stood for?

**You could feel the confusion and unease in the air. But worse was yet to come.**

The band struck up and the meeting commenced with a time of singing and worship. It was easy for me, I'm a Pente (Pentecostal) from way back. Jim, on the other hand, from a Catholic background, was finding it a bit more challenging and seemed more pre-occupied with his computer than singing. **Later I would find out why.**

Announcements, preliminaries, a musical item from the band and then a couple of testimonials. The conference theme this year was "True Stories". There was an authenticity and at times an almost brutal honesty expressed by those who spoke. Certainly no testimonials like *"God has healed me"* or *"I've been set free from homosexuality"*. Not like previous ex-gays such as Sy Rogers, and from Alan himself. For nearly four decades people had proclaimed to the 10,000's of faithful followers at Exodus conferences, ex-gay groups in America and other parts of the world, that they must keep *"fighting the battle"*, *"overcome"*, *"believe in God's power"* and eventually, like them, they would turn from gay to straight. Years of believing this "change is possible" message, struggling, suppressing thoughts and feelings, produced tragic results for many, such as mental health issues, thoughts of suicide and some tragically taking their own lives. **The actual number will never be determined.**

For years I have been endeavouring to communicate the belief that LGBT people from faith backgrounds are one of the **highest risk** groups in our community in several areas; one being suicide. To me there were obvious reasons but considering the space that I work in, I had wondered at times if I was getting a distorted perspective. Ministers and churches seemed oblivious to or disinterested in the harm being done to individuals. Creating awareness of this in the often anti-religion LGBT community itself is challenging. At last people are beginning to research specifically in this area and separating the participants into faith and non-faith and my theory is proving to be true. The latest study, *"The Role of Help-Seeking in Preventing Suicide Attempts among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals"*, by The Williams Institute, has revealed some chilling data. Counselling from a religious or spiritual advisor was associated with worse outcomes. Compared with individuals who did not seek help at all, those who sought help from a religious or spiritual advisor were more likely later to attempt suicide.

Religion in itself is not a bad thing. A review of 850 research papers concluded that people with religious involvement and belief system have better mental health outcomes. They have higher levels of psychological well-being such as life satisfaction, happiness, positive effect, and higher morale and less depression and suicide. **If however, you are gay or lesbian, in the closet or your sexuality/belief system unresolved, it can drive you crazy or kill you.**

So while there are some who would say they got help from ex-gay ministries like Exodus and they saved people's lives, there are far more whose experience has been the exact opposite.

Alan was introduced. He mounted the stage to the applause of the audience. The enthusiasm in the applause could mean several things. Honouring, respecting or please give us hope. Or maybe a combination. It was genuine, they all liked this man.....a lot.....to some he was a hero.

I'd never heard or seen Alan speak publicly before.....

## PART 4 THE BOMBSHELL AND THE AFTERMATH

In an **unprecedented** move the opening address was being live-streamed.

Alan was introduced. He mounted the stage to the applause of the audience. The enthusiasm in the applause could mean several things. Honouring, respecting or please give us hope. Or maybe a combination. It was genuine, they all liked this man.....a lot.....**to some he was a hero**.

I'd never heard or seen Alan speak publicly before. There was no Evangelical/Pentecostal "rah-rah-rah" hype..."God's here! He is going to do a miracle for you. God's here to meet your every need. Amen?" Alan was mellow, thoughtful, and considered, **like every word counted**. I listened intently as he shared his own journey. Much of what he said I'd read before. Like his recent letter in February 2013 "Messy Story, True Story".

Alan's childhood was troubled, he was bullied, he had some same-sex experiences but felt **lost and lonely** and unable to connect with the gay scene. Had he connected with the LGBT community it may have been a very different story. But alas, if you are in a Evangelical/Pentecostal culture you know nothing about "the tribe" **only about the small tip of the iceberg referred to as the "homosexual lifestyle"**.

As a relatively young Christian man of 19, he reached out for help and that's when he found Exodus. Alan went on to talk about how supportive and helpful it was to find people who understood and would help him. It became his sole support mechanism away from condemning church people, bullying world and a gay scene he never felt he could fit into. **Not an uncommon experience when people pluck up the courage to reach out for help**. Alan believed that Exodus had literally saved his life. He went on to speak further of how his positive experience had been the experience of many but over the years Exodus had lost its way and become something it was never meant to be. Certainly not to be high-jacked by the religious right and Christian conservatives for their own anti-gay political agendas as it once had. **Alan admitted he'd lost his way too**.

Where is this going, I thought for a moment in the midst of my notetaking. To me, it was pretty obvious that Alan was preparing the audience, gently leading them along a journey for a reason. **But what was the destination? The punch line!!!!**

### Alan continued

"In January 2012, after spending a lot of time with other leaders, we got together for a leadership conference and came with an agenda. We're at a crossroads. We have only 4 options:

- 1. Stay the same.** For us that wasn't an option.
- 2. Re-brand**, which is common. Let's put lipstick on the pig. This wasn't an option. When they changed Kentucky Fried Chicken to KFC, they still sold fried chicken.
- 3. Modify**, the goal we'd tried. But to completely modify, it's risky and potentially deadly. Exodus has suffered, been ridiculed, maligned, scorned. Life has been incredibly difficult. I begged God to let me be a decorator. He said "no" What we realized was that God does not want us to modify Exodus further."

### Then the bombshell.

"We are at option 4, to shut down". Even though the audience had been quietly listening the entire time there was something about this moment where it felt like there was a collective holding of breath.

"I knew this option would come to pass. It's the fulfilment of what I was hired to do".

**"We have decided to close Exodus down and this is our last conference"**

At that precise moment, unbeknown to any of us, Vice President Randy Thomas, seated in the front row, pressed the publish button on his laptop and the announcement went up on the Exodus website for the whole world to see.

**It was done.** The service closed with prayer, a melodic worship song and it was over. I looked over at Jim, who was feverishly typing away on his computer. I thought he was taking notes but he had been minute by minute live blogging the entire proceedings. When he looked over at me I mouthed the only word I could think of at that moment "FUCK!". I can't believe it. It's over for Exodus and I'm here to witness it. A surreal moment when something you have wished for and worked towards for a long time has finally come to pass. Alan had alluded to this in his email he'd written only six hours earlier "*it's almost over*" but I wasn't completely sure what he was trying to tell me. Even though I'd reported on the progressive white-anting of the ex-gay message twelve months earlier.....sometimes I'm a bit thick.

I did know something though. I'd been in a confidential online group leading up to the conference with several Exodus leaders as well as ex-gay survivors. This had been created at Alan's request and I was invited to participate. The Exodus leaders were hopelessly out numbered and it was definitely not a space for the faint-hearted. **For all that others might criticise Alan for, one thing I believe we should give him some credit for is his courage. I'm not sure I would have willingly placed myself in some of those spaces.** A number of the ex-gay survivors became a part of the Lisa Ling, Our America show "God and Gays" on the Oprah network. In this show, Alan and his wife Leslie were seated in dark church basement with about a dozen ex-gay survivors who, **through tears and anger, confronted them with their stories.** It was here that Alan first apologised but it had not yet been made public. "*God and Gays*" was aired the second night of conference after Alan had officially closed Exodus down.

### **Are you seeing what's going on here?**

This was a planned and well executed closure or was it just an evolution? Possibly over twelve months before, seat belts were fastened and the lever pulled on this roller coaster ride. It began clanking slowly with a change in position statements, more nuanced blog posts, reaching the peak with Alan's written apology to the LGBT community in the afternoon before the conference, racing off that same night with the official close down. The opening address was live-streamed so that as many people as possible could get the information first hand. From there on it just bolted and rattled on a crazy ride. **I am sure there were times they thought it would run totally off the tracks.** I'd even emailed Alan encouraging him not to quit, concerned that if he did the role might be taken over by someone else who had not made the progress Alan had. **That could set things back another ten to fifteen years.**

With the service now over, most people remained seated. **Stunned.** A few got up and hugged other people. A time of ministry and prayer was offered for those feeling the need for comfort. I didn't really know what to say myself. I mean "what now?". We are here for another three days at the conference. Places were provided for the various groups like youth, parents and married couples to have supper together after the meeting. **I didn't go to those.** Not that I wasn't welcome but it was like the family needed some private time to talk about the implications of what they'd just heard. I felt that intimate space needed to be respected.

I did immediately wonder about the wisdom of making this announcement at the opening address. Possibly there was no perfect time.

Looking back, I see the first night was best and not the final night as it gave those attending a safe space to talk, share and process the implications of what they had just happened. **I hate to think what terrible consequences it would have had on some attending the conference had they heard this last.**

This was not a "**they won - we lost**" moment. Exodus was closed with a level of dignity.....certainly honesty and authenticity.

### **But what about the next three days?**

## **PART 5 "A JOURNEY TO EXODUS - THE LAST DAYS"**

The next three days included a full program of speakers and workshops from 9am to 9pm. The theme "True Stories" seemed particularly appropriate as people continued to honestly share their journeys. No real victory stories, just people trying to make some sense out of their lives. Some had already come to the place of full acceptance of their sexuality but were choosing a life of celibacy, still seeing their sexuality as not a part of God's "ideal". Occasionally I spoke with a person who was hoping that one day they would find love and a partner. Chatting with a young woman on the way to dinner, I inquired politely "So where are you at on this journey?" She paused a moment and then replied confidently "**I love God**" she paused again "**and I love women**". I'm not sure if she had said that to anyone else before but I loved the succinctness and simplicity in her answer. **It spoke volumes to me.** I knew exactly where she was on the journey. Full self-acceptance, her same sex orientation integrated with, not separate from or in opposition to her relationship with God.

Occasionally, but only occasionally, I heard people use the word "gay".

"Gay". Now there is a word not often heard previously at an Exodus conference except in terms like the "gay agenda" or "gay lifestyle". The term used normally is "same-sex-attractions", usually with the adjective "**unwanted**" in front of it or a verb like "I **struggle** with" or even worse "I **have** same-sex-attractions" sounding like a mental health condition or terminal disease. But of course, Exodus had preached for years, homosexuality didn't have to be terminal, freedom came to those who resisted temptation and kept their eyes on Jesus. Attending a workshop later in the conference I heard one minister make a statement that still rocks me today. It was said with confidence and an air of "expertise" that came from a straight man who'd spent years working in this area. He used three fingers to make each point and ensure everyone understood the distinction.

**"Gay is a cultural identity to be rejected.  
Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice.  
Same sex attraction is a feeling".**

You can probably imagine that it took every bit of self-control and grace I could muster to not jump up and say "*What a load of crap. All those things you've mentioned are an orientation. Neither a lifestyle nor a choice. An orientation that is healthy to embrace. And it's not a feeling IT IS who I am*". But I was not there to be a troublemaker; I'd been given a privileged invitation. I quietly excused myself from the workshop, went outside and took deep breaths.

Amongst the broad spectrum of those attending, there were obviously people who still had a long way to go. Most likely they would go over to the Exodus splinter group Restored Hope Network who'd vowed they would maintain the "change is possible" message. Good luck with that. It seems the last remaining ex-gay organisations in Australia are planning the same.

Jim Burroway made an interesting observation. During the workshops, every time a person (particularly a young person) mentioned the term "same sex attraction" to describe their experience, their demeanour changed. Automatically, they looked down, avoiding eye contact and shoulders drooped. Their body language spoke of **shame, shame, shame**. I felt sad for them. Shame is attached to beliefs like "I am a failure" and "I am bad" which undermines self-esteem and self-worth. Living with this for too long is soul-(self)-destroying.

These poor kids and young adults I reflected. They have been locked in a prison of Christian cultural ignorance and unnecessary shame. So unlike the wonderful gay and lesbian young people I know who hold their heads high with dignity, pride and self-respect. Alan's apology for the shame they had caused will obviously take longer than a few days to correct. **Having been entrenched for years, liberation is never instantaneous.** Like the young elephant who is tied to a stake so it can't escape, grows up being held by this belief (not the stake), unable to free himself in later life.

**I had no doubts about what my role was at the conference.** It certainly was not to cause trouble, argue or try to convert anyone but just to **BE**. Be me: a fulfilled, openly gay man who has no conflict with his sexual orientation and his faith. **I sorted that out years ago.** I have nothing to prove to anyone really. Over the next three days I got to meet some lovely people and had interesting, sometimes intriguing, conversations. **Hearing my accent they usually began like this.**

"Oh you're from Australia. How wonderful. What do you do there?" I tried to explain the mission of Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International. Providing training and consultancy for churches and

leaders to educate them on LGBT issues. To do bridge building between the LGBT community and the church. **Some found the concept difficult to understand.** One lady I was speaking to couldn't quite get it. "I'm a professional homosexual," I said laughing. She cracked up immediately. "**Oh you're on my side then**" she said. We've been cyber-connected ever since.

**Randy Thomas** was the Vice President of Exodus.

Now I couldn't write about my Exodus experience without talking about Randy. It's interesting how one can gain a perception of people without even meeting them, only to discover how far off the mark your original perception was.

I've been a part of the ex-gay survivors (people who have previously been in ex-gay programs and come out accepting their sexuality) world for nearly two decades. I couldn't recall a single positive thing being said about Randy. In fact, some hated and ridiculed him. It's challenging to be objective meeting someone you've never heard a nice thing said about. It didn't take too long for the negative perception to fade. Randy, had what I would call a drag queen sense of humour. Not crude or smutty but sharp, clever, witty. Camping it up seemed his natural way of being and quite comfortable with. Unlike myself who, for decades, had suppressed the real me and monitored mannerisms, voice and gestures.

Over meals together we got beyond the humour as Randy shared openly and very honestly with me about his journey. Particularly that he had never considered himself an ex-gay but that he had allowed others to hijack his story for their own agendas. Honesty is always refreshing. From time to time he genuinely ask "*What do you think about this or that Anthony*". It's hard not to like someone who thinks they can learn a thing or two from you and value your opinion. The more time I spent with Randy the more I came to respect him and his journey. Even though the outcomes of our resolution have taken us to different places it is a level of resolution. Who knows? Maybe one day a man will come into Randy's life and they will fall hopelessly in love and want to be together for the rest of their lives. I reckon he'd make an excellent partner. Good man. Good heart. Good sense of humour. I did enjoy his message at the conference "God used a drag queen to save my life"

Of all the apologies I have read Randy's apology is the most profound. It's not just an apology it's a confession and is especially interesting as it looks back over twenty years of involvement as a participator and leader in the "ex-gay" myth. Whilst others have been cynical, to me, it demonstrates that Randy has done some deep soul-searching and self-reflection.

The conference was coming to a close and Alan had promised me an interview. I'd already been bumped back several times as every conceivable media outlet had had their piece of Alan over the last four days. The term "media frenzy" comes to mind. Actually it had been going on for days even before the conference. Most of the leading newspapers around the world and TV networks along with Christian media outlets got the story first hand from the man himself. I was pretty well the last. We sat down in the media room for 20 minutes. I was hoping for more. Not so much an interview but a conversation as we'd had in the emails but over a meal, bottle of wine or cocktail. I could see the man had little more to give. He was exhausted.

You can read the interview [online here](#).

Walking back to the final meeting, Leslie pulled me aside. "*I just wanted you to know that Alan has spoken very highly of you and appreciates you*". I thanked her and mentioned that I actually get what they had been going through more than others might so I appreciated her words. The time I'd invested in building the relationship and the hours I'd put into constructing well thought-out emails had paid off.

The final meeting came to a close. Alan prayed and finished with the words that were not only to the conference but to LGBT people and the Christian Church.

*"The culture war is over. Let us lay down our weapons and be at peace"*

**AMEN!!!!**

And with the closure of Exodus, nearly four decades of unnecessary suffering, shame, torment and false hope had come to an end for 1,000's of people. What will it look like for the new generation of young LGBT Christians raised in an atmosphere of acceptance and equality?

**Now the questions remain.**

Can the church now allow its gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender members to take their rightful place alongside their straight brothers and sisters?

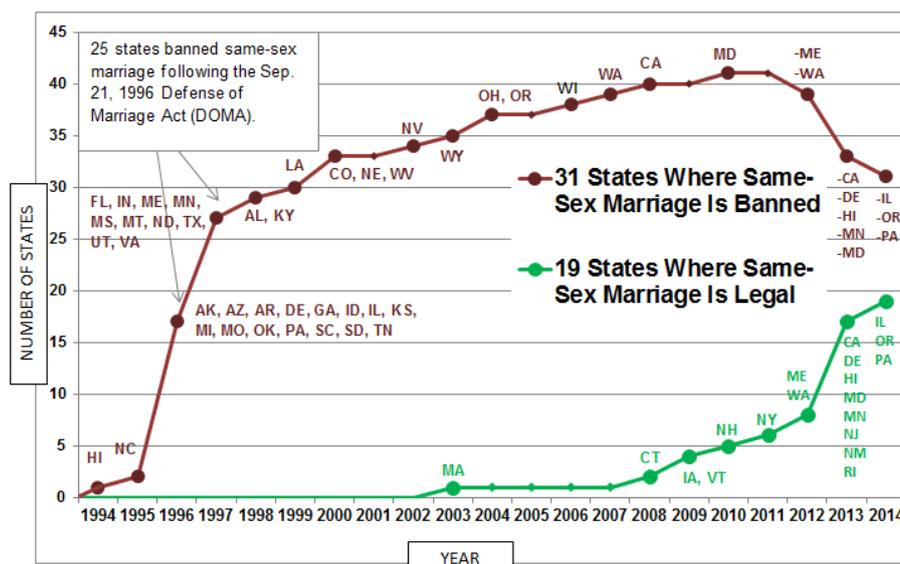
Can the church rise to the challenge, let go of judgment, preconceived ideas and misinformation and reach out to the LGBT community with love and grace.

Can the church also take responsibility for the harm, ignorance and misinformation has caused and have the courage to say, like Alan, Randy and others, "We are deeply sorry"

## "THE TIPPING POINT" ...WHAT WERE THE 8 FACTORS THAT CREATED THE DOWNFALL OF EXODUS?

In Malcolm Gladwell bestselling book, "The Tipping Point", he describes several key factors that, put together, create the phenomena of a shift in consciousness and/or society.

Exodus closing was not an insignificant event. **It is/was a tipping point.** For LGBT people, the Stonewall riots in 1969 were a tipping point. The major factor that created this was that the harassment and oppression had gone on for too long and it ignited anger and rage in the gay men, lesbians and drag queens. The riots that spilled over to several nights on the streets of Greenwich Village, New York have been seen by many as the birth of the gay rights movement. We are still feeling the impacts of that event over four decades later. President Obama's declaration in 2012, that he supported same sex couples getting married was a tipping point. The graph below demonstrates the impacts of this.



- Notes:
- A plus or minus sign before the state indicates that the legal status of gay marriage changed.
  - DC legalized same-sex marriage on Mar. 10, 2012.
  - Wisconsin banned same-sex marriage in 1979.
  - California legalized same-sex marriage on May 15, 2008, but banned it on Nov. 4 of the same year.

Source <http://gaymarriage.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004857>

Some have suggested that Exodus closing was solely a financial decision and that Alan and the Exodus leadership saw "the writing on the wall". Whilst this may have been a contributing factor, to accept this simplistic assumption demonstrates a lack of understanding about the complexities involved and all that went on behind the scenes. A deeper look reveals several key factors that brought, what was inconceivable to many, into the world of reality. Let's just remind ourselves again what actually happened.

***The largest, most influential, longest running (37 years) ex-gay/reparative/conversion therapy organisation said "sorry we were wrong" and overnight closed its doors.***

From my observation all the factors below were key elements that contributed to the closure. We can learn lessons from these.

## 1. THE SOCIETAL SHIFT FACTOR

Personally, I've never liked the term "culture wars" or used it; it's an evangelical construct/concept. It began taking hold thanks to failed Republican presidential nominee and televangelist Pat Buchanan.

In 1992 at the Republican National Convention, he claimed: *"There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. **It is a cultural war**, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself. The agenda [Bill] Clinton and [Hillary] Clinton would impose on America — abortion on demand.....homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat — that's change, all right. But it is not the kind of change America wants. It is not the kind of change America needs. And it is not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God's country".*

**Them's fightin' words Pat. Rally the troops!**

The mythical, conspiracy theory, "The Gay Agenda" had now become a 'Culture War'

Under some objective analysis it isn't hard to see that **American evangelism is pretty much fear based**. Fear of hell; fear of the judgment of God on the nation, fear of being overcome, fear of losing your children and freedom, a fear of falling from grace, a fear of being outside the will of God. The list is endless. If you don't believe me then just Google the comments by high profile evangelical leaders in the US after September 11 and hurricane Katrina. Fear drives people into action and is a powerful motivator for fundraising apparently.

**It was only a culture war in the minds of conservative Christians because they felt threatened.** Institutions only rise when they feel threatened. If there was any war going on it was a battle for equality. **What was actually happening was a shift in society's consciousness/understanding of sexuality and gender identity that was leading to equality.** It's been a progressive evolution (another dirty word for evangelicals) that has been going on for at least four decades. At one point Exodus moved from being a support network to the front lines of the "culture wars". As Alan Chambers has admitted ....**this was a BIG mistake.**

Sometimes the Christians played real dirty as you will see on this Boxed Turtle article, In 2012, Charisma magazine resurrected an eight year old article of Alan's possibly to discredit his and Exodus's recent shifts. Alan responded, *"I have no idea why Charisma decided to reach so deep, edit and republish an 8 year old article that I am embarrassed that I ever wrote. Our PR team has asked them to remove the article and not to repost it. "Shame on you **Charisma**, whatever your motive/agenda was it certainly wasn't a holy/Christian/righteous one.*

## 2. THE GULF FACTOR

Born in 1951, I grew up in a generation when racial slurs and sexist jokes and poking fun at people with disabilities were commonplace **and accepted**. No longer would anyone dare say something like

**"A woman's place in the home"** Imagine the outcry, because we know these things are completely inappropriate in this day. But once, it was the common belief. A racial slur can get you sent off the playing field or straight to the Human Resources manager. It is not tolerated in a civilized society, workplace of sporting arena. Our society says you can't discriminate and there are laws to penalize you if you do. We are a better and fairer society for dismantling prejudice and bigotry and creating equality.

In western countries such as the UK, Australia and the US there was a time when societies and the churches belief that homosexuality was a sickness, crime, abomination, perversion etc was aligned. **So negative was the view of same-sex-orientation they originally hanged gay men but later incarcerated or tried to "cure" them with cruel "treatments" such as lobotomies and electric shocks.** Some of you will remember this from the 50's and 60's. This belief and treatment was born out of nothing more than ignorance.

Growing up in the 50's and 60's no one was out. To reveal your true identity meant imprisonment, loss of jobs, rejection by family and friends. Very feminine gay men and masculine lesbians had difficulty hiding their identity (this left-over stereotype still exists today). People had their suspicions or would secretly gossip that he is "one of those" or "a friend of Dorothy's". Others were able to hide behind the facade of a heterosexual marriage with an unsuspecting spouse or they chose a lavender marriage.

That began to change, thanks scientific research and the American Psychiatric Association (followed by other mental health professional organisations) removing homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973. Society's attitudes began to change as more people felt brave enough to come out. This was still a perilous act though with the possibility of public humiliation, loss of jobs, promotions, rejection by families as I've mentioned. We owe a lot to those brave early pioneers who took risks we could never comprehend. **So when you hear of Gay Pride, remember, it was not born out of a need to celebrate being gay. It evolved out of our struggle as human beings to break free of oppression and to exist without being criminalized, pathologized or persecuted for being who we are. Don't be mystified by the term and wonder why there is no such thing as a "straight pride", be grateful you never needed one.**

Coming out of the closet, being open and honest created a visibility. Without that, preconceived notions, misconceptions, ignorance and stereotypes could never have been broken down in the minds of average citizens.

Eventually laws changed as well so that these days only a small minority of people view same gender loving people as sick, immoral or evil. The US is a good example. With its highly religious influences, in 1973, 70% of Americans felt same-sex relations are "always wrong," and in 1987 (most likely due to religious political campaigning) that rose to 75%. By 2000, it had dropped to 54% and finally bumped over the 50% in favour milestone only a few years ago (2007). By 2010 it was down to 43.% against.. ....and will continue to drop as people see that marriage equality hasn't produced hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes or the slippery slope theories of sensationalist, fear-mongering religious conservatives have not become reality. .

The breakdown of the Public Religion Research Institute's research is even more revealing. Among self-described Evangelicals, the millennials (18 to mid-30s) showed the highest level of support for same-sex-marriage at 43 percent (though the poll only included white Evangelicals), compared to 33 percent for generation X, 22 percent for Baby Boomers and 19 percent for those 68 and older. The church leaders of tomorrow have it all worked out and those maintaining negative attitudes towards LGBT people are a dying breed.

Whilst the rest of society moved on Churches and ex-gay organisations like Exodus fought to maintain an outdated mindset under the guise of maintaining Christian "values" and biblical principles. **They became locked in a time warp re sexual and gender identity.**

**This gulf between conservative Christians and the rest of society is so wide now they are in the minority and their views considered extreme.** Not only do they have gay and lesbian people opposing them (who are a minority) but also their family, friends and an increasing number of progressive churches.

It's interesting to note that now in the volatile space of the homosexuality/Christianity "debate" certain Christian groups are crying they are being persecuted. There is a universal law that Jesus spoke of, which says "**what you sow you reap**". Possibly the conservative Christians are now getting a taste of what they have dished out to LGBT people and their community for decades.

Come on church.....you have forty years to catch up on. **You can't bury your head in the sand any longer hoping it will not go away. It won't.** Soon you will have gay and lesbian couples coming through your doors that are legally married and have children. Will you turn them away as you once did people of colour or those who'd been divorced?.

According to the majority of western society, the view that homosexuality is a sin and that our loving committed relationships are flawed, unnatural, sick, broken is outdated, offensive and extreme. When tired, hackneyed clichés like "**love the sinner – hate the sin**", or "**God made Adam and Eve – not Adam and Steve**" are used, expect a backlash. When you say hurtful, cruel and untrue things about LGBT people, the community or our relationships, you can no longer cry 'freedom of speech' and you lose all credibility as a representative of God - a God of Love. **Times have changed.**

This gulf put Exodus on the side of extremism.

### 3. THE INTERNET FACTOR

The influence of the internet to gain information and connect people cannot be overestimated re the downfall of Exodus.

When I resigned from the ministry and came out in 1992 internet usage was in its infancy and not the commonplace entity it is today. I am a little embarrassed to say that for years, I really believed that I was probably the only Pentecostal minister in the entire world who had resigned because he couldn't "overcome" his homosexuality. It wasn't until after 1996 when [www.PlanetOut.com](http://www.PlanetOut.com) was launched and I joined the internet that I actually found someone just like me. Searching various criteria on PlanetOut I found an African American Pentecostal preacher who was gay ....and out. **I was over the moon.** Then I found [Jallen Rix](#), the first former ex-gay person I'd ever met. Talking with others who had similar experiences was reassuring. **No longer did I feel so alone or like I was a freak.** Probably a similar feeling that young people got when they finally connected with an ex-gay group..

During the 70's 80's and 90's, before the internet, where did the 1,000's of gay men and women who'd "failed" and left ex-gay programs and anti-gay churches go? **They went into another closet.**

A few found love like [Michael Bussee](#) and [Gay Cooper](#) (Exodus originals). Those who found love realised that their homosexuality was not a sin but an orientation which created the most beautiful human experiences of love, intimacy, affection and finding a partner for life. Others left the ex-gay programs with an even greater sense of failure and shame. Years of conditioned internalised homophobia continued to play out in self destructive behaviours. They had been told for years about the "**homosexual lifestyle**" and assumed this was how they should live once they accepted being gay so went straight to the tip of the iceberg. Many had been traumatised and developed mental health issues like post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To go back to these experiences reminded them of the pain of some of the darkest days of their lives so they just kept quiet. Some just wanted to move on and forget about it.. For others it all became too much. They'd failed to become straight, rejected by family and friends, disillusioned by their experiences in the tip of the iceberg; they choose suicide. **The horrendous toll that ex-gay thinking and organisations have had on individuals lives can never be fully documented.**

The ex-gay survivor movement grew in the underground cyberworld of online forums in the late 90's. I commenced Australia's only ex-gay survivor group in 2000 which quickly grew to 400 people. **It was here, listening to tragic story after tragic story that my passion to see change ignited.**

As the features of the internet developed, ex-gay survivor stories moved from the secrecy of online forums to other platforms like blogs, websites and YouTube. They were now sharing their stories in public spaces, speaking of the harm and the ongoing impacts their years in ex-

gay/reparative/conversion therapy and programs had on them. For the 1,000's Exodus and others were claiming had been 'cured' we were now hearing from 1,000's saying it's a lie.

**Then the apologies began.** Apologies from three former Exodus leaders Darlene Bogle, Michael Bussee (one of the founders of Exodus), and Jeremy Marks (from the UK who'd been in the International board of Exodus). I released five Australian ones in 2007. One of those was from the leader of Exodus in Australia. I've added more since. It was out there for anyone searching for information.. When I first searched "unwanted same sex attraction", I couldn't find one positive link on the first eight pages on Google. All said I was broken, sick, and dysfunctional and that God could "heal" me. I determined to change that. Now on the first page several of my articles appear. So when a young troubled Christian person is secretly searching for answers in the privacy of their bedrooms at least they get an alternative perspective. **Thank God for the internet I say. It's saved people unnecessary torment and wasted years. And saved lives.**

#### 4. THE HONESTY FACTOR

Yes, simple honesty contributed to this tipping point. The message for decades was "Change is Possible". The goal of people who sort out ex-gay organisations was always to rid themselves of homosexuality and become heterosexual/'normal'. Even though some groups and leaders profess today that heterosexuality is not the goal they still constantly refer to now being married and fathered children.....thus setting up a false hope.

Alan Chambers was once of these people. *"Our organization hears from thousands of teens and young adults each year who are desperate for information and resources beyond the one-sided 'born-gay' message that saturates our culture".*

In a written testimony he said, *"In 1998 my ultimate earthly dream came true when I married my best friend. My wife, Leslie, is the embodiment of all I consider to be godly, pure and beautiful. She is not my diploma for healing, nor is she proof that I have changed."*

Alan like many others in Australia like Rev Fred Nile of the Christian Democratic Party, Bill Muehlenberg, Ron Brookman – Living Waters, Peter Stokes – Salt Shakers and Margaret Court repeatedly have told us about the 1,000's of people who had left the "homosexual lifestyle" and were now married.

#### First it was 1,000's then 10,000's

*"Again, I am one of tens of thousands of people whom have successfully changed their sexual orientation. I am grateful for the message of change and for the current laws that saved my life".* (April 17, 2004) Opening Testimony of Exodus President Alan Chambers *U.C. Berkeley Debate on Same-Sex Marriage*

#### Then it grew to 100,000's

In an interview with the San Francisco Gate in 2006 he said, *"If people like me exist,"* Chambers said, **"then they weren't born like this (gay). Change is possible or could be possible."** The article went on to say. *"Chambers claims there are "hundreds of thousands" of ex-gays, his evidence being the nearly 400,000 phone calls the organization receives each year from people seeking their help."*

In 2009 Alan, along with others, signed an open letter to the President of Uganda saying *Exodus opposes Anti-Homosexuality Bill*, as a **former** homosexual. I doubt that had any impact. Probably the opposite.

Finally the honesty comes out January 9, 2012 when Alan says at the Gay Christian Network conference, *"99.9% of people do not change their sexual orientation"*.

What a lot of people missed however was that Alan was beginning to face up to the reality that change is not always possible some five years earlier. Alan Chambers told the Los Angeles Times in

2007 that **"by no means would we ever say change can be sudden or complete,"** adding that he was uncomfortable with the term 'ex-gay' as he didn't believe he'd ever met one the article says.

At last some people were becoming honest but not all. What was going on before? **Self-deception or denial? It was both for me.** Deceiving myself that being married and having children meant I was actually straight (or that it was a possibility) but still "struggled" with homosexual thoughts and feelings. Denying the reality I desperately never wanted to accept that, **I was, am and always will be gay.**

Alan's new level of honesty and openness was refreshing **The honest truth is, firstly there were not 1,000's and 1,000's of ex-gays and secondly that Alan himself and others had not miraculously turned from gay to straight.**

*"As far as my life goes, I am married. I am happily married. There's not been one day in the course of our nearly 16 years of being married that I've been tempted to be unfaithful to my wife. I would say I have an orientation towards her. **I do have same-sex attractions.**"* Alan admitted in an interview with the Huffington Post.

If you want to know what I think of Alan and Leslie and their relationship listen to this interview on ABC Radio National.

## 5. THE BRIDGE BUILDING FACTOR

When I first wrote briefly in my newsletter about being at the Exodus Conference and the 37 year old organisation was closing a lovely person responded via email saying "Thank you.....etc etc". **I laughed aloud.** Oh dear, this person was under the illusion that somehow, singlehandedly, I had managed to bring the world's largest ex-gay organisation to a grinding halt. I replied thanking them for their gratitude but that I was a very very small cog in the wheel. Others have been far more influential in the long saga.

To even attempt to name the individuals involved in reaching out to Alan and others at Exodus would be mammoth task. I know some of them but in naming individuals I'd be sure to miss some important contributors. One thing I do know is that it began as far back as 2007 when the first Ex-gay Survivors Conference was going on only kilometres from the Exodus conference A group went over the conference and met with Alan. **Amidst the 1,000's of angry condemning emails Alan received others were taking a different approach; emails, phone calls and meetings set up..... all with the same end in mind to build trust, relationship and dialogue.** Some gave up in frustration.

One thing I've learnt in bridge building is that one needs enormous amounts of patience and grace. Changes like we have seen with Exodus shutting down do not happen overnight. Going from being anti-gay to gay accepting/affirming is a journey of many years through several stages. I've been on this journey with some individual church leaders and churches for over 10 years now.

Sadly, in most cases it has not been Exodus or the Church reaching out for dialogue with the LGBTI community as one would think Christians motivated by love would do. **Quite the opposite actually.** It's been LGBTI organisations and individuals who have reached out and built bridges to them.

## 6. THE LISTENING FACTOR

If people are going to reach out to dialogue there has to be a willingness on the other part to engage. Of course their willingness to listen depends largely on the approach and the language used to reach out. No one is going to engage if they are attacked and the language consistently accusatory or defamatory. I don't bother with emails or people like that myself. Alan's words in his response during our interview probably sums it as well as anything. When I asked him the question *"I'm here, and you said 'I'd love you to come,' so that's probably intriguing for a lot of people as to why would you want Anthony Venn-Brown to be attending that conference and so what was all that about?"*

His answer was a simple yet incredibly enlightening. "***You have been kind to me and these days kindness is hard to come by, so it means a lot to me, and you've wanted to have a conversation though we disagree on some things, that's what I want to do and it's amazing to me that here I am, saying very clearly what I believe and yet creating this new space, what some are calling this wishy washy space, my gay friends and my gay activist friends haven't doubted for a minute what I really believe and yet they have been so welcoming and so warm, and so receptive and so desirous of relationship with me***"

.Alan was willing to listen but it had to be the right approach.

One thing I remind churches and leaders of constantly is "***No conversation about us, without us***". It's important to remember that having a conversation about us (LGBT) without us will usually be a recycling of preconceived ideas and misconceptions.

Can you imagine a group of male church leaders discussing the role of women in the church without females present. We would call that misogyny. Or church leadership discussing indigenous issues without ever consulting with indigenous people themselves to get insight into what their life experience is really all about. We would call that white supremacy/racism/elitism. The church has done a great deal of talking about us but rarely has spoken with us. So when church leaders discuss LGBT people, relationships and the community without speaking with or spending time getting to know LGBT people it does beg the question why. What is there to fear? Why the exclusion? Is this another evidence of homophobia?

It's time for the church to invite LGBT people into the conversation. For some this is a conversation about their thoughts and beliefs but for us it is about who we are. You can ask questions. What was it like to sit in church and hear the word abomination to describe your orientation. What was it like to get to the point of coming out knowing you might be rejected by those you've loved and a church you've served.? How did you find resolution of your Christian beliefs and your sexuality? In listening you will learn.

That's why it's so important to remember. No conversation about us, without us.

<https://www.abbi.org.au/services/church-consultancy/>

## 7. THE EVOLVING FAITH FACTOR

People in evangelical/Pentecostal circles have a strongly biblically based faith. This type of theology has been at the core of the ex-gay movement and you'll often find it clearly stated on ex-gay websites. An evangelical/Pentecostal faith is all very neat and tidy. **It's black and white**. There are no arguments. No wiggle room. Doubts and questions are not encouraged. I remember well the slogan, "**God said it. I believe it. That settles it**".

The problem with this kind of theology/faith is it doesn't take into account interpretation of what God "said". Not only has Christianity been smashed into 1,000's of denominational pieces because of interpretation, it happens within denominations as well. Do you know how many breeds of Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostals there are in each of those groups? Each one believing they are right, which of course makes the other wrong, in error or apostasy because they have strayed from "the truth".

When a person from this background begins to question or have doubts then they, and others, might say they are losing their faith. Actually, what is often happening is that is **their faith is evolving** but because the system is so tight, they can't see the reality of what is happening. To go with the process is scary. A loss of faith means disbelief and disbelief leads to a loss of salvation. Paul said in Ephesians 2:8 "***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God***"

Those who move through the stages of faith come out the other end with an evolved faith. Their God is no longer neatly fitting in a box of answers it is a God of mystery of unanswered questions and ambiguities. **Far from their faith being destroyed, it is now broader, larger, and richer.** They know that they don't have all the answers and it is arrogant when people say they do. They are less judgemental, live more in grace and love instead of the law (the Bible says). This doesn't mean they have rejected the sacred texts but recognise the source of all life is bigger than a book and certainly man's limited attempts at interpretations.

This piece by a Pentecostal pastor friend of my mine demonstrates what this evolved faith might look like.

***The way we were -***

*When I look back over my life I realise how much I have changed in thought and theology. The journey of life is certainly never boring! And the journey in and of itself, is probably one of the main things God uses to reveal himself to us.*

*There was a time when I actually thought God was in sensationalism – in the goose bumps, and the atmosphere of certain songs – nowadays I see him far more clearly in the slums and the ordinary.*

*There was a time when I thought that the mountaintop is the right and nirvana of every Christian – nowadays I see His footprints in the muddy paths of very dark valleys.*

*There was a time when I thought that I had clearly mastered and understood most major doctrinal truths – nowadays I walk with a lot more contradiction as I face the fact of how little I really know.*

*There was a time when my god could comfortably fit into a safe box, or on a flannel board, and he would make everyone smile – nowadays I am content to simply recognise that what I worshipped was a god the way I wanted him, not the God who said his ways and thoughts are beyond mine.*

*There was a time when I thought triumphant victory was the reward of the strong and courageous – nowadays I feel more at home with failure, and a recognition that God is not freaked out by it either (the freaked out god belonged on my flannel board).*

*There was a time when I thought that suffering was a strange phenomena, now I stand at the foot of a bloody cross and wonder “what the hell was I thinking?”*

*There was a time when I thought God depended on my prayers, nowadays I continually pray in the face of my own helplessness.*

*There was a time when I looked for miracles in the supernatural and gobstopping, nowadays I realise every breath of life is a miracle and gobstopping.*

*There was a time when I thought that friends should be found in the community of the triumphant and all-together ones, nowadays I feel very at home with sinners, mainly because my own sinfulness stares me in the face.*

*There was a time when I though God had cursed the lepers in our community – nowadays I realise He is the leper that our Christian communities often curse.*

*Change is painful. Pain causes us to wake up to the matrix, once woken we really don't want to go back...*

Within those words above is the essence of the journey of faith. It oozes with humility. I think it reflects the core of the Christian message and the life of Christ himself.

To not evolve (grow up) in faith leaves one with simple Sunday School faith which conveniently denies other evidence like science. Much like the Catholic Church did when Galileo suggested the world revolved around the sun. This immediately put him in opposition to the "authority" of the scriptures (the interpretation of the time) and the church. He spent the rest of his life imprisoned as a heretic. **It took the Catholic Church another three centuries to acknowledge they were the ones in error and apologise for that.**

Worse than the Sunday School type of faith is the Pharisaical faith of laws, rules and regulations. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of his day. Pharisaical faith is harsh and judgmental (totally Bible based of course). LGBT people are very familiar with this type of Christianity. I still chuckle when I get an email from someone trying to "set me straight" (pardon the pun) and quote Sodom and Gomorrah, Leviticus the first chapter of the book of Romans and I Corinthians 1:9 as if I was completely oblivious that these verses existed let alone knew what they meant. You only need to read the gospels to see how cruel and illogical the Pharisees were. Jesus life and teachings are the antithesis to Phariseeism. Well explained by my friend Rowland Croucher in his article [Pharisees Ancient and Modern](#).

**Pharisees in Jesus time were the ones who told people how they should live, who they should be, where they could and couldn't go and who they could or couldn't mix with.** Sound familiar? Jesus got really pissed off with the Pharisees regularly and said all that stuff was a load of crap. Ignore them he said repeatedly to the crowds who followed Him. *"It's simple,"* he said. *"Love God and love your neighbour as yourself"*. **Right wing conservative evangelicals are like the Pharisees in many ways. I call them Pharagelicals.** I can't recall a time when they treated LGBT people or the community as they would like to be treated themselves. Their rhetoric is full of judgement, disdain and disrespect.

For those of us who have some understanding of these things it wasn't hard to see that Alan and others at Exodus were shifting theologically and faith wise to a more loving and gracious expression of Christianity. Far from abandoning the scriptures, they have sort to be more like Jesus than a Pharisee. This of course has put them at odds with the Pharagelicals like [Robert Gagnon](#) and [Peter Le Barbara](#). Alan's faith shift is expressed in the way he writes and also his interactions.

## 8. THE MIDLIFE FACTOR

Yep..... something I think many people have missed is possible the influence of midlife I believe. Maybe I'm more aware of this than others are because it happened to me like clockwork and I've worked one on one with so many who are in midlife facing similar issues. Coming up to my 40th birthday something was happening. A shift. It wasn't pleasant. Midlife is a transition where, particularly for men, many things have to be faced. One of those is unresolved issues and that some things you dreamed were going to happen may never become a reality. At 40, I faced the reality that I was, am and always will be gay. As a high profile preacher, married with two children facing this reality had enormous challenges, as you can no doubt imagine. Those who don't face up to what comes up at midlife are plagued with it for the rest of their lives. If they are not conscious of what is going in then they slip into midlife crisis mode.

Alan turned 40 in 2012. Randy four years earlier. Midlife transition can hit anywhere between 35-45 depending a numerous factors. It was around this time that Alan began expressing new levels on honesty and facing huge challenges with Exodus. Whilst midlife transition would not have be major factor in the decision to close Exodus that certainly would have had some impact. Younger or older men would have reacted differently.

Like Alan and Randy, I know what it was like to have to kill your baby. I was abandoned by the leaders of my denomination to kill my baby, the ministry I'd invested years of blood, sweat and tears building. It was devastating. **So where are these men now?** Re-inventing themselves. From my experience, it can take several years before you find that complete centeredness again and that you feel like you are on track/on purpose. You can see what Alan and Leslie are up to [here](#). Randy's blog is [here](#).

Maybe a good way to finish this story of is with quote from Alan's blog. It's his reflection of what happened twelve months ago sitting in a basement surrounded/confronted by hurting, angry ex-gay survivors and his reactions at that moment would change the entire homosexuality/Christianity debate forever. It's called **An Unlikely Love**

*"The words used to describe us in the last year could fill volumes. Hitler. Hero. Traitor. Antinomian. Hypocrite. Hater. Lover. Good. Kind. Evil. Brave. Pretty much every good and bad name you can think of has been awarded to us. From any vantage point, Leslie and I have been marginalized. For years we have been marginalized by society for our belief that God's creative intent for sexual expression is one man married to one woman for one lifetime. Now in our efforts to simply and wholly love and serve people, we have been marginalized by the mainstream Christian Church who once hailed our story as miraculous. We are now an embarrassment to many and I'm not always exactly sure why. **Ironically, it is now the LGBT community who respect our complex story and are increasingly accepting us for who we are: unlikely friends**".*

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## Mission

To create understanding and acceptance for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) people, empower community members and build bridges with religious organisations and leaders.

## The Issue

Enormous unnecessary suffering is caused by ignorance and misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity. **This is especially true in religious and certain cultural contexts.**

- High **suicide** rates among LGBT youth and people from religious backgrounds
- Existence of **“ex-gay” programs** that attract the emotionally vulnerable and tormented with false promises of change
- Eventual **breakdown of marriages** when one partner believed heterosexual marriage would solve their ‘problem’
- **Depression** and other **mental health issues** caused by the perceived conflict of faith and sexuality
- **Self-destructive and obsessive behaviours** as a result of internalized homophobia
- Religious organizations and leaders **reinforcing myths & maintaining stereotypes** about LGBT people & their relationships
- **Fragmented relationships** when families and friends reject the gay or lesbian person who ‘comes out’

## Founder and CEO

Anthony Venn-Brown is acutely aware of the harm ignorance and misinformation creates. Anthony was high profile preacher in Australia's mega-churches and a leader in the Assemblies of God. Believing that his sexual orientation was against the teachings of the church, he spent twenty two years doing everything possible to become acceptable to God and others. This included ex-gay programs, exorcisms and sixteen years of marriage. In 1991 he was forced to face the reality that all these attempts had changed nothing. He resigned from the ministry and came out.

Anthony has become a respected LGBTI community leader. In recognition of his work he was twice voted one of the 25 Most Influential Gay and Lesbian Australians (2007 & 2009) and was a finalist for ACON's 2011 Community Hero Award.

## The organization

ABBI became an association incorporated in May 2013. ABBI is governed by nine gay, lesbian and straight board members. Each board member is personally aware of the struggles of LGBTI people from faith backgrounds and bring a range of skills and expertise to the organization..

ABBI uses social networks, newsletters, blogs and the media to circulate relevant up to date information about LGBTI issues. ABBI also reaches out to churches, Christian leaders and organizations to create respectful dialogues and provide resources, consultancy services and training that will lead to greater understanding, acceptance and equality.

## Why we need your support

ABBI receives no government funding. Its transformational work can only be achieved with the financial support of people such as yourself. Please consider becoming one of the below. As you see, even a small but regular donation makes a big difference.

You can make donations securely either via internet transfer or credit card through this link. <http://www.givenow.com.au/ambassadorsandbridgebuilders>

Thank you for your consideration.

If you'd prefer to make a one off donation then you can do that on the same [site](#).

If you have any questions please email [info@abbi.org.au](mailto:info@abbi.org.au)

### **Anthony Venn-Brown**

**Founder and CEO of Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International (ABBI)**

[Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Sign up for newsletters here](#)

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### **Background on Ambassadors and Bridge Builders International (ABBI)**

Founder and CEO of ABBI, Anthony Venn-Brown was a high profile Pentecostal preacher, married with two children. For twenty two years he tried everything to change his sexual orientation. At forty he resigned from the ministry and came out. This was not a proud coming out however as it was clouded with scandal, shame and Anthony lost everything he held dear and had worked for. It would take another six years for him to find resolution of his faith and his sexuality.

In 2004, the first edition of his autobiography "[A Life of Unlearning](#)" was released. This produced an avalanche of people contacting him, telling their own stories of struggling with faith/sexuality conflict. Many of these people had never spoken with anyone about their ordeal before. The impact of theirs and others ignorance was heart-wrenching. Rejection by friends and family, failed marriages, mental health issues, thoughts of suicide as well as attempts were common themes. Some shared of friends who had taken their own lives over the perceived conflict of their Christian faith and their sexuality

In 2005, Anthony co-founded Freedom2b to provide support for these people. Under his six year leadership Freedom2b became Australia's largest network of LGBTI people from Christian backgrounds with monthly chapter meetings in capital cities, an online forum of over a thousand users and 30 volunteers and leaders.

Whilst support for these people was vital, even life saving at times, Anthony saw an greater need by getting to the source of the problem. ***"It's better to build a fence at the top of the cliff than run ambulances down the bottom"***. Pastors, church leaders and denominations needed to be educated not only about sexual orientation but also the harm that was being inflicted because of ignorance and misinformation.

After resigning from Freedom2b Anthony founded ABBI and it became an association incorporated in May 2013. ABBI is governed by nine gay, lesbian and straight board members. Each board member is personally aware of the struggles of LGBTI people from faith backgrounds and bring a range of skills and expertise to the organization.

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