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NATION

Therapy aims to make 'ex-gays'

Backers say regimen, often religious-based, growing in popularity; critics say it's harmful, amounts to self-hatred

By **Sean D. Hamill**
 Special to the Tribune
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GIBSONIA, Pa. -- Proponents say participation is surging in the controversial, often religious-based therapy that many call the "ex-gay movement."

Christian therapist Warren Throckmorton points to a patient named Jeff as an example of success for this therapy.

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Jeff, 41, who asked that his last name not be used, said his life has always been centered on family, church and work as a college administrator outside Pittsburgh. But every few months, to satisfy an urge that would well up inside him, it was all about gay bathhouses, clubs and anonymous sex with men.

After a nearly lifelong struggle between his Christian beliefs and his homosexual urges, Jeff believes he has finally conformed his life with his values after 20 months of religious-tinged treatment that some call conversion, sexual reorientation or reparative therapy.

All the major medical and mental health organizations see such therapy as potentially harmful and recommend against it. The gay and lesbian community denounces it as self-hatred. And even the most thorough studies say just a fraction of the people who enter such treatment truly change their orientation.

The subject has even become a part of the dispute over President Bush's nominee for surgeon general. Dr. James Holsinger, a Kentucky cardiologist who helped establish a church that reportedly helps gays "walk out of that lifestyle," is opposed by gay activists.

Despite the criticism, groups that support such counseling say they have seen a surge in interest.

Throckmorton, an associate professor of psychology at Grove City College north of Pittsburgh, says the therapy works, even if it doesn't work the same way for everybody.

Jeff said it worked for him.

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"I had compartmentalized these parts of my life. I'd go out and say: 'This is my time to be gay,'" the married father said. "Then, when I'd come home, I'd come back to my regular life, back to God."

Through weekly one-on-one sessions with Throckmorton, and twice-monthly group meetings with a church-based group, Jeff said he has changed his actions, even if his feelings toward men will never change.

"He's helped me to put the same-sex attraction in the same category as any other sin," Jeff said.

The case of then-National Association of Evangelicals President Rev. Ted Haggard -- who was involved in a homosexual affair and underwent therapy -- has helped spark interest in such counseling. After three weeks of therapy, Haggard was declared to be "completely heterosexual," but the minister's representatives have since backed away from that claim.

Exodus International, an Orlando-based group, says it is the world's largest Christian referral and information network dealing with homosexuality.

"We've seen growth, and I think it's because there's more awareness," said Alan Chambers, Exodus' president, who said he used to be homosexual.

Exodus said it refers people to 158 groups across the country, up from 111 in 2003.

Mainstream medical and mental health organizations say people shouldn't be calling groups like Exodus at all.

"These are faith-based models, and I'm a physician who works in evidence-based medicine, and there's no good scientific evidence that this works," said Dr. Jack Drescher, who was chairman of the American Psychiatric Association's committee on gay, lesbian and bisexual issues until last year.

Throckmorton, who has worked with about 250 patients, acknowledges that results vary widely.

Though Throckmorton is a Christian therapist, as a rule he does not use the Bible to get across a message; the client has to bring it up, and many do.

"I don't say, 'Here's how you become straight,'" Throckmorton said. "I say, 'Can you move forward with a value and do the things that are good to do and right to do, that you believe in?'"

Throckmorton and his colleague, Mark Yarhouse, a psychology professor at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., have been trying to get the American Psychological Association to consider their sexual identity therapy guidelines, which leave a role for consideration of religious values.

The association said it has not accepted the guidelines for consideration because they are in the form of a journal article, a format not usually considered. But the association of 148,000 psychologists is planning a review of its position on homosexuality and reparative therapy.

Throckmorton and Yarhouse have found an unusual ally in Nick Cummings, a psychologist who counseled about 2,000 clients in San Francisco in the 1960s and '70s who felt conflicts over their homosexuality.

Long a supporter of gay rights, Cummings, a past president of the American Psychological Association, believes that for a small percentage of homosexuals, changing sexual orientation is possible.

He found that about 13 percent of his 2,000 clients were able to change their orientation with therapy, while he helped most of the rest become happy with their gay orientation.

But some activists simply reject the ex-gay movement.

"The therapy is so destructive," said Sue Laurie, outreach coordinator for Reconciling Ministries Network, a Chicago-based group of Methodists opposed to their church's position that homosexuality is a sin. " ... I just don't know how you can ground a ministry in self-hatred."

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