

In The Name Of Love: The phenomenon of "ex-gay" ministries

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CAMBRIDGE — Love is perhaps the most overused and misused word in Christianity. Some "Christians" proclaim their "unconditional love" for the rest of humanity only as long as the rest of humanity becomes just like them. Through the centuries, Christians have spent a good deal of time, money, and blood trying to convert those they feel do not measure up to their "Christian values." Among the usual targets of their mission efforts are gays and lesbians.

Some "Christians" would be quite happy to see gays and lesbians disappear despite their claims to "love the sinner but hate the sin." Hence comes the phenomenon of "ex-gay" ministries which promise to release gays and lesbians from the "bondage" of homosexuality. The first of these "ex-gay" groups was Love in Action, founded in 1974 by Ken Philpot, a heterosexual minister with no background in sexuality. Later on, other groups sprouted up touting similar promises such as Evergreen (for Mormons), LIFE Ministries, Day One, and Desert Streams. Exodus International, the umbrella organization for many of these ministries, has as its president a man who was not gay to begin with but is a transsexual who confused gender identity with sexual orientation.

Vermont's entry into the "ex-gay" sweepstakes is New Journey, begun by heterosexuals (or "ever-straight" to use "ex-gay"-speak) Rev. Craig Benson of the Cambridge United Church, Christian counselor Mark Williams, and Rev. Peter Anderson of the Jericho Congregational Church. According to its brochure, "there are a few places where that person (a gay or lesbian) can feel free to talk about his or her temptations, and receive prayer and encouragement on a regular basis." Such "temptations" are to be overcome through "prayer, Bible study, and an atmosphere of honesty and caring to help the work of healing." Ultimately, those involved with New Journey hope that "many (will) find emotional restoration and sexual wholeness through this channel of His (Jesus Christ's) grace."

The brochure does not mention that such ministries are strewn with broken promises and broken lives. As Robert Bray of the Washington, DC-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force put it, this is "homophobia with a happy face." Most of the claims given by these ministries are made by those involved in the "ex-gay" movement for a short time. The average time anyone has ever stayed "ex-gay" has been only three years. "Ex-gay" leaders, both past and present, admit that either they have never seen anybody "change" or they themselves are struggling with their "gay" feelings. "Change" seems to come with heavy doses of denial.

Andrew Comiskey, director of Desert Streams and facilitator of workshops on achieving "sexual wholeness," admits that he "has homosexual temptations and has a different response to men visually than a man who has never struggled with homosexuality," but despite that, "I don't think that even someone acting out homosexually [sic] should define himself as a 'homosexual.'" Frank Shears, a former anti-gay crusader in Vancouver best known for his fight against the 1990 Gay Games there and past director of Exodus International, spent thirty years trying to deal with his gayness, going so far as to strap a Bible over his genitals.

Perhaps the most famous "ex-gay" defectors are Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, the founding directors of Exodus International, which started off initially as a hotline at the Melodyland Christian Center in Anaheim, California. "Ironically," according to Bussee, "all the time we were holding forth on ex-gays, with ourselves as the prime example, Gary and I were falling in love." The hardships of leading a double life were so great that Cooper was given high dosages of Thorazine courtesy of the psychiatrists at Melodyland in order to control the "urges."

Bussee now says that he "counseled ... hundreds of people ... who tried to change their sexual orientation and none of them changed." Other former "ex-gay" leaders found similar results in their respective ministries. Jeff Ford said that during his five year tenure as director of Outpost in Minnesota he never saw anybody change, including himself: "I honestly say that I did not see that happen in my work with over 300 gay and lesbian people." According to Mario A. Rodriguez, who spent two years with the Alternative Identification Ministry in Dallas, "I never saw anyone 'cured' of their homosexuality. Instead, I saw many people hurt by AIM's message that a fundamental part of their being was immoral."

Many Christians are tolerant of differences amongst humankind and believe that they do not have the monopoly on "truth." At times, however, they seem few and far between, maybe because they do not have the money and resources of their more conservative brethren. Unfortunately, those conservative Christians are bent upon destroying those who do not fit their idea of how things should be and in so doing, destroy what makes each human being an individual, all in the name of love. ▼

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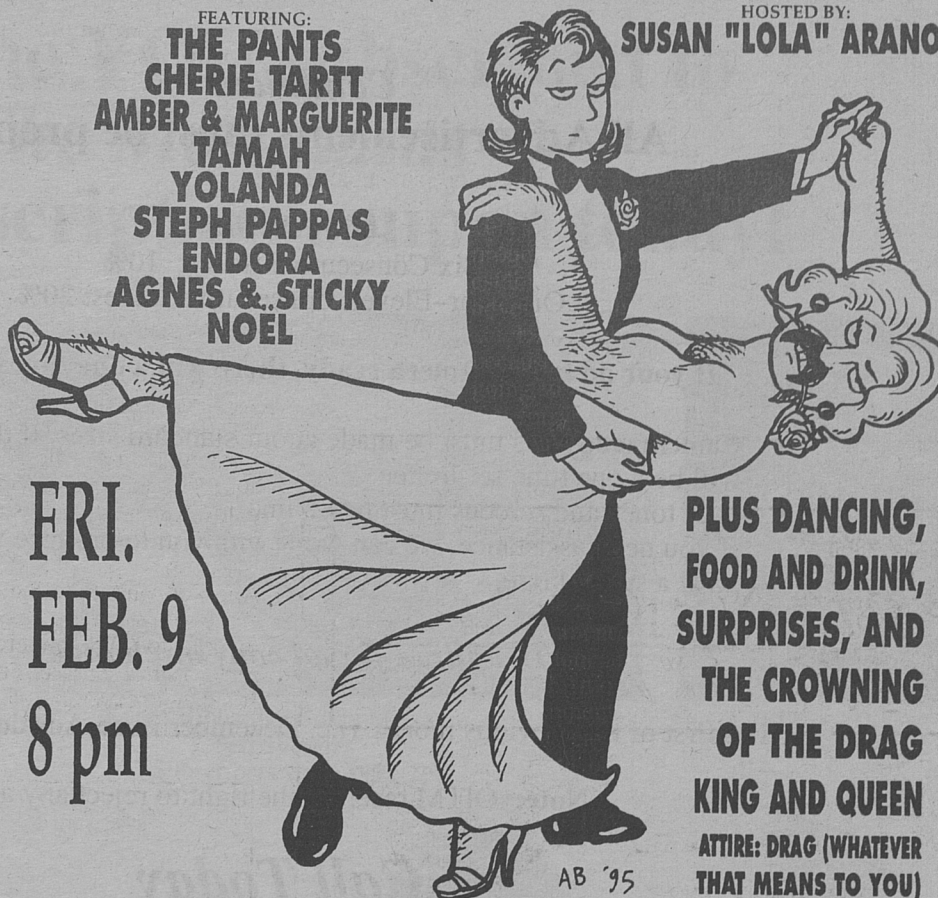
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