

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

End Conversion Therapy/Practices Virtual Engagement Session in private with the Committee and Individuals with lived experiences

26 October 2021

Committee Member – Joe FitzPatrick

The participant told us that for some years he ran an ex-gay ministry which today would be banned under any conversion therapy legislation. It ran from 1988 until 1995 when he realised how damaging it was. It then took 5 years to work out how to do things differently; by the year 2000 he announced that they were completely repudiating ex-gay ministry or any attempts to seek “change” and even the idea that leading a celibate life was something to aspire to. It then became an LGBT affirming ministry. It continued in that role for 12 more years and closed in 2012.

The participant was married to a woman for 29 years. The marriage was damaging to both of them. He is now divorced and has been married to a man for the last year. His ex-wife has also re-married and they remain friends.

The participant was born in 1952 and began realising he was gay in 1965 at around the age of 13. He thinks he may have begun thinking about it as the media was full of reports of the Wolfenden Report which led to homosexual acts being de-criminalised. Because of the way it was talked about it the participant told us it was a scary thing to realise he was attracted to his own sex. Everyone he knew thought gay people were reprobates you needed protection from. He grew up with a great deal of fear in his teens so decided that he wouldn't be gay and would instead find a girlfriend; but had little success as he was not attracted to women.

His perception of the gay community was that they seemed the kind of people who were outspoken and did not mind being the object of derision or suspicion; so it was not a comfortable or inspiring place for him. Looking for a solution he went to see his GP, who referred him to a psychiatrist. This led to him being referred to a psychotherapist who was quite progressive in his thinking and did not see what the problem was, but was not able to offer help.

He sought help through the church. Although he had been brought up in the Anglican faith, he did not find they had much to say about real life problems, so he moved to a Baptist church and found this to be an exciting place with a community of people of all ages. Like them he believed that homosexuality was unacceptable and told us if they had accepted it he would not have known what to do. This was in the mid-1970s.

He found the Baptist church leadership to be intelligent, non-judgemental people who wanted to help. The only way any of them could see a way through was that this

was something he needed to be delivered from. He encountered deliverance ministry where some people thought he was possessed by demons. An English Christian psychologist at the time - Elizabeth Moberly - thought gay men developed those feelings due to a lack of bonding with the same sex parent and this was because fathers were out at work. He found it easy to buy into that idea which seemed to make sense. He wanted to find a way out of homosexuality at that time and not to embrace it. He made a lot of good friends in the church but as his friends married and had children, he found that he was a single man in his 30s and very lonely.

He moved house and joined a new church which believed in healing if you were gay. It was at this stage that he discovered ex-gay ministry, firstly in the USA, which led him to visit an organisation called "Love in Action" in California. It ran a community house with the rationale being that homosexuality develops in those who do not embrace or follow Christ wholeheartedly enough. Those committed enough to Christ would be able to find freedom from their homosexuality. There was less emphasis on healing.

The participant found it to be an exciting community and left his job to go and work for them for a couple of months. He found many individuals' lives to be split - they would lead very Christian lives but also visit gay clubs. This was around the mid 1980's during the AIDS crisis and he worked for the ministry for around four months.

In this community, there were a lot of people addicted to drugs and alcohol so the programme really could be life-changing and gave them an affirming sense of belonging to community, but the thinking was still that you could not be a practicing gay person and a Christian. Homosexuality was treated like an addiction.

He came back to the UK and his local church encouraged him to set up a ministry similar to Love in Action, which he did. He called it Courage. He was locked into the theological outlook that you could not be gay and Christian. Lots of people wanted to take part in what they could offer. They came from all over Europe. Over the next few years, he created a community with up to 14 people living in at any one time. There were many positive aspects in providing an environment of non-judgement and acceptance. Some members reported that the community was life-changing for them in a positive way. They were a community trying to find their way together

In 1991 he got married to a woman who was a pioneer for female leadership in churches. She was a community church leader of a 500 strong congregation and was interested in his work. The marriage was borne from deep friendship and that they were both workaholics. The marriage however proved to be a struggle because his orientation had not changed.

Over the next few years, the participant realised that the ministry was causing serious harm to people and that because of being married he was, by implication, living out a message that "change was possible".

At that time society was still very hostile to gay people due to the AIDS epidemic. When he kept in touch with people who had left the ministry after a year or so, he realised they had not changed at all, and this created a crisis of confidence for them. He was horrified at the levels of depression former members were suffering and one

had attempted suicide. He came to the realisation that what was happening was the very opposite of what they had set out to try to achieve.

The participant tried to raise his concerns at leaders' meetings with members of an umbrella ministry in America called "Exodus International", with the result that the participant was deemed to be someone who should not be trusted. He noted that none of the ministries had any follow up.

The participant found he was no longer believing in the ex-gay ministry objectives. He started to feel compelled to support those in same-sex relationships. This was a difficult period of change. In early 2000 he announced that he would no longer be pursuing ex-gay policy and was kicked out of Exodus and the Evangelical Alliance.

By 2010, the participant now in his late 50s was finding it a struggle to keep going due to the heavy workload and significant financial burden, so he announced he would stop at 60. But he had underestimated how many people would still need one-to-one support. He continues to offer pastoral care to those trying to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. He has a new website <https://www.postcourage.net>.

The participant told us that he can see now with great clarity how damaging the whole notion of trying to change is, especially when churches still teach that you can't be both gay and Christian. If churches are "welcoming" but on the condition that you don't accept your sexuality, then if you leave that church, you can lose your support system and that can be very challenging.

The previous work of his ministry that provided regular meetings and retreats was replaced in 2012 by the Two:23 network for LGBT Christians <https://www.two23.net/>.

He told us that there is no need to anonymise this note if having his name would add more weight to the inquiry as his story is in the public domain.