



Religion and Healing in America

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Sexual Healing: Self-Help and
Therapeutic Christianity in
the Ex-Gay Movement

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Spoken in time, to the proper party, and by the person who was
both the bearer and the one responsible for it, the truth healed.

(Foucault *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 1978)

New Hope Night

New Hope Night is one of the most dramatic events of the year for the ex-gay men who have come to heal their homosexuality at New Hope Ministries. It is the first time they testify about their personal struggles with homosexuality in front of the other members at Church of the Open Door, the ex-gay-affiliated church. Hidden behind a Safeway grocery store in a small northern California town, Open Door has a stage with a single podium but no pulpit, sacraments, or images. An antiquated disco ball slowly revolves above the smattering of fifty people in attendance. The congregation is composed of mainly middle-aged men and women, former ex-gays and long-term members with their teenage children. The pastor, Mike Riley, stands at the podium speaking into a makeshift public address system with the Open Door band: his son on electric guitar, a keyboardist, drummer, and three singers set up alongside him. "God is good, amen, amen, God is good," he tells the men from New Hope. "What I most appreciate is the courage and vulnerability in your lives, to be as transparent as you."

The New Hope men have been preparing for this night for

months by memorizing long biblical passages from Romans. Abruptly, one at a time, they rise from their seats and begin reciting scripture as they stride toward the front of the church. Some have memorized longer passages and pronounce their verses in booming voices, and others speak timidly. One proclaims, "For a sin shall not have dominion over you." When they all reach the front, they intone in unison, "For the wages of sin are death and the gift of God through eternal life." The band launches into a song: "I will never be the same again, I will never return, I have closed the door." Each man approaches the microphone. Doug tells the congregation, "Thank you to a bunch of prayer warriors in Spokane who never gave up on me," referring to his Pentecostal parents who prayed regularly for him during the years he lived in San Diego as a gay man.

Mitch, a house leader at New Hope, gives a testimony. He relates how he was forced to resign as a youth pastor when his church discovered he was a homosexual. Two years earlier, he had arrived at New Hope with piles of gay pornography on the backseat of his car after driving across country, stopping in rest areas, and cruising for sex. When he sheepishly mentioned his stash to the ministry, Anita Worthen, the wife of the New Hope director, marched out to his car with gloves and a garbage bag to dispose of the contraband. Now he tells the congregation that the temptation to look at pornography lingers, but he is well on his way to recovery. Within two weeks he will leave the ministry after he admits to having gay pornography in his bedroom, but at the moment there is no reason to doubt the veracity of his testimony.

Afterward, the congregation stands and claps. Pastor Mike asks the people to gather around the men fanned out on either side of him and pray for them. "We encourage you to adopt some of these men into your lives this year. You are a big part of what happens in their lives. Come now, Holy Spirit, come, come, come Lord, come. Come out of your seats and pray for these men." The congregants pour down the aisles and lay their hands on each man, kneeling and standing around them until the New Hope men are no longer visible in the crush. The service functions as an introduction of the ex-gay men to the church and symbolizes the fusion of two parts of their lives that had previously been separate—conservative religion and sexuality. As one man explained, "New Hope night is like a giant therapy session."

The ex-gay movement, of which New Hope Ministries is a part, is a product of the confluence of religion and therapeutic culture. It draws heavily from the self-help and recovery movements' notion of twelve steps to conceptualize healing homosexuality. In their rhetoric and practices, men and women at New Hope have replaced the concept of sexual orientation change with the idea that homosexuality can be healed through religious belief and therapeutic means. As part of the twelve-step model, the ex-gay movement focuses on sexual addictions that stem from homosexuality. Lingering "problems" of same-sex behavior and attraction become part of a therapeutic language of addiction. Per-

sonal testimony is central to healing sexual addictions, and people are urged to constantly confess sexual lapses to one another in small accountability groups and more public forums. At New Hope, testimony blurs the distinction between the public and private, religious and therapeutic, making sexuality and sexual addiction part of a public discourse of confession and public intimacy.

New Hope?

New Hope is directed by Frank Worthen, a former gay man. Frank founded the first ex-gay ministry in 1973, and New Hope is one of three residential ex-gay programs in the United States.¹ Located in a Marin County suburb ten miles north of San Francisco, the ministry sits off a suburban main road that is discreetly lined with alcohol and drug treatment centers. There are no signs outside the ministry, a low-slung, stucco building almost completely obscured by flowering vines. Across the street is an apartment complex where twenty men live during their year in the residential program. From 1999 to 2001, there were fifteen men in the residential program. They are predominantly white, from working-class and middle-class families, raised primarily in rural areas or small towns of the United States. A similar program for women flourished in the 1980s but was eliminated due to a lack of space and leadership. Instead, New Hope currently sponsors Grace, a weekly ex-gay women's support group led by a woman who had spent years at New Hope and eventually married a man from Open Door church. With the help of a board of directors and house leaders who have successfully completed the program, Frank oversees New Hope, teaches classes to the men, and serves as a pastor at Open Door. His wife of eighteen years, Anita, spearheads a ministry for parents of gay children from the same office. After two decades of marriage, Anita and Frank are paragons for other Christian men and women who pray that they will be healed enough to get married.

New Hope is part of the Christian ex-gay movement, which sponsors hundreds of ministries in the United States and abroad where men and women attend therapy sessions, Bible studies, twelve-step-style meetings, and regular church services as part of their "journey out of homosexuality."² The wider ex-gay movement consists of a network of organizations with overlapping but not necessarily coordinated agendas, including psychoanalytic organizations and independent therapists throughout the world. It has also expanded beyond Christian ministries and now includes Jewish and Catholic groups, Homosexuals Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays (PFOX), and the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH). New Hope is funded entirely from donations and the money that men pay to enter the program; like Exodus International, it is

registered as a nonprofit organization. To come to the program, an applicant must be willing to pay \$1,200 upfront for a security deposit, program books, and the first month's rent. The monthly fee is \$850 to cover the cost of a shared bedroom, ten meals a week, and all utilities, phone calls, and household necessities. The program does not have the financial resources to provide scholarships. To prove that they can afford the program, applicants must disclose their financial information and credit history.

Almost all the people who decide to come to New Hope were raised within conservative Christian traditions, and many experience a profound conflict between their religious and sexual identities. They are Christians from Nazarene, Presbyterian, Catholic, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Lutheran backgrounds. Unable to reconcile their sexuality with their religious beliefs, and suffering from guilt, shame, and what they call a sense of distance from God, these men and women are drawn to ex-gay ministries because they hope that as their religious identities strengthen, their sexual conflicts will diminish. Many arrive with distressing tales of anonymous sex, pornography, sexual addiction, and suicide attempts. While the majority never participated in a gay community, others have given up long-term relationships and active political and social lives.

Healing for ex-gays involves an identity transformation in which an individual is born again and becomes a new creation in Christ. They gain a specific identity—ex-gay—which aids them in reconciling the opposing frameworks of homosexuality and conservative Christianity. The new identity comes about as a result of conversion. As they spend time at the ministry and with God, they also believe that their homosexuality will change. Despite disparate backgrounds, many ex-gays describe a crisis point in their lives when they were no longer able to conceal their sexual identities and live as Christians. Most reached a point at which the conflict became unbearable, and this crisis led to the onset of spiritual conversion.

What does it mean to become healed from homosexuality and gain a new ex-gay identity? Based on eighteen months of fieldwork at New Hope Ministries, I examined this and other questions. I conducted two- to three-hour interviews with forty-five men and women, with follow-up interviews when it was possible. I chose New Hope as the research site because of Frank's position as the founder of the movement and the fact that it is the oldest and most established residential program. Aside from men currently enrolled in the program, I met and interviewed many ex-gay and ex-ex-gay men and women living in the surrounding area who had completed the program, left to live as gay men and lesbians, or married. After a few months, Frank granted me permission to peruse his carefully cataloged archive of articles, letters, and pictures from the early 1970s, and I spent part of my days reading and copying these files. At night, before I drove back to San Francisco, I would often eat dinner

with the entire house of men and listen to their praise and worship sessions. I met others through church on Sundays and group outings on weekends.

Evangelical Healing and the Rise of Twelve-Step Recovery

The ex-gay movement emerged during a period when the concept of self-help was gaining greater popularity and currency in American culture. Ellen Herman writes that after 1945 the social influence of white male psychological experts began to wane as psychological authority shifted from the domain of academic institutions and became more of a worldview and factor in everyday life (Herman 1995). Therapy was no longer a stigmatized activity that took place in mental institutions. By 1970, approximately 20,000 psychiatrists were ministering to 1 million people on a purely outpatient basis (Herman 1995: 262–63). The self-help recovery movement also gained prominence as a result of “modern, anti-authoritarian developments in psychology (and popular psychology) since Freud” (Simonds 1992: 52). The shift toward using therapy for exploring personality rather than as a prelude to mental institutionalization was implicated in wider cultural trends, including feminism and gay liberation, that counseled self-actualization, as necessary for human evolution and social change. The trend toward therapy, self-actualization and self-help also overlapped and intersected with evangelical and charismatic theology. In these religious traditions, any person who believes he or she possess a gift of prophecy can speak the word of God. There is a focus on personal freedom, self-fulfillment, self-worth and growth, and adherents are urged to discover their own inherent abilities and spiritual gifts.

As ideas about healing and recovery gained prominence in the 1970s, the concepts of self-help became interwoven with religious precepts. “By the 1960s and 1970s, most evangelical spokespersons embraced modern psychology with great enthusiasm and only minor reservations. By then, the evangelical subculture was less a bulwark against than a variant of the therapeutic culture” (Simonds 1992: 138). The confluence of the religious and therapeutic accounts for the emergence of the ex-gay movement. Like evangelical Christianity, self-help is the ideology that salvation occurs through personal effort, sanctioned by the idea of grace. The ex-gay therapeutic worldview considered homosexuality as not simply a sin but a sickness or addiction that could be healed through personal effort in conjunction with a relationship with God. This overlapped with the increasing popularity of twelve-step programs during the same period. The idea that a person can save him- or herself through close adherence to a twelve-step program intersects with born-again Christian notions of the creation of a new self through religious conversion. The ex-gay movement reinte-

grated evangelicalism and recovery, combining religious and twelve-step therapeutic principles.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the forerunner of most twelve-step groups, materialized out of an evangelical tradition of the 1920s and 1930s known as the Oxford Group, "a nondenominational, theologically conservative, evangelically styled attempt to recapture the spirit and the impetus of what its members understood to be primitive Christianity" (Kurtz 1988: 9). The Oxford Group operated according to six basic assumptions, five of which became the foundation for AA's Twelve Steps: men are sinners, men can be changed, confession is a prerequisite to change, the changed soul has direct access to God, and those who have been changed must change others (Kurtz 1988: 23). AA had been in existence for thirty-five years in 1970 and possessed a growing membership base. However, its concept of the Twelve Steps did not gain pervasive acceptance within the medical community and American culture until the popularization of therapy and the focus on self-betterment in the 1970s. By the 1990s, the influence of the twelve-step model was ubiquitous, extending from the corporate retreat to the Overeaters Anonymous meeting.

In the Twelve Steps, "sin" is specified as being "powerless over alcohol" and having "character defects." In place of the Bible, AA's primary text is the Big Book. Confession becomes "a moral inventory" that is admitted to oneself, God, and another human being, but the basic assumptions of the Oxford Group remain intact. Just as an Oxford Group member experienced a spiritual conversion in stages or steps, an AA member recovers from alcoholism by following the Twelve Steps one by one, achieving a spiritual awakening as a by-product. The fellowship (the meetings themselves and the interactions within the group) and the program are based on the premise that recovery from alcoholism requires a spiritual transformation, one that can be achieved through the Twelve Steps. The language of the Twelve Steps both obscures and magnifies AA's evangelical origins. Alcoholics are not required to submit to Jesus, but they must turn their will and their lives "over to the care of God as we understood him" (Kurtz 1988: 13). Although the evangelical concept of God becomes a universal higher power, in both movements recovery is dependent on submission to a higher authority. The twelve-step program emerged as the answer to alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating, gambling, and a variety of other addictions and "diseases." As practices once billed as bad habits and dilemmas became redefined as addictions, therapeutic syndromes like co-dependency gained currency in American culture.

Ex-Gay Sexual Healing

New Hope Ministry has adopted ideas about sexual addiction and elements of the twelve-step process for its residential program. During the week at the

ministry, twenty to thirty men live together communally, dividing their time between jobs, nightly prayer, accountability groups, group outings, and classes on topics such as masculinity, anger management, and dating. They even have “straight men” meetings with men from Open Door church at which they ask questions about being heterosexual. The first step toward “coming out of homosexuality” is to admit to yourself and to God, “I have a problem” in the same way that AA’s first step is to admit, “We are powerless over alcohol” (Alcoholics Anonymous 1955: 59). Other steps include “We came to perceive that we had accepted a lie about ourselves, an illusion that had trapped us in a false identity” and “We learned to claim our true reality that as mankind, we are part of God’s heterosexual creation, and that God calls us to rediscover that identity in Him through Jesus Christ” (New Hope 1996: 3). All ex-gay ministries have three crucial components: healing, teaching, and discipleship. New Hope believes that people need healing in the areas of “sexual and relational brokenness.” Healing from addiction involves recognizing the following:

- God’s powerful love for us and how Jesus is central to our hope for wholeness
- The depth of our brokenness and our profound need for him
- The power of the cross to restore our souls, sexuality, and relationships

New Hope leaders emphasize that although they believe in the process of recovery as central to healing from homosexuality, their Christian identities come first. Frank tells the men, “Although today it is popular to identify yourself by your problem, this is not healthy or the way God intended us to identify ourselves. Our identity is Christian, this, in itself is a full and complete identity; nothing more needs to be added” (New Hope 1996: 21). The program acknowledges that the ex-gays are Christians with addictions, and that any form of lust is a sin. However, the leaders stress taking on a Christian identity rather than an identity as an addict. They do not want the person and the problem to be synonymous. “We can admit to an unmanageable problem (Step One of AA) without having to take on the sinful identity” (New Hope 1996: 21). Men at New Hope avoid the terms “gay” or “homosexual” because it is imperative to treat homosexuality as a condition that can be healed. They make a distinction between the binding nature of an identity versus an addiction that can be healed. Rather than explaining, “I am Frank, and I am a homosexual,” the men in the program state, “I am Frank, and I am dealing with homosexual tendencies,” or “I struggle with homosexuality.” All sinful sexual behaviors and feelings are contained within their new identity—ex-gay. They are neither homosexual nor heterosexual, but still Christian. Instead of a person who has used pornography, they are Christians and recovering porn addicts. Instead of a homosexual, they are ex-gays or strugglers. The concept of being “ex-gay” alters the regulatory behavior and norms of their identity: it is expected that a man will fall (succumb to same-sex desire) and be saved (return to ex-gay ministry).

Ex-gay Christians become conversant in a therapeutic language that is specific to the ex-gay movement, reinventing the language of sin and pathology. The term "sexual brokenness" describes their current state of homosexuality or addiction. "Brokenness" is the term that ex-gays use to describe the addictions in their lives. New Hope's program manual reads, "Christ's capacity to touch and restore us at deep levels of shame and brokenness extends to all of us, regardless of the specifics of our issue." "Sexual sobriety" illuminates the process of recovery. Having sex outside of heterosexual marriage is "acting out." When a man or woman has a same-sex experience or looks at pornography, he or she has had a "sexual fall." An attraction between two people is an "emotional dependency." The estrangement from their parents that many people describe is called "defensive detachment." When they leave the program unhealed, they have gone back to the "lifestyle," thus distinguishing between being gay (a temporary lifestyle choice) and being homosexual (a changeable condition that results from "gender deficits" in childhood).

In their daily classes, the men at New Hope utilize a four-part workbook entitled *Steps Out* that devotes eight weeks to the question of sexual addiction. The workbook covers everything from finding a job to Christian beliefs to theories about homosexual development. In addition, the men consistently practice journaling, a technique borrowed from the recovery movement that enables them to record their feelings on a daily basis as a way to hear God speak to them. At the first class, men are given a scenario of two options for a Saturday and asked to pick one. The first option involves going to a local men's room where they know a man will be there to service anyone sexually. The book asks: Will you be there at three o'clock? The second option involves going to the beach with an old friend who happens to be visiting that day. The book asks: Will you choose to go to the beach? The lesson explains that those who choose the beach option are less addicted than those who forsake their friend to have anonymous sex. After a lengthy discussion of these choices, men spend time sharing with each other and are permitted fifteen minutes to write in their diary page at the end of the lesson. At the next lesson, they discuss characteristics of addiction like obsession, anger, denial, boredom, paranoia, and self-degradation. Together they answer the questions, "Do you feel trapped by your addiction?" and "Are you in denial?"

Self-sufficiency is a sin in the ex-gay model of addiction and healing. Frank teaches that we are not the masters of our fate and that we must acknowledge our dependence on God. The men at New Hope call the inability to rely on God the "Sinatra syndrome." Rather than looking to Jesus for healing, many men who are addicted to homosexuality insist on "doing it my way." Without turning to Jesus, any person struggling will always revert to his or her prior behaviors. "Freedom comes through surrendering to Jesus. If addiction stops us from facing the truth in our lives, then it can only be Jesus who knows the way out," according to Hank, a New Hope house leader who completed the

program several years ago. The reliance on Jesus offers ex-gays not only the promise of salvation but also the assurance that they need not push themselves too hard or fret unduly about their failures. Within the sexual addiction model, Jesus welcomes and forgives any individual no matter how much their life is in shambles.

The Enemy's Tool? Battling Addictions

New Hope Ministries believes that addictions are a form of idol worship and that Satan has a direct interest in feeding addictions (New Hope 1996: 22). Addiction is surrendering to anything other than Jesus, and Satan is the enemy who lures one from God and closer to harmful behaviors. "Satan will reach us one way or another with a distortion of God's plan," according to Frank. "Many of our initial childhood sexual fantasies may have come directly from the evil one." The New Hope program teaches that compulsive addictions and behaviors are useful to Satan and that a man's urge to masturbate is often instigated by satanic suggestion. Mitch often described his gay pornography addiction as satanic.

Many ex-gays speak of their homosexuality as part of a wider problem of sexual addiction that includes pornography, masturbation, and any form of sex that occurs outside of marriage. New Hope focuses on these problems, but the main issue is homosexuality, from which other addictions may stem. The New Hope workbook explains, "Homosexuality in itself may be a type of addiction, but usually homosexuality is broken down into a series of supporting addictions." These addictions, including compulsive masturbation or "body-watching," "feed into" the main problem of homosexuality. Despite his fervent belief that God would cure him, Hank argues, "Yes, I would say I was addicted in the sense that my behavior was uncontrollable in that it dominated me." However, by defining the behaviors of homosexuality as addictions, the program can treat men while acknowledging that healing is a long process.

Critics of the ex-gay movement insist that no one changes his or her sexual orientation, and the New Hope men would have readily agreed that healing is a recovery process, a conversion, and a gradual transformation. Even Frank acknowledges that full heterosexuality is not the ultimate goal. The men in the New Hope Program believe that a new "identity in Christ" emerges and that accountable community living provides the religious support to keep men and women from returning to homosexual behaviors. Most acknowledge that their desires do not change even after many years, and the common sentiment among the men at New Hope was that healing is a process that is uncertain, fraught with relapses and some kinds of successes. More often, religious identities change rather than sexual feelings or behavior. Bob Davies, the president of Exodus for twenty-two years, explained, "We know behind closed doors that

change is possible, but change is rarely complete. I know many men who are totally transformed compared to twenty years ago, but that doesn't mean that they never have a thought or a memory or a temptation or a struggle. It means that the struggle has diminished significantly. It means that for all of us, redemption is still incomplete."

For many, years after doing a program, healing remains simply a leap of faith or a belief that they are doing what God wants for them. The idea that healing may occur in unexpected forms is borne out by the experiences of ex-ex-gay men and women at the ministry. Some men and women are unable to live with the idea of denying sexual feelings, and some of these people who left the program moved on to form their own ex-ex-gay community. They believed not only that their sexual feelings did not change but that they finally came to accept themselves as gay because of the program. Most felt it was a necessary step in figuring out their sexual identities. If these men had residual anger, it was aimed at the ministry's contention that by choosing to live as gay men they could no longer have a relationship with God, and the fact that New Hope often disassociates itself from men who have left the program. One man completed three years of the program before realizing he was still gay. Over the holidays, he sent Frank a letter explaining that he could not understand how he could be separate from God because he had accepted his homosexuality: "The message I felt I received from the program when I was there was that if I ever chose to become gay, I would then become cut off from my relationship with God. I have since found that to be untrue. Indeed my relationship with God is burning bright to this very day! I am a gay man, which is clear from the feelings inside me. How do you explain that?" Other men who had accepted a gay identity often still struggled to reconcile this with their religious beliefs.

For people who had been gay for years and lived out the fantasies and relationships they had wanted but still found they were not happy, New Hope's methods of recovery, occasional sexual falls, and healing seemed to be more successful. Frank writes, "The strange truth about change is that often those who have been the most involved, the most addicted, those who may have cross-dressed or undergone a sex-change operation are the most motivated." They seem able to emerge from the program and still lead celibate lives because they have already had same-sex experiences. Most of the ex-ex-gay men never had same-sex experiences before entering the program, and when they leave the repression and prohibitions of New Hope are counteracted by extreme promiscuity.

New Hope utilizes a variety of techniques to regulate the men in the program to control potentially addictive behaviors. Accountability to the group and each other is crucial. The men meet all together at least twice a week, as well as in smaller groups to dutifully relate any feelings of lust or sexual temptation they might have experienced. Every week they fill out an accountability report that they submit to their house leader, and any improprieties are brought up

for group discussion. The sheet is an elaborate two-page questionnaire that asks everything from "Have you had a quiet time with God in prayer and Bible reading each day?" to "Have you looked at someone in a sexual way (cruise) or gone anywhere hoping to meet someone?" The questions begin on a more general level: "At any time did you compromise your integrity?" "Have you taken time to show compassion for others in need, or demonstrated a servant's heart?"

However, three-fourths of the questionnaire is devoted to any possible behaviors related to same-sex attraction or the potential for sexual falls. The questions include "Have you had sex with anyone?" "Have you looked at any personal ads, answered a personal ad, or placed a personal ad for yourself?" "Have you looked at, or do you have any pornography, fitness/muscle magazines?" "Have you gone into a video store alone or looked at the adult video section?" and "Have you masturbated, and is it compulsive?" Other questions ask about phone sex, entering public bathrooms without an "accountability partner," going to the beach alone, listening to music that is a reminder of the past, leaving work early, using the Internet, opening a private voice mail account, and contact with friends "in the gay lifestyle." The sheet anticipates any possible form of behavioral transgression an ex-gay man might engage in and even presents ex-gays with ideas they may not have considered. At the end of this barrage of questions the sheet asks, "Is there anything else that has happened since your last accountability sheet that you should confess?"

The men at New Hope believe that absolute truthfulness in their answers is the key to healing. Curtis, a twenty-one year old from Canada, explains, "I'm very honest, because if I'm lying about these things, I'm wasting my time and money here. If I'm going to come here, I might as well do it all the way." Although designed to stem addictive behaviors and give men structure, the accountability sheets and confessional structure also may incite the possibility of transgressive behavior on the part of the men. The explicitly detailed prohibitions actually grant off-limit behavior more power precisely because it is prohibited.

Darren, an ex-gay who is now a father with several children, admitted that he still has to keep certain forms of sexual addiction at bay. He married a woman from Open Door church and talks openly about the fact that gay pornography is still a difficult area for him. After his wife "nailed him on it," he joined a support group at Open Door for men struggling with pornography. He participated for a year and a half in a weekly accountability group and felt what he calls "the compulsion" gradually diminish. However, he conceded, "I still have to watch where my eyes go." Darren attributes his healing to God and to his support group: "I believe that I'm sitting in God's hands. I could never have the strength to stop pornography. I've just been held." Despite his assurance that God had been aiding his battle, he still had incidents every few months that he revealed to his wife. When she presented the ultimatum that

he would have to leave her rather than continue with his addiction, he decided to take more drastic measures. He visited every video store in his town and nearby towns with a letter he composed himself. It said, "My name is Darren _____, and my wife is Miranda _____. Here's our phone number. If you see me in here renting pornography please call my wife." As Darren recalls, "It was like cutting off my own arm. That nixed it. I walked out of there and knew I could never go back." While many ex-gays continue to struggle with sexual addictions and assert that it is God who changes their lives, at times the more direct threat of personal abandonment rather than God's disapproval provides the impetus to regulate their behavior.

The model of sexual addiction at New Hope and other ex-gay ministries still tends to focus primarily on lust and sexual purity as a problem for men. Frank admits that when he began New Hope in the 1970s, he knew absolutely nothing about women. The first women's program began in 1979, and Frank characterized it as "a total disaster." A married couple with two kids directed the program. The wife, who had been an ex-gay for several years, fell in love with another woman in the program and divorced her husband. It was not until Frank married Anita in 1985 that New Hope initiated another program for women. Frank admits, "I couldn't handle it. I had no idea what their issues were."

As a result of the early years, New Hope's program and its models of change still cater primarily to men. The accountability sheets, straight men nights, and ideas about addiction presume that men are sexual and women experience little or no sexual attraction or lust for one another. The program asserts that lesbianism consists of primarily emotional relationships, whereas gay men are sexual predators who cannot control their desire. The problems of pornography, masturbation, and lust are gendered as male. Frank explained that the reason there are so few lesbians in the ex-gay movement is because homosexuality is not a sexual issue with women as it is with men. This is reiterated throughout ex-gay literature and conference speeches. At New Hope's annual conference, Starla Allen, an ex-gay therapist and former lesbian, elaborated on her point that lesbianism is a problem of emotional dependence on another woman. In describing her previous lesbian relationship she told the audience, "Sex was the last thing I wanted. Mine was mostly emotionally dependent. That was what broke up most of the relationships—emotional dependency."

Although women have sexual falls, people like Frank either disregard them or view them as too rare to warrant extensive prohibition. Starla Allen uses the term "monster enmeshment" to describe the idea that all women's friendships were potentially codependent. Allen also claimed that women have "anger issues" and come into lesbianism as they get involved with feminist organizations. The ex-gay model in which all lesbians are asexual reinforces certain Christian ideas about gender roles and female asexuality. A nonsexual ex-gay

woman will ultimately become an appropriate Christian wife in a marriage in which sexuality is designed simply for the purposes of procreation. The notion that women are nonsexual is also essential in the Christian narrative that women domesticate men. According to this model, a sexually promiscuous ex-gay man needs an asexual female partner to control his sinful and addictive behavior.

A Culture of Public Intimacy

As part of their intimacy with God, ex-gays are also encouraged to testify about their sexual transgressions in twelve-step-style meetings. Recovering from homosexual addiction requires individual motivation and self-discipline, but at New Hope the group is also extremely important. Little of a personal nature is felt to be off-limits for discussion, and whatever remains hidden is a potential source of shame. Private confession or prayer is encouraged but not considered to have as much efficacy as a public confession. New Hope expects ex-gays to speak publicly about the most private and harrowing aspects of their lives in small groups, in published materials, and in front of churches and large audiences. According to Andy Comiskey, creator of another ex-gay program called Living Waters, "The only bridge that can connect the two parts of the struggler—pious Christian and detached addict—is confession to other people who mediate the reality of Christ's grace and truth."³

By testifying about their past experiences, ex-gays attempt to convince others that sexual conversion is necessary to retain a relationship with God. Ex-gay men and women express how God has come into their lives, how they have become convinced of his presence, and how he has helped them transform their sexuality. By giving witness to the changes in their lives, they attempt to convince others that their only option is to disavow their sin of homosexual behavior and/or attraction. The point of testifying is to instill in the listener the sense that his or her life is empty, and that only God can fill and change it. As Mitch's story demonstrates, each testimony progresses to a crisis point that results in a born-again experience and the discovery of the relationship with God and finishes with participation in the ex-gay ministry and the path to conversion. The most celebrated cases end with marriage or children.

New Hope has an entire wall in its office with different shelves for every type of testimony: homosexuality, lesbianism, masturbation, pornography, transgender identities, parents, and materials for teenagers. Every month, the Exodus newsletter presents a testimony or story on the front cover. Most of them feature a ministry leader who has been out of the lifestyle for several years. The headline in March 2001 was "From Prostitute to Pastor: Mike Haley Was Once Addicted to Homosexuality. Today He Is a Fulfilled Husband and Father. How Does He Explain the Change?" Mike completed the New Hope

program in the early 1990s and now works for Focus on the Family, one of the largest Christian public policy and media organizations dedicated to the preservation of the family and the eradication of homosexuality.⁴ His testimony contains a brief description of his life as a gay prostitute, his sexual relationships with other men, his experience of being saved by another ex-gay, and his eventual marriage to a woman. Other testimonies have a similar narrative structure but are geared to other issues. Barbara Swallow, a former lesbian gives a testimony called "All Things Made New." The byline reads, "After being molested, I decided it wasn't safe being a girl. So I began to construct a new Barbara who wasn't female at all." There are other testimonies by wives of men who are struggling, daughters of lesbians, and parents of gay children.

As Mike Haley's and Barbara Swallow's testimonies demonstrate, to a certain extent, ex-gays lay claim to victimhood as a primary source of identity. Doug says he becomes weary of everyone in the program proclaiming their brokenness: "We all have brokenness, but if you keep on using that as a crutch, then you're never going to move on. I think that's one of the big problems we have here. We get into this brokenness contest. I'm like, let's move on people." The discourse of victimhood tends to imbue the trivial with grave import so that every event from having a sexual fall to having a bad day at work is validated as equally terrible. The emphasis on group sharing often leads to what one man called "group hysteria." In many of the group meetings, one or two people begin crying, and then suddenly everybody is weeping.

The New Hope culture enables a candid discussion of sexuality that would not occur at other churches or in other religious settings. Since most of the men testify about same-sex feelings, looking at gay pornography, and having anonymous sex, the ministry frequently deals with sex on an explicit level. Self-disclosure opens the way to healing because it creates shared, honest, and mutual vulnerability. Many men feel that the secrecy about their homosexuality and sexual addictions had been the most destructive force in their lives. Curtis explains, "You see, the thing for me and for most of us is this secrecy, where it's all secret and you can never share. The aim is to bring our diseased attitudes and misdeeds to the light of others and God to be done with them. When it comes from such an attitude, sharing becomes a liberating and life-giving experience."

The idea that someone would not confess is inconceivable. When I asked what would have happened if Mitch had not confessed his pornography addiction, Curtis remarked that he had not even considered the possibility. Addiction and recovery from homosexuality mirror the Christian ideas of sin and redemption. As with the idea of a sexual fall, the ex-gay movement believes that no matter how many sex acts a person has committed, there is still the possibility of healing. Grace and forgiveness are extended to all people as long as they vow to stay with the ministry and maintain their trust in God. The individual who experiences a sexual fall can still become a new creation in Christ.

The ex-gay worldview is structured by unwavering faith in the fact that God has a plan for each of them, and that becoming heterosexual is the only path that enables them to remain close to God. Healing their same-sex desires is a religious process, bolstered by the twelve-step elements of the ministry. Although their feelings may not change, and their sexual falls continue, they feel transformed religiously.

New Hope is part of a wider public culture of intimacy in which ex-gay confessions of traumatized identity become part of a public testimonial discourse of conversion. Bringing the intimate into public prominence is the vehicle for self-help and healing. Although the ex-gay movement views confessions as central to healing, this relentless focus on personal testimony also fosters myopia. In many cases, ex-gays are too caught up in their own healing to envision their relationship to a wider politics. Yet their narratives of healing have become part of a wider political antigay discourse promulgated by organizations like Focus on the Family. Based on the testimonies of ex-gay men and women, Focus on the Family promotes wider antigay activism cloaked in the rhetoric of choice, healing, and compassion.

New Hope and the ex-gay movement have created a religious culture of therapy for troubled individuals in an increasingly fragmented world through an emphasis on self-help and healing. For ex-gay men and women, to believe that God would create a person to be gay and then condemn homosexual behavior is incompatible with their theological view that heterosexuality means a closer personal relationship with God. It is a far more hopeful mode of thinking to believe that homosexuality is a learned behavior or condition caused by arrested development that can be cured through therapy, religious faith, community, and accountability.

NOTES

1. Formerly known as Love in Action, New Hope changed its name in 1996. In 1994, Love in Action moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where it still runs a residential program for men and women. The other residential program is Freedom at Last in Wichita, Kansas. Most ex-gay ministries are support groups that meet on a weekly basis.

2. Exodus includes more than 100 local ministries in the United States and Canada. It is also linked with other Exodus world regions outside of North America, totaling more than 135 ministries in seventeen countries.

3. Exodus International Conference, July 26–28, 2000. Point Loma Nazarene University.

4. Focus on the Family, founded by James Dobson in 1977, is a conservative Christian conglomerate with daily radio broadcasts and more than sixteen publications geared toward youth, parents, teachers, physicians, and church leaders. It also oversees missionary organizations and other media ventures. Dobson sends a monthly letter to everyone on his mailing list in which he outlines his thoughts on

current political controversies. According to Focus, Dobson's syndicated radio broadcast is heard on more than 3,000 radio facilities in North America and in nine languages on approximately 2,300 facilities in over ninety-eight other countries. By the mid-1990s, Focus had an annual budget of more than \$100 million. See Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 30–36. For more information see the Focus on the Family Web site at www.family.org.

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