

Ex-Gay Ministry Expands Reach Through Merger

✖ A leading ministry to people battling same-sex attraction is expanding its church outreach by uniting with ministries within two prominent mainline denominations.

During a press conference Wednesday in Wheaton, Ill., Exodus International announced a merger with Transforming Congregations, an ex-gay ministry affiliated with the United Methodist Church, and OneByOne, a similar outreach affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA).

“The compassionate truth of the gospel is still the hope of the world today,” said Alan Chambers (pictured), president of Exodus International. “Together, we hope to advance a new era in the global Christian church that is defined by God’s truth as well as His heart for hurting individuals experiencing confusion and conflict about their sexuality.”

In recent decades, both denominations have seen increasingly vocal segments of their memberships lean toward a more liberal theology that embraces homosexuality. But Exodus leaders say the merger could help the ministry better reach those groups with more effective resources that promote a biblically orthodox view of sexuality.

Transforming Congregations and One by One will function essentially as departments within Exodus’ church-equipping ministry.

“Part of the merger understanding is that we will retain our own identity and focus on missions,” said the Rev. Karen Booth, executive director of Transforming Congregations, which has been affiliated with Exodus since 2000. “We still will be working within the United Methodist Church or with churches from the Wesleyan heritage. ... I hope with Exodus working with

us, we will be a bit more strategic in our outreach.”

Randy Thomas, executive vice president of Exodus International, said the ministry also hopes to reduce the culture-war dichotomy that casts Christians as either condemning homosexuals or uncritically embracing the gay lifestyle.

“While the culture war has taken us into a polarization of either condemning the sin or condoning the behavior, Exodus and these groups are speaking into it redemptively and we’re saying we can hold on to truth but at the same time have compassion, have grace, have mercy and have resources available to those who do want to overcome homosexuality,” he told *Charisma*.

Those themes are the focus of Exodus’ 34th annual International Freedom Conference being held in Wheaton this week. Speakers range from former San Diego Charger Miles McPherson, a California pastor who fought for passage of Proposition 8, to Nancy Heche, whose husband and daughter, actress Anne Heche, were involved in homosexuality.

Gay activists were expected to protest the conference when it opened Tuesday night, and Chambers said he welcomed them.

“What we, as the global Christian church, must recognize is that on the other side of a picket line, are often hurting people in need of God’s unconditional love,” Chambers said. “While our views on these issues may differ, the bold love of Christ must prevail over opposing policies, differing views and even our own pride.”

Exodus leaders say navigating the fine line between loving homosexuals and communicating to them the truth of Scripture is the real challenge facing Christians. “I think it’s critical that Christians do take a stand for a traditional understanding of marriage,” Booth said. “But I think we need to move beyond that to proactively reach out and do ministry.

From a lot of the churches I work with, there's a fear in doing that. There's a fear of not knowing quite what to do."

Complicating that even further are concerns that with six states now allowing same-sex marriage, gay rights will one day trump religious liberty, leading to laws that punish those who preach that homosexual practice is sinful. In parts of Europe and Canada, preaching against homosexuality has been deemed hate speech, and some Christians have been prosecuted.

"I do believe that that is a very real threat, and that we should be involved in [public policy issues]," Thomas said. "At the same time, even if I lost all my personal rights or my civil liberties, my God calls me to be a witness to the world, to have a loving, gracious witness that speaks of His redemption and honors His work on the cross and respects the atonement.

"We must be involved in [public policy], but that shouldn't be our top priority. Our top priority is loving God and loving others as ourselves."