

Exodus International Marks 35th Year of Freedom Conferences

More than three decades ago, 63 men and women met in Anaheim, Calif., to encourage and support one another in their struggle with homosexuality. The event has since grown into an international conference and led to the founding of what is considered the world's largest ministry to people with unwanted same-sex attraction.

Exodus International, the organization birthed out of that first meeting in 1976, will celebrate the 35th anniversary of the event this week at Concordia University in Irvine, Calif.

Around 1,000 people are expected to participate in the International Freedom Conference, which begins Wednesday and includes workshops and testimonies from people who have left homosexuality. It will conclude Saturday with Love Won Out sessions designed to help those ministering to people with unwanted same-sex attraction.

Those in attendance also will hear from some of the original 63 people who met in Anaheim, including Exodus board member Ron Dennis and founding member Frank Worthen.

Although the size of the conference has changed, Exodus Executive Vice President Randy Thomas said the mission remains the same. "We exist to help mobilize the body of Christ to answer the issues concerning homosexuality from a Christian and redemptive perspective," Thomas said.

For Thomas, attending his first Freedom Conference in 1995 was a life-changing experience. "It was a catalyst for so much positive growth in my life, and it really propelled me forward in my own life as a Christian," he said.

The theme for this year's event is "Moving Forward," which encompasses everything Exodus aims to do: help individuals find freedom through its member ministries, professional counselors and church association members, and mobilize the body of Christ to minister to those in their churches and communities.

Exodus International President Alan Chambers said his goal for the last nine years has been to move the organization's focus from just individuals to a "ministry of the church."

Though it began with only a few people, Exodus now works with almost 250 ministries and is affiliated with organizations around the globe. According to Exodus' Web site, the ministry is the "largest Christian referral and information network dealing with homosexual issues in the world."

Chambers said the fact that Exodus has survived so long when many other ministries haven't made it past a decade is telling. "It speaks to the longevity of the power of Christ to change someone, and it speaks to the fact that this has been a solid, biblically based organization that has helped countless people," he said.

Since Exodus International was founded the cultural perspective on homosexuality has continued to change rapidly. "Our culture has gone from shoving homosexuality to the closet to parading it down Main Street," Thomas said.

The shift has brought both positives and negatives. People are more open to talking about homosexuality, but Thomas said the changing culture also has encouraged some people to experiment with homosexuality who might not have otherwise. "On the one hand we're talking about it more, but on the other hand our culture has completely gone away from a biblical viewpoint of sexuality," Thomas said.

While Exodus officials are convinced – and many are living proof – that people can turn from a life of homosexuality,

there are many critics. "The question that's been posed ... has been: Do your programs really work? Do they bring about meaningful change?" said psychology professor Mark A. Yarhouse, director of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va.

"Really the question's even been more firm than that: Is change ever possible and, in fact, is it even harmful to try?" he said.

Yarhouse, along with Wheaton College Provost Stanton L. Jones, led a longitudinal study of change attempts. "We reported that change does appear to be possible for some people," said Yarhouse, who with Jones reported their findings in the 2007 book *Ex-Gays?: A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. The pair presented further results last year at the American Psychological Association's annual convention.

However, Yarhouse said their research showed more of a decrease in same-sex attraction than a complete shift from homosexuality to heterosexuality.

Through the years, Yarhouse said there seems to be more religion-based ministries such as Exodus that are dealing with the issue of homosexuality.

"I wondered if that doesn't correspond with the decrease in responsiveness from professional mental health organizations," Yarhouse said, adding that many secular groups are limited in what they offer clients and may even discourage change attempts.

Although research has shown change is possible, Yarhouse said he's not sure any ministry can promise an outcome of complete heterosexuality.

"I think they're at their best when they talk about Christ-likeness and sanctification and growing in Christian maturity," he said.

Thomas – who considers himself “predominately heterosexual” and knows people who have completely overcome same-sex attractions – said for some, temptations may still come at times.

However, he said people shouldn’t be discouraged if this happens because they aren’t defined by what may or may not tempt them. He said it’s important to remember that one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is self-control.

“If I am tempted, I know what to do about that, and because of the grace and love of God I can continue walking my walk in obedience and maturity, and that to me is as much freedom as someone who says they’ve experienced complete freedom,” he said.