

Bondage-Breakers In San Francisco

Thirty years ago Frank and Anita Worthen founded a ministry that today has helped thousands of homosexuals escape that lifestyle.

Although others have tried to claim the title, Frank Worthen is the founder of the Christian movement that proclaims freedom from homosexuality through a relationship with Christ. In late 1973, he formed a weekly support group in San Rafael, California, that served as a forerunner of Exodus, the international network of organizations that today are commonly called “ex-gay” ministries.

Four years later, he opened Love in Action, the first residential-treatment program for men who wanted to leave homosexuality. He departed for the Philippines in 1991 to start an Exodus group and also played an integral role in forming the organization’s European ministry.

Over the years, Worthen has distributed literature or had discussions with some 35,000 people about homosexuality and has overseen residential treatment for almost 400 others. He also has written three books, including Helping People Step Out of Homosexuality, which remains in print. His wife, Anita, is co-author of Someone I Love Is Gay: How Family & Friends Can Respond.

“Frank’s pretty much interwoven in every fabric of Exodus,” says Alan Chambers, executive director of Exodus International North America. “He’s never compromised, never wavered. And he’s modest. He would never tell you he’s the father of this. ‘Unsung hero’ is a good label for him.”

“Frank is one of my heroes,” adds Bob Davies, former North American director of Exodus who is now on staff at a Seattle

church. "Despite the incredible ways that God has used him, he remains genuinely humble and never takes himself seriously. Many others have grown 'weary in well doing' over the years, but Frank has held his position on the front lines of a difficult ministry."

Worthen, who is shy, soft-spoken and modest in appearance, rededicated his life to Christ in 1973 and left homosexuality after more than two decades of involvement. After sharing his story at Church of the Open Door (where he now is an associate pastor), several members told him of their struggles with same-sex desires. It prompted the first support group. A few years later, he helped organize the first conference of ex-gay ministries, and it became the springboard to Exodus.

In 1984, Worthen married Anita. Today she helps him administer New Hope, another residential-treatment center they started in 1995 after returning from overseas. They are described by observers as "polar opposites"—Anita's chatty, lively personality meshes with her husband's quiet, unassuming nature. But both are dedicated to lifelong ministry.

"I'm in this as long as I'm married to Frank," says Anita, whose introduction to ex-gay ministry came via attempts to convince her son to give up homosexual practices. "I can't back out and do something else."

Frank doesn't consider it unique that he has stayed with the ministry for nearly three decades. He also eschews applying the word "hero" to him, shrugging it off by saying that he just does what God tells him. He has been motivated more by a desire to stay under the Lord's protective covering than a grand vision for his ministry, he says.

Besides, he notes, the joys outweigh the frustrations.

"It's very rewarding when we have alumni night and all the guys come with their wives and their children, happy and free of that lifestyle," Worthen says. "The people we help are the

least capable of making a change because they're beaten down by society and have low self-esteem. And yet they do."

Still, he feels disappointed that the center reaches just 10 to 15 men a year when he knows millions need help. Anita is challenged by the fact that her son, Tony, continues in homosexuality. Despite their disagreement with Tony on this issue, the couple maintain a good relationship with him, and they all spend many holidays and vacations together.

Those who criticize Christian ministry to gays as judgmental, harsh and uncaring must pause in the face of one of Anita's most selfless acts. After the man who seduced her son at age 16 contracted AIDS, she helped care for him until he died. She not only grew spiritually through that experience, but she also learned that the way to reach homosexuals is with love, not with finger-pointing.

"I was able to take care of Tony's friend because I prayed for him," she says. "Once I prayed for him, I couldn't hate him. I know a lot of people who came out of the gay community because [Christians] were so nice to them."

That kind of unselfishness is a quality that marks the Worthens, says Mike Haley, a former Love in Action staff member. When Haley got married in 1994, Frank and Anita offered him a honeymoon gift of one week at their time-share condominium, even though he had known the Worthens only briefly.

"It was an incredible blessing," says Haley, now a youth-and-gender analyst for Focus on the Family. "Frank has always been an incredible encouragement to me. I give him 99 percent of the credit for my healing. Without his faithfulness, there never would have been an Exodus."

Sandra Aslesen, who homeschools her three children, admires the couple for investing countless hours in emotionally broken people, many of whom were sexually abused during childhood.

She was one of several women admitted to the final year of a three-year women's program in the late 1980s. She came to San Rafael with the view that men were either sexual predators or sickeningly passive. The program helped her break out of emotionally destructive patterns and develop healthy relationships.

Sensing the times when Aslesen was at the height of personal struggles, Anita responded with a soft, affirming touch or kind words.

"Frank had a wonderful presence, too," Aslesen says. "He's the most unassuming guy in the world, yet he runs around the world affecting lives for Christ. He's got a great sense of humor and is a prankster, although he's very subtle. Anita's a corker. She's really 'out there,' but she has a tender side, too. They're like Mutt and Jeff."

Although the Worthens aren't attention-seekers, their ministry still manages to attract hate mail, nasty phone calls and other forms of adversity. By withstanding such opposition, they have encouraged people such as Haley, whose visibility at Focus attracts threats, too.

"I thought, If Frank and Anita can do that, I can deal with these death threats," Haley says. "Who am I when Frank and Anita have given it all?"

Ken Walker is a frequent contributor to Charisma. He lives in Huntington, W. Va.

For more information, write Exodus, P.O. Box 540119, Orlando, FL 32854; or call (888) 264-0877. Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.