

Introduction

In a run-down community center in San Rafael, California, a middle-aged man spoke haltingly in front of fifty people sitting on rickety folding chairs. As he testified to the power of Jesus in changing his life, there were murmurs of assent. He told the assembly, “I will never be the same again. I have closed the door.” What would be a fairly normal evangelical church experience was transformed as he recounted his pornography addiction and his anonymous sexual encounters with other men. Rather than expressing shock or outrage, the members of the audience raised their arms and called out, “Praise him” and “Praise the Lord.” Hank was one of a dozen men who had come to New Hope Ministry to rid themselves of homosexuality.¹ At this annual Friends and Family conference, his testimony provided assurance to the gathering that after three years, he was a living example of the possibility for change.

Listening raptly in the audience was a new member of the program. Curtis, twenty-one years old, with streaks of blond in his hair and numerous facial piercings, had arrived from Canada a month before. Raised in a nondenominational conservative Christian family of missionaries, Curtis believed that having same-sex desire was antithetical to living a Christian life. At age sixteen, he had come out to his family as “someone with gay feelings who wants to change.” Instead of attending college, he had been involved in Christian youth groups since he was eighteen. Aside from a clandestine sexual relationship in high school, he had never allowed himself to date men. Eventually, with the encouragement of his

parents and youth pastor, he decided that in order to conquer his same-sex attractions, he needed to devote himself to an ex-gay program. His ultimate goal was to overcome what he called his “homosexual problem” and eventually get married. “I don’t want to be fifty years old, sitting in a gay bar because I just got dumped and have no kids, no family—and be lonelier than heck,” he reasoned. Unable to secure a green card, Curtis was working in the New Hope ex-gay ministry administrative offices for the year. Whether filing or copying, he moved around the office tethered to a five-foot Walkman cable, listening to Christian techno music and reminiscing about his nights in the clubs of his hometown.

During the course of his year in the program, Curtis would experience moments of elation, severe depression, crushes on other men, homesickness, and boredom. He eventually would return home with the expectation that he would apply everything he had learned at New Hope to his old life in Canada. Instead, during the next several years he experienced only more uncertainty regarding his sexual struggles. He began occasionally dating men at the same time that he volunteered at a local ex-gay ministry. Later, he embarked upon a chaste relationship with a woman he hoped to marry, but he broke it off when he realized he could never be attracted to her sexually. Finally, he resumed his career as a hairdresser and moved from his rural hometown to Montreal, the first city he had ever lived in.

Curtis’s story represents a familiar pattern for many ex-gay men and women who come to New Hope with the objective of healing their homosexuality, controlling sexual compulsions, becoming heterosexual, or even marrying someone of the opposite sex. Curtis arrived with the idea that, after a year, his homosexual struggle would subside. He left feeling stronger in his Christian identity, but not necessarily with diminished homosexual urges. It was through religious growth that he believed he would eventually conquer his attractions to men. Struggling with these attractions his entire life was acceptable to him. He reasoned that his faith in God would sustain him and provide him with hope that change was possible.

The controversy around the ex-gay movement has tended to fixate on whether people can change their sexuality. In their testimonies, Hank and Curtis both swore they were altered people, but their assertions encompass a range of possibilities for change that do not necessarily include sexual orientation, behaviors, or desires. When they spoke of personal transformation, they were more likely to refer to their religious identities and sense of masculinity. Christian Right groups claim that

men and women can become heterosexuals, and they present men like Hank as confirmation. Opponents of the ex-gay movement argue, based on their evidence of the men and women who have left ex-gay ministries to live as gay- or lesbian-identified, that ex-gay men and women are simply controlling their behavior and repressing their desires. Both sides neglect the centrality of the religious belief system and personal experiences that impel men and women to spend years in ex-gay ministries. Rather than definitive change, ex-gays undergo a conversion process that has no endpoint, and they acknowledge that change encompasses desires, behavior, and identities that do not always align neatly or remain fixed. Even the label “ex-gay” represents their sense of being in flux between identities.

While many conservative Christian churches and organizations condemn homosexuality, New Hope Ministry represents a unique form of nondenominational Christian practice focused specifically on sexuality. New Hope combines psychological, therapeutic, and biblical approaches in an effort to change and convert gay men and lesbians to nonhomosexual Christian lives. Unlike previous Christian movements in the United States, the ex-gay movement, of which New Hope Ministry is a part, explicitly connects sexual and religious conversion, placing sexuality at the core of religious identity. By becoming a born-again Christian and maintaining a personal relationship with Jesus, ex-gay men and women are born again religiously, and as part of that process they consider themselves reconstituted sexually. They grapple with a seemingly irreconcilable conflict between their conservative Christian beliefs and their own same-sex desires. In their worldview, an ex-gay ministry becomes a place where these dual identities are rendered temporarily compatible. Their literal belief that the Bible condemns homosexual practices and identity leads them to measure their success in negotiating their new identities through submission and surrender to Jesus in all things. Even if desires and attractions remain after they have attended an ex-gay ministry like New Hope, their relationship with God and Jesus continues intact. That relationship supersedes any sexual changes, minimizing their frustration and disillusionment when the longed for sexual changes do not occur. In the words of Curtis, “Heterosexuality isn’t the goal; giving our hearts and being obedient to God is the goal.”

New Hope Ministry is the oldest of five residential ex-gay programs in the United States. Frank Worthen formed New Hope in 1973 after a revelation in which God exhorted him to abandon homosexuality.²

With the help of a board of directors and house leaders who have successfully completed the program, Frank, a spry man in his mid-seventies who still jets around in a cherry-red convertible, oversees New Hope, teaches classes to the men in the program, and serves as an assistant pastor in an ex-gay-affiliated church called Church of the Open Door. His wife of over twenty years, Anita, spearheads a ministry for parents of gay children from the same office. She is not an ex-gay but the mother of a gay son. Frank and Anita live a few minutes away from the residential program in a tiny but immaculate studio apartment. After two decades of marriage, they are paragons for other Christian men and women who pray that they will also get married. New Hope is now one of hundreds of evangelical Christian 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.”

In 2000 and 2001, fifteen men participated in the New Hope program. A similar program for women existed throughout the 1980s, but New Hope eliminated it in the early 1990s because of a lack of space. Instead, New Hope sponsors Grace, a weekly ex-gay women’s support group led by Suzanne, an energetic woman in her late thirties, now with three children, who spent years in the New Hope program and eventually married a man from Open Door. Participants in Grace and New Hope attended the events at Friends and Family Weekend in 2000, listening as Hank gave his testimony. During the conference, ex-gays and their families enthusiastically participated in small encounter-group discussions for women struggling with lesbianism, parents and spouses of ex-gays, pastors, and church leaders.

After the activities for the Friends and Family Weekend conference concluded, men and women returned to the New Hope residence, Emmanuel House, a two-story stucco apartment complex on a suburban cul-de-sac. Unlike Curtis, most of the men in New Hope’s program tended to be in their late thirties and forties. They were predominantly white, from working-class and middle-class families, and raised primarily in rural areas or small towns of the United States. There also were a few men from Europe who, like Curtis, had obtained religious worker visas, which enabled them to be employees of New Hope. They worked in the New Hope offices, located directly across the street from the ex-gay residential apartments. The number of international participants was low, since many now have the option of joining ministries in their

home countries as the ex-gay movement expands throughout Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. Most of the men in the New Hope program grew up with conservative Christian backgrounds and fervently believed not only that homosexual attraction and behavior are sins according to the Bible but also that life as a gay person means being separated from Jesus. This had created a wrenching conflict, causing estrangement from their families and churches. In some cases, it had led to drug and alcohol abuse, isolation, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and depression.

Although there were a few men from mainline Protestant denominations and one Catholic in the program, at some point most had become involved in an evangelical form of Christianity and undergone a born-again experience. All of the New Hope participants maintained a personal relationship with Jesus and believed to differing degrees in the infallibility and literal truth of biblical scripture. With few exceptions, the informal, experiential religious style of New Hope and Church of the Open Door was familiar to them. All those in attendance believed that through Christian faith, religious conversion, and a daily accountable relationship with one another and with God they could heal their homosexuality. Desires or attractions might linger for years, but they would emerge with new religious identities and the promise that faith and their relationships with one another and God would eventually transform them.

A week before the Friends and Family conference, I ventured up to New Hope for an initial meeting with the intention of making it my fieldwork site. I had interviewed Frank, the New Hope director, on the phone a year before about the early history of the movement, but we had never met. As I approached, it was hard to distinguish the ministry from other nondescript buildings lining the placid, tree-lined street. However, when I peered closely, I could discern signs for Alanon, psychotherapy practices, and various drug rehabilitation centers scattered among the two-story houses. There was nothing to mark the ministry office except a profusion of bright flowers, a few bristling cacti, and vines trailing down from the first-floor landing, which I later learned were assiduously tended by two men in the program. Upon arriving, I was ushered into a small room by Anita, who made it clear that in order to talk to Frank, I would have to pass muster with her. Anita was in her early fifties, with short brown hair and a no-nonsense manner that some considered brash, but I found refreshing. Slightly heavysset but not

overweight, she struggled with dieting, I later learned, even as she bus-tled around the office with ease. We sat in a small prayer room with a plaque on the wall that read:

Some Facts from God to You:
You need to be saved
You can't save yourself
Jesus has already provided for your salvation
Jesus will enable you to overcome temptation
Your part: Repent

After I explained that I hoped to comprehend the perspectives of men and women in an ex-gay ministry through prolonged fieldwork and interviews at New Hope, Anita informed me that “we are in a battle,” and the battle is between “us versus them.” I was unsure what she meant, and she clarified that “them” meant Satan, and she was convinced that many people were in his service. Her next question, “Who do you serve?” was calculated to establish where my allegiances lay.

I had never been faced with the choice of God or Satan, but I replied that since I was at the ministry to understand their viewpoint rather than simply to dismiss or ridicule them, I supposed I was on the side of “us.” Somehow, I passed the test, and my answer enabled Anita to assimilate me into her religious universe. From my own patchwork religious background of first-generation immigrant Catholic grandparents and brief childhood forays into a New England United Church of Christ congregation, Anita read me as a Christian, albeit an unsaved one. She remained undecided about my research, but the New Hope leadership team would “pray on it” and get back to me. After a few weeks of group prayer and consultation, Anita and the other leaders determined that it was part of God’s wider plan for me to come to New Hope. They incorporated my research agenda into their own worldview through the idea that it was part of a divine scheme, and they had faith that God was directing the course of my research. Implicit within my acceptance by the New Hope leadership team was their belief that I, too, had the potential for conversion to a Christian life. However, no one ever directly proselytized to me or insisted that I pray or give a testimony in church. Instead, Anita and the men I met imparted their stories of healing as reminders of what God could effect in my own life if, in their words, I allowed my heart to be open.

Ethnographic research has a tradition of investigating groups with whom the ethnographer shares a political, cultural, or social affinity. Only within the past decade have ethnographers begun to document

their experiences with groups they may disagree with politically. These ethnographers have illustrated how they grapple with conflicting emotions and expectations when the social and religious conservatism of the people or groups they study—which have ranged from anti-abortion activists, to Jerry Falwell, to the women’s Ku Klux Klan, to the Christian Right—reflect moral and political ideals that are distinct from their own.³ Their studies also highlight crucial questions about what it means to have a fieldwork agenda when one’s research subjects are conservative Christians with their own conversionary agendas for the researcher. There are inherent tensions in this situation, especially when writing about a proselytizing community means committing to understanding the community’s belief instead of viewing it as “false belief.” For instance, in her book on Jerry Falwell, Susan Harding raises complicated questions about how to comprehend the experience of faith, asking whether academic understanding necessitates conversion to her subject’s religious belief system.⁴ As one researcher bluntly put it, we go to coffee with them for data, and they want to save our souls.⁵ From my first meeting with Anita, in which she pressed me to choose between God and Satan, it was evident that there would always be inherent frictions and incongruities between the biblically based language of evangelism and the language of ethnography. Knowing I was entering a community that placed a premium on the ability to evangelize, I accepted with some trepidation Anita’s invitation to attend Friends and Family Weekend a month later.

However, I later learned that despite New Hope’s religious interpretation of my research agenda, Anita’s motives were not merely godly. Around the time we met, the ministry had been praying for someone to update their Web site, which was functioning but required editing and reorganization. In what I considered a fortuitous coincidence and Anita considered “God’s work,” I had done freelance Web programming throughout graduate school and discovered that helping New Hope with its Web site and other computer woes would provide a basis to spend time in the office. I thus became an unofficial volunteer as well as a researcher. Performing concrete tasks like reviewing New Hope’s booklets and testimonies and spending hours on the phone with Pacific Bell because no one in the office could connect to the Internet eased my entry into the world of New Hope. Being in the office also led to my first meetings with Brian, a thirty-two-year-old who had originally designed the New Hope Web site and now worked full time as a computer engineer, and his close friend, Drew, New Hope’s affable Danish office manager,

also in his thirties, both of whom had completed the program several years earlier.

Although gradually everyone at New Hope became aware that I was there to conduct interviews and research, to them, the idea that a single woman would move across the country to spend time at New Hope was more inconceivable and bizarre than their decision to spend a year in an ex-gay residential program. The desk that I used faced the wall behind Drew's desk, so I found myself sitting back to back with him in the office every day I was there. Our unavoidable proximity made informal conversation necessary, and his wry humor made it comfortable. Because the office was the focal point for the ministry and people dropped by after work and throughout the day, I gradually became a familiar presence to the men in the program. Drew oversaw the office and the application process for the program, while Curtis, the newest arrival, bore the brunt of less exalted work like copying and collating hundreds of pages to make the workbooks for the classes men attended. He worked in another room, across the hall, at a crowded desk pushed against an over-size window. From there he could monitor who came and went from the ministry apartments across the street. As in any office, the dynamic between these two colleagues ranged from camaraderie to outright annoyance. Drew seemed perpetually bemused by Curtis's antics, especially his bold fashion choices and tendency to alternate between Christian techno music and Ukrainian polkas on the stereo.

The offices were sparse aside from computers and a literature table. The main decoration was a colorized photograph of a lighthouse, New Hope's official symbol, on the wall. Frank and Anita had separate offices that sandwiched the room where Curtis worked, jammed with file cabinets and poster boards covered with photographs of men who had completed the program. At the end of the first month, I noticed that my bag with my laptop computer in it had mysteriously disappeared when I returned from talking to Anita in her office. As I began to panic, I heard Brian laughing outside. I had become the latest victim of his infamous pranks. His antics were so frequent that when his bike was stolen, it took days for the other men to convince him that it wasn't in revenge for his practical jokes. Unlike most of the men, who had been amiable toward me, Brian had been suspicious from the beginning, and this fake theft represented a thawing in his attitude. At our first encounter, he had plopped down next to me without introducing himself and asked confrontationally, "Why are you here, and what are you going to write about us?" He had been living out of a storage room in the office until

he could move into his own apartment and was therefore around all the time. By our second meeting, he had put my name into the Google search engine, and he quizzed me relentlessly about conferences I had attended and places I had worked. "So, you're basically a liberal who thinks we're crazy, right?" It took many conversations over several months before we began inching toward friendship and a wary trust.

Once Curtis, Drew, and Brian had accepted my presence and incessant questions, it was easier to interact with others in the program. Men sauntered into the office after work to chat with Drew and, gradually, with me by extension. Many seemed flattered that I deemed their lives important enough for an interview, and they were curious about what I had found in my research. Some assumed that I had objective or even expert knowledge of the movement, even though in the ex-gay world, expertise is not based on credentials but entirely on personal experiences of sexual addictions and familial dysfunction—none of which I possessed. As the only young woman they interacted with on a daily basis, I was an anomaly and an outsider. After a while, I unexpectedly came to be a safe repository for advice, confidences, and complaints about life in the ministry for some men. When the day-to-day became familiar, I had to continually remind myself to take note of what would have seemed extraordinary only months earlier. It was never simple to gauge when it was appropriate to record fragments of casual conversations and occurrences into my notebook. As one anthropologist explained, "They told their subjects carefully who they were, but then did their best research when their subjects forgot."⁶

During my eighteen months at New Hope, I conducted two-to-three-hour interviews with forty-seven men and women, with nineteen follow-up interviews. I often talked and interacted informally with these same people in other contexts, like dinners, church, and the office. I formally interviewed Curtis, Brian, Hank, and Drew two or three times over the span of a year and a half. I chose New Hope as my research site because of Frank's position as the founder of the ex-gay movement and because, at the time, it was the oldest and most established residential program. Aside from men enrolled in the program, I interviewed ministry leaders and men and women living in the surrounding area who had completed the program. Four of these people were married but remained affiliated with New Hope in some way. One had married but sought out a church where he did not have to reveal his sexual struggles and history. I also interviewed seven men who had left the program to live as gay-identified. Later, I interviewed members and leaders of Jewish and Catholic ex-gay

groups in New York City and at the annual Exodus conference. This broad focus was especially important given that a coalition of Jewish, Catholic, Mormon, Christian, African American, and therapeutic groups formed an organization called Positive Alternatives to Homosexuality in 2003 as a way to reach out to members of more religious denominations on a national and global scale.

My research received a huge boost when Drew mailed a letter I drafted to sixty ex-gay people in the immediate vicinity, asking them to complete interviews, and it was through these early contacts that I met others. After a few months, Frank granted me permission to peruse his carefully cataloged archive of articles, letters, and pictures related to homosexuality and the ex-gay movement from the early 1970s, and I spent part of my days reading and copying these files. Other times, I taught men how to use and edit the Web site, fixed computer problems, and engaged in long conversations with Anita, Frank, Drew, Curtis, and the various men who wandered through the offices during the day. Sometimes Brian and I would meet for dinner outside of the ministry since he was no longer in the program or working at New Hope. At night, before I drove back to San Francisco, I would often eat with the entire house of men and listen to their praise and worship sessions, and I met others through church on Sundays and group outings on weekends. In the course of the research, I volunteered in the ministry's offices; attended classes, dinners, conferences, and parties; and maintained over a span of several years relationships with men and women affiliated with the ex-gay movement, three of whom I am still in contact with. I viewed ethnography as an extended and sometimes never-ending conversation, and inevitably that conversation changed me just as my presence at New Hope changed the fabric of everyday life there. I never converted to Christianity, which was the change perhaps Anita and others desired, but my relationships with the people at New Hope radically altered how I understood their faith and their desire to change their sexualities.

Doing extended participant observation and interviews provided me with access to a perspective on the ex-gay movement and the Christian Right that journalists' undercover exposés of ministries or ex-gay testimonial accounts of change have tended to ignore. Similarly, although political science and sociological scholarship on the Christian Right and conservative political movements is rich and varied, it has tended to focus on leadership and political rhetoric rather than ground-level participation. This work often discounts the worldviews of participants in

Christian Right organizations, issues of gender and sexuality, and, in some cases, religion.⁷ The majority of these studies have been concerned with measuring the Christian Right's success, in "re-Christianizing America," in making legislative inroads, or in growing its numbers,⁸ and they draw upon social movement theory approaches to understand conservative social and cultural movements.⁹ Although I consider the ex-gay movement a political, cultural, and social movement, I did not situate New Hope within this body of theory, choosing instead to analyze daily life and interactions. Many of the studies of conservative groups have generally involved national surveys and interviews conducted by field researchers rather than prolonged fieldwork.¹⁰ Participants' observations and interviews revealed how religious and sexual conversion occur as a complicated process over time. They also demonstrated that the ex-gay movement is far from politically cohesive and that there is a wide gulf between leadership and laity.

Although my sample was not necessarily representative of the entire ex-gay movement, my focus on a concentrated group of individuals revealed why people joined, what they did while they were there, and what became of them after they left. I compiled basic statistics about age, race, class, gender, and religious background, but I was less interested in quantifiable conclusions proving or disproving change than in the worldviews of men and women. These worldviews became a window onto the larger ex-gay movement and the way Christian political organizations have appropriated ex-gay narratives of change. However, to understand the connection between the local experiences of ex-gay men and women and the wider political implications of the movement, I situate the ex-gay movement within the wider historical currents of twentieth-century evangelical religion; self-help culture; psychiatric and psychological theories on sexuality, gay and lesbian liberation, and feminism; and the history of the Christian Right.

Gaining information from men and women was greatly facilitated by the manner in which ex-gays are encouraged to confess and testify as part of their process of sexual transformation. With the exception of Brian, they were much more interested in talking about themselves than in questioning me. The testimony, with a sin and redemption narrative, has long been a hallmark of evangelical Christianity. Testifying for men and women at New Hope was central to their process of sexual and religious conversion, illustrating their stories before and after dedicating their lives to Jesus, from sinner to saved. The testimony is the narrative form into which all ex-gays eventually fit their lives before and after

becoming Christians. It attests to their religious transformation and their hope that sexual transformation will follow. Ex-gays are accustomed to continually sharing testimony about the most private and harrowing aspects of their lives in public, group settings. Continuous testimony in small groups and at church is the centerpiece of the ex-gay residential program, and reluctance or refusal to give testimony is a liability.

Unlike many mainline Protestant denominations where personal problems are not aired publicly, the evangelical religious style of New Hope encourages and rewards public confessions of intimacy. Repentant narratives about homosexuality, drug abuse, sexual abuse, abortions, and promiscuity provide former sinners with unimpeachable authority in the ex-gay culture because expertise is predicated on experience. The emphasis on personal testimony is also emblematic of the therapeutic dimension of the ex-gay process of conversion. The ministries assert that sexual healing occurs through these public confessions, or “offering problems up to Jesus.” Talking in interviews was a natural extension of the wider public discourse of testimony and public emotionalism for most men and women. Hank, for example, would often break into tears as he spoke to me, and I found that in the course of conversations, ex-gay men and women would casually slip in intimate details about abuse or addiction as if they were everyday topics.

A person’s testimonial narrative of conversion becomes more structured and even rigid the longer he or she has been involved in an ex-gay ministry. Although the religious and sexual testimony generates a life history, I found that it was crucial to talk to men and women before they placed their experiences within the frame of what they learned at the ministry, read in the ex-gay literature, and heard from others. These testimonial life stories were messier but more revealing than that of someone like Hank, who had spoken and written widely about his life for years. A common theme in ethnographies of conservative Christians has been a focus on the narrative strategies expressed through life stories.¹¹ In her book on pro-choice and pro-life women, Faye Ginsburg uses the term “procreation stories” to analyze the formal strategies these activists employ to give meaning to their own activism around abortion and to challenge the expected outcomes of their lives. Ex-gay men and women also express their life stories through the form of the testimony, even if their actual experiences do not fit neatly into the testimonial structure. As they hear other testimonies through day-to-day interactions in the program, they learn to strategically position and locate their own lives into a similar framework of sinner and saved. Testimonies circulate

in published materials as pamphlets and cassettes sent throughout the world, and men and women perform them in front of churches and large audiences.

There is also a social and collective aspect to testimony, and giving one becomes a rite of initiation into the religious world of a ministry. These stories of trauma and healing are central to the culture of therapy that predominates at New Hope and other ex-gay ministries. Testifying as therapy keeps the focus on the individual's experience of pain and trauma but permits each person to relive it within the safety net of a wider religious narrative and community. Religious transformation is deeply connected to a therapeutic process that allows men and women to renarrate their pasts as part of being born again. Through subsequent retellings, the trauma lessens and a person heals. The object of testifying is forgiveness and redemption from other Christians and from God, and the personal relationship a person has with Jesus is an extension of this focus on healing the self. As a narrative strategy, these confessions are proof of religious and sexual conversion and grant the testifier power as a witness to non-Christians or those living in sin. Testimonies become a form of evangelism that is necessary to self-healing and to the wider dissemination of the ex-gay movement. The testimonies of hundreds of conservative Christian men and women who have felt compelled to participate in ex-gay ministries function as evidence that change is possible through a relationship with Jesus. Everything in a person's preconversion life becomes a story that illustrates how a relationship with Jesus transforms people. The mission statement on the ex-gay movement's Web site claims to offer "Freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ." The testimonial narratives attest that freedom and redemption can only be obtained by dedicating one's life and sexuality to Jesus.

In the ex-gay movement, change is a complex process that incorporates developmental theories of sexual identity, religious proscriptions against homosexuality, biblical prayer, therapeutic group activities, counseling, and self-help steps. The idea of change is the financial, political, religious, and personal basis of the ex-gay movement, and it continues to be the fulcrum on which the debate over the fixity or fluidity of sexual identity turns. Change is a conversion process that incorporates religious and sexual identity, desire, and behavior. Sexual identity is malleable and changeable because it is completely entwined with religious conversion. A person becomes ex-gay as he accepts Jesus into his life and commits to him. Much has been written about the widely

publicized sexual scandals of prominent ex-gays, but in the ex-gay movement, it is far more scandalous to abandon Jesus than to yield to same-sex desire. It is commonly accepted that a person will continue to experience desire and even occasionally lapse into same-sex behavior as part of the overall conversion process. Recovery and relapse are built into the creation of an ex-gay identity, and sexual falls are expected. Rather than becoming heterosexual, men and women become part of a new identity group in which it is the norm to submit to temptation and return to ex-gay ministry over and over again. As long as the offender publicly repents and reaffirms her commitment to Jesus, all is forgiven.

I call this process of religious and sexual conversion, sexual falls, and public redemption through testimony “queer conversion.” The word “queer” literally means “odd,” “peculiar,” or “out of the ordinary,” but I use “queer” in the context of the academic discipline of queer theory and its indebtedness to queer activism, which has reappropriated the word “queer” from its history as a negative or derogatory term. In queer theory and activism, “queer” means to challenge the very concept of the normal, and it can encompass a range of sexual acts and identities historically considered deviant that the words “gay” and “lesbian” sometimes exclude. Queer theorists refute the idea that sexuality is an essentialist category determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth.¹² Instead, queer theory argues for the idea that identities are culturally and historically determined rather than fixed; sexual practices and desires change over time and do not consistently line up with masculine or feminine gender expectations. The idea of queerness accounts for the possibility that a person’s sexual orientation, behaviors, and desires can fluctuate, moving between different identities, political affiliations, and sexual arrangements.

Although the political goals of the ex-gay movement and queer activists are radically distinct, by accepting that a person’s behavior and desire will not necessarily correspond with their new ex-gay identity or religious identity, ex-gay men and women enact a queer concept of sexuality when they undergo queer conversions. Although men and women in ex-gay ministries do not and cannot envision homosexuality as a positive way to be, their lives also exemplify the instability of the religious and sexual conversion process. Their narratives of testimonial sexuality are performances that, while sincere, point to the instability and changeability of their own identities rather than serve as a testament to heterosexuality. The ex-gay notion of sexuality as a religious process of transformation may be fraught with sexual falls, indiscretions, and

moments of doubt, and ex-gays' notions of change are fluid even if their eventual goal is heterosexuality or celibacy. In its insistence on the influence of cultural, familial, and religious factors on sexuality, the ex-gay mode of religious and sexual conversion unwittingly presents a challenge to a conservative Christian construction that a person can and must move from homosexuality to heterosexuality.

The ex-gay position complicates debates between those queer activists who, on the one hand, argue for a politics of civil rights for gays and lesbians based on biology, and those who, on the other, envision sexual practices, desires, identities, and affiliations as variable over a lifetime. Proponents of queer theory are wary of the strategy of predicating civil rights on anatomy or genetics because of the history of eugenics, the pseudoscience of improving the human race by selective breeding. They fear that this strategy could easily be used against marginalized people to justify sexual, racial, and gender inequalities as it was in the past. The well-documented history of medical interventions imposed on lesbians and gay men also makes them cautious of theories of a gay gene. The ex-gay movement shares the queer mistrust of biological explanations for a different reason: the immutability of sexuality would signify that conversion is irrelevant or impossible. However, the ex-gay position goes beyond this to argue that even if science were to prove that homosexuality was biological, Jesus can effect miracles, and it is ultimately with Jesus that ex-gays place their faith in change. Members of the ex-gay movement believe that heterosexuality is God's intent, regardless of behavior; queer theorists and activists posit that heterosexuality itself is neither natural nor stable. Further, the ex-gay movement is wedded to the idea of a binary system of gender roles in which heterosexuality connotes masculinity for men and femininity for women.

The liberal rights position, the foundation of organizations like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign, both of which vehemently oppose the ex-gay movement, is another important voice in the debate over sexuality and change. Politically, these organizations are invested in the idea that sexual identity is fixed, unchangeable, and possibly even biological. Many other gay activists and writers espouse the view that sexual orientation is innate, or that people are born that way.¹³ Studies such as those of Simon LeVay and Dean Hamer, which argue that a gay brain or gay genes exist, are revered as the basis for a minority identity and entrance into U.S. civil rights discourse.¹⁴ The Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force position considers a biological rationale for

homosexuality as strategically advantageous in the political realm, despite the problems associated with providing biological explanations for social inequalities. This position contends that if sexuality has the same immutable status as race, the law must grant gay men and lesbians the rights of full citizenship. Their stance is in opposition to the way ex-gay literature differentiates between being “gay” and being “homosexual,” describing the former as a misguided choice or false lifestyle in order to repudiate gay identity and any accompanying political rights. In the wake of the 2004 presidential elections, when eleven states passed anti-gay-marriage referenda, some conservative Christian organizations are using the idea that homosexuality is changeable to continue to dismantle gay and lesbian civil rights protections. In these public debates, the queer position is often absent.

Despite the ex-gay movement’s antipathy to biological approaches, it conceives of homosexuality in multiple ways: as religious sin, sexual addiction, gender deficit, and psychological disorder. On the one hand, the movement utilizes developmental models and the diagnosis of gender identity disorders to explain the origins of homosexuality. These theories argue that men and women become homosexuals because of a gender deficit in masculinity or femininity as children, an overbearing mother, an absent father, or familial dysfunction. They also argue that a person may develop attractions to someone of the same sex because of trauma. For instance, the same literature often describes lesbianism as a result of sexual or physical abuse. To help recover lost masculinity and femininity, or repair “gender deficits,” the leaders of the ex-gay movement organize workshops and teachings where women learn to apply makeup to be feminine and men learn to play sports to be masculine. These performances also point to the idea that masculinity and femininity are constructed in the social world, not ingrained in the body. Other ex-gay literature discusses homosexuality as an addiction, and some ex-gay ministries model themselves on twelve-step recovery groups. The developmental and addiction explanations provide alternatives to the model that homosexuality is sin. These overlapping accounts about how a person’s sexuality develops enable the movement to explain huge variations in the life stories and experiences of people who come to a ministry, oftentimes conflating morality, disease, and addiction.

The basis for the live-in program at New Hope stems directly from the developmental and addiction models of the ex-gay movement. At New Hope, men are urged to form same-sex friendships, which will rebuild their sense of masculinity and, by extension, their heterosexuality.