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PRAY AWAY

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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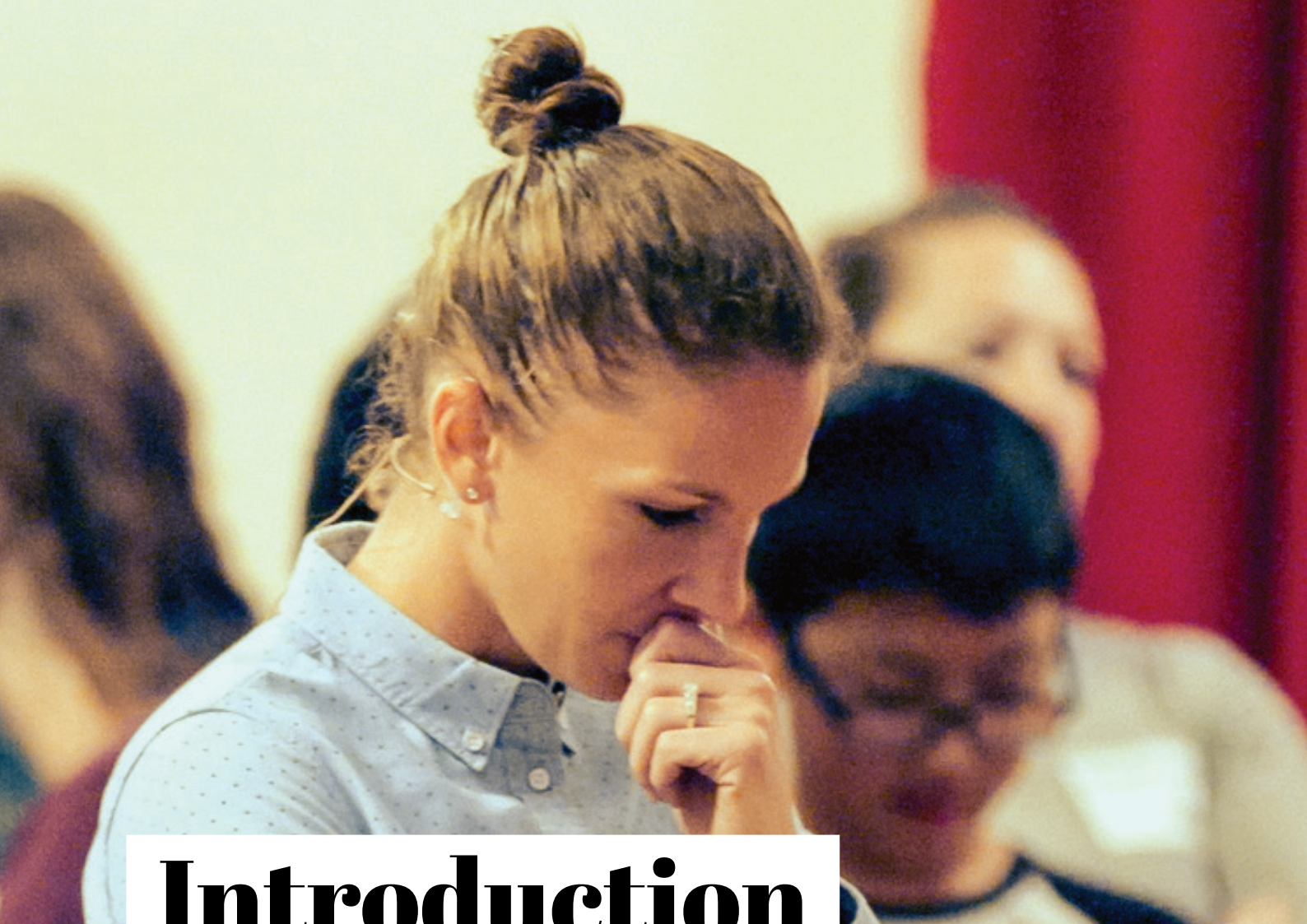
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This guide accompanies the feature documentary PRAY AWAY to support screenings, conversation, and engagement. It includes tips on facilitating a post-film dialogue, the historical background of the “ex-gay” movement, a discussion guide, and references to resources all of which are intended to support reflection on the role ending so-called “conversion therapy” plays in the larger context of LGBTQ rights and dignity.



Introduction



Reparative or “conversion” therapy is the attempt to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity by a religious leader, licensed counselor, or in peer support groups. **All major medical and mental health associations have denounced the practice as harmful.**

PRAY AWAY was created with the goal of supporting the acceptance, safety, and wellbeing of LGBTQ people. The film is a clear-sighted examination of the motivations that drive efforts to change sexual orientation or gender identity, deepening audience’s understanding of the harms of “conversion therapy.” PRAY AWAY also offers a forum for discussing these difficult topics and propelling community conversations toward action. For some communities this might look like engaging in advocacy or launching a public education campaign. For others it could be setting up a local support group or creating a network of LGBTQ services. However you see fit to use this guide, our hope is that it complements any work to help secure the full affirmation of LGBTQ people in your community.

Is Conversion Therapy Still Happening?

Nearly 700,000 people in the US alone have gone through a form of conversion therapy.¹ Research published in July 2020 demonstrated that LGBTQ youth who underwent conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times as likely to report multiple suicide attempts in the past year.² For this reason, alongside its correlation with high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and social withdrawal, the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, and virtually every other professional health organization have publicly opposed these practices.³

Despite these statements and the dissolution of one of the most prominent conversion therapy organizations, Exodus International, in 2013,⁴ the “ex-gay” movement continues. Sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts exist on nearly every continent and are endorsed inside countless churches and religious organizations.⁵ In communities where the practices have been repudiated or legally restricted, proponents reshape the way they present “treatment.” Many of these groups narrowly define conversion therapy by its most extreme forms, like electroshock therapy or other physical aversion techniques, and therefore falsely claim they are not engaging in conversion therapy because they don’t use these extreme techniques. In fact, many of today’s religious proponents of conversion therapy utilize a millennial-driven live-event and digital strategy and spread their message through the appropriation of the LGBTQ movement’s language of “love,” “freedom,” and “inclusion.” Yet despite this rebrand, these organizations continue to promote the same false belief that anything LGBTQ is a sign of brokenness, sinfulness, or an evil spirit and can thus be “left behind” or “prayed away.”⁶

Ending Conversion Therapy Once & for All

There is a robust state-by-state movement underway to pass legislation to protect LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy as practiced by licensed professional counselors. These bans are a critical component of ending conversion therapy. Yet, even as they are passed, the majority of conversion therapy will continue to happen within religious institutions, constitutionally shielded from this legislation.⁷ Consequently, these legal prohibitions must be accompanied by family, community, and national heart-and-mind change in order to truly end all forms of conversion therapy.

¹ [Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth](#). The Williams Institute: UCLA School of Law. 2018.

² [The Trevor Project's peer-reviewed article in the American Journal of Public Health \(AJPH\)](#). 2020.

³ [APA Reiterates Strong Opposition to Conversion Therapy](#). The American Psychiatric Association Newsroom. 2018.

⁴ [After 37 Years of Trying to Change People's Sexual Orientation, Group Is to Disband](#). New York Times. 2013.

⁵ [ILGA Curbing Deception: A World Survey on Legal Regulation of So-called "Conversion Therapies."](#) 2020.

⁶ [CHANGED Movement: #ONCEGAY Stories](#)

⁷ [One notable exception is Ferguson v. JONAH](#), where in a New Jersey Superior Court jury unanimously determined that conversion therapy offered by Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality (JONAH) constituted consumer fraud for selling services that they claimed could change a person from gay to straight.

Synopsis

“I lived transgender, but I left it all to follow Jesus.” So explains Jeffrey, who describes himself as an “ex-transgender” person and whose belief that change is possible reflects both the historic and continued core message of the conversion therapy movement today.

In the 1970s, five men struggling with being gay in their evangelical church started a bible study to help each other leave “the homosexual lifestyle.” They quickly received over 25,000 letters from people sharing their mission or asking for help and eventually formalized as Exodus International, the largest and most controversial conversion therapy organization in the world. But leaders struggled with a secret: their own “same-sex attractions” never went away. After years as Christian superstars in the religious right, many of these men and women have come out as LGBTQ, disavowing the very movement they helped start. Focusing on the dramatic journeys of former conversion therapy leaders, current members, and a survivor, PRAY AWAY chronicles the “ex-gay” movement’s rise to power, persistent influence, and the profound harm it continues to cause.

Director's Statement

Though PRAY AWAY is not a personal film, the topic is of personal significance to me. PRAY AWAY was inspired by my religious background and close ties to a conversion therapy survivor. My uncle, who was like a second father to me, went through conversion therapy after coming out as trans as a child. Depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicidal ideations followed until his recent unexpected death. His experience prompted my initial research on the subject. After I discovered a group of former leaders and their work to build the “pray the gay away” movement, I realized that my uncle’s experience was part of something larger and more strategic than I’d originally imagined. I finally understood the depth of his hope that change was right around the corner and that those leading this movement were often fellow LGBTQ people claiming to have changed themselves.

When I started my research, I assumed, like many, that my uncle’s experience was a thing of the past. What I found is that the “pray the gay away” movement is alive and well today.

Having filmed with active leaders in the movement, I know that many have good intentions. Many believe that they are helping people. They’ve been convinced by peers, counselors, pastors, family members, and a complicated belief system that “change is possible.” But I’ve also filmed and met with survivors who have everlasting scars from the trauma they endured. Many don’t make it out of the movement alive.

My ultimate goal is to tell the truth of the “pray the gay away” movement’s enduring harm. I hope that after the film’s release, a family member or struggling LGBTQ person of faith searching for information on conversion therapy finds PRAY AWAY, learns about our subjects’ compelling stories, and finds their way to affirmation and self-acceptance.

"

“When I started my research, I assumed, like many, that my uncle’s experience was a thing of the past. What I found is that the “pray the gay away” movement is alive and well today.”

Kristine Stolakis, Director

Screening Checklist



Create goals

Think about what you want screening PRAY AWAY to achieve. For example, if there is an organization or coalition in your state or city working to pass a conversion therapy ban, your screening could be used to collect signatures for a petition, or to generate interest in offering public comment during a city-council or state legislative vote. The resource list at the end of this guide can help connect you with local efforts. Alternatively, your goals could be geared toward educating your audience about the ways conversion therapy is still happening or as an event for survivors to create a space of reflection and healing. Your goals will help you determine needs such as having a third-party facilitator, mental health professionals, co-host partners, or the types of panelists you'd like to reflect on the film's themes.



Localize the film

Consider the ways in which PRAY AWAY is relevant to your community. For some settings it will be appropriate to point toward current advocacy efforts, for others it will make more sense to center the conversation around personal stories, empathy, and safety for LGBTQ youth. While PRAY AWAY does not prioritize any one form of direct service or action, you can use the film in support of many different aims to support LGBTQ people and the work towards ending conversion therapy in your area.



Event coordination

Identify a date, time, location, and an outreach plan for your screening. If you're planning a virtual gathering, please see the resource list for additional guidance. Your date can coincide with a holiday relating to topics of mental health awareness, suicide prevention, LGBTQ history or Pride, days of remembrance/resilience, etc. For in-person screenings, when there are extra bodies in a room it muffles sound, so make sure the sound system is accommodating. Depending on the time of day, consider the need to prevent reflections or moving light on the screen with curtains or other means. If possible, run a complete tech-check before the day of your screening to make sure all your AV elements are working.

If this is a public gathering, determine if there are particular organizations or publications you think would help promote the event. Feel free to use any of the materials on www.prayawayfilm.com to share your event.



Follow up

If your audience wants to continue the conversation, how can they do that? Consider sending thank you notes to those who were involved and if appropriate, provide people with information so that they can plug into campaigns to protect LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy.⁸ If there are currently local or state efforts⁹ underway, it could be helpful to share these with the audience immediately following the event as well.

⁸ [The Trevor Project](#) has launched [50 Bills, 50 States](#) and [Protecting with Pride](#). [Born Perfect: The Campaign to End Conversion Therapy](#) is a project of the National Center for Lesbian Rights. These campaigns are focused on passing laws to protect LGBTQ minors from the harm of sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts. Born Perfect also represents conversion therapy survivors in consumer fraud and other lawsuits against their former conversion therapists.

⁹ [The Movement Advancement Project](#) offers an up-to-date map of local and state conversion "therapy" laws around the U.S. as well as an in-depth analysis of the laws through their [LGBT Policy Spotlight Report: Conversion Therapy Bans](#).



Tips on Facilitating

Know your audience.

As much as you can, gauge who will be in the room. You may have participants who are survivors of conversion therapy or have lost someone they loved dearly as the consequence of "ex-gay" ministry. You could also have participants who consider themselves "formerly LGBTQ" or love someone who identifies as such. Preparing in advance for the various intense emotions and dialogue that could emerge will help mitigate some of the tensions that will naturally arise.

Agree upon norms for discussion.

This will vary depending on who is in the room. Some examples could include a confidentiality agreement, speaking one at a time, raising your hand, and encouraging participants to speak only for themselves and not generalizing or presuming to know how others feel. As a group, decide if there are terms that should be off limits and provide acceptable alternatives. Reinforce a climate of respect with the language that you use to pose questions. For example, instead of inviting judgment by asking, "What did you think about [insert person]," ask, "What did you learn from [insert person]?"

Clarify the difference between dialogue and debate.

When discussing complex political or religious ideologies it is helpful to create an environment where people can exchange ideas and learn from one another and try not to persuade others. For groups excited to use PRAY AWAY as a tool to activate, note that dialogue is often a stronger organizing tool than debate and helps generate collective solutions to a problem.

Don't make assumptions.

You likely do not know the sexuality, gender identity, religion, or any other relevant social location details of everyone in the room. Therefore, it is best to try and use language that is open and inclusive to ensure that everyone feels affirmed in the space. For example, it may be helpful to begin with personal introductions that include gender pronouns and what it feels or looks like to have one's personhood and perspectives respected when in a difficult conversation.

Be prepared to protect vulnerable participants.

Keep an eye out for participants who seem to be struggling or upset. Again, every person has a different proximity to the themes presented in the film which can result in mild to severe stress responses. Offer to speak with them privately, be sure to have a list of local mental health resources, and be prepared to point participants to professionals who can help navigate intense reactions from direct and indirect trauma.¹⁰ Remember it could be difficult or harmful to ask someone to share their story in front of a group, and it is always better to allow for voluntary participation instead of creating accidental pressure.

Be honest about what you do and do not know.

It is safe to assume there are a variety of knowledge and experience levels in the room. You do not have to be an expert to create a warm learning environment. Simply hosting the space and modeling comfort in not knowing all the answers goes a long way in facilitating constructive dialogue.

¹⁰ For young people in particular, it could be worthwhile to mention upfront the support resources available through [The Trevor Project](#) and available 24/7 every day of the year.

Glossary

Language shapes our perceptions of people and understanding a term can help others feel understood and respected. The following offers working language of frequently used (and misused) terms in the film. The vocabulary mentioned below will evolve, and there is no universal agreement about usage or meaning. Therefore, these definitions serve as a starting place for dialogue and do not represent final definitions.

Bisexual - a term referring to a person who acknowledges in themselves the potential to be attracted—romantically, emotionally and/or sexually—to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree. The “bi” in bisexual can refer to attraction to genders similar to and different from one’s own. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal sexual or romantic experience—or equal levels of attraction—with people across genders, nor any experience at all; attraction and self-identification determine orientation.

Cisgender - a term used for someone whose gender identity is exclusively what they were assigned at birth. (Cis- from Latin, meaning, “on this side of.” In contrast to trans, from the Latin meaning “beyond,” or “on the other side of.”)

Evangelical - a term that can refer to a person, church, or organization committed to the message that Jesus Christ is the savior of humanity, that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, and that Christians are obligated to share that message with the rest of the world. Evangelicalism is embraced across a variety of Christian denominations and doesn’t always mean “politically conservative Christians” despite this usage in popular culture.

Ex-gay/ex-trans - a term for a person or organization that believes that sexual and gender variance are morally wrong and describe themselves as having “left the LGBTQ lifestyle” (see definition below) to follow an anti-LGBTQ interpretation of Christian identity. Can be interchangeably used with “once gay/trans,” “formerly gay/trans.”

Exodus International - previously the world’s largest “ex-gay” Christian umbrella organization connecting groups that sought to “help people who wished to limit their homosexual desires.” Founded in 1976, Exodus originally asserted that through conversion therapy, complete change in one’s sexual orientation was possible.

Gay - an adjective used to describe people who are emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to people of the same gender. While *lesbian* is often a preferred term for women, many women use the term *gay* to describe themselves. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determine orientation.

Gender - a set of social, psychological, and/or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as man, woman, both, or neither. Gender is distinct from sex.

Gender expression - the manner in which a person publicly expresses or presents their gender in reference to masculinity and femininity. This can include appearance such as dress, hair, make-up, body language, and voice but can also pertain to gender roles as well. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation. An individual’s gender expression does not automatically imply one’s gender identity.

Gender identity - a person's deeply held core sense of being a woman, man, some of both, or neither. One's gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex. Awareness of gender identity can be experienced as early as 18 months old.

Internalized Oppression - the conscious or unconscious belief among oppressed groups that negative stereotypes about themselves and positive stereotypes about a dominant group are true. For example, when LGBTQ people believe they are (morally) inferior to cis-gender and heterosexual people.

Intersex - an adjective that describes someone who at birth has sexual anatomy that is between or goes beyond definitions for exclusively female or male sex. Medical experts estimate that approximately as many as 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 babies are born intersex.¹¹

Lesbian - a term that describes women who are emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

"The Lifestyle" - a term widely used in the 1990s to refer to LGBTQ people who embrace their sexual and gender identities. However, the term became recognized as offensive because it trivialized LGBTQ identity, implying that it is monolithic, and/or a trend someone chooses.

Mixed-Orientation Marriage - a term describing a marriage between partners of differing sexual orientations. Entering this type of marriage is often prescribed by proponents of conversion therapy. For example, when a marriage is between a heterosexual man and a woman who is primarily attracted to other women.

Prop 8 - a California ballot proposition fueled by conservative Christian legal interest groups, that passed in the November 2008 election to ban the state-wide marriage equality that had been granted six months previously.

¹¹ For more information see the [Intersex Society of North America's](#) section on "Frequency."



Queer - a term that was once used as a slur but has been reclaimed as positive by many people who experience gender and sexual diversity. It is currently used by many LGBTQ people to describe an identity that challenges exclusionary structures in society. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer.

Sex - refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that determine if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include both primary and secondary sex characteristics, including genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, and genes. Often also referred to as "*biological sex*," "*physical sex*," "*anatomical sex*," or specifically as "*sex assigned at birth*." Sex is often conflated or interchanged with gender, which is more social than biological, and involves personal identity factors as well.

Sexual Orientation - the enduring pattern in which a person experiences physical, emotional, and/or romantic attraction to none, one, or many genders. For example, gay, bisexual, asexual, queer, and straight are all sexual orientations.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE) - the broad set of practices intended to change, minimize, or suppress attraction to members of the same gender or the practices that attempt to eradicate the sense that there is any difference between one's sex assigned at birth and gender identity. SOGICE includes "conversion therapy," "reparative therapy," "reintegrative therapy," or religious interventions (i.e., intercessory prayer or exorcisms) that aim to "treat" or "deliver" people from "the LGBTQ lifestyle." These practices have been named harmful by every major medical and psychological organization.

Straight - a term that's interchangeably used with "heterosexual" to describe the experience of emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction solely (or primarily) to members of a different gender than one's own.

Transgender - a term used for someone whose gender is not (exclusively) the one they were assigned at birth. Note that indigenous and other communities of color have different words to describe gender variance. Sometimes these terms can be included in the transgender umbrella and sometimes they cannot. Transgender is an adjective. Using this term as a verb (i.e. transgendered) or as a noun (i.e., transgenders) is considered offensive and should be avoided.

Timeline

U.S. CONVERSION THERAPY AND "EX-GAY" MINISTRY

1800-1900

The terms 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' are coined and concerted research begins to be conducted on sexual diversity through the emergence of German and Austrian based modern psychology.

1920s

Sigmund Freud begins to publish work regarding homosexuality. Different than some of his contemporaries who begin experiments to try and change sexual attraction, Freud does not see homosexuality as an illness, but does believe that it is connected to arrested psychosexual development. Freud goes on to write that he doesn't think it possible for most gay people to change their sexual orientation and furthermore that "it is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality."¹²

1951

Homosexuality becomes officially labeled as a disorder in the DSM-I, the guide created by the American Psychiatric Association to establish common language for diagnosing individuals with mental disorders, despite "the explicit disagreement of the prominent psychologist, Sigmund Freud."

1969

The Stonewall Riots of New York City begin as a protest against the criminalization of LGBTQ people and police brutality. The uprising occurs in the context of a growing movement for gay liberation and LGBTQ leaders begin to speak directly against conversion therapy. Their activism focuses primarily on challenging DSM-I's designation of homosexuality as something that needs a "cure."

1973

Homosexuality is removed from the DSM as a psychological disorder, following years of research and organizing among LGBTQ psychologists to demonstrate that gay and lesbian relationships can be natural and healthy sexualities. In response to this change, a minority of therapists and many conservative Christian ministries such as Love in Action, the first nationally recognized "ex-gay" organization, emerge to take over the work of "helping" people to change their sexual orientation and gender identity.¹³

1976

Exodus International is born and eventually becomes the largest conversion therapy organization in the world.

¹² Historical Notes: A Letter from Freud in: The American Journal of Psychiatry (1951)

¹³ [A Timeline: Homophobia & Reparative Therapy](#) by Southern Poverty Law Center

1979

The Moral Majority, led by prominent evangelical leader, Jerry Falwell Sr., creates an integrated Republican “traditional family values” platform in order to politicize several social issues for the first time. The organization focuses on attacking abortion access, divorce, feminism, the Equal Rights Amendment, and LGBTQ dignity. Their message attempts to tie Christian identity with Republican affiliation.

1980s

The HIV AIDS epidemic begins. American churches around the country spread rhetoric popularized by celebrities like Anita Bryant and groups associated with the Moral Majority that describe the public health crisis as “God’s curse to punish homosexuals.” Public “ex-gay” ministries spread the damaging message to Christian parents of LGBTQ youth that they can “save” young people from this “certain end.”

1992

Psychologist Joseph Nicolosi founds The National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), an organization that continues to consider homosexuality as a mental illness, in opposition to the majority medical view. The trifecta of psychological, religious, and policy institutions is solidified and becomes the driving engine for sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts.

1997

The American Medical Association creates the “AMA Resolution on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation” to take a formal stand against conversion therapy.¹⁴ In return, religious right organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council begin employing “ex-gay” spokespeople. A \$600,000 ad campaign runs for several weeks in publications such as The Washington Post, USA Today, and the Los Angeles Times. These stories feature various “ex-gay” stories featuring the message that “change is possible.”

2008

In May, the California Supreme Court rules that same-sex couples have the right to marry but this right is taken away the following November. Propelled by Exodus International and Christian right organizations, “ex-gay” people are used as the face for the movement and the “Yes on 8” campaign targets churches to spread the message that marriage equality is wrong.¹⁵

¹⁴ Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on AMA Resolution on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation by The American Psychological Association.

¹⁵ Are Blacks and Latinos Responsible for the Passage of Proposition 8? Analyzing Voter Attitudes on California’s Proposal to Ban Same-Sex Marriage in 2008 by Marisa Abrajano. Political Research Quarterly. December 2010.

2012

Following continued reports from the American Psychiatric Association that conversion therapy poses a great risk, including increasing the likelihood or severity of depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior, California becomes the first state to ban licensed counselors from offering conversion therapy for minors.

2013

After years of internal dissent and an influx of stories detailing the harm survivors have experienced, Exodus International announces it will dissolve and issues a public apology for the damage it has caused. However, Exodus’ influence continues through its global partner, Exodus Global Alliance, which operates today, and many former participants in Exodus’ network either form new alliances or continue to operate independently.

2016

As a part of the Republican National Convention’s subcommittee on healthcare, education, and crime, the Family Research Council’s Tony Perkins creates an amendment in support of conversion therapy for children. This becomes an official addition to the national Republican Platform having already been successfully incorporated into the GOP state platform in Texas as early as 2014.¹⁶

2018

The Freedom March, a new ex-LGBTQ organization, hosts its first national event under the umbrella of the CHANGED Movement,¹⁷ a project supported by the multi-million dollar, internationally recognized, mega-ministry Bethel Church, based in Redding, California.¹⁸

2020

Momentum around local and national campaigns to ban licensed professionals from practicing conversion therapy with LGBTQ minors expands. As of December, NCLR’s Born Perfect campaign, PFLAG, The Trevor Project, and a number of coalitions have built bipartisan support to pass bans in twenty states, Washington DC, and dozens of municipalities. Nevertheless, “formerly LGBTQ” groups continue to spring up around the world. Their stories are shared on Christian broadcast television used for lobbying against the Equality Act on Capitol Hill, and cited in state courts against legislation attempting to protect youth from conversion therapy.¹⁹

¹⁶ GOP Platform Contemplates Anti-Porn Provision, Embrace of ‘Conversion Therapy’ by Zeke J Miller. Time Magazine. July 2016.

¹⁷ “What Is The Freedom March for ‘Ex Gay’ People in Washington D.C.?” by Harriet Sinclair. Newsweek. May 2018.

¹⁸ “Bethel Church’s recent LGBT controversy: What’s the Real Story?” by Hayden Royster. Christian Post. September 2019.

¹⁹ “Ex-gays Descend Upon D.C. to Lobby Against LGBTQ Rights” by Gwen Aviles. NBC News. October 2019.



Discussion Questions



Introductions

- What are some of the immediate thoughts and reactions you have to the stories presented in PRAY AWAY?
- Was there anything in the film you didn't already know or that you found surprising or challenging?
- Is there a person in the film you connected the most with? The least? Why?
- Was there a particular moment in the film that stuck with you? Why?



Understanding Motivation

- In the opening scenes of PRAY AWAY we see Jeffrey McCall sharing his story and offering prayer in front of a grocery store. He says, "I lived as a woman. I left everything to follow Jesus Christ." Why do you think Jeffrey chooses to share his conversion to Christianity in this way?
- In the glossary on page seven there is a definition for the term internalized oppression. It could be argued that this is what Michael Bussee, Randy Thomas, John Paulk, and Yvette Cantu-Schneider were experiencing when they describe entering into the "ex-gay" movement because it was "what they believed God wanted them to do." Have you ever experienced anything like this? What was it like?
- What similarities and what differences do you see between the beliefs of the former "ex-gay" leaders and the beliefs expressed of current leaders like Jeffery McCall within PRAY AWAY?
- When Julie Rodgers describes attending her first Exodus International conference as a teenager she says, "We just got to be our little queer selves, and it was in many ways like one of the few safe places in our lives." Did this comment surprise you? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt like you sacrificed a part of yourself for the sake of belonging? What did that look like for you and what do you think about that experience today?



Thinking about Power

- Is it surprising to you that the majority of people leading the conversion therapy movement identify as "formerly" LGBTQ but claim to have changed? Why or why not?
- Why do you think personal testimonies of sexual orientation or gender identity "change" are often centered within the movement?
- How did you personally relate to the stories of people who believe that they themselves have changed?



Thinking about Identity and Fluidity

- In PRAY AWAY, Yvette mentions that one of the reasons she was told she would make a good spokesperson for the Family Research Council was because she "didn't look gay." While sexual orientation and gender expression are different (see glossary) for many people, they are not completely unlinked. As you were growing up, were there rules (spoken or unspoken) for how you could or couldn't express your gender? If so, how did this impact you?
- Research on sexuality and gender has often suggested sexual attraction, gender expression, as well as overall sexual orientation and gender identity can be fluid or demonstrate natural flexibility over time. How might bisexuality and natural ebbs and flow of sexual and gender compare to conversion efforts? How would you describe the differences?





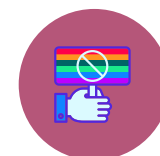
Narrative Shift & Taking Action

- Do you personally identify or know someone who identifies as an LGBTQ person of faith? Do you think increasing visibility of people who hold these identities, and their experiences could help end conversion therapy?
- What role do you think LGBTQ affirming organizations can play in supporting people who might be susceptible to conversion therapy? For example, LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ people with limited access to resources, LGBTQ role models, and affirming community?
- The last thing Michael Bussee says in the film is, “As long as homophobia exists in this world, some version of Exodus will emerge.” What do you think is at the root of homophobia and transphobia? Are there any practical steps you see that could address this?
- What other take-aways from this film are meaningful for you, your family, or your community?



Victim / Perpetrators

- Moral injury is defined as “the damage done to one’s conscience or moral compass when a person perpetuates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that go against one’s own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.” Do you think this is a helpful lens to think about PRAY AWAY’s protagonists? Why or why not?
- In the film we see Randy Thomas grapple with the possibility that he lives with “blood on his hands.” What do you think about this statement? Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been in a situation where a job or leadership role caused you to go against what you thought was right or wrong? If so, does it still have any effect on you?



Seeing the Harm of Conversion Therapy

- Was there a moment in the film where you particularly felt the pain of one of the protagonists? How did this impact you? What do you wish you could say to this person if you could?
- Self-harm is a common way in which pain or trauma manifests in people who have gone through conversion therapy. What was your reaction to Julie sharing this part of her story?
- Is there a way you’ve been impacted by the conversion therapy movement that caused you or a loved one pain you’d be willing to share?

Resources

National Partners

[NCLR: Born Perfect Campaign](#) is an initiative of the National Center for Lesbian Rights focused on passing laws across the country to protect LGBT children and young people from the harm of sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts. Born Perfect drafts, introduces and passes legislation, spreads awareness through public education, media, and advocacy, and empowers conversion therapy survivors and their families. If you'd like to get involved or share your story you can sign up [here](#).

[Trevor Project](#) provides 24/7 life-saving support via phone, text, and chat, as well as a safe space social networking site for LGBTQ youth, as well as creates and runs research, education, and advocacy programs. In the effort to protect LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy in every state of the nation and countries around the world, Trevor Project has launched [50 Bills, 50 States](#).

[PFLAG](#) is the first and largest organization for LGBTQ people, their parents and families, and allies. You can find PFLAG's webinars and their free training toolkit to assist people looking to take action in the effort to protect LGBTQ people from conversion therapy in all its forms [here](#).

[GLAAD](#) is a non-profit media organization that works through entertainment, news, and digital platforms to share stories from the LGBTQ community that accelerate acceptance and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change.

Relevant Data & Reports

[Curbing Deception: A World Survey on Legal Regulation of So-called "Conversion Therapies"](#) published by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (2020)

[National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) published by the Trevor Project (2020)

[Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth](#) published by The Williams Institute: UCLA School of Law (2019)

PRAY AWAY

Support Hotlines

[TrevorLifeline](#) - The only nationwide, 24/7 crisis and suicide prevention lifeline offering free and confidential counseling for LGBTQ youth, available at 1-866-488-7386 or text "START" to 678-678.

[Trans Lifeline](#) - A trans-led organization that connects trans people in the US and Canada to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive. Available 7am-1am PST at 1-877-565-8860.

[NCLR's Legal Helpline](#) - 1-800-528-6257. Available 9am-5pm PST Monday through Friday.

For more advocacy and support organizations please see PRAY AWAY's [resource page](#).

Changing Hearts & Minds

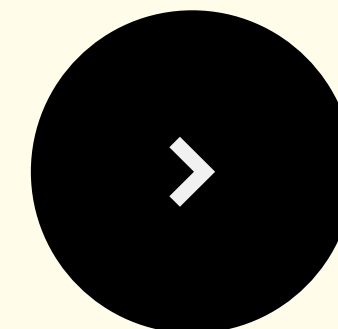
[Aspirational Communication](#): A Six-Step Strategy to Change Hearts and Minds -- For Good. Created by veterans of progressive change strategy and messaging, Hattaway Communications has put together a six-step checklist, an article published by the Stanford Social Innovation Review, as well as a podcast interview with Evan Wolfson, one of the architects behind Freedom to Marry, an organization that helped achieve federal marriage equality throughout the United States.

[Being In Relationship Guide](#): Created by religion researchers and faith leaders assembled by Auburn Seminary, BIR is intended to support conversations with theologically conservative Christians about the place of lesbian and gay people in families, churches, and society. While the research that informed this guide does not address the nuances of bisexuality or gender identity, the findings still present critical insights for constructive engagement with Christians unsure about affirming sexual and gender diversity.

APPENDIX A

Prioritizing Mental Health: A Viewer's Guide for Watching PRAY AWAY

For many audience members, watching PRAY AWAY can be an emotionally intense experience. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, you are not alone. Here are some tips and resources to prioritize your mental health before, during, and after viewing the film.



Tips for Watching:

Be aware of some of the difficult themes that are explored throughout the film including but not limited to homophobia, transphobia, religious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide ideation.

Consider watching the film with someone else who can support you throughout and after viewing the film. Talking with someone about an issue as it appears in the film can help to ease anxiety or discomfort.

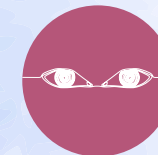
If there are scenes that feel too difficult to watch, **it's ok to skip them**, to hit pause when you need to, or to break up your viewing into different sessions.

For some people, watching this film may produce physiological reactions. These can include rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, dry mouth, sweating, tightened muscles, or jaw locking. If you experience any of these responses and need help relaxing your body, try some grounding techniques. Grounding techniques are movements that help you stay in the present moment and reestablish safety. You can find more information about grounding [here](#).

Here are some exercises to try:



Diaphragmatic breathing is a method to decrease or manage physiological reactions. Various resources like Breathe2Relax or MindShift CBT, (free through all mobile app stores) and YouTube videos like Dr. Andrew Weil's 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise offer helpful tutorials.



Observe your environment, either by counting the objects in the room or noticing sounds and colors around you. The goal is to bring yourself back into the room and out of your head. Other grounding approaches are holding a hot cup of tea close to your chest, holding an ice cube, or rubbing your legs for a few moments.



Drinking water will help with any of the dehydration your body might start to experience as a result of a rising heart rate, muscle strain, and shallow breathing. Dehydration can lead to nausea, fatigue, or headache and is best to treat immediately upon recognition.



Move your body by taking a walk outside or doing some stretches. This helps to get your blood flowing and helps you interrupt racing thoughts.



Listen to your favorite music or draw with colored pencils or markers. Creative expression helps to engage both sides of your brain and regulate yourself when you are feeling distressed.

If these grounding exercises do not seem to work for you, reach out to a friend and/or contact one of the resources listed below.

Additional Resources:

For LGBTQ-affirming professional counseling:

[The National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network](#) (NQTTN) is a healing justice organization committed to transforming mental health for queer and trans people of color (QTPOC). If you are a queer or trans identified person of color, NQTTN also provides financial support for therapeutic services.

[PRIDE Counseling](#) is a professional, affirming, affordable online counseling for the LGBTQ community. PRIDE helps LGBTQ people find counseling resources regardless of financial limitations or geographic location.

[The Christian Closet](#) is a fully LGBTQ team of counselors and coaches, providing 100% online mental and spiritual health services.

For LGBTQ people leaving conversion therapy or non-affirming religious communities:

[The Reformation Project](#) is a Bible-based, Christian organization that works to promote the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church. For people looking to reconcile their faith and sexuality or their faith and gender identity, TRP's website provides affirming educational materials that integrate the authority of the Bible, Christian tradition, reason, and the lived experiences of LGBTQ people.

[Conversion Therapy Survivors](#) is an online group of people who have experienced reparative therapy, 'ex-gay' ministries, sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), aversion therapy, and other methods to mitigate or change their sexual orientation or gender identity. CTS exists to affirm lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer identities as psychologically, spiritually, and relationally whole.

For online LGBTQ Faith community:

[Q Christian Fellowship](#) is a Christian ministry focused on serving LGBTQ+ and straight ally Christians. QCF seeks to cultivate radical belonging through a commitment to growth, community, and relational justice. In keeping with its mission, QCF has launched the UNCHANGED campaign as an affirmative counter to the damage wrought in the name of God through ex-gay theologies and conversion therapy. You can read the stories and join the community [here](#).

[Transmission Ministry Collective](#) is an online community dedicated to the spiritual care, faith formation, and leadership potential of transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender-expansive Christians. If you are looking for support or are in need of a virtual community you will be able to find that through TMC's text-based chat servers, video-based support groups, as well as their online Bible studies.

[Transgender Faith and Action Network](#) (TFAAN) is a multi-faith collective of trans people who recognize the value of being connected to one another and providing mutual support. TFAAN exists not only to change policies and raise awareness about issues that affect the trans community, but also to provide spaces for trans folks to network and heal through webinars, support groups, Zoom calls, and other virtual and in-person events.

While PRAY AWAY documents conversion therapy in the U.S. within Christian communities, they are far from the only religious groups who endorse sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts. For more LGBTQ affirming multifaith and interfaith resources, we recommend checking out [the LGBTQ Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources](#) website.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

CREATED BY
Myles Markham

DESIGNED BY
Eva Najjar

WITH SUPPORT FROM
Perspective Fund

THE FILM

DIRECTED BY
Kristine Stolakis

PRODUCED BY
Jessica Devaney
Anya Rous
Kristine Stolakis

www.prayawayfilm.com