

Haggard's cure claim greeted by skepticism: Experts on both sides of debate doubtful

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Claims by one of Ted Haggard's spiritual overseers that he is now "100 percent heterosexual" should be taken with a significant grain of salt, according to experts with differing opinions on the value of "ex-gay" or sexual-reorientation therapy.

In November Haggard stepped down as president of the National Association of Evangelicals—and was forced to resign as pastor of the Colorado Springs, Colorado, megachurch he founded 22 years before.

The moves came following allegations from a Denver male prostitute that Haggard had paid him for sex and crystal methamphetamine over a three-year period. Haggard initially denied the claims but later admitted "sexual immorality" to his congregation. He then went into a period of counseling with a board of overseers appointed by his congregation, New Life Church.

One of those overseers, Tim Ralph, said in a February 6 *Denver Post* interview that Haggard is now straight, after three weeks of counseling.

"He is completely heterosexual," Ralph said. "That is something he discovered. It was the acting-out situations where things took place. It wasn't a constant thing."

In an e-mail that the pastor circulated to members of New Life February 4, Haggard broke his three-month silence on the subject.

"We all wanted to know why I developed such incongruity in my life," he wrote. "Thankfully, with the tools we gained there, along with the powerful way God has been illuminating his Word and the Holy Spirit has been convicting me and healing me, we now have growing understanding, which is giving me some hope for the future."

But two experts on therapy designed to change the sexual orientation of gays—one supportive, one not—said Ralph’s claim about Haggard may strain credulity.

“To be honest, I’m not aware of the specifics of what Mr. Haggard went through. But in my own personal experience [quick recovery is] not the case—and in the experience of everyone I’ve talked to,” said Randy Thomas, vice president of the Florida-based group Exodus International.

Exodus’s Web site says that the organization believes that “reorientation of same-sex attraction is possible” through therapy “based upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” But Thomas, who says he formerly struggled with a gay orientation, said successfully reorienting one’s sexuality typically takes much longer than three weeks.

“Sexuality is very complex. So, for many people, depending on what issues they deal with . . . it could be months, it could be years,” he said. “So for someone to claim complete healing . . . I find that remarkable.”

Likewise, Utah psychologist Lee Beckstead said that one’s perception of one’s own sexuality may not square with one’s actual physical attractions.

“The problem with this whole phenomenon is, it’s a complex thing—the way people describe themselves and describe their sexuality, if you take it at face value, there’s lots of ways to be misled,” he said.

Beckstead, like the majority of mental health professionals, believes that much of “ex-gay” therapy is psychologically harmful for people with homosexual orientations. However, he has done extensive research into the effects of sexual-reorientation therapy on people who have strong religious motivations for avoiding homosexual contact.

People with religiously based antipathy toward homosexuality feel a “need to see themselves as heterosexual, and their communities need to see them as heterosexual,” he said. “And so that kind of pressure kind of distorts the facts and distorts the information they present to other people.” —*Associated Baptist Press*