

After teen suicides, gay opponents look inward

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

October 18, 2010

(RNS) When Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi killed himself after his roommate allegedly broadcast his sexual encounter with another man, the Rev. R. Albert Mohler wondered if anything could have prevented the 18-year-old's suicide.

"Tyler could just have well been one of our own children," said Mohler, a father of two and president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who criticized the Christian treatment of gays on his blog.

"Christians have got to stop talking about people struggling with sexual issues as a tribe apart."

In the wake of a spate of gay youths who were bullied -- and some who took their own lives -- Mohler and some other vocal opponents of homosexuality are taking new steps of introspection.

While defending traditional Christian teaching against homosexuality, they say divisive and condemnatory rhetoric needs to be replaced with actually getting to know a gay neighbor or classmate.

Some have gone even further. Exodus International, a leading "ex-gay" group, pulled its sponsorship of the annual "Day of Truth," which encourages students to express their disapproval of homosexuality.

Alan Chambers, president of Exodus, recalled the pain of being a middle schooler who was bullied because peers thought he was gay. The recent suicides led him to think his organization needed to lead the way in encouraging less "polar" ways of addressing sexuality.

"I think the church really needs to approach these issues in a much more conversational, relational, service sort of way," Chambers said. "Not to change our position about biblical truth -- because we haven't done that -- but to really understand that whether someone agrees with us on this issue or not doesn't mean that they're not our neighbor."

On Tuesday (Oct. 12), Mormon officials received 150,000 signatures on a petition that criticized a top church leader for condemning gay marriage and declaring that a homosexual orientation can and should be changed.

Noting Mormons' own history of persecution, church spokesman Michael Otterson said there is "common ground" between Mormons and gay rights supporters on the topic of standing against bullying and harassing young gays.

"Our parents, young adults, teens and children should therefore, of all people, be especially sensitive to the vulnerable in society and be willing to speak out against bullying or intimidation whenever it occurs, including unkindness toward those who are attracted to others of the same sex," he said.

The current issue of an Assemblies of God ministers' journal discusses pastoral counseling on homosexuality, and while the church maintains that homosexual behavior is "against God's word," leaders say hatred and bullying are entirely inappropriate.

"It's that balance between conviction and compassion and we are really trying to walk a line," said the Rev. James Bradford, general secretary of the Pentecostal denomination.

Gay rights groups, meanwhile, remain skeptical. Such sentiments are a positive "step in the right direction," said the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, but they do not go far enough.

"If we reach out in love, and yet our real message is that who you are as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person is not beloved in the sight of God, then that reaching out may in fact be under false pretenses and could in fact be even more dangerous," said Voelkel, a minister of the United Church of Christ.

In recent weeks, blogger John Shore has found many evangelicals grappling with these issues in their comments on his blog post that connected Christian opposition to homosexuality with gay teen suicide.

Shore, a progressive Episcopalian from San Diego, said he can't applaud evangelicals who say they are sympathetic to gays but also condemn their behavior as sinful.

"It doesn't matter during the course of the day how often I move to defend the gays if at the end of the day I am convinced that the way they are is an abomination to God," he said.

Pastor Mike Cospers of Louisville, Ky., said he agrees with Mohler that the church could be less judgmental about homosexuality, and believes evangelicals shouldn't get any more "fired up" about it than they would about greed or any other sin.

Yet he disagrees with advocates like Voelkel who wish conservative churches would change their viewpoint on sin.

"The reality is we have historic faith, we have a belief and we have plenty of anecdotal and testimonial evidence of people who've said I've walked away from this lifestyle," said Cospers, whose Sojourn Community Church has hosted conferences to help pastors "shepherd people through that journey."

Religious leaders aren't ready to lay the blame of the suicidal deaths of gay teens like Clementi on themselves. But Mohler said gay friends in his congregation have helped him realize he should not consider homosexuality "someone else's problem."

"Do I think the church is primarily to blame? No," said Mohler. "But does the church have a responsibility? You bet. ... I'm not suggesting there was some congregation that failed (Clementi). My concern is that we're failing many others."