

# Aversion Therapy – Other Places It Was Being Practiced

## Introduction

Prior to Western society's wide acceptance of homosexuality many institutions were grappling with how to address the issue including universities, medical settings, mental health practitioners, parents, churches, parachurches, denominations, and more. Nearly 700,000 adults in the US have received some form of aversion therapy, 350,000 of them did so as adolescents.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Williams Institute at UCLA Law School, “Conversion therapy has been practiced in the U.S. for over a century. Academic literature has documented instances of conversion therapy being used as early as the 1890s and continuing through the present day”<sup>2</sup> This practice – sometimes called “aversion therapy” (denoting a practice where a negative stimuli such as an electroshock is paired with a behavior), and sometimes called “conversion therapy” (which is primarily talk-based) is practiced by some clergy and spiritual leaders as part of their faith tradition.<sup>3</sup> While many states have passed laws banning this therapy these laws do not apply to unlicensed counselors who are working in their role as clergy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Williams Institute. (2019, June). Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth. UCLA School of Law. Retrieved February 2021, from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/conversion-therapy-and-lgbt-youth/>

<sup>2</sup> Judith M. Glassgold et al., Am. Psych. Assoc., Report of the Am. Psych. Assoc. Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation 22 (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Susan L. Morrow and A. Lee Beckstead, Conversion Therapies for Same-Sex Attracted Clients in Religious Conflict: Context, Predisposing Factors, Experiences, and Implications for Therapy, 32 Counseling Psychologist 641, 642 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code § 865.

In order to put BYU's position into context it is important to consider how other similar – and dissimilar – institutions were addressing the issue of homosexuality during the 1960's – 1980's.

### **Other Universities – Conservative Christian**

In the United States and Canada there are over 1,000 higher learning institutions that designate themselves as being dedicated to the education of Christian students<sup>5</sup>. And one-third of undergraduate institutions in America are religiously affiliated.<sup>6</sup> In this section we will look at the colleges and universities that most closely cater to conservative Christian students – or in other words, the group that is the closest Protestant analogue to BYU students.

What was happening at these schools in regard to aversion therapy? Examples:

#### **Wheaton College**

Wheaton College is sometimes called the “Harvard of Christian Universities.” Founded in 1860 and located in Wheaton, Illinois their famous alumni include individuals ranging from Evangelist Billy Graham, to famously martyred missionary Jim Elliott, to Todd Beamer famous for being a passenger on United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11. Wheaton has always been a very serious institution trying to educate very serious Christian students.

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<sup>5</sup> *Abhe history*. Association for Biblical Higher Education. (2021, September 3). Retrieved January 19, 2022, from <https://www.abhe.org/about-abhe/abhe-history/>

<sup>6</sup> The Religious Exemption Accountability Project (2021). The State of Sexual and Gender Minority Students at Tax-payer-Funded Christian Colleges [The Report | My Site \(thereap.org\)](https://thereap.org)

In 1963 Wheaton College (then called Wheaton Academy) hired a dorm mother by the name of Leanne Payne. Payne has a keen interest in what she calls “Healing Prayer.” While working at Wheaton she earned two masters degrees, one in English and one in theology. She then becomes a professor. And all along the way she is developing the idea that homosexual behavior can be changed through prayer. Her book, “The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness Through Healing Prayer” becomes the original manual for how to use prayer and other forms of traditional Christian spirituality to effect change in sexual orientation. And she first begins practicing this method with students at Wheaton while working as a professor.<sup>7</sup> She later develops her method for a wider audience through a ministry called Pastoral Care Ministries, however many of the attendees at her seminars were students at Wheaton as well as students from other similarly minded colleges.<sup>8</sup> Her methods are diverse and include teaching in a seminar style for a large group; small group meetings where members talk about the material and apply the principles to their own struggles with orientation; confession of sins to a group or individual as a means of accountability; individual appointments with prayer ministers who would use the laying on of hands, glossolalia (speaking in tongues); commanding of demonic spirits, the use of holy water, icons and crucifixes; and guided imagery to bring change to the individual’s sexuality.<sup>9</sup> But did it work?

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<sup>7</sup> Yarhouse MA. Group Therapies for Homosexuals Seeking Change. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 1998;26(3):247-259. doi:10.1177/009164719802600303

<sup>8</sup> Payne, L. (2015), Heaven’s Calling: A Memoir of One Soul’s Steep Ascent. Baker Books.

<sup>9</sup> Yarhouse, M. A. (1998). When clients seek treatment for same-sex attraction: Ethical issues in the “right to choose” debate. *Psychotherapy*, 35, 248–259.

In a 2009 study by Stanton L. Jones (Wheaton College) and Mark A. Yarhouse (Regent University) 23% of students who went through the methods proposed by Payne (and added to by her disciples) reported that their homosexual attractions decreased, and heterosexual attractions increased. Another 30% reported a reduction in homosexual desires along with an increase in commitment to chastity behavior.<sup>10</sup>

In total over 50% of participants in this program, during the 1970's and 1980's felt that it has a positive impact on their experience of their own unwanted sexual attractions. While history may look back on this era of aversion through what is now called "pray the gay away" with distaste, it seemed to be a positive influence for more than half of the participants.

## **Liberty University**

A similar story can be traced at Liberty University. Plaintiffs in the REAP lawsuit from Liberty University claim, "Liberty welcomes" LGBTQ students, only to shame and discriminate against them in public. That includes forced community service, fines or forced conversion therapy programs."<sup>11</sup>

In 1976 Liberty University hired Dean Emerick as a resident director. Emerick would stay employed at Liberty until December 2020 when he retired at the age of 75. Emerick is not

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, S., Wheaton, M., & Yarhouse, P. (2009). Sexual Orientation and Faith Tradition Symposium. APA Convention. <https://www.cedarville.edu/~media/Files/PDF/Student-Life-Programs/Critical-Concern/Ex-Gays/jones-and-yarhouse-2009.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Thegaymagneto. (2021, April 6). LGBTQ students file lawsuit against Liberty University. Queerty. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.queerty.com/lgbtq-students-file-lawsuit-liberty-university-20210406>

trained as a mental health professional, he has an undergraduate degree in Biblical Studies from Washington DC Bible College, a non-accredited and now defunct Bible school.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of his tenure at Liberty Emerick became the universities specialist in conversion therapy for LBGTQ students. Lucas Wilson was one of these students. He attended Liberty from 2008-2012 and had “one-on-one conversion therapy sessions” with Emerick.<sup>13</sup>

It is unclear if Liberty University is still practicing conversion with students today (2021) or not. It appears that Liberty has followed Wheaton’s example and outsourced this aspect of their counseling center to a private group called “Armor Bearers.” This group is believed to be run by Liberty staff, but the group has no official online presence so details about rather or not this practice is currently being carried out are unclear.<sup>14</sup>

## **Evangelical Influence in Other Conservative Christian Institutions**

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<sup>12</sup> Longtime campus counselor and mentor leaves Legacy of Love at liberty " liberty news. Liberty News. (2021, February 1). Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.liberty.edu/news/2021/01/13/longtime-campus-counselor-and-mentor-leaves-legacy-of-love-at-liberty/>

<sup>13</sup> Baska, M., Butcher, R., Yates, J., & Chudy, E. (2021, May 16). Former Liberty University student describes meetings with 'in-house conversion therapist'. PinkNews. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/05/16/liberty-university-conversion-therapy-lgbt-lawsuit-lucas-wilson-advocate/>

<sup>14</sup> Despite a culture 'entrenched in fear,' LGBTQ students find ways to thrive at Liberty University. Religion News Service. (2020, June 30). Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://religionnews.com/2020/06/29/despite-pushback-from-liberty-university-administrators-lgbtq-community-thrives-at-evangelical-school/>

In August 2019 a University of Colorado student named Alana Chen detailed to the Denver Post the conversion therapy she experienced through her Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> Chen confessed to her priest that she had same-sex attractions and she entered a church sponsored program for conversion therapy. The program called Living Waters is the ministry of Andrew Comiskey, Founder of Desert Stream Ministries and he is a disciple of Leanne Payne, of Wheaton College.

Chen speaks to the reporter about how the therapy did not seem to help her, she ended up in a psychiatric hospital due to extensive cutting and self-harm. 4 months after the article is published Chen is found dead by suicide and her family blames the stress of her conversion therapy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Other Institutions and Places**

It was not only conservative Christian Universities who were (and perhaps still are) using this practice, secular educational institutions were using them too.

#### **University of Alabama, Birmingham**

A man only identified as “Chris” shared with the BBC in December 2020 about his experience of electro-shock therapy at the University of Alabama, Birmingham in the 1970’s. The University has responded by saying, “The University of Birmingham spokesman said: "While we are unable

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<sup>15</sup> Hernandez, E. (2019, December 11). Colorado's new ban on conversion therapy wouldn't have protected these LGBTQ women. here's why. The Denver Post. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/08/18/colorado-conversion-therapy-pastoral-counseling/>

<sup>16</sup> Hernandez, E. (2020, January 13). Family blames religious conversion therapy for Alana Chen's death, looks to spark hope with New Foundation. The Denver Post. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/01/06/alana-chen-conversion-therapy-suicide/>

to find any evidence that this was a university sanctioned research project, we are aware that during the late 1960s and 1970s there may have been some isolated activity of this nature.”<sup>17</sup>

## **How It Has Been Practiced Around the World**

Conversion therapy happens in every country around the world.<sup>18</sup> In May 2020 the United Nations offered a detailed report of these practices in their member countries.<sup>19</sup> And sometimes conversion is, “attempted through beatings, rape, electrocution, forced medication, isolation and confinement, forced nudity, verbal offense and humiliation and other acts of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.”<sup>20</sup> In China, a randomized survey found that roughly 50 per cent of “conversion” agents were public hospitals.<sup>21</sup>

Who is primarily involved in conversion therapy around the world? “In a recent global survey, a total of 1,641 survivors of practices of “conversion therapy” identified main perpetrators. Medical and mental health providers were identified as the main perpetrators in 45.8 per cent of cases, religious authorities, traditional healers

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<sup>17</sup> Hunte, B. (2020, December 16). Gay 'conversion therapy': Man given electric shocks demands apology. BBC News. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-55263392>

<sup>18</sup> Conversion therapy report - OHCHR | home. (n.d.). Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/SexualOrientation/ConversionTherapyReport.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Report on conversion therapy. OHCHR. (n.d.). Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SexualOrientationGender/Pages/ReportOnConversiontherapy.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> UN expert calls for global ban on practices of so-called "Conversion therapy". OHCHR. (n.d.). Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26051&LangID=E>

<sup>21</sup> FanFan, “Five years later, who really needs to be ‘corrected’?”, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, public WeChat account, 2019. Available at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5CzIP3b59wZCNoirtc6kzA>

and groups in 18.9 per cent, conversion camps and rehabilitation centres in 8.5 per cent and parents in 6.9 per cent. State authorities – such as police, military and other entities – accounted for 4.4 per cent of cases, and school authorities in 4.4 per cent.<sup>3</sup><sup>22</sup>

Most countries consider conversion therapy to be an area where legislation is not needed. For example, “Malaysia has adopted several programmes and plans to curb behaviours perceived as immoral, including same-sex behavior, and specifically promotes practices of “conversion therapy.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> OutRight (2019)See [outrightinternational.org/reports/global-reach-so-called-conversion-therapy](http://outrightinternational.org/reports/global-reach-so-called-conversion-therapy).

<sup>23</sup> National strategic plan to end AIDS, 2016–2030, and the action plan to address social ills of LGBT behaviour. See also [www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/07/malaysia-health-ministry-propagates-harmful-anti-lgbt-myths](http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/07/malaysia-health-ministry-propagates-harmful-anti-lgbt-myths).

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