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The newspaper serving the GLBT Nashville & Knoxville community

NASHVILLE

Conference dismisses reparative therapy as 'pop science'

Metro councilwoman Tucker welcomes 'Love Won Out' attendees

by Jerry Jones
Publisher

A former Southern Baptist minister told some 200 attendees at a Vanderbilt University conference on reparative therapy that he had been gay his entire life and had made every effort to conform, including reparative therapy.

"I was convinced I could change," said Don Schlosser. "It was a constant struggle to hide my true nature. But I prayed; read the bible; fasted; made vows to God; joined Promise Keepers and went into counseling."

Schlosser had been married for 15 years at this point in his life, and had three children. His psychologists referred him to psychiatry, and they both diagnosed him with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and placed him on the prescription antidepressant Paxil.

"I didn't have OCD, and didn't need Paxil," he said. "I then came to two important conclusions. First, that I would never be free of my attraction to me. This was an unsettling realization, but I knew it to be true. Second, God knew of my struggle, and I came to realize that perhaps God made me this way and loved me as I am."

It was a redefining moment in Schlosser's life. He spent the following three years learning how to accept who he was.

"I was gay," he said. "Not broken, not damaged, not sick, not damned. For the first time in my life I could be honest and proud of who I was."

Schlosser's comments underlined what other religious and psychological professionals told conference attendees – that reparative therapy is damaging, doesn't work, and used by conservative right wing Christians to promote a political agenda.

Organizer Christopher Sanders began organizing the Vanderbilt conference in November after he heard the Focus on the Family conference was coming to Nashville. Sanders is director of development for Vanderbilt Divinity School.

"I'm very pleased with the turnout and discussion," Sanders said. "It's important to look at all sides of an issue and especially one that can be as emotionally damaging as reparative therapy. There was no one on the panel that supported it."

The Focus on the Family conference at Two Rivers Baptist church titled "Love Won Out," highlighted the success stories of reparative therapy and focused on the church's role in aiding a family member or friend coping with homosexuality.

That conference was opened by Nashville Metro Councilwoman at Large Carolyn Baldwin Tucker, who read a proclamation officially welcoming the conference, and its message of hope, to Nashville.

Tucker, who is Nashville's first black woman to win a county-wide election, recently said in an interview with The Tennessean that gay rights could not be equated with civil rights.

"They can't be compared, and I think anyone who does that is someone who just doesn't under-

stand," she said in the interview with Tennessean religious reporter Brian Lewis.

"Those persons have never been made to sit on the back of the bus; they've never been made to not be able to vote because of the virtue that they were black. They've never had the situation of second-class citizenship. ... Never before in the history of this nation were people imprisoned for teaching people to read or write."

Tucker has said that she believes that homosexuality is not genetic.

She led the fight against an equal rights ordinance proposed last year that would have prevented discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation for housing and employers. She is director of graduate education at Lipscomb University.

"Reparative therapy is unethical and has been labeled as such by every major medical and mental health association," Carlton Cornett, LCSW, said.

Panelist Mark Jordan, agreed, and said that groups that promoted reparative therapy were simply using "pop science masquerading as Christianity."

Jordan, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Religion at Emory University, said reparative therapy isn't based on scripture of the Bible.

"There's only one passage in the Christian Bible that considers origins of same sex desire," he said. "Homosexuality in the clutches of reparative therapy leads to nothing but despair."

The conference, "psychology,



Barb Neligan, Gene Floyd, Mark Lopez, Don Schlosser, and Wayne Besen, author of "Anything but Straight." This was one of three panels throughout the day. This panel was sponsored by the local HRC (Human Rights Campaign).

religion and homosexuality: critical responses to reparative therapy," was divided into three themes.

The first panel addressed the theory and practice of reparative therapy, and was sponsored by the Vanderbilt Center for the Study of Religion and Culture. It featured panelists Daniel Helminiak, Ph.D., a professor with the State University of West Georgia, and a former Roman Catholic priest for twenty-eight years. Helminiak has written a book for general readers, "What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality;" and Carlton Cornett. It was moderated by Volney Gay, a Vanderbilt professor and chair of Religious Studies, professor of Psychiatry and director of the Center for Religion and Culture.

The second panel sponsored by Vanderbilt's Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality, featured Jordan, and James Hudnut-Beumler, dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School. It was moderated by Amy-Jill Levine,

a professor with Vanderbilt Divinity School.

The final panel dealt with strategic activism and reparative therapy and was sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign. Moderated by Barb Neligan, it featured Gene Floyd (a mother from PFLAG); Mark Lopez (local activist and this year's HRC honoree); Schlosser; and Wayne Besen (author of the book, "Anything but Straight").

Besen, who spent three years researching reparative therapy and then wrote a book on the topic, said the "exgay" leaders of the reparative therapy movement were lying about how they had overcome homosexuality.

"They are like actors playing a role," he said. "They know it doesn't work. Many of them continue to have sex with men while promoting the values of groups like Focus on the Family." ■

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