



Evangelist's therapy fuels "gay debate"

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By Ed Stoddard

DALLAS (Reuters) - Reports that disgraced U.S. evangelical leader Ted Haggard, felled last year in a gay sex scandal, had gone "straight" after a few weeks of therapy may not have surprised conservative Christians who argue that sexual orientation is a choice.

But what did surprise some who also made the switch but took years to do so was the speed of the declared transformation.

In the eyes of many conservative U.S. Christians, homosexuality is a sinful lifestyle choice that can be reversed through prayer and counsel. Gay activists say they don't choose their sexual orientation and there is nothing sinful about it.

"The entire underpinning of America's anti-gay industry is that homosexuality is a choice and they can never move off of that position because if they do, everything crumbles around them," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**.

"Haggard's people have to say it is a slip because to say otherwise is to admit that God creates gay people," he said.

Haggard, former senior pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church in Colorado Springs, was a vocal opponent of gay marriage who resigned in November after a male prostitute went public with their sexual liaisons.

Haggard also resigned as president of the influential National Association of Evangelicals. He admitted to unspecified "sexual immorality" after his resignation.

After undergoing three weeks of therapy, Haggard emerged convinced that he was not gay, the Rev. Tim Ralph, one of the ex-preacher's spiritual overseers, was quoted as telling the Denver Post newspaper.

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

Several of the more liberal Christian churches in the United States have few or no issues with homosexuality. Others such as the Episcopalians are sharply divided on the topic.

But many conservative evangelical Protestants stridently oppose homosexuality and have come out in force to vote for state bans on same-sex marriage.

Since they see homosexuality as a sinful choice, gays have -- in their view -- the option of electing a different path.

LONG PATH

Religiously motivated men who say they have made the journey from gay to straight say it is a long one.

"I do know that a three-week journey is not something reflected in my own life ... It took me three years to change my personal orientation," said Randy Thomas, executive vice president of Exodus International, which seeks to turn gays onto the "straight path" through Biblical inspiration.

Other religiously motivated activists who have taken the same route agreed it took years.

"I would say that a transition would take five to eight years -- I came out of a gay lifestyle and it was a long process," said Frank Worthen of New Hope Ministries outside San Francisco, which also is devoted to turning gay men straight.

James Dobson, chairman of the influential conservative advocacy group Focus on the Family which has strong evangelical ties, said shortly after Haggard's resignation that it could take a long time to "restore" him.

"... this could take four or five years," he said on CNN's Larry King Live, explaining why he did not have time to be on Haggard's "restoration panel."

If the reports this week are true, Haggard "restored" himself in a fraction of that time.