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Mormon group still using discredited 'gay cure' therapy

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SALT LAKE CITY — The author of a controversial 2001 study claiming that gays can change their sexual orientation has now disavowed his conclusions, but a Utah organization for Mormons plans to continue using so-called reparative therapy in its efforts to help or “cure” those with same-sex attraction.

David Pruden, executive director of Salt Lake City-based Evergreen International, is sticking with the study’s initial conclusions — even though the author, Robert L. Spitzer, is backing away from them. Pruden told The Salt Lake Tribune the group has no plans to remove Spitzer’s initial research from its website.

Spitzer “defended his methods for 10 years. To suggest that his feeling ‘sorry’ somehow changes the data in any way is totally unscientific,” Pruden wrote in an email to The Tribune. “Science is not about the researcher’s feelings one way or the other. Good science asks a question, sets up a research process and then the data leads where the data leads.”

Evergreen, a nonprofit support group for Mormons who want to “overcome homosexual behavior,” is not officially affiliated with the

LDS Church, but a leader of the Utah-based faith addresses the group each year.

Spitzer wrote in a letter to a psychiatric journal that “I believe I owe the gay community an apology,” because of his study, according to a recent New York Times story.

He interviewed 200 gay men and women before and after therapy aimed at changing their sexual orientation. The majority said they had become “predominantly or exclusively heterosexual.”

Gay leaders questioned Spitzer’s results when they were reported a decade ago.

“The study had serious problems,” The Times reported. “It was based on what people remembered feeling years before — an often fuzzy record. It included some former gay advocates, who were politically active. And it did not test any particular therapy; only half of the participants engaged with a therapist at all, while the others worked with pastoral counselors or in independent Bible study.”

The most serious flaw, critics argued, was that the change was all self-reported.

Spitzer now agrees.

“I offered several (unconvincing) reasons why it was reasonable to assume that the subject’s reports of change were credible and not self-deception or outright lying,” the psychiatrist writes in a letter to Ken Zucker, editor of the Archives of Sexual Behavior, the journal in which Spitzer’s original study appeared. “But the simple fact is that there was no way to determine if the subjects’ accounts of change were valid.”

Pruden, however, argued Spitzer's initial work has since been validated.

Elan Karten and Jay C. Wade at Fordham University "did their own follow-up study to test Spitzer's results," Pruden said. "(His) results were generally confirmed."

Though loosely connected to Evergreen, the LDS Church takes no position on reparative therapy.

"This is an issue that those in psychiatry, in the psychology professions have debated," LDS emeritus general authority Elder Lance Wickman, then of the First Quorum of Seventy, said in a 2006 interview posted on the church's website. "Case studies I believe have shown that in some cases there has been progress made in helping someone to change that orientation; in other cases not. From the church's standpoint, from our standpoint of concern for people, that's not where we place our principal focus."

Rob Lauer, a gay man in southeastern Virginia who resigned his LDS membership, wishes Pruden and Evergreen would reverse course as Spitzer has. Reparative therapy, he believes, is damaging for gay Mormons.

"For decades, I thought of my mind as a ball of threads knotted together," said Lauer, who posted his correspondence with Pruden on Facebook. "I thought if I could just find the gay threads and pull them out, I'd be straight."

Lauer now believes that view was "slow, psychiatric and spiritual suicide," he said in a phone interview. "Trying to remake myself was an impossibility. God did not create me as gay; I'm just gay because that is my nature — eternal and uncreated."

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(Distributed by Scripps Howard News Service,
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