

## Longtime support group for gay Mormons shuts down

*LGBT • Evergreen International, which used to push reparative therapy, is now part of*



By Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune

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Days after hundreds of gay and lesbian couples swarmed county offices to get Utah marriage licenses, a group originally founded to help Mormons eliminate same-sex attraction closed its doors.

Before doing so, Evergreen International turned over some of its resources and mailing lists — said to number up to 30,000 participants, including many from Spanish-speaking countries — to a newer LDS-based gay support group, North Star.

Combining the two groups, organizers say, will create "the largest single faith-based ministry organization for Latter-day Saints who experience same-sex attraction or gender-identity incongruence and will also provide increased access to resources for church leaders, parents, family and friends."



The scale and scope of the challenges facing this community "can sometimes be overwhelming," North Star board chairman Jeff Bennion writes in a news release, "which is why I am thrilled that so many of the strong and experienced associates of Evergreen will be standing even more unitedly with us."

Evergreen President David Pruden, who could not be reached Thursday for comment, will not be joining North Star's leadership but will continue as executive director of the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality. Preston Dahlgren, Evergreen's chairman, will become a member of North Star's board.

As to the question of changing or diminishing sexual orientation, North Star takes no position, says the group's newly named president, Ty Mansfield.

"If someone had a positive experience with reparative therapy or change, we are OK with them sharing that," says Mansfield, a marriage and family therapist in Provo. "If they had a negative experience, they can share that, too."

Neither Evergreen nor North Star has any official connection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but both groups cater to Mormons and follow LDS doctrines.



"North Star affirms the right of individuals to self-determination," Bennion says in the release, "and supports all efforts consistent with the [LDS] gospel that help individuals live in harmony with their covenants and attain greater peace, fulfillment, and sense of individual worth, while affirming that the most essential and eternal growth and progress come through the power of the Savior and adherence to the teachings of his prophets."

The group tries to "stay away from ideologies," Mansfield says, "and focus on the narrative experience."

To that end, North Star has produced a series of online video testimonials from gay Mormons called "Voices of Hope" and found at [ldsvoicesofhope.org](http://ldsvoicesofhope.org).

Right now, the series has 40 testimonials, with 20 more ready to go, Mansfield says. "We are hoping eventually to include a thousand."

This approach "is more consistent with national positions by the American



Utah. The group is still trying to provide a support for Mormon gays to maintain their connections with their religion."

It's time, says Ferre, who has had many gay patients, to recognize that "diverse experiences and different voices require different responses. We need to respect individuals and their personal discovery of the response that would most benefit them."

Evergreen's end has been obvious for a while, says Kendall Wilcox, a Mormon filmmaker working on a documentary about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Latter-day Saints.

For years, a Mormon general authority typically spoke at the group's annual conference, but that practice eventually stopped.

In May 2012, the author of a controversial 2001 study — which claimed that gays can change — disavowed his conclusions. But Pruden told The Salt Lake Tribune he saw no reason to discontinue using so-called reparative therapy.

In June, Exodus International, a group similar to Evergreen but for a larger Christian audience, shut its doors. At about the same time, Pruden approached North Star with the idea of merging the two groups.

"There was some unnecessary competition between us," Bennion told The Tribune. "We were starting to step on each other's toes."

Evergreen began in 1989 as a therapeutic solution for Mormons with unwanted same-sex attraction, while North Star took a more person-to-person tack.

The newly constituted North Star will now provide its own annual conferences — the first one is scheduled for May in Provo — but its focus will be on wide participation.

Wilcox — who is on the board of Mormons Building Bridges, a grass-roots group seeking to enhance good will between the LGBT and LDS communities — fears a subtle evolution in North Star's perspective as well.

Mansfield co-wrote a 2004 book, "In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-Gender Attraction." He described himself as permanently, inescapably gay and accepted the requirement of celibacy to remain a faithful Mormon. He has subsequently married a woman and had two children.

With Mansfield at the helm — and Bennion, who is also married to a woman — there seems to be subtle pressure, Wilcox says, to follow their lead.

Both North Star leaders hope that isn't the case. They believe that marriage to someone of the opposite sex should not be seen as a way to "cure" gayness, Manfield says, "but it should be considered as an option."

Whether gay Mormons stay single or marry, he says, "we want to help them to be as healthy as possible."

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'Voices of Hope' videos

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