

Overview of Evergreen and Chairman's Message

by the Chairman of the Board of Trustees

Delivered Friday, September 17, 2010, at the 20th Annual Evergreen Conference

Conference Theme

This year's theme is from D&C 6:36: "Look unto me in all things; doubt not, fear not."

In the sessions and workshops throughout this conference, look for things that will help you to look to Christ without doubt and without fear. We will be fortunate to hear keynote addresses from four amazing individuals: Bishop Keith B. McMullin Saturday morning, John Paulk this afternoon, Joseph Fielding McConkie Saturday afternoon, and Vickey Taylor in our fireside Saturday evening. Check your program for information about these keynote addresses, as well as all the other workshops and events.

Evergreen Mission Statement

"Evergreen is founded on the belief that the atonement of Jesus Christ enables every soul the opportunity to turn away from all sins or conditions that obstruct their temporal and eternal happiness and potential.

"Evergreen attests that individuals can overcome homosexual behavior and can diminish same-sex attraction, and is committed to assisting individuals who wish to do so.

"Evergreen provides education, guidance, and support to those involved in the transition from homosexuality, and is available as a resource to family, friends, professional counselors, religious leaders, and all others involved in assisting individuals who desire to change.

"Evergreen sustains the doctrines and standards of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints without reservation or exception, but is not affiliated with the Church. Evergreen welcomes all people who wish to participate in the pursuit of these goals."

Evergreen Organization

Evergreen was founded 21 years ago this summer by 11 LDS men who experienced same-sex attraction and came together to form a support group. They knew that homosexual behavior was not in keeping with the gospel of Christ. But try as they might, the feelings would not go away. They were faced with the choice that everyone who experiences same-sex attraction faces: (1) pretend you aren't attracted to your own gender and try to ignore these strong feelings or (2) set aside your spiritual beliefs and

accept a gay identity and engage in homosexual behavior. They knew there had to be answers and ways to address their situation in keeping with gospel standards.

Evergreen has evolved over the years and today is governed by a Board of Trustees which has fiduciary and oversight responsibility to ensure that the organization's goals and objectives are carried out according to the Mission Statement. These Trustees serve without compensation.

Organizational Review

This year, the Board of Trustees conducted a major review of the organization's priorities and, as a result, made some rather significant changes to refine its focus over the next five years.

The task force considered five fundamental questions:

1. Who do we serve and what should we do for them?

A major purpose of this organizational review was to consider all our potential audiences (such as individuals, families, members, leaders, therapists, and the public), and sort through the possible things we could do for them. Given limited resources, we can't do everything for everyone, so we have to focus on the right audiences, and determine what we are uniquely qualified to do, compared with the services that the Church and other organizations provide.

2. What are our fundamental messages to our audiences?

We took a look at, and refined the key messages we had defined the previous year.

3. What services do we provide?

We conducted an analysis, looking at our strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to identify the special experience and knowledge that is unique to Evergreen.

4. How do we know we are doing a good job?

The board identified the key success factors and key success metrics.

5. How should we organize to complete the processes and provide the services?

To streamline the decision-making process and to put more of Evergreen's volunteers in positions where they can truly make a difference, the board voted to reduce the

number of Trustees from 12 to 6 and to establish three standing committees, where the majority of work will be done.

The three standing committees are the following:

The *Patron Resources Committee* that will oversee the services we provide to individuals, families, members, and the public at large. They will determine how well we are meeting the needs of our constituents in terms of our referral process, our bookstore, the website, our newsletters, and conferences.

The *Church Resources Committee* that will build and maintain relationships with the Church, LDS Family Services, Church schools, therapists, and other like-minded organizations.

The *Capital Resources Committee* that will oversee efforts in fundraising and building an endowment fund.

Ad hoc committees will be formed from time-to-time as needed to develop resources and training materials.

Hopefully, you have met our Executive Director, David Pruden. We have renamed his role President of Evergreen to strengthen the role as the public face of the organization. In the future, the President will deliver the organizational message and conduct other public meetings rather than the Chairman of the Board.

Evergreen's Priorities

Evergreen will continue to focus on three main priorities: (1) being a referral service, (2) developing resources, and (3) providing education.

1. Referral service

We maintain the world's largest database of therapists and other trained resources to which we can refer people who need help with same-sex attraction. We also nurture relationships with other faith-based organizations with goals similar to ours.

We answer over 300 phone calls every month and perhaps twice that number of e-mails. Perhaps the most important thing we do is just to be there when an individual, or a bishop, or a parent, or an individual calls for help. They don't know where to turn and we point them to resources and give them hope.

2. Developing Resources

Perhaps our most extensive resource is our website with about 600 pages of information in English, a few hundred pages in Spanish, and limited information in 31 other

languages. It's been around for nearly 11 years, and has been visited a million and a half times. Visitors to the site have read four million pages.

We maintain a reference library at the headquarters office, provide information packets, and have published a workbook for men, and this year published a workbook for women.

We provide two online support resources today for individuals working on same-sex attraction who live in remote areas. One is in English and the other is in Spanish. In addition, we plan to launch another online support network for friends and family.

Evergreen has twenty years of experience with support groups for individuals working on same-sex attraction. At times, we have had as many as 40 different groups functioning around the world. Over the years, as we have gained more experience, we have adjusted the model from time to time. For most of this year, we have considered how to structure an experience that can best promote growth and accountability. We have consulted with experts and with men and women in support groups, and have developed a model we feel will provide the benefits of interaction and support in a safe environment, but at the same time promote real growth and progression, and also provide something that individuals can use in areas where they don't have others who live close by to interact with.

This revolutionary new program will completely change the way you look at the growth process and ultimately eliminate the need for old-style support groups. We are developing a Growth and Accountability Course that can be worked on individually or in a group setting when several individuals are located close to each other. This will be a structured approach to helping individuals grow and progress.

Immediately after this session, David Pruden's address titled "A New Perspective on Growth" will discuss the philosophy behind the concept and cover many more details about how it will work. After that, one of the workshops for men will further discuss the Growth and Accountability Course. We invite your participation in these sessions and welcome your input and experience as we develop this course.

3. Providing Education

Today, you're at this year's annual conference. 400-500 people attend these conferences each year from many states and from several other countries. The 20 conferences we have held have been attended by more than 7,000

people and have included major addresses by 15 general authorities, numerous world-renowned speakers, and hundreds of workshops.

Even though about half of you here today come from other states and countries, as you can imagine, there are many more who need to hear these messages of faith and hope, and get practical advice about how to respond to same-sex attraction in positive ways.

To this end, we are happy to announce that next year, the format of the conference will change. We plan to hold two separate conferences at different times of the year:

The Education and Resource Conference will be a one-day public conference to provide information and training to the general public, parents, and church leaders. In addition to the traditional address by a General Authority, there will be various speakers, as well as presentations or booths available for local therapists, local programs, and others who offer resources related to same-sex attraction. We think this kind of public profile conference can attract a lot of attention and reach more of the general public and more church leaders.

The second conference will be a Growth and Accountability Conference specifically for individuals who are working on same-sex attraction. It will include workshops to teach the concepts and practical skills needed to grow and progress. It will be structured around the key concepts found in the Growth and Accountability Course I mentioned a moment ago.

We believe that these two separate conferences will serve the needs of our constituents better. The public conference can be heavily promoted and attract many parents and church leaders, while the separate workshops for individuals working on same-sex attraction can be more confidential and provide very specific, structured help.

In addition to the two conferences, we are making plans to create videos, webinars, and other training materials that can be used anywhere around the world.

We are excited about these efforts to step up the pace in providing education about same-sex attraction. In all these efforts, we try to maintain a delicate balance of staying fairly low-profile, staying out of political issues, and focusing on helping individuals. We are grateful to God for the progress we've made and the lives that have been changed. At the same time, we also feel dwarfed in our meager efforts compared to the well-funded and highly organized public relations machine of the gay rights movement. Over 30 years ago, the gay movement came out of the proverbial

closet and began demanding public acceptance. Today, they are gaining the upper hand in cultural acceptance and political momentum. They have swayed popular opinion to almost believe that people are born gay and will always be gay and that homosexuality is simply a normal variation equal in value to heterosexuality. Unfortunately, even many faithful members of the Church have bought into this philosophy and become confused about how to respond to loved ones who experience same-sex attraction.

How grateful I am that Evergreen stands as another voice testifying of eternal truths of gender and the ability of individuals to direct the course of their lives. Evergreen participants who experience same-sex attraction define themselves as sons and daughters of a loving God, knowing they were born on this earth for a purpose and with a divine destiny. Evergreen proudly proclaims its support of the doctrines and standards of the Church without exception or reservation. As an organization, we commit to follow the direction of the Prophet without exception.

That's the summary of our three areas of focus.

Branding Initiatives

Over the next year, you'll also notice a change in Evergreen's logo to better emphasize who we are and what we do. Although Evergreen International, Inc. will continue to be official name of the organization, our logo will be the word "Evergreen" with the tag line "LDS Resources for Same-sex Attraction." This emphasis on "LDS" and "resources" more clearly identifies the logo with our mission. We have also developed a logo and brand for our efforts with women as "New Leaf: Women of Evergreen."

How We Encourage Others to Help

Many people ask us how they can help. Let me quickly mention three ways.

First, we invite everyone to be part of the educational process by learning as much as you can, then sharing that knowledge with others. The mass media is not the answer. Understanding happens one-on-one and in small group conversations, as we help people understand the genesis and the solutions to same-sex attraction. Prophets have taught that since individuals have no control over the emergence of homosexual feelings, there is no sin in experiencing such feelings. However, we can make conscious choices—and we are accountable—not to harbor inappropriate feelings and to choose correct actions in response to the feelings. We can help people understand the incredible inner struggle of a person who experiences same-sex attraction—as well as their families—and learn to succor

people in their struggles—and encourage them in making gospel-centered choices.

When people make offensive comments because they don't understand the issues, teach them so we can collectively be more loving, compassionate, and nurturing of each other. When people spread incorrect information, stand up for what you know is right and correct them.

After attending an Evergreen conference, one sister shared the information she learned with her Relief Society. She expressed her love for her son, even though he was making destructive choices in his life. She asked for the support and prayers of the ward. She also talked about the many people she met at the conference who are turning their lives around and staying true to gospel standards.

Take a book back home and share it with a neighbor. Get a copy of the introductory CD from the bookstore and give it to your bishop and stake president along with an Evergreen brochure so they'll have information to help those who approach them seeking help with same-sex attraction.

The second way we can all help is in knowing that faith and prayers have an amazing effect on how this work moves forward. We believe that God wants this work to move forward and that He will bless us individually and collectively as we are ready to make things happen.

Third, like any non-profit organization, we have to beg for money. Every hour we spend in fundraising could be better spent helping connect people with services that can help.

In Evergreen's case, that poses a unique dilemma. Evergreen's model to support Church members, leaders, and families—and to maintain a close relationship with the Church—is purposely low-key. We stay low-profile out of respect for the people we serve. Fundraising would be easier if we carried a higher profile and involved ourselves in news-producing activities. But we don't, and that's why we rely on good folks from the community who believe in our cause to sustain us financially.

You can make one-time donations, set up monthly contributions by direct deposit, or indicate "Evergreen International" on your United Way donation form with your employer. Your employer may even match your contributions or make a contribution themselves. You can donate appreciated stock and avoid paying capital gains tax. You can even leave assets to the organization in your will.

We are building an endowment fund, with the idea that in the future, its proceeds can provide the majority of our

needed funding.

Definition of Same-Sex Attraction

For the next few minutes, let me review a few issues about same-sex attraction and clearly state Evergreen's position.

Same-sex attraction includes sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors directed toward the same gender. These attractions should not be confused with a healthy emotional and social interest in persons of the same gender. *Homoemotional* and *homosocial* interests are healthy as long as they are not excessive and do not develop a sexual dimension. It is when same-sex interests are eroticized and become sexual that they are unhealthy.

Homosexuality may include sexual feelings or attractions without sexual behavior or it may include complete emotional and sexual involvement. It cannot be identified simply by the presence or absence of outward sexual behavior.

Individuals usually have no control over the emergence of homosexual attractions. Since they make no conscious choice for them, they should not feel guilty for having them. However, we can choose how we respond to any feelings we experience and should not deliberately feed the feelings by fantasizing or turning them into lustful thoughts. We are responsible for our agency in the thoughts we entertain and in the behaviors we pursue.

In 1991, the First Presidency issued a letter to all members of the Church with a subject line "Standards of Morality and Fidelity." In it, they make clear the Lord's standards:

"The Lord's law of moral conduct is abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage. Sexual relations are proper only between husband and wife appropriately expressed within the bonds of marriage. Any other sexual contact, including fornication, adultery, and homosexual and lesbian behavior, is sinful."

The letter continues: "There is a distinction between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in either immoral heterosexual or any homosexual behavior. However, such thoughts and feelings, regardless of their causes, can and should be overcome and sinful behavior should be eliminated. This can be achieved through faith in God, sincere repentance, and persistent effort. The help of others may be needed. We commend and encourage those who are overcoming inappropriate thoughts and feelings. We plead with those involved in such behavior to forsake it. We

love them and pray for them. We are confident that through repentance and obtaining needed help, they can experience the peace that comes from conforming their lives to God's teachings."

Reserving sexual activity for use within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman is central to the Creator's eternal plan of salvation and is necessary for mortal and eternal progression.

Homosexual behavior violates God's commandments and blocks eternal progress. However, it is also important to overcome sexual attractions toward the same gender because they distort healthy, loving relationships and steer individuals away from the blessings that can be found in marriage and family relationships. Such attractions divert capable priesthood holders from the roles of husband and father. They divert loving women from the roles of wife and mother.

Complex Issue: Complex Solutions

Same-sex attraction is a complex issue and many factors may contribute to the development of homosexual attractions. Humans are complex beings and our feelings and behaviors are the result of many complex interactions. People are not genetically predestined to have same-sex attractions. Same-sex attractions usually result from a complex interaction of personality, biological inheritance, and developmental experiences.

Just like the entry into same-sex attraction is multifaceted, we have found that the answer is also multifaceted. Individuals can be more successful when they use all the relationships and resources available to them, such as family, friends, counselors, Church leaders, faith, prayer, group and individual therapy, individual study, and support groups. They may also need to grow in other areas like coming to understand their divine self, confirming their masculine or feminine identity, healing the effects of abuse, healing old wounds, forgiving, reconciling their relationships with parents and peers, learning to control their behavior or overcome addictions, and most importantly, surrendering to God and the healing power of the Atonement.

It is also important to recognize that this progression out of a state of same-sex attraction may take many years. In issues of personal growth and development, how long it takes to reach a goal is not as important as the choice of direction.

Acceptance of Individuals Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction

We encourage members of the Church everywhere to reach out and be loving and kind to individuals and families who face these difficult challenges. Those who experience same-sex attraction need to feel the love and support of family, friends, and fellow ward members.

After speaking in a general conference on the subject of same-sex attraction, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "I desire now to say with emphasis that our concern for the bitter fruit of sin is coupled with Christlike sympathy for its victims, innocent or culpable. We advocate the example of the Lord, who condemned the sin, yet loved the sinner. We should reach out with kindness and comfort to the afflicted, ministering to their needs and assisting them with their problems." ("Reverence and Morality," Gordon B. Hinckley, *Ensign*, May 1987, p. 47.)

One of the reasons that people don't always respond with love and compassion is that same-sex attraction is foreign to many people. Unless they know a relative or friend who is affected by same-sex attraction, the only experience they have to draw on is perhaps a news report they saw about a gay pride parade where they saw lewd costumes and flaunted sexuality. From this, they draw conclusions based on the extremes of the gay population. They usually don't think of the man or woman sitting next to them at church. And this is a catch-22 because if we are unwilling to share our struggles with others at church, we don't give them a chance to change their stereotypes.

While same-sex attraction is a considerable trial to those who experience it, the discomfort and pain is not dissimilar to that experienced by others with different kinds of trials. The more we can help our fellow brothers and sisters to recognize this, the less strange and appalling same-sex attraction will be to them, and the more willing they will be to reach out with compassion and love.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks said that "each member of Christ's church has a clear-cut doctrinal responsibility to show forth love and to extend help and understanding. Sinners, as well as those who are struggling to resist inappropriate feelings, are not people to be cast out but people to be loved and helped (see 3 Ne. 18:22-23, 30, 32)." Elder Oaks continued, "Church leaders are sometimes asked whether there is any place in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for persons with homosexual or lesbian susceptibilities or feelings. Of course there is... the message of hope and the hand of fellowship offered by the Church is the same for all who strive." Elder Oaks further explained that people who experience same-sex attraction "are in special need of the love and encouragement that is a clear responsibility of

Church members, who have signified by covenant their willingness 'to bear one another's burdens' (Mosiah 18:8) 'and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2)." ("Same-Gender Attraction," Dallin H. Oaks, *Ensign*, Oct. 1995, p. 14.)

Gay Identity

The popular notion of a *gay identity* is a political and social construct that says that people are born gay and will always be gay and that homosexuality is simply a normal variation of sexuality equal in value to heterosexuality. Evergreen participants typically don't accept such an identity. They believe that they have other options in life.

Some people consider same-sex attraction to be the defining fact of their existence. Most Evergreen participants choose to define themselves as sons and daughters of a loving God, knowing they were born on this earth for a purpose and with a divine destiny. Whenever any other notion "gets in the way of that ultimate defining fact, then it is destructive and it leads us down the wrong path" (Dallin H. Oaks, [Same-Gender Attraction](#)).

People are Making Changes in Their Lives

Those who promote pro-gay philosophies would like you to believe that no one has really overcome same-sex attraction. I know hundreds of Latter-day Saints who have in varying degrees found success and liberation from same-sex attraction.

We testify that people do overcome homosexual behavior and diminish same-sex attractions. We've seen it happen time and time again. For some, it means that they figure out why they have the attractions, what they are lacking, and they find ways to legitimately fill those needs. The attractions diminish to the point that they don't get in the way of moving on with their lives, going on missions, marrying, and raising families. They are fully capable of living the Lord's law of chastity and remaining faithful. That is the experience of many people I know personally.

For others, it may be something less than that ideal. We do not believe that everyone will make a total change to exclusive heterosexual feelings and attractions. However, most people who put forth a significant effort will be able to stop addictive or destructive behaviors. Most people will gain more self-esteem, learn to see themselves as God sees them, learn to love themselves, and recognize that God loves them. They are able to diminish same-sex attractions enough that they are manageable. They develop patterns of behavior and self-perception that are consistent with their personal beliefs and values.

Let me conclude with a quote from Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin: "We see ourselves in terms of yesterday and today. Our Heavenly Father sees us in terms of forever. Although we might settle for less, Heavenly Father won't, for He sees us as the glorious beings we are capable of becoming. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of transformation. It takes us as men and women of the earth and refines us into men and women for the eternities." (Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Great Commandment," *Liahona*, Nov 2007, 28-31)

I testify that God loves us and will help us become "men and women for the eternities." In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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