

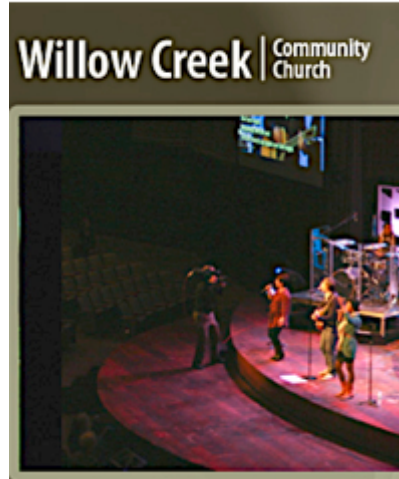


Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 25, 2011

## Willow Creek Mega-Church Cuts Ties With Exodus Outreach to “Gays”

Willow Creek Community Church, a Chicago-area mega-church that gained fame 20 years ago for its “seeker-sensitive” approach to evangelizing non-Christians, has announced that it will no longer partner with Exodus International, a national ministry that reaches out to individuals wishing to leave the homosexual lifestyle.

Willow Creek officials said the move has more to do with the church’s overall ministry approach than to a change in its view on homosexuality, which has been traditionally viewed by Christians as sinful. Susan DeLay, a spokeswoman for Willow Creek, told [Christianity Today](#) that the congregation has an open-door policy toward individuals struggling with same-sex attraction. “Willow Creek has a whole host of ministries for people dealing with these issues, and we would never intend for them to feel sidelined,” DeLay said. “All we’ve changed is how we’ve gone about inviting them into the church, which is the primary issue here.”



While Willow Creek made the decision to sever its relationship with Exodus in 2009, the decision became widely known only in June. Scott Vaudrey, a member of the congregation’s leadership team, told *Christianity Today* in a statement that the church’s decision was not meant to reflect a political or social position on the issue, emphasizing that the church was in “a season of reviewing and clarifying some of our affiliations with outside organizations.”

But Alan Chambers, president of Exodus International, said that Willow Creek’s move reflected an emerging tendency among some evangelicals to shy away from dealing with controversial issues. “The choice to end our partnership is definitely something that shines a light on a disappointing trend within parts of the Christian community,” Chambers told *Christianity Today*, “which is that there are Christians who believe like one another who aren’t willing to stand with one another, simply because they’re afraid of the backlash people will direct their way if they are seen with somebody who might not be politically correct.”

Added the ministry leader, “Biblical truth is unpopular, and when you’re supporting unpopular truth, you are unpopular too — which means, some days, getting upwards of 10,000 phone calls and emails....”

Throughout the 1980s and ’90s, Exodus enjoyed a close ministry relationship with Willow Creek, with the national organization referring people in the Chicago area to the mega-church’s own outreach to



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those struggling with same-sex attraction. Similarly, Willow Creek hosted “[equipping events](#)” sponsored by Exodus that trained church workers and clergy to minister to “gays,” and Chambers was a welcomed speaker at the church.

But that all changed after Willow Creek’s head pastor, Bill Hybels, agreed to a meeting in 2008 with members of [SoulForce](#), a homosexual activist group that specifically targets churches and Christian organizations. According to the [Chicago Tribune](#), Hybels was one of the nation’s few mega-church pastors who had agreed to meet with the homosexual group. Others, including Joel Osteen, pastor of the massive Lakewood Church in Houston, did not respond to SoulForce’s request for a sit-down.

“Bill Hybels is to be commended,” said Jeff Lutes, a spokesman for SoulForce. “They were the first church that responded to our letters and to begin to have conversations with us and show willingness to meet face to face. By being willing to sit down at the table with us, they’ve demonstrated courage.”

While Willow Creek may be the most high-profile evangelical group to give the boot to Exodus, it is certainly not the first. According to [Christianity Today](#), two other ministries that help people overcome same-sex attraction, Where Grace Abounds and Mastering Life Ministries, split with Exodus in 2008, and a Canadian ministry, New Direction, severed its ties with Exodus the next year, explaining that it had “become uncomfortable with some of the messages expressed in a variety of ways through the very diverse Exodus network.” Even [Dawson McAllister](#), a conservative Christian spokesman and host of a popular radio talk and ministry show, “announced the separation of his organization from Exodus last year,” reported [Christianity Today](#).

Cindi Love, executive director of SoulForce, applauded the news that Willow Creek had decided to stop working with Exodus International, calling it a “red letter day” for her group, which would ultimately like to see evangelicals take a tolerant — or even embracing — stance toward homosexuality.

In an editorial published by the [Huffington Post](#), Love wrote that groups such as hers, “who long for the Church Universal to equip its saints in the walk of peace and justice and inclusion are celebrating today that Willow Creek has found a door in the wall of religious bigotry and walked through it in such a public way.” She called Willow Creek’s public split “with Exodus and its harmful reparative therapy” a “blessing that I want to affirm and thank Bill Hybels for doing. As a minister of the Good News shared by Jesus Christ, I am grateful for Good News today.”

Meanwhile, Chambers said decisions such as Willow Creek’s to cut ties with ministries that help individuals overcome same-sex attraction “highlight a reticence in the church to stand up for biblical truth....” He added that such moves are “coming at a time when we’re going to have to stand up for what we believe. I think there’s a way to stand up. We have to find that way.”



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