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## A Mormon Missionary's Guide to Conversion Therapy Addiction Recovery

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A MORMON MISSIONARY'S GUIDE TO ~~CONVERSION THERAPY~~ ADDICTION  
RECOVERY

by

Shaun M. Anderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2020

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## ABSTRACT

A Gay Mormon's Guide to ~~Conversion Therapy~~ Addiction Recovery

by

Shaun M. Anderson, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Department: English

This collection of essays explores my experience as a gay Mormon missionary, studying the Mormon Church's Addiction Recovery Program in an effort to alter my sexuality. The initial four essays take place during the two years that I lived in Southern California, as a Mormon missionary. They present the text of the *LDS Family Services Addiction Recovery Program* workbook, with my own thoughts, experiences, and stories driven into the margins. Through these four essays, I demonstrate the hope, anguish, and longing of a man who wants to live as a righteous Mormon man. The final essay explores the year after my mission, when I returned to Utah State University, and began the process of leaving the Mormon Church.

This thesis explores the damage of conversion therapy, and stands as a testament against the practice of conversion therapy in any of its insidious forms. My aim is to hold institutions who encourage the practice of conversion therapy accountable, while simultaneously creating a space of validation and understanding for survivors of conversion therapy.

(111 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

A Mormon Missionary's Guide to ~~Conversion Therapy~~ Addiction Recovery

Shaun M. Anderson

This collection of essays explores my experience as a gay Mormon missionary, when I studied the Mormon Church's Addiction Recovery Program in an attempt to alter my sexuality. The initial four essays take place during the two years that I lived in Southern California as a Mormon missionary from 2011-2013. They present the text of the *LDS Family Services Addiction Recovery Program* workbook, with my own thoughts, experiences, and stories driven into the margins. Through these four essays, I demonstrate the hope, anguish, and longing of a gay man who desperately wants to live the model of a righteous Mormon man.

The final essay explores the year after my mission, when I returned to Utah State University, and began the process of leaving the Mormon Church. In this essay, I abandon the text of the workbook to create a space for my own story, mirroring my experience leaving the Mormon Church.

This work explores the damage of conversion therapy, and stands as a testament against the practice of conversion therapy in all of its insidious forms. My aim is to hold institutions who encourage conversion therapy accountable for the harm they create, while simultaneously creating a space of validation and understanding for survivors of conversion therapy.

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Shaun M. Anderson

## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. STEP 1 .....	10
III. STEP 2 .....	25
IV. STEP 3 .....	44
V. STEP 4 .....	63
V. STEPPING FORWARD .....	82

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## INTRODUCTION

As President Cook stepped into the church gymnasium filled with missionaries in black suits and white shirts, I knew he was looking for me. I sat at a table near the door, pressed in between two larger, burlier missionaries who had lived in Southern California for months longer than I had. Their experience, their body mass, their overall worthiness to be here as Mormon missionaries set them apart from me: the missionary who had called President Cook a few days ago to confess that he felt attracted to other men.

President Cook's eyes landed on me, and he sped across the gym, ignoring the other missionaries around us, all trying to catch his attention and earn his favor.

"How are you doing, Elder Anderson?" President Cook asked, bending in between me the missionary to my right.

Aware of the attention of the missionaries on each side, I shrugged him off with a brief and nervous, "I'm fine."

President Cook accepted this statement, and walked to the front of the room where he started our day-long missionary training meeting. I stayed seated at my table on the side of the room, pretending to listen and take notes.

When I had called President Cook, I had asked him to send me home, afraid that my attractions made me unworthy to serve as a missionary. President Cook had refused, telling me that we would talk at this meeting. Now that I had told him I was fine, I worried that he would let it go, and my chance to return home from my mission would be lost.

As the meeting closed, President Cook gathered the missionaries at the back of the gym for a picture. When the photographer asked us to angle in and get closer, I looked out, and saw President Cook watching me, inching my body closer to another man's body.

As President Cook and I watched one another, I tried to convey all of the pain I felt, as a man struggling with same-gender attraction who lived in Southern California, where, just two years earlier, the religion that I represented had funneled millions of dollars into preventing the legalization of same-sex marriage. Some fragment of that anguish must have passed between us, because President Cook's smile crumpled, and he looked away.

Once more, President Cook hurried to me, as soon as he could. This time, he led me out of the church gym through the hallways to his office, where he settled in behind his desk, and gestured for me to sit in a chair across from him.

"It breaks my heart," President Cook started after waiting to see if I would break the silence, "that you have been carrying this for so long, without telling anyone."

I sat silent, unsure what to say. At this point, I had barely admitted my attractions to myself.

He didn't send me home from my mission. The one sexual experience I had was with an older cousin, when I was six. President Cook told me that didn't count as acting on my feelings of same-gender attraction, and, even though I couldn't quite believe him, I wanted to. He told me that since I had never acted on these feelings, I was a worthy missionary, just like the other missionaries out there in the gymnasium, the burly ones, and the ones whose bodies pressed in on me, while we lined up for pictures.

“I just can’t stop thinking about men,” I replied, after he finished trying to comfort me.

“That’s because this is an addiction,” President Cook said, opening a desk drawer. “You are addicted to men.”

He pulled a glossy spiral bound book out from the drawer and held it out to me. Across the front were the words: *LDS Family Services Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing*. I would later write in my own handwriting on the cover the words: “Shaun Michael Anderson” and “Philippians 4:13 ‘I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me.’”

“No one has a deeper understanding of the repentance process than an addict,” President Cook said, as I took the Addiction Recovery Program workbook into my own hands. “Work through these steps, and I promise that you will begin to heal.”

The following essays demonstrate the desperation of a Mormon missionary working to alter his sexual attractions. President Cook never sent me home. I gave two years of my life to the Mormon Church, living as a Mormon missionary. There is no proper way to describe what a Mormon mission experience is. When I stepped off the plane in California, I knew no one in the area. I would spend the next two years within sight and sound of a roommate. Even when my roommate and I would return to our apartment—at 9:30 pm sharp—we had to stay close, sleeping in the same room but not the same bed—a mission rule literally states, “same room but not same bed.” My contact with my family was restricted to two phone calls a year—Christmas Day and Mother’s Day—and weekly emails or letters.

Missionaries are commanded to shed their first names. Men assume the title Elder. Women assume the title Sister. I worked to destroy my identity as Shaun Michael Anderson in order to step into this new creation: Elder Anderson.

I reach back to this space of fractured identity and written self-flagellation to explore the seeds of shame, planted through years of church attendance and harvested between the pages of the *Addiction Recovery Program* workbook. Although the workbook did not work in the ways that President Cook had intended, cramming myself and my words into the margins and into the open answer portions of the text taught me the power honest writing has to lead to genuine healing.

The first four essays of this thesis rely on the actual text of the workbook. The formatting matches the exact text that I studied and prayed about throughout my two years as a Mormon missionary. I've transcribed the exact text of the Addiction Recovery Program workbook, with a few minor exceptions. My own words and my own stories are forced to the margins, surrounding the primary text. Although I didn't understand this at the time, the need for my stories to exist in the margins demonstrates the clear fact that the Addiction Recovery Program workbook was never designed for a queer voice. The only spaces where the workbook invites my voice in is in the "Study and Understanding" sections at the end of each chapter. This forced marginalization reveals there has never been space for a queer voice inside the church. These essays require the words of the Mormon Church. Nothing else could so clearly demonstrate the fruitlessness of a twenty-year-old gay man pleading with God to allow an Addiction Recovery Program to act as a twisted form of conversion therapy.

Exploring my time as a Mormon missionary grows more challenging because of the forced bifurcation that occurs within each individual who enters the mission program. The intentional dropping of family, friends, and name creates a second identity who must also exist on the page. The marginal comments and responses throughout the initial four essays show the battleground between these two identities. Elder Anderson writes with faith, condemnation, and Mormon doctrine, as he tries to live his life with exact obedience to the commandments of God and the rules of the missionary handbook. Shaun enters the page with fear, questions, and an inability to let go of the first man he loved. Throughout the essays these two identities struggle to discover the definition of happiness.

Both Elder Anderson and Shaun—the identity Elder Anderson wanted so badly to kill—work together to write the first essay of this thesis. Elder Anderson rises with faith in the process of Addiction Recovery. He tries to demonstrate how his attractions exist as an addiction that can be overcome with the help of prayer and religion. Shaun settles in, questioning and persistent, wondering if abandoning love and attraction will actually appease God.

In the second essay, Elder Anderson and Shaun continue their battle. Elder Anderson, hurtles doctrine at Shaun, while Shaun prays for some sort of peace. As the essay winds down, Elder Anderson recognizes that he must kill himself in order to kill Shaun and the same-sex attractions. In this space of suicidal ideation, a third voice begins to speak in redacted text. This new voice is my own current voice, utilizing the second-person narrative perspective to reach back to the torn man contemplating his own death. This voice can only exist in redactions, because I can never go back and change what

happened throughout my years as a Mormon missionary. That story has happened. It is unchanging. Yet, even though this voice cannot exist, in this story, he steps in to give hope in a time when hope seemed impossible.

The third essay explores how these three voices ponder what it means to trust as survivors of abuse. The redacted voice steps in more firmly here, urging Shaun to trust in himself, as Elder Anderson works away at eroding whatever self-trust Shaun builds. At this point, Elder Anderson has survived over half of his missionary service, and both he and Shaun are starting to recognize that no changes have occurred in terms of sexuality.

As all three voices move into the fourth essay, the redacted voice begins incorporating Mormon doctrine about homosexuality to demonstrate the fact that there will never be space for any of these identities within the church. Elder Anderson begins to fade as the two years of missionary life wind down. Shaun steps in, recognizing that his time as a missionary hasn't changed any of the attractions that he wanted to. Both Elder Anderson and Shaun begin to recognize that as hard as they've fought, the Addiction Recovery Program has not and cannot change them in the ways that they want it to. As they prepare to return home, they abandon the Addiction Recovery Program.

The fifth and final essay abandons the text of the Addiction Recovery Program. The redacted voice steps out of the redactions and, still using the second-person narrative perspective, guides the recently returned missionary forward as he navigates leaving the church and leaving the man he has fallen in love with.

Several types of texts inform this work: texts written by the Mormon Church, works that experiment with form, memoirs written about childhood sexual assault and

works by survivors of Conversion therapy. This collection of essays could not exist without the texts written by the Mormon Church. However harmful the practices of the Mormon Church can be for queer individuals, my story, documented in my journals, planners, and annotated study materials—*Preach My Gospel*, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Holy Bible*, etc.—tell a more complicated story. Each time I wrote about President Cook in my journals and in my Addiction Recovery Program workbook, the words express admiration for his kindness. My aim with using the Mormon texts has been to hold an institution accountable for the pain it has created within its queer members. However, this work does not seek to condemn the individuals who reached out to me with love and kindness, despite the teachings of the institution.

The first four essays rely on the borrowed form of the Addiction Recovery Program workbook. This form grows into a structural metaphor that acts as confinement for my experience. However, the confinement allows my work to grow. Because I rely on the form of the Addiction Recovery Program workbook, I invite readers to import what they already know about addiction recovery. This understanding of addiction recovery allows reader to understand from the beginning that the tools I work with will not be effective in changing my sexuality. In order to understand what makes a structural metaphor essay, I studied the works in *The Shell Game*, a collection of hermit crab essays compiled and edited by Kim Adrian.

The most difficult part of this work was balancing each of my three distinct identities. The battle between Elder Anderson and Shaun was easy enough to convey, but it took several drafts to balance the addition of my present voice, and demonstrate that this voice acts as a new and separate voice. The decision to include redactions came from

Genevieve Turkett's lyric essay entitled "Bodily Violence as Seen in Reaction to Stress in Adolescents." Turkett's essay utilizes the borrowed form of a court recording where she must rely on redactions in order to include herself in a space that cannot contain her. Her redacted text demonstrates that her voice cannot enter the text, no matter how hard she tries. In a section of Ryan Van Meter's *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*, Van Meter shifts to a second-person voice in order to try to reach a younger version of himself. This essay inspired the move to the second-person in my thesis, as I address a younger version of myself.

Writing about my own experiences with childhood sexual abuse, required research into how others have written about their own experiences. Martin Moran's *The Tricky Part* helped me shape the work surrounding my own experience. Moran's work explores and disproves connections between his sexuality and his childhood abuse. The third and fourth essays of my thesis take up this question of connection between adult sexuality and childhood abuse. During my mission, two of the most important voices in my life—President Cook and my mother—explicitly explained to me that my sexuality resulted from the abuse that I experienced as a child. However, as I began to study the Addiction Recovery Program as a missionary, I could not persuade myself of the connection. Ultimately, my own writing follows Moran's example to argue against the connection between childhood abuse and sexuality.

Most importantly, my work adds to the conversation surrounding conversion therapy, inspired by Garrard Conley's *Boy Erased* and Peter Gajdic's *The Inheritance of Shame*. Each of these memoirs explore the devastation conversion therapy creates in the lives of queer individuals. From *Boy Erased*, I learned how to write with focus on

humanity. Conley's work explores the damage conversion therapy causes, but he chooses to represent everyone involved in the process as human. He refuses to vilify, instead exploring and embracing the humanity of his parents and his therapists, despite their efforts to force him into harmful practices. In *The Inheritance of Shame*, Gajdics writes clearly about the mental damage conversion therapy can cause, exploring the ways that these practices create and reinforce shame. While my experience as a Mormon missionary cannot be defined exactly as conversion therapy, the impacts are similar.

President Cook told me, "no one understands the repentance process like an addict."

When Russell M. Nelson—the current leader of the Mormon Church—visited the missionaries in Carlsbad, he taught us the definition of repentance: "to change the way one acts; to change the way one breathes."

This thesis is a work of change, a work of repentance. As a missionary, my study of the Addiction Recovery Program changed me, and the way I view repentance. Placing my own stories in the margins of the Mormon Church's doctrine revealed to me word-by-word that to stay in the Mormon Church meant that I would have to constantly fight to find space for myself. This revelation urged me to begin taking the steps required to leave the Mormon Church. To heal. To finally breathe.