



THE NEWSLETTER OF PRODIGAL MINISTRIES

Reaching Out

APRIL 2010

Web Site Launches

First-month stats on target

"Approximately 200 unique visitors, each spending close to five minutes checking us out!"

February 2010 marked the first full month of Prodigal Ministries' Web site, **Prodigal-Ministries.com**. And that's the short-version summary given by Board member Neal Sunderman, after reviewing a detailed analysis of February's activity.

"We were hoping that a Web presence could be instrumental in helping us reach our expansion goals," said Sunderman. "And these first-month numbers are right on target."

Prodigal's executive director, Jerry Armelli, also was excited by the first-month results.

"Many of the visitors came through search engines," Armelli noted, "and that's exactly what we were praying would happen. Folks are typing in 'same-sex addiction,' 'restorative therapy' or other distress signals, and they're finding us."

"For people struggling with an unwanted

same-sex identity," Jerry explains, "anonymity is critical on that first contact. Contacting us through the Web form feels even safer than leaving us a phone message."

"Besides," Jerry adds, "with the skill and compassion that has been poured into the design of this site, visitors quickly develop a comfort level and feel good about clicking on the 'Contact' form."

Web designer Dave Murray Miyamasu, who donated his professional services, is quick to point out that launching the new site was a "team effort." Armelli and board member Ed Perrine wrote the concise but warm text, and Prodigal friend Melissa Triantafillou provided the contagiously joyful graphics.

In addition to four tabs explaining Prodigal's services and history, the site includes a "Donate" page.



"For ministries such as Prodigal, research shows that online giving is fast becoming the dominant revenue

source," says Sunderman. "Presently, there's a significant gap between the demand for Prodigal's counseling services and our ability to meet that demand with current staffing. Online giving is one of the ways that we hope to fund an expansion of staff and close that gap."

Sunderman encourages current Prodigal friends to help increase awareness of the ministry's services and needs by asking churches and other ministries with which they are affiliated to link from their Web sites to Prodigal's new site.

For more information, click on "Contact" at Prodigal-Ministries.org or phone

Jerry Armelli, 513-861-0011.



God Never Let Go Part III

by Jerry Armelli

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many factors contribute to the successful counseling ministry of Jerry Armelli, Prodigal Ministries' founder and executive director. Among those factors are years of specialized training and membership in professional organizations. Central to Jerry's ministry, however — and to the passion, which he brings to his work — is his own personal journey out of homosexuality. At our request, Jerry agreed to tell you his story. Following is the final segment of this three-part series.

Finally, I was onto something real.

From my early teens I had lived a life of secret misery, torn between an inability to relate normally to other males — including those in my immediate family — on the one hand, and an unwanted sexual attraction to males on the other.

But in this small group of Christ-followers I experienced something real and new.

These transparent men and women had life struggles of their own, but they exuded a joy that transcended those struggles. And even more amazingly, they genuinely cared about my struggles, and about me. Without reservation. Without conditions.

"If they can find joy in the midst of their struggles," I said to myself, "then why can't I?"

And so I made it my goal, for the first time in my "Christian" life, not to rid myself of an unwanted same-sex attraction, but simply to know and to follow Jesus like these friends were following Him — wherever that led.

That, you see, was the key. Not focusing on myself and my battle with homosexuality, but focusing on Him. On His love for me. On all that He had done because of His love for me. And then, out of gratitude for His love, determining to be obedient to Him in every aspect of my life.

Don't get me wrong! God did not

immediately reward my new commitment to obedience and surrender by freeing me of my same-sex feelings.

This was just the beginning of a real relationship with Him and the beginning of a life-long journey of transformation. And if He had not graciously kept caring friends by my side to encourage me, it is a journey from which I would have turned back many times.

Once I had committed to that journey, God began to expose countless areas of my life in which I had been living for myself. Slowly, and sometimes painfully, I began to understand what a life of surrender to Him really meant. Slowly, but wondrously, I began to experience a peace and a joy in my life that far outweighed the pain of letting go.

To be sure, my feeling of attraction to the same sex proved to be the most difficult obstacle to real surrender and joy. In prayer, I expressed my anger. I understood that sexual relationships with same-sex partners were outside of His creative intent and His will for me. I understood that.

"Why, then," I cried out, "will You not remove these feelings, Jesus?"

At long last, on my knees with those caring, Christian friends, I let go.

"Whether You choose to remove those feelings or not, Jesus, I want to be obedient to You."

And that is the point at which I began to feel real freedom in Him at last. Joy. I had been holding back complete surrender and obedience until He answered my selfish request to remove those unwanted feelings. He deserved complete obedience from me — not because He would answer my selfish requests today — but because of the incredible love for me that He expressed on the Cross.

In time, as you know, He did remove those unwanted feelings, and not only granted me sexual wholeness, but also led me to a beautiful relation-



An experienced, trained and compassionate counselor, Jerry Armelli also is an engaging public speaker. To schedule Jerry to address your church or civic group, contact him at (513) 861-0011.

ship with a loving Christian wife.

So that pretty much concludes the story of my personal journey out of homosexuality. I hope that telling my story helps you understand better my heart for the ministry, which God led me to found 26 years ago. And I hope that you will feel free to share my story with others who might benefit from hearing it.

But before signing off, I want to add one very important "disclaimer." That is, simply, that my story is my story. I feel that I must add that disclaimer, because I do not want any of you to make the mistake of trying to force others who may be struggling with same-sex attraction into the mold of my story.

Over the course of these 26 years, I have met with and developed client/friend relationships with thousands of men and women struggling with same-sex attraction. And each one of those persons had a unique, personal story. Many, complex and varied are the experiences and personality factors that

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The Rest of the Story

Beginning on page 2 you will find (or, hopefully, already have found!) the final segment of Jerry Armelli's personal journey out of same-sex attraction. His story is a testimony to Christ's unconditional love and to the transformation that He accomplishes in those willing to deny self and follow Him.

Through Christ-centered ministries such as Exodus International and its many affiliates, tens of thousands of men and women who, like Jerry, once struggled with same-sex attraction have found freedom and restoration and now enjoy healthy heterosexual identities.

The vast majority of those set free from same-sex attraction through the power of Christ, though, do not devote themselves to counseling ministries as Jerry did. The varied careers that they pursue are unrelated to their former struggle.

How is it, we wondered, that Jerry was led to a career in this specialized area of professional counseling? So we asked him, and thought that you might be interested in hearing "the rest of the story."

By surrendering myself to Him, I was experiencing a joy — in every aspect of my life — unlike anything that I had ever even imagined.

Editor — The personal journey that you chronicled in the "God Never Let Go" series ends with your being freed from same-sex attraction. You must have been in your mid-twenties then. Did you immediately have a desire to pursue a career in counseling?

JA — No, in fact, not at all. At the time I was between my junior and senior years at CCM (University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music) and was focused on two related goals — first, completing my degree, a bachelor of fine arts in dance, and then, landing a job with a major metropolitan ballet company.

Ed. — I'm intrigued. Keep going. Professional ballet and counseling seem to be pretty unrelated career paths. What precipitated the transition?

JA — Whereas a career in counseling had

never entered my mind, reaching out to other individuals trapped in an unwanted same-sex attraction was a personal passion. Through Christ's grace and power I had just been freed from a 15-year struggle with homosexuality. By surrendering myself to Him, I was experiencing a joy — in every aspect of my life — unlike anything that I had ever even imagined. A joy that I couldn't keep to myself! I felt a desire, and a debt, to share my story.

Ed. — "Desire" I understand. Elaborate on "debt."

JA — A double debt, actually. When I was going to gay parties, gay bars and gay organizations, I met hundreds of young men and women who were suffering in the same way that I had suffered —

acquiescing to an identity and a lifestyle that they felt trapped in. I felt a debt, an obligation, to communicate with these fellow human beings, to tell them that there was a better life, a way that led to Joy and Peace. And I felt a debt to my Lord and Savior, Who loved those men and

women as much as He loved me.

Through mutual friends to whom I had shared my story, I soon met two other men who had found freedom from homosexuality through their relationship to Christ. Like myself, these two men were eager to share their stories with other individuals who felt trapped in a same-sex identity.

Before long, God gave all three of us a vision to form a support group where men and women could come to speak openly about their same-sex struggles, and where we could share the love of Christ with them.

Ed. — So the three of you had a vision. That's great. Lots of people have visions that never get beyond the vision stage. How did you get your vision to materialize?

JA — That's the amazing part. Looking back, it's clear that our common vision was a "God thing." God just started opening doors for us. With a very uncharacteristic boldness, we approached a very welcoming church in the Clifton area, Faith Christian Assembly (FCA), and asked them to let us use a room in their facility for our meetings. And praise God, they agreed. We distributed a few hand-made fliers around the campus neighborhood and in a matter of weeks we were meeting in a room at FCA, listening to and sharing our experiences with a group of twenty or so men who felt trapped in a same-sex identity.

Ed. — And that was the official beginning of Prodigal Ministries?

JA — No. That was the unofficial beginning. The official beginning came about 18 months later. As we continued to meet and word of our support groups continued to grow, the three of us felt a need for some organizational support. A

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The Rest of the Story

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group of Christian men and women — mostly from FCA — who had been praying for us agreed to serve as our board of directors. With their guidance, we submitted an application to the IRS to form a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. That was mid-1988, and that was the official beginning of Prodigal Ministries.

Ed. — At that point, were you still pursuing a career in ballet?

JA — You bet! By that time I had completed my degree and was traveling to audition for every major ballet company that posted an opening. To pay the bills, I took a job in the hospitality industry — bellman, valet, whatever. And meanwhile, I was spending several nights each week leading support groups for Prodigal.

About a year after our official beginning, one of our supportive board members approached me with this novel idea — and idea that I did not immediately buy into. Feeling that I had a “gift” for communicating with people struggling with same-sex attraction and desiring to

see our ministry expand, he suggested that I pursue a master’s degree in counseling and obtain state licensure.

Ed. — Initially, you said, you didn’t buy into the idea. Why? And what caused you to change your mind?

JA — Dance was still my passion. A major ballet company was still my goal.



Jerry, with wife Mia and their daughter, Croin.

And further, the idea of returning to the classroom for 90 credit hours — two-plus years — just didn’t appeal to me.

But I couldn’t shake the idea. God kept tugging at me. And by the fall of ’90 there I was, working toward my Master of Education in Agency and Community Counseling by day, meeting clients for Prodigal by night, and doing what I could to keep up my dance technique — whenever! I completed my course work in the spring of ’93, and shortly afterwards took the state test to become a Licensed Professional

Counselor in Ohio.

Ed. — Looking back on that experience, are you glad that you pursued the degree and licensure?

JA — Yes. I’m absolutely sure that this was God’s direction. Many of the clients whom He sends to us have backgrounds and experiences to which I could not relate on a personal basis. They have deep wounds from abuse, rejection, neglect, alcohol and drug abuse — none of which applied to my personal struggle. The counseling coursework as well as the continuing education required for certification have enabled me to identify and respond to these situations and to relate to their needs.

Ed. — So that was the end of your dance career, I assume?

JA — No! God gave me the gift of dance and I remained confident that he would use that gift to His glory. Just how, I wasn’t sure. But I kept working on my technique and even continued to audition.

Then in ’92 a good friend who was a Christian songwriter asked if I would work with his sister, Mia, who also was a dancer, to choreograph a song that he had written. Never having met his sister, I was a little reluctant at first. Choreographing is like composing, a very personal expression. Clearly, though, God was in the details again. It was an instrumental piece entitled, *The Atonement*, and working with Mia on that project was a thrilling experience. That choreographing

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God Never Let Go

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can result in homosexuality. And making assumptions about the factors contributing to any one individual’s homosexuality can be demeaning and destructive to building a relationship with that individual.

Further, I want to reiterate that although the roads leading to homosexuality are many and varied, ultimately there is but one road leading

out. And that is the narrow but exciting road of complete surrender to a Savior Who loved us enough to suffer and die for us just as we were.

Finally, let me say that in both my personal and my professional experience I have found that one element critical to keeping a person on that narrow road is maintaining close relationships to fellow Christians who have experienced — and who can share — Christ’s unconditional love.

That does it. That completes the

story of my personal journey out of bondage to homosexuality, and into the freedom that can only come through complete surrender to a Savior Who loves me so much. The story and the journey that are the foundation of Prodigal Ministries.

If you missed Parts I and II of Jerry’s story, or would like a copies of God Never Let Go to distribute to friends, e-mail Jerry at jerry.armelli@prodigal-ministries.org or contact him by phone, 513-861-0011.

Local blogger reflects on his Encounter with Prodigal's Armelli

"I am an ignorant fool."

That's how popular Cincinnati blogger Steven Fuller began his February 1, 2010 reflection.

In fact, Fuller is no one's idea of an "ignorant fool."

The harsh self-description was Fuller's way of admitting that he had been guilty of a mistake for which he would have been quick to criticize others. He had judged a person without getting to know him. He had let media stereotyping shape his opinion of another human being.

And the object of his unfair judgment was

Prodigal Ministries' president, Jerry Armelli.

So Fuller began that February 1 entry by setting the record straight.

A week ago, I considered leaving my home church because of their affiliation with Prodigal Ministries (an organization that provides holistic counseling to gays and lesbians). Today, I consider Prodigal Ministries (and its founder, Jerry Armelli) a loving voice in the midst of too much polarizing hatred.

That statement speaks volumes about both men.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND INFORMATION.

On the home page of his blog, Fuller refers to himself as "teacher/writer/storyteller."

That's teacher, as in Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Communication in U.C.'s College of Arts and Sciences. Writer of short stories, novels and blogs. And a gifted storyteller, which no doubt accounts in part for his success as teacher and writer.

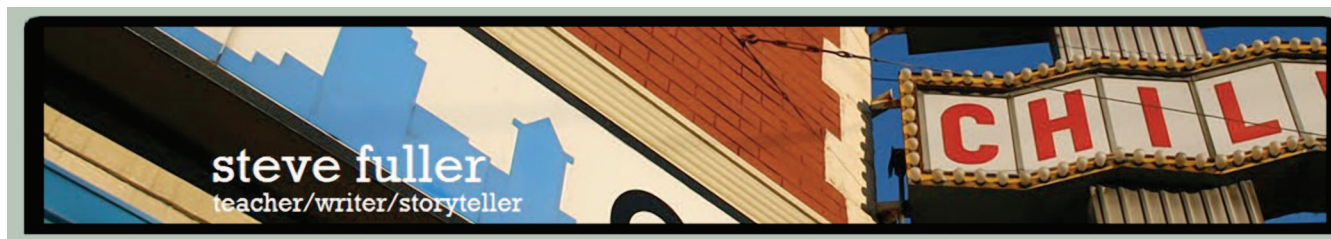
In 2009 Fuller launched the "Church Experiment," determining to visit 52 churches in 52 weeks in an effort "to reconnect with God and redefine my faith." He described those church visits in his blog, stevenfuller.blogspot.com.

At the beginning of 2010, Fuller took on another 52-week project. He explained —

In 2010 I am stepping outside of the church to connect with people. During the Social Experiment, I will experience 52

to a friend and seriously considered leaving the Vineyard (again) because of their affiliation with Prodigal Ministries. In my mind, Prodigal Ministries rounded up gay people from the streets and forced them back to their hideout where Jerry electro-shocked the gay out of them.

Even a bright, articulate independent thinker can get caught in the trap of accepting a vicious stereotype when it is repeated over and over again in the media that we rely on for "news."



random encounters in 52 weeks. Nothing is preplanned, but I trust that God will lead me to the right places and cross my path with the right people.

He's [Jerry's] not trying to "fix" everyone or "force" anyone into changing against his will, he simply wants everyone to live the life God intended.

— Steve Fuller

Exactly why did the storyteller choose Prodigal Ministries as the subject of Social Experiment #5?

After a year of The Church Experiment, I decided to attend the Springdale Vineyard in early 2010. It seemed like a good choice considering my history there. On my first night back, I was perusing the program when I found a blurb about Prodigal Ministries. They were hosting a series of workshops at the Vineyard to help educate Christians about ministering to the gay population.

I was annoyed. I made a snide remark

Unlike many writers, who are less honest and less independent, Fuller was quick to admit having been trapped and anxious to warn others.

First, you need to know that Prodigal Ministries is nothing like the various media outlets make them out to be. They don't go into the streets to round up gay people. Every single person who walks through their doors does so voluntarily. Prodigal Ministries exists to help people confront issues of sexuality, specifically homosexuality.

I was surprised to hear that Jerry doesn't see his mission as "changing" everyone from gay to straight. As someone who formally lived the homosexual lifestyle, he is passionate about helping people. That means eventually diving in pretty deep to confront unhealthy behaviors... (If people want to pursue a different life trajectory, Prodigal Ministries exists to provide support.

During their two-hour conversation Fuller developed his own impressions about Jerry Armelli, the man, and the



Steve Fuller

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Blogger reflects

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counseling ministry he leads. And in most respects, his impressions were right on target.

What struck me most about my conversation with Jerry was how much he deeply cares about the gay population. He's not trying to "fix" everyone or "force" anyone into changing against his will, he simply wants everyone to live the life God intended.

And he adds, "I'm not sure how many Christians can honestly say that."

When we get angry or offended by someone else's "sin," it's more about our own insecurities. But when we actually love other people, we feel compassion for them. We point out sin not because it feels good to be right, but because we want the best for their lives. This is a key difference that Jesus lived, but so many of us are missing.

I don't understand why we (by we, I include myself) bash people like Jerry. (Well, okay, I do understand...we're uninformed.) And I don't understand why Prodigal Ministries doesn't have a bigger platform. More than almost anyone else I have ever encountered, Jerry is living like Jesus. He isn't settling for either extreme. He refuses to be polarizing. Instead, he tries to love people into a deeper relationship with Jesus, and through that deeper relationship, he trusts God will heal those who desire wholeness.

MUTUAL RESPECT

Jerry Armelli admits that he was "a little concerned" when Fuller first approached him about an interview.

"But the more I dug into his blog," Armelli explains, "the more comfortable I became that this writer genuinely wants to understand what motivates his subjects. By his own admission, Steve brought some pre-dispositions to our encounter. But he was honest about those pre-dispositions. He gave me the opportunity to share my heart. He listened intently. And he left our encounter with his own opinions. What more could you ask for!"

That does not mean that Jerry Armelli and Steven Fuller agree on all matters.

"Steve is still a defender of 'gay rights,' including the right to marry," Armelli points out. "The conviction that heterosexual marriage is God's only creative intent for our sexuality is central to my personal theology and to the foundation of Prodigal Ministries."

What Fuller does understand — and it's the primary message of Social

Experiment #5 — is that Jerry Armelli and Prodigal ministries are focused on reaching out with Christ-like, unconditional love to all those in the gay community, and on helping those who feel trapped in an unwanted same-sex identity understand that restoration and freedom are possible through complete surrender to a loving Savior.

If only more teachers, writers and storytellers would make that honest effort to understand.

The Rest of the Story

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partnership marked the beginning of a relationship that has never ended — and never will. Mia and I were married in '94!

Ed. — So *that* was the end of your dance career?

JA — Wrong again. Mia was working as an instructor at a ballet studio for children. A year after we were married the owner retired and we were able to purchase the studio. Mia continues to run the studio and I am able to work part-time as an instructor. Without that income to supplement my Prodigal salary, I'm afraid that there would have been times when we could not have made ends meet. The dance studio has been a huge blessing in many ways.

Ed. — Is there anything else that you would like to add to your story?

JA — Nothing to add to the story, except to say I'm glad that God knew — and planned — my whole story long ago. I just wake up each morning eager to let him reveal the next chapter. I thank Him every day for the way that He has worked in my life. And this may surprise you: I thank Him even for those agonizing years when I struggled with same-sex feelings. I thank Him because it was through that struggle that He drew me into this joyful — and eter-

nal — relationship with Him that I now have.

I'm amazed, also, at how He has used my story to reach out to others. But I must admit that lately I have been somewhat overwhelmed by the conviction that He wants to reach so many more. For the past several years



our staff — that's me plus two dedicated, devoted part-time counselors — has been maxed out at around

550 clients per year. Research tells us that at any given time, in the greater Cincinnati area alone, there are at least 4,000 persons who feel hopelessly trapped in a same-sex identity. That's 3,500 additional persons who need to hear about the freeing power of Christ's unconditional love and to understand God's beautiful plan for their sexuality. We're only scratching the surface. I simply want to ask that anyone reading my story will honestly ask God whether helping Prodigal Ministries financially might be a part of *their* story. We desperately need to hire a female counselor and expand our office facility.

Ed. — Thanks, Jerry, for being faithful to His calling, and for letting us in on the rest of your amazing story.

JA — It's my pleasure!