



# the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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## Freedom is Infectious by Tara Cooper

*Freedom always seemed to be an obscure ideal obtained only by a lucky few, never an actual reality that I could ever attain. For so many years I was held captive to such a vast array of vices that I had a difficult time understanding where those chains ended and where the true me began.*

I have been a Christian for roughly eight years, but it was not until the last few years that I became able to separate who I was from my bondage. It was like the struggles of the flesh and the desire to walk with God we were one and the same. And yet the most horrifying piece to this self-crafted puzzle was that I had become totally oblivious to those chains that ensnared me. Without thinking, I began accepting this crippling bondage as normal.

At its root, my story is no different than any of the ones you have read before in the Fellowship Message. Portland Fellowship continuously shares stories of God's powerful work in the lives of his children. Most of those stories come out of the *Taking Back Ground* program which I have been honored to be a part of. I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I came to the group that first night. It was incredible! I saw Christian men and women seeking God right in the middle of their brokenness, their bondage to unhealthy behavior and false thinking, and their desperate desire for freedom. It did not take long before I realized that I was one of them. I have struggled with depression, sexual brokenness, perfectionism, emotional dependency, narcissism and defensive detachment. Like most, the list goes on and on. And the list continues to reveal more areas of insecurity as I more fully understand my wretchedness as a sinner, while at the same time recognize how the perfection of Jesus Christ is able to free me from each of those chains. While at its root my story is the same, it has manifested itself somewhat differently: I have never struggled with unwanted same-sex attractions.

There is a common fear that takes place in approaching a ministry like Portland Fellowship. A struggler, when he or she walks through the doors of this ministry is acknowledging his or her weakness. I have heard stories of new participants who circle the block many times before walking through the door. For those who don't struggle the fear is a little different. It comes in the form of "If someone sees me, maybe they will think I'm one of *them*." Several years ago, a former director of women's ministry, Jody Mayhew, shared her story of how this concern impacted her. She said that the first time she came into the ministry she had that same concern, "What if people think I struggle with this?" The Lord gently yet firmly reminded her that He came in the form of a man, to live among us, to suffer for us, and to identify with us. He was sinless – without fault or blame. Yet he did not say, "I'm really not one of you. I hope you don't look at me *that way*." If Jesus can humble himself even to the point of death on a cross, certainly I can come along side those who struggle with different issues and trust that God can and will use me. But I was unsure how.

Until quite recently, I had allowed this difference to interfere with the way I saw myself as a small group leader for *Taking Back Ground*. I knew that there was this unspoken gap between me, a leader who had never "struggled," and the women who had. God finally had to break this false pretense in me, showing that there really is no difference. The first reality check came as I reflected on the scripture in Isaiah 53:6 "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned, *everyone*, to his own way". When God spoke this truth, He declared to each one of us, individually, that we are all in the same boat, struggling to obtain the same type of



Tara has been a small group leader in the *Taking Back Ground* program for 3 years. Tara and her husband Adam are expecting their first child March 7.

wholeness. The answer was in the prospect of *freedom*, met only through the unconditional love of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The second reality is that: “the LORD, has laid on Him the iniquity of us *all*” (Isa. 53:6b). What a simple “Sunday School” type of answer, but one that became the fuel to ignite the fire of growth and change in me.

Not only did these two realities become clear as I interacted with Jesus personally, but I began seeing a ripple affect in my relationships with others. The more I grasped the truth that Jesus has set me free from *my* chains, the more confident I became to invite others to be free as well. This is how I can claim that “freedom is infectious”. Once the reality of Christ’s freedom has infected our soul, it has a wonderful tendency to latch ahold of others, permeating their lives as well.

After I realized God intended for me to be free from the bondages in my life through Jesus, I was able to allow freedom take hold of me. Thus, this newfound freedom began to stream into many areas of my life.

My thoughts, emotions, actions, relationships, and priorities began to be affected by this concept. This was exciting, because it gave me a completely new understanding on how to relate to others. This probably has to do with the fact that most of my struggles are, at the core, rooted in relational brokenness. My marriage, for instance, is one key relationship that has been drastically affected by this infectious freedom.

I have made intentional and uncomfortable strides to insure that my husband knows without a shadow of doubt that I am a safe person for him. Regardless of what he has done, or what he may continue to struggle with, I deeply desire to give my husband the freedom to open up to me. By allowing vulnerability and honesty, we can walk the path of healing together. This is the very thing that the Lord has given me through the ministry of Portland Fellowship, as well as through my church, a wonderful counselor, my time at Multnomah Bible College, healthy and loving friends and, of course, my amazing husband Adam. God, in a sense, put me in a virtual greenhouse of people who love me, value me and accept me for who I am.

Portland Fellowship gave me the joy of encouraging others to receive the same freedom I have been given. By being open to the Spirit’s prompting to understand my struggles — their roots, causes and effects — I am able to empathize with others who struggle. At a time in my life when I was in the midst of experiencing an intense amount of recovery and healing, a very wise man shared with me a promise God made. He said, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of *all* comfort, who comforts us in *all* our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in *any* trouble, the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted

by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). This verse encouraged me with the *fact* that when we allow ourselves the freedom to respond to the comfort that God is offering, we are then able to comfort others with the *exact same comfort* we ourselves have received. Is it not amazing that God chooses to use us to comfort others in the midst of their pain and hurt because he has comforted us in our time of need? Ministering to others was not a burden for me, but a joy because of this.

We have a tendency to believe that people are capable of staying the same; but this is untrue. Either we can grow into the reality of freedom, or we can be pulled back by even more chains of bondage never meant for us. Though freedom is a very powerful force, so is fear. Fear is a force that keeps us from the reality of Christ’s redemption. Indeed, the root of bondage is fear — of being rejected, exposed, shamed, lonely, and disconnected. This fear of the unknown is very real; unwilling to allow Christ to break their chains and bonds. This is where the *emotion* of fear is able to dictate reality, instead of letting reality dictate to the emotions.

Many in the *Taking Back Ground* program know this fear. The idea of sharing their struggle with a friend in the church or with a pastor is paralyzing. We fear being rejected, shamed, or ridiculed. Part of our job as “non-strugglers” is to become a safe place where anything can be shared without judgment and condemnation. The reality is that the Evil One is out to steal, kill, and destroy. If the church is not a safe place for strugglers to be honest, then we as believers help to promote the work of our adversary.

I desire to stand against this fear and be a willing vessel for God’s comfort and love to be passed on to those in need. I desire to help unveil the lies that so many have come to believe and the fear that has kept so many people from God’s transforming love.

The apostle Paul wrote of this freedom: “But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:13-18).

Have you been comforted by God’s love? Has the Redeemer set you free? Will you be a vessel of God’s work in the lives of those struggling against sin? Obviously many of you are doing just that because you receive this newsletter. It’s an amazing honor that God beckons us to be transformed into an image of His glory, Jesus Christ!

Once we are able to allow God to make us free, we shall be free indeed!



*Tara standing alongside the women of Taking Back Ground at the 2003 annual retreat.*

## tbg retreat with Sy Rogers

It is with great enthusiasm that we announce Sy Rogers as our guest speaker for the 2004 Fellowship Retreat. While normally our retreat is conducted by our own leaders, this year, by Sy's generous offer to come to Portland, and with God's incredible timing to make this possible, we will be blessed with a world-class speaker. We are thrilled to have Sy join us for what will be a powerful weekend.

Sy is internationally regarded as a gifted communicator. He is an award-winning talk-show host and a recording artist, and has 17 years' experience as a pastoral care specialist in the area of sexuality. His seminars and speaking events have been conducted on six continents, in numerous denominations. He has done counselor training, and has appeared at youth festivals and men's events including Promise Keepers conventions. Sy was in Portland last September to conduct a well-received seminar for Portland Fellowship.

We are honored to have Sy return and bless the men and women who are currently attending the *Taking Back Ground* program. The theme of this year's weekend retreat is

"Anchored in Hope." Friday evening will include worship, testimony, and fellowship time. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, Sy will encourage us with lessons he has learned through his own journey into wholeness. After returning from the Saturday afternoon free time, we will have a special surrender service including sharing, prayer and communion.

If you are an alum of the *Taking Back Ground* program and would like to attend the March 12-14 retreat, call the office to make your reservation. Space is very limited, so be sure to register immediately.



Breakaway Lodge in Gearhart, Oregon.  
2004 Fellowship Retreat



## family and friends with Sy Rogers

Before heading down to the coast, Sy will share at our Family and Friends group on Friday evening, March 12. If you have a family member or a friend who identifies himself or herself as gay or lesbian, we encourage you to attend the meeting. For directions to our office, or more information, please call 503-235-6364.

## John Paulk says "Goodbye"

Last June, John Paulk, who had spent the previous five years working for Dr. James Dobson at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, returned to Portland and re-joined the PF staff on an interim basis. John and his wife Anne returned to Oregon because they wanted a quieter, and more low-profile life for raising their three sons. "I was thrilled John and Anne came home to Portland and we have been blessed to have John assist PF as our project coordinator," Jason said. "John has been a big support to me and provided valuable wisdom based on his years of ex-gay ministry experience. It was evident when John returned to PF that he was searching for God's will for his future."

Last fall, God made it clear to John and Anne that it was time for him to head back to school and pursue his degree. At that time, John reduced his hours to part-time. This past January, God called Jim Thompson, a minister of the Gospel for 30 years, to work with our Friends and Family group and the Upper Room Internship Program. The timing was perfect for a smooth transition for John to leave PF in order to pursue work in his new career field. Jim joined our team full-time on John's last day. God's timing is always perfect.

"The past eight months have been absolutely wonderful being part of the team once again," remarked John. "Jason, Rebecca and I have grown close and have worked together beautifully. I'm sad to say goodbye to them both, but I'm so excited to begin a new life, in a new direction."

Neither John nor Anne will disappear from PF. They have agreed to teach from time to time and to stay connected to the ministry. Please join us as we pray God's blessings on the Paulk family. They have and will continue to serve the Lord well.



## march-april calendar & services

march 1; april 5

### Monthly Board Meeting

7 p.m. - Fellowship House

march 2

### Taking Back Ground

Final evening for section 2. TBG is a discipleship group for men and women seeking freedom from unwanted same-sex attraction. Applications available for section 3

march 7

### Missions Fair

Portland Fellowship will be hosting an informational booth at First Church of God - Vancouver, WA.

march 11

### A.W.A.R.E

Jason Thompson will be speaking to an abstinence training seminar.

march 12; april 9

### Family & Friends Group

Support for family and friends with loved ones struggling with homosexuality. Special Guest in March: Sy Rogers. Meeting begins at 7 p.m.

march 12-14

### TBG Fellowship Retreat

Open to current participants and alumni of the *Taking Back Ground* program. Sy Rogers will be our special guest speaker.

march 31

### George Fox University

Speaker: Jason Thompson

april 1

### Greater Portland Bible

Ministry to Mothers

Speaker: Jason Thompson

april 6, 13, 20, 27

### Taking Back Ground

Section 3 - Limited space, please sign up soon. 7 p.m.

### Additional updates:

[www.portlandfellowship.com](http://www.portlandfellowship.com)

## fellowship house purchase update

We continue to be amazed at God's provision through you — our faithful friends. We have received many calls, notes of encouragement, and gifts large and small. At the time of this writing we are waiting on the decision from Murdock Charitable Trust in the requested amount of \$212,500. Private gifts, other foundations, churches, PF staff and the Portland Fellowship board have all contributed to this project in the amount of \$215,000.

We have one more month to raise the additional \$172,500. We will be ecstatic if the Lord chooses to provide the remaining funds, before the closing date in mid-April, but are prepared to acquire a loan in order to finalize the deal. We will continue to pursue gifts to pay the remaining amount as quickly as the Lord provides. Thank you for your prayers.

## family and friends find support

"I was pretty nervous the first time I came," said one of the parents who attend PF's Family and Friends group. "But as soon as I heard someone else's story, I knew this was the place for me." Those who come know they can expect empathy, information, and encouragement from fellow Christians who are also concerned by the choices their children, friends and other family members have made to embrace the gay lifestyle. Each meeting includes a speaker or presentation, group discussion, Q & A and prayer. Printed resources are available. Meetings start at 7:00 p.m. the first Friday of every month. Call Jim at 503-235-6364 for driving directions or other information.



## family and friends schedule for 2004

- March 12 – Guest appearance: **Sy Rogers**  
– internally known conference speaker.
- April 9 – **Don McCleod** "How healing happens"
- May 14 – **Sean Harlow** — "Please talk to me!"
- June 11 – **Jason Thompson** – "Report on PF"
- July 9 – **Summer Social**
- Aug. 13 – **Jim Thompson** — "Relinquishment"
- Sept. 10 – (simultaneous sessions)  
**Rebecca Wade** – "Focus on Women" &  
**Andrew S. & Jim T.** – "Focus on Men"
- Oct. 8 – Tape & discussion  
"On **C. S. Lewis Four Loves**"
- Nov. 12 – Author and speaker **John Paulk**  
"How to relate to partners"
- Dec. 10 – **Christmas Social**  
and a special video presentation



## P O R T L A N D

f e l l o w s h i p

The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of The Portland fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ

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