

## How Exodus New Life Agenda Contributes to Growth and Change

Introduction: No-one denies the impact that religion, philosophy, the arts, literature and/or education have on an individual's spiritual growth, nor how important spiritual growth is when "coming to terms with life." Having said that, the greatest growth and change has occurred for those who fully embrace Exodus Concepts and in coming to understand the imaginal and the practical aspects of Exodus New Life Agenda, employing them, and incorporating them into daily life. This paper is excerpted from The Exodus Handbook (2019) and presented with some minor edits and updates in terminology. GWB

The study session...centers on a study paper of one to three pages in length. The paper is often written by one of the members of the group and it should have a significant relationship to the Exodus Contract or [Exodus Concepts].

The study session has a philosophical grounding in a process called Imaginal Education, an educational philosophy developed by The Ecumenical Institute in Chicago...Though the initial grounding of the Exodus study method is in Imaginal Education it must be understood that...it has undergone its own maturing process so that today it stands alone with its own integrity. The following is a description of that theoretical position.

Most people today, including incarcerated people in particular, develop formative and fundamental convictions about life. These center in two areas, that of the self and that of the world. Out of these convictions, a person begins to make practical decisions about daily living as well as basic decisions that affect the totality of life. Exodus study group participants should be concerned with three critical areas:

1. The problem of relating to the limits of life.
2. The problem of grasping the possibilities of human existence.
3. The problem of freely and intelligently creating life-giving responses to the given human conditions.

When the first area of fundamental convictions is considered, the concern is with the internal self-images of those involved. These images inform a person as to who he is in relation to the world. The "revolving door man" and "the revolving door woman," who are present in prison today, are well informed as to their role in society. Sometimes even before they are released they anticipate their return. They may be heard saying: "If I am still out at Christmas..," not even aware of what they have implied. Here you are given a clue as to the power their negative self-image has over them. The significant thing is not that other people see them that way, but that they see themselves, at an unconscious level, as those who are always destined to return. There are...[a multitude of] negative self-images operating in our prisons today and they have incredible power to drain the human spirit of creativity. In the sessions, members try to uncover their negative self-images and create new ones that enable them to find meaning in life.

The second area of concern is that of external environment. It is important to understand that in addition to a new internal self-image a new picture, or model, of the external world is essential. This is why in every Exodus meeting both the theoretical and the practical...must go hand in hand. The formative convictions one has concerning one's world are developed from self-image and practical engagement with the problems of the human community.

The third area concerns itself with ways in which the study method takes concrete form by constantly reminding the members of the group what decisional possibility looks like. [Historically,] Exodus members who have been released and are doing significant new things are brought back as visitors. Articles published about and by members are brought in. Projects that have been conceptualized and started by members of the group are subjects of discussion. Ways in which the thinking of the group has helped to shape trends in social progress are emphasized.

Sometimes one visitor who is the embodiment of the new human being can do more to create images of possibility than anything else.

There are a number of practical guidelines that are important to Exodus study:

1. The study paper should be no longer than three pages. It should always be read sentence by sentence.
2. The leader should be aware of words, phrases, thought patterns, sounds that can become springboards for discussion.
3. The study paper's purpose is to place thoughts or ideas "on the table" for the individual or the group to relate to.
4. The author is most relevant when he or she has value in an Imaginal/ life-giving sense. For example, a returning citizen's work or a group member's work that has been used as a study paper serves as a symbol of hope and possibility for the group.
5. The basic purpose of the study paper is to provide a neutral ground on which members of the group can relate without being required to "bare their own souls." In general, prisons are not places where trust levels can run high. In some cases, to reveal the problems in one's own life may be a foolish thing. By talking about a problem in the study paper one may also safely wrestle with significant problems of one's own.

The study of images offers the deep personal permission to be and to do. They are the guides, forces, and critics of our sense of personal integrity and vocational accomplishment. Exodus study is intended to awaken, expand, and furbish the image-making capacity of the [members]..., thereby releasing within [them]...an opportunity for effective participation in society.