

Messiah alumni group supports gay students

by [Ivey DeJesus](#) in the [June 28, 2011](#) issue

Alumni at evangelical Messiah College have launched an online petition urging the conservative Christian school to change its policies toward gay and lesbian students.

The petition has collected hundreds of alumni signatures, with some indicating that they would withhold donations as long as the college continued to foster "an unsafe and noninclusive campus climate."

The group, Inclusive Alumni, is petitioning Messiah to become "a place of reconciliation, compassion, and true community." The petitioners call on Messiah, located in Grantham, Pennsylvania, to take steps to prevent harassment and provide sensitivity training to staff.

The move follows a similar petition at another evangelical flagship institution, Wheaton College, west of Chicago, where gay alumni and gay-friendly supporters have launched the group OneWheaton.

Messiah's Community Covenant prohibits "homosexual behavior," which the petition says dehumanizes and marginalizes students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and creates divisions within the campus community.

The petition comes in the wake of a story about an openly gay Messiah student who plans to transfer at the end of the semester after being harassed and threatened on campus.

"I'm proud of the fact that I went to Messiah," said Emily Yoder, a 2009 Messiah graduate who spearheaded the petition. "In my experience most professors and students are very accepting and tolerant of LGBT people. However, it does make me kind of embarrassed to be associated with [the school]."

Messiah spokeswoman Beth Lorow said that administrators recognized the right of alumni to voice their personal opinions on a variety of issues and that "the issue isn't new for Messiah." She said that though the initiative could "lead to conversation and dialogue," it is not likely to lead directly to a change in the college's codes and policies.

"If Messiah College were going to make that significant of a change, it would ultimately require governance action and a decision from the board of trustees," Lorow said.

Yoder said the school's current policies have motivated her not to donate to the college's fund-raising campaign, adding that other alumni had expressed similar opinions.

Messiah freshman Isaiah Thomas, who is gay, has said he has received death threats on Facebook, has had property stolen and has been harassed by a professor. Thomas said Messiah administrators had followed up on his claims but had been unwilling to consider changes to the school's covenant.

Louie Marven, the director of education and youth services for the LGBT Community Center Coalition in central Pennsylvania, said the campaign is "not about one person." The 2007 Messiah graduate added: "It's about creating an environment where LGBT students are safe and included in campus life."

Messiah President Kim S. Phipps said media reports had not conveyed the school's thoroughness or speed in investigating Thomas's claims.

"Messiah

is transparent about its faith commitments, religious heritage, core values and behavioral expectations on a comprehensive range of issues, not limited to but including sexual behavior (both heterosexual and homosexual)," Phipps said in a letter to the campus.

"Specifically,

the college's stance on homosexual behavior is rooted in a scriptural understanding of marriage and a sexual ethic historically affirmed by the Christian church—including Messiah's founding denomination, the Brethren in Christ." —RNS