

# On evangelical campuses, rumblings of gay acceptance

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(RNS) Late last week, the provost of Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn., announced that the school officially had recognized its first gay student organization.

The announcement came barely a month after the Christian school changed its anti-discrimination policy to include homosexuals, after a popular women's soccer coach was forced out last December because her lesbian partner was expecting a child.

The gay student group had twice been turned down for official recognition. Belmont Provost Thomas Burns said the change of mind reflected an "ongoing campus dialogue about Christian faith and sexuality."

The thing is, that dialogue isn't just limited to Belmont.

Belmont's policy changes are the latest in a series of incidents at evangelical Christian campuses involving issues surrounding homosexuality. Some observers now wonder whether a major shift in opinions about homosexuality might be occurring among younger evangelicals.

The answer seems to be yes.

Last month, the student newspaper at Westmont College in California printed an open letter signed by 131 gay and gay-supportive alumni who said they had experienced "doubt, loneliness and fear due to the college's stance on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues."

"We offer our names as proof that LGBT people do exist within the Westmont community," their letter said.

In 2009, Hope College in Holland, Mich., banned "Milk" screenwriter Dustin Lance Black from screening his Oscar-winning film or talking about gay issues on campus. College officials said Black's "notoriety as an advocate for gay rights would not contribute constructively to the ongoing exploration and dialogue on our campus."

Eventually Black, who had been invited to Hope by students and faculty, screened "Milk" at a public theater in Holland -- an event organized by the group Hope is Ready, founded by college and community members to foster dialogue about gay issues.

Wheaton College in Illinois, the alma mater I share with Billy Graham and countless other evangelical leaders, is widely considered the pinnacle of evangelical Christian colleges. Earlier this year, several gay (and gay-affirming) Wheaton alumni started a Facebook page; it currently has more than 100 members.

The group is working to produce a collection of "It Gets Better" videos to show their solidarity with and concern for young gay and lesbian students at their alma mater and elsewhere.

While some of the policy changes are new, the conversation isn't. It's just more open.

Since 2005, activists from the gay civil rights group Soulforce have taken their "Equality Ride" to Christian campuses to spur dialogue about homosexuality. They've been welcomed with varying degrees of hospitality; they were arrested for trespassing at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, Pat Robertson's Regent University, Oral Roberts University and Baylor University.

Whether the train of change among young evangelicals has left the station is certainly a matter of debate. Yet either way, some observers sense a rumble on the tracks.

"Clearly attitudes are changing," said David Gushee, director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University in Georgia. "The activism of an entire generation of Christian right leaders had left its mark. Unfortunately the mark wasn't mainly to change the culture, it was to make Christianity look bad."

As Gushee puts it, evangelicals -- but especially younger evangelicals who have little taste or patience for the political battles of their parents' generation -- are looking for a course correction.

"We can't have the name of Jesus certainly associated with hatred or contempt for homosexuals," Gushee said. "And in general we should be known by what we're for rather than what we're against."

A 2010 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service found that a majority of young adults favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry and adopt children. Researcher Robert Jones said there is no other issue with such a generation gap than the gay question.

Gushee cautioned, however, that a difference in attitude doesn't necessarily equal a difference in belief, even as one might shape the other.

"The possibility that the church has been wrong on the ethics of committed homosexual behavior -- that's a momentous question," Gushee said. "It's obviously one that people in the broader culture have determined a long time ago that the church was wrong about. But I would say that, from the perspective of any kind of understanding of Christian doctrine and Christian ethics, it is not an easy thing to throw (overboard) the majority position of more than 2,000 years."