

'Equality Ride' Targets Christian Colleges

Organized by the gay activism group Soulforce, the tour sought to change the schools' policies on homosexuality

A gay activist group organized a tour of several Christian colleges in the hope of pressuring the schools to change their policies regarding homosexuality.

Patterning their Equality Ride after the Freedom Rides of the civil rights movement, more than 30 young adults were to spend seven weeks visiting 19 college campuses, including Pentecostal schools such as Lee University, Oral Roberts University and North Central University, and socially conservative colleges such as West Point and Brigham Young University.

All the Christian colleges on the riders' March 10-April 26 tour are private and forbid any kind of sexual expression outside the bonds of marriage between one man and one woman.

"Making these choices is fully within a school's right, but we do see the choice to discriminate as a decision with moral weight," said Equality Ride co-director Haven Herrin. "We question the morality of exercising the right to discriminate against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons."

Exodus International, an ex-gay ministry based in Florida, sent teams to several of the targeted colleges to prepare students for the Equality Ride visit. Exodus Youth director Scott Davis said many of the students were looking to move the dialogue about homosexuality beyond "the Bible says it's sin"

to understanding how to reach students who struggle with same-sex attraction or identify themselves as gay. "In general students really are wrestling with this," he said. "They're hearing all kinds of cultural messages promoting homosexuality, but not as much from the church."

The Equality Ride was sponsored by Soulforce, a gay activist group founded by Mel White and his partner, Gary Nixon. A former ghostwriter for several prominent Christians, including Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham, White identified himself as gay in the early 1990s and has since become an advocate for Christian acceptance of homosexuality.

The schools on the tour were notified in advance and were asked to help facilitate a dialogue about homosexuality on their campuses. If the riders were denied access or if an agreement about the content or format of forums could not be reached, Soulforce organized a public demonstration near the campus and contacted local media.

Before the riders' April 5 visit to Azusa Pacific University (APU) in California, administrators developed a carefully scheduled program. "We believe it is our responsibility as Christ-followers to demonstrate loving, scriptural treatment of our guests while maintaining an unwavering commitment to our policy statement, which prohibits homosexual activity at the university," said Maureen Taylor, director of strategic communication at APU.

Wheaton College in suburban Chicago planned to give the riders limited access to its students during the group's April 20-21 visit by offering a series of seminars addressing the agenda set forth by gay activist groups. "A panel discussion will be the central event of the visit," said campus spokeswoman

Tiffany Self. "This will offer an opportunity for members of the community to hear why Soulforce has embarked on this Equality Ride and why Wheaton's stance will not change from the historical stance of the church."

Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell denied the Equality Riders access to his campus March 10, accusing the group of not acting in good faith. He said Liberty hosted a Soulforce team last year, allowing them almost unlimited access to roughly 150 people at its campus church.

"Several of the Soulforce delegation later professed faith in Christ and abandoned the homosexual lifestyle," Falwell said. "However, it is now our firm belief that Soulforce is ... simply trying to use such encounters on Christian college campuses as a media attraction and for their ultimate purpose of fundraising."

Administrators at North Central University, an Assemblies of God college in Minneapolis, also did not allow the riders on their campus April 17. As a result, the riders staged a protest near the school. Similar rallies were held near Liberty University's campus and in Dallas March 31 outside the national convention of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Most of the colleges targeted during the Equality Ride are CCCU members or affiliates.

Herrin believes Soulforce's cause is advanced no matter how schools respond. "Every time a school validates the necessity of the discussion we bring to a campus, we view that as part of the evolution of faith and social justice moving toward reconciliation," she said. "We will not be barred from this conversation any longer."

Exodus President Alan Chambers said Christians should expect the gay community to become more aggressive in its attempt to change public sentiment about homosexuality. Believers should strive to model Jesus' example "of being 100 percent grace and 100 percent truth," he said. "Once we are educated and have the right attitude, then I believe we need to proactively go out in the public square and begin countering the lies ... with the truth.

"Martin Luther King said it best: The church is neither the master of the state or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. The church needs to regain its role as the conscience of our society and help navigate it through these very murky waters. The stakes are high: our children."

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