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Christian ministry caught up in rights battle on campus

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Illustration: Photos, A) Tufts University junior Jonathan Lee and graduate student Myriam Herlet pack their car for a campus InterVarsity Christian Fellowship end-of-year retreat last weekend. The chapter is being booted off campus because it will not allow homosexual students in leadership.; B) InterVarsity members (from left) junior Lakeisha Ruley, sophomore Amanda Watson and freshman Robert Woo plan for the retreat, held to discuss options in the battle between Christian and homosexual forces., Both By Chin Goh/Special to The Washington Times

When Curtis Chang enrolled at Harvard University in 1972, he was an idealistic Taiwanese immigrant eager to learn how democracy was born in the Boston area nearly 200 years earlier.

He eventually went on staff of the campus ministry InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and was assigned to Tufts University, about a 15-minute drive from Harvard.

Nearly 30 years later, he is at the vortex of a battle between Christian and homosexual forces at the 8,000-student university. Tufts is one of four campuses in the country where IVCF chapters are being booted off campus because they will not allow homosexual students in leadership.

"The great irony," he says, "is Tufts was founded by Unitarians [in 1852] seeking to escape religious persecution from more orthodox Christians at Harvard."

IVCF chapters have also been silenced on these campuses:

* Grinnell College in central Iowa, which unchartered its chapter of IVCF during

the 1996-97 school year after a homosexual student was told he could not lead the group.

* Middlebury College in Vermont, which is clashing over another homosexual student who has petitioned to run for office in the IVCF chapter there. The chapter refused to allow his name on the ballot, mainly because he does not believe homosexual behavior is sinful. The campus administration has threatened to evict the chapter.

* Whitman College, a Presbyterian campus in Walla Walla, Wash., where the IVCF group has been defunded after being accused by another student group of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

* Tufts, where the IVCF fellowship refused to allow one of its members, a lesbian, to run for office. When she complained, the student government voted to derecognize the 70-member group. The group has since hired a lawyer and has appealed the decision to a student/faculty board.

Until then, the fellowship, which ordinarily meets on campus eight times a week, cannot advertise, recruit, notify its members of meetings, nor call itself the Tufts Christian Fellowship, a title it has held since 1940. IVCF members went on retreat last weekend to discuss their options.

"I don't think people at Tufts and Middlebury know what they are getting into by going down this path," says Steve Balch, executive director of the National Association of Scholars in Princeton, N.J.

"It's a New Age type of psychological egalitarianism where everyone has to be affirmed and sexuality is beyond the bounds of appropriate moral discourse; whatever you do is great.

"These institutions talk about being multicultural. What does that mean? Doesn't that mean respecting different communities? It's not like this Christian group is bothering anybody. They're not going off and setting bombs."

Charles Haynes, senior scholar for the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center in Arlington, says these are cases "of the freedom of religion bumping up against what the community considers what the civil rights of its members are."

"In the Tufts case, the freedom of these students to select leadership consistent with their faith is the most important principle," he says. "Whereas it would exclude some students, it doesn't make sense to allow student religious

groups to be formed on campus and then deny them the right to have an identity and adhere to their beliefs. To deny them the right to be led by people who hold those convictions denies freedom of association and freedom of speech."

Jerry Martin, president for the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, said the civil rights argument increasingly will be used against campus religious organizations.

"What's struck me in all these kinds of cases is universities are supersensitive in regard to certain favorite groups, but show no sensitivity whatsoever to their religious groups," he says. "Certainly in the classroom, such students get ridicule, jokes or insults about their belief in God or any particular religion."

Even university officials have begun ridiculing Christian students, as shown by some comments in an ongoing debate about the Tufts controversy on the Chronicle of Higher Education Web site.

"I find comments of various Christian 'victims' on this matter almost comical," wrote Todd Martinez-Padilla Simmons, director of media relations for the University of South Florida. "No one is trampling the Tufts Christian group's right to freedom of association, freedom of expression or freedom to choose its own leadership. What is being said is that if the group expects campus funding and recognition, it mustn't discriminate against others."

But Utah State philosophy professor Richard Sherlock countered: "Groups have a clear right to define who they are and what they stand for. Orthodox Catholic or Jewish students will not let women be priests or rabbis. The institution actually has no business in trying to tell these groups and others what to believe."

Phil Evans, spokesman for the Madison, Wis.-based IVCF, which comprises 750 chapters involving 34,000 students on 560 campuses, said membership is open to anyone.

"Students from any background can investigate Christianity," he says, "but we feel a private organization and a religiously based organization should select its own criteria for leadership selection. It's identical to the Supreme Court's case on the Boy Scouts: Can a private organization establish its own leadership criteria? Some campuses say we cannot."

Mr. Chang said no religious group on campus - save the Asian Christian

Fellowship - would openly side with them.

"It's one word: fear," he says. "Sheer, raw fear. They feared the political climate would turn against them next. I don't know how many conversations I've had with other religious folks on campus - the eastern Orthodox, orthodox Jews, Muslims and Catholics - who admit they share the same religious beliefs as we do and admit they're under the same danger. There is a determined movement to eradicate dissent."

University of Pennsylvania history professor Alan Kors, president of the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, says it's the Christians who should be crying foul.

"Evangelical Protestant groups and conservative Catholics are expected to hear any insult at all without being offended," he said. "They're called born-again bigots or Jesus freaks. No one is ever prosecuted for that under harassment codes.

"Imagine a scenario where evangelical Christians could run for leadership in a gay organization without their views on sexuality be taken into account. No one would impose that on a gay group."

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