Being Christian and Gay Aren't at Odds, Group Says

The Soulforce Equality Ride stops in Riverside to challenge Baptist students' thinking about sexual orientation.

By Arin Gencer, Times Staff Writer
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The 15 young adults stepped onto the campus of Riverside's California Baptist University on Tuesday expecting some conflict.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, they wanted to challenge students' ways of thinking about sexual orientation. They wanted to tell the school's possibly closeted students that God loved them, and that being gay and Christian was not a contradiction.

The group, participants in a 51-day nationwide bus tour called the Soulforce Equality Ride, was provided a campus activities room, across the hall from Wanda's, a bustling cafe, to meet students. University officials asked them not to distribute any pamphlets outside that area.

The riders, as they call themselves, planned to push those limits — a move that last month had gotten 14 of them arrested at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., and six more at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla.

But when they ventured outside to a courtyard, where students sat chatting, reading books and studying for exams, they found a campus largely ready to hear them. Not to accept or condone, but to listen.

A few riders stood in the courtyard's center, reading letters written to the Rev. Dr. Mel White, the gay minister who founded Soulforce. Some letters praised him, while others condemned him, and the riders shared them to demonstrate what they called Christian intolerance.

Others spread out, distributing pamphlets titled "What the Bible Says — and Doesn't Say — About Homosexuality." The Soulforce Equality Ride aims to open a dialogue at Christian universities and military academies nationwide with policies that prohibit homosexual relationships and discipline those students who don't comply.

"These are people who are standing up for people that don't have a voice," said David Coleman, 23, one of the riders, the majority of whom identify themselves as Christians. "They need to know that their humanity is worth something."

Coleman played guitar and sang worship tunes such as "Yes, Lord, Yes" and "Open the Eyes of My Heart" with a fellow rider.

Students started to gather in a half-circle.

Junior Jamie Terpack, 21, scrutinized the arguments inside the Soulforce booklet, which lay on top of her open New King James Version Bible. She had skipped her class on the care and prevention of athletic injuries to hear what the riders had to say.

While she read the booklet, a friend was looking for a biblical verse to counter the
Soulforce argument.

"Where is the verse in Corinthians?" asked Michelle Schmidt, 22, a senior. She took Terpack's Bible. Behind them, another friend, Christopher Williams, 19, was talking to his mother on a cellphone, seeking more verses from Genesis to explain their position.

"There it is!" Schmidt said seconds later, having found the passage that read, "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God." She slapped hands with Terpack.

"I think a lot of times Christians come across as if we're gay haters," Terpack said. "But homosexuality is a sin.... The sins in my life are just as against God as their choice to live that lifestyle."

She and Williams debated that point with Coleman later that morning, pointing to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. The conversation was polite, never heated, but they both held their ground.

The men of Sodom wanted to have sex with two male visitors, Williams said, one of many sins that led to their destruction.

"Sodom and Gomorrah was actually about hospitality," Coleman said. "I don't necessarily think that's a condemnation of homosexuality."

"It's a sin," Williams said. "It's a sin."

Minutes later, just after noon, Yajaira Cadet, 29, a senior, asked Coleman and rider Jacob Neal, 21, whether they thought gays who converted to Christianity and renounced their homosexuality were liars.

"Have you met any of those people?" Neal asked.

I'm one of those people," Cadet said. Seven years ago, the native of the Dominican Republic said, she met God and I gave up her homosexual life. Now a married woman with a 3-year-old son, she said, "I cannot imagine not being with the opposite sex.

God "cannot judge me one way and you another way," Cadet said. "To be a just and righteous God, he has to judge everyone by the same measure."

California Baptist, with about 3,100 students, was one of three schools on the ride's swing through California. Another group went to Biola University in La Mirada. All 33 riders will go to Azusa Pacific University today. The ride started in March and is scheduled to end this month at West Point, N.Y.

At California Baptist, even as the riders and students grappled with their divergent views and common faith, they both experienced moments of light.

Rider Tommy Atz, 25, sat at one table in the activities room and described how high school classmates in his Philadelphia suburb would harass him daily, asking him if he had HIV and flinging epithets at his brother and friends as well. Raised a Baptist and
now not affiliated with any religion, he remembers his mother telling him he was "not created by God" and his grandparents saying he was going to hell.

"I feel like the Bible's being used as a weapon, and that's not OK," Atz told the nine students around him. But then one of them, Brad Noblitt, 22, surprised him.

"I apologize for all the other people who've treated you guys that way … because that's not at all, as believers in the Christian faith, what we're supposed to do," Noblitt said. "We're called to love you guys."

Atz, in turn, apologized "for giving up on you all."

A table away, Terpack and fellow junior Christal Walker, 21, were engaged in a more passionate exchange with ride organizer Jacob Reitan, 24.

Her Bible still in hand, Terpack and others argued about verses in Genesis and Matthew that said men and women were created for each other.

"I believe in my heart that Genesis applies to me too," Reitan said. "I want somebody to share my hopes and dreams, to raise a family."

But his helper, as Eve's relationship with Adam was described in Genesis, could only be a man, because he wasn't attracted to women, Reitan added.

The students disagreed, saying it was one thing to have feelings for men — and another to act on them.

Reitan said he didn't expect them to embrace gay and lesbian relationships until they changed their view of them as sins.

Terpack stretched out her hand and asked, "What's your name?"

Reitan told her.

"Jake," Terpack said as they shook hands, "we'll be praying for you."

http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-ride5apr05,1,6529372.story?page=1