Gay-rights activists pursue dialogue at college

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The debate about homosexuality among Christians was heated but civil at California Baptist University in Riverside on Tuesday when a group of young gay-rights activists on a nationwide college bus tour stopped to meet with students.

Participants in the Soulforce Equality Ride, which organizers say is modeled after the freedom rides of the civil-rights era, seek the reversal of religion-based policies that they say exclude gay people.

Organizers said Cal Baptist's admissions policy discriminates against gay students.

But school officials said the campus does not ask students about their sexual orientation. Its policy states that students must refrain from "sexual conduct outside of marriage as defined by the state of California."

California law defines marriage as being between a man and a woman.

The riders, who organizers say include gay, lesbian and transgender Christians, talked with Cal Baptist students in a central courtyard and a student activities room. They also handed out brochures and pins.

Many students listened. Some watched. Several asked questions and debated with the riders.

One student sat listening to music over headphones and sang loudly as if trying to drown out a lesbian who was telling her story of coming out to her friends and family.

The Soulforce group made headlines in recent weeks after members were arrested on suspicion of trespassing at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.; Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va.; and Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla.

Riverside police officers were present on campus Tuesday, but there were no arrests.
"We were very pleased with our students' response. They exhibited good, positive Christian hospitality," said Mark Wyatt, Cal Baptist's vice president for marketing and communication. "We feel like it was a positive and gracious reception, even though sometimes it didn't feel like it was reciprocated."

Wyatt was not happy because group members did not stay in a room reserved for them, and he didn't know that Soulforce riders had invited members of other gay-rights groups.

The visitors included the Rev. Mel White, Soulforce's founder, and members of DignityUSA, a group of gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics.

White is a gay-rights activist and former ghostwriter for evangelists Billy Graham, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

Jacob Neal, 21, one of about 15 riders, spoke to a group of students in the campus's central courtyard about his right to be gay and Christian.

But Cal Baptist senior Yajaira Cadet, 29, said she did not believe that Neal could be both.

Cadet told the group she was a lesbian who changed after becoming a Christian seven years ago. Now, she said she is happily married and has a son, 3.

"I don't believe that homosexuality and Christianity are compatible," said Cadet, a psychology and Christian studies major.

Neal shook Cadet's hand and said, "I validate you as a person."

Neal, a junior at the University of Richmond in Virginia, later said he was saddened by their encounter because she didn't agree that gays could be Christians.

"I do think it exposed an inequity in our coming together," he said.

Jamie Terpack, 21, a junior at Cal Baptist, debated with Jacob Reitan, co-director of the Soulforce Equality Ride, about his right to be Christian and gay. She told him that she could love him but not condone his actions as a gay man.

"If you choose a lifestyle of open homosexuality, that's not what the Bible teaches," said Terpack, a kinesiology major.

Reitan said he was pleased with the group's day on campus.

"This conversation would not be confined to one room," Reitan said. "I'm very happy. We did it our way, and it was the right way."

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