

Lariat editorial sparks controversy_30804

March 5, 2004

Posted: 3/05/04

Lariat editorial sparks controversy

By Marv Knox

Editor

WACO-A Baylor University student newspaper editorial supporting gay marriage has been condemned by Baylor President Robert Sloan and ruled a violation of school policy by the university's Student Publications Board.

An editorial in the Feb. 27 Baylor Lariat affirms a lawsuit brought by the city of San Francisco, which seeks to declare unconstitutional the California Family Code's definition of marriage—a union between a man and a woman.

A tagline at the end of the column indicates the Lariat editorial board voted 5-2 in favor of the position.

"While we respect the rights of students to hold and express divergent viewpoints, we do not support the use of publications such as the Lariat, which is published by the university, to advocate positions that undermine the foundational Christian principles upon which this institution was founded and currently operates."

—Robert Sloan, Baylor University president

More than 3,200 gay couples have been married since Feb. 12, when Mayor

Gavin Newsom announced the city would provide them with marriage licenses, the editorial notes.

The editorial outlines response to that event, including California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's attempt to prevent the city from issuing marriage licenses to gay couples and the city's legal challenge to the definition of marriage.

"San Francisco officials believe barring gay marriages violates the equal protection and due process clauses of the state constitution," the editorial says. "The editorial board supports San Francisco's lawsuit against the state."

The editorial also offers the board's rationale for gay marriage.

"Taking into account equal protection under the law, gay couples should be granted the same equal rights to legal marriage as heterosexual couples," the editorial stresses. "Without such recognition, gay couples, even those who have cohabitated long enough to qualify as common-law spouses under many state laws, often aren't granted the same protection when it comes to shared finances, health insurance and other employee benefits, and property and power-of-attorney rights.

"Like many heterosexual couples, many gay couples share deep bonds of love, some so strong they've persevered years of discrimination for their choice to cohabit with and date one another. Just as it isn't fair to discriminate against someone for their skin color, heritage or religious beliefs, it isn't fair to discriminate against someone for their sexual orientation.

"Shouldn't gay couples be allowed to enjoy the benefits and happiness of marriage, too?"

Sloan refuted the newspaper's assertion.

"This position held by five students does not reflect the views of the administration, faculty, staff, board of regents or Student Publications Board, which oversees the Lariat," Sloan said in a statement distributed to media March 1. "Nor do I believe this stance on gay marriage is shared by the vast majority of Baylor's 14,000 students and 100,000 alumni."

The editorial touched off a torrent of response, Sloan acknowledged.

"We have already heard from a number of students, alumni and parents who are, as am I, justifiably outraged over this editorial," he said.

Sloan sought to draw a line between free expression and inappropriate advocacy.

"While we respect the rights of students to hold and express divergent viewpoints, we do not support the use of publications such as the Lariat, which is published by the university, to advocate positions that undermine the foundational Christian principles upon which this institution was founded and currently operates."

The Student Publications Board, comprised of Baylor administrators and faculty who oversee three professional staff members who supervise the Lariat's student staff, concurred with Sloan.

The board "has determined that the editorial published in the Lariat on Feb. 27 ... violates university policy as defined in the student handbook, as well as student publications policy," the board reported in a statement released after it met March 1.

"The student publications policy states that 'since Baylor University was established and is still supported by Texas Baptists to conduct a program of higher education in a Christian context, no editorial stance of student publications should attack the basic tenets of Christian theology or Christian morality,'" the statement continued.

“Clearly, the editorial published on Feb. 27 is inconsistent with this policy. The guidelines have been reviewed with the Lariat staff, so that they will be able to avoid this error in the future.”

Ricky George, a Baylor staff member and news director of the Lariat, accepted blame for the editorial.

“I made an error in judgment,” he conceded in a prepared statement. “It is my responsibility to ensure the students have a strong editorial voice within the parameters of Baylor's mission.”

Wallace Daniel, chairman of the Student Publications Board, said George has “done a very competent job” of supervising the Lariat's news staff, “but he missed this.”

“He was contrite. He said he saw this (the editorial's position) as a legal issue,” said Daniel, dean of Baylor's College of Arts and Sciences. “The publications board took a different view. We didn't appreciate it.”

Lacy Elwood, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, issued a statement on behalf of the Lariat editorial board.

“We ... stand by our decision to address an issue at the forefront of national public debate,” she said. “The editorial board's opinions reflect the views of the majority of its members, not necessarily those of the Baylor community, as stated in a disclaimer on the editorial page.”

Daniel said the Student Publications Board feels it has resolved the issue without retribution.

“We see this as a learning opportunity in which some people made a serious mistake,” he said. “We didn't retaliate or remove anybody. ... We have gone over again very strictly our policy regulations. I doubt we'll see it happen again.”

Speaking to the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board March 2, BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade stressed the editorial does not represent the opinion of the state convention.

“We are disappointed that this small group of students chose to editorialize in support of gay marriage,” Wade said, reading from a prepared statement. “We do respect the students' right to discuss the issue openly and to voice their opinion, but to do so in an official Baylor publication lends more seriousness than their opinions merit.

“They do not express the opinion of the university, its leadership, of the student body, or of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. They represent only themselves.”

Wade also commended Sloan's response to the situation and affirmed a longstanding Texas Baptist position.

“Baylor University and the Baptist General Convention of Texas have been consistent about our stance that homosexual behavior is sinful,” Wade said. “The BGCT's guide is always Scripture on every issue, and the biblical model only allows for marriage between a man and a woman.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.