

Abilene Christian University to review sexuality policy

December 14, 2023

ABILENE (RNS)—Abilene Christian University is revisiting its sexuality policy after more than 2,000 students, alumni and friends of the university voiced concerns about Holy Sexuality Week, claiming the school event on relationships and sexuality included one-sided, exclusionary messages about LGBTQ people.

“You gave a public platform to people who denied the lived reality of LGBTQ+ Christians, claimed inaccurately that homosexuality lacks a genetic basis, and made the ludicrous and hateful statement that ‘the opposite of homosexuality is holiness,’” said a Nov. 16 letter written by Wildcats for Inclusion, a new alumni group formed in the wake of Holy Sexuality Week.

In an email to the group, university President Phil Schubert said the board of trustees plans to review the school’s Sexual Stewardship Policy in January.



Wildcats for Inclusion voiced concern about Holy Sexuality Week at Abilene Christian University, asserting the campus event

included one-sided, exclusionary messages about LGBTQ people. (Screen Grab / YouTube video of campus tour)

But in an interview with Religion News Service, Schubert said that while he can't speak for the board, he doesn't expect the policy to change, largely because the board dedicated extensive time to researching, praying over and developing its policy in 2017.

That policy calls for "chastity outside of marriage between a man and a woman" and for the university "to create an inclusive environment for all students—even those who disagree with ACU's beliefs—so long as they refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and woman."

"We don't have a neutral position on this," Schubert said in response to concerns about one-sided messaging at the event. "We're a faith-based institution of higher learning that is governed by a board of trustees that is deeply faith committed. And so, they've chosen to provide some guidance on this.

"So, I understand that some would like there to be equal representation of affirming and traditional views of marriage, but that's not where the university sits today. And it's not what we feel is the responsibility we have to teach and mentor students according to what we believe the Bible instructs."

From Nov. 6-9, the school, affiliated with Churches of Christ, hosted a handful of speakers who addressed topics related to sex and sexuality. Ninety percent of those speaking events, Schubert said, were not focused on same-sex relationships.

Speaker describes 'sin struggle'

Speakers included Christopher Yuan, an author who has taught at Moody Bible Institute, who used to identify as gay. In his chapel session, Yuan emphasized God's unconditional love but added that love doesn't include unconditional approval of a person's behavior.

"The opposite of homosexuality is holiness," said Yuan. "In fact, the opposite of every sin struggle is holiness."

Just as people who struggle with depression shouldn't make their identity about being depressed, people shouldn't make being gay their identity, Yuan said.

He went on to compare identifying as gay to identifying with watching pornography or committing adultery.

"None of us should put our identity in our sin struggle," he said.

Wildcats for Inclusion said in a Dec. 5 letter posted online: "By our count, Christopher Yuan alone compared homosexuality to two mental illnesses, a horrific disease, and a majority of the so-called 'Seven Deadly Sins' from Proverbs. Even as he rightly and admirably condemned the bullying of queer people, he perpetuated the conditions that allow bullying to occur."

In response to a request for comment, Yuan directed RNS toward Luke 9:23, which says "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." He also pointed to the conclusion of his chapel lecture, where he said that rather than summarizing his story by saying he is no longer gay, his story is really about finding Christ.

"I once was lost and now I'm found. I once did not believe and now I believe in the Son of God and his name is Jesus," he said.

‘Spirit of kindness and compassion’

Schubert said each of Holy Sexuality Week’s sessions, including Yuan’s, effectively balanced truth and love and was pervaded with a “spirit of kindness and compassion.” Schubert said he would not characterize any of the speakers’ remarks as “hateful.”

While society often interprets disagreement as hateful, he said, Abilene Christian University strives to have effective conversation about a host of relevant topics, “and even in our disagreement, reflect love and compassion that is from God.”

Some students, including over 100 LGBTQ students who signed the Nov. 16 Wildcats for Inclusion letter, said they felt the series didn’t allow room for complexity or discussion.

In addition, the Dec. 5 letter from Wildcats for Inclusion included testimonials from students who said that in the wake of Holy Sexuality Week, they were “harassed online,” experienced panic attacks and heard a student joke that “all gay people deserve to die.”

“The topic was presented as if it were to be discussed as a conversation with multiple viewpoints. Instead there was only one viewpoint: Don’t be gay and if you choose to be so, you have to stay celibate,” Brinkley Zielinski, a first-year student at the university, told RNS.

“I was also appalled to hear homosexuality be compared to depression, but also an eating disorder,” Zielinski said, noting that one of the other speakers had argued that supporting homosexuality is the same as someone supporting an anorexic friend starving herself.

Zielinski said since Holy Sexuality Week, she has also been more concerned about her safety as an openly queer student.

“I feel in the establishment’s eyes, I’m a sinner, but to a larger degree than the rest of the population,” she said.

In response to Holy Sexuality Week, Wildcats for Inclusion has made three requests: Reopen discussion about ACU’s Sexual Stewardship Policy; incorporate human sexuality in the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’s efforts; and revise the school’s approach to future series on human sexuality to include diverse Christian perspectives.

Promised a ‘safe and welcoming atmosphere’

Paul Anthony, one of the 15 alumni organizing Wildcats for Inclusion, noted support for the group’s letter shows that a large cross-section of the ACU community agrees that what happened at Holy Sexuality Week was a significant problem the school needs to address.

“We’re obviously grateful that the board is going to discuss again the sexual stewardship policy in January, but then the president has been on local television this past week saying he doesn’t expect the policy to change. So we’ll see what happens,” Anthony said.

“We’re obviously not going to stop pushing, because we think it’s important that queer students be given the safe and welcoming atmosphere they were promised when they enrolled at ACU.”

Schubert confirmed the board is planning to revisit the policy in the new year, describing the move as a “routine activity” that was “somewhat influenced by Holy Sexuality Week and responses to it.” Wildcats for Inclusion has also requested to meet with him, and while the details are still being sorted, Schubert told RNS he is “very open” to the meeting.

“I don’t think the university is going to change its policy, but would we be

willing to host thoughtful conversations that might include varying perspectives? I think that's something worth considering," Schubert said.

As far as bullying is concerned, Schubert said the university has a clear zero-tolerance policy.

As the board anticipates revisiting the school's sexuality policy and the school considers whether to make Holy Sexuality Week a regular event, Zielinski called on the ACU administration to take time to reflect on how Holy Sexuality Week impacted queer students like her.

"Your queer students took a leap of faith coming to this school, *I* took a leap of faith choosing to study here," Zielinski wrote in an email to RNS. "Many queer students including myself were told by you that 'we belong here.' After Holy Sexuality Week, I can assure very few of us feel that that is still the case."