



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 27, 2012

Vanderbilt Forbids “Personal Commitment to Jesus” in Student Group’s Bylaws

Last year the CLS was one of four Christian groups on campus targeted by school officials for their distinctly Christian requirements for leaders and members. The other groups were [Fellowship of Christian Athletes](#), Graduate Christian Fellowship, and [Beta Upsilon Chi](#). According to an [overview of the case by CLS](#), Vanderbilt has dropped its long-standing embrace of Christian groups, decreeing that such groups can no longer:



- [Require their leaders to agree with the groups’ religious beliefs.](#)
- Require leaders to lead Bible studies, prayer, and worship.
- Force leaders to step down if their religious beliefs change (for example, if a leader became an atheist — which, the school’s administration conceded, has actually happened at the school).

In all, CLS noted, a total of 13 Christian student groups have “have joined together to resist the administration’s demand that religious groups surrender the right to have their leaders agree with their religious beliefs.” In addition to the original four, those groups are: Asian American Christian Fellowship, Vanderbilt Catholic, Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru), Medical Christian Fellowship, Navigators, Bridges International, St. Thomas More Society, Lutheran Student Fellowship, and Every Nation Ministries.

According to the [Christian Post](#), when Vanderbilt student groups were allowed to register in mid-April for campus recognition, they were required to agree to a new “all-comers” policy that prohibits the groups from selecting members and leaders on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. “Christian groups on campus argue that the new policy violates ‘the central tenets of our faith,’ as being able to elect faith-filled leaders is integral to the survival of a religious group,” reported the *Post*.

Thus far this year, the university has accepted 26 faith-based campus groups, none of them the 13 groups that have resisted the university’s faith-denying requirement.

Early in the year, 11 of the Christian groups, calling themselves Vanderbilt Solidarity, issued a [statement in opposition](#) to the university’s new policy, noting that up until the implementation of the “anti-discrimination” policy, “Vanderbilt explicitly protected the freedom of all student organizations to select members and leaders who shared and supported the group’s purpose, including - for religious groups - its faith.”

The statement noted that each of the eleven organizations “is a faith-based group dedicated to sharing the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on campus. As such, we simply cannot allow those who do not share our faith to lead our ministries, as Vanderbilt now demands.”

When it came time to register for campus recognition in mid-April, some of the Christian groups “purposefully issued their individual charters with specific faith requirements for membership and



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leadership positions,” reported the *Post*. “Other religious groups, such as the university’s Catholic student group, Vanderbilt Catholic, chose not to register at all.” In either case, such groups have been denied campus status because of their refusal to abide by the school’s “all comers” policy.

Richard McCarty, Vanderbilt’s provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs, said that university officials were “disappointed that some religious groups have either not applied for registered student status or submitted applications that do not comply with the policy. We will continue our conversations with them into the next academic year.” He said that the university had emphasized “that the policy is about rejecting discrimination and not about restricting religious freedom. We firmly believe the two principles can coexist on the Vanderbilt campus, and are gratified that many of our religious student organizations agree.”

Apparently, none of the faith-based groups making the cut had emphasized the importance of a personal commitment to Christ, as had the CLS. When applying for recognition, the group had provided the following stipulation: “Criteria for officer selection will include level and quality of past involvement, personal commitment to Jesus Christ, commitment to the organization, and demonstrated leadership ability.”

University officials responded by informing the group that in order to retain its campus recognition, it would have to drop the requirement of a “personal commitment to Christ” for leaders, and substitute the following sentence into its bylaws: “Criteria for officer selection will include level and quality of past involvement, commitment to the organization, and demonstrated leadership ability.”

Kim Colby, a spokesperson for CLS, told the *Christian Post* that when Vanderbilt reviewed the group’s constitution on January 31, CLS leaders were told that everything was in order for retaining campus recognition. But nearly three month later, on April 24, “ they were told it’s not fine unless you take out these five words: ‘a personal commitment to Jesus Christ’ requirement for your leaders,” Colby recalled. “They were told they would not be recognized next year, which means they cannot reserve space, or attend the student fair, or be a part of e-mail blasts from the college.”

In a [press statement](#) regarding the required change, CLS noted that by mandating the elimination of a personal commitment to Jesus Christi, “Vanderbilt requires students to abandon their religious integrity and undermines their religious freedoms. Leadership is crucial to the direction of any organization. Eliminating the requirement of a commitment to Jesus Christ in leaders takes away the group’s ability to effectively fulfill its purpose and continue its ministry.”

CLS said that in compelling Christian groups “to choose between remaining on campus and upholding their religious convictions, the university inhibits the development of a community based on freedom and inclusivity.”

Colby told [Fox News](#) that there is no way CLS can comply with the university’s demands. “They’re going to leave campus rather than take those five words out of their constitution,” she said. She pointed out that the school’s intransigent attitude appears to be specifically targeting Christian groups. “Any students have to be concerned about what an administration that’s being as radical as the Vanderbilt administration has been might do,” she told Fox. “There’s a lot at stake for students when they stand up against their administration.”

She added that “we used to have religious liberty — where people understand that religious groups having their leaders agree with their faith was not only permissible and protected, it was common sense. And we’ve lost a lot of common sense in this country.”



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At least one Tennessee legislator is fighting back, however. State Representative Bill Dunn has drafted legislation that would block Vanderbilt's policy because, while it is a private university, it still receives public funding. "Some people have book sense and other people have common sense," Dunn told Fox News. "I think Vandy has gone with what the liberal elite would like to see and they aren't using the common sense God has given them."

Dunn's proposal would allow the university to maintain its "all-comers" policy, but would require it to be broadened to include all student groups, including fraternities and sororities. Thus far, those two categories of student groups have been exempted because of federal Title IX regulations covering gender.

Dunn said that the selective policy "shows the hypocrisy of Vanderbilt University. They know they can pick on Christian groups and it won't affect their donors. But if they go after fraternities and sororities they realize it might hit them in the pocket book."

[OneNewsNow.com](#) reported that in response to Dunn's proposed legislation, Vanderbilt has threatened to stop offering medical treatment to the poor under Tennessee's Medicaid managed care program. Attorney David French of the [American Center for Law and Justice](#) noted that such a response demonstrates Vanderbilt's skewed commitment "to excluding Christians from campus. They would rather stop treating poor Tennesseans, they would rather stop treating the 'least of these,' and turn their backs on their fellow Tennesseans than give in and allow Christian groups to have basic religious liberty on their campus."

Graphic: Emblems of the Christian Legal Society (top) and Vanderbilt University



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