NCAA Common Ground & Wesleyan Higher Education

Over the past decade, one of the more challenging conversations in higher education has been how a Christian university effectively and gracefully engages with LGBTQ individuals and the broader gay community. Some of these conversations, and unfortunately some of the lack of conversations, have been in the face of legislative processes that aimed to eliminate access for student financial aid at faith-based higher educational institutions. Other times, the encounters assumed there was nothing in common and therefore communication was blocked, resisted, or assumed to be impossible.

As culture and power shifted, particularly in the political and legislative processes, one could easily assume as unlikely any attempt to meet and seek understanding. However, something as simple and universal as seeking what is best for students became a unifying purpose for seeking a conversation and a common ground for relationships.

A door was opened by the courage of Pat Griffin to walk across the aisle at an athletic convention and ask those at the Fellowship of Christian Athletes table if there was anything they would have in common to talk about. As a result, the NCAA and Christian higher education have come together for the good of students. Through the Wesleyan Holiness Connection, those initial steps have been extended, bringing universities and colleges in the Wesleyan tradition to have personal, frank, and generous conversations to seek ways to build some common ground.

Last September and again in February, I had the opportunity to join several other WHC presidents for meaningful conversations with the leadership of the Common Ground committee within the NCAA. Each of us came to listen, share, learn, understand, and seek to ensure the very best for students, both LGBTQ students and students of faith.

Hearing the very personal, difficult, and painful journeys of those leading Common Ground, which, no doubt, reflect the journey of many others, has provided insights to individual lives too often lost in the shouting at each other that is common in society today. Hearing brothers and sisters of faith share their struggle and pain as LGBTQ individuals has been revelatory and frankly, heartbreaking. These conversations reminded me how difficult this work is and how it is too often the case that the Christian community has just not entered into to the conversation with individuals.

When most of Christianity is characterized as being like the Westboro Baptist Church, it is no surprise that the LGBTQ community has little interest in knowing us. It’s also true that too many in the Christian community stereotype the gay community and find little reason to know and talk with individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Through our meetings we have found that we can talk and listen and that we do have a common interest in our students. That was and is the foundation of the ongoing dialogue among friends and colleagues for each of us participating.

After these meetings with Common Ground LGBTQ leaders and other opportunities to a part of the general conversation, I am convinced that this effort is a model for caring and working together to ensure that LGBTQ students are safe and respected at faith-based universities and that students of faith are safe and respected at secular universities. We are committed, even when it is difficult, to work for the good of our students, and in the process, be the presence of Christ that our universities work so hard to reflect in our living, teaching, and shaping.

The reality is that too often in today’s society, the conversation around LGBTQ and faith issues tends to seek the destruction of the other in generalized terms involving no faces and no relationships. Our conversations with the Common Ground leaders is a model for a different way. It doesn’t eliminate the difficult questions or avoid the questions around the theological and faith practices that are essential to the church, but this effort does seek to see a person, to hear a story, and to seek to understand the other person. For me, these conversations have been holy conversations where I have felt the presence of Christ and seen the faces of brothers and sisters who are loved by Christ.

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