

Timeline

OCTOBER, 1996:

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship leader Rebecca Harms '97, resigns her position because of her views on homosexuality.

NOVEMBER 15, 1996: *The Scarlet & Black* reports that "a number of students outside the organization have raised questions as to whether or not" InterVarsity violated Grinnell College's nondiscrimination policy.

NOVEMBER 21, 1996: Tom Crady and Frank Thomas meet with members of InterVarsity; Crady informs them that he is rescinding their student group status. InterVarsity plans to appeal the decision to President Pamela Ferguson.

JANUARY 21, 1997: Six leaders of InterVarsity, in a letter to Ferguson, lay out their reasons for asking Harms to resign. "Rebecca Harms is not a homosexual," they write. "She was asked to step down because of a difference in theological beliefs."

FEBRUARY 28, 1997: After consultation with lawyers for the college, Ferguson announces that she will uphold Crady's ruling.

SUMMER 2000: A member of Grinnell College Christian Fellowship asks President Russell K. Osgood if the group could possibly be reinstated.

OCTOBER 2000: GCCF leaders begin the process of registering as a new student group. Crady informs them that there shouldn't be a problem, as long as the group agrees to abide by the nondiscrimination policy. They do.

NOVEMBER 1, 2000: Responding to news of GCCF being granted official status, SGA Senator Paul Ford '02, questions group leaders in front of a session of SGA Joint Board. Some senators question whether Joint Board can legitimately involve itself in such issues. The discussion lasts for about an hour.

compiled by Erik Gable

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS VS. HATE SPEECH

Grinnell College Christian Fellowship (GCCF) is reinstated after four years of suspension; debate continues

by Erik Gable
Staff Writer

A recent debate in SGA over the status of the Grinnell College Christian Fellowship has touched raw nerves and unearthed painful memories of a conflict that first divided the campus four years ago.

GCCF is the successor of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an organization which lost its official student group status in 1996 when Dean of Students Tom Crady ruled its leaders had violated the college's nondiscrimination policy. The controversy arose when Rebecca Harms '97, a worship leader for the group, resigned her position because her beliefs about homosexuality were in conflict with the group's interpretation of the Bible.

The revocation of InterVarsity's official status sparked angry debate on both sides of the issue, and "what ensued was four more months of campus turmoil," recalled Chaplain Deanna Shorb, who was present at the time.

"Lives were affected every day, and it was very painful," said Shorb.

Paul Ford '02, the senator who brought the question of GCCF's status before SGA, said that "it concerned me for the main reason that... it caused such a schism within the Christian community, and the Christian community is still recovering from what this schism cost."

Ford said the controversy "made an environment that was already unfriendly towards people with faith more unwelcoming."

For the next four years, the group operated unofficially, without being either an official InterVarsity chapter or a registered student group. Earlier this year, members of GCCF approached Crady and asked if the group would be eligible for official recognition by the college. While Crady stood by his 1996 decision, he agreed that GCCF could be recognized.

"The reason why we withdrew status before was because of an incident involving a member, not because of the beliefs of the group," Crady said. "We looked at the group freshly this time because they are a different group and they have agreed to follow our nondiscrimination policy."

When GCCF leaders met with him, Crady said, "they indicated that they are loosely affiliated" with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which is a national evangelical group.

However, the college does not control what off-campus affiliations a student group may have. Crady added that if the administration were to deny GCCF official status because of their association with InterVarsity, that too would be a violation of the nondiscrimination policy.

"I can't regulate the beliefs of a group," Crady said. "To regulate beliefs or to try and anticipate what groups would do once we register them would be problematic."

Shorb agreed. "Then, as now," she said, "we were not in the business of dictating beliefs."

In the wake of the InterVarsity controversy, then-President Pamela Ferguson appointed a task force to revise the college's nondiscrimination policy. As a result, a paragraph was added to the statement acknowledging that "the application of the college's nondiscrimination policy will often involve conflicting interests." It also stated that "the application of the nondiscrimination policy should always be made with consideration of how best to preserve the free, open, and civil exchange of ideas."

Whether the group would be censured if the homosexuality question came up again is subject to debate. "I would have definitely handled [the issue] the same" if it came up today, Crady said.

It is doubtful whether the group's actions in 1996 would be permissible under the 2000 nondiscrimination policy.

Angela Bishop '01, a leader of the group, she thought the 1996 situation would be covered today. "My impression was that because we are a religious group, we have the right to choose our leaders based on a biblical foundation, and that there is sway in the nondiscrimination policy for religion," she said.

Concerned about the decision to grant GCCF official status, Ford asked representatives of the group to attend the Nov. 1 meeting of the SGA Joint Board. He criticized the administration for not informing students about the decision sooner, arguing that "the history of Fellowship on this campus warrants our inclusion in this

discussion."

Crady said he couldn't have presented GCCF's request to SGA or the student body as a whole without questions of fairness coming up. "It's something we wouldn't do for any other group, and the concern would be treating groups equitably," he said.

"We cannot treat the reinstatement of the Fellowship like any other group being chartered," Ford countered. "When this group lost their charter, it caused a campus-wide conflict... any issue that has ramifications for the entire campus must be offered to the entire campus for comment."

Ford said he was concerned that GCCF was simply a reincarnation of InterVarsity, and that the 1996 situation could repeat itself.

Don Weston, an RLC and director of the Stonewall Coalition, was concerned about the group's ties to InterVarsity as well. "If they really want to serve the Grinnell community, and they want to be friendly to the GLBT community, they need to distance themselves from InterVarsity International and be an independent group," he said.

"InterVarsity has a history of being an anti-gay organization," Weston said. "I think their association with InterVarsity spoke more loudly than what they were saying about just wanting to be a ministry on this campus."

Leaders of GCCF said they have not yet decided whether to officially align themselves with the larger group. "We're not sure right now what level of association we want to have with

InterVarsity," Bishop said. While GCCF has been using InterVarsity's guidelines for group leaders, it has not been an official part of the organization since losing its charter.

"Technically, you can't be an InterVarsity chapter unless you are an official group at your school," Bishop said. Over the last few years, she added, "we've had a very fuzzy relationship" with InterVarsity.

"I just want to reiterate that what happened then is not our group now," Bishop said. "I would really like the campus to see us for who we are now, and not for how the campus reacted to the issue four years ago."

Weston questioned why GCCF would bring InterVarsity into the equation at all. "Why would they want to keep the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship controversy alive if their goal was to reach out to the campus?" he asked.

If the group does decide to become an InterVarsity affiliate, Bishop said, it would be largely to take advantage of the resources the larger group offers, including conferences, speakers, and contact with other Christian groups through a paid staff worker from InterVarsity. "It's very hard to be Christian on this campus," Bishop said. "A staff worker provides support, and a connection to Christians on other campuses."

GCCF has not yet ironed out its position on homosexuality, or even determined whether or not it will have an official position. Over the next few months, according to member Jonathan Emmons '02, the group will be "looking at all of our options."

Emmons said the group doesn't answer to InterVarsity, and as of now is only accountable to the college.

"The attitude of the group is a very loving, welcoming outlook based on the Bible, not on hatred of one group or another," Emmons said.

"To possess any hatred toward any group would be to go against the fundamental beliefs that we hold to," Bishop added. "It would go against everything we believe."

During and after the Nov. 1 meeting, some observers questioned whether SGA should involve itself in the debate at all. "A lot of senators think that Joint Board shouldn't have a say in these kinds of issues," said SGA president Sean Flammer '02, who presided over the hour-long discussion.

"I don't know what Tom [Crady] could have done differently," Flammer said.

Debates over the regulation of religious groups have been growing all over the country, and sexual orientation has emerged as a major bone of contention. "This campus, now and then, is a microcosm of the larger world," said Shorb. "This is the issue in churches right now. This is the divisive sociological issue."

What happened to InterVarsity in '96?

by Erik Gable
Staff Writer

At times, more rumor than fact has surrounded the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship controversy. Over the last four years, the story has circulated so much that some of its incarnations are virtually unrecognizable.

Even the national press got in on the act: last May, the *Washington Times* wrote that "Grinnell College, in Central Iowa... unchartered its chapter of IVCF during the 1996-97 school year after a homosexual student was told he could not lead the group." In fact, the student in question was not gay, and was not even male.

Reverend Deanna Shorb, the college chaplain, was at the center of events in late 1996. In October of that year, she recalled, an InterVarsity staff member who had been working with the campus chapter met with her "and told me they had made a decision that they wanted to share with me."

Shorb said the staff member, Anna Carney, had been preparing core members of the group to lead a bible study session on the first chapter of Corinthians. During the course of their meeting, Shorb said Carney drew a set of concentric circles representing basic tenets of InterVarsity, areas where leaders "could agree to disagree," and areas where they absolutely had to be unified.

Listed as basic tenets were such staples of Christian philosophy as the divinity of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible. Leaders didn't have to agree on whether or not women should be allowed to assume leadership roles in the church. And they had to agree that drunkenness, premarital sex, and homosexuality were all sins.

Angela Bishop '01, a leader of the Grinnell College Christian Fellowship, said her understanding was that the chapter leaders, not the larger InterVarsity organization, concluded homosexuality ran counter to Biblical teachings.

In either case, the statement caused a personal conflict for one leader. "At the end of that bible study," Shorb said, "this worship leader came forward and said that if they needed to absolutely agree with these things, they needed to know that when she arrived at Grinnell, she believed that homosexuality was a sin. But having spent time with homosexual Christians, gay men and lesbians, she no longer believed that homosexuality was a sin... [and] she wasn't sure that she qualified for leadership any longer."

She wanted the other leaders to decide, Shorb said, and after meeting, they elected to ask her to step down.

Almost exactly four years ago, on Nov. 15, 1996, the *Scarlet & Black* reported that the student, Rebecca Harms '97, had "chosen to resign her leadership position as her views on homosexuality [were] in conflict with the doctrinal basis of the national organization." Bishop said that Harms' resignation was entirely voluntary.

On Nov. 21, Dean of Students Tom Crady and Frank Thomas, who was then Vice President of Human Resources, told InterVarsity members that their status as

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