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MSOE, Christian group at peace

Decision gives full status after debate

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For several months, the Milwaukee School of Engineering and a group called ReJOYce in Jesus Campus Fellowship have found themselves in the middle of a national debate over the practices of college religious groups, an issue that pits the principle of freedom of speech and association against non-discrimination.

This week, the school's Student Government Association voted to give full recognition to ReJOYce in Jesus, a non-denominational Christian group that ministers on college campuses.

Monday's 10-4 vote came several months after student senators had granted the group only "temporary" recognition, citing concerns that ReJOYce in Jesus' constitution allowed discrimination based on sexual preference. Senators also voted to grant full recognition to two other groups that had faced similar questions over discrimination: the Muslim Student Association and the Cigar and Pipe Social Club.

Student President Brian Braun, a 20-year-old electrical engineering major, said the senators routinely examine the constitutions of campus groups, "almost like a proofreader."

One portion of ReJOYce in Jesus' constitution came under particular scrutiny, a section that said voting members of the group "shall not commit those acts which are expressly forbidden in Scripture, including idolatry, premarital or extramarital sex, homosexual behavior, drunkenness, coveting, theft, profanity, occult practices and dishonesty."

Braun said the issues raised by this section were "immensely complicated," pitting freedom of speech against non-discrimination, but also pitting "First Amendment law against Wisconsin Law and university policy, both of which prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation."

Daphne Wilson, alumni adviser for ReJOYce in Jesus, said the group had only applied the requirements from Scripture to voting members and had allowed anyone else, including homosexuals, to participate in fellowship meetings and other activities. The group has been recognized at Milwaukee School of Engineering since 1993, though it had not applied for recognition status in the 2003-2004 school year because of lack of membership. The group sought recognition again last fall and submitted the same constitution it had submitted previously.

Until this week's vote, ReJOYce in Jesus had still been able to meet on campus and distribute fliers based on its "temporary" recognition status, though the group would have faced some funding restrictions, said Sandra Everts, director of marketing and public affairs for the School of Engineering.

Nonetheless, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based non-profit civil liberties group, challenged the initial decision to grant only temporary recognition. David French, president of FIRE, said that political groups on college campuses are allowed to discriminate; for example, campus Republicans can mandate that no Democrat serve as club president.

"Problem comes," he said, "when you don't give a religious organization the same rights as a political organization, including the right to discriminate in a way that maintains the integrity of their message."

French said his organization has dealt with this conflict at 40 different colleges across the nation, from Harvard to community colleges.

"It is epidemic," he said.

Most of the cases have involved evangelical Christian groups on college campuses, but a number have involved Muslim groups.

According to Wilson and documents on FIRE's Web site, student governors at the School of Engineering had recommended changes to ReJOYce in Jesus' constitution, including the addition of a sentence stating, "We will require our active (voting) members to be ethical and morally upright persons, as far as we, as human observers, can accurately assess and determine these attributes." ReJOYce in Jesus never adopted the changes.

Wilson said she felt the changes were "watering down what Christians stand for." She added that she was pleased to have the recognition issue resolved.

"We've been on campus for ten years. We've never had a problem. We've never had a violation," she said. "We've helped many students get through school."

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