

Sexuality, Gender and the Religious Right: Youth Advocacy on LGBT Rights in the United States



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Soulforce Q (young adult division of Soulforce)

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“Hopefully one day a gay student can walk on this campus and not get the feeling that God hates them for who they are and how they feel. Right now though I just have to face what others face every day ... [which is] that there might be violence and it might be me that is the receiver. I hope, if it happens, I will be the last, that I will be the one that forces change and tolerance.” *Student at Abilene Christian University, 2006*

“Do you really think that when our troops from Delta Force crawl into Osama bin Laden’s cave in Afghanistan or into the face of the muzzle of a terrorist machine gun, that they are doing it so that women can kill their children, so that pornographers can peddle their smut, so that people of the same sex can marry? If those features of American life become the fixtures of American life, I fear that our nation may not long endure.” *Ken Connor, President of the Family Research Council*¹

Christian Fundamentalisms in the United States: History, Strategies, Resources and Influence

Christian fundamentalisms, as discussed in this paper, occur in the United States where Christianity meets institutional power. Known as the Religious Right, the broader movement supported by many Christian fundamentalists seeks not only to espouse a morality for personal and political behaviours, but also to enthrone [this morality] as the standard for all citizens.

In the United States, 76% of the total population, or about 245 million people, identify as Christian.² Of those who are Christian, a significant proportion identifies as conservative or evangelical, and there are claims that this is the fastest growing segment.³ Those who comprise the Religious Right come from this subgroup of Christianity, and they represent a spectrum of social and political positions. Fundamentalists exist within many denominations: Roman Catholic, the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter Days Saints, Baptist, Lutheran, the Assemblies of God, and several others.⁴ Some denominational doctrines fit partially or entirely within the fundamentalist description.

People within this sector of society (the Radical Right or Religious Right) tend to have a similar set of conservative social, theological and political values. There is no single platform that defines a member of the Religious Right, but this group generally works to curtail abortion and birth control, stem cell research, sex education, social welfare systems, protections for sexual and gender diversity, and any expansion of the definition of marriage or family deviating from the nuclear unit of a mother, a father, and children if possible. Although there is near-unanimous opposition to abortion, some denominations may make an exception in the case of saving a mother's life. The Religious Right is generally in favour of capitalism and militarism, and pro-war sentiments, often against mostly non-white and non-Christian nations, are common. Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment for women is also a consistent issue on the fundamentalist platform. Opposition to social and political equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people is another consistent and significant part of the Religious Right's strategy to sustain its power base.⁵

A common thread among the issues on the fundamentalist agenda is the direct or indirect support of patriarchy. This paper will focus on the challenge to patriarchy faced by one civil rights and social justice organization within the LGBT rights movement in our attempt to engage and shift U.S. Christian fundamentalism on matters of sexual and gender diversity.

The current blend of politics and Christianity in the United States coalesced in the late 1970s. At the same time that Anita Bryant, founder of Save Our Children,⁶ was working in multiple states from Florida to California to repeal local anti-discrimination legislation regarding sexual orientation, groups like the Moral Majority (a Christian coalition, founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979) and Concerned Women for America⁷ were working to galvanize the fundamentalist movement nationally. The work of these groups was picked up by the Christian Coalition, founded by Pat Robertson after his run for President in 1988. A few years later, in the 1990s, James Dobson came to unofficial leadership of the Religious Right through another organization called Focus on the Family.

The U.S. Religious Right is also active internationally. The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), for example, is an overtly Christian think-tank and advocacy group that traces the arc of current U.S. fundamentalism's breadth and intention. Established in 1981, their mission is to "reform the churches' social witness, in accord with

biblical and historical teachings, thereby contributing to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad."⁸ It supported U.S. military growth and anti-communist intervention in the former Soviet Union and its ally states (such as Cuba, Angola and Nicaragua) in the 1980s. During the invasion of Iraq, past IRD vice-president, Alan Wisdom, told church leaders not to question the morality of the war or the U.S. military's decisions.⁹ The organization also works to ban marriage equality and pushes against feminism, sexual liberation, multiculturalism (read: pro-immigration reform) and environmentalism. They often label as "radical" the politics they oppose, as in "radical feminism" or "radical environmentalism." The IRD builds global conservative coalitions within denominations on issues ranging from Israel (pro-occupation) to global warming ("it is hype"). They often conduct particularly aggressive outreach to churches in Africa, and their coalition platforms consistently oppose sexual and gender diversity.

Fundamentalism and the Current Politics of Sex and Gender

The quote at the beginning of this paper from Ken Connor comes out of the "politics of desert," which posits that calamities like the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City are punishment for U.S. tolerance of "leftist" people and politics. Women's rights and feminism, LGBT people, atheists and others pose a threat to Christianity and America, as the Religious Right defines them.¹⁰ The Christian God is angry and our country suffers because of a political and moral shifting away from fundamentalist values. Former president George W. Bush worked in concert with Religious Right leaders throughout his tenure in the White House. His administration curtailed access to abortion at home and abroad, put hundreds of thousands of dollars toward abstinence-only education in schools, and cut back on social welfare programs and health services.¹¹

In 2003, Bush spoke from the White House Rose Garden to say that gay people should not be allowed to marry. In his view, marriage is both a fundamental unit of society and a religious institution and, as such, cannot be permitted between members of the same sex. Since the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) prohibiting federal recognition of same-sex marriage had already become law in 1996, this move was largely symbolic.¹² Throughout



his tenure, Bush listened and catered to the Religious Right because it constituted his power base. Karl Rove, Bush's main campaign and strategy advisor, admitted that the then president-elect had lost the popular vote in 2004 because "white, evangelical Protestants" did not show up to vote in expected numbers.¹³

Individual denominations give wealth to the fundamentalist agenda. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints exhorted its members to volunteer thousands of hours and donated over USD 20 million to the "Yes on Proposition 8" campaign to repeal same-sex marriage rights in California in 2008. The Religious Right, however, is led politically by organizations with their own financial and structural power. Annual budgets can range from USD 9 million (Concerned Women for America) to USD 160 million (Focus on the Family). Fundamentalist activism in legislation and policy is further supported by legal groups like Alliance Defense Fund (USD 15 million budget) and lobby groups like the Family Research Council (USD 11 million budget).¹⁴

The Family Research Council, originally the political arm of Focus on the Family but now an independent non-profit organization, maintains 120 employees, 40 state-wide action groups, and 455,000 members. Working through church congregation networks, state-based action teams and the media, the Family Research Council targets federal legislators, local elected officials, voter initiatives, businesses and public opinion. Focus on the Family has 74 international ministries and a daily radio listenership of 220 million people worldwide.¹⁵

In 1993, the Traditional Values Coalition produced a short documentary entitled *Gay Rights, Special Rights*. Distributed to black churches across the country, it painted the LGBT community as a white, upper-class, anti-religious bloc that was out to co-opt the legacy of the civil rights movement. This film plays subtly upon the intersection of racism, homophobia and transphobia. Methodologies such as protests, marches and boycotts and terms such as "civil rights," "justice" and "equality" resonate deeply in the American consciousness largely because of the historic civil rights movement, where religious leaders were often at the forefront. The Religious Right has therefore made efforts to whitewash the LGBT rights movement, intentionally making invisible or ignoring the existence of LGBT people of colour as though there were a clear-cut division between African Americans and the LGBT community. We acknowledge that racism and exclusion pose significant challenges for us and that much more work needs to be done within mainstream queer rights organizing.

Furthermore, propaganda like *Gay Rights, Special Rights* simultaneously works to usurp the language of U.S. social movements and deny the

reality that people can (and many do) work for LGBT justice because of or in addition to their religious values. Perhaps more insidious is how this kind of propaganda foments and intensifies racism within and beyond the LGBT community, undermines alliances among marginalized groups, and, by denying the existence of complex and layered identities, exacerbates the experience of multiple oppressions. The leaders of the Religious Right are most often white men, and the patriarchy they reinforce most benefits men who look like them.

While the Religious Right gives various reasons to justify the oppression of LGBT people, most often cited is the belief that the Bible condemns sexual and gender diversity. They also create and play upon the fear that social and political affirmation of LGBT people will lead to the destruction of family, child endangerment, and God's anger. People have been told lies, given false statistics, and presented with innuendoes about child molestation, bestiality, and "recruitment" or "turning others gay." One must grant that at least some fundamentalists genuinely believe they are doing the work of God.

The anti-LGBT focus of the Religious Right also represents a long-term fundraising strategy. Fear-based opposition to LGBT equality is perhaps the Religious Right's most enduring money-maker and mobilizer.¹⁶ In a 1992 fundraising letter for Concerned Women for America, its founder Beverly LaHaye wrote: "We are at war in America today ... We don't want our children taught that the sin of homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle 'choice.' Young boys and girls must not be taught that for a man to love another man is as normal as the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage."¹⁷

A more subtle reason for the anti-LGBT focus, discussed later, is the connection between patriarchy and the oppression of LGBT identities. The oppression of sexual and gender diversity is an essential part of ensuring patriarchy's endurance, and vice versa.

Soulforce Focuses on the Religious Right

In 1995, Dr. Mel White, the founder of Soulforce, the organization I work with, wrote a book entitled *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*. It is the story of his work alongside Pat Roberston and Jerry Falwell inside the Religious Right



before he came out and affirmed himself as a gay Christian man. The book records several theological shifts toward a more expansive and accepting framework but focuses mainly on the issue of sexual diversity. In response, he received thousands of letters from people around the world echoing his story and thanking him for challenging the use of Christianity as a tool of oppression of LGBT people. These letters made evident the urgent need to transform the Religious Right.

Soulforce incorporated in 1998 with a mission to end political and religious oppression of LGBT people using the philosophy of non-violence as taught by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The issues of sexuality, gender and Christianity can often inspire heated and hostile debate. Non-violence thus provides a model for bringing truth and calm to this difficult discussion in our activism.

Soulforce's mission to engage conservative Christians comes out of pragmatism and compassion. Non-violence teaches that even the oppressors suffer in a system of injustice. This approach accepts compassion for both oppressor and oppressed as the starting point. Non-violence also drives the practitioner to seek the heart and the mind of the adversary, as just societies and laws are best borne of personally held beliefs in the equality and dignity of all people, rather than legislative victories per se. We are thus willing to meet those with whom we disagree and to endure painful statements about our identities as we seek to change them. Our willingness to make such sacrifices allows for conversations about who we really are and what society can become. The goal is reconciliation through dialogue, honesty, education and, when necessary, direct action that may include civil disobedience.

Our work can take many shapes. Soulforce Q, the young adult (ages 18 to 28) division of Soulforce established in 2006, sponsors the [Equality Ride](#). This project is an annual two-month bus tour of colleges and universities that discriminate in policy and/or deed against LGBT students. This project exists to undo misinformation from the Religious Right and acquaint more Christians with self-affirming LGBT people and their allies. Since 2006, four Equality Ride buses have engaged 66 schools.¹⁸

An Equality Ride bus would have clear reason to visit over 200 campuses in the United States alone. Most of these 200 are Christian, denominationally bound and funded. This paper began with a statement from a student from Abilene Christian University (please see the Appendix for information on the universities and colleges mentioned in the case). Its juxtaposition with the quote from Ken Connor of the Family Research Council represents the crux of what drives the work of Soulforce and Soulforce Q: dogma from people like Ken Connor functions both at the level of institutionalized oppression and at the

community level. Thus, fundamentalism must also be challenged at the community level, since both a positive cultural shift in attitudes toward LGBT people and protective legislation are needed to create true safety and well-being. Security, liberation and happiness, for the ACU student and others like her, particularly in the more rural and conservative areas of the country, will be found first in challenging the hearts and minds of fundamentalists to soften, learn, and seek a loving response to LGBT people.

Equality Ride's Methods and Intentions

Soulforce Q's engagement with institutions of higher learning is intentional. These institutions play a powerful role in the country as centres of research, employment, social codification and sanction of thought. Campus-based activism has a long history of energizing social justice movements, from free speech protests and civil rights activism in the 1950s and 60s to calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Apartheid in the late 1980s and 90s. In calling upon schools to collaborate with us, we rely heavily on the cultural expectation that campuses be forums for social engagement and contemporary discussion.

The Religious Right recognizes the university as an effective space to extend its conservative doctrine to future generations. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson both started their own schools, Liberty University and Regent University respectively. Students at schools the Equality Ride visits are usually required to sign doctrinal and social covenants. For example, the Simmons College of Kentucky 2006-2007 Student Handbook states: "We deny any teaching that would excuse sexual promiscuity, adultery, spousal abuse, abortion, or any kind of homosexual acts or unions as contrary to the express teachings of the Bible and contrary to the historic faith of the Christian community in all past ages." Hundreds of educational institutions, in line with official denominational policy and the fundamentalist agenda, propagate the religious rhetoric of LGBT condemnation through thousands of students. It is wise and effective work to challenge this ideology in the education system because, unchecked, it disseminates and reifies fundamentalist thought.

This methodology also has the potential of making the story larger than any one campus. The Equality Ride travels thousands of miles across the country to conservative and rural areas to talk about an issue that has rarely, if ever, been openly addressed in these contexts. Even if a school is openly working with us to organize our time on campus, questions remain. How will students treat the Riders? How will parents and trustees react? How deep does the disagreement run? Will there be counter-protestors? The media are greatly interested in the project's outcome because our interactions are unpredictable. We reach out weeks in advance with phone calls and press advisories, through the organization

GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), to local and national media outlets, which often respond with interest to our work. TV news affiliates, local print and radio, MTV, Newsweek, BBC and PBS (the public broadcaster in the U.S.) have covered the Equality Ride.

Most of these campuses are physically and emotionally unsafe for LGBT students and their allies. For example, LGBT students at Oklahoma Baptist University are required to go to weekly counselling and ultimately sign a statement claiming they are heterosexual before they can graduate. Students at Liberty University who are suspected of being LGBT have their emails and online activity monitored. They too are required to go to weekly therapy. The Northwest University transgender policy claims the “cure” for gender dysphoria is chastity. Many LGBT students across the country are summarily expelled, which often results in losing one’s faith community, friends and family, in addition to losing financial and/or emotional support and forfeiting academic credit. Even if they are able to obtain their academic transcripts, often the only option for continuing their courses of study would be at other Christian schools, due to the religious nature of their chosen subjects.

I am currently speaking with one young woman at North Central University who has been brought in to meet with the school administration several times. At the time of writing, she is three weeks away from graduation, yet expulsion is imminent. Her major is offered only at two other schools, both similarly conservative Christian institutions. Because of her situation, her landlord at a church-owned apartment is debating whether to let her remain there, and her family is not supportive. This is an unfortunate confluence of events that many students experience, where they must choose between honesty and an education. Choosing to live one’s identity openly rather than staying in school and retaining the approval of family and friends is a luxury most cannot afford. In the case of the woman at North Central University, however, there was little choice at all; fellow students turned her in to administrators, as is often the case with students across the country.¹⁹

Every year, the Equality Ride planning process begins with recruiting and interviewing applicants to participate. Many learn about our work from the media, from friends, through word of mouth, or by reading mailings from our organization. We reach out online through social networking sites like Facebook and identify activist groups on and off campus that may be interested. The application process involves a written essay and then two phone interviews, one to gauge intention and personality, and the second to gauge how the applicant responds to a set of biblically inclined questions like those we encounter on campuses.

Equality Rider alumni, 101 participants at the time of writing, are increasingly diverse. Each group averages about 25% people of colour, and transgender or genderqueer participation has increased from one member in the first year to a quarter of total Ridership in 2008. The statistics are the same for straight ally participation. About 30% of participants come from a working-class background and 60% from a middle class background. In terms of religion, about half are not people of faith or are agnostic, while the other half claim a spirituality of some sort (these are mostly Christian, with some Jewish, Buddhist and Wiccan adherents). Their ages have ranged from 17 to 30. Young adults more often have the ability to take time away from school, jobs, and regular life to study, plan the Equality Ride, and then travel for two months. Peer-to-peer engagement makes the conversations more viable, as identity and personal value systems are undergoing formation in college.

The next step is identifying a shortlist of approximately 60 candidate schools. A letter is sent to each institution’s president asking, “What do you think about an Equality Ride visit to your campus, and how can we work together to make it valuable for everyone involved?” While conversations ensue with university administrators—often the deans of student affairs or public relations officers—Soulforce Q staff finish the process of identifying the Equality Riders, roughly 25. After negotiations among Riders and with schools, a route of about 15 campuses is set and includes a mix of schools that chose to work with us on organizing programming for our visit as well as those that would not allow us on campus. Administrations make their choices based on a variety of reasons: some have a true desire to welcome us and are interested in theological debate, while others are concerned about the opinions of trustees and the reactions of parents.

A thorough conversation about sexuality, gender and Christianity requires preparation. Training for the school visits includes basic keyword Hebrew and Greek translation, how to speak to and draw from biblical themes like renewal or breaking tradition, strategies for maintaining logic in conversation, and how to embody non-violent dialogue when confronted with such responses as “I love you, but you are going to hell,” exorcisms, and intense anger.

The training is exhaustive: readings, facilitated discussions, presentations by experts on anti-racism and transgender issues, and non-formal education methods. Riders learn how to speak to the media, to plan and recruit for events and rallies, to use non-violent communication skills, to examine internalized sexism, racism and classism, as well as to neutralize the biblical texts traditionally used to condemn LGBT people. Ample scholarship on holistic readings of the Bible with a social justice lens is available in texts like *The Good Book*

by Peter Gomes²⁰ and *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministries and Communities of Faith* by Dr. Justin Tanis.²¹

Riders also learn to make positive assertions about the lives of LGBT people from a faith perspective, to discuss the nature of love and sin, and to formulate what justice looks like for LGBT people based upon the Bible's own logic. They couple this information with facts on the biological and political realities of LGBT people, as well as relevant public policy. Though Riders present to classrooms and auditorium halls on topics ranging from liberation theology to the history of civil rights, the unique and most vital aspect of our work is the one-on-one conversation.

During training, we also look at historic examples of public direct actions and consider the use of civil disobedience and its ramifications. We continually debate about when and how to challenge schools that refuse to work with us, and that ask the police to arrest us for trespassing. Interaction with the police and the prison system has been a part of our work from the beginning. However, we recognize that this risk is experienced differently by different people, mediated by many factors, class, race, sex and gender expression among them. Should a Rider make the personal decision to participate in civil disobedience, we work to be supportive and protective of each other.

On the Road

Each Equality Rider is in charge of a community and campus visit, which includes working with the administration, professors and students to plan activities and doing outreach to the community around the school. After Soulforce Q staff has initiated the negotiation process with school administration, if they arrive at a point of collaboration, the responsibility for continued negotiation is passed to the Rider.

An Equality Ride visit is more than a campus event. We often involve churches, synagogues, LGBT-affirming universities, and citizen activists and allies in off-campus events. Community potluck dinners feed the Riders most nights. Local activist groups invite us in to share stories, teach scriptural skills, and learn more about local LGBT activism.

The on-campus aspect of an Equality Rider's work varies. Personally, I have given PowerPoint presentations on gender issues, and I have shared my life story in standing-room-only plenary sessions for 400 attendees. At Wheaton College we had two full days on campus, met with the student government, ate lunch with all the deans and vice-presidents, participated in two school-wide forums with panellists who affirm the rights of LGBT people and those who don't (attended by about half the student body), visited student-led Bible study sessions, and set up an

information table in the student union. While this may sound ideal, it was still difficult. A young man told me transgender people sin against God. A professor sitting with my co-worker at lunch turned to her and calmly compared her romantic relationship to kleptomania. Straight students learned that although they may have known the school's stance on homosexuality, they did not know that it was not considered permissible for them to disagree with school policy even in their personal theology.

Another school we visited, California Baptist University, was a more ambiguous case. The administration refused to enter into any agreement with Soulforce Q about what activities the visit could hold. The Southern Baptist Convention that funds the school claims that homosexuality is "perverted" and that LGBT relationships are "counterfeit alternative relationships." The president was clearly anxious; he wanted to avoid civil disobedience in liberal Los Angeles as much as he wanted to avoid welcoming our message. At first, the school offered us a room in the student centre that they would "not be opposed" to our using, but everywhere else was off limits. We maintained that this was not adequate. In such negotiations, trust and clarity are essential. I delicately but firmly stated, "I hear what you are saying, but I do not agree to the terms. I will see you tomorrow and I hope that we will find the dialogue productive."

The next day, we arrived and walked onto campus without a clear sense of what would happen. Not knowing what—arrest, anger or compliance—would occur in response to which actions—speeches, singing, handing out literature, or our simple presence—made for an unnerving start. The president met us at the sidewalk and escorted us to the aforementioned room. He instructed us to remain there, but I walked into the coffee shop and started to give a speech. Several Riders walked onto the campus green and led some singing with a guitar. The president screamed that I was a liar, so I reminded him that we had no agreement. Despite these circumstances, we had an incredible day of conversation on campus and never reached the point of arrest. The photos show single Riders engaged in peaceful dialogue with dozens of students with open Bibles. The school even provided boxed lunches.

Civil disobedience within our work is necessary and principled. Not every school is as welcoming as Wheaton



College or even California Baptist University. Some are like Brigham Young University, which we visited in 2006 and 2007. The first year, the administration ignored us but allowed us on campus. Then they arrested us after we held a “die-in” where Riders and students lay down one by one, each representing a member of the Mormon Church (also known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) who had committed suicide because of LGBT oppression. As the police took us away, we each left a lily in our place. When we returned in 2007, we found the campus resolutely closed to us. Over 50 letters were collected in support of our visit from Brigham Young students, alumni and their family members. When a transgender Equality Rider and his mother attempted to deliver these messages to the school president, they were arrested.

At Baylor University in 2007, we were not welcomed on campus, though a strong LGBT student organization was working with us. During their campus chapel, we gathered outside with students and sang peace and social justice songs. We used chalk, in Baylor tradition, to write messages of inclusion and love on the chapel steps. For this, Riders and Baylor students were arrested and charged with trespassing.

As a matter of principle, we cannot accept no for an answer to our request for dialogue with a school. Some Riders even feel it appropriate to risk trespass when necessary. But most of us believe that if we do not challenge a school's rejection, then nothing will change. Further, we function as stand-ins for the closeted students on campus; walking away would make us complicit with the school's daily rejection of their LGBT students. The spectre of arrest also has another function. Knowing that we are firm in our intentions, schools like California Baptist University are pushed to find ways of collaborating with us, however haltingly, because they realize the choice is between having some control over the proceedings or an arrest publicized in the media. Being willing to risk civil disobedience creates the space for dialogue that would not occur otherwise. For example, without that commitment, we would not have had the successful days of dialogue that we had at California Baptist University or the Naval Academy, places where the threat of arrest was imminent but never fulfilled.

Friction goes beyond the Equality Ride/campus dynamic. We have received harassing calls and threatening comments from people we've met in public establishments. Our buses have been vandalized five times. Police in Springfield, Missouri sent a letter to local businesses insinuating that we would act violently. Sometimes these schools play a central role in the community, and newspapers do not want to print material that does not favour the campus. News about our work has, at times, been coloured to make us appear unreasonable or disingenuous. Many hostile interviews have taken place with journalists who have

repeatedly tried to push an Equality Rider into saying, “I want to get arrested.” This is never true; we would much prefer that the school allow for on-campus dialogue.

There is also internal strife between consensus and hierarchic decision-making on the bus. The co-directors of each bus are peers—sometimes older and sometimes younger than the Riders. Sexism, racism, ageism, and other forms of social privilege are also present in our community of 25. This can manifest unexpectedly in arguments over choice of movies to watch, stores to frequent, who packs the luggage under the bus, and the experience of participation in civil disobedience. Discussing oppression within our own group after ten or 12 hours on campus or in jail is difficult but necessary.

Some circumstances in this country make the Equality Ride more feasible. There is a critical mass of young people who are “out” with their LGBT identities. People have been honest about their lives long enough to nurture allies who support us. Some denominations, such as United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalists and some Jewish sects, support LGBT people in doctrine and policy. We have been embraced at dozens of houses of worship. They provide spiritual and physical re-energizing on what is an otherwise gruelling journey. Other groups also offer necessary support: PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), gay-straight student alliances at many schools, and the American Civil Liberties Union have stood with us on the vigil line, donated to our effort, assisted in reaching out to local communities prior to our arrival, and even secured our basic right to assemble in Alabama.

Funding is a crucial factor because we pay for Riders' participation in the project. To cover bus rental, airfare, food, hotels, clothing, books and other materials for 25 people over two months is an expensive endeavour. Several factors, however, contribute to the feasibility of such a project, including the U.S. culture of philanthropy, the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of individual donors, the existence of well-endowed foundations that can give in the range of USD 100,000 or more, and the routine giving of small, online donations.

What must also be recognized is a political environment in the United States that allows for dissent and civil disobedience. Not only do we have the ability to communicate a positive message through acts of civil disobedience, thanks to a long history of justice-seeking dissidence in this country, we also have the general assurance that being arrested for trespassing as a matter of conscience does not result in excessive, if any, time in prison. The judicial process happens in the open, and sentencing guidelines are fairly mild: usually a fine, some community service, or a few days in jail.

Success and Weakness

For such an investment of time and resources, the outcome ought to be significant. But in some ways, it is difficult to measure our success, as the real goal is transformation of hearts and minds. The work of non-violence takes time and is rarely quantifiable. The less tangible successes are the lives that are saved by reading about, observing, or participating in what is often the first LGBT-affirming event to happen on campus. Letters to our staff and Riders express gratitude for having started a conversation that few people, if any, on campus knew how to begin. They explain how a seal has been broken for the better, and during every campus visit we are assured that we have changed the thinking of many future leaders. It is the students that show, ultimately, how and why this project works: those who want to see change and be part of this conversation usually participate in the hundreds when we are at their universities. Even those who disagree participate. It is rare to have such an open forum and to be able to ask questions of an LGBT person or straight ally who can speak to the particular obstacles that LGBT students face.

As a third party advocating a position that is, according to school policy, not permitted to students, we open up a space that is vital to bringing together a critical mass of like-minded advocates for a change in culture and policy. Sixteen gay-straight alliances have been formed on campuses, and they all continue the work of asking uncomfortable questions, making public demonstrations, working with professors for institutional change, and offering the space for debate and organizing strategy. On the campuses that we have visited, classrooms more frequently take up the issues of sexual and gender diversity. Students continue to debate the topic regularly in their student newspapers. At Calvin College students are still organizing two years after the Equality Ride. They recently challenged a dictum that curtails speaking about homosexuality in class, prompting the administration to reconsider the issue. To date, four students from past school visits have become Equality Riders themselves.

Both graduate and undergraduate students at Equality Ride schools (and others) have written thesis papers about the project, some of which have been published in scholarly journals. During campus visits, as many as ten media outlets at a time are able to attend. Sirius Satellite Radio, MTV, the BBC, and National Public Radio (NPR) consistently cover our work, and a full-length documentary entitled *Equality U*²² is currently playing at film festivals across the country.

Remarkably, two schools have already changed their policies. Samford University created complete parity for all students by re-wording a section of their student handbook to enforce the same sexual ethic

for everyone. Brigham Young University made a positive change in their policy, from condemnation of LGBT identity and behaviour to condemnation of just sexual behaviour in general. It is not yet a just policy, but it has curtailed unchecked surveillance and intrusion.

Wisdom Gained: How Movements Intersect

The methods of a project of this size and scope certainly come with flaws, difficulties and valuable lessons.

Racism within and beyond the LGBT community is a prominent question for many working in the LGBT rights movement in the United States. Racism manifests itself in the language of the movement, the imagery in LGBT media, the kinds of communities in which we work, the way we recruit participation, and the affordability of activism. The issue is even more nuanced in efforts to challenge fundamentalism and is a constant obstacle in our work at Soulforce.

The Religious Right, with its pro-family, pro-life, and pro-military agenda, is largely a white movement, and the schools that teach its ideology are mostly white. They are also expensive, costing USD 15,000 or more per year for tuition alone. Though there are other schools where campus visits would be of value—schools that are predominantly Spanish-speaking or attended mostly by Native Americans or African Americans—we have only visited three historically black colleges and universities²³ thus far on the 2008 Equality Ride. Racial diversity in whom we engage with will require more structural change, adjustments of priorities, new relationships, and intellectual preparation within Soulforce.

The predominantly white schools that we have visited are those with overtly discriminatory policies and, often, political weight. Patrick Henry College was established in 2000 in response to two requests: one from Republican members of Congress for their conservative staff members and the other from Christian parents who wanted their home-schooled children to continue their college education with a similar set of values. Three times a year, the White House chooses 100 university students for short-term internships. Patrick Henry College has taken between one and five slots each year for the last five years. Among 61 Patrick Henry graduates in 2004, two got jobs in the Bush White House and six found staff positions with Republican members of Congress. Past president Michael Farris said of one of the College's star debate pupils, "[m]aybe one day he'll be the one standing before the Supreme Court, arguing to overturn *Roe v. Wade*."²⁴ When the Equality Ride visited Patrick Henry College in 2007, not one student there was African American.

In order to not further white hegemony as we work to undo LGBT oppression, Soulforce is critically challenging our own structure and practices. This work involves attending anti-racism trainings, examining our past and future work through an anti-racist lens, and having people of colour on our board and staff, and involved in every planning stage of every campaign. We now have monthly staff book-club meetings as a means of collective education and growth. This analysis and transformation is essential to the continued relevance and basic success of our work in the United States. Racial injustice undermines our integrity when we call for justice and hinders our effectiveness in working in all communities.

Our current task in Soulforce is examining the economic and racial justice aspects of our agenda. We need to examine how the Equality Ride and our other programming are weighted in terms of resources, time and priority. Issues that are important to the LGBT community include, but are not limited to, medical access, marriage equality, healthcare, religion, HIV and AIDS, the workplace and homelessness. Each of these has a different relationship with racial and economic justice, and each intersects with the fundamentalist agenda in some way.

Other than the focus on racial justice, the greatest lesson that has come out of this work for me is the place of gender in the conversation we have so often about LGBT people, and how this relates to sexism. At the beginning of the Equality Ride, conversations were mostly couched in the language of religion, sex and sexuality, but I have found that the real crux of the issue lies deeper in notions of gender and masculine/feminine dichotomies. I am still working in a context in which sex and sexuality are tightly bound with gender; sexual attraction and behaviour are components of gender expression. It is a constant feedback loop: the gender of the person I choose to be in a relationship with is read as part of my own gender expression. My partner choice is viewed as a form of gender expression, as much as my hairstyle, clothing, form of dance, mannerisms and speech patterns. Conversely, my gendered clothing and mannerisms seem to broadcast what my partner's gender would be.

LGBT justice is a women's issue because resistance to sexual and gender diversity is deeply connected to how traditional sexism and oppositional sexism interact. Women and female-bodied people of all sexual orientations and gender identities have suffered under these sexism for millennia.

Traditional sexism, or patriarchy, is the system that places women and what is deemed feminine (in a given context) beneath men and what is deemed masculine. Oppositional sexism is the more complex class system that dictates that the sphere of woman/female body/feminine is,

by "nature" and social mandate, cohesive and distinct in all ways from the sphere of man/male body/masculine.²⁵ It implies that the two worlds are biological and psychological realities separated by an abyss. This social construct implies that it is socially and morally unacceptable to blend or deny the separation of the two in any way.

I stated earlier that a fundamentalist reading of the Bible and certain scriptures is a significant obstacle for the LGBT rights movement in the United States. No "clobber passage" (those verses from the Bible used to condemn LGBT people) can justify this oppression if one understands the historical and social context of scripture. It is a choice to read Leviticus and Genesis and other passages in a way that gives license to LGBT oppression. The Religious Right is invested in patriarchy, and LGBT identity inherently challenges traditional and oppositional sexism, given that our partner choices and gender identities do not conform to the binary and mutually exclusive framework.

Why fundamentalists choose to read certain passages in the Bible the way they do reveals as much about their attitudes toward LGBT people as toward the place of women in society. For example, a common concern in LGBT work in the fundamentalist context is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—a text relevant to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Traditionally, it is understood to condemn gay men and, by extrapolation, lesbians and bisexual people. It is a story of the men of Sodom attempting to rape two male angels staying at the house of Lot. In this context, women were viewed as the property of their husbands and fathers, and it was women's bodies that were meant to be penetrated in sex. The Hebrew word for woman, *naqeba*, means "hole" or "orifice-bearer."²⁶ Male-on-male anal rape was a tactic sometimes used in war in ancient Mediterranean cultures.²⁷ The men of Sodom were angry about strangers being in their town, and penetration of the rape victim would have conveyed total dominance through sexual violence that essentially forced a gender transgression from masculine to feminine. It certainly would have communicated to the two strangers (the angels) that they were unwelcome. Such male-on-male-rape was a weapon whose potency rested squarely in the force of sexism. Without the degree of inequality of the sexes, the use of rape as weapon would have had a different meaning or lesser impact.

Sodom and Gomorrah should not be interpreted without a feminist critique. What we really learn from this story is not that gay people are sinful but that gender injustice and xenophobia have been brutal throughout history and that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for such violence.

In a near reversal of how gender plays out in a biblical text, the creation story in Genesis can be interpreted to be about human kinship and social nature, and not about the complementary nature of male and female. If we are to understand that fundamentalism reinforces patriarchy and homo/bi/transphobia, then women's liberation and affirmation of sexual and gender diversity are inextricably linked. The foundation of patriarchy is driven by defamation of the feminine, while much of the violence and marginalization of the LGBT community originates in expressions of gender that show up as "unexpected femininity," as in the case of a gay man who is the sexual partner of another man; "thwarted femininity," as in the instance of a lesbian who chooses not to be the female counterpart to a man; and a genderqueer or transgender person who traverses that myth of "opposite sexes."

Soulforce and Soulforce Q work from the premise that fundamentalist religion is one of the stronger mechanisms for sustaining gender- and sex-based oppression. The schools we visit are tightly integrated into larger denominational structures through church funding, campus policies derived from church doctrine, and long-serving members of the denomination receiving career appointments at the schools. Many students are brought to these schools at a young age by parents and local faith communities.

I have had so many conversations where a student or professor says they love me, but this or that scripture bars them from voting for pro-LGBT legislation or letting students like me into their school. The scriptures about sexuality and gender can and must be confronted. Critical and historical analysis is needed to open the space for counter-organizing, but such analysis is rarely given the consideration granted to prevailing conservative notions of sex, sexuality and gender. Direct one-on-one engagement has proven an effective means of disseminating scholarship that supports LGBT people. As important as this intellectual challenge is, so is peaceful confrontation: LGBT Equality Riders sitting, studying, speaking and eating with students. To condemn the idea of homosexuality in the abstract is far easier than condemning a lesbian from the Equality Ride who has embodied and explained how her sexuality is an integrated and healthy part of her life.

The process of working 16 to 18 hours a day for two months out on the road, with multiple conversations on campus during the day and more work at night preparing presentations, answering emails and doing outreach in the local communities, is not easy. It requires setting aside ego as well as some physical well-being and most creature comforts, and it requires you to cultivate a deeply compassionate patience. We put our lives into the open as a means of connecting on an authentic

human level with the people we meet. This is the most moving aspect of what we do, but it also the most emotionally taxing. The Equality Ride is a methodology constructed for young adults because we seek peer connections at colleges and universities that are training grounds perpetuating fundamentalist politics. Young adults are also most often suited to the demanding and transitory lifestyle of the project.

Despite the physical, mental and emotional difficulty of the Equality Ride, there are moments that hold the great energy of revolution and progress. We find people who are grateful, shocked, changed and inspired by our work. We get to be purveyors of ideas from the Bible that support justice for the most marginalized in society, breaking down the status quo and welcoming diversity. In a nuanced way, it can feel radical to point to the very book that is used for fundamentalist oppression and say, "No, I see liberation and unity and profound freedom."

Appendix: Universities and Colleges Mentioned in the Case Study

University/College	Approx. Student Pop.	Religious Affiliation	City, State
Abilene Christian University	3,800	Non-denominational Christian	Abilene, Texas
Baylor University	14,600	Baptist	Waco, Texas
Brigham Young University	32,900	Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)	Provo, Utah
California Baptist University	4,100	Southern Baptist Convention	Riverside, California
Calvin College	4,100	Christian Reformed Church	Grand Rapids, Michigan
Liberty University	25,000	Evangelical Christian	Lynchburg, Virginia
North Central University	1,200	Pentecostal Christian	Minneapolis, Minneapolis
Northwest University	1,100	Assemblies of God (Pentecostal Christian)	Kirkland, Washington
Oklahoma Baptist University	1,700	Southern Baptist Convention	Shawnee, Oklahoma
Patrick Henry College	415	Non-denominational Christian	Purcellville, Virginia
Regent University	2,200	Non-denominational Christian	Virginia Beach, Virginia
Samford University	4,600	Southern Baptist Convention	Birmingham, Alabama
Simmons College of Kentucky	100	African American Baptist	Louisville, Kentucky
Wheaton College	2,300	Non-denominational Christian	Wheaton, Illinois

Endnotes:

¹ Ken Connor, "Reflections after the Terror." Family Research Council statement (10 Oct. 2001), cited in "Organizational Profile: Family Research Council," by Right Wing Watch.

² Barry A. Kosmin *et al.*, "American Religious Identification Survey 2001," City University of New York, and "American Religious Identification Survey 2008," Trinity College, Hartford, CT.

³ Movement Advancement Project, "Religious Congregations & Membership: 2000," Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 2000.

⁴ Kosmin *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁵ Ioannis Mookas, "Faultlines: Homophobic Innovation in Gay Rights, Special Rights," *Afterimage*, 22 (1995). Reproduced in *Culture, Media and the Religious Right*, Eds. Linda Kintz & Julia Lesage, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

⁶ Save Our Children was formed as a coalition to oppose legislation against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in Miami, Florida in 1977.

⁷ Concerned Women for America was started by conservative activist and author Beverly LaHaye in 1979. The organization describes itself as "the nation's largest public policy women's organization with a rich 30-year history of helping our members across the country bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy." From the [Concerned Women of America](#) website.

⁸ Mark Tooley, [Letter from the President](#), Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) website, undated.

⁹ "[The Institute on Religion and Democracy](#)," Right Web website, 25 Feb. 2007, citing Statement from the IRD President, 10 Oct. 2003.

¹⁰ Cynthia Burak, "Getting What 'We' Deserve: Terrorism, Tolerance, Sexuality, and the Christian Right," *New Political Science*, 25.3 (Sept. 2003).

¹¹ Gloria Feldt, *The War on Choice: The Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and How to Fight Back*, New York: Bantam, 2004.

¹² Neil A. Lewis, "From the Rose Garden: Same-Sex Marriage; Bush Backs Bid to Block Gays from Marrying," *The New York Times*, 31 July 2003.

¹³ Hanna Rosin, "God and Country," *The New Yorker*, 27 June 2005.

¹⁴ [Right Wing Watch](#) website.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Mookas, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Surina Khan, *Calculated Compassion: How the Ex-Gay Movement Serves the Right's Attack on Democracy*, Political Research Associates, 1998, cited in Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, New York: Guilford, 1998.

¹⁸ Note that in the United States the term “school” is used for various levels of educational institutions, including colleges and universities.

¹⁹ As of November 2009, the student has been expelled, so after five years of schooling she has no degree.

²⁰ Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

²¹ Justin E. Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003.

²² Dave O'Brien, Director, *Equality U*, USA, 2008.

²³ In the United States, the term “historically black colleges and universities” (HBCUs) is used to refer to institutions of higher education established before 1964 with the express intention of serving black communities.

²⁴ Hanna Rosin, “God and Country,” *The New Yorker*, 27 June 2005.

²⁵ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Feminism*, Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007: 95-100.

²⁶ Lecture by Tony Marconi, God vs. Gays: The War That Never Was, PFLAG-Columbus monthly meeting, 25 October 2009, Unitarian Church, Clintonville, Ohio.

²⁷ K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, London: Gerald Duckworth, 1978: 104-105.

Author Bio:

Haven Herrin grew up in Dallas, Texas and studied art at the University of Richmond in Virginia. Self-determination and understanding through creative expression has always been a meaningful path to liberation for Haven. She became involved in Soulforce Q at 23, inspired by the true empowerment of youth and possibility of travel to the places in the United States where the conversation about sexual and gender freedom is most rare. After her time with Soulforce, where she eventually came to serve as director of Soulforce Q, Haven has continued to work on economic justice, art-based activism, and youth trainings.

Organizational Bio:

Soulforce is a national civil rights and social justice organization co-founded by Dr. Mel White and his partner Gary Cooper in 1998. Soulforce operates as a network of staff and volunteers committed to teaching and applying the principles of non-violence to end discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Its vision is freedom from religious and political oppression for LGBT people through the practice of relentless non-violent resistance. In 2006, Soulforce organized the first Equality Ride, a two-month cross-country bus trip to 19 colleges that actively discriminate against openly LGBT students. Thirty-three young adults made the journey. Soulforce Q, the youth component of Soulforce, was founded as a result of the first Equality Ride and is based on the belief that sustained and coordinated nationwide activism is an essential component of the LGBT rights movement. Youth are particularly capable of direct activism where the goal is to change hearts and minds through personalizing efforts for equality. The fourth Equality Ride will be on the road in spring 2010. www.soulforce.org