BRIDGE GROUPS AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE: THE CASE OF LGBT RELIGIOUS

ACTIVISM AT A CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

By

Jonathan S. Coley

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Professor Larry Isaac

Professor Shaul Kelner

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INTRODUCTION

The gay rights movement has made rapid progress in the United States. Just a few decades ago, laws or policies protecting LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people from discrimination were nearly nonexistent. Furthermore, as recently as 2003, over a dozen states effectively criminalized "homosexual activity" through anti-sodomy laws (Lambda Legal 2003). Today, many states have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and several states recognize same-sex marriage or domestic partnerships (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures 2011). Public support for gay rights has risen dramatically in the past few years, with just over 50% of Americans now supporting same-sex marriage, and this support seems likely to rise over the next few years (Silver 2011).

Despite this progress, acceptance of homosexuality remains low among certain religious groups. Conservative religious sects and denominations continue to label homosexuality as a "sin" (Religious Institute 2012), and hundreds of religious high schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries across the United States maintain bans on "homosexual acts" or "homosexual activity" in their student and faculty handbooks (Soulforce 2011). Religious-based bigotry has contributed to recent suicides by gay teens and young adults in the United States (Hubbard 2011), and support for same-sex marriage among white evangelical Christians stands much lower than the national average at just 23% (Public Religion Research Institute 2011).

Continued prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people in certain religious communities, combined with skepticism toward organized religion in the LGBT community (Halkitis et al. 2009), suggests the existence of a "structural hole" (Burt 1992) between LGBT and religious communities. An opportunity exists to carve out a "middle" between these two

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communities – to build dialogue between non-religious LGBT individuals and heterosexual religious individuals, and to provide space for LGBT individuals who identify as religious or religious individuals who are accepting of LGBT people – and thus build tolerance and transform attitudes toward homosexuality and religion. Over the past few decades, some religious groups have attempted to fill this structural hole between religious and LGBT communities. For instance, new religious denominations have emerged to bring LGBT and religious communities together (Wilcox 2001), and some older denominations have become open to LGBT individuals (Adler 2012). Yet, more pertinent to this paper, groups outside of formal religious denominations have taken up much of the work of filling this structural hole or gap. What exactly are these groups? How do these groups go about their work? And what changes can groups such as these reasonably hope to achieve, especially given the personal nature of religious belief?

In this study, I develop the concept of "bridge groups," organizations that bring two or more groups of people together in an attempt to build mutual dialogue and understanding, as well as share that understanding and promote change within their broader communities. Bridge groups differ from coalitions in that the bringing together of two or more groups is not a temporary means to achieve a common goal but is one of the primary ends of the group. Furthermore, the groups that are brought together are not defined by their membership in other organizations but by their shared identities (e.g., along the lines of religion, race, social class, gender, and sexual orientation). Bridge groups may employ extra-institutional tactics when they are denied recognition by parts of their communities or when their mutual concerns are not being addressed by their communities, and thus exist in their early and more active forms as social movement organizations. Thousands of such organizations exist in the United States alone, ranging from Gay-Straight Alliances that seek to build dialogue between LGBT and straight

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individuals (GLSEN 2012; Human Rights Campaign 2012) to racial reconciliation groups that seek to resolve historical divides between racial groups (Regional Alliance for Truth and Racial Reconciliation 2012; William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation 2012).

I illuminate the work of bridge groups and the changes these groups bring about through a case study of a student group at Belmont University, a Christian university in Nashville, Tennessee. Beginning in 2009, a group of students at Belmont worked to establish an LGBT religious organization known as Bridge Builders, which sought to "bridge the gap between the LGBT and Christian communities." The group peacefully worked to establish dialogue groups about religion and homosexuality at the school for over a year. But in December 2010, after Belmont continually denied their organization official recognition, and after a lesbian soccer coach mysteriously left the school, students comprising the Bridge Builders group organized sit-ins, outside rallies, prayer walks, petition drives, letter writing events, and media appearances to challenge perceived discrimination and bigotry against LGBT students and faculty at the school.

As a result of the protests, Belmont agreed to officially approve the Bridge Builders group and adopt a nondiscrimination statement inclusive of sexual orientation. But, as I discuss in this paper, perhaps the most interesting results of Bridge Builders activism were religious in nature. Drawing on over two-dozen in-depth interviews with student activists and faculty members at Belmont, I first show how initiatives led by Bridge Builders facilitated a shift in Belmont's institutional identity. The bridge group participants in this study challenged the very idea of what it meant to be a Christian university, moving their school from a conservative identity based on difference to a more ecumenical identity based on shared similarities. I then show how Bridge Builders helped to transform the religious climate at Belmont. Bridge Builders members sought more inclusion on campus from their religious peers, and in the words of those

members, the atmosphere on campus slowly changed from a "culture of exclusion" to a "culture of inclusion." Finally, I show how the bridge group impacted participations' own religious beliefs. Some of the members of Bridge Builders started out rejecting religion, or at least uncertain of their own religious identities. But as they participated in the Bridge Builders group, several participants decided to join or change religions, becoming members of churches that embraced sexual minorities. Other members left the group with a better understanding of religious teachings on homosexuality, while still others felt that their participation in the group reaffirmed their already deeply held religious beliefs.

In the following sections, I develop in more depth the concept of "bridge groups," with a focus on how these groups resolve their differences and bring about change. Next, after discussing my data and methods, I provide descriptions of what Belmont was like before Bridge Builders, as well as details about Bridge Builders' initiatives and protests. Finally, I elaborate on the changes produced by Bridge Builders as highlighted above and discuss the broader implications of this study for scholarship on social movement organizations and other civic groups.

CONCEPTUALIZING BRIDGE GROUPS

What are bridge groups?

Over the past few decades, thousands of organizations that bring together two or more previously separate and sometimes hostile groups for the purpose of fostering dialogue and promoting

change within their wider communities have formed in the United States.[1] These groups include (but are not limited to) Gay-Straight Alliances, found in many high schools and colleges across the United States, as well as racial reconciliation and interfaith groups found in many local communities.

I call these organizations "bridge groups" because they work to overcome some type of "gap" or "structural hole" (Burt 1992) – that is, an absence of connections or ties between groups. The term "bridge" has previously been employed in the social movements literature, generally in reference to leaders who connect the leaders of organizations (e.g, civil rights organizations) to people in local communities (e.g., black communities) (Robnett 1997; see also Isaac and Christensen 2002; Kim and Pfaff 2012). However, the use of the term "bridge leaders" in these studies generally refers to the connection of two groups that have similar concerns yet remain structurally unconnected. My use of the term "bridge" instead builds on work on "bridge building" and "bridging processes" in civic organizations (Lichterman 2005; Beamish and Luebbers 2009) and refers to the connection of two groups who are not only structurally unconnected but have also historically been divided along the lines of religion, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

I also use the term "bridge groups" because many of the organizations I call "bridge groups" explicitly draw upon the metaphor of the bridge in their names, mission statements, and/or activism. To provide a few examples: the group discussed here, which seeks to bring together LGBT and religious communities at a Christian university, is named Bridge Builders; a prominent group in Memphis that seeks to overcome religious and economic divides also calls

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[1] Considering Gay-Straight Alliances alone, 3,000 of these organizations have been formed at the high school level (GLSEN 2012), while over 800 of these organizations have formed at the college and university level (Human Rights Campaign 2012), the vast majority over the past twenty years.

itself Bridge Builders; and a group known in Selma, Alabama as Project: Dance Selma, seeks to bring black and white communities together in a display of unity on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of "Bloody Sunday" during the civil rights movement.

It is helpful to distinguish the concept of "bridge groups" from related concepts such as coalitions. Bridge groups are different from coalitions, as defined by Van Dyke and McCammon (2010), in at least two important ways. First, whereas coalitions are formed as a temporary means to an end – to bring two or more organizations together to achieve some common goal – the bringing together of two or more groups is itself one of the primary goals of bridge groups – indeed, the two groups that are brought together might not yet have common goals. Second, whereas coalitions generally bring together two or more formal organizations, bridge groups bring together individuals who may not be members of formal organizations. Rather, they are characterized by their collective identities (e.g., along the lines of religion, race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation).

It is also helpful to consider the concept of "bridge groups" in relationship to broader concepts such as "civic groups." In his book *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge American's Divisions,* Lichterman (2005) defines "civic groups" as those organizational "places in which people learn to deliberate about public issues, and to look out for each other and the wider world" – including "community centers, service clubs, citizen advocacy groups, social movement organizations, town hall forums, volunteer associations, e-mail discussion groups, churches, synagogues, mosques, and religiously based alliances" (p. 6). While Lichterman (2005) devotes his book to a study of church groups that work to build bridges with outside communities (though not, as in this study, within the space of the group itself), he notes that not all civic groups build bridges – rather, some civic groups are "culture-warring, politically

escapist, racist, and religiously bigoted," aiming to divide groups of people rather than bring them together (p. 29). Bridge groups thus might be considered any type of civic group devoted to bringing together disparate groups from the wider society as opposed to dividing groups (as "hate groups" do) or primarily seeking some other goals (e.g., organizations seeking to gain benefits for a single disadvantaged group).

Finally, it should be noted that, although bridge groups take on "bridge building" as a central part of their collective identity and as a primary goal of their group, they may at times engage in activities not traditionally associated with "bridge building" (just as groups which do not take on "bridge building" as a part of their identity may at times engage in "bridge building" activities). Indeed, the bridge group I study here employed more confrontational protest tactics in an attempt to establish standing in its community. However, as I discuss, even these protests were in keeping with the group's "bridge building" character, as students emphasized their love for their university and appealed to shared religious convictions rather than emphasizing their differences.

How do bridge groups resolve divisions?

A focus on bridge groups has the potential to expand scholars' thinking on two theoretical issues: first, how civic groups resolve divisions along the lines of religion, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.; and second, the nature of social movement-induced change.

The first question has been surprisingly underexamined in the social movements literature especially, despite the fact that many activists encounter individuals of different religious, racial, class, gender, and sexual identities within their organizations, broader coalitions (especially cross-movement coalitions), or global gatherings (such as the World Social Forum).

Social movement scholars have instead focused on how social movements resolve tensions arising from differences in political ideology (for example, Mayer 2009).

The few scholars who *have* addressed this question have approached it from a more micro-level, or social psychological, perspective. Lichterman (2005), for instance, focuses on the importance of communication -- the idea that "communication about social ties matters a lot for creating social ties" (p. 16). Specifically, he argues that successful groups practice social reflexivity; by talking self-critically about their social ties, they are more likely to "spiral outward" and thus build relationships with individuals outside the group. Similarly, a recent study by Beamish and Luebbers (2009) of a cross-movement "peace and justice coalition" divided along the lines of race and class describes four components of a "bridging process" by which social movement groups resolve "positional tensions": first, "cause affirmation" (in which one group completely endorses another group's goals and claims); second, "strategic deployment" (agreeing on a division of labor through which the strengths of both groups are realized); third, exclusion (expelling members of the groups who violate the terms of an alliance); and fourth, the "co-development of cross-movement commitment" (for instance, developing shared stories of outrage that cement the relationship between the two groups).

While such micro-level processes were present in my research on an LGBT religious bridge group, the imagery of the bridge group invites us to think about how bridge work might also be accomplished through or facilitated by meso-level, or organizational level, processes. Specifically, we might draw from the insights of LGBT activists who have long recognized the importance of "safe space," as well as on scholarly work that emphasizes the importance of "free space" for cultivating members' "voices" (see especially Evans and Boyte 1992; Polletta 1999). Since facilitating dialogue and developing cooperation between people of different religions,

racial groups, social classes, genders, sexual identities, etc., is a primary goal of bridge groups – not something that must simply be dealt with to achieve other goals – bridge groups work hard to create a space where dialogue and understanding can develop. The student bridge group I study here was initially threatened when school administrators insisted on attending meetings and censoring the kinds of materials that could be brought into group meetings. As the group began to establish autonomy, it was much better able to confront and resolve the tensions both in their group and in their wider community.

Furthermore, the specific case examined here invites us to think about how bridge work might be facilitated by collective action. In some ways, the very presence of individuals and organizations devoted to resolving identity tensions can have positive effects on the communities in which they are embedded. As members of the bridge group I study here became visible through protests and other activities at their university, even students, faculty, and staff outside the bridge group began to engage in more open dialogues about issues surrounding religion and sexuality and exhibited more tolerant attitudes toward LGBT individuals. The university itself was also forced to reevaluate its institutional identity.

In sum, I argue that bridge building between different groups relies on the cultivation of safe space – space where individuals can gather privately to discuss their ideas openly -- on the one hand and increased visibility through protest or other forms of collective action on the other. I illustrate these processes in the paper below.

What changes do bridge groups bring about?

Research on bridge groups can also shed light on the nature of social movement- and other civic group-induced change. While the question of the consequences of social movements has

received increased attention in recent years, scholars have mostly focused on the policy or narrowly political impacts of social movements (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Because bridge groups work to create change at both an individual and cultural level, a focus on the work of bridge groups has the potential to open up underexplored avenues of research on biographical and cultural consequences of social activism.

Research on biographical consequences of social movements has thus far been quite limited (see review by Giugni 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that social movement participants generally come away with more politicized worldviews and are more likely to continue participating in social movements throughout their lives than activists who did not participate in the movements under study (McAdam 1988; McAdam 1989; Whalen and Flacks 1989; McAdam 1992; Fendrich 1993; Sherkat and Blocker 1997; Klatch 1999; Van Dyke, McAdam, and Brenda 2000). However, this body of research is mostly entirely centered around the impact of social movement participation on individuals' political lives and political orientations and is mostly focused on social movement activists of the 1960's. We know little about how contemporary social movements might transform participants' attitudes toward people of other religions, races, genders, social classes, sexual orientations, and even political groups, or how social movements might transform individuals' own identities outside of the political realm. (McAdam's (1988) study of Freedom Summer is a notable exception, showing how Freedom Summer participants became friends with people of other races, social classes, etc.) Research on bridge groups can shed light on these kinds of attitudinal and identity changes since their goal is to promote dialogue and thus help resolve historical differences between groups. For instance, this study makes a contribution to sociological knowledge about the biographical consequences of social movements by showing how participants in a social movement bridge group came away

with increased tolerance toward other religions, and in a few cases became more religious themselves.

Research on cultural consequences of social movements is somewhat more developed. Earl (2004) describes three main types of cultural consequences: symbolic studies of cultural outcomes (in which social movements create or cause changes in artwork, literature, music, and even scientific practice; e.g. Isaac 2009); social psychological studies of cultural outcomes (in which social movements transform the attitudes, values, and beliefs of those outside the social movement; e.g., d'Anjou 1996; d'Anjou and Van Male 1998; Rochon 1998; and Gamson and Modigliani 1989); and macrocultural studies of cultural outcomes (in which social movements create or cause changes in collective identities, as well as subcultures, countercultures, and communities; e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1992; Nagel 1995). I consider culture here in these latter two senses and argue that research on bridge groups can help us better understand how values and identities are transformed. In writing about how social movements can transform the attitudes, values, and beliefs of a community outside the social movement itself, scholars have again generally focused on values about policy matters such as the slave trade (d'Anjou 1996; d'Anjou and Van Male 1998), nuclear power (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), and prohibition, the Equal Rights Amendment, and school integration (Rochon 1998) rather than more personal values such as religious beliefs. Furthermore, in writing about collective identity as an outcome of social movement activism, scholars have generally written about the identity of the social movement group itself (e.g., Taylor and Whittier (1992) discuss a social movement's construction of a lesbian feminist identity), not the identity of groups outside the social movement (though see Nagel 1995). My discussion of how Bridge Builders group facilitated a change in Belmont University's identity from a conservative Christian identity to a more

ecumenical identity, as well as how the group helped to bring about a more inclusive community at Belmont, highlights how activism by social movements and other kinds of civic groups can contribute to changes in institutional identities and the character of the communities that surround them.

DATA AND METHODS

To understand the work and impact of one bridge group, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 26 people who participated in the Bridge Builders group from 2009 to 2011, as well as the protests they led in December of 2010. The majority of these interviews were with Belmont students, but five of the interviews were with faculty and staff who taught or worked at Belmont during the time of the protests, and three interviews were with students who participated in the Belmont protests but attended other universities. The interviewees are roughly evenly divided in terms of sexual identity (LGBT or straight) and gender (female or male), and reflecting the racial composition of both the protest participants and the Belmont student body, all but one of the interviewees was white. I have been careful to preserve the anonymity of my respondents by removing individuals' names from the interview transcripts. The exception is when I incorporate public statements made by highly public individuals, such as the president of the university.

I identified these interview respondents through purposive and then snowballing sampling – specifically, I sought out all of the leaders of the protests and the Bridge Builders group for interviews, and I asked each of the individuals who agreed to the interviews for the names of other students or faculty who were involved in the protests and/or the Bridge Builders

group. I stopped interviewing individuals when I reached saturation and was gaining no new data on theoretical concepts and processes of interest.

The interviews generally lasted from forty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours, and ranged from topics such as the extent of the respondents' participation, the motivation for the respondents' participation, what Belmont was like before the protests, what happened during the protests, the impact of the protests on the school and the respondents themselves, the respondents' beliefs about why Belmont ultimately changed its policies, and the respondents' reflections on how their participation in the Bridge Builders group and protests changed themselves. The interviews took place during the summer and fall of 2011, usually in-person, but occasionally over the phone when respondents were now living out of state.

Interviews do have limitations – for instance, interviewees were often not able to recall the exact timelines for events, information about group meetings, names of individuals involved with the group, etc. Thus, for additional data about the response of the public to the protests at Belmont, I consulted media reports and press releases online, as well as meeting notes and other documents provided by the Bridge Builders group. I coded both the interview transcripts and these relevant documents for recurring themes and processes. The impacts of the Bridge Builders group at Belmont, as well as the processes that brought about these impacts, were ones continually emphasized by students and faculty alike in interviews.

BELMONT BEFORE BRIDGE BUILDERS

To understand the role of Bridge Builders and its impact on Belmont, it is necessary to understand what Belmont was like before Bridge Builders. How did Belmont identify itself as a university? How conservative and religious were the students and faculty? And how had the

university changed in these respects in the years preceding the protests? In this section, I address questions about Belmont's institutional identity and culture, as well as the religious beliefs of the eventual protest participants.

Belmont as a historically Baptist university

In 1890, a wealthy Nashville socialite, Adelicia Hayes Acklen Cheatham, established Belmont as an elementary school, prep school, and junior college for women in her famous antebellum home, the Belmont Mansion. Since then, Belmont has undergone a number of changes. In 1913, the school merged with the Ward Seminary and became the Ward-Belmont College for Women. In 1951, the school changed its name to Belmont College, opened the school to both women and men, and formally affiliated itself with the Tennessee Baptist Convention (hereafter, TBC).[2] And in 1991, after beginning new professional programs, Belmont College became known as Belmont University (Belmont University 2012).

The funding that Belmont began to receive from the TBC in 1951 was conditioned on its adherence to strict rules about the structure and operation of the school. Three such rules are especially relevant to this study. First, the TBC required that any person who joined the Board of Trustees be an active member of and leader in a Baptist church (Baptist Press 2006). In practice, this meant that the Board of Trustees consisted almost entirely of conservative white men. Second, the TBC required that all faculty and staff identify as Christians, actively participate in local churches, and live up to certain "Biblical standards" such as marital fidelity. This requirement continues to be reflected in the faculty handbook, which states that faculty are "expected to show a personal Christian commitment in both precept and example, evidenced in

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[2] The Tennessee Baptist Convention represents hundreds of Baptist churches across Tennessee, most of which are also affiliated with the national conservative Southern Baptist Convention.

part by active involvement in a local church committed to the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord… It should be understood by the faculty member that a personal alignment with the institutional mission is an important condition of ongoing employment" (Belmont University 2011, p. 57). Faculty members whom I interviewed recall even tenured faculty members being fired from the school in previous years for violating various standards of morality. Finally, the TBC required that Belmont maintain a prohibition on "homosexual acts" in both its student and faculty handbooks (Selden 2009). According to interviews, if Belmont had allowed an LGBT group to form on campus or had approved a nondiscrimination ordinance covering sexual orientation for most of its history, it would have almost certainly forfeited funding from the TBC.

In 2007, Belmont decided to sever its ties with the TBC after a few religious yet non-Baptist donors asked to join its Board of Trustees and promised that they could bring in new funding for the school (Baptist Press 2006). Yet, Belmont did not suddenly become a welcoming place for LGBT students, faculty, and staff, as well as any individuals not identifying as Christians. Most of Belmont's trustees were still Baptists, the school continued to receive a large amount of funding from individual Baptist churches, and Belmont continued to identify and market itself as a "Christian university" (with the strong implication of a more conservative brand of Christianity). As late as 2009, Belmont maintained the prohibition on ambiguously-defined "homosexual acts" in its student handbook (Selden 2009).[3] And, as I describe below, as students began to pressure the school to allow an LGBT student organization to form, school

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[3] According to Belmont's campus newspaper, "The Bruin Guide now states, "Specific behaviors of sexual misconduct include, but are not limited to: sexual behavior outside of marriage, sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, other non-consensual sex offenses and possession or distribution of pornographic materials." Before this year, the phrase "homosexual behavior" was listed among the forbidden acts" (Selden 2009).

officials continually invoked the "history" of the school in explaining why they were denying

their applications. Challenging the conservative Christian institutional identity of the university

would be a major goal of the Bridge Builders group that began organizing in 2009.

Belmont as a religiously conservative environment

Given Belmont's history as a Tennessee Baptist university, it is not surprising that most students

and faculty members whom I interviewed described Belmont as a politically and religiously

conservative environment, especially on matters pertaining to gender and sexuality. Students,

faculty, and staff generally shied away from open discussions about gender and sexuality at the

school, and when individuals attempted to start these discussions, they were usually met with

hostility. One faculty member described a hostile reaction by the administration toward a student

who wanted to do research on sexuality at the school. Another faculty member told me about

receiving an e-mail from one of the many "incredibly vocal, evangelical, the Bible-is-the-direct-

word-of-God" students on campus when LGBT and allied students were first trying to organize

an LGBT organization known as Bridge Builders. Among other things, the student told the

faculty member that the Bridge Builders were going to be "building a bridge to sin." Finally, one

student, who ultimately became a leader in the Bridge Builders group and protests at the school,

described the reaction she received when she asked whether the school had a Gay-Straight

Alliance during her freshman orientation:

> "I have this very long involvement with searching for LGBT rights at Belmont, starting
> from the first time I ever set foot on orientation. I went to an orientation session and
> asked if there was a Gay-Straight Alliance or anything like that. I got completely shot
> down – they told me, there will never be anything like that at Belmont, that is completely
> against our Christian morals. I was like, okay, a little bit shellshocked."

When discussions about sexuality *were* held, they were usually from a conservative perspective. For instance, the school's University Ministries occasionally brought in speakers to discuss issues surrounding sexuality at the school, but these talks preached abstinence before marriage for heterosexual students and the sinfulness of all non-heterosexual behaviors. One student also told me about a Christian conference the school once hosted that featured sessions about how people could leave lives of "homosexual behavior."

All of this created an isolating environment for LGBT students at the school. Indeed, many of the students I talked to had been personally discriminated against or harassed by their peers at the school, with some students relating situations in which their roommates switched rooms after finding out they were gay, and with other students reporting being called names such as "dyke" or "fag" by their peers. The students told me that they longed for greater dialogue on LGBT and religious issues on campus. As one student summarized the environment at Belmont before the protests, and his desire for change:

> "I felt like before the protests [homosexuality] was not talked about a lot in the general Belmont community. Religious people claim we don't have that "problem" here, whereas in reality there are tons of people who have that "problem" here… My #1 goal with the protests was to promote a discussion about these issues, about LGBT people and Christianity. And whether or not people were going around campus saying 'oh my gosh, I hate those Bridge Builders' – they will still be talking about us, and hopefully that will promote discussion with other students."

Belmont protest participants as religiously apathetic

While Belmont in general had a conservative religious atmosphere, many of the students I talked to described themselves as religiously apathetic or agnostic. Why, then, had the students who eventually participated in the Bridge Builders group and protests decided to come to Belmont, and how had they arrived at their current religious views? While I discuss several of the

individual students' biographical narratives in more depth later, it is worth noting several commonalities in the students' biographical trajectories here.

In general, the students could be divided into three groups. A first group of students, the "formerly religious," described themselves as coming from conservative religious backgrounds like their peers. These students had been encouraged by their parents to attend Belmont because of its conservative religious reputation and generally came in with conservative religious views themselves. However, by the time of the protests, these students were generally not church attenders and would not describe themselves as particularly religious. Some students had been turned off from religion because of the isolation, discrimination, and harassment they had experienced from their religious peers. Other students had experienced difficulty in finding a church that matched their evolving religious and political views and often experienced difficulty in reconciling their religious and sexual identities. And finally, still other students had simply arrived at agnostic or atheistic religious views and no longer believed in God.

A second group of students, the "consistently non-religious," had not come from particularly religious households and came to Belmont for reasons other than the school's religious reputation. For instance, some students had been attracted to Belmont's nationally recognized music school, and other students had been attracted to Belmont because of its location (generally, because it was in the same city in which they lived) and relative affordability. Given the hostility toward LGBT students on campus, they had not been motivated to pursue religious faith while at college. Thus, at the time of the protests, they too did not identify with a particular religious faith.

A final group of students, the "consistently religious," came to Belmont with religious beliefs and continued to hold on to those religious beliefs by the time of the protests. These

students were most often straight, allied students but also included LGBT Christian students who were particularly motivated to promote discussion about LGBT issues within the Christian community. These students would play a major role in the religious transformations of the groups of students listed above.

THE EMERGENCE OF BRIDGE BUILDERS AT BELMONT

In response to their experiences of isolation on campus, and in an attempt to move Belmont toward a more ecumenical and inclusive identity, a group of LGBT and allied students began work to establish a group called Bridge Builders, which had as its stated goal to "bridge the gap between the LGBT and Christian communities." I focus here on the first two "phases" of Bridge Builder's time at Belmont: the initial efforts to create safe space at Belmont from the fall of 2009 through 2010, and the outbreak of protests at Belmont in December of 2010.

Establishing safe space at Belmont

The original idea for Bridge Builders came from a group of students who had come from high schools, or had transferred from other universities, that had Gay-Straight Alliances and wanted a similar organization at Belmont, especially in light of the often chilly climate for sexual minorities at the school. The students, who were mostly religious themselves, specifically proposed a religious LGBT organization because they believed dialogue about religion and homosexuality was needed at their school. Yet, an application to establish the student organization was denied by the school's administration by the beginning of the spring semester in 2010. Administrators cited the school's "history" in arguing that such an organization was not appropriate at Belmont.

The administration instead proposed a compromise group known as "Difficult Dialogues" that began to meet in March 2010. The idea was that school administrators, rather than students, would host and facilitate discussions about religion and homosexuality. The discussions were not open to the entire university community – rather, only those students who were invited could attend. Furthermore, any materials the group discussed had to be approved by the administration, with the goal of providing a "balanced perspective" on homosexuality – for every article condoning homosexuality, school administrators wanted students to read an article critical of homosexuality. This approach was in part inspired by a nationally recognized Christian author whom the school brought in to help advise the group efforts. But, as one student complained:

> "We were talking about how we wanted to show videos, and [the author] was like, if you show anything that's pro-gay you have to show an anti-gay movie. And we were like, no, uh uh, no. Our BSA [Black Student Alliance] doesn't have to show pro-white supremacy movies, that's not how it works. So I was just like, this is… I voiced my concern about it and said, that doesn't make sense. We were trying to make a welcoming and safe environment for people who otherwise might feel alienated in this community. And doing that just furthers the alienation."

The meetings would continue through the fall semester of 2010, but most members of the administration, as well as many students and faculty, gradually dropped out of the "Difficult Dialogues" group. Though the Bridge Builders students were not able to hold official meetings on campus, a few students began to meet off-campus during the summer of 2010 and took advantage of a multi-week curriculum about homosexuality and Christianity entitled "This I Know" (thisiknowstudy.org).

During the fall semester of 2010, a few students began to organize "underground meetings" near the campus. It was during these meetings that the form of the group began to take hold and that safe space was being established for Belmont students. At the beginning of these meetings, one of the students would generally give a prayer before the students played board

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games or some other "ice breaker" so that they could get to know each other better. Then, according to documents provided by the group, a new student each week agreed to lead a discussion over topics that included "GLBT History (Stonewall, etc.)," "Biology of Gender/Homosexuality," "How to Be a Good Ally," "Heteronormativity/Bullying in Schools," "AIDS and Its Impact in the GLBT Community," "Deconstructing the Binary," "Media Representation of the LGBTIQA community," "Deconstructing Trans-phobia," "Reclaiming Words," "Recognizing and Addressing Relationship Violence," "Famous Gays & Alllies," "International Rights," and "Drag, Camp, and Gender."

In addition to these meetings, the group would sometimes hold socials such as "cupcake parties." Finally, at a separate time during the week, one of the more religious students (who was also openly gay) volunteered to lead Bible studies for the Bridge Builders students. According to the student, he did not spend time going over the few verses in the Bible that seem to discuss homosexuality, or otherwise focus the Bible study on sexuality; rather:

> "I think I talked about Isaiah because I love Isaiah. I mean – it was a normal Bible study, but it was intended for students who were gay who had been rejected by their churches to come and just be Christians and not have to focus solely on their sexual orientation. I wanted to show the people who came that they could be people of faith. I wanted to provide a space at Belmont where people were comfortable with exploring that. Not everyone is comfortable coming into the church especially if in your mind it represents a space of discrimination. And so I wanted to start the process of bridging that divide for some people."

Raising visibility through protest

Despite the success of these "underground meetings," the students still desired an officially approved organization that would be able to freely discuss issues surrounding religion and homosexuality with all members of the campus community. In an attempt to pressure school administrators to approve the Bridge Builders group at Belmont, students began to organize petition drives in the fall of 2010. Specifically, the students set up tables around the school's

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event center and circulated petitions in their classrooms. While some students agreed to sign the petitions, many others politely declined, often unaware of the organization and its cause. A few students hurled insults at the group.

The students began to look for another way to draw attention to their cause, and an opportunity arose near the end of the fall semester of 2010 when a soccer coach, who had just revealed to her soccer team that she and her same-sex partner were having a baby, suddenly left the school.[4] Both the soccer team and the Bridge Builders students believed the school had forced out the soccer coach because of her sexual orientation, and together they organized several protests and events that they hoped would also draw attention to the Bridge Builders cause during the final week of the school year in December 2010.

A first outside rally was held outside Belmont's campus on Sunday, December 5, 2010, and was attended by about 40 students and alumni (Greenberg 2010). Attendance was somewhat sparse due to snow, but a retired Methodist bishop made a surprise visit and delivered a positive speech. In keeping with the group's "bridge building character," religious signs emerged as an early theme of the protests, with students holding up signs such as, "WWJD?" (What Would Jesus Do?), "Jesus Loves [The Coach]," "God is Love, 1 John 4:8," "Belmont, Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself," and "Jesus Had 2 Dads and He Turned Out Just Fine." (One person did bring a sign comparing the Belmont administration to the Nazis, but students quickly asked him to hide the sign and announced rules for future protests banning any language that might be perceived as "anti-Belmont.") The protest was covered by Nashville's newspapers, including *The Tennessean*, and local news stations.

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[4] Both Belmont and the soccer coach, citing an exit agreement, have refused to comment on the circumstances of her departure – for instance, why she left, and whether she was fired, asked to resign, or resigned voluntarily.

Students held a sit-in outside the office of the school president on Monday, December 6, 2010, during a "convocation" hour in which no classes were held, and about 50 students attended this protest (Heim 2010). Several local newspapers and news stations were present. The school's president was out of town but issued an e-mail to the Belmont community, subsequently reported by the media, containing his first public statement in response to the protests: "We support every individual's right to share their opinion. I would ask that respect, patience and thoughtfulness drive our actions and conversations as a Belmont community now and in the coming days" (Heim 2010).

A second outside rally was held outside the school's main offices on Wednesday, December 8, 2010, a university-designated "reading day" in which no classes were held, and drew over 100 students, alumni, and members of the Nashville community (Wilson 2010b). Local newspapers and news stations were again present throughout the day, with several members of the Bridge Builders group making statements, and the protest was widely covered by local as well as national media outlets, including *The Associated Press*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Huffington Post, Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN*, and *CNN*. Students again held up a variety of religiously themed signs, such as "Jesus Was Born to a Nontraditional Mother, Would Belmont Fire Her Too?", "There is Neither Male nor Female, Slave nor Free, Jew nor Greek, Yet All are One in Christ's Love (Galatians 3:28)," "All I Want for Christmas is Equality," and "CHRIST=LOVE."

On the morning of that second rally, students held a letter writing drive so that students could write to national media outlets, including ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC; national media figures and celebrities, such as Anderson Cooper, Ellen, and Lady Gaga; the coach who was fired from the school; and the president of the school. By the next day, the school President

confirmed he had received over 400 e-mails and letters (Brooks 2010). Finally, on the way from the letter writing event to that second rally, students held a prayer walk in which over 50 students participated. The student who had been holding Bible studies for the students prayed, "God of peace and justice, you surround us now. We believe you liberate the oppressed, God … open (the university administration's) hearts, open their minds, so we may see change on campus" (Brooks 2010).

The students were joined in their opposition to the school's actions by others in the Belmont community. The school's faculty senate passed a unanimous resolution encouraging the school to have an open dialogue on issues surrounding religion and sexuality, though it tabled a more strongly worded resolution (Wilson 2010a). Most significantly, a major Belmont donor and former trustee named Mike Curb took notice of the protests and began speaking out to the media against Belmont's actions. Curb, who had a national reputation as former Republican Lieutenant Governor of California and founder of the music company Curb Records released a public statement saying, "It's time for Belmont to change. Belmont has to decide whether they want to be a national, recognized university, particularly with their school of music business, or they want to be a church" (Robertson 2010). And in a separate statement, he continued, "I promise you if the matter is not resolved, I will continue speaking out about this the rest of my life" (*Nashville Scene* 2011).

THE IMPACT OF BRIDGE BUILDERS AT BELMONT

On Wednesday, December 8, 2010, immediately after students held their second rally outside the school, Belmont's president, Bob Fisher, held a press conference addressing the events surrounding the protests. Though he refused to comment on the circumstances surrounding the

soccer coach's departure and dismissed the idea that Belmont had ever discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation during his time at Belmont, he announced a new nondiscrimination statement inclusive of sexual orientation (Belmont University 2010), which was officially approved by the Board of Trustees in January 2011 (Belmont University 2011).[5] Around the same time, the school's president reached out to the Bridge Builders students and began working with them to approve Bridge Builders as an official student organization, which was finalized later in the spring semester of 2011. These changes were facilitated by the Bridge Builders' activism, in large part by raising the visibility of their cause and, in turn, gaining the attention of the media, donors, and the entire Belmont community.[6] Yet, the impacts of the Bridge Builders group at Belmont were even broader than these. As I show in Figure 1, and as I discuss below, the protests led by Bridge Builders and the safe space established by Bridge Builders facilitated changes in Belmont's religious identity and culture, as well as the biographies of the protesters themselves.

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[5] Fisher's refusal to acknowledge any discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been viewed by the activists as a legal maneuver to protect the school against future lawsuits, especially as faculty and staff besides the soccer coach had recently come forward to claim the school discriminated against them on the basis of their sexual orientation (Caress 2010).
[6] Though it's difficult to determine the causal importance of each of these factors, interviewees believed that the negative media attention generated by the protests were perhaps most instrumental in changing the Belmont administration's policies. Belmont had doubled in size from 2000-2010 and was taking steps to become a nationally recognized research university; thus, they were very sensitive to negative media coverage.
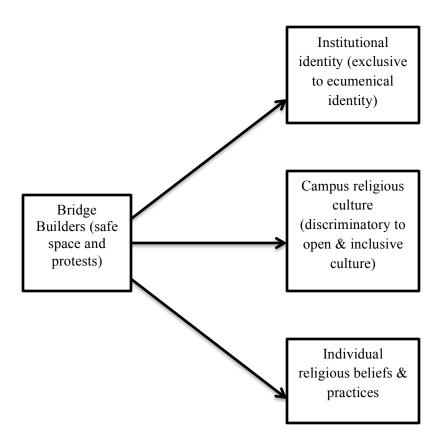
Institutional identity (exclusive to ecumenical identity)

Bridge Builders (safe space and protests)

Campus religious culture (discriminatory to open & inclusive culture)

Individual religious beliefs & practices

Figure 1: The Impact of Bridge Builders on Belmont

Impact on Belmont's institutional identity

Among the changes facilitated by the Bridge Builders students' activism at Belmont was a redefinition of what it meant to be a Christian university. Whereas Belmont had been affiliated with a Christian denomination with conservative views on sexuality until 2007, and had banned "homosexual acts" in its student handbook until 2009, Belmont now began to claim that the acceptance of all students, faculty, and staff, regardless of sexual orientation, was part of its Christian mission.

The contrast between Belmont's previous identity as a conservative Christian university and Belmont's new identity as an ecumenical Christian university can be most clearly seen in statements made by the administration directly before and directly after the protests. On Sunday, March 5, 2010, the same day Bridge Builders students held its first outside rally at the school,

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The Tennessean ran the following story, which quoted the chair of the board of trustees, Marty Dickens:

> "Belmont University may not be Baptist-affiliated anymore, but it's still Christian. So faculty and staff must do what the Good Book tells them to do. And at Belmont it's telling them no sex outside of marriage.
>
> "We do adhere to our values as Christ-centered, and we don't want to make apologies for that," said Marty Dickens, chairman of Belmont's board of trustees"" (Smietana 2010).

The story then continued:

> "[Belmont has] retained a written policy for students, faculty, and staff that forbids any sexual relations outside of marriage. Dickens said the expectations for faculty are clear, so [the soccer coach] needed to leave. He said some will disagree with that decision, but Belmont won't apologize for its Christian values.
>
> "We expect people to commit themselves to high moral and ethical standards within a Christian context," he said. "That includes members of the board, faculty, and administration"" (Smietana 2010).

Just before the protests at Belmont occurred, then, Belmont's leadership invoked "Christ-centered" values and Christian moral and ethical standards to defend the exit of a lesbian soccer coach from the school, as well as to defend (effectively) discriminating against individuals on the basis of sexual orientation.[7]

Yet, as part of the press conference immediately after the second student rally on Wednesday, December 8, 2010, Belmont's President stated, "Because of Belmont's aspirations to demonstrate Christian character, it is a safe and welcoming place for all. The Belmont family, like any large family, comprises a rich and diverse mix of people" (Belmont University 2010). And, after the Board of Trustees officially voted to add sexual orientation to the school's

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[7] Most of the activists involved in the protests believed that enforcing a prohibition on sex outside of marriage was a way of discriminating against lesbian and gay individuals without actually acknowledging discrimination against lesbian and gay individuals, since same-sex marriage is not currently recognized in Tennessee.

nondiscrimination statement in January 2011, Belmont's President released the following statement on behalf of the Board:

> "Today our Board of Trustees met and affirmed officially who we are and who we will continue to be. We are a Christian community that is welcoming, loving, and inclusive of everyone. To reflect the unique character of Belmont University, the Board added a preamble to our existing non-discrimination statement. The language in this preamble was inspired by our existing mission statement and our current employment handbooks. It states that Belmont is a Christian community, and the university's faculty, administration and staff uphold Jesus as the Christ and as the measure of all things. In addition, the Board voted today to amend the university's written anti-discrimination policy to reflect our long-standing practice of non-discrimination as it relates to sexual orientation" (Belmont University 2011a).

It seems, then, that the Bridge Builders' protests facilitated a redefinition of what it meant to be a Christian community; whereas before the school's leaders emphasized its boundaries – excluding anyone from the community who engaged in practices such as sex outside of marriage – the school now claimed itself to be a "Christian community that is welcoming, loving, and inclusive of everyone."

Impact on Belmont's religious environment

The Bridge Builders group also helped bring about significant changes in the culture or atmosphere at Belmont. As previously discussed, discussions about gender and sexuality were once shied away from at Belmont, and LGBT students at the school had reported significant instances of discrimination and harassment by their mostly conservative religious peers. Now, with few visible exceptions[8], the Belmont community embraced the cause of the Bridge Builders

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[8] Soon after the soccer coach left the school, one alumnus created a Facebook group entitled "Support Belmont University Not [The Coach]." The alumnus noted that if enough people joined the group, he would organize counterprotests at the school; however, the Facebook group never reached more than four members, prompting the creator to complain that so many people were rejecting invitations to the group.

participants and began to engage in wide-ranging conversations about religion and homosexuality.

One sign of the changed atmosphere at Belmont came from students' positive reception to the Bridge Builders students' continued activism. After the December 2010 protests, but while negotiations for the Bridge Builders student group were still ongoing, the Bridge Builders students continued to hold petition drives to support the official recognition of Bridge Builders at Belmont. Several students noted that students seemed much more receptive to the petition drive after the protests and that the Bridge Builders students received far fewer insults or rejections. For instance, one of the group's leaders gave this typical response about the protest drives (I indicates interviewer, R respondent):

> "I: Have you noticed any changes in the culture or atmosphere at Belmont since the protests?
>
> R: Since the protests, I would say yes, because during the spring – this sort of slipped my mind – we held petition days, where we set up tables on campus and we talked to passing students saying, hey, do you want to sign this petition to get us an official group. And people would come and talk to us, and we had so many more students sign the petitions after the protests. Students would say, yeah, I support that, I'll sign that for you. And then we even had several faculty members that would say, yes I'm in support… Whereas, before the protests, it was more, uh, yeah, I guess I'll sign. People were – I wouldn't say unwilling, but they had no motivation to voice their support.
>
> I: Did you get any rejection before the protests?
>
> R: Yeah, we had quite a few… many people would say, oh I don't support that, I'm a Christian… But after the protests we had so much more support and much less rejection, so that was actually surprising, it was really really good."

Increased tolerance and acceptance of LGBT students on campus was also evident in focus groups that Belmont held after the protests to gauge the Belmont community's reaction to the possibility of an official LGBT student group on campus, as well as the addition of sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination statement. Sign-ups were held for individuals who were

interested in attending (thus creating some sample bias), though the school also sent out invitations to a seemingly random mix of alumni and students (including recent transfer students who had not been aware of the protests). Each focus group contained 20-25 individuals; interviewees differed in the exact number of focus groups that were held, but no respondent believed there were more than five. Students I talked to reported that, at nearly every focus group, even the more conservative religious attendees unanimously voiced their approval for a Bridge Builders group on campus. (The exception is a focus group in which two people voiced their disapproval.) For instance, one student gives a typical response about the focus group he attended:

> "Dr. Fisher, after all the protests, had focus groups with groups of students and groups of alumni and groups of faculty. And the one I went to – Dr. Fisher wasn't allowed to talk, he just sat there. But his helper would ask questions, and then we would talk. And everyone in the room that I was in was overwhelmingly supportive of Bridge Builders and adding sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination clause, even this old pastor from rural Georgia."

While there were no focus groups prior to Bridge Builders' activism to serve as a comparative baseline, it is perhaps notable that any focus groups were held at all given the lack of conversation on LGBT issues prior to Bridge Builders.

Perhaps the most significant change in the culture at Belmont following the protests was the University Ministries' support of the Bridge Builders group. As previously noted, the University Ministries had been known for bringing in speakers that would deliver conservative perspectives on sexuality. Representatives from University Ministries who had attended the Difficult Dialogues groups did not seem to be in favor of the Bridge Builders group being in existence. But by the end of the spring semester of 2011, University Ministries agreed to officially sponsor the Bridge Builders group and began to host more inclusive talks about faith and sexuality at the school.

Impact on protest participants' religious practices and beliefs

The Bridge Builders students certainly took notice of the improved atmosphere for LGBT students at the school. Several students who became active in Bridge Builders came out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during or after the protests once they realized how many other LGBT students were at the school and once they perceived the Belmont community to be more welcoming. Others felt more emboldened to bring up issues surrounding religion and sexuality in their classes.

Not only had the largely religious Belmont community become more accepting of LGBT individuals, however, but several of the LGBT and allied students and faculty in Bridge Builders became more religious. These were generally not the "consistently non-religious" students who came from nonreligious households and had never claimed religious identities, but the "formerly religious" students who had come from very conservative, religious households and had since turned away from religion. Because non-LGBT religious individuals, non-religious LGBT individuals, and religious LGBT individuals were brought together in new ways through Bridge Builders – including through Bible studies that continued to be held after the organization's approval, but also through the protests, in which many students had emphasized religious yet pro-LGBT messages -- students became exposed to religious perspectives on homosexuality to which they had previously given little thought.

One woman, who began her participation in Bridge Builders as a student and then continued as an alumna, had attended a more conservative church in Nashville because she was paid to sing there. Yet, she had begun to pull away from religion because she found it to be such an unsupportive environment, and was brought back to religion through her involvement in Bridge Builders:

"I: Did the protests and your involvement in the Bridge Builders group shape or change your views about religion at all?

R: I would say yes. At the time I was working for [X] Presbyterian Church. I do sort of – I'm a paid singer at various churches, for extra money on top of my job. They were a pretty gay negative group. And while I loved them very much, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to stay there very much longer if I was to be comfortable with myself and deal with my own religious issues surrounding sexuality. So I put in my notice there and got a job at [X] United Methodist Church, which is pretty much the gayest church in town. There is apparently a rumor about the United Methodist churches that you have to be gay to be in the choir. And I was like, nice – that's not true, but hey, that's exciting. So it kind of spurred me to find a more welcoming community of faith as well. And the Methodist church has been a lot better for me than – I was raised Southern Baptist, and they were very gay-negative. They just don't deal with that at all. There were kids I grew up with who I found out later had killed themselves just because their families were seminary people who were pastors or whatever and kicked them out of the family etcetera. So it did make me move around a little bit and in doing so I was able to get over some of my own personal issues with religion. Basically, I had pulled back from religion because of being in an unsupportive and hurtful environment, and Bridge Builders brought me back.

I: What about your involvement made you change churches and pulled you back to religion?

R: Well, there were a lot of allies involved, as well as – one of the women in Bridge Builders… is a religion major and she is very passionate about the fact that it was okay for her to be a pastor and to be gay, and that was totally fine, and that everyone should just get the fuck over it. And she is one of the most religious and theological and spiritual people that I've ever known. So in just talking to her, in getting to know her – she's going off to theological school in [X] – sort of made me feel like there didn't have to be this divide, I didn't have to stick with the views that had been espoused to me since I was a child about gay people in religion."

She went on to say that she then told others in the Bridge Builders group about welcoming churches in town, and some of them started attending those churches.

Another student described a similar and common story of having attended a conservative church most of her life but coming to understand alternative religious perspectives on homosexuality through her participation in the Bridge Builders group:

"I: Did the protests or your participation in the group shape your views on religion at all?

R: Yeah, definitely. I think there were some really strong spiritual leaders that were part of Bridge Builders. And that still are. Many of these people felt like someone needed to pray over our meetings, and they did. I learned that – my home church is very exclusive and not very open and every week I'd hear at least one homophobic or racist statement made. Generally unintentially racist and intentionally homophobic. And there were a lot of really sexist statements too – I stopped counting those a couple years ago. And I knew deep down that wasn't right, but I didn't know anything else, so I just kind of sat there... And after seeing these people that firmly held this conviction that homosexuality was okay and having someone sit down and teach me and showed me in the Bible where it talks about it and how it talks about it and the verbage that's used, having someone sit down with me and teach me was very helpful too. So I think I've become stronger in my faith."

Finally, while those "consistently religious" students who had entered the Bridge Builders group already claiming a strong religious identity did not change their views as a result of their participation in the group, they did say that their religious views and practiced had been reaffirmed. For instance, one student had just recently begun to attend church when he became active in Bridge Builders, and when he saw other members of his church become active in the protests, his decision to rejoin a religious community was reaffirmed:

"I: I'm wondering if your participation in the protests or Bridge Builders group shaped or changed your views on religion at all?

R: I think – sort of, but not directly. I think it made me that much more grateful for a church community, because my church community was present throughout that entire process. It reaffirmed for me my decision to return to church. Because I had basically given up on church before I started going to [X] Baptist Church, and through the process of the protests, seeing the members of my church, some of whom were employed by Belmont, being present throughout that whole process, just reaffirmed for me the importance of genuine church community.

I: When did you go to [X]? How far back was that?

R: I joined [X] in August of 2009.

I: How long had you been out of church at that point?

R: Uh, officially, probably about a year… but I had kind of checked out two and a half years before that. "

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the emergence of a group known as Bridge Builders dedicated to resolving tensions related to religion and sexuality at Belmont University, as well as the impacts of that group on Belmont's institutional religious identity and religious climate and the participants' own religious identities.

What can scholars learn from this case of Bridge Builders, which has since been presented in the national media as a possible model for LGBT students at other Christian colleges and universities (Eckholm 2011)? First, I've argued that Bridge Builders is part of a growing trend of civic and activist organizations, which I label "bridge groups," that are working to bring together seemingly hostile groups for the purpose of creating dialogue and understanding and promoting change within their broader communities. The social movements literature especially seems to have had a blind spot to such groups, possibly because central concepts in social movements imply that social movement organizations and communities actively define themselves in opposition to outside groups. For instance, Taylor and Whittier (1992) argue that social movement communities constructive collective identities by drawing boundaries, which "mark the social territories of group relations by highlighting *differences* between activists and the web of others in the contested social world" (p. 111, emphasis added). But, as Ghaziani (2011) has recently argued, "activists today are motivated less by drawing boundaries against members of the dominant group and more by *building bridges* toward them" (p. 99, emphasis added).

Second, I've suggested that by paying attention to such groups, scholars can learn more about how activists resolve tensions related to religion, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus far, scholars have mostly focused on the social psychological processes that

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facilitate "bridge work" (Lichterman 2005; Beamish and Luebbers 2009). I've argued that scholars should also pay attention to the kinds of organizational level conditions that allow such micro level processes to take place. In this study, the Bridge Builders group was initially threatened by rules about what kinds of conversations could take place in the group and who could take part in conversations in the group. It was only when the group opened up to all members of the Belmont community to discuss whatever the students felt important that bridge building could truly take place. Furthermore, I've argued that bridge building can also be facilitated by awareness-raising actions outside the group itself. This is because sit-ins, rallies, and other types of protest activity draw attention to the existence of certain groups in a community and create conversation about previously taboo topics.

Finally, I've argued that by studying bridge groups, scholars can learn much more about the biographical and cultural consequences of social movement organizations and other civic groups, two underexplored areas of social movements research especially.[9] Bridge groups have an effect on both the participants of the groups and the communities in which they are embedded. In this case, several of the LGBT students in Bridge Builders became religious as a result of their participation in the group, or otherwise had their religious beliefs strengthened or reaffirmed. Furthermore, the Bridge Builders group facilitated a shift in their school's institutional identity – from a conservative religious identity emphasizing difference to an ecumenical religious identity emphasizing shared similarities – and in their school's environment for LGBT students – groups such as University Ministries, which had previously promoted

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[9] This is not to say that bridge groups don't have impacts on policy. Just a few weeks after the protests by Bridge Builders, and in direct response to the controversy at Belmont, Nashville passed a nondiscrimination ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by businesses such as Belmont who did contract work with the city, though a subsequent Tennessee law later overturned the ordinance (Sisk 2011). Nevertheless, changing public policy is generally a secondary objective of bridge groups.

conservative understandings of sexuality, began to embrace the Bridge Builders cause and contributed to a more welcoming environment for LGBT students on campus.

The undercurrent here, of course, is that social movements can have an impact on religion, and in this area too the paper makes a contribution. The social movements literature has previously examined religion mostly as an independent variable – for instance, pointing out the centrality of churches and other religious organizations to social movement mobilization efforts (Morris 1984; Young 2002; Stamatov 2010; Isaac et al. 2012) and the ways in which religion inspires tactics, messaging, and movement culture (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Williams 2002; Williams 2003; Nepstad 2004; Kelner 2008; Nepstad 2008; Kelner 2011). Other scholars have examined religion as an impediment to social change, showing how religious groups have mobilized in opposition to movements such as for LGBT equality (Fetner 2008). But many sociologists have ignored how social movements can challenge and transform religion, whether conceptualized as private belief, public identity, or culture. (An article by Kim and Pfaff (2012) is a recent exception in the social movements literature; also see literature on feminist religious reform, such as Katzenstein (1999) and Prell (2007).)

In addition to pointing to the need for further research in these areas, this paper suggests additional avenues for future research. As a case study, this paper is unable to fully address questions about the emergence of bridge groups across history and social structures. First, in what ways is the apparent growth of bridge groups a product of historical trends? Might growth in organizations that strive to bring groups together be a reaction to a perceived increase in political polarization, in the same way that the rise of left-wing and (to a lesser extent) right-wing movements in the 1960's were a reaction to the so-called "end of ideology" and middle-class conformity of the 1950's (Anderson 1995)? And second, what kinds of structural conditions

support, or hinder, the establishment of bridge groups? Are bridge groups more common where tensions between groups are higher (what social movement scholars might call a reaction to "political threat") or where tensions between groups are less severe (what social movement scholars might call a response to "political opportunity")?

Relatedly, scholars studying strategic choices by social movements might inquire into why groups employ bridge building rather than boundary drawing as a strategy, as well as take on bridge building as part of their collective identity. Finally, it is still an open question whether the successes of the Bridge Builders group at Belmont will be replicated at other conservative Christian colleges and universities, as well as conservative religious communities across the United States. A recent *New York Times* article by Eckholm (2011) notes that the events at Belmont are an exception in an otherwise bleak trend of LGBT groups being denied recognition at Christian colleges and universities, even at nationally recognized research universities such as Baylor, Brigham Young, and Notre Dame. Why do some LGBT groups gain recognition while others do not? And why do some religious colleges and universities adopt nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation while others do not? These are the kinds of questions that would benefit from comparative research designs and which cannot be answered definitely by this study. Still, given the growing support for LGBT rights nationwide (Silver 2011), it is likely that other Christian colleges and universities will eventually follow in Belmont's footsteps.

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