

Catholic group leaves Vanderbilt over membership rules

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c. 2012 USA Today NASHVILLE (RNS) One of the largest student religious groups at Vanderbilt University is leaving campus in a dispute over the school's non-discrimination policy that bars student groups from requiring their leaders to hold specific beliefs.

Leaders of Vanderbilt Catholic, which has 500 members, says the rule make no sense. P.J. Jedlovec, the group's president, says the group's meetings are open to all students, but only people who share the group's beliefs can be leaders.

"If we were open to having non-Catholics lead the organization, we wouldn't be Catholic anymore," Jedlovec said.

Vanderbilt Provost Richard McCarty said religious groups are free to choose their leaders but must allow any student to be a member and to run for office, no matter their beliefs. Vanderbilt was founded as a Methodist university but now is independent.

Similar disputes have taken place in California, New York and North Carolina. The University of Buffalo suspended the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in December after a dispute over a gay student member.

The University of North Carolina-Greensboro refused to recognize a Christian group called Make Up Your Own Mind because it discriminated on the basis of faith for leaders. The school relented after being sued.

Jeremy Tedesco, legal counsel for the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Alliance Defense Fund who represented Make Up Your Own Mind, expects conflicts to grow.

"The non-discrimination policies are meant to protect religious groups, but instead, they are being used to discriminate against religious groups," he said.

The Supreme Court has upheld campus non-discrimination rules, most recently in a 2010 decision known as *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*. That dispute was at Hastings College of Law, part of the University of California. The school has an "all comers" policy, which bans student groups from restricting membership in any way. The campus chapter of the Christian Legal Society sued to challenge the rule and lost.

Vanderbilt has cited the case in defending its non-discrimination policy.

Vanderbilt Catholic isn't the only religious group at odds with school officials. Four others are on provisional status for violating the policy; the groups must decide in a few weeks whether to drop their faith-based requirements or leave campus.