

Former Baptist school center of gay-rights dispute

by [Bob Allen](#)

December 9, 2010

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A private, historically Baptist Christian college has sparked a national media firestorm over its successful women's soccer coach leaving her job shortly after telling members of her team that she is gay.

Officials at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn., issued a press release Dec. 2 [saying](#)

Coach Lisa Howe was leaving after six years on the job. Members of the team said she was told to resign or be fired after revealing that she and her same-sex partner are expecting a baby in May.

The initial release quoted the athletics director saying Howe "informed the university of her intent to conclude her employment with Belmont" and that it was her decision. Another [release](#) the following day said Howe did not "resign" and was not "dismissed." Acknowledging "inaccuracies" in the first release, officials said Howe's leaving was by "mutual agreement."

The former coach isn't discussing the terms of her departure, on advice from a lawyer. She released a statement expressing appreciation for the opportunity to lead the women's soccer team, thanking her student athletes and concluding, "I am at a point in my life where I am satisfied to move on, and I wish the Belmont women's soccer team continued success."

Students, alumni and other supporters [braved](#) cold temperatures Sunday, Dec. 5, to hold signs on the edge of campus protesting what they called a firing over sexual orientation. Another demonstration [followed](#) Dec. 8 with a cross-campus march by about 100 students.

The protests made headlines in the campus and Nashville newspapers and lead stories in Nashville TV news broadcasts before [spilling](#) over into national outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Sports Illustrated*, *CBS News* and the [Huffington Post](#).

Belmont's faculty senate [passed](#) a unanimous resolution encouraging conversation about the university's hiring policy and affirming belief "that sexual identity of individuals should not impact that person's standing on campus." The senate voted to postpone until January another [resolution](#) that called for clarification of Belmont's hiring policies regarding sexual orientation after a number of faculty senators voiced concern about what actions a hasty resolution might force.

Belmont President Robert Fisher [said](#) Dec. 8 the university did a poor job in communicating and that he took full responsibility for that. He said it is against school policy to discuss personnel matters, but stated clearly that "sexual orientation is not considered in making hiring, promotion, salary or dismissal decisions at Belmont."

Howe praised Fisher's statement Dec. 9, saying it would "set an example for Christian schools and universities across the country."

"I look forward to seeing this policy implemented," she said in a [statement](#). "I intend for my next job to be in a place where I feel safe and welcome. If Belmont is that place, then I will certainly consider reapplying."

Students, faculty more gay-friendly than trustees?

The controversy sheds light on a possible disconnect between Belmont students, faculty, administrators and trustees when it comes to sexual identity.

The administration has twice refused to [recognize](#) a student organization to "examine the intersection of Christian faith and LGBT related issues through group discussion." The official response was that such a group could be "potentially provocative or even

divisive." As a compromise the university initiated a series of discussion groups called "Difficult Dialogues."

Members of Bridge Builders, which now functions as an unofficial group and spearheaded the recent student demonstrations, said the university-sponsored discussion attracted primarily people on their side of the issue and that they believe official recognition would better poise them to engage differing points of view.

The rift also revealed tensions for schools like Belmont tethered to a sectarian heritage yet ambitious to lure top talent in athletics and fields such as law and the entertainment industry. In 2007 Belmont agreed to pay \$11 million to settle a lawsuit terminating its 56-year relationship with the Tennessee Baptist Convention, in part to diversify its trustee board and donor database in a day when the majority of students are no longer Baptist.

Major donor criticizes school

Trustee emeritus Mike Curb, a music business executive who has given millions of dollars to the university; issued a [letter](#) criticizing the school's actions. He said current board members are out of touch with the reality facing alumni of the university's music-business [school](#), which carries his name. Curb, whose major gifts [include](#) \$10 million for naming rights to Belmont's \$52 million Curb Event Center, said regardless of their own sexual orientation, Belmont music students would have to work with gay colleagues after they graduate.

Like many colleges, Belmont's policies are ambiguous when it comes to hiring gays. Its [policy](#) of non-discrimination cites both civil-rights law and "Christian values." Among other things, those values "affirm the dignity of each person as a creation of God." Sexual orientation is not mentioned in the policy, but the university reserves the right to "discriminate on the basis of religion in order to fulfill its purposes."

The school recently deleted "[homosexual behavior](#)" from a student policy on sexual misconduct while [retaining](#) "sexual relations outside marriage."

Women on the soccer team [said](#)

Howe had never spoken about her sexuality before, but when her partner became pregnant, the coach wanted her team to hear the news from her instead of through gossip or rumor. After waiting several weeks for permission and with word starting to leak out, Howe took it upon herself to share the news just before Thanksgiving. A day after classes resumed Nov. 29, the coach was gone.

A team leader who asked administrators for clarification on the departure said she was told that Belmont's policy is "don't ask, don't tell," and that by sharing that she and her partner were having a child Howe outed herself. Howe would have been fired after the baby's birth, anyway, the player said she was told, because it is impossible to hide a child.