

Queer Christianity at Davidson College, 1980-2021

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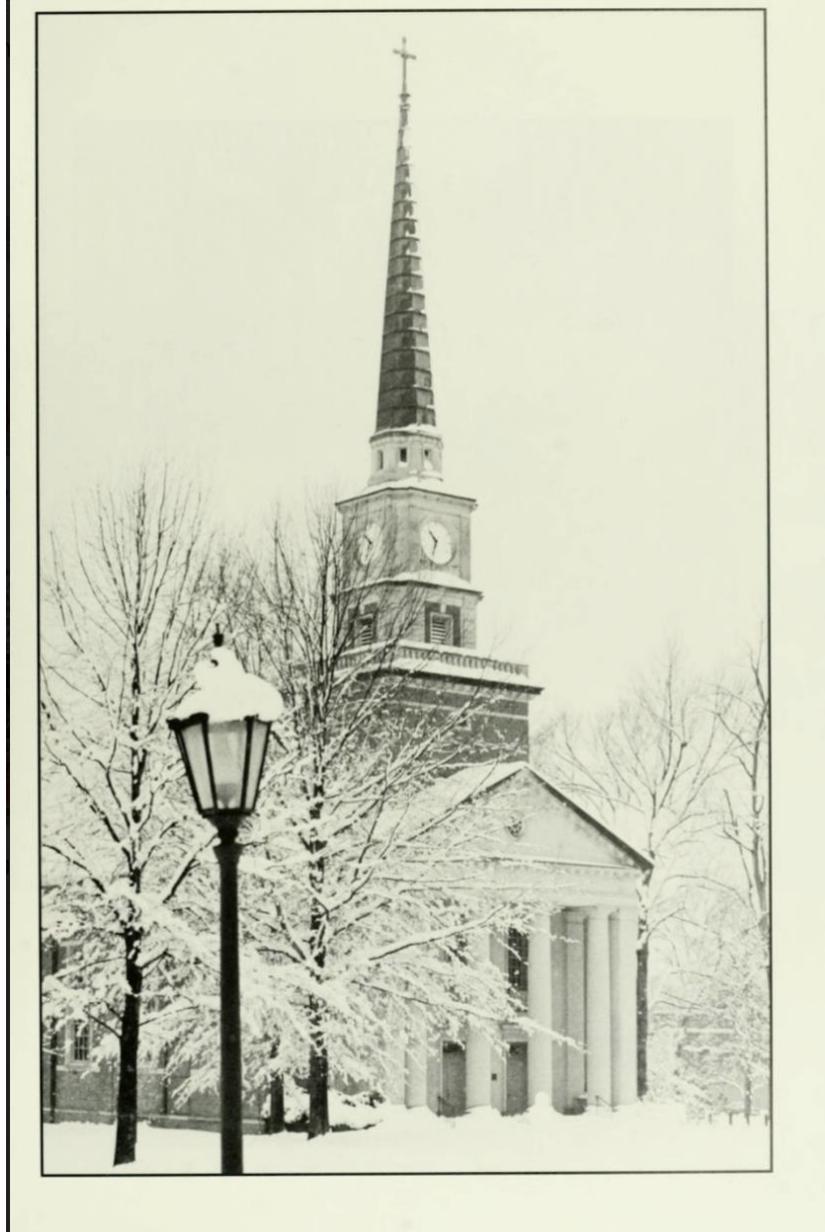
Utilizing primarily the oral history of a lesbian Davidson alumni couple, Heather McKee ('87) and Jane Campbell ('87), this essay will examine how Christianity and Christian spaces within Davidson College's history have impacted the experiences of queer students at Davidson. While for some queer students, Davidson's Christian identity has contributed to an isolating environment, others have experienced Christianity as a means to obtain companionship and acceptance on campus. We treat the legacy of this tension as a phenomenon of changing experiences over time, chronicling student life from the 1980s up to the current campus culture in 2021. In doing so, we are able to examine how students' complex and varied queer experiences of Christianity at Davidson have both changed and shared similarities over time.

Queer Isolation and Christianity at Davidson in the 1980s

Davidson College has been affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, specifically the Davidson College Presbyterian Church (DCPC), since its founding in 1837.¹ In 1985—while Heather McKee and Jane Campbell were students at Davidson—the denomination declared lesbian and gay full church membership unconstitutional.² Davidson's affiliation with this church—which, at the time of McKee and Campbell's time on campus, rejected the basic rights of and intentionally isolated LGBTQ+ individuals—created an unwelcoming culture for queer students at Davidson.

¹ "History & Traditions," Davidson College, Accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.davidson.edu/about/history-traditions>.

² "Timeline of LGBTQIA+ History in the PC(USA): 1970-2019," Sutori, PC(USA), February 19, 2019, <https://www.sutori.com/story/timeline-of-lgbtqia-history-in-the-pc-usa--JiBbvQQSWSTGX8WQcgLG8SY7>.



This photo shows Davidson College Presbyterian Church as it appeared in 1987.³

It was not only through official church policy, however, that Christianity on Davidson's campus contributed to the isolation of LGBTQ+ students in the 1980s. For example, one undergraduate student, Dee Reynolds, wrote in the 1986 *Quips and Cranks* yearbook that "the shadow of the church spire reaches far," referencing the anti-LBGT+ presence and beliefs of

³ *Quips and Cranks*, Davidson College, 1987.

many Christian student groups that pervaded the social atmosphere of Davidson.⁴ Throughout the 1980s, several of these overtly anti-LGBTQ+ groups thrived on campus, including the Catholic Campus Ministry, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and InterVarsity Campus Fellowship.⁵



A clipping from the 1986 yearbook Quips and Cranks, in which Dee Reynolds writes about the prevalence of Christian culture on Davidson College's campus.

Davidson's culture, so influenced by these institutions and groups on its campus, oftentimes did not provide an open and accepting space for queer exploration and identity. Students lacked openly queer role models in College leadership, especially when looking for such mentors within Christian spaces. Specifically, in interviews conducted with Davidson alumni, one encounters a culture in which high-profile administrators and church leaders in the Davidson community were not at all open about their sexuality, at least to the knowledge of the student population.⁶ Reflecting on the atmosphere at Davidson, McKee stated:

⁴ Dee Reynolds, "Under the Church Spire," *Quips and Cranks*, Davidson College, 1986, 69.

⁵ Katie Dagenhart, "A Personal Challenge," *Wildcat Handbook*, Davidson College, 1984, 49-50.

⁶ Wilson Hardcastle, interview by Laura Collins and Julia Bainum, March 25, 2021.

As far as I know, there was no support for LGBTQ students. And that's really sad, I mean, it's terrible, I struggled [...] there were classmates that we had and dear peer folks who left Davidson. Because they couldn't get support, and, you know, it just was such a toxic atmosphere.⁷

McKee's experiences demonstrate that, without the support of those in positions of leadership within the Davidson Community, queer students in the 1980s lacked the institutional support they needed as they navigated a hostile Christian environment. This was especially true for Christian students who were not heterosexual and who yearned for accepting communities of faith within Davidson's Presbyterian culture.

Queer Exploration and the Church

Stopping at this site of historical violence, however, does not tell a full story of the intersections of queerness and Christianity in Davidson's history. Scholars of queer history have recognized how, in many contexts, churches historically fostered queer exploration and identity, even as church teachings and procedures said otherwise. Social events, church groups, choirs, and retreats all provided the opportunity for church members to gather and spend significant time with members of the same gender identity.⁸ Additionally, church buildings provided physical spaces for queer desire, as they remained frequently unoccupied and unlocked during the weekdays, providing space to engage in queer sexual activity.⁹

In more recent decades, churches in Davidson have exemplified this historical observation. They have increasingly served as spaces that fostered queer love and identity. Such fostering was not entirely underground or covert, however; rather, it was established by official church policy. McKee and Campbell had their service of blessing at DCPC, becoming the first

⁷ Jane Campbell and Heather McKee, interview by Lucy Walton and Courtney Clawson, March 12, 2021.

⁸ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 52-54

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

lesbian couple to be married there in 2013.¹⁰ This was important to the couple due to their close ties with the Presbyterian church and the role that their faith has played in their identity formation. Indeed, McKee, who has a Master of Divinity and is an ordained elder, noted that: “when I really came out was at seminary.”¹¹ McKee and Campbell’s ongoing commitment to and identification with the church, despite the faith-based homophobia they faced during their time as Davidson students, complicates the sometimes-oversimplified notion that Christianity and queerness must be intrinsically in conflict.



This photo shows the members and coach of Davidson College’s Women’s Golf Team in 1986. Jane Campbell is on the far left, and Heather McKee is on the far right.¹²

Campbell and McKee’s choice to be married in a Christian service was not only impactful for them. Sharing a memory about their friendship with an older Davidson alum, Bill Benson, Campbell recalls: “We had at our service a blessing, and as everything was getting ready, I looked out into the sanctuary and just about lost it because I was wearing my Navy

¹⁰ Campbell and McKee, interview by Walton and Clawson, 2021; Ariana Howard, “Wildcat Weddings: A Look at Davidson Marriages,” *Davidsonian*, November 20, 2019.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Women’s Golf,” *Quips and Cranks*, Davidson College, 1987, 106.

service dress white uniform and, lo and behold, in was walking Bill Benson in his World War Two era service dress uniform.”¹³ She went on to explain that after Benson passed, she was approached by his children, who communicated to her that:

We firmly believe that dad got to live these extra months because you guys changed it and you guys gave him an appreciation and understanding [...] Our father didn't live a life where he would have accepted your relationship. But it was- it was you guys, [...] it was two Davidson alumni, and it was a Davidson alum who served in his navy.¹⁴

The testimony shared by Bill’s children demonstrates the impact of increased harmony between queer members of the Davidson Community and the Davidson College Presbyterian Church. In witnessing the union of lesbian and Christian identity experienced and publicly celebrated by McKee and Campbell, Bill was able to find inner reconciliation between his own faith and his beliefs regarding queer acceptance. By fostering a queer-tolerant form of Christianity, the Presbyterian community of Davidson College was able to model a form of Christian identity that made space for and celebrated various sexual identities within the Davidson Community.

Making Space for Queerness and Christianity at Davidson

McKee and Campbell’s marriage at DCPC clearly served as a powerful symbol for the politics of belonging and visibility. Conducting this ceremony in the Davidson context created a public demonstration of a lesbian couple taking up religious and social space on Davidson’s campus to celebrate their love and companionship. Further, their relationship with Benson demonstrates how such visibility can directly impact the beliefs of individuals and help to foster a broader culture of acceptance. This speaks to the capacity for influence that Davidson could

¹³ Campbell and McKee, interview by Walton and Clawson, 2021; Ariana Howard, “Wildcat Weddings: A Look at Davidson Marriages,” *Davidsonian*, November 20, 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

yield when making the campus and its Christian spaces safe and affirming environments for queer students to celebrate their identities openly and visibly.

Regardless, there is still much to be done to make Davidson a safe space for queer students. When asked what Davidson students and administrators could do to make it a better place, McKee and Campbell both cited the presence anti-LGBTQ+ fundamentalist Christian groups at the school as a continued barrier for queer students, emphasizing the importance of inclusive religious dialogue on campus.¹⁵ Heather noted, “There are religious organizations on the Davidson campus now that do not foreground their theological beliefs, when it comes to LGBTQ people and do—I think—some pretty, you know, disingenuous recruiting to get folks involved and in their groups.”¹⁶

Thus, the complicated history of queerness and Christianity at Davidson continues to unfold in 2021, revealing a fluid relationship between queerness in which Christianity, sin, and sexuality are much more nuanced than any “one size fits all” conception. Heather McKee and Jane Campbell’s marriage and ongoing leadership roles point to the possibilities for radical change in the politics of belonging on Davidson College’s campus and in Christian spaces more broadly. Further, our experience interviewing these women demonstrates the capacity for oral history sources to cultivate a deeper and more rich understanding regarding the relationship between sexuality and Christianity at Davidson College.

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¹⁶ Ibid.

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