

Belmont Wesley Foundation
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A focus of Belmont Wesley this year has been extending welcome to the wider Belmont University community. In the midst of the transitional challenges of this year, a new leadership team of five incredible students was unified in their passion that the presence of a campus ministry that was rooted in the Methodist tradition and therefore welcoming and inclusive of all students was essential for the wider campus community. The student leaders and myself took every opportunity to be present on campus from “tabeling” at weekly chapel services, to crafting a float for the Homecoming parade, to hosting events that all students could attend, such as an Interfaith panel focused on female leaders in faith spaces for Women’s History Month. At the same time, we worked to cultivate genuine connections and community in which students deeply felt that all of who they are is celebrated not only by our community, but also by God.

Two stories come to mind that reflect the impact of this work. One community event we hosted was a morning at a pumpkin patch in October. It was a beautiful fall day and we had a blast taking a hay ride, petting animals, and eating popcorn. What stands out in my mind from that day however is the car ride home. I was driving two students back to campus when, unprompted from me, they began sharing the impact of Belmont Wesley on their lives. One student shared that they had tried other ministries on campus, of which there are many, but never quite felt like they fit in. But at Belmont Wesley, they immediately felt welcome and at ease. This allowed them to reconsider the beliefs they carried about God and to begin to release the ones that didn’t actually feel like good news.

The other student in the car resonated with this sentiment deeply and shared how after coming to Wesley the first week only so she could tell her parents that she was trying to join a Christian group, something started to shift in her. She felt that maybe in this place she could be curious and pull at the threads of a faith that didn’t feel loving or genuine. In the tradition she was raised in, she said it took more effort to hate the people that her church taught her she must hate, than to let go of that rigid dogma and let love guide her. Now at Belmont Wesley, she felt like she was unlearning everything she had known about God in a liberating way within a safe space. She shared how she didn’t know that a Christian community like Belmont Wesley could exist.

The second story took place at the beginning of this spring semester. There is one student who had come to Wesley off and on and regularly attended the Belmont UMC College small group throughout the fall semester. This student came to our second Wesley meeting this spring and brought not one, not two, but three friends with them. They all seemed excited and engaged from the start, too. As we engaged in group discussion, each of these three new students shared, which I thought was remarkable. And then the student who brought them all shared that in their hometown, they had experienced faith communities telling them that they are not welcome and do not belong in their community because they embrace their queerness. This news was told to the student after they had been an active member of that faith community and of the worship team. This student said they felt so grateful and a little bit in awe that a group like Belmont Wesley existed, a community that is committed to following the ways of Jesus and therefore welcomes and celebrates them as they are. They shared their relief at not having to shed or minimize their various identities in order to find belonging at Wesley. I can’t help but think how this experience for them is what energized them to invite three new people and bring them to our weekly meeting knowing that whatever identities their friends possessed would be welcomed and affirmed too.

Being a community where moments like this can happen, and continuing to invite others who might desire a place to belong into it, is the gift and the work of Belmont Wesley that has energized us this year and will continue on into the next.