

## THE FOUNDING OF ROOM FOR ALL

by Mary Kansfield, RfA Archivist<sup>1</sup>

In 1978 and 1979, the Commission on Theology of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) presented papers on homosexuality to the General Synod: “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal” (1978) and “Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual” (1979). These papers first brought the subject of homosexuality to the church’s attention in a major way and suggested that sexual orientation was not totally a matter of choice.<sup>2</sup> They also outlined what was required of the church in caring for both homosexual and heterosexual persons.<sup>3</sup>

While the RCA struggled to respond to these papers, popular culture was rapidly changing. In June, 1969, the Stonewall Uprising took place in New York City, followed a year later by the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade and the Boston Gay Pride Parade. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and in 1977 Harvey Milk, an openly gay man, was elected to the Board of Supervisors of the City of San Francisco. The times they were “a-changin.” Among these and other shifts in civil society, it wouldn’t be long before the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would become in 2004 the first state to legalize same-sex marriage.

Against this backdrop, the Reformed Church in America struggled. Prior to the June 2005 trial of New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) president Norman Kansfield, five events

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was included in Brumm, James Hart, ed. “Yes! Well ...” *Exploring the Past, Present and Future of the Church: Essays in Honor of John W. Coakley*. Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America). Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (hereafter *Acts and Proceedings*), 1978, 229-240.

<sup>3</sup> *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, 128-135.

relating to the history of Room for All took place which encapsulated the pivotal issue of same-sex relationships that the RCA could no longer avoid.

### **Event 1. New Brunswick Theological Seminary's Appointment of Judith Hoch Wray**

In the spring of 1998, President Kansfield learned that two tenured faculty members would be leaving New Brunswick Theological Seminary. To fill these faculty positions, a year-long search process for each position would have to take place. Acting on the prerogative of his office, President Kansfield appointed interim professors in Old Testament and New Testament for one-year terms, thus allowing time for more measured searches for these permanent positions. He appointed the Rev. Dr. Judith Hoch Wray to the one-year interim position in New Testament. Dr. Wray was not new to the NBTS faculty; she had been teaching as an adjunct professor for six years, and had also served as Stated Supply pastor for an RCA congregation. Her students spoke very highly of her teaching, and her pastoral skills were clearly evident. As a lesbian in a committed relationship, Dr. Wray was open although not assertive about her sexual orientation, which was known to the administration, the faculty, and the student community.

Within one day of signing the contract, word spread within the RCA and immediately brought about a firestorm of controversy. Pressure quickly mounted for President Kansfield to withdraw the contract, which he refused to do. The threat of introducing the matter at the upcoming meeting of the General Synod to be held in Holland, Michigan brought Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the RCA's General Secretary, to New Brunswick to meet with the Seminary's Board of Trustees. Granberg-Michaelson, an *ex officio* member of the Board, strongly

pressed the reluctant Board to rescind the contract<sup>4</sup> “for the peace and unity of the church.”<sup>5</sup>

While finally agreeing to rescind the contract, the Board stipulated that the full value of the contract would be paid to Dr. Wray. However, the pain Dr. Wray experienced and the damage to her career were irreversible.

The matter was brought before the 1998 General Synod as an item of new business, and the Classis of Passaic Valley (NJ) requested the Synod to act and to instruct New Brunswick Seminary “to neither hire nor continue to employ any person in its faculty or administration whose theological and moral commitments concerning homosexual practice are not in agreement with the teachings of Scripture, RCA doctrinal standards, and past General Synod actions, all of which clearly say that homosexual practice is sin.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Kansfield in *Defending Same-Sex Marriage Vol 2: Our Family Values: Same-Sex Marriage and Religion*, edited by Traci C. West (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2006), 200. “The Board took its action to rescind the contract with Dr. Wray only after attaching four clauses to the action: 1) They were committed to paying Dr. Wray for the entire value of her contract, so that she was in every way financially whole, in spite of the rescinding; 2) they wanted their action to be seen as taken solely for the peace and unity of the church; 3) they called upon the General Secretary and all other responsible persons within the RCA to immediately facilitate the conversation on the role of homosexual persons within the church that the Synod of 1994 had called for and that had never happened; and 4) they call for the General Secretary and others to assure homosexual persons within the church a safe participation within that conversation. They also committed themselves and the Seminary to a program of self-education about the issues that have prevented homosexual persons from open participation within the life of the church.” Minutes of the NBTS Board of Trustees, May 28-30, 1998, as noted in “The Reformed Church in America: One Denomination’s Response to Same-Sex Marriage.”

Dr. Kansfield’s chapter titled “The Reformed Church in America: One Denomination’s Response To Same-Sex Marriage” is the most accurate and complete account of this history to date. It can be found in *Defending Same-Sex Marriage*, Vol 2; of *Our Family Values: Same-Sex Marriage and Religion*, edited by Traci C. West (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2006), 191-219.

In 2013 the Commission on History submitted to the General Synod a report titled “A Historical Summary of the Actions of the General Synod with Regard to Homosexuality: 1974-2012.” This was accepted by the General Synod at its 207<sup>th</sup> Regular Session and entered into the record accordingly, MGS, 334-340.

For additional reading, see “Making Room for All” by Mary L. Kansfield found in “Yes! Well . . .”: *Exploring the Past, Present, and Future of the Church: Essays in Honor of John W. Coakley*. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, ed. James Hart Brumm, no. 87 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 253-270.

<sup>5</sup> *Acts and Proceedings*, 1998, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Acts and Proceedings*, 1998, 32.

Before any action could be added to the General Synod agenda as new business, the General Secretary used his Synod Report to call upon the Synod “to refrain from deliberative debate and policy decisions relating to homosexuality ... and to urge this same action upon the 1999 and 2000 General Synods ....”<sup>7</sup> The Synod approved this motion. Toward the end of the meeting, Dr. Kansfield was given an opportunity to speak. He seized this opportunity to say:

You already know where my commitments lie. So, while I assure you of my and New Brunswick’s full future compliance with that part of the recommendation which requests “all commissions, agencies, assemblies, and institutions related to the General Synod to refrain from taking any action that would be in obvious contradiction of our stated positions, as expressed especially in 1978, 1979, 1990 and 1994... I ask you also to count me among those who are committed carefully to listen to and, as necessary, to speak on behalf of homosexual persons, most of whom will not feel free enough to participate in the church’s important conversations.”<sup>8</sup>

This gave the Synod full understanding of President Kansfield’s committed support for the inclusion of homosexuals in the church.

## **Event 2. The Buchanan Group and the Holy Relationships Conference**

In January, 2002 President Kansfield received a telephone call from the Rev. C. David Buchanan, who had graduated from New Brunswick Seminary in 1975, and in 2002 was serving the United Methodist Church in Manlius, New York. Having received an unexpected inheritance from his mother, he and his wife Diane, who have a gay son, wished to advance the conversation within the RCA and the broader church regarding the place and ministry of homosexual persons within the life of the church. Members of a planning committee first met at the Seminary on

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>8</sup> See Room for All Archives for the full text of this General Synod Address.

October 27, 2003.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent meetings a group of ten participants plus David Buchanan, Sherrill Holland, Dean of the Seminary, Everett Zabriskie, Director of Development at the Seminary and President Kansfield met at the President's House to pray, to study and to plan a national conference that "comes to grips with the pain within the church ...."<sup>10</sup> (As a hostess, the author was welcomed and invited to join the group.)

This group of clergy and laity, diverse in gender and sexual orientation, as well as academic and denominational affiliation, soon became known as "The Buchanan Group." The Rev. Dr. Judith Hoch Wray served as Moderator, and the conference they planned took place October 16-18, 2005 in New Brunswick, New Jersey.<sup>11</sup> Titled "Holy Relationships: A Conference on Theology and Sexuality," the event included outstanding keynote speakers<sup>12</sup> and workshop leaders. It brought together persons from many denominations and joined almost two hundred attendees (about fifty participants came from the RCA<sup>13</sup> alone) to worship, to embrace one another, and to grow in understanding the issues that divide us.<sup>14</sup> The conference was "transformative"<sup>15</sup> and led to

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<sup>9</sup> Participants on that Planning Team included: Dr. Jane Dickie of Hope College, Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale, Pastor of the Highland Park Reformed Church, Rich McCarty from Iowa City, Iowa, Rhonda Shipley from Indianapolis, Indiana, Dr. Judith Hoch Wray, Rev. Everett Zabriskie, Director of Development at NBTS, and Dr. Norman Kansfield, NBTS President.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. David C. Buchanan quoted in "One United Methodist Pastor Seeks Healing in the Church," *The Christian Century*, August 9, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> The Holy Relationships Conference Planning Team included: C. David Buchanan, Brad Clark, Sam Cruz, Jane Dickie, Howard Gaas, Ann Kansfield, Seth Kaper-Dale, Rich McCarty (Chair), Jill Russell, Rhonda Shipley, Rich Williams, and Judith Hoch Wray.

<sup>12</sup> Keynote speakers included Rita Nakashima Brock, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, David Myers, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, John Selders, Miguel De La Torre, Mel White and Judith Hoch Wray.

<sup>13</sup> Professor Jane Dickie of Hope College arranged for a bus to transport students and friends from the Holland, Michigan area to the Conference.

<sup>14</sup> The site of the Conference included the First Reformed Church, Christ Episcopal Church and the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Brunswick. Sponsors of the event included: the Buchanan Group in association with New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the Collegiate Church of the City of New York, Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, Metropolitan Community Church in North Brunswick and Park Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) New York City.

<sup>15</sup> As described by Shari Brink, Room for All Archives, Email to [RoomforAll@googlegroups.com](mailto:RoomforAll@googlegroups.com), May 15, 2006.

a movement that carried the Holy Relationships conversation forward at additional Holy Relationship Conferences.<sup>16</sup>

### **Event 3. The 2004 Women's Triennial**

Additional events contributed to the RCA's awareness of the issue of inclusion and affirmation of gay and lesbian people (it was not until several years later that bisexual, transgender and queer-identified people would be part of the church's awareness and advocacy). Beginning in 1960, the women of the Reformed Church, jointly called Reformed Church Women's Ministries (RCWM), held a national conference every three years. "Triennials," as they were called, were held in different geographic locations, and in July, 2004, a Triennial was held at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California.

Originally a workshop was offered at this event titled "A Time of Togetherness for Silent Mothers" that focused on sharing stories and the common bond of having a gay or lesbian child.<sup>17</sup> It didn't take long before conservative voices rose up in protest, and the workshop was pulled from the registration. However, since some conference registrants had already signed up for the workshop, it was quietly decided to give those participants an opportunity to come together. Five women met in a covert location in the undercroft of the church.<sup>18</sup> There the women shared their individual stories and their experiences as loving mothers. It was truly a time of embrace. This

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<sup>16</sup> Regional Conferences were held including the first Holy Relationships Midwestern Conference October 19-20, 2006 in Iowa City, Iowa. Another conference took place November 2-4, 2007 in Indianapolis, IN at the campus of the University of Indianapolis. Room for All Archives, Holy Relationships, "Newsletter of the Holy Relationships Movement", Vol. 1, Nb. 1, Summer, 2007 and Vol. 1, Nb. 2, Winter, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> The title of the workshop was "A Time of Togetherness for Silent Mothers," and it was to be taught by Carol Babinsky and Mary Kansfield. The workshop description noted its purpose as: "To increase a sense of confidentiality, the location of this workshop will only be disclosed to those who have pre-registered." Triennial July 22-24, 2004 folder in possession of the author.

<sup>18</sup> Those women included Carol Babinsky, Mary Kansfield, Carol Mutch, Barbara Neevel, and Marjorie Shimmin. (Names revealed with permission.) Exposed heating pipes and limited light made our meeting space in the church's underground feel quite out of the way. But we all wanted to be there. There was no question about that.

Triennial experience revealed the depth of the tension over inclusion among women within the denomination.

#### **Event 4. Friends of Norm**

The anxiety and nervousness within the RCA increased dramatically following the wedding of Ann Kansfield and Jennifer Aull on June 19, 2004 conducted by Dr. Kansfield.<sup>19</sup> By January, 2005, an awareness of the marriage was quite widespread within the RCA. Use of the internet and chat groups was still fairly new, but their use served to fan the flames of the controversy. An immense amount of mail began to be delivered to the Kansfield home. While some letters firmly supported Dr. Kansfield's act of marrying his daughter to a woman, others steadfastly opposed.<sup>20</sup> At this point Dr. and Mrs. Kansfield's children and their friends independently decided to initiate a support group of their own to protect their dad from some of the extremely mean-spirited responses he was receiving. Founded in December, 2004, they created an online Google group called "Friends of Norm."<sup>21</sup> It didn't take long before friends and those advocating for inclusion began signing their names to the list. As the number grew, the word spread.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Event 5. "Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable, Too"**

Among those wholeheartedly supporting Norman Kansfield's act of marrying Ann and Jennifer was a young RCA pastor serving as co-pastor of the Reformed Church of Highland Park,

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<sup>19</sup> The marriage took place in the sanctuary of the First Churches in Northampton, Massachusetts, a united American Baptist and United Church of Christ congregation. A copy of the sermon delivered that day can be found in *Defending Same-Sex Marriage Vol 2: Our Family Values: Same-Sex Marriage and Religion*, edited by Traci C. West (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2006), 201-202.

<sup>20</sup> The incoming mail was gathered in three-ring binders. A total of 7 three-ring binders, each with a three-inch spine, were collected and indexed. In the future, the notebooks will be housed in the RCA Archives, with limited access due to the sensitive content in some of the notes and letters in the collection.

<sup>21</sup> April Greenberg, a close college friend of Ann, set up the website [friendsofnorm@googlegroups.com](http://friendsofnorm@googlegroups.com). Ann was not without computer skills, and she aggressively solicited support using the website.

<sup>22</sup> It is recorded that by February 9, 2015, up to 267 names appeared on the Friends of Norm list. By May 11, the number exceeded 600. May 10, 2005 Email from Rob Williams to Mary DeJonge-Benishek, Room for All Archives.

New Jersey, named Seth Kaper-Dale. Feeling “bound in ropes of sinfulness” by failing to speak out on the issue, Rev. Kaper-Dale prepared a statement to be read at the upcoming General Synod titled “Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable, Too.” With the help of Friends of Norm and their website, signatories to the Kaper-Dale document affirmed that they agreed with what Dr. Kansfield had done and that they had or would have acted similarly. Signatories invited the denomination to further the dialogue on homosexuality or to hold the signatories accountable as well.<sup>23</sup>

If the aborted hiring of Dr. Judith Hoch Wray in 1998 that occurred within the context of New Brunswick Seminary was viewed as “a Kansfield matter,” a broader circle of supporters had begun to extend beyond the Kansfield family. Persons outside the RCA, as well as RCA members, added their names to lists supporting LGBTQ inclusion. Like the non-RCA folks who attended the Holy Relationships Conference, there was a growing diversity among participants who shared a variety of backgrounds, gender identities, and varying church traditions. When the names of those claiming accountability were read into the public record of the General Synod, another significant step had been taken.

### **The Trial**

On June 16 and 17, 2005 the General Synod tried and convicted the Rev. Dr. Norman J. Kansfield, a General Synod Professor of Theology and President of its New Brunswick Theological

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<sup>23</sup> As of the day before the beginning of General Synod, 167 signatories and one whole Consistory had signed the “Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable Too” document. In signing the document, the names of 167 RCA office-bearers, plus the Consistory of the Reformed Dutch Church of the Town of Brooklyn (Old First) were read into the Record of General Synod. *Defending Same-Sex Marriage*, Vol 2, edited by Traci C. West, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 207-208.



Seminary, on three charges arising from his marrying his daughter Ann to Jennifer Aull in June, 2004.<sup>24</sup> These charges were:

1. That Dr. Kansfield's "actions were contrary to our faith and beliefs as affirmed by the Holy Scriptures and the decisions of the General Synod concerning the relationships of active homosexuality."
2. That Dr. Kansfield contradicted his ordination declarations in which he promised "to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church seeking the things that make for unity, purity and peace."
3. That Dr. Kansfield failed to keep his promise to "submit myself to the counsel and the admonition of the General Synod, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of my understanding of the Christian Faith." *Acts and Proceedings*, 2005, 43-44. It is interesting to note that none of the charges pursued questions of Norm Kansfield's understanding of Scripture, his Christian faith or his theology.

During the trial, a small group of faithful and passionate supporters knelt outside the closed doors where the trial was proceeding to pray for Dr. Kansfield and for a positive outcome to the trial. The verdicts were not positive; he was found guilty on all three charges.

The penalty phase of the trial continued into the evening. Dr. Kansfield was removed from the Office of Professor of Theology and suspended from the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. At the conclusion, Dr. Kansfield was given an opportunity to address the Synod, and his words rang out with prophetic thunder.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Here follow Dr. Kansfield's remarks as they appear in *Defending Same-Sex Marriage Vol 2: Our Family Values: Same-Sex Marriage and Religion*, edited by Traci C. West (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2006), 192.

...You may depose and suspend me, but the terrible plight of the children of the Reformed Church who are gay and lesbian will remain before you. It is your own children and their children who are gay and lesbian that you have really deposed and suspended – left again with no place within the church. In Jesus' day the Samaritans were just like that. The Samaritans had no place within the religious conversations of those who considered themselves the people of God, because hundreds of years earlier their forebears had intermarried with the nation which then had taken them captive. The "sin" was merely a genetic one. And that kept them from being accepted in the circles of "God's people." But Jesus gave the Samaritans a prime place in several of his parables. He talked with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, our Lord finds himself in the middle of a long and violent argument with the religious leaders of his day. It is the toughest verbal fight that the gospels portray for us. As it moves toward its end, the pious, faithful Jews said to Jesus: "Are we not justified in saying that you are a Samaritan

Some who earlier had prayed so passionately outside the doors of the Synod assembly hall gathered with Dr. Kansfield's family in a motel room that night to grieve. The removal of Norm Kansfield from the Office of the Professorate was understandable. After all, if members of the General Synod held in question any concern about his gifts for ministry or his theological positions beyond those outlined in the Book of Church Order (BCO), this would be logical. But suspending his ordination from the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, thus classifying him as a heretic, made no sense to them at all.<sup>26</sup>

### **Making Room for All**

Once the trial was over the need for a voice, proactive and prophetic yet open to dialogue within the RCA, became clear.<sup>27</sup> The pain of the trial, the stress for so many from public

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and have a demon." Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon." He wanted them to be clear about the kind of person they were arguing with. So he insisted, "I am not going to allow you to think of me as out of my mind – as having a demon." But he did not say, "I am not a Samaritan – you cannot call or think [of sic.] me a Samaritan." Jesus, even though he was not a Samaritan, was willing to bear their name – a name more often spat out by Jews than said with any sense of kindness. In just the same way, Jesus in our time, I am sure, would bear the name of "lesbian" or "gay." He wouldn't even flinch if he were called "Queer," or "Dyke," or "Faggot."

This is, dear friends, exactly what we have to learn to do. You all have continued to say that you regard it as important that the numbers of Reformed Churches increase. You have said that church revitalization and multiplication are the efforts to which you want to give all your attention. Well, you may, but until you learn to accept people – especially people whom you think are not clean and pure enough for you to welcome – the growth of the church is not going to happen. You are concerned about the constantly diminishing number of members within the RCA. But until our denomination is prepared to welcome all the persons for whom Christ died, our numbers will continue to shrink until we are no more. We cannot be concerned with the purity of the church and the growth of the church at the same time. Evangelization only begins to happen when our hands and our feet are muddy with the reality of everyday life all around us.

And so I leave you now. Be assured that I will continue to pray for this Synod, and for the work that yet lies before you. Good Night.

<sup>26</sup> A judicial error had occurred. See "Case Dismissed," *Church Herald* (hereafter CH), July/August, 2006, 15, as to why it made no sense to those gathered in the motel room that night. In this issue of the *Church Herald*, the editor says, "Although deposed from the professorial office, synod 2005 failed to dismiss Kansfield to a classis as required by the Book of Church Order (BCO). Technically, this action was consistent with an unintended anomaly in the BCO, requiring that one suspended remain amenable to the judicatory that voted to suspend – in this case, General Synod . . . The actions of General Synod 2005 left both Kansfield and the synod in a quandary because General Synod has no constitutional authority to supervise ministers of Word and sacrament – only professors of theology, the office from which Kansfield was deposed." CH, July/August, 2006, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Meetings began within three weeks of the trial and regularly took place at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City.

revelations of what formerly had been deeply held secrets, and the profound letdown from feeling betrayed by their own denomination, all contributed to tremendous individual pain and a sense that the RCA didn't care. During the early days following the trial, folks who could travel into New York City gathered around the back tables at Dano's Restaurant on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan before meetings at Marble Collegiate Church,<sup>28</sup> not only to pray and dine together, but mostly to minister to the grief each one felt in different ways. The pain didn't abate much, but sharing stories, embracing one another and feeling the mutual assurance of being there for one another made a positive future seem more possible. This group and these activities led to the formation of Room for All.

From the outset,<sup>29</sup> the founders of Room for All recognized the need to identify and incorporate certain foundational tools. The name, "Room for All," was formally adopted<sup>30</sup> as well as a logo showing a ripple of water symbolizing Acts 10: 47, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? A Board of Directors was immediately established.<sup>31</sup> Applications for incorporation in New York State and for IRS tax

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<sup>28</sup> It was mostly ministers who came together. Never known to be highly paid, the cost of traveling into the City, parking, and eating out limited some from participating in the Room for All (hereafter RfA) founding group. This was unfortunate. Participants in the early meetings were also limited to those living in the Eastern, Tri-state area.

<sup>29</sup> Records in the Room for All Archives identify a formational meeting that took place on July 7, 2005 at Marble Collegiate Church. No Minutes survive of this meeting. The first recorded meeting for which Minutes appear is November 2, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> The name first appeared as the logo on tee shirts worn by those maintaining a prayer vigil at the trial of Dr. Kansfield. The full logo read "Room for All: Reformed Church in America, Increasingly Inclusive since 1628." Neither at the time of trial nor thereafter was it known who came up with this tongue-in-cheek logo or paid for the tee shirts worn at the trial. Someone had a sense of humor, and this was appreciated.

<sup>31</sup> The By-Laws of the Articles of Incorporation state that "There shall be not less than nine (9) or no more than twenty-one (21) Directors." The original Board of Directors included fifteen members: Jennifer Aull, Beverly Bell, J. Karel Boersma, Jack Branford, Ann M. Kansfield, Mary Kansfield, Norman Kansfield, Hank Lay, Marilyn Lay, Stacey Midge, William F. Rupp, Conrad J. Strauch, Ronald E. Vande Bunte, Ken Walsh, and Rob Williams.

exempt status were drawn up and submitted to the State of New York in September, 2005.<sup>32</sup> The Incorporation Certificate states the purpose of Room for All to be:

The Corporation is organized to engage in charitable, educational, religious and community activities. The Corporation's purposes are to support, to educate and to advocate for the full participation of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender (GLBT) persons in all aspects of the life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America as compelled by the inclusive love of God revealed to us by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

At its November meeting, Room for All officers were elected and committee chairs identified.<sup>34</sup>

After taking inventory of the immediate financial needs of the organization, it was estimated that the organization would require \$11,000 to begin operation. All members of the Board made a commitment to make Room for All their second or third cause for charitable giving.<sup>35</sup>

On Monday, November 7, 2005, Norm and Mary Kansfield were invited to meet with the Collegiate Consistory of New York City, where Norm presented the case for financially supporting Room for All.<sup>36</sup> The Consistory's response was overwhelming. Instead of underwriting the start-up costs of \$11,000, the Consistory voted to make \$15,000 available for this purpose.<sup>37</sup> Collegiate

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<sup>32</sup> The names of Directors on the Articles of Incorporation were limited to persons living in New York State at that time. These included: Beverly J. Bell, Jan Karel Boersma, Shari Brink, Ann M. Kansfield, Harold W. Lay, Marilyn Mariani Lay, Stacey Midge, and Conrad J. Strauch. The Rev. Beverly J. Bell Esq., along with William F. Rupp Esq. and Rev. J. Karel Boersma served as Dr. Kansfield's defense team during the trial. As a partner with Humes & Wagner, LLP, Rev. Bell submitted the legal documents on behalf of the Board.

<sup>33</sup> Taken from the Certificate of Incorporation of Room for All, Inc. Under Section 402 of the Not-for-Profit Corporation Law.

<sup>34</sup> Officers included Shari Brink and Rob Williams, Co-Presidents; Stacey Midge, Vice-President; J. Karel Boersma, Secretary; and Conrad J. Strauch, Treasurer. Ann Kansfield became the Communications Director, and Norm Kansfield became the Fundraising Officer. RfA Min November 2, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> This commitment has remained in place to the present time.

<sup>36</sup> See "Conversation with The Collegiate Consistory NY, NY, Nov. 7, 2005." RfA Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Over time, additional grants from a variety of sources, church mission shares, and contributions from an ever-expanding donor base served to meet the budget needs of Room for All.

Church Corporation support for Room for All, along with the support of its individual congregational ministries, was evident from the start, and has continued.

Beyond these organizational steps, Board members recognized the need to move in several different directions simultaneously. One first step involved coming to know and learn from the vast experience of similar advocacy groups. Thanks to Harry Knox, then Director of the Religion and Faith Project of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and from leaders of the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), Room for All Board members participated in a day-long directors' workshop on January 11, 2006. Over the years, participation in IWR (and later, the National LGBTQ Task Force) has continued to allow representatives from Room for All to meet with leaders from other welcoming church initiatives and to benefit from their collective wisdom and support.<sup>38</sup>

### **Communication and Use of the Internet**

In anticipation of the need for an online presence, two domain names were purchased (RoomforAll.com and RoomforAll.org). Once those were secured, a plan was developed for a Room for All website. The original website would contain five navigation sections: 1) About RfA (its purpose, names of Board members and history), 2) Regional Gatherings, 3) Stories, 4), Resources, and 5) Taking Action. A Google group was established that would allow for conversation, and links were included with IWR, HRC and other welcoming church programs.

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<sup>38</sup> Among Christian and Unitarian Universalist congregations, almost every denomination has a LGBTQ advocacy group. Most of these groups are yoked together in a federated or umbrella arrangement known as the Institute of Welcoming Resources (IWR). In 2005 Rebecca Voelkel served as IWR's Program Director.

Over time the website would evolve as technology and web design improved, but as of December, 2005, the new Room for All site functioned well.<sup>39</sup>

### Early Strategies

With the Holy Relationships Conference scheduled for October 16-18, 2005, the Room for All Board members scurried to use its resources, especially its network resources, to support and promote the Conference. Among those attending the Conference, word of the fledgling Room for All organization spread quickly.

Seeking to publicize its identity and its commitment to participate in the denomination-wide dialogue mandated by the 2005 General Synod, Room for All requested to take out an advertisement for May, June and July, 2006 in *The Church Herald*, the denomination's monthly magazine.<sup>40</sup> The ad appeared in the May, 2006 issue, and immediately there was a controversy. Pressured by *The Church Herald* Editorial Council, the editor informed the Room for All Board that future ads would not be run.<sup>41</sup>

With the trial of Dr. Kansfield forcing the actualization of an "honest and intentional denomination-wide dialogue on homosexuality," the RCA hired the Rev. Dr. John C. Stapert in

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<sup>39</sup> Once again Ann Kansfield's college friend April Greenberg, designed the website. GiftWorks software was purchased by the Board.

<sup>40</sup> The quarter-page ad showed the ripple of a single drop of water with the quotation from Acts 10. 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" plus the bylines "Responding to the inclusive love of God through welcome and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies, and authentic dialog with those who think differently."

<sup>41</sup> Room for All was told by the Editor that the Room for All ad conflicted with *The Church Herald* advertising policy – that "Ads that challenge or denigrate Reformed Church in America polities, programs or personnel are not accepted." "Church Herald Advertising Policy," September, 2004 attached to an Email from Christina Van Eyl, editor, to Ann Kansfield, May 24, 2006. RfA Archives.

At its June, 2009 meeting, the General Synod voted to suspend publication of *The Church Herald*. In November, 2006, Mary Kansfield, a Room for All Board member, submitted to *The Church Herald* an article titled "To Love and Embrace All God's Children" for which she received a one-time publishing fee of \$150. However, the article failed to appear – that is, until the very last issue of *The Church Herald*, when it appeared in print. This honor belongs to Christina VanEyl. RfA Archives.

December, 2005 to serve as dialogue facilitator.<sup>42</sup> Seeking to have its voice heard, the Room for All Board collected stories<sup>43</sup> from those within the RCA who struggled with their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, and made these stories available to Dr. Stapert and Rev. Mark Kellar<sup>44</sup> in preparation for their visit with the Board on September 17, 2006. Listening to one another was believed to be beneficial to the dialogue process, although grave concern was expressed by Board members that no LGBTQ person had been invited to serve on the Steering Committee. Without an LGBTQ voice present in planning the three-year dialogue, it was impossible for Board members to imagine how LGBTQ voices would be heard within the initial “listening phase” of the conversation, much less in the subsequent “dialogue” phase of this important conversation.

Beginning in 2006, and at every subsequent meeting of the RCA General Synod, delegates and visitors have been invited to meet with RfA members following the end of the first day’s official business. Any distribution of flyers or RfA brochures was against Synod policy, and routinely resulted in complaints by offended delegates to Synod administrators, who were charged with enforcing the policy. At first, palm cards<sup>45</sup> were used surreptitiously to identify when and where these gatherings would be held, and later, supporter delegates wore inserts in their plastic name badges that gave the location of the meeting. Despite the challenges, over time

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. Stapert was supported in his work by a steering committee of eight members representing the eight regional synods of the denomination.

<sup>43</sup> A total of seven vignettes were shared, four of which were signed and three listed as anonymous. Email from Mary Kansfield to Rob Williams, September 26, 2006. Room for Archives.

<sup>44</sup> Rev. John C. Stapert, Ph.D. previously served as Editor of *The Church Herald* (1975-1991). Since 1994 he has worked as a psychologist in private practice in Scottsdale, Arizona. Rev. Mark Kellar participated as one of the members of the Steering Committee. At that time Mark served as pastor of the First Reformed Church of Jamaica, Queens.

<sup>45</sup> Palm cards were the approximate size of business cards and could be slipped into the palm of a person’s hand when introductions were made.

these RfA “meet and greet” meetings at General Synod have attracted more and more people, and have proven to be an extremely useful way to engage with persons within the denomination and to tell them who we are and what we stand for.<sup>4647</sup>

### **The Last RCA Women’s Triennial**

In 2007, the last of the RCA Women’s Triennials was held in Chicago.<sup>48</sup> As at the previous Triennial, the presence of the “homosexual issue” within the church found its way into this event. Once again Room for All was forbidden from meeting at the Conference site and from distributing brochures and flyers. Although asked to stop handing out palm cards, RfA supporters continued to do so. At the last minute, space in the basement of the hotel became available, and one hundred of the five hundred fifty women registered for the Triennial event crowded into a room designed to hold fifty persons.<sup>49</sup>

These women listened to presentations about the work of RfA and an explanation of the acronym TULIP<sup>50</sup> that appeared on the original tee shirts that were given out.<sup>51</sup> A workshop

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<sup>46</sup> At the very first such Synod gathering, more than 50 delegates and RCA members attended, and during the meeting it was announced that a \$1000 challenge grant had been made. In response \$5600 was pledged that night.

<sup>47</sup> In addition to these informational gatherings at General Synod, beginning in 2015 and each year thereafter, RfA has offered an intentional, LGBTQ inclusive worship service by members of the LGBTQ community in the RCA. This service is held on Sunday morning as an alternative to those at local RCA congregations that are advertised to delegates. Because the RCA’s contracts with the various hosting institutions prohibit it, the services are held in local schools, affirming churches, hotels or other facilities. Attendance at, and appreciation of, these services continues to grow.

<sup>48</sup> No Triennial has been held since 2007, and none is presently planned. The first Triennial, which was called the “First National Women’s Assembly,” was held in 1957 in Buck Hill Falls, PA. Chairwoman of the 2007 Triennial was Barbara Neevel.

<sup>49</sup> Marilyn Lay, Carol Babinsky, and Mary Kansfield provided the leadership for the meeting.

<sup>50</sup> Taken from an old mnemonic for the principal conclusions of the Synod of Dort, the TULIP letters refer to Total depravity, Unlimited election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and the Perseverance of the saints. But on the tee shirts was printed, “totally unconditional love includes all people.”

<sup>51</sup> In total 180 tee shirts were given out. One of the conference speakers who appeared at the gathering was asked if she would like to take along a tee shirt. She replied, “No” – and then with additional thought said “Yes, maybe someday I’ll be able to wear it.” Final Report to the RfA Board, Sept. 17, 2007, RfA Archives.



presentation on homosexuality by Dr. David Myers, professor of psychology at Hope College, had been originally scheduled to be part of the conference, but was cancelled due to a firestorm of threats to boycott the Triennial. Copies of Dr. Myers' intended presentation were provided at this basement gathering. Room for All commitment forms and contact data were gathered from those who attended, and the conversation proved so engaging that 27 women remained until one o'clock in the morning talking and sharing stories.<sup>52</sup>

### Developing Regional Groups as Hubs of Influence

Of all the challenges facing the founders of Room for All, organizing a network of regional groups became a top priority. Using the boundary lines of regional synods that already existed within the denomination,<sup>53</sup> these groups would form the heart and soul of the organization in its early years. Of special concern to the founders were the many hurting persons whose stories had come to light especially at the Holy Relationships Conference in October, 2005. Speaking to the Collegiate Consistory on Nov. 7, 2005, Norm Kansfield spoke of “envisioning a denomination-wide network of committed persons, who will stand with, counsel, and encourage persons facing issues/concerns about their sexuality. Among the ministers alone, there are at least 280 persons whom we know we can trust for this purpose.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Google Report Chicago Women’s Conference July 20, 2007. RfA Archives

<sup>53</sup> These are mid-sized assemblies/judicatories composed of a number of classes usually located within a particular geographic area. They were formerly referred to as Particular Synods. When the women of the RCA organized on January 7, 1875 to form the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions, they likewise recognized the need to form “hubs of support.” They utilized the existing classes boundary lines, and by this means became an extremely powerful organization until 1946, when the denomination’s mission boards were encouraged to merge in the interest of efficiency. See Mary L. Kansfield, *Letters to Hazel: Ministry within the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 46 (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> “Conversation with the Collegiate Consistory of New York, NY,” November 7, 2005, RfA Archives

Using the Friends of Norm list, the mail received from supporters (and detractors alike!), and the contact information obtained from old and new supporters who reached out to the new RfA organization, a network plan was agreed upon at the May 4, 2006 Board meeting.<sup>55</sup> "Point persons" were identified in eight regional locations,<sup>56</sup> and Board members forwarded to these group leaders lists of potential group members who might like to come together to dialogue and support one another.

On February 18-19, 2007, thirty persons who included representatives of nine regional groups joined Board members to share and support one another, to develop a plan of action, to improve communication among network groups, and to talk about size, structure and diversity within the Board; it was an eye-opening meeting!<sup>57</sup> This was the first such meeting, but it would not be the last. Regional group representatives returned to their homes traumatized by the stories of those in need, yet energized, full of new ideas, and above all else, hopeful.

Coming out of this meeting, the Room for All Board prepared a letter that was sent to the RCA General Synod Council, the RCA's powerful governing group that functions in place of the General Synod when the Synod is not in session. The letter said:

You know our organization. You know our purpose and our goals. We are faithful members of the Reformed Church in America. Most of us are officeholders within the church - elders or ministers of Word and Sacrament. In everything that we seek to do, we would do nothing to harm the Reformed Church in America. We seek only to offer pastoral care to persons within the denomination who have concerns about their sexuality; to provide accurate and helpful information to individuals and congregations who attempt to minister to such persons; and to encourage those who love gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons to keep the baptismal promises that they and the church have made.

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<sup>55</sup> RfA Min, May 4, 2006, 3.

<sup>56</sup> These regional groups included: upstate New York, New York City, central New Jersey, Holland, Michigan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, central Iowa, and Denver, Colorado. "A Report to the Consistory of the Collegiate Church," October 10, 2006, 5.

<sup>57</sup> "Room for All Gathering of Regional Representatives, February 18-19, 2007," RfA Archives

In every attempt we have made to carry out these intentions within the denomination we have been thwarted. When we sought to hold an open meeting during the General Synod of 2006, our signs were removed. When we tried to purchase advertising space within *The Church Herald*, the Editor felt obligated to deny our request. When we attempted to have a display table at the Women's Gathering in Chicago this summer, again we were told that it is not possible. When we offered to serve the denomination's dialogue on inclusion, we were told that that would be too political.

We are totally frustrated in our efforts to make this special ministry known within the denomination. We therefore seek your advice. How do you propose we should proceed? What methods would you have us follow, as good and faithful members of the Reformed Church?

Most sincerely,  
 Shari Brink, Co-President  
 Robert Williams, Co-President<sup>58</sup>

The letter was dated March, 2007. It wasn't until August, 2012 that executives and officers of the RCA finally met with the officers of Room for All.<sup>59</sup>

### **Becoming Room for All "Rostered Churches"**

Within the strategy for building regional hubs of influence, it was early recognized that leaders would have to be trained to enable congregations and classes to move ahead in their commitments to become welcoming. Stepping in to help meet this need were leaders and trainers from The Institute of Welcoming Resources (IWR), an umbrella organization and support group yoking together almost all Protestant church groups advocating for LGBTQ inclusion. IWR provided community organizing training sessions to regional groups and held workshops in 2009 at the first RfA national conference.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Letter in RfAMin, March, 2007. RfA Archives.

<sup>59</sup> "Five Pivotal Moments in the History of the Reformed Church in America's Commitment to Ministry for and with LGBTQ Persons," as referenced in email from Marilyn Paarlberg to Gwen Ashby, October 2, 2012. RfA Archives.

<sup>60</sup> The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel and Rev. Vicki Wunsch from IWR served as trainers on numerous occasions, and the training process was called "Building an Inclusive Church." Rebecca served as the Speaker at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Banquet held as part of the RfA national conference, October 22-25, 2015, held in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Board members recognized the need for their own training. On April, 2007, six board members and three guests of the Board participated in an all-day media training workshop at Auburn Seminary's Media Division. RfAMin, April 23, 2007.

It was always the dream of the RfA Board to create a network of congregations and classes who both internally and publicly commit themselves to be genuinely LGBTQ affirming.<sup>61</sup> IWR was instrumental in helping RfA become part of the larger Welcoming and Affirming movement, and IWR helped the Room for all Board to clarify the process for becoming Open and Affirming (O&A) and hence becoming “rostered.”<sup>62</sup>

In November, 2011, a new initiative was undertaken. Although the Board was already aware of a number of publicly inclusive RCA congregations, a plan was established systematically to grow the number of congregations, who were willing to undertake a self-study process and make a commitment to publicly stand together as “welcoming” and committed to inclusion. A rostering invitation was sent out to regional RfA groups, and Board members followed up on these invitations with phone calls. With the help of a grant from the David and Carol Myers Foundation, regional training events took place. A brochure titled “Is Your Church LGBT Inclusive?” was made available to those thinking about publicly declaring themselves to be inclusive, and the RfA website was used to acknowledge those congregations who completed the process. By January, 2012, sixteen churches were listed on the Roster; that number has steadily grown. To chart the growth of rostered churches, see the RfA website.

### **Celebrating with National Conferences**

Our first national Room for All conference was held October 27-29, 2009 at the Central Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. By hosting this conference in the heart of the

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<sup>61</sup> For further commentary in this regard see “A Report to the Consistory of the Collegiate Church,” by Norman J. Kansfield, October 10, 2006, page 7. RfA Archives.

<sup>62</sup> To become “Rostered,” RfA congregations and classes undertake an intentional process in introspection and study. There are four steps in this process: 1) to discuss and discern, 2) to write a statement of inclusion, 3) to send the statement that has been approved by the Consistory to RfA requesting to be Rostered, and 4) to make the statement public and to celebrate. See <http://www.roomforall.com/welcoming-and-affirming-congregations/>.

conservative Midwest, Central Reformed Church was associating its name with LGBTQ inclusivity. This was a brave act. Members of the congregation cooked and served the meals of the conference to help keep the costs as low as possible. A spirit of welcome and hospitality pervaded this and future conferences. Board members and their regional RfA allies stepped boldly, and not without anxiety, into the task of planning the conference. It was a big step forward, and it was taken in hope and in faith – hope that people would come to bless and to be blessed by their presence, and faith that scholarship aid and the necessary means for financing the conference would somehow be found.

The title of this first conference was “Making Room for All.” Almost 140 people participated, including 39 Hope College students. Peggy Compolo was the Keynote Speaker, and six workshops were available.<sup>63</sup> The Rev. Dr. Louis Lotz preached a sermon titled, “In My Father’s House There Are Many Closets.” A new song honoring Room for All was composed by Lorraine Nelson Wolf in 2008, and introduced at the conference.<sup>64</sup> A memorable concert by the

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<sup>63</sup> Workshop leaders included Bruce Cornwell, Miguel De La Torre, Lynn Japinga, Norman Kansfield, David Myers, and Steve Robbins.

<sup>64</sup> Both tune and text are composed by Lorraine Nelson Wolf and copyrighted in 2007 by Ribbon Hill Music. The text of the Room for All song follows here:

In God’s house there is room for all.  
 Every person has a place  
 Held within the arms of grace.  
 In God’s house there’s no room too small,  
 In God’s house there is room for all.

In God’s house there is room for all.  
 Every child, a child of light,  
 All are precious in God’s sight.  
 In God’s house there’s no room too small,  
 In God’s house there is room for all.

Room for all who hunger,  
 Room for all who thirst,  
 Room for all to love the one who loved us first.

In God’s house there is room for all.

West Michigan Gay Men's Choir drew loud applause. The colorful IWR Shower of Stoles Project was on display throughout the conference. In this display, stories are told of LGBTQ persons of faith in leadership positions within IWR member denominations, many of whom decided, or were forced, to give up their ordination status after they came out. In hindsight, the conference was an overwhelming success!

On October 27-29, 2011, the second National Conference took place, again in Grand Rapids and hosted by Central Reformed Church. Rev. Shari Brink was the keynote speaker, and six workshops were made available.<sup>65</sup> Rev. Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell and Rev. Thomas Goodhart served as worship leaders.

At each national conference, the community is invited to the opening and closing worship services, and each service is eagerly anticipated. Serving communion has traditionally

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Every tiny grain of sand  
Is a diamond in God's hand.  
In God's house there's no room too small,  
In God's house there is room for all.

In God's church is there room for all?  
Do our eyes and arms and hands  
Bear the truth that understands?  
In God's house there's no room too small,  
For God's prepared a room for all.

Room for all who hunger,  
Room for all who thirst,  
Room for all who love the one who loved us first.

In God's house there is room for all.  
Every child, a child of light,  
We're all precious in God's sight.  
In God's house there's no room too small  
For God's prepared a room for all, for all.  
In God's house there is room for all.

<sup>65</sup> Workshop leaders for the 2011 conference included Rob Bauer, Senator Scott Dibble, Patricia Fox, Norman Kansfield, David Myers, and Rob Williams.

become part of the closing worship service. In 2011, this communion service was officiated by the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield and his daughter Rev. Ann Kansfield. In 2007 the Classis of New York, RCA, refused to ordain Ann given her sexuality and her marriage to Jennifer Aull in 2004; she was subsequently ordained in the United Church of Christ. Norm Kansfield's ordination, having been suspended by the RCA General Synod in 2005, was reinstated on October 18, 2011 by the Classis of Rockland-Westchester. Given this past, a special symbolism was brought to the table. Amid tears of celebration, those gathered instinctively felt a bond to the past, a wholeness in the present and a promise for the future. No one doubted the presence the Holy Spirit at that memorable occasion.

Each national conference has taken on a character of its own. In October, 2013, a third conference took place, again at Central Reformed in Grand Rapids. Justin Lee, executive director of the Gay Christian Network at the time, served as conference speaker, with Rev. Adriene Thorne leading the worship services.<sup>66</sup> Joel Schoon Tanis engaged participants in a collaborative art project. The Rev. Dr. Ed Mulder and the Rev. Dr. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, both former RCA General Secretaries, formed a panel moderated by the Rev. Dr. Lynn Japinga of Hope College on the topic "The RCA and Same-Sex Relationships."

Our 2015 national conference took on special significance, because it recognized and celebrated the tenth anniversary of Room for All. "From Sorrow to Celebration" was the theme of the conference, and the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel, our friend through whom we had come to know IWR, presented an address entitled: "A Love Letter from the LGBTQ Movement to Room for All." The fact that this celebratory banquet took place at the Grand Rapids Public Museum

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<sup>66</sup> Workshop leaders for the 2013 conference included Sean Harvey, David Myers, JamieAnn Meyers, Jim Brownson and Justin Lee.

seemed to many to reflect a public recognition of our now decade year-old organization. Jeffrey Chu served as conference speaker, and Rev. Renee House led worship.<sup>67</sup> A highlight of the conference was the opportunity for conference participants to attend the play “Listening for Grace: Variations on a Theme of Struggle and Hope,” a new play about relationships, sexuality and the church, written by Ted Swartz (Ted & Company) and performed by Ted Swartz, Justin Yoder and Phillip Martin.

In September, 2017, Room for All sought and received an invitation to hold its sixth national conference at Hope Church in Holland, Michigan, at the time the only congregation in Michigan on the RfA Roster of churches. The Holland community responded in amazing ways. Local businesses contributed to the conference. Room for All members used palm cards to express their appreciation to these businesses. Faculty and students from Hope College and Western Theological Seminary attended in record numbers, as well as local pastors and supporters who had not attended a RfA conference before and came out of curiosity. Giving the keynote address was Dr. Keisha McKenzie, program director of Believe Out Loud.<sup>68</sup> Rev. Ann Kansfield and Rev. Chad Tanaka Pack served as conference preachers. Worship, workshops,<sup>69</sup> panel discussions,<sup>70</sup> dining together and listening to one another’s stories all contributed to what was considered another successful conference.

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<sup>67</sup> Workshop leaders for the 2015 conference included Jim Brownson, Matthew Clark, Rebecca Voelkel, Wendy Gritter and Annie Reilly, Alex Patchin McNeill and Ara Lawrence. Pastors leading a workshop specifically for pastors, elders, and church leaders included Shari Brink, Sophie Mathonnet VanderWell, Steve Mathonnet VanderWell, Mara Joy Norden, Jill Russell, and Gordon Wiersma.

<sup>68</sup> Believe Out Loud is a program of Intersections International, a ministry of the Collegiate Churches of New York, and part of the extended family of the Reformed Church in America.

<sup>69</sup> Workshop leaders included Lindsay Jarratt, Derek Guy, Tricia Sheffield and Darren Major, Alex Patchin McNeill, Emily Janssen, Jennifer Aull, Shelley Donaldson, Barbara Satin, Deirdre Johnston and Jill Russell, Stacey Midge, and Jonathan Vanderbeck.

<sup>70</sup> A plenary panel moderated by Annie Reilly included Don Jiskoot, Ann Kansfield, Chad Tanaka Pack, and Jonathan Vanderbeck as panel participants.



### Hiring an Executive Director and Community Organizer

As early as 2007 Board members began to voice the need for someone in a paid position to help carry out the expanded involvements resulting from the organization's growth. A staff person was needed "to help with movement building, resource development, communications coordination, administrative liaison work in the Welcoming Church Movement, and to assist the volunteer treasurer with financial responsibilities."<sup>71</sup> In September of 2010, the RfA Board hired Marilyn Paarlberg of Albany, New York.<sup>72</sup> Marilyn's work has been a gift to the Room for All community. Her writing skills, her capacity to organize, her energy and her absolute commitment to the cause of Room for All stand out in extraordinary ways. Clearly, Marilyn was the right person in the right place at the right time. As she began, Marilyn's journalistic skills were immediately put to use in creating *The Room for All Newsletter*. Responding orally and oftentimes in writing to unsympathetic audiences became part of her daily tasks. She received the stories of LGBTQ people and their families, seeking to carry their voices and experiences throughout the RCA. She has raised funds, visited congregations, classis and regional Synod meetings and has spoken at General Synod. She has represented RfA on three General Synod-mandated working groups. Although not always warmly welcomed, Marilyn has continued to urge the RCA to affirm the voices, experiences, gifts and calling of God's LGBTQ beloved. Room for All's vision for full LGBTQ affirmation in the Reformed Church in America has made great strides, and Room for All has become a "household word." At the end of the 2019 calendar year Marilyn

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<sup>71</sup> As identified in a Grant Request to the Collegiate Church, NYC, March 5, 2010. RfA Archives.

<sup>72</sup> Marilyn began her RfA responsibilities on September 13, 2010. RfAMin Sept. 17-18, 2010.

concluded her responsibilities as Executive Director of Room for All. Her retirement is well earned.

In January, 2015, a second full-time employee of the Board was hired. Cameron Van Kooten Laughead joined the RfA staff as Community Coordinator. His background in non-profit management and community organizing wonderfully enabled him to work to further the work of Room for All's growth. As his tasks multiplied and came to include oversight of the website, Cameron became Associate Director.

Today the Room for All mission remains the same:

To support, educate and advocate for the welcome and full affirmation of people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions in the life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

And, by the grace of God, the impact continues to grow.

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February 1, 2020

