

AN INVITATION

I come before you offer a very specific invitation. While the invitation is open to all it is addressed to some very specific churches and congregations. I am speaking primarily to the elders and pastors of those congregations that, in the name of Christ, welcome all who may be led by God to come into their presence. If your congregation is not of that mind and spirit I ask you to bear with me as I speak a word to the leaders of those congregations that are.

In January I had the privilege of sitting in on a congregational meeting of the Hope Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan at which that congregation voted overwhelmingly to become a "Room for All" congregation. In doing so they joined 13 congregations from New York and five congregations from New Jersey including one from our classis. It was a rather poignant moment for me because I couldn't help but remember that about 40 years ago a young man, a member of that congregation took his own life because the community could not deal with the fact that he was gay. Sad to say, over the years, that was not a rare occurrence and it is something we hear about almost weekly, the most notorious in recent months being the sad case of the two Rutgers students- I say two because when you read the details of the case you realize that the young man being held responsible is in many ways as much a victim of societal attitudes as was the young man who jumped off the George Washington Bridge.

Through the years and in recent months there have been a number of stories of tragic suicides which have come about through bullying, condemnation and harassment of various kinds. In a significant number of these sad and tragic occasions the victims were young men and women who had come out to their family and friends as gay or lesbian. In nearly every case, there was no safe haven for them or their parents to deal with what was for all involved the heavy burden imposed by some segments of our society. Unfortunately, the burden of coming out is exacerbated by the statements of some, indeed too many churches, religious groups and so-called family values groups to say nothing of the political capital some candidates try to make in an election year.

But thanks be to God, there are churches who by the amazing grace of God are open and welcoming to all are led to enter into their presence. I believe that there are congregations in our Classis that by the Grace of God are welcoming and affirming congregations. Unfortunately, they hide the light given them and thereby effectively deny what, by God's amazing grace they are enabled and called to be and indeed, might, by their silence and passivity, be said to be denying Christ.

I realize that living up to the demands of our faith can be intimidating in a society and a culture that often seeks to enhance its own status by dehumanizing, demonizing or diminishing others. But we claim allegiance to the one who in his ministry reached out to least and sometimes most despised of those among us.

Fortunately, we have at our disposal the resources and skills to discuss and explore effective and sensitive ways to proclaim our faith in our respective communities. I am referring to that group of our Reformed Church brothers and sisters who comprise the "Room for All."

What is the point of being inclusive and welcoming brothers and sisters of Christ if we neglect to express and extend that welcome. If we wait for everyone else to get on board it will never happen. Take it from an old man. Not all congregations, not even a majority of congregations were involved in the civil rights movement back in the 1960s and 70s. Believe me, not all Reformed churches were in favor of ordaining women to the offices of Deacon, Elder and Minister of the Word. It took a few

congregations who sought to live out the will of God as they saw it before the denomination could embrace it.

My urgent invitation simply is for those congregations that choose live by the very basic tenet of the Reformed faith to say so. I think it is not too dramatic to say that for some young person in your congregation or your community it could be the difference between life and death.

Thank you.

Presented by the Rev. Carl Kleis at the meeting of the Delaware-Raritan classis
Tuesday, May 8th, 2012