

*Supporting, Educating,
Advocating ...*

*for full inclusion of LGBT
persons in the Reformed
Church in America*

The RfA Newsletter

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ROOM FOR ALL

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INCLUSIVE CHURCH TRAINING EVENTS COMING THIS FALL

"Building an Inclusive Church" training events provide insight and skills for pastors and church leaders who want to nurture a movement toward LGBT inclusion in their local congregation. The training teaches congregational assessment, strategic storytelling, choosing a frame, one-on-one conversation skills, scriptural contexts, and more.

What a great experience we had at our recent BIC at First Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey last month! To read about it, please go to page 3.

Three additional BICs are planned for the remainder of 2012:

Oakland, NJ at Ponds Reformed Church, September 13-15

Grand Rapids, MI at Eastern Ave. Christian Reformed Church, Oct. 25-27

Pella, Iowa at Central College, Nov. 8-10.

For more information, and to register for these trainings, go to the Institute for Welcoming Resources website, www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm. Watch our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) for emerging details. Or, contact us at (201) 364-4538.

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*“Turn the disciples
so children can
pass between them
to Jesus.”*



It had been at least ten years since I last told “Jesus and the Children” using the Children and Worship model. I knew the program’s potential to engage adults in biblical stories as deeply as the children for whom it is designed; still, I was caught by surprise on a recent Sunday afternoon.

I had agreed to introduce Children and Worship at my home church, and decided this would be an appropriate story to demonstrate, given its clear message of love for God’s little ones.

I had always experienced the “drama point” in the story to be when the children try to approach Jesus as he is teaching his disciples. The directions cue the storyteller to simultaneously bring the two adult figures close together to block the children’s access to Jesus. The words and action are

LIKE A LITTLE CHILD

blunt and unequivocal: “No! Don’t bother Jesus! He has important work to do.” This is near the end of the story, and the rest is rote. Or so I thought.

A week earlier, I had been in another classroom—this time with five LGBT seminary students. I had come away filled with admiration at their conviction and courage, but on the long drive home my impressions were tempered by feelings of sadness, knowing that they may face stiff opposition from the very church they feel called to serve in Jesus’ name.

A few days after that, I had heard from two pastors who are in spiritual struggle over the fact that their church leaders are rigid in their refusal to welcome LGBT persons, insistent that to do so is neither what Jesus would do, nor want them to do—especially not at the risk of making anyone in the church uncomfortable.

Back to the story. After the disciples’ confrontation with the children, the directions read:

“Turn the disciples so children can pass between them to Jesus. Move children to Jesus one at a time. Have Jesus take them in his arms and bless them... move

Jesus forward to the disciples. [Say:] Jesus said, ‘It is true. Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’”

Talk about engaged! At that moment, after that week, the wooden figures might have been real people. I experienced the story not as a sweet affirmation of Jesus’ love for children, nor even as a metaphor for marginalized people being made welcome. Rather, it is a rebuke; a strong challenge to followers of Jesus who, if we would understand and participate in the beloved community, need to take a lesson from children.

And what are children like? They accept others until taught to judge; trust until told to fear. They see infinite possibilities until we constrict their horizons. And they understand with winsome humility that God is God.

May we in the church be given the child-like grace to turn, trusting in God to populate God’s realm beyond our knowing or control, receiving all as we would be received.

Marilyn Paarlberg

TRAINED FOR INCLUSIVENESS

A TOTAL OF 22 PEOPLE—pastors and laypersons representing eight RCA congregations along with Presbyterian (PCUSA), Episcopal and United Methodist churches—gathered at First Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey in April for a Room for All-sponsored “Building an Inclusive Church” training, an opportunity to learn and share ways that churches might become more welcoming and affirming of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Participants pondered and practiced skills in becoming “graceful engagers” around the invitation to transform their congregational culture toward one of greater LGBT inclusiveness.

Those who attended noted appreciation for the well-organized leadership, theological and scriptural exploration, opportunity to practice the concepts, the freedom to share their own stories in a supportive and sacred



Workshop leaders Michael Adee and Emily Eastwood, Executive Directors, respectively, of More Light Presbyterians and Lutherans Concerned North America, offer years of experience and insight from an ecumenical perspective.

environment, and being able to network with other like-minded people in their denomination. The group is already exploring ways to share best practices as they carry their learning back to their home churches.

“What Did You Learn?”

We’ve all come home from a workshop or seminar to be greeted with this question. Here are three things that participants at the Building an Inclusive Church training in New Brunswick came away with:

- **Practice graceful engagement**—this isn’t your high school debate team. What’s the difference? Debates allow rhetoric we would never use in conversation. They are about entrenched positions, using the rules to gain power, a winner and a loser. Graceful engagement is about meeting others where they are and then walking with them, building relationships across ideological and affinity group lines. From Emily Eastwood: “Our job is to introduce Peter to Cornelius; when relationships take root, miracles occur. You can be a non-anxious presence because God’s ultimate outcome is assured. When you take that assurance into yourself, you can be different in the world.”
- **Choose your frame.** For your church context, it might be hospitality, or diversity. If your conversational frame is Scripture, draw upon the whole of Scripture. The Bible is full of good news for pro-LGBT people. Its main theme is the grace-filled love of our Creator and how we are to respond to that love by loving others. Or, if you engage at the level of theology, know your denomination’s core theological tenets (see sidebar).
- **Watch your language.** From Michael Adee: “The word ‘issue’ should be removed from our lexicon when we talk about inclusion; it implies a problem that needs to be studied and debated. LGBT inclusion is not an issue; it is simply the Gospel. The question is not, ‘Is it a sin; is it a choice?’ The only question is, ‘Are we living the Great Commandment?’”

“What does it mean to be Reformed?”

Semper reformanda implies that we must keep asking that question. We’ve been thinking about it in the context of church, culture and LGBT inclusiveness. So we asked some RCA theologians about Reformed distinctives that might inform our conversation.

Here are a few responses, abbreviated by necessity. We intend to keep asking!

“For a Reformed view, there is a middle term between church and culture, and that’s the Kingdom of God.”

“For Calvin, God’s engagement is with the entire of human reality, including the political/cultural/economic world in which he lived. But the issue for Calvin and his descendants would not be about conforming to culture, but how does God reshape culture? In the instance of LGBT, the issue might not be the ‘culture’ as such, but what culture are we talking about? As I’ve been thinking about it, we might ask: what shape does God’s kingdom take, and how do we live into that reality?”

“As Reformed Christians, we of all people should be able to affirm all the gifts of our Creator, and then choose to let them become the way we follow Jesus.”

“It may be helpful to think about issues of purity and unity in Calvin...Which does Calvin value most? My inclination is that [for Calvin] unity takes priority over purity.”

KNOCKING ON DOORS, OPENING HEARTS

by **Karis Granberg-Michaelson**

"I can see no religious argument against ensuring gay and transgender people basic housing and employment protections. My faith propels me to do this work. Along with many others, I'm involved because of my belief in the Gospel."

In Holland, Michigan it is still legal to fire someone or deny them housing just for being gay or transgender. An effort to include sexual orientation and gender identity in the city's anti-discrimination laws was defeated in June, 2011 by a 5-4 vote in the Holland City Council.

In the aftermath of that vote, Holland is Ready, a community action group working for LGBT equality, sent a few supporters to Flint, Michigan to attend the Michigan Power Summit organized by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Unity Michigan. I was fortunate to be part of that group, feeling as if we were undergirded and sheltered by existing branches even as new ones emerged, inviting us to go further—to challenge our personal limitations and give canvassing and fundraising a try.

The experience was a powerful affirmation of collective action. We were stunned to come back from canvassing, tally the numbers and realize what had been accomplished in a few hours. We've been tallying and encouraging ever since, celebrating every positive conversation and inviting friends and family to support us.

Every Saturday, we hit the streets and knock on doors in Holland, the heart of our exchange being, "Do you support basic protections for gay and transgender people?" Nothing melts canvassing anxiety like meeting a person who's been waiting for you to ask her this question, excited to be reached and eager to learn

how to be involved. Change is not only imminent, it's already happening, one mustard-seed action at a time. Canvass by canvass, conversation by conversation, standing in the rain, knocking on the doors of strangers, we are availing ourselves of beautiful surprises.



This crash course in political action has also taught me the electric joy of fundraising. I'm learning that people want the opportunity to support this work. As a Room for All friend said to me during one of my early Holland is Ready fundraising calls, "Ask us. People love you and they want to give. Ask. Keep asking."

In fundraising and in canvassing I'm invited to push past my assumptions and give the person behind the door or on the phone the opportunity to decide how much they want to give and how. It's easy to feel like an interruption, something in the way of what you're sure they're in hurry to get back to, but in fact the canvasser or caller is an invitation, a way in to the movement. There are many surprises: the tearful handing over of a \$100 bill from a stranger, a successful large ask, or a supportive vote from an army veteran.

I can see no religious argument against ensuring gay and transgender people basic housing and employment protections. My faith propels me to do this work. Along with many others, I'm involved because of my belief in the Gospel. *(continued)*

Knocking on Doors, cont.

For example, at this year's Be In, a pro-LGBT sit-in on the campus of Hope College (see p. 8), half the students who were participating ducked out for a while to attend Chapel. Hope College, too, is ready for people whose faith compels them to be actively pro-LGBT.

Organizing with pastors, Hope College professors, students, RCA clergy and lay people, mentors and friends, teaches me who my community is and what it is ready for. I now believe

that people want to give, want to be part of change. I push past assumptions. I have shifted my world to "Yes"—a world that says yes to me, yes to LGBT people. I no longer see Holland as a community that says no to LGBT persons, and I now envision the RCA saying "Yes."

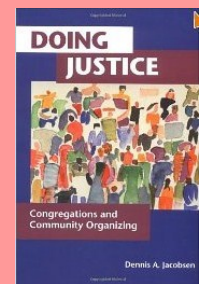
Whether canvassing in Holland or through my role with Room for All, I am in relationship with a denomination that loves and nurtures me, that has since before my birth. This

empowers me to work with my church family for an open and affirming Reformed Church in America that proclaims the Good News of the Gospel, the simple imperative—there is room for all.

Karis Granberg-Michaelson is a member of the Board of Directors of Holland is Ready and Room for All, and serves in development in both organizations. [For more on her perspective on legislating for change in Holland, go to http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/03/post_216.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/03/post_216.html).

Want to know more about the foundations of faith-based organizing?

This resource, recommended reading for those attending "Building an Inclusive Church" training events, is broadly applicable:



*Doing Justice:
Congregations and
Community
Organizing*
by Dennis Jacobsen

To learn about the Faith Organizing Project of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force:
www.thetaskforce.org/issues/faith

RfA REGIONAL SUPPORTERS CONTINUE ADVOCACY

The Mid-Hudson NY regional group met in March to welcome Rev. Cari Keith, pastor of the All-wood Community Church in Clifton, NJ. Cari led the group in considering transformational scripture passages that enable the church to move beyond fear toward welcoming and affirming all persons.

The group is making plans for a May meeting. For further information, check our website or Facebook page.

The Albany-Schenectady NY group is making plans to participate for the third year in the Capital District Pride Parade on June 10th. For this first time this year, the group will staff a table for the afternoon, enabling members of Albany's three "Room for All Churches" to distribute information about their congregations.

Anyone wishing to march with the group is welcome! Call (201) 364-4538 for details.

The Pella, IA group met recently and welcomed over 40 people from Pella area churches. The speaker for the evening was retired RCA pastor Jim Ebbers, who presented sections of his family's personal story of healing as they learned to accept and affirm a lesbian daughter.

In addition to efforts in Holland is Ready, supporters in West Michigan have been active in the Gays in Faith Together group in Grand Rapids, which recently launched the "Gay Christian? Yes!" billboard campaign and website, www.gaychristianyes.org.

Room for All Christian Camp

The RfA Board of Directors recently voted to establish a covenant of support with the Room for All Christian Camp, a ministry of the Reformed Church of Highland Park, under the director of RCHP Associate Pastor and RfA Board member Rev. Patty Fox.

Now entering its second year, the camp was born when a member of the youth group at RCHP saw a video about a similar program. "Why can't we do that?" the student wondered. Apparently, the answer was "No reason!" After the 2011 camp, one young person reflected that until that week, she hadn't known that God could love her.

This summer's camp will focus on faith exploration through the arts. Patty Fox is excited that four professional artists will be among the teaching staff members helping the campers explore and express matters of faith, scripture, and spiritual practice.

A brochure with complete information is available at: <http://roomforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/2012-brochure-room-for-all-2.pdf>

Room for All Christian Camp 2012 LGBTQ Youth in Search of God

August 19-25, 2012



Exploring faith and self-identity
through the performing and
visual arts

painting
drawing
music
movement theater
spoken word
film making

Room for All Christian Camp seeks to create a safe space for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth to develop community and to contemplate together their questions about life and God.

Registration and info

Additional information, as well as camp registration forms are available on the Reformed Church of Highland Park website: www.rchighlandpark.org; or call 732-249-7349 to speak with camp director Rev. Patty Fox. Room for All Camp will be held at the Crossroads Retreat Center in Port Murray, NY.





Since a tentative beginning in 2009, the gay support group at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa is confidently living up to its new name, **LEAP** (Love, Education, Acceptance, Pride). The group's mission statement reads:

"We are a group of LGBT people and their allies, located in the small, Christian community of Orange City, Iowa. Although we are open to all members of the community, our core lies at Northwestern College, where we are fighting for rights and equal treatment for all students who are LGBT. Our mission:

- 1. To be a safe haven, a place of shalom for all nearby LGBT persons to escape from the oppression, fear, self-loathing, conflict, misunderstandings, and isolation that comes from living in a conservative Christian community.*
- 2. To promote tolerance within the larger community, via education, awareness, discussion, peaceful provocation, and - most importantly - love."*

Although aware of their somewhat precarious position in the eyes of the college administration during its first year, a small group of

GAY SUPPORT GROUP AT NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE GAINS MOMENTUM

students met consistently to share experiences of being an LGBT student or supporter on campus, and to focus on planning an awareness event, such as placing LGBT statistics about bullying and suicide across campus. A high point was a showing of "For the Bible Tells me so" on campus with about 80 in attendance for the film and discussion.

Since then, the group has gradually grown to include about 36 students (LGBT and allies) this year, and has become more tightly organized, thanks to strong leadership and a greater sense of purpose and cohesiveness. Most important to the group's current strength, according to their advisor Rein Vanderhil, retired NWC art professor, is a deep sense of trust among the participants. "It's a safe place," he comments.

One member notes that LEAP is working to communicate that sense of openness to LGBT students who are still struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity. "We know it is a difficult time for LGBT Christians, and we want to respect peoples' struggles, so even if we know someone is struggling with coming to terms with their homosexuality, we don't want to pressure them to join the group until they are ready."

Although LEAP is supported by individual faculty members, the College does not currently recognize it as a school-affiliated or supported group, which means they are not allowed to host pro-gay events on

campus or receive funding from the school. However, administration officials have been supportive of LEAP's endeavors to end bullying and unequal treatment at the College.

Some of the group's recent activities have included observing the April 20th National Day of Silence (a day of action in which students across the country vow to take a form of silence to call attention to the silencing effect of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment in schools) and that night, "Breaking of the Silence" with a poetry reading. Earlier this year, the group hosted a dramatic reading of honest letters from members of Northwestern's LGBT community, past and present, dealing with bullying from their homophobic peers. The event was part of the "Day of Learning in Community at Northwestern College."

How has LEAP changed student life at Northwestern? These responses say it all:

Since its origin, the group has really been able to raise more awareness of mistreatment on campus; before LEAP was around, people had no idea there were many LGBT students on campus, and these students themselves had no idea there were others. Many of our members are not out in the open; some are only out to close friends and group members."

L.E.A.P.... "I don't know where I'd be without this group!"

"Knowing that there is a community of support and love to fall back on, knowing that you don't have to make these hard decisions all by yourself, and knowing that when things go poorly there are friends to fall back on, that's what makes LEAP so special and helpful to those who need us. That's why I love this group. That is why it is important to me."

"People are definitely, slowly but surely becoming more aware of the issues LGBT students and people in general face today. They are becoming awakened to the dangers of hate and abuse and they are beginning to want to do something about it. When that day comes, we will be here."

"Having a safe haven where people can be open and honest with each other, where people can be themselves, is a beautiful thing."

"LEAP has opened the door for talking about sexual orientation with others. Events like the Day of Silence and Late Nite Lit Nite helped make people aware of this group on campus that is trying to make a difference. While I know there are negative feelings at times, overall I think the group has received positive responses from others."

"LEAP is a place where I feel safe being myself. I haven't come out to many people on

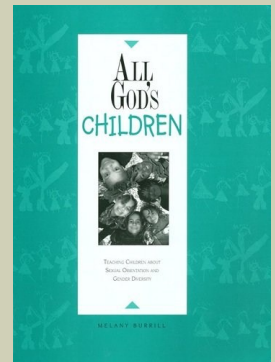
campus yet, and I know the people in the group are supportive of me wherever I am at in my journey. It's comforting to know that I am not alone."

"When I came to Northwestern at the beginning of this year, I had no intention of coming out to anyone, let alone discovering a support system and friends who accepted me for me, regardless of my sexual orientation. LEAP has changed me so much this year. I've learned that being gay does not mean that I can't be a Christian, nor that all Christians hate me for what I am. I've found friends and acceptance from God that I never knew was possible before. It's extremely comforting to know that I have people I can go to no matter what."

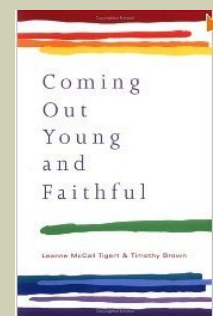
"LEAP has forever changed my life. The people of this group have helped me through the worst times in my life. I am forever indebted to this group and its people. The best part of this group is the safe haven it provides, we have many members in our group that are not out to anyone except for the members of LEAP I don't know where I'd be without this group!"

[Ed. note: In a commitment to guard the privacy of all students, we have not used anyone's name. However, Room for All can verify that these are direct and unedited quotes from students in this year's L.E.A.P. group at Northwestern College. We are grateful to them for their willingness to assist in the preparation of this article.]

Resources For & About Young People



Anti-LGBT bullying has made teaching children about sexual orientation & gender diversity imperative at home AND in church. A wonderful resource is available to help in both settings, "All God's Children," by Melany Burrill.



"Coming Out Young and Faithful" edited by Leanne McCall Tigert and Timothy Brown. Winner of the 2003 Mayflower Award for Church and Society.

Both books are available from Amazon; for many more resources, go to <http://www.welcomingresources.org/youth.xml>



Hope College Students Model "Being" Inclusive

Based on the premise that LGBT-inclusiveness needs to be demystified, a group of students held a "Be-In" in the Hope College Pine Grove recently, to visibly model what an inclusive

space looks like. The purpose of the event was not to be in protest, but in peaceful, positive community. The participants were led in an opening prayer by Hope chaplain Kate Davelaar, and for the rest of the afternoon were simply present and available for conversation, much as any other student group on a diverse campus might "be."

ROSTER OF “ROOM FOR ALL” CHURCHES

Since the project was launched in June, 2011, nineteen RCA congregations have joined a list of churches that are publicly welcoming and affirming of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities. We are aware of several more consistories that are in active conversation about their congregation's response. Thanks be to God! To learn more about the rostering process, we invite you to begin at our website: <http://roomforall.com/welcoming-and-affirming/>

“ROOM FOR ALL CHURCHES”

May 1, 2012

MICHIGAN:

Holland: Hope Church

NEW JERSEY:

Clifton: Allwood Community Church

Highland Park: Reformed Church of Highland Park

Metuchen: The Reformed Church of Metuchen

New Brunswick: First Reformed Church

Somerville: United Reformed Church

NEW YORK:

Albany (3):

The First Church in Albany, Third Reformed Church, Community Church of Colonie

Brooklyn: Greenpoint Reformed Church

Kingston: Old Dutch Church (The First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church)

New Paltz: The Reformed Church of New Paltz

New York City (4):

Fort Washington Collegiate Church, Marble Collegiate Church, Middle Collegiate Church, West End Collegiate Church

North Babylon: St. Paul's Reformed Church

Scarsdale: Greenville Community Reformed Church

Spring Valley: United Church of Spring Valley



Already on the Roster? Check out the “Now What?” resource on our website:

<http://roomforall.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/RfA-Rostered-Churches-Brochure.pdf>



RfA PINS A HOT ITEM

In fact, they're going so fast we'll need to place another order soon. They can be seen on the lapels of pastors, elders, deacons, members of rostered churches, regional group members, RCA college and seminary students.

**WILL YOU BE A
GENERAL SYNOD
DELEGATE THIS
YEAR? LOOK FOR
SOMEONE WEARING
THE PIN, AND FIND
OUT WHERE YOU CAN
GET ONE!**

***Looking for a
tangible way to
support our
efforts?***

**How about funding
our next order of
RfA pins?
Call us at
201-364-4538**

SPRING 2012

ROOM FOR ALL CHECK-LIST:



Please consider joining this ministry as you are able:

- ☐ Help us share the newsletter electronically & in print.
- ☐ Consider a financial donation and invite others to do so.
- ☐ Wear a RfA lapel pin, or fund the next order.
- ☐ Become a “Room for All” rostered congregation.
- ☐ Share stories about what you, your church, or your RfA regional group are doing to help build this movement for LGBT inclusion.
- ☐ Spend an inspiring hour reading the RfA website, www.roomforall.com
- ☐ “Friend” us on the RfA Facebook page and “Like” us (we like you, too!).
- ☐ Foster dialogue about sexuality in your church.
- ☐ Offer to host a “Building an Inclusive Church” training event at your church., or provide a scholarship for someone else to attend.
- ☐ Share a resource that may be helpful in the work of inclusion.
- ☐ Invite a Room for All board member to speak at your church, your classis, your regional synod.
- ☐ Pray for the LGBT youth and adults in RCA families, churches and campuses.
- ☐ Pray for the work of Room for All.