VOLUME 3, NO. 2 WINTER 2013

"CAN ANYONE WITHHOLD THE WATER FOR BAPTIZING THESE WHO HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT JUST AS WE HAVE?"
(ACTS 10: 47)

Supporting, Educating, Advocating...

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

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ROOM FOR ALL

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The RfA Newsletter



WAYS FORWARD:

A New Year for Support, Education and Advocacy

Conversations swirl these days about "a way forward" in the context of LGBTQ inclusiveness in faith communities, including the Reformed Church in America. The phrase also serves as a gathering theme for the articles in this first 2013 issue of the RfA newsletter. In the pages that follow, you'll read about plans for:

- "Making Room for All 2013," RfA's third national conference;
- "Building an Inclusive Church" workshops:
- Reflections on the R-28 "A Way Forward" task force;
- Author Justin Lee's suggestions for a way forward in the gay vs.
 Christian debate:
- How one RfA rostered church is poised for future ministry;
- A pastor's journey through exile toward wholeness in a new life.

You can also learn about new Board members, exciting progress in our educational resource module development, a new website, and more.

The RfA Board is grateful for the opportunity to serve and to work toward making a positive difference for people and congregations in the RCA. We're inspired by the forward movement forged by so many who continue to "support, educate and advocate for full participation of LGBT persons in the life and ministry of the RCA, compelled by the inclusive love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" (RfA mission statement).

Thank you, and thanks be to God for your partnership in this ministry.

The Room for All Board of Directors

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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SAVE THE DATE!

The RfA Board is actively planning our 3rd national conference. "Making Room for All: 2013" will be held on October 24th-26th **Central Reformed Church in Grand** Rapids, MI. (See p. 3)

RfA Board News: Thank You, Welcome & Next Steps

At its annual meeting in Ianuary, the RfA Board of Directors voted to welcome three new members, and expressed gratitude to outgoing members who have served two consecutive terms and therefore are required to step down.

Cyndi Boertje from Pella, Iowa, Rev. Tom Goodhart from Ridgewood (Queens), New York, and David Van Heest from Holland, Michigan joined the Board in 2007, when RfA was still in its early formation, still clarifying its mission and identity within the RCA, still existing in relative obscurity. They came to the Board before there were national gatherings, before "Building an Inclusive Church" workshops, before RfA had a staff person. Cyndi and Tom as copresidents and David as the longtime Board secretary helped to guide those initiatives and many more. Their leadership and insights have shaped our ministry, and their presence on the Board will be missed.

As any organization knows, however, new members bring fresh ideas, energy and expertise, and the Board is delighted to welcome Carl Haan, Tricia Sheffield, and Cameron Van Kooten to their first 3-year terms.

Carl Haan graduated from Hope College with a degree in Piano Performance. As a senior, he helped to revive Hope's Gay, Lesbian &

Bisexual Student Union (later renamed GLOBE), culminating in a first-

ever LGBT awareness week on the campus. He has enjoyed a successful career as a musical director, conductor and pianist for musical theater; at present, Carl performs on and off-Broadway. He is a member of Marble Collegiate Church and is the co-chair of GIFTS. Marble's LGBT fellowship. He resides in midtown Manhattan in New York City with his partner of 4 years and loves live theater and reading mystery novels.

Dr. Tricia Sheffield is an Associate Minister at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. An ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Tricia earned her M. Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, her Ph.D. in Theological and Religious studies from Drew University, and is a candidate for ordination by

the New York Classis of the Reformed Church in America. She has taught religion and gender theory at the college level, and has published and lectured on the relationship between religion and queer theory.



Cameron Van Kooten is a member of the Class of 2013 at Central College in Pella, IA with

majors and minors ranging from art and business to theater and non-profit management. He is currently job-hunting in the Pella/Des Moines area. Cameron was a student delegate at the 2012 General Synod, where his candidness impressed several people in his advisory group during the discussion that followed "A Pastoral Response to Homosexuality."

The Board also elected new officers for 2013 (see sidebar), and looks forward to celebrating progress and envisioning future goals at an extended strategic planning meeting in March.

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2013 NATIONAL CONFERENCE TO INCLUDE AUTHOR JUSTIN LEE & OTHERS

Recognize this photo? If you do, chances are it will bring back memories of an experience that participants called transformative, healing, celebrative, a "coming home" to the church. The event was "Making Room for All - 2011" our second national conference, where we were inspired by inclusive worship, speakers, workshops, panels and the welcoming embrace of supportive LGBT persons, families and allies.

Given those responses, the RfA Board is eagerly planning our third conference, to take place at Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Oct. 24–26, 2013.

The program team has assembled an "A-List" of prospective speakers, preachers, new workshops and featured panel participants, and we're delighted to announce that the acceptances are streaming in! The keynote speaker will be <u>Justin Lee</u>, author and Executive Director of the Gay Christian Network (see p. 7). One of several new features will be a workshop on inclusive music, led by <u>David Lohman</u>, a gifted composer of welcoming worship songs. David will also lend his talents to our worship services and a special concert. There will even be opportunities for art response this year!

As we have done in the past, we're seeking scholarship funding to make it possible for anyone to attend who feels led to do so, because one of the benefits of the conference has been the age and geographical diversity of participants. LGBT students from Iowa get to meet gray-haired supporters from New Jersey, and members of churches who are just beginning a welcoming



journey can learn from those who led the way for LGBT inclusiveness in the RCA long before Room for All existed.

So come: gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered or queer, young or old, East coast, West coast, Canada, and in between. Mark your calendar for an experience in affirming Christian community that you won't soon forget. Watch for registration details in the months to come.

"MAKING ROOM FOR ALL-2013" ~ OCTOBER 24-26

RCA-SPECIFIC RESOURCE MODULES TAKING SHAPE

The RfA Board is pleased to announce that we have identified a creative director for a series of video-based resources which will address LGBT inclusiveness through the lens of concepts central to our Reformed heritage.

WEBSITE COUNTDOWN

When complete, we look forward to offering these and other resources on our new website, which is "this close" to a launch date!



Room for All is grateful to the Collegiate Church Corporation of New York for a generous grant that makes these two projects possible.



REFLECTIONS ON THE R-28 TASK FORCE

by Marilyn Paarlberg

A recommendation passed at last June's General Synod stating, among other things, that homosexual behavior is a sin according to scripture, and

calling for the formation of an eight-member committee charged with the task of presenting recommendations for a "way forward" for the RCA, given our disagreements relative to homosexuality.

On the long drive home from that meeting, I remember thinking, "I wouldn't mind being on that task force." Be careful what you wish for.

Fast forward to November, when the R-28 Task Force was getting ready for our first face-to-face meeting: three days around a table in a curtained hotel conference room, with eight people whose baggage admittedly included disagreements, assumptions and stereotypes. But that's where the predictability ended.

One of the eight members, an elder from Iowa, had been designated as the facilitator of the group. In his preparatory email before that meeting, he asked each person to bring a scripture passage that would be read at several points throughout the three days. I was dubious. "What's to keep everybody from bringing a verse that seems to validate our own opinion?" I wondered.

But then I read the next sentence of the email: we were asked to bring a passage which we thought related to Paul's list in Galatians 5 of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Hmmm. I was still skeptical, but at least this would make it harder for someone to bring their favorite proof text.

We met one another over dinner, and everybody was on their best Christian behavior as we began to find common ground in shared life experiences. By dessert, there was laughter in the room, but I could feel my anxiety rising as we walked down the long hall to the conference room.

As it turned out, the only thing on our agenda that first evening was to take turns reading our chosen passages (see sidebar). No comments—just listen.

The room quieted, and the first person began to read. Before long, I began to feel a shift; we were gradually disarmed by the power of the Word. I went to sleep that night grateful for the wisdom of that Iowa elder.

As we inched along through our deliberations- and ves, disagreementsover the next two days, we stopped several times to read our passages aloud. As the meeting continued, I was struck with the fact that conversations were happening that "shouldn't" have happened, in the sense that none of us could have predicted them, given where we started. We were listening deeply to one another, honoring each one's faith, acknowledging each one's perspective as a child of God. And wonder of wonders – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control were evident among us.

At the close of our time together, we read our passages once more; they had become a kind of litany. As the words drifted around the table, I thought of that verse from the Psalms, "Let my prayers rise like incense before you." I had a powerful, even mysterious sense of the tangible presence of the Spirit in that room, and that I wasn't the only person in whom transformation had taken place. Not that positions were changed, but hearts were. Had we happened upon a way forward for the RCA without realizing it?

[Marilyn Paarlberg is RfA's Executive Director, and represents the Regional Synod of Albany on the R-28 Task Force.] Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

I John 4:7

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.

II Cor. 12:9

Grace, mercy and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love.

II John 3

God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Romans 15: 5-7

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

I Peter 4:10

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Luke 10:27

For Christ is our peace... he has made both groups into one and has broken down the diving wall, that is, the hostility between us...

Ephesians 2: 14-18

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"I was fully committed to following the Way of Jesus Christ and still am.

Unfortunately, I discovered along the Way that certain aspects of myself were not acceptable to some within the church."



BY THE RIVERS OF AUSTRALIA: POETIC PRAYERS FROM THE EXILE

by Rev. L. Don Battjes

"By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.... O daughter Babylon... happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" ~ from Psalm 37 (NRSV).

I was brought up near what Dutch-Americans jokingly refer to as the "holy land" of the Reformed Church in America: Grand Rapids, Michigan. Baptized by Rev. Dolphin, I was fully immersed into the high-tide waters of the church in our culture.

Two decades later, I began ministry as a zealous youth pastor. A constant flow of committed blood, creative sweat and compassionate tears went into living out the holy expectations of my culture – morning and evening worship, Sunday school and catechism, altar calls and summer camp evangelism, Bible studies and seminary classes, prayers and music, wife and children. I loved God, loved the church, and loved my family, so I saw living up to these expectations as healthy challenges.

I was fully committed to following the Way of Jesus Christ and still am. Unfortunately, I discovered along the Way that certain aspects of myself were not acceptable to some within the church. During my twenty years in ministry I affirmed women in ministry, cared about the environment, wrestled with Jesus' call to love our enemies and wondered if God's love might extend to people of other faiths – all of these expressions of grace ran into conflict with a few who thought they needed to defend the TULIP of Calvinism.

The last straw came when I led a discussion on *If God is Love* by James Mulholland and Phillip Gulley. This book entertains the notion that

God loves the world – the poor, the oppressed, our enemies, the environment and people of different orientations.

At the Congregational Church where I was serving as an interim pastor, the discussion was positively received. But some supervising leaders within my RCA classis were so disturbed by *If God is Love* that a letter was drawn up asking me to transfer out of the RCA. This letter asking me to leave my church home was delivered the same week that my wife asked for a divorce.

I didn't have the will to fight either request. The hidden truth was that I was an advocate for extending grace to others, because I couldn't extend grace to myself. I had known since I was a teenager that I was gay, and the reality terrified me. But there was no way I could talk about it. I was having a difficult time being an environmentalist, let alone being gay. I knew the church was not a safe place.

I had risked telling my wife about my struggle years earlier – a struggle I had hoped our relationship could overcome. But after decades of counselling, praying and projecting, she was done. She wanted us to pursue wholeness, not just holiness. So my home denomination was divorcing me for being liberal and my wife was divorcing me so I could be liberated.

Nothing could have scared me more.

As the reality of divorce set in, the reality that my wife wanted to marry someone in Australia also set in. I could argue to keep my children in the U.S. or support her new relationship and let my children go. I worried that the West Michigan court system would reflect an anti-homosexual bias and I feared losing any legal contest, so I agreed to

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Psalm 137 - By the Waters of South Australia (Jan. 2013)

Along the banks of the Torrens River

flowing South in Australia,

I sit and remember the Grand River flowing Mid-west in America.

I was a member of the Reformed Church until I flew a rainbow flag.

I remember singing the old Doxology:

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

But the blessings have dried up under the blind heat of judgment.

Pious pastors still invite us to sing *Amazing Grace* which is amazing since we are lost to them.

Here I sing in the Uniting Church Love is flowing like a river, and Aussie voices trickle out over rocky music.

I remember playing this simple song in the Sunday School of my childhood.

That Reformed Church is now closed:

the dry pews silently gather dust;

Waiting for the wrecking ball of time

to knock the walls to ground level.

The church's one foundation is

the One who said, "Love your neighbour."

And bless the little ones even if

a few are rainbow children.

Do not smash them on the rocks of hardened hearts or the future may be hard on all of us.

I remember. Salty tears start to flow and roll into the river as it meets an ocean of religious grief.

~ L. D. Battjes



come to Australia ~ making it possible to support my ex-wife, be close to my children and rebuild my own life far away from the "holy land" of my childhood.

So, here I am in Australia on a student visa, which allows me to work part-time. I happily serve as a Family Pastoral Worker within the Uniting Church in Australia. The leaders who called me here know of my gay orientation and they do not believe this is in conflict with my gifts for ministry. Their support is helping me to work on a Masters in Teaching Special Education. In this way, I can continue a ministry of caring for others who are marginalized.

On my way to church, I often ride my bike along the Torrens River, a small stream that winds through Adelaide and empties into the Southern Ocean. As I flow along with the waters to the sea, I wonder about where life has taken me. Much of the movement in my life has been driven by fear of rejection – a fear that has been justified by the number of times I felt smashed against the rocks of institutional powers within the RCA.

Yet my RCA heritage has also been my greatest comfort, for my spiritual life has been sustained by focusing on the psalms – a very reformed tradition. I study a psalm, identify its emotional content, and write my own contemporary poem that reflects a similar experience.

At the beginning of this year I turned my attention to the classic poem from the time of Israel's exile – "By the Waters of Babylon." This brief psalm speaks of feeling far from home, victimized by conflicts, remembering songs of faith and then ends with the horrible image of smashing children against the rocks. After identifying these elements the poem wrote itself.

I accepted Room for All's invitation to publish the psalm and my story with a mixture of hesitation and relief. Doing so represents yet another coming out, this time to the denomination that baptized me, nurtured my faith, ordained me, and ultimately asked me to leave. To come out to my church home is to face more rejection, but I keep hoping that grace will prevail and my years in exile might come to end.

[Ed. note: If you are interested in receiving four re-voiced psalms per month by email, you may send your request to Room for All.]



"God Boy" Calls Us Back to the Table Reflections on "Torn" by Justin Lee

Justin Lee's new book, "Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs. -Christians Debate" is getting a lot of press. Publicity and reviews can be found along the journalistic spectrum from National Public Radio to Huffington Post to evangelical author/ blogger Rachel Held Evans. The book's Author Notes describe Lee as "a passionate Christian from a conservative evangelical background," yet even the reviews from more predictably liberal and skeptical corners are largely positive, and his book is being widely touted as a gift to the church.

We agree—so much so, in fact, that RfA has contracted with Lee to give the keynote address at our third national conference in October. Why?

Like many in the RCA today, his native tongue is "evangelicalese," a faith language he speaks with integrity — it's who he is. Most of the Gay Christian Network's statement of faith (Lee is GCN's founder and executive director) would likely resonate with many in the RCA. Lee's

personal piety and reliance on scripture are evident throughout the book, and he gives a fair and balanced hearing to those who don't share his positions. He is a bridge builder over a lamentable chasm that exists in the church today.

In short, we trust "God Boy," as he was called in high school, for his transparency, his faith, his concern for the church, and his vision for its future.

Although "Torn" has a wholesome innocence about it (UCC writer/ pastor Lillian Daniel quips that it's a book "your Southern Baptist grandmother could read and then sigh at the end, 'Well, bless his sweet heart'"), there's nothing sweet to be found in Lee's words about the church's increasingly hostile reputation in the gay/ Christian debate. His critical assessment of the damage is harsh, no matter which side you're on.

Lee minces no words ("the Christians are killing Christianity"), but neither does he give up on the church. In fact, in our

opinion, the chapter titled "The Way Forward" is an outline for the RCA. In it, he discusses seven things "we must focus on if we want to create a better world for the next generation and see the church become what God has called her to be" (p. 227). The list ends with "We Must Learn How to Effectively Dialogue."

Sadly, dialogue about homosexuality has come to be viewed as a negative, even unfaithful concept in some circles of the RCA. And to be fair, maybe effective dialogue has yet to happen. Lee characterizes it as "reaching out to people whose views and experiences are different from our own and having the patience to really listen to them with a goal of better understanding them and their worldview" (p. 249).

Perhaps that's the best gift that Justin Lee's book extends to the church: an invitation to come back to the table — to dialogue, to listen, and to move forward in faith.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE FOR PASTORS TO KEEP ON HAND

Parents whose child has just come out as gay or lesbian may not feel emotionally ready to talk, nor to focus on a book on the subject. A new 11-page booklet may be a helpful gift for such times.

"What Do I Do Now?
When a Child Comes Out as
Lesbian or Gay"
by Rev. Dr. Mark C.
Johnston is brief, pastoral,
and genuinely reassuring.
Johnston, a pastoral
psychologist with 25 years of
experience working with
LGBT youth and their
parents, repeatedly affirms
variations on this truth:

"The fact that your child has come out to you tells me that you've done something right: instilled the values of honesty and integrity and nurtured a relationship that your child values... Your son or daughter has decided that being in close relationship with you is important enough to risk the feelings that both of you are having right now."

Download at http://www.chalicepress.com/
AuthorID=1351. Printed copies are also available by emailing info@roomforall.com.

"What It's Like to be a Room for All Church"

This is the third in a series which invites pastors or parishioners in rostered Room for All churches to reflect on how the decision to be publicly welcoming and affirming of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities has affected their congregation's life together, or that of individual members. This month, we're pleased to feature a reflection by Rev. Gordon Wiersma, pastor of Hope Church in Holland, Michigan.

Hope Church has been a welcoming and affirming congregation in practice for some years now, but recently taking the more formal step of becoming a "Room for All Church" has been important and energizing for us.

The decision has freed us to be more publicly intentional about expressing this aspect of our congregation's identity, and it has motivated us to find ways to use this designation as both witness and invitation to our community. Within our congregation, while the decision of approving the Room for All Church

designation has been a significant source of joy and celebration, the decision process has also continued to teach us the importance of listening to and valuing all perspectives and voices. We believe that through a faithful process

and decision, the Spirit has blessed us with a fruitful way of living out our witness to God's grace and gifts for all people.





"BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH" WORKSHOPS

Do you want to widen your church's welcome of LGBT persons? "Building an Inclusive Church" workshops have been designed with congregations and their leaders in mind, to help you discern and respond to God's call to become more inclusive.

Trained BIC leaders will help you assess your congregation's welcoming climate, learn how to build relationships before you start, discover the best frame for the conversation to take place, gain skills in telling your own story of why you care about LGBT inclusion, share ways to have effective conversations about scripture, gain knowledge about sexuality and gender differences, and more. You will be guided through a "welcoming toolkit" and throughout the workshop, you'll get to know like-minded persons from other churches who share your heart for inclusiveness.

RfA HAS SCHEDULED A BIC WORKSHOP ON FRIDAY EVE./SATURDAY APRIL 19 & 20 AT THE REFORMED CHURCH OF METUCHEN (NJ) AND MAY 3 & 4 AT THE REFORMED CHURCH OF NEW PALTZ, NY, AND WE'RE IN CONVERSATION WITH OTHER RCA CONGREGATIONS ABOUT HOSTING IN OTHER AREAS IN THE COMING MONTHS. In addition, these BICS are already scheduled by our ecumenical partners: March 1-2 Moorhead MN; April 5-6 Salt Lake City UT; May 4 Vancouver WA. For details, go to http://www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm.

"ROOM FOR ALL"
CHURCHES

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 (2):

Greenpoint Reformed Church

New Utrecht Reformed Church

Hudson: First 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

Schenectady: First Reformed Church of Schenectady Spring Valley: United Church of Spring Valley

WINTER 2013

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
	"Like" the RfA Facebook page (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, classis, or regional synod.
	Pray for the LGBT youth and adults in RCA families, churches and campuses.
	Pray for the work of Room for All.
	Pray for the Reformed Church in America & its staff.
	PLAN TO ATTEND "MAKING ROOM FOR ALL 2013–OCT. 24-26 in Grand Rapids, MI.

What's on Your Mind?

The RfA Newsletter is a forum for extending our mission of support, education and advocacy for full LGBT inclusiveness in the Reformed Church in America. If you have a response to something you've read in our newsletter, or an idea for a future article, please let us know. We welcome your letters, stories or questions.

info@roomforall.com



PLEASE CONSIDER PRINTING &
MAILING THIS ISSUE TO SOMEONE YOU
KNOW WHO DOESN'T HAVE
ELECTRONIC ACCESS.

COMING EVENTS:

"Building an Inclusive Church" training workshops at The Reformed Church of Metuchen (NJ) ~ April 19 & 20

and

The Reformed Church of New Paltz (NY) ~ May 3 & 4

(Info soon at http://www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm.)

"MAKING ROOM FOR ALL: 2013" NATIONAL CONFERENCE"

OCTOBER 24-26 ~ GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

WATCH FOR DETAILS!