

*Supporting, Educating,
Advocating ...*

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

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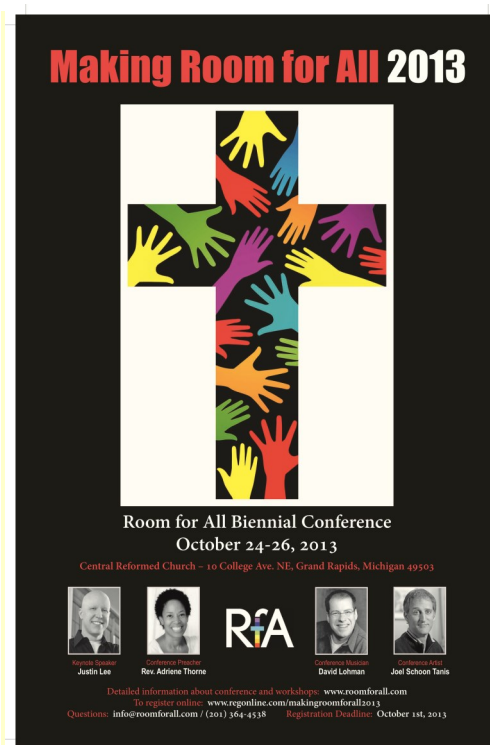


ROOM FOR ALL
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The RfA Newsletter

NATIONAL CONFERENCE NEARS



Online registration is open for RfA's third biennial conference, to be held October 24-26 at Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Poster brochures including a registration form have been mailed to supporting churches and individuals. If you didn't get a copy, please call 201-364-4538 or email info@roomforall.com

You'll find information about workshops, panels, presenters, underwriting, and more in this issue. Check our website for further details about the speakers. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, once again we're able to offer need-based travel scholarships to the first 50 registrants who apply. And for the first time, students at RCA and CRC colleges and seminaries may register at no cost. All the logistics come in a confirmation email when you register, or contact us with your questions. **We look forward to seeing you in Grand Rapids on October 24th.**

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Ever-Widening Circles:

Reflections on Marriage Vows and General Synod

by Marilyn Paarlberg

Like other idealistic young couples at the time, John and I wrote our own marriage vows. And like most, we had little or no idea of what our words implied. For example: *“Though our love should never end, because it is of God it is not meant for us alone, but for ever-widening circles.”*

Hello? How could fresh-faced lovers whose world centered in ourselves possibly know what such a statement might mean, let alone ask of us? We couldn't, of course.

It was easy enough when we chose to widen the circle ourselves, to include new like-minded friends, shared commitments, and later, our children. Surely God meant for our love to apply to such circumstances; “pebbles” that created ripples so gentle they didn't require us to alter our assumptions or worldviews.

But inevitably (and thankfully), life events take most of us to ponds beyond our own, to people and concepts that challenge and invite new understandings of who we are in relation to others and to God. And to be honest, “Great Commandment” or not, making a connection between our love as a couple, what or whom it's meant to affect, and where God is in all of that has been elusive for me at times, if I've thought to make it at all. Vows have a way of bringing you up short.

Over time, though, I've sensed that the best, most life-affirming, marriage-enriching, people-loving, self-humbling, gospel-clarifying, God-honoring encounters have been those that remind me that I don't know what I don't know about God, but that I may have just glimpsed something of what God's love is about and what I'm called to do. Hindsight.

So these days, that's my gauge. When those sorts of holy ripples are the result of an experience with people or ways of thinking I couldn't have predicted, I can only conclude that the vows that we made cannot be meant for me—for us—alone, and that somehow God is in it.

The connection? My passion for LGBTQ affirmation in the church is one such God-pebble, undeniably invoking all of the above. Grace-filled, sacred ripples that compel my loving response.

I was thinking about all of this last year during the 2012 General Synod. On that Sunday, John and I went to worship at the church where, 40 years ago to the day, we had spoken our vows. I remember marveling that I could never have known in 1972 that one of those “ever-widening circles” would lead me to become RfA's director and an annual visitor to General Synod, where debate over same-sex relationships in the church continues to flare.

The next day, the Synod passed what became known as R-28, naming “homosexual behavior” as contrary to Scripture, and judging advocacy like my own as “disciplinable.”

But in the conflicted minutes after that vote, a pastor who disagrees with RfA's premise asked if we might talk. Did we know the risk? We met by phone for several months of candid conversation, both of us trying to respond to the implications of God's love, both of us changed. A positive ripple that I didn't initiate and couldn't have seen coming.

In the year that followed, I served on the R-28 task force with others whom I knew to be opposed to full inclusion in the RCA, and I saw that somehow my marriage vows were meant to apply even there. That, too, was a sacred surprise.

As for Synod 2013, conversations and votes seemed to indicate that doors to further dialogue about same-sex relationships will be kept ajar for another year, and the Synod affirmed the value of unity, despite the ongoing division among us. I was encouraged.

And finally this: Someone else who firmly disagrees with me about full inclusion said, “I love you.” I can't be sure what prompted his words, but in that moment, I heard myself say, “I love you, too.” And somehow, instinctively, I do. I don't know what I don't know, but the circle has widened again, thanks be to God.



CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

No matter where you turn, opportunities for inspiration, education and community will be plentiful at RfA's third national conference. For example:

Worship Opportunities:

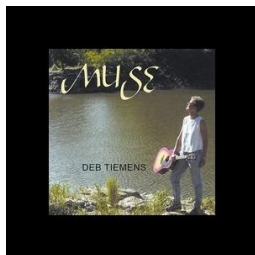
The Reverend Adriene Thorne will preach at opening worship and closing Communion. She is an Associate Minister at Middle Collegiate Church and a former RfA Board member. Adriene is currently pursuing counseling studies at the Blanton-Peale Institute.



Conference Musician David Lohman will lead music during worship. A native of Minneapolis, David is a church musician, singer and songwriter known for composing welcoming music for the church. He led singing at the Minnesota Capitol building during the recent vigil at the State's marriage equality vote.

Friday Evening Concert & Keynote Address: (7 PM, open to the public)

A pre-keynote concert will feature conference musician David Lohman in concert with singer/songwriter Deb Tiemens. Both David and Deb have important stories to tell as LGBTQ Christians, and those stories will be woven into their music.



Keynote Speaker:

Justin Lee: *"Taking a Stand without Having a Standoff"* (Open to the public)

Justin Lee is the founder and executive director of The Gay Christian Network, an interdenominational organization building bridges between Christians on LGBT issues, and the author of *"Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay vs. Christians Debate."*



Choice of 3 Workshops:

"Sing a Song of Welcome" – David Lohman
As people of faith, it is vitally important that the music we sing actually reflects the theology we believe and the God we worship. In this session you'll be introduced to songs of God's extravagant welcome from a variety of traditions.

"Practical Tips for Real-World Bridge-Building" – Justin Lee

We've all been there: You're in a conversation with someone about LGBT issues, when you find the conversation turning into a full-fledged argument. How do you get through without losing your temper? What do you do if they're more interested in preaching than listening? Is it worthwhile to "agree to disagree"?

LGBTQ and Christian: Living a Christ-Centered Life" (workshop for LGBTQ people only) – Sean Harvey

This workshop will focus on how our intentions and actions in all aspects of our lives as LGBTQ people are in line with our Christian faith, looking for ways to expand the spiritual outlets for healing in our community – a dialogue that promotes personal acceptance, Christ-centered living, and love for one another.

Oct. 24, 3:30 pm – Oct. 26, 12 noon at
Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids

[Click here to register](#)

WAYS TO HELP

REGISTER

Social media is great, but meeting "F2F" with other supporters from across the wider church is powerful and fun!

INVITE

If you've attended a previous conference, let your positive experience be the invitation. If you've never been before, coming with a friend will double your testimony when you get home!

UNDERWRITE

Your gift in any amount will make it possible for students and others who may need financial help to attend. [Here's](#) a description of our underwriting goal.

TRANSPORT

If you're local and have a van or access to a church bus, we need help with airport & hotel transportation.

Call us if you can help: 201-364-4538

ADDITIONAL CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

Our sincere apologies for the omission of these two important workshops in this issue of the newsletter. Both workshops will be offered as planned and advertised:

“Most are Straight, Some are Gay, and Why it is that Way:

the Science and Future of Sexual Orientation” – Dr. David Myers

David Myers will summarize research indicating that sexual orientation is a natural, enduring disposition, and that the world would be a happier and healthier place if, for all people, love, sex, and marriage went together. He will also review Americans' rapidly changing attitudes, and what they imply for the future of gay marriage and ordination.

David Myers is a Hope College social psychologist and ordained Reformed Church in America elder. His 17 books include (with Letha Dawson Scanzoni), “What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage.”



“Our Gendered and Sexual Lives: The Invisible T & B” – Dr. JamieAnn Meyers

This workshop will give participants a foundation for understanding transgender and bisexual people and the complex issues they face. A combination of activities, including storytelling, Q and A and group brainstorming sessions will address such things as terminology, myths and stereotypes, the differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, participants' own gender and sexual identities, gender-conforming and heterosexual privilege, “coming out,” and how to respond as allies and people of faith to trans* and bisexual individuals and their communities.



Dr. JamieAnn Meyers serves as transgender representative and board member of ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation, and is a member of GenderFold in the UCC. She is also a member of T Forward within the Interfaith Working Group, an organizer of TransLutherans within ReconcilingWorks, and a member of the transgender working group in the Institute for Welcoming Resources. JamieAnn takes a social justice and anti-oppression approach to her activism and advocacy, which is focused on transgender and bisexual issues and trainings for allies across the boundaries of all LGBTQIA communities.*

“Bible for Sexual Ethics: Basic Issues & Problems” – Dr. James Brownson

How do we properly read the Bible in order to develop a comprehensive sexual ethic, and think about same-sex relationships within that framework? Building on his recent book, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, Dr. Jim Brownson will explore how we can most effectively understand and apply the Bible's message in a variety of cross-cultural contexts.

“Storytelling that Invites Change” – RfA trainers Rev. Patty Fox, Bob Mutch, Marilyn Paarlberg & Rev. Rob Williams

Do you care about building an inclusive and affirming church? Then you have a story to tell. It has been said that when the heart is changed, the mind follows, and personal stories have the power to change hearts. In this workshop, trained RfA “Building an Inclusive Church” leaders will coach you in a brief, simple and natural structure for telling your story effectively, so that when the opportunity presents itself, you can invite change!

Panel Discussions:

A Retrospective on the RCA and Same-sex Concerns, featuring General Secretaries emeriti Ed Mulder (1983-1994) and Wes Granberg-Michaelson (1994-2011). Panel moderator – Dr. Lynn Japinga

“Family Matters” – Three sets of family members talk about making the adjustment when a son, daughter or sibling comes out. Panel Moderator – Bradley Redeker

Other Opportunities:

Throughout the conference, there will be time to explore any of these options:



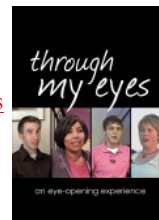
During the day on Friday, **Conference Artist Joel Schoon Tanis** will facilitate the creation of a corporate piece of art. Take a few minutes and

engage with the topic both through words and through playing with paint. Joel will take everyone's spontaneous contributions and assemble a collage that he will paint back into and reveal at the closing assembly.

“We Have Faith,” a photo/story exhibit by ***the Family Diversity Project***, will be on display throughout the conference. The exhibit features inspiring stories of LGBTQ clergy of all faiths, including RfA founding members Rev. Ann Kansfield and Rev. Jennifer Aull.

“Through My Eyes” Film

Screening— Justin Lee will lead discussion on **this documentary** that intertwines the stories of over two dozen young Christians as they wrestle with issues of faith and sexuality.



Conference Choir— Conference musician David Lohman will direct an impromptu choir that will sing at the closing worship service.

BOOK SIGNING

We're delighted that these five authors will be present at the conference as leaders

or participants:

Jeff Chu

Jim Brownson

Lynn Japinga

Justin Lee

David Meyers

You'll be able to pick up a copy of their books at the conference book table, meet the authors, and get signatures on Friday evening after the keynote address!



Book Table – Thanks to Eerdmans Publishing, we're able to offer books for sale that pertain to LGBTQ concerns in the church, including titles by five authors who will be presenting or participating in the conference (see sidebar).

Author's Cred includes "RCA Elder"



Award-winning Journalist Jeff Chu has an impressive resume: Princeton, London, interviews in major media, Reformed Church Elder. We asked Chu to describe how he landed at Old First Reformed Church in Brooklyn:

I first wandered into Old First during a season of strong doubt in my faith. I'd only just moved to New York—I'd been living in London for nearly six years—and I had recently come out as a gay man; this double-barreled culture shock sent me into a trough, a time of turmoil and great depression. Old First was just a few blocks from my apartment, so the barriers to entry—well, the physical ones at least—were relatively low. Sometimes the feet take you where the heart doesn't even know it's ready to go.

[Read more on the next page]

Book Review: *"Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America"* by Jeff Chu. (Harper Collins, 2013)



Jeff Chu recounts a comment by Andrew, a young gay man who has finally found a job in an open and affirming church. Andrew had told the interview committee that he'd begun to feel that "sitting around and talking about whether God actually loves gay people is quite uninteresting. There are far more interesting things in our faith to discuss, and far more important work that our faith requires of us."

Indeed. Or, as increasing numbers of church folks are apt to say these days, "Can I get an amen?"

And yet, as Chu's layered and compelling interviews with gay people across the geographical and faith landscape make abundantly clear, many North American Christians seem to find the question, "Does Jesus love gays?" not only interesting but worth splitting the church over.

It is the question that Chu, himself a gay Christian raised in a devout home, sets out to explore—partly because it was sometimes his own question, as well. Now an elder in the RCA (sidebar), Chu candidly

acknowledges that now and then he still wonders "how good a Christian could I be if I struggle to believe that God loves me at all...? I doubt. A lot. And yet I can't not believe in God."

Chu's pilgrimage takes him coast to coast to collect the stories of more than 300 people whose coming out has clashed with coming in, or coming back, to church—and for some, to any faith at all. Some of their stories are sad, even tragic. Others are funny, many inspiring. Overall, nearly every conceivable attitude toward the church by gay Christians, and vice versa, is represented in the lot. All are important not only because they're about the welfare of real people, but because of what they imply for the survival of the church.

We meet pastors whose fear of stating and acting on what they believe is discouraging at best; "more sheep than shepherd" as Chu puts it. "My fear," he continues, "is that the people who pay the greatest price for pastoral failure are ... those who do not get the nurture they hope for and need, and then find themselves marginalized from the family of faith, believing that there is no

place for them in it."

Reassuringly, Chu also introduces us to pastors and church folk whose transparency and humility exemplify the challenge that he poses for all of us:

"If those of us who have some loyalty to this thing called the church do not consider what [Jesus meant by love] requires of us in terms of openness and hospitality, we'll continue to alienate and shut off conversation when we should be doing the opposite... We must personify grace. We must recognize our limitations and leave to God what is God's."

Chu: *Do you believe Jesus really loves you?*

Michael: *It's not so much a question of whether or not he loves me. It's more that he has not proactively loved me yet."*

Jeff Chu's book leaves the reader with some pesky questions. Where are the bearers of Jesus' proactive love? Why are so many gay people still waiting for a personal glimpse of it? Why should anyone be left to wonder if God loves them?

Surely there are more interesting things for the church to be discussing.

A “One Issue” Church

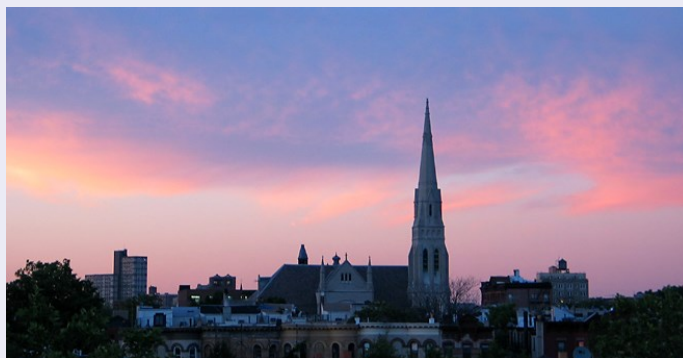
There’s no denying it: We’d love it if all the welcoming and affirming congregations in the RCA would add their name to the Room for All roster—we know there are more than 23!

But let us say this clearly: A growing list of publicly welcoming and affirming RCA congregations is important to us, but it’s not the end goal. The roster is a tool by which to measure progress toward the goal of a **vibrant and transparent welcome and affirmation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in RCA congregations.**

There are several reasons why congregations might hesitate to join the roster of Room for All churches; in fact, we’re in the process of revising our process based on their feedback. But apart from that, we honor and give thanks to God for all the RCA congregations that are fully inclusive, some before RfA even existed.

For example, writer and Elder Jeff Chu (previous page) chose Old First Reformed in Brooklyn because in his words, it’s a “one-issue church,” and that singular issue seems to us to be at the heart of the matter:

Other neighborhood churches were more bombastically open and affirming—one had declared, rainbow flags flying, that no heterosexual couples would be married there until homosexual couples could wed legally too. What I found at Old First was perhaps quieter but for me more powerful. It seemed to me to be a one-issue church in the best way, and that issue was figuring out how to be, as the pastor, Daniel Meeter, says at the start of every Sunday service, "a community of Jesus in Brooklyn."



Over the past seven years, I've come to love Old First because of how it has been open and affirming of me—and of all its congregants—in the wholeness of our complicated humanity. That includes my fears and hopes, my doubts and questions, my strengths and weaknesses—and my sexuality. It's a family in which I can be me. It's a place where we struggle together to love and to serve. It's a congregation where all can come to stand on that level ground at the foot of the cross, to seek our Jesus.

“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

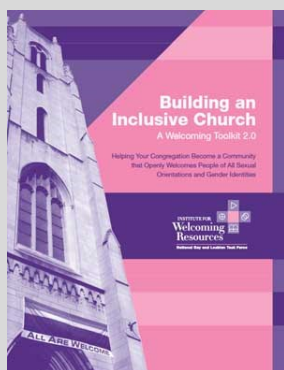
Scarsdale: Greenville Community Reformed Church

Schenectady: First Reformed Church

Spring Valley: United Church of Spring Valley

NEW RELEASE! A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0

Updated and greatly expanded, based on feedback from BIC trainers and participants.



Drawing upon thirty years of experience within a variety of Christian denominations, this Toolkit is a step-by-step guide to help facilitate a Welcoming Process in your local congregation.

Biblically and theologically based, it uses tools of relational organizing, congregational assessment, conflict management and change theory.

**AVAILABLE FOR FREE
DOWNLOAD!**



Since March, 2011, six RfA-organized “Building an Inclusive Church” workshops have drawn nearly 300 people from 39 different RCA congregations in eight states.

And that’s just the tip of the ecumenical iceberg. Our colleagues in other welcoming church programs also sponsor BICs (and were doing so before RfA existed) through the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR).

As demand for the workshops grew, staffing and funding changed. In 2012 IWR began to offer “train the trainer” events across the denominational welcoming programs, thus increasing the network of potential BIC trainers and events. At present, five RfA members have been trained, and have co-led BICs in New Jersey, New York and Iowa.

Workshops Offer Practical Steps Toward a More Welcoming Community

More good news: Two more RfA-sponsored (and co-led) workshops are coming up in the next few months: Nov. 8 & 9 in Ada, Michigan at The Community (an RCA ministry), and Feb. 21 & 22 at Lord of Life Lutheran Church near Columbus, Ohio.

If those dates don’t fit your schedule, take a look at all the BIC trainings that some of our welcoming church colleagues are offering in other states:

Sept. 14: Pittsburgh
Oct. 4-5: San Antonio
Oct. 25-26: Chicago
Nov. 1-2: Minneapolis
Nov. 8-9: Ada, MI at The Community (RfA sponsored)
Nov. 8-9: Dunedin, FL (Tampa area)
Nov. 23: Sacramento
Feb. 21-22, 2014: Columbus, OH at Lord of Life Lutheran Church (RfA co-sponsored)
Feb. 28-March 1, 2014: Shaker Heights, OH (Cleveland area)

Who should come to a BIC workshop? Anyone who wants to explore practical steps for widening their congregation’s welcome to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities; pastors, consistory members, anyone with a heart for LGBTQ inclusion! You’ll meet a great community of folks who, like you, are looking for a way to begin.

All the information you need to sign up for a BIC workshop is at [the IWR website](http://theIWRwebsite), along with a host of resources and other information.

And as always, if you would like to hold a BIC workshop at your church, let us know!



SUMMER 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
- ☐ Underwrite the conference so that others may attend.

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