

*Supporting, Educating,  
Advocating ...*

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

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# The RfA Newsletter

## DEADLINES APPROACH FOR "BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH" WORKSHOPS



"Building an Inclusive Church" trainings offer powerful tools to help us be the church Christ that calls us to be — **just, loving and extravagantly welcoming.** Through faith-based skills training for engaging gracefully with those who differ, sound Biblical, theological and sexual orientation/gender identity education, meaningful worship, and opportunities for strategic and faithful thinking about your context, "Building an Inclusive Church" is meant for lay leaders, clergy, denominational leaders and members and leaders in denominational LGBT groups.

Room for All will co-sponsor three more ecumenical BIC trainings in the fall of 2012, to be co-led by Rev. Vicki Wunsch from the Institute for Welcoming Resources and trained members of the Room for All Board. The events take place from 1 pm on Thursday through 12 pm on Saturday, and registration costs are kept low so that all may attend (financial assistance is available). **To register online or to download a mail-in form, go to [www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm](http://www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm).**

### LOCATIONS, DATES AND REGISTRATION DEADLINES:

- Oakland, NJ at Ponds Reformed Church, September 13-15; Deadline Sept. 1st
  - Grand Rapids, MI at Eastern Ave. Christian Reformed Church, Oct. 25-27; (Hosted by *All One Body*, our partner organization in the Christian Reformed Church); Deadline Oct. 11th
  - Pella, Iowa at Central College, Nov. 8-10; Deadline Oct. 25th
- Questions? Contact us at (201) 364-4538 or info@roomforall.com

### RfA Board Welcomes New Directors

At its May meeting, the Room for All Board of Directors regrettably accepted resignations from Rev. Adriene Thorne and Rev. Patty Fox, and thanked them for the significant gifts they brought to our ministry. The Board has elected Rev. Carolyn Keith and Mr. Thomas Folkert to fill these unexpired terms. Cari and Tom bring strong leadership and proven commitment to RfA's mission. Welcome!

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### Executive Committee:

Rev. Eric Johnson President  
Jan Koopman  
1st Vice-President  
Rev. Thomas Goodhart  
2nd Vice President  
Brad Redeker Secretary  
Cyndi Boertje Treasurer  
At-Large:  
Rev. Jessica Kast-Keat and  
Rev. Miriam Bush  
Marilyn Paarlberg  
Executive Director

Dr. Jane Dickie  
Thomas Dibble  
Tom Folkert  
Karis Granberg-Michaelson  
Rev. Carolyn Keith  
Robert Mutch, Jr.  
Robert Sweeney  
David Van Heest  
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Rev. Rob Williams,  
Development Officer  
Mary Kansfield, Archivist

“...it is very difficult for us to earnestly say that we don’t know with certainty most of the things we confess. It is hard for us to be satisfied saying we feel them with confidence and then go on to live them out with grace.”

## Aunt Ada and the Myth of Certainty by Eric Johnson



**Below is a reflection that I posted back in April on the Church Herald Blog, which is one of the only official places RCA folk interact online. Some telling conversations take place there. I share my post and will follow with thoughts I’ve had since.**

*The first time I heard my friend mention his Aunt Ada was in the context of what she said to his wife at their wedding, “t’s a shame you are marrying my nephew. I always liked you and now I know you’ll never be saved.” He shared this with good-natured humor, but the lingering hurt of it was there too.*

*Well, today he is back from Aunt Ada’s funeral and as is often the case, on the day his family gathered to mourn a death and celebrate a life, the time proved to be marked by grace and growth. He had described Aunt Ada to me as a person who was rigid and judgmentally religious. At the funeral, he heard more about her life and gained insight.*

*Perhaps living in a story where all things are either good or bad provides some sense of security or control, but it also comes at a cost. He talked about Ada’s son who married a Jewish woman and had real wine at the wedding! He talked about a grandchild who went to jail. He reflected on the reality that Ada’s own story placed her at odds with the people she loved and the*

*reality that, to some degree, she was able to revise her story later in life so that she didn’t become isolated from her family.*

*It strikes me that Ada’s experience is not all that different from anyone’s. We attempt to organize our world in a way that is manageable and predictable—to ensure that “all things be done decently and in order.” In the Reformed Church in America, this inclination is almost genetic. We can’t help but operate with control, structure and certainty, particularly in regard to our doctrine and theological expression. This posture comes with benefits—feelings of security, of confidence, of peace. Of course, it also comes with costs, which we usually incur in relationship and our openness to others.*

*As we as a denomination digest the reality of our diversity that was so obvious during the Conversations event and is often painfully clear in forums like this one, how does the notion of revising your own story for the sake of maintaining relationship strike you? Wishy-washy? Gracious? Flawed? Hopeful?*

*What about God’s story? As you read the redemptive narrative of the Bible, do you have the sense that God revises the story to prevent isolating the children of God? Obviously this is a perspective I am sympathetic to, but I’m curious how it plays with other RCA folk.*

I’m disappointed to say that this invitation for conversation about the flexibility of our theological story got no response at all.

So, here’s what I’m thinking. None of us wants to embrace the humility this piece invites. From the high road we progressives who advocate for inclusion like to think that the rigid folks on the other side are the ones who need to revise their story. Obviously in regard to inclusion I am convinced that this is a necessary adjustment in the Reformed Church in America. That said, I think we progressives can be smug, rigid and inflexible in our own ways.

Perhaps the same is true of the moderates that make up the bulk of the RCA. In a tradition that is as cognitively oriented as ours, it is very difficult for us to earnestly say that we don’t know with certainty most of the things we confess. It is hard for us to be satisfied saying we feel them with confidence and then go on to live them out with grace.

I wonder, though: if we were able to admit this would we be more successful living as a diverse family of faith? I wonder if our myth of certainty is one of the things that puts the unity of the church most at risk.

## PICKING UP THE PIECES: RfA Responds to R-56

By a 120–91 vote, the 2012 General Synod approved the Substitute Recommendation R-56 (see sidebar for full text). In the aftermath, Room for All supporters have reacted in sadness, bewilderment, anger and solidarity. Hours have been spent supporting those who are hurt and vulnerable, sharing educational resources, and continuing in advocacy for welcoming and affirming persons of all sexual orientations in the life and ministry of the RCA. In other words, while R-56 has certainly affected the climate in the Reformed Church, it has not changed RfA’s three-pronged mission of support, education and advocacy. As Board president Eric Johnson assured soon after the vote was taken, “This recommendation will not dissuade our ministry... We gently and persistently keep at the work of Christ to throw open the doors of the church that she might one day truly reflect the immensity of the heart of God.”

Indeed, we have already seen evidence that the vote may prove to be a “loss forward,” as many are asking how they can become voices for inclusion in their congregations and classes. One of the most commonly asked questions is, “What now?” followed by requests for clarification about polity, positions and church discipline. **Thank you!** We have invited RfA Board member, Rev. Tom Goodhart, to respond to some of your questions in the pages that follow. In addition, we’ve set up a [new page](#) with further responses on our website.

### So Now What?

Following General Synod, RfA Board members and our Executive Director have been thrown a variety of questions: *What does this mean? Can we get in trouble? How do we proceed? What’s next?*

One thing that has become evident—both in the passing of R-56 and in the subsequent reaction to it—is that it raises many questions about the polity of the Reformed Church in America and how that polity involves you, me, and this movement called Room for All.

by Tom Goodhart

And perhaps even more importantly, it demonstrates that there is significant need for some biblical and theological education across our beloved denomination.

Here, let’s address some of the basic questions and concerns that General Synod raises and explore where it leads us.

#### What is a General Synod Recommendation?

Recommendations are brought to General Synod by



various commissions, agencies, and committees for General Synod to act upon. R-56 was actually a substituted recommendation, amending on the floor of Synod a previous one from the Advisory Committee on Overtures/New Business. R-56 received a majority of votes of GS delegates, and thus became an action of the most recent General Synod.

### R-56 SUBSTITUTE AS APPROVED

*While compassion, patience, and loving support should be shown to all those who struggle with same-sex desires, the General Synod reaffirms our official position that homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures, therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense; and further,*

*that the General Synod Council shall oversee the creation of an eight member committee made up of representatives appointed by each of the regional synods to pray and work together to present a way forward for our denomination given the disagreement in our body relative to homosexuality. The purpose of the committee is not to revisit our stated position, but shall operate with the understanding expressed earlier in this recommendation and issue a report with practical recommendations to the General Synod of 2013.*

## I Am Your Creation

Maker of All,  
You made me who I  
am;  
You gave me life;  
You gave me a soul;  
You made me worthy of  
your love;  
You made me in your  
holy image to love and  
be loved;  
Holy Author,  
Give me the courage  
never to lose hope;  
Give me the strength  
never to lose faith;  
Teach me to love and  
respect myself in mind,  
body, and spirit;  
Send your guidance to  
teach me your ways and  
show me your  
revelations.  
Divine Mystery,  
Never let me forget that  
I am beautiful because  
I am your Creation.  
Amen.

Prayer by  
Father Paul Jesep  
(The Rainbow Times)

## So Now What? by Tom Goodhart (continued)

### Does the RCA have an official position regarding homosexuality?

It does, but...

As the RCA website says, "The Reformed Church in America's General Synod often speaks on important social and ethical issues... The RCA's position papers provide guidance to the members of the church and are a part of the church's witness in society. The reports and study papers that summarize the denomination's positions on social issues were originally presented at General Synod, the RCA's annual church-wide assembly."

### The position papers, reports, and General Synod statements concerning homosexuality include a

paper from 1978, a report from 1979, a 1980 resolution, and then General Synod of 1990 voted on an "official position": "To adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings." (Minutes of General Synod 1990: 461)

GS would approach this subject making some statement again in 1994,

1998, 2000, 2005, 2006, and encourage again in 2009 continued dialogue and discernment.

So yes, the RCA has an official position; but what is meant by "RCA" and what is meant by "official position" should be further explained: By RCA, it is meant in these circumstances that the General Synod has spoken, and that that particular General Synod took a position and it is official to that assembly. Thus, General Synod representing the RCA makes certain statements and the church speaks, but having an official position is not the same as making it RCA law.

### Then what does "official position" mean?

It means it is the official position of the General Synod and as "the highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America (Book of Church Order 1.IV.1), General Synod exercises "a general superintendence over the interest and concerns of the whole church" and that it "alone shall determine denominational policy" (BCO 1.IV.2.1and4) . When

General Synod speaks, the rest of the RCA should listen, for we believe there is wisdom and Holy Spirit guidance in the gathered community.

However, regarding position statements, the RCA—its members, ministers, congregations, and classes—is not governed directly by General Synod and its official positions. Which means, just because the General Synod has an "official position" on homosexuality, an individual member or congregation is not bound in any way to hold that same position.

One would only be bound—covenantally speaking and dependent upon office held—if an official position were to be ensconced into our RCA Constitution and that has not happened.

### So, you're saying I don't have to agree with or follow the "official position."

Correct, but keep reading...

### Then what do I have to follow?

You do not have to agree with or follow the official

**So Now What? by Tom Goodhart (continued)**

position. And many faithful and devout RCA members and churches believe that the official position is not only incorrect and blatantly wrong, but dangerous and cruel and gives a bad testimony of the love and grace offered in Jesus Christ. That is why the number of Room for All congregations continues to grow!

With that said, however, you should not take it as license for “anything goes.” One could consider the verses from Judges, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” (17:6 and 21:25) First and foremost we understand Jesus Christ to be the only Head of the church and rightly we look to him to be our sovereign. We don’t simply do what’s right in our own eyes, we attempt to follow Jesus.

And to clarify a bit more, perhaps the words from the Preamble of the Book of Church Order (sidebar) could be of assistance.

In total, then, we govern ourselves by the Holy Scriptures using the Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, and Government, and thus are bound to follow them.

**Then what does “committed a disciplinable offense” mean? Can I get in trouble?**

The R-56 “disciplinable offense” line is, in our opinion, not clearly written. The intention behind it is that, if you “advocate” homosexual behavior or assist in a same-sex union in some way, you should be disciplined. For the most part however, General Synod is not the judicatory which can dole out such discipline. So, technically, it is not in General Synod’s authority to discipline you, and in that manner, R-56 is out of order.

That said, “Can I get in trouble?” is an entirely different question and its answer is, it depends. This is where a fuller appreciation of our polity is helpful, both from the *what* standpoint and the *who*.

First, the *who*: In the RCA, there is no such thing as a *Lone Ranger*. We believe in covenant and every person is accountable to another. In our practice of this belief, our polity makes each of us amenable to an assembly. As members of a *congregation* we are to be

shepherded by a group of *Elders*. Ministers and congregations belong to a *Classis*. There we practice covenant and accountability, and we call this and mean it to be church discipline. Therefore, in every case there should be somebody (a Board of Elders or a *Classis*) looking out for us and holding us accountable. This is the *who*.

Now, for the *what*: A truly disciplinable offense would be to go against something in Holy Scriptures, the Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, or the Government of the RCA. As was previously pointed out, in the latter three Constitutional elements, homosexuality does not get mentioned as a category or subject.

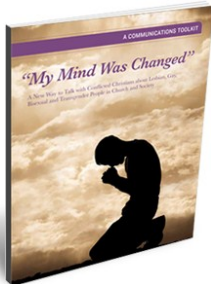
(This, it should be noted, is different from what many of our mainline and evangelical ecumenical partners have had or continue to have in their governance. The RCA has not written anti-gay perspectives into our Constitution.) As it relates to Holy Scriptures and the church’s understanding

***Preamble:  
The Book of  
Church Order***

*The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards.*

*The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. Its Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures.*

**NEW RESOURCE**



**“My Mind was Changed”**

Based on original research, this toolkit by Auburn Media (a division of Auburn Theological Seminary) offers a new way to talk about the dignity and equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people that helps move conflicted Christians through their religious and emotional conflicts to stand for, not against, LGBT equality.

The 48 page toolkit is available in a free PDF

<http://www.groundswell-movement.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/My-Mind-Was-Changed.pdf>

To purchase a hard copy (\$25) go to <https://auburnseminary.secure.nonprofitsoapbox.com/mindchanged>

**So Now What? by Tom Goodhart (concluded)**

of homosexuality, there is obviously no consensus and the RCA continues to wrestle with this as we dialogue, discern, and disagree. Therefore, regarding the what, can you get into trouble—or better put, be disciplined—for advocating inclusion and acceptance of LGBT persons? Yes. If you are amenable to an assembly whose biblical understanding is different from yours then yes, you could be disciplined. **This was true before R-56 and remains true still.** R-56 did not change this reality.

So now what?

As stated, R-56, while mean-spirited and painful, did not change the reality or the rules of the RCA. In some areas, it has emboldened folks, both for making room for all and those against it. If you are in an area—church or classis—where speaking Christ’s loving words of grace and truth find resistance to including and affirming our LGBT sisters and brothers, please know that you are not alone.

And also know, your voice and presence is so vitally important. If you are in an area where it hasn’t been “that big of a deal” before, then please know that *it is a big deal.*

Let R-56 encourage you to respond, speak up, and pray.

When Ministers of Word and Sacrament are ordained and installed in the RCA, they are required to declare the following words. Perhaps this promise holds true for all of us in the church, ordained or not, testifying to the truth of a God who is making room for all.

“I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. I will submit myself to the counsel and admonition of the classis, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, *to give an account of my understanding of the Christian faith.*”

May this be so for all of us.

[Rev. Tom Goodhart is the pastor of Trinity Reformed Church, Ridgewood (Queens) New York]

**What is Graceful Engagement?**

Graceful engagement is neither a monologue, a debate, nor a way to overcome an opponent. It is a way to meet people where they are and then walk with them, building a relationship across ideological or affinity group lines. Graceful engagement is:

- ◆ Prayer centered - let a prayerful attitude be with you as you listen and speak.
- ◆ Spiritual - look for the face of Christ in the other, and bear the face of Christ to them.
- ◆ Non-anxious (Christ is our peace)
- ◆ Expressing genuine interest in and openness toward the other person.
- ◆ Authentic, transparent
- ◆ Empathetic, compassionate
- ◆ Hospitable
- ◆ A 70/30 balance (listen 70% of the time, speak 30%)
- ◆ Engaging both the heart and the head (seeks more to learn “why” than “what”)
- ◆ A possible opening to hear another’s story regarding LGBT inclusion or to share your own.



## **“Freedom, Glorious Freedom” Book Review by Brad Redeker**

Experience unites us all—whether we know someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, or we ourselves identify as LGBT, or if we simply seek to learn more about what the LGBT experience is. As common voyagers on this experiential journey of life, I would encourage us all to locate a copy of *Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey to the Fullness of life for Gays, Lesbians and Everybody Else* by John J. McNeill.

McNeill, a Jesuit priest and psycho-therapist, offers a refreshing, integrative and liberating view of spirituality and sexual identity. Openly gay and partnered at the time of writing *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*, McNeill offers his reader genuine transparency into his own journey. He does not focus on his own experience, but weaves it in along with bits of other people’s stories in order to paint a more vivid portrait of what the journey toward spiritual maturity and self-love can involve.

As a Catholic, McNeill devotes two chapters (of thirteen) specifically to dealing with Roman Catholic teachings and Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. While I found his summary of these intriguing and enlightening, especially as he has found himself in the crosshairs, they can also seem a bit cumbersome to a reader unfamiliar with Roman Catholicism.

The overall flow of *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* follows four main parts: 1) Gay Spiritual Maturity; 2) Coming Out: The Three Stages of Homosexual Holiness; 3) Twelve-Step Spirituality; and 4) The Gay Love of God and God’s Love of Gays.

Part 3, the comparison to a Twelve-Step program, proved a most welcome way of thinking about spiritual liberation for LGBT persons. Whereas I have sometimes heard individuals talk about homosexuality as a sinful choice arising from excessive lust, which draws strong negative parallels to alcoholism for example, McNeill sees hiding in the closet as a form of addiction. So when LGBT persons come out to themselves and to God, letting love rather than fear rule, freedom will ensue.

According to McNeill, the forces of darkness are those values and assumptions that hold self and others captive through systemic oppression. Perhaps most provoking is where McNeill talks about internalized male homophobia as boiling down to “*feminophobia*.” If we think about issues of (in)visibility in relation to diversity and systemic sins of oppression, then we begin to recognize that McNeill prophetically speaks of the ways in which fear of the feminine self, and closeted behavior on account of societal and internalized fears, can lead to self-loathing and promiscuity. We must hold in balance both the healthy masculine and feminine aspects of self and community.

Throughout the book, McNeill weaves in scripture and quotes from church fathers and mothers seamlessly, and the prayers included throughout are beautiful.

Let love be free, living in the light. I encourage you, beloved of God, to read *Freedom, Glorious Freedom* for a fresh perspective—to experience love of God, love of self and love of others more fully.

## **New Release**

### **“We Have Faith: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Clergy & People of Faith Speak Out”**



Room for All is pleased to co-sponsor the newest initiative by the Family Diversity Project. Created by the same team that made the award-winning exhibit and book, “Love Makes a Family,” which was displayed at RfA’s 2011 national conference, “We Have Faith” is a traveling exhibit that presents photos and accompanying stories of LGBT clergy of many faiths and denominations, including Rev. Ann Kansfield and Rev. Jennifer Aull, co-pastors of the Greenpoint Reformed Church. This exceptional resource provides powerful testimony to the ministry being carried out by LGBT people of faith. For more information about “We Have Faith,” including how to bring it to your church, RfA regional event, college or seminary, go to <http://wehavefaithexhibits.org/>.

## New Series: “What It’s Like to be a Room for All Church”

Several months ago, we wrote to the pastors of the “Room for All Churches” to ask if they, or someone from their congregation, would contribute to an article for this issue of the RfA newsletter. We wanted to know how the decision to be publicly welcoming and affirming of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities had affected their congregation’s life and ministry. “A line or two,” we invited, “maybe a paragraph.” The responses quickly confirmed that this isn’t an article, it’s a series! We’re delighted to begin with this response by Priscilla Chattah, a member of West End Collegiate Church, New York, NY.

I have belonged to West End Collegiate Church for more than 25 years. Two fellow church members, in the context of West End’s welcoming and affirming environment, have taught me that our tolerance of one another’s sexual orientation is not a Christian *choice*, but a natural outgrowth of Christian *practice*.

A person I’ll call “Tom,” the son of a minister, was volunteering at our church when I first arrived. Tom is happily married, with two adult children, to his college sweetheart. Tom has pursued, over the past two decades, further education in the ministry.

Tom told me years ago, as did his wife, that he’d made a conscious decision before and then again once after his marriage, to turn away from his desire for men, simply because he felt that God had a different purpose for his life. He made a choice for himself, and although some may find it naïve, after witnessing Tom and his wife go through financial and professional struggles over the years, yet remain joyful in their relationship, I am inclined to

believe that he is happy with his choice, and at peace with God. He says as much. Tom has not chosen to urge other men and women to “go straight.” He does not preach on the topic, but in fact maintains his friendships with people regardless of their sexual orientation. He will speak openly about his own choice if asked, but he does not ask others to make the same choice.

“Bill” is my other church friend. He and Tom worked alongside one another in various church programs for years. Bill has lived with his male partner for over twenty years, and Bill is hoping to be ordained as a pastor this coming year, upon completing seminary training. Bill will tell me, if I bring it up, that he mourns the prospect of leaving our church. He would, I think, prefer to be ordained in the Reformed Church, the church in which he was raised, but he has to seek his ordination elsewhere. He did not discern his path to be the path that Tom chose to take, but Bill and Tom have supported one another in our church, and respected each one’s choice.

I know this because Tom and Bill are personal friends, but I also know this because at West End Collegiate, we have had open discussions on the issue of ordaining, and marrying, homosexual men and women. We have debated the issue, and at the end of the debate, we have gone back to our fellowship. I have not, in 25 years, known of anyone leaving our church because he or she disagreed with another’s choice on the matter. People have, of course, left the church over the years, but as both Deacon and Elder my experience has been that the reasons are usually more concrete: a divorce, moving to a new job, or that perennial favorite: “I don’t like the music anymore!”

I have experienced instead a fellowship of believers searching for answers to all the most difficult questions of faith, searching for ways to become better individual Christians, and better witnesses to our faith. We believe that it is in our effort to “walk humbly with our God,” that we will find our paths, as individuals and as a church. We find our paths in prayer, works, and fellowship. This is, I believe, the true way of the Reformed Church.

**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  
**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  
**Spring Valley:** United Church of Spring Valley





## Perseverance, Forgiveness and Prayer: Learning from the Civil Rights Movement

by Bob Mutch

*“Faith is being so sure of what the Spirit has whispered in your heart that your belief in its eventuality is unshakeable. Nothing can make you doubt that what you have heard will become a reality. Even if you do not live to see it come to pass, you know without one doubt that it will be. That is faith.”*

*“Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change” by U.S. Rep. John Lewis*



After being swept into the march up the ramparts of the iconic Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, I took up a position at mid-span, my back against the bridge rail over the rain-swollen Alabama River. I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the dignitaries as they came up behind me.

That group included a long-time hero of mine, John Lewis, who had led the first march across this bridge in 1965, on what came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” That march was conducted under far different circumstances; then, the marchers faced a gauntlet of segregationists and state troopers armed with tear gas and clubs, which they would soon viciously employ. Today, the march was commemorative, to

protest the voter suppression efforts underway in the South.

As I surveyed the scene around me—police boats plying the muddy waters below, checking the nearby island for snipers, state police motorcycles now protecting rather than threatening the thousands of marchers—I couldn’t help but ponder what we at Room for All could learn from the Civil Rights Movement. Two things came immediately to mind:

I have always been awed by the **perseverance** of the civil rights activists. Through 100 years of dehumanizing Jim Crow laws, they soldiered on. Through lynchings, beatings, and a deeply entrenched, institutionalized denial of their basic human rights, they persisted. At those darkest moments when it’s hard to imagine how they could have kept any hope alive, they found a way to persevere. When the marchers on this very bridge were tear-gassed, beaten with clubs, and dispersed, they tended to their wounded and planned the next march.

Equally inspiring has been the ability of those who suffered through such appalling injustices to somehow find a wellspring of **forgiveness** for those who had oppressed them. In 2009, when a onetime Klansman and white supremacist, Elwin Wilson, who had personally beaten John Lewis during one of the Freedom Rides of the 1960s, apologized to him on national TV for his earlier hatred, John hugged him like a brother. When Nelson Mandela was released from 27 years of harsh imprisonment, he sought not to exact vengeance against those who had unjustly imprisoned him, but to bring reconciliation and unity to his country.

I was snapped out of my reflections as the main group approached and then, to my utter amazement, stopped directly in front of me. Security cleared a tight circle in the crowd, forming something akin to the eye of a hurricane, and I was on the inner perimeter of that circle as John Lewis began to recount those awful events of 47 years ago—events that, without question, turned the tide of the civil rights movement.



And then, high above the river, we all bowed and prayed. We prayed for those in the civil rights movement who had given their lives in the past and for those who would pick up the mantle in the future. And at that moment that I will carry with me forever, I knew the source of their perseverance and forgiveness. It was prayer and the all-abiding presence of the Holy Spirit—the same Holy Spirit that today is steadfastly by our side.

*[Board member Bob Mutch participated in the ceremonial march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on March 4, 2012.]*

## SUMMER 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](http://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, 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.
- Pray for the Reformed Church in America & its staff.

