

northwest

Transforming Faith

Putting the "T" in LGBT

by Malka Geffen

"Congregations are having the wrong conversations when they discuss whether transgender people have a choice or whether it's OK GLBT people are there," said the Rev. Tara Wilkins, executive director of the Community of Welcoming Congregations. "Listening to the experience of transgender people—that's the conversation we should be having."

First United Methodist Church in Corvallis, the Community of Welcoming Congregations, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, and the Religion and Faith Program of the Human Rights Campaign will present a two-day conference Oct. 21 and 22 to educate, inspire, nurture and celebrate the gifts of transgender people within and among communities of faith.

"Transforming Faith: A Transgender Witness" is an interfaith conference for anyone interested in inclusive ministry. "It's just time," Wilkins said about the need for this conference. "I can count on my hands how many congregations have out transgender people. The faith community is greatly under-resourced. Faith leaders need to be ready."

The goals of the conference are to educate communities of faith in the spectrum of gender identity and issues, begin to dismantle gender binary constructs and their roles in misogyny and homophobia, and celebrate the original blessing of body sexuality and gender expression.

For Wilkins, the most exciting thing about the conference is the lineup of national speakers. "The plenary speakers have never all presented together," she said. "It's a big deal we got Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott to come to Oregon."

Mollenkott, according to Wilkins, is the premier scholar in issues of sexuality and gender identity and religion. The keynote speaker is the author of 12 books, including the most recent and her most radical work, *Omnigender: A TransReligious Approach*, which won a 2002 Lambda Literary Award.

Mollenkott is probably best known for her seminal book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor: A Positive Christian Response*, which she co-authored with Letha Dawson Scanzoni. According to Family Fellowship, a volunteer service organization engaged

in strengthening families with queers, "*Is the Homosexual My Neighbor* was the only book of its kind—a powerful wake-up call for Christians to re-examine their attitudes toward gay and lesbian people." In 1994, a revised and vastly expanded edition was released, including timely topics such as gays in the military, the AIDS crisis and genetic research on homosexuality.

According to Mollenkott's Web site, www.virginiaramey-mollenkott.com, "Her reinterpretation of the Bible opened the way to reconciling feminism and her lesbian identity with biblical teachings." She has been a guest lecturer at hundreds of universities, church conferences and seminaries. In 1999, Senior Action in a Gay Environment presented her with a lifetime achievement award for her work combating heterosexism in religion.

The Rev. Justin Tanis, program manager at the National Center for Transgender Equality in Washington, D.C., will speak about public policy and advocacy in his workshop, "Let My People Go: Transgender Liberation on the Move." An ordained minister in the Metropolitan Community Church, he is the author of *Transgender: Ministry, Theology and Communities of Faith*.

The Rev. Malcom Himschott might be best known for his appearance in the documentary film *Call Me Malcom*, which was released in 2006 by the United Church of Christ. The film, which follows Himschott as he transitions to become "one of the brothers," will be viewed and discussed at the conference. Himschott was ordained as an openly transgender man at age 27 and serves as associate minister at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis.



From left, the Rev. Frodo Okulam, convener for SisterSpirit; the Rev. David Zawarski of Waverly Heights United Church of Christ; the Rev. Susan Leo of Bridgeport United Church of Christ; the Rev. Wesley Mullins of Metropolitan Community Church of Portland; the Rev. Lynne Lopez of Ainsworth United Church of Christ; the Rev. Tara Wilkins; and the Rev. Ed Evans, Community of Welcoming Congregations executive director.

Other conference workshop topics include non-Christian religious perspectives on gender and gender identity, political and socioeconomic implications for transgender people, communities of color and the transgender experience, partners and families of transgender people, and people of faith younger than 30.

Worship leaders at the conference include the Rev. Erin Swensen and Rabbi Maurice Harris. Swensen, a Presbyterian minister and licensed marriage and family therapist, became the first mainstream Protestant minister to make an open gender transition while in ordained office. She counsels people with gender identity issues and their families at Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and is co-founder of the Southern Association for Gender Education. Harris serves as one of two

rabbis at Temple Beth Israel in Eugene. He is an active member of the Religious Response Network, a Eugene-area group of pro-equality clergy.

Performing at the conference is Transcendence, the country's first all-transgender gospel choir from San Francisco. According to its Web site, members of the choir "endeavor to demonstrate that the preconceived notion of a bipolar, heterosexual, hetero-gendered 'natural order' is not reflected in the nature of God or the ministry of Jesus Christ. In this way we will challenge intolerance and hatred, transcend boundaries and restore hope to our communities." 10

To register for the TRANSFORMING FAITH conference, call 503-665-8741 or visit www.welcomingcongregations.org.



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