

Presbyterian Welcome

friends • fellowship • family

Winter 2007/08 Newsletter

We continue our newsletter tradition in this issue with the theme of Family.

Family

The Rev. Mieke Vandersall

A few months ago my brother and I were traveling home to visit our family for a big birthday affair. We got to LaGuardia running a bit late. We were cranky. I was approaching the gate agent, when John (my brother) accused me of jumping people in line. I ignored him; I was determined to get premier exit-row seats. As I was quizzing the gate agent, he began a conversation with a woman standing next to us, who was just as exasperated as we were. Explaining my bad behavior, John quipped one word to her: "Family." He rolled his eyes and went on, "We're going to visit family." She sympathetically nodded her head in understanding, and said, "Oh, sorry to hear that," flashed him a smile, and wished him the best of luck.

Family is a loaded word for everyone, especially around this time of the year, especially for GLBT people. We all have mixed feelings sparked when we think of the families that raised us, the families we've created on our own, and our past and present church families.

As a church family, we are brothers and sisters in Christ, tied together by our baptism. If we really believe that we are all intri-

cately connected through Christ, as siblings, then that should change how we treat each other. Of course, some of us have to imagine what a sibling relationship feels like, because we don't have any siblings from our family of origin. For others, our relationships with our siblings are so tremendously painful and hard that it creates a hole. And for some of us, the siblings we grew up with have proven to be our guiding lights.

Many of our church families have some work to do. Church has sometimes proven our families of origin to be better, kinder, more accepting, and more loving places than our pews. Regardless, we all have a dream of what family—church family included—can look like: accepting and loving and understanding. Indeed, as accepting and loving and understanding as Christ is with each of us.

As we move into Advent, we get ready to celebrate the very untraditional family—the family that births the One who truly accepts all who come in his

path. Jesus "gets it;" he gets people's need to create family outside of what is culturally sanctioned. He gets the need to forge one's own way in a world that is rejecting of his radical love. He gets the experience of separation and re-creation in new and refreshing ways. He gets the joy of gathering his family together and celebrating life.

Blessings to you and your family, whatever that may look or feel like, as we celebrate together the birth of Christ!



The Honorable Christine Quinn, 2007 Faithful Public Servant, and The Rev. Mieke Vandersall

A Journey Toward Becoming Family

When Life and Family Became *Real* for Me

Steve Parelli
Executive Director
The Other Sheep
www.othersheep.org

The movie *Touch of Pink* illustrates my journey toward becoming family. The main character, Alim, a young gay man of Indian decent living in London, has an ongoing imaginary friendship with the actor Cary Grant. He tells Cary Grant any personal difficulty he is experiencing and his imaginary friend always has the right answer.

Two conflicts in Alim's life keep him coming back to Cary Grant for solace and direction: Alim is closeted to his pushy but warm and caring mother, and is in a relationship with his lover with whom he feels immense insecurity. As long as he is closeted from his mother and indulges in feelings of rejection from his lover, he clings to Cary Grant as his only true intimate, his only confidant, his only significant other.

Alim's life unravels and he is outed. His mother is more than accepting of her son's sexual orientation and his lover. Alim comes to trust enough to rest secure in his relationship with his lover. It is at this point that Cary Grant and Alim have their final conversation in which Cary Grant kindly, gently steps aside and fades away. The imaginary childhood playmate is no longer needed.

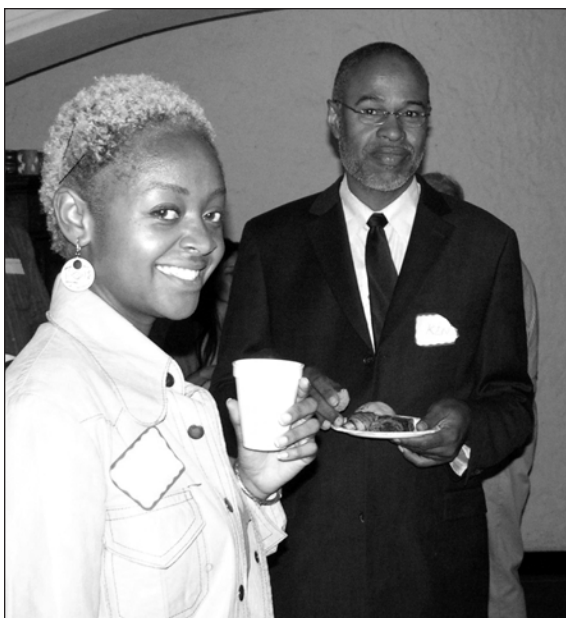
Alim has at last stepped into *family*. He has an accepting mother who is able to adjust, and he is securely partnered with a loving *real* significant other. These two characters, his accept-

ing mother and his loving partner, were already in place; it was Alim who needed to make some critical mental changes to make real that understanding. Once these changes came into Alim's life, the imaginary Cary Grant was no longer the substitute parent and the perfect lover, and so Cary Grant fades away.

Alim's journey toward *family* in some ways mirrors my own. Jesus was my Cary Grant, the perfect childhood playmate. The Bible was my play script from which I could adapt whatever words I needed to hear from my Jesus as playmate. This, sadly, was pretty much the totality of my family until age forty-four. My playmate-like Jesus was the only person with whom I could be honest and open about myself and find full acceptance, understanding, and validation. Members of my given family – parents, siblings – did not have the resources or the power to do so. I had to hide from my given family for years and then, unlike Alim's situation with his mother, I was made an outcast once my parents and siblings knew that I was gay. It's no wonder that Jesus took on proportions like that of a childhood imaginary playmate for thirty one years of my life.

Unlike the movies where everything resolves in 90 minutes, my cordial good-bye with my Jesus as playmate played out over the course of three years. Beginning at age forty-one, I rose daily before anyone was awake and walked out of my house and into the still morning. With tears coursing down my face, I talked with God out of my brokenness, and in those arguments and pleadings that I placed before God, I believe I began to love the Triune God with my body and mind. With the self disclosure that was characteristic of my life with God, I prayed, "Father, I cannot wait for the ascended resurrected Christ to some day place his physical loving arms around me and hold me. I need loving male arms now to cradle me. Send, I pray, the arms of Jesus to me now in the person of another loving male."

That person I prayed for came into my life more than ten years ago. He held me for literally hours on end. The tender warmth of his physical touch and the mutual self disclosure we shared through speech, healed my broken spirit. I revived. We bonded, coupled, committed ourselves in love to each other, and found in the other meaningfulness and fulfillment that we had not known prior to our love for each other: It was "Like coming home to no home I ever



Friends at the Presbyterian Welcome Celebrating Family Worship Service.

see *Journey*, page 5

We are grateful to the following 2007 Presbyterian Welcome Friends.
 If you are not on this list it is easy to get there! Either donate online at
www.presbyterianwelcome.org or send in your check with the form below.

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- Friend (\$35–99)
 You will receive a newsletter, will be updated on all events, be added to our news alert list serve, and an invitation to our annual Christmas party.
- Best Friend (\$100–249)
 You receive all the benefits of Friends with the addition of a tin of Presbyterian Welcome mints.
- Special Friend (\$250–999)
 You receive all the benefits of Best Friends with the addition of a Presbyterian Welcome t-shirt.
- Friends Forever (\$1,000+)
 You receive all the benefits above with the addition of a ceramic fish dish...and much more!
- Other
 I am a student or am on a budgeted income but still want to be a Friend. I am contributing \$ _____ to the cause. Please sign me up as a supporter!
- I am sending \$ _____ right now and pledge to send \$ _____ by the end of the year.

(please see other side)

Opening the Welcome Circle

Please join us February 8-10, 2008, for "Opening the Welcome Circle" weekend, with our special guest Sara Herwig, candidate for ministry in Boston Presbytery.

Friday, Feb 8: Screening of the movie "TransAmerica" at First Presbyterian Church, Manhattan. Movie starts at 6:30 p.m. Discussion with Sara Herwig following.

Sunday, Feb 10: Sara Herwig teaches adult education at FPC, Manhattan, on how to make your congregation more welcoming to the T part of LGBT. Class begins at 9:30 a.m.

Website Update

The new website – www.presbyterianwelcome.org – is going strong! We've added a photo gallery, more items to the resources page, and we've linked up with other supportive organizations. You can check the site regularly for updates and announcements on Presbyterian Welcome events.

Starting in January, we'll have a new weekly devotional blog. Called "Psalms Modern," the blog will be comprised of devotionals and reflections inspired by lectionary readings, scriptures, poems, books, and other media. The idea is to help us see how God is still speaking to the LGBTQ community and the wider world. There will be an easy link from our homepage, and if YOU would like to write a devotional, please don't hesitate to let us know. Our email address is info@presbyterianwelcome.org.

Announcing Our Board of Directors

Class of 2008	Class of 2009	Class of 2010	Executive Committee
Elder Helen Bowen	Elder Betty Bolden	Elder John Bradley	President: Cheryl Pynch
The Rev. David Cockcroft	Derrick McQueen	The Rev. Chris Shelton	Secretary: Brian Symonds
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- I'd like to be listed anonymously.
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We give thanks for your generosity!

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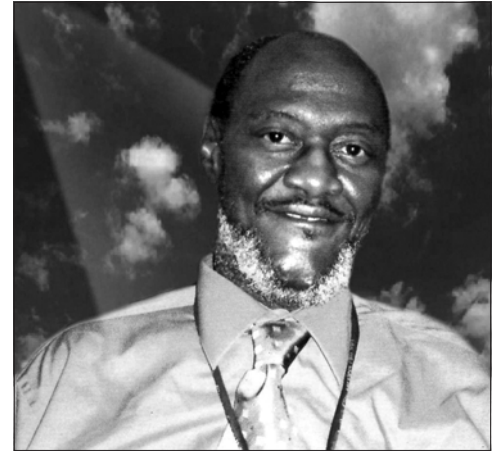
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Remembering with Celebration Orlando Haynes

July 31, 1951–November 3, 2007

Orlando was a dear, loving, wise and delightful soul. He was a devoted member of Presbyterian Welcome Supporting Congregation, the Church of Gethsemane. He rose quickly in leadership from deacon, elder, treasurer and finally Clerk of Session. Devoted to Gethsemane's ministry, he spent many days visiting prisons and shelters. He tirelessly gave time to JusticeWorks Community as a board member, making flowers and phone calls and attending rallies. Orlando was the most devoted and prolific creator of origami flowers.

Orlando was a loyal supporter of Presbyterian Welcome. He was on our Steering Committee as Gethsemane's representative for many years and faithfully attended meetings and shared his wisdom. He spent hours with us helping with mailings. He was a joy, a bright light in our witness at the annual Pride March. Although not a gay man, he faithfully held a sign that read "Out Gay Elder," proclaiming that this is what he needed to do to be in solidarity. We have fond memories pushing him down Fifth Avenue in his wheelchair with a wide smile on his face and his sign held high.



Every person who met Orlando was touched by grace.

Journey (continued from page 2)

knew" (Sleepless in Seattle), or *Like being family like no family I ever knew.*

My Jesus as playmate faded from my life. He was no longer the focal point around which everything revolved. I came to understand that in this particular area of my need and longing, Jesus sustains me *through* his appointed means. As Eve was distinct from God and as Eve, not God, satisfied Adam's incompleteness, so my in-the-flesh-significant-other life-partner is distinct from Jesus and he, not Jesus, will complete me in the sense that God intended. God completed Adam *through* Eve, his appointed means. Though God walked with Adam in the Garden in the cool of the day, God's presence with Adam did not suffice *in all things*. Adam was incomplete without Eve albeit God was there. Building a life solely around Jesus as though he was *all* I needed as family to meet my needs for belonging, fellowship,

community and communion, is what warped my Jesus into an imaginary playmate.

With the realization that Jesus had functioned by-and-large as an imaginary playmate for some thirty years, and along with other faith related questions of doubt and re-examination, I experienced a personal faith crisis in my mid life years. It caused me to enter into a process of rethinking my faith and then mending, rebuilding and redirecting my faith. I refer to this process as loving God with all my mind.

As I reviewed my thirty years prior to my faith crisis, I became aware that Jesus had not been real to me, not in the areas of intimate relationships, fellowship and family. No, in this area of my life Jesus had become an imaginary playmate as the perfect significant other who would fulfill all these needs. I didn't need family. I didn't need a relationship. I had Jesus. But this way of thinking is fatally flawed. I had made Jesus the end. Instead, he

provides the means to the end. In this department of life, he is not the end.

Suffice it to say, that in these last ten years of being family, that is partnered with my loving spouse, life has become real for me. I suppose that's why Cary Grant smiles in *Touch of Pink* at the end of the movie as he fades away for the last and final time while looking fondly on Alim: at last life became real for Alim; at last Alim was truly connected to his significant others – his mother and partner; at last family. When I watched the movie for the second time, I saw Jesus, or the imaginary playmate Jesus, smiling fondly upon me as he faded away.

At last a real Jesus appeared who is not simply meshed in with my personal intimate needs. No, He is the Other, standing apart from me, who has heard my plea and provided for me by giving me a family, a significant other. •

The Charming Gardeners

The Rev. Laura Cunningham

Those who love me will tell you that it's not often that I don't know what to say, but this was one of those times. A little over one year into my first call as associate pastor in a progressive, metropolitan church, I was leading an Advent small group discussion of spiritual practices. Group members were sharing how they were finding daily times for prayer and silence, while one woman, a friend, practically glared at the rest of us. When her turn came, instead of addressing the group, she said to me, "Laura, you're going to be such a better pastor after you have children."

In that one comment, this mother with three young children let us know how much (or how little) silence she had found in her week. She also managed to push about ten of my personal and pastoral buttons. Was she implying that somehow I was incomplete without children? Did she see me as less than mature, or less fulfilled than she was, because I had never given birth? Didn't she know that ours was a church that was trying to celebrate all kinds of families, with or without children? Hadn't she heard the good news preached from our pulpit, that we are blessed, not because of anything we have done (like have children), but because in Jesus Christ we discover our own identity as God's beloved children?

The buttons triggered more frustrations and insecurities - Was I less of a pastor to children or to parents because I had never been a parent myself? How would I do all the things I did as a pastor if I had children? Going on youth ski trips, serving on the board of a local outreach ministry, showing up at the hospital late at night - not to mention the session and committee meetings, the commuting - how did she think that would ever happen if I had

children? What could this woman have been thinking when she made this comment?

Almost ten years, five churches, and two kids later, here I am, by God's grace and sense of humor still a pastor and now a mother, and the remark still makes me crazy. It reminds me of all the work left for the church in defining families, and in claiming the child, the Christ child, who makes us complete. I have learned, though, that when something makes me crazy, God often wants me to listen more closely, both to the other person and to myself.

What I now hear, thinking back on this group, is that as I was getting preachy about finding God in silence, this busy yet faithful mom knew she didn't have time to add another spiritual practice to her already full to-do list. This didn't mean that she hated quiet time, or rejected a silent experience of God during Advent, but that she had experienced the power of God with her in the lives of those who filled her life. Maybe it was in seeing her children grow, or hearing them resolve a fight, or peeking in on them sleeping - something had led her to claim a very real God, not in silence, but in her relationships with her children. Perhaps she knew that this kind of experience, of God in the life of another person in whom you have invested much of your own time and energy, and not more meetings or activities, would make me a better pastor.

You don't have to be a mother - you don't have even have to be kin - to experience God this way. Those who fill our

lives with meaning - who care for us, who invest time and energy in us, who hold our hands in our deepest pain, who share their love in food or hugs or emails, and those for whom we do the same - those people Proust called "the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom" - these are the people who show us God and thus become our family. They may also be the people who wound us more deeply, who irritate us the worst, because they also hold the key to our internal fuse boxes. God uses them, too.

As I get ready for this Advent, thinking not so much about silence, but more about God using all the gardeners of my soul, becoming flesh again in the soil around me, I turn to that age-old family portrait that we all remember. Not the place where I would have posed it, had I been Mary, nor the family members I would have allowed in the labor and delivery area. As much as I have sung about that supposedly silent night, I have realized that significance of this image, the power of the story, is not in the silence. The power comes when the worn-out parents, confused shepherds, jubilant angels, and whoever else has gathered in the stable help us to see God, not just in the manger, but in all the people who garden our souls. This year and always, may God be with you and all of those you call family.



The Revs. Leslie Merlin and Liz Alexander at the 2007 Christmas Party



2007 Faithful Servant Takako Suzuki Terino

Presbyterian Welcome



retreat 2008

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, or questioning Presbyterian Inquirers and Candidates for Ministry of Word and Sacrament

Why Do We Need to Gather?

- Offer pastoral care to one another.
- Discover our path towards justice.
- Laugh and cry in the presence of God.
- Develop a network of support.
- Worship to inspire spiritual strength for the journey.
- Set goals for the coming year.
- Claim our call in changing the church!



Supportive Organizations:

List being compiled.

For more information:
917.441.8638
info@presbyterianwelcome.org
www.presbyterianwelcome.org

Presbyterian Welcome's mission is to build up and repair the Body of Christ by working for the full inclusion of all disciples without regard to sexual orientation and gender identity.

All those in the "in-care process" are invited to retreat from July 17–20 in rural Indiana.

We hope to create a safe space for all inquirers and candidates to feel comfortable, no matter how "out" they can be. The retreat will be facilitated by participants from the 2007 retreat and by lesbian and gay individuals recently ordained.

Retreat cost is \$250. In order to gather all LGBTQ inquirers and candidates, very substantial scholarships are available to all who are in need. We gratefully thank supportive organizations for their commitment to the participants and their financial support in helping us gather.

If you are an inquirer or candidate and feel this retreat would be helpful, or if you know someone who is in the "in-care process" please call Mieke's confidential voicemail at 917-441-8638 or email mieke@presbyterianwelcome.org.

Call or email for an application. Deadline: July 1, 2008. Space is limited.

Our Mission

Presbyterian Welcome, a validated ministry, is a community of congregations and individuals in the New York area. Our mission is to build up and repair the Body of Christ by working for the full inclusion of all disciples, without regard to sexual orientation and gender identity.

In being a resource for the church we aim to:

- Provide leadership and education for the exploration of human sexuality in a theological framework;
- Reform the Church constitution to remove barriers to inclusion;
- Raise awareness, encourage discipleship and promote welcome in local congregations;
- Witness to God's faithfulness for those who face difficulty in responding to God's call;
- Join in partnerships with like-minded organizations to accomplish these goals.

Our 18 Supporting Congregations

- The Brick Presbyterian
- Broadway Presbyterian
- Central Presbyterian
- First Presbyterian, Brooklyn
- The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
- The Church of Gethsemane
- Jan Hus Presbyterian
- Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian
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- Palisades Presbyterian
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- Second Presbyterian
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