

My name is Mieke Vandersall and I am the Executive Director of Presbyterian Welcome, an organization that works to reconcile the spiritual, sexual and gender identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals. We do this by unabashedly providing an open space for harmonizing and healing, connecting two traditionally opposite worlds. In particular we have three program areas where we see this happening: in our youth program for LGBT young people and their allies, as we nurture and train LGBT future pastors, and in our new worshipping community, called Not So Churchy.

To be a vessel for reconciliation is our work, so God can do the actual healing, bridging worlds so that we can be in the world God has created in wholeness.

I am here this morning to talk with you about our youth program for LGBTQ young people and their allies, the work that you are supporting this morning through your Pentecost Offering.

In your bulletin you see an important statistic: 68% of LGBT youth hear negative messages from religious leaders more than any source. This comes from the Human Rights Campaign.

In addition, in New York City, among the homeless population, 40% of the homeless youth are LGBT—and are kicked out of their home more than any other reason based on religious values.

We understand that in order to change these statistics we must work directly within religious frameworks, addressing religious-based homophobia within churches. Our work is both preventative and also in response to the reality that already exists.

Rev. John Russell Stanger, our Program Director for the youth program, speaks with youth groups about his experience as a gay man in the church, how he interprets the Bible in ways that are affirming of LGBT people, and how all can welcome, embrace and integrate LGBT people into the lives of their congregations. For many of these young people, some of whom have never met an openly-gay pastor, who have been told that “being gay” is a sin, and who want to love themselves or their friends who are LGBT, meeting John has been a moment of great revelation. After speaking with and teaching youth groups, he continues to cultivate relationships with these young people, their families and their pastors. Many individuals he has met have used him as a sounding board as they or their friends have begun the coming out process.

The work he is doing with youth groups is also being developed into a curriculum that we believe can be used nation wide.

In addition we are leading spirituality groups among communities of young homeless LGBT folks who have come to secular organizations seeking help to get themselves off the streets. Many of these young people are surviving on the streets through prostitution and drugs.

Again, these folks that John is working with have never experienced a place where their spiritual, sexual and gender identities could be in parity, where there did not need to be a continual internal fight between God and who God has created them to be.

Just last week John worked with a group of young people to prepare for our LGBT Pride celebration in a Spanish-speaking congregation in an outer borough, a congregation whose Session would not be open to declaring themselves open and affirming, but whose youth leaders brought him in anyways. One of the young people that came that day to youth group for the first time had been recently kicked out of his grandparents home because he came out. This young person will now come to our youth retreat in the fall for LGBT youth and their allies and will have a Christian, affirming space where he can explore the complexity of his multiple identities and experiences. However, the other night, in the same group, where John met this young person as he was teaching them about the concept of pride, and how complex that is in the church, and how June being LGBT Pride Month gives us the opportunity to explore pride, something else happened. One young person began to inform John and the whole group that the Bible is against gay people being proud, for we need to change to become heterosexual. John was able to address these concerns right next to this child who no longer had a bed to sleep in because his family would not allow an ounce of pride. It is in this moment that we see the complexity of the work we currently have and that we have ahead of us.

This work that we are doing, it is simultaneously preventing and healing of the violence too often committed in the name of God. It is work that opens space for the blowing of the Holy Spirit and the resurrected Christ to enter and mend wounds, bringing us back to the wholeness with which God created us.

And so we work together to change these statistics—so church may be a place where 100% of LGBT youth might be able to come and be welcomed, loved and cared for, just as they are.

We are so grateful that you all are dedicating this offering to this work that only together can we do.