

**Transgender Religious Summit  
Berkeley, California  
January 19 to 21, 2007**

**Report on Proceedings by Ruth Bramham  
Affirm United Leadership Team (TG Representative)**



This invitation only conference was organized by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLGS) in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion. Invitations were sent out to 50 ordained and lay representatives from a wide range of faith communities. It turned out that I was the only person from Canada to receive and accept such an invitation.

The spectacular setting for this conference was the Berkeley campus overlooking San Francisco Bay with a direct view of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. I will quote the words of Mara Keisling (NCTE Executive Director) as she explained the purpose of this summit:

*“Faith is a vitally important part of many trans people’s lives. Too often, though, instead of the nurturing welcome they have expected, trans people have come face to face with ignorance, alienation and spiritual violence. In many faith traditions, however, this has been changing quickly, and for the better. NCTE is please to be here with CLGS and all of you to begin a long overdue discussion of how we can all individually and collectively accelerate the acceptance that transgender people need and deserve—and how we can strengthen the commitment to social justice that can be the hallmark of communities of faith.”*

The first plenary session dealt with current denominational policies (if any) towards trans people. We all had an opportunity to voice our own experiences and how we register on our church hierarchy radar, both nationally and locally. As expected, there were a wide range of stories, both bad and good, typifying the confusion many non TG people portray when confronted by us. Examples of simple ignorance abounded (*ignore them, they’ll go away...*) but there were also many examples of genuine effort to understand and include, particularly in the United Church of Christ (UCC). They are so far ahead of our church in embracing trans people it’s not funny. However, it really boils down to numbers and the willingness of a few to make their presence felt on behalf of the many. In the United Church of Canada (UC-Can) our numbers are few and our voices still crying in the wilderness.

A discussion followed on how we could advance education and inclusion without seeming like we're shoving our message down people's throats. After all, it is difficult to alter well-entrenched opinions when TV talk shows continue to regurgitate trans stereotypes whenever they opportunity arises. We all agreed that we desperately need more higher profile trans people to fly the flag of respectability (as everyone applauded Joan Roughgarden, Rev. Erin Swenson, Justin Tanis and Mara Keisling), people who openly profess their faith and religion.

Consensus was reached that we must continue to debate those who would try to deny us our fundamental right to our faith journey. We must educate all who we can persuade to listen, and, simply by our example, show all that we are fully functioning members of the faith community. In so doing we need to identify and know our enemies and detractors, most of whom can also be found in the faith communities. Gays and Lesbians (and Bi's) have been fighting this battle for many years. They have won hard fought rights in many parts of North America over the last five years in particular. And in so doing the religious right's voice



Delegates gathering ready for another session.

has become ever more strident. So finally trans people are coming out from the shadow of the GLB groups—right into the sights of the very angry and well organized religious opposition. Almost none has questioned the binary concept of male and female because that's how God ordained it. Our future progress is not going to be smooth sailing. Above all, we need to show that the light of Christ shines just as brightly in us as TG people as it does in all other children of Christ (or of Abraham in the case of our Jewish friends).

The afternoon group discussion focused on the barriers we face. Four questions were posed:

1. What do we need to do as a congregation to welcome Trans people?
2. How does scripture affect the acceptance/rejection of Trans people?
3. What are you doing in your Trans community to support it?
4. What can we do to counteract those who would deny us and even try to destroy us?

The common barrier encountered is the minister's argument: *"You were born a boy (girl). How can you think of changing the way God made you?"* Arguments that there are plenty of babies born with disabilities or medical conditions fall on deaf ears as God's binary concept of male and female is indisputable. One interesting point raised was that, despite this point of view, often we end up providing education and pastoral support to our ministers as they try to grasp the significance of our struggle for recognition of our true selves.

There are several denominations that have active GLBT groups and programs that local congregations can join and learn how to be "open and affirming" to all. The UCC publicly



Author Ruth Bramham relaxing dockside at a Sausalito eatery prior to the conference

includes trans people in their program, whereas UC-Can does not, although I hastened to add this was not a deliberate omission, simply that they hadn't got around to it yet!

Lacking denominational guidance, often we try to find allies within our congregations who can “go to bat” for us. We seek out other churches that have some experience with trans issues. In the USA there is a considerable amount of material and guidance to be found on some church web sites—

the UCC and Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) for example.

Frequently we raise our own barriers as we progress through transition. We are very sensitive to others' opinions and comments, our appearance (do we “pass”?), rejection by our peers, family and workplace. As people of faith we don't want to endure the added burden of rejection by our church/synagogue. Will our denomination live out of its faith, or its fear, as it comes face to face with trans members and their issues? Will it allow space, time and resources to facilitate dialogue, understanding and the full acceptance of trans people?

In overcoming our own fears and those of our church we must project a strong faith of our own. We need to help the church continue to honour the whole person, and accept that being TG is but a small part of that person's identity. To do so we must overcome the theological barriers that traditional thinking erects. We do have a rich heritage in our past. People who we now call TG existed in most aboriginal communities around the world. We were revered in many. It was only the influence of European explorers in enforcing their religious dogma that has buried aboriginal spiritual traditions. Our “two-spirited” nature is indeed a gift from God. As such we need to use the Bible/Torah creatively to transform rejection into acceptance.

We are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet people of faith still seem to reject the knowledge God has given us. All the wonderful scientific discoveries we have made about our bodies, ourselves, is looked upon with great suspicion because it's not found in scripture. The nearest we can come to finding trans people in the Bible is mention of “Eunuchs”. Of course there is the infamous reference to Deuteronomy 22:5—men forbidden to wear women's garments and vice versa. Most people fail to check what the original language actually says in the context of the era it was written. That is our biggest hurdle to overcome—the languages of the Pentateuch and Bible being mistranslated and retranslated to fit in with modern idiom and dogma.



Co-Organizers Rev. Justin Tanis (NCTE) and Bernard Schlaeger (CLGS)

The Bible has little to say about the trans issue. It *seems* to be clear in its rejection of homosexuality. Again current translations have really muddied the waters. Although some passages do seem to show intolerance, there are actually very few passages condemning homosexuality compared with a myriad of other sins. Interpretation of those passages must be placed in the context of the era. However, such an argument will fall on deaf ears when trying to debate with a literalist and the conservative right. It is unfortunate that these people do not separate sexual orientation and gender identity when they talk about us. To most we are but extreme/failed homosexuals. Therefore it is left up to the more liberal and mainstream denominations to welcome (and welcome back) trans people into their congregations. And therein lies another dilemma: how do we persuade trans people who have been rejected and traumatized by their churches to return and rekindle their faith journeys?

Most attending the conference are “out” within their local faith communities, and thus accessible to others there who are looking for guidance and help. Much depends on the tolerance level displayed by their congregations and church hierarchy.

While there are many trans support groups in the secular world, there are few that are specifically faith based. In fact there are far more faith based organizations who would “rescue” us from our sinful ways—some that actually masquerade as trans support groups. Buyer beware! No wonder many trans people are so wary of genuine faith based support groups. Somehow we have to make ourselves easier to find. Communication with the faithful and the questioning is all important. The sad fact is that when religious trans people “come out” to their families, nine times out of ten that trans person will be ostracized and sent packing, whether they are 15 or 50 years old. Consensus was that we have a long, hard road to negotiate to overcome that prejudice and attain respectability.

Counteracting the strident, religious voices who oppose us will not be successful until it becomes obvious to all that they speak out of ignorance not knowledge. Consequently the primary action to take must be one of education. To accomplish this we must have our own facts straight, clear beyond scientific doubt—not easy given the current climate in the scientific research community.

In the meantime, we need to provide:

- resources for trans positive activities and support.
- a safe space, a haven where enquiring trans people can learn more about themselves.
- opportunities for our clergy, and other potential supporters, to learn more about us.
- educational tools to help our churches make trans people feel welcome.

## DAY TWO



Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson and Ruth Bramham

The first session of day two featured Presbyterian minister Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson retelling her own experiences as she came out to her church 12 years ago and transitioned. She lost her pulpit and waged a two year fight to save her ordination. Ultimately she was able to persuade enough senior church officials to vote for her to continue as an ordained minister. However, the penalty was the continued ostracism within the Presbyterian Church. Since then she has had limited acceptance in that she acts as a guest preacher, and a licensed marriage and family therapist at the church that she calls home—Morningside Presbyterian Church in suburban Atlanta,

Georgia. However, she continues to be in great demand to speak at transgender functions. (Her profile and story can be accessed at: <http://members.tgforum.com/bobbyg/swenson.html> This is a reprint of a story first published in an Atlanta paper in July 2000. Googling her name will produce a plethora of hits!) She has been able to maintain a good relationship with her family that includes a severely handicapped daughter.

Following her personal testimony, she led us into a “Leader’s Journey of Discovery”. This was a discussion on various leadership styles—Visionary, Supportive, Exemplary, Activist or Spiritual/ Inspirational—to assist us in taking possession of our own personal style. Much depended on our personal field of activities: medical, counselling, support groups, education, politics, church leadership. Many in the group idealized future aspirations—where they hoped to make a difference given the opportunities. Therein lies the rub. Often our efforts are hampered by the lack of adequate funding and interference from opposing vested interests. That’s when Erin reminded us that “When the going gets tough, the tough get going!”

The remainder of the morning was taken up by Mara Keisling giving us an overview of current political happenings in Washington with regard to the latest version of ENDA—the Employment Non-Discrimination Act—and efforts to make it trans inclusive. In the past it has been interpreted as being a Gay Rights bill, but there are many other minority groups that also seek to be included, not just the trans community. Mara noted that even if the bill is proclaimed, it will likely be a “lame duck” bill as there is no funding approval for enforcement attached to it.



Rev. Justin Tanis and Mara Keisling

Another piece of legislation coming before Congress sometime in February or March will be a new Hate Crimes bill that will be trans inclusive and specify other frequently targeted groups too. Of course everything of this nature is highly politicized with intense lobbying of Congress members the order of the day. Time will tell.

For me this highlighted a major difference between US and Canadian activism. Here in Canada we do not have any grass roots organizations capable of carrying out that sort of lobbying program both in provincial capitals and in Ottawa. There are several groups scattered across the country but they are quite fragmented and operate independently of one another, safeguarding their own turf and pushing their own agendas instead of combining their efforts. In effect the Canadian trans community shoots itself in its collective foot!

Finally, in the afternoon, we were split into small groups and given time to prepare presentations on a number of trans related socio-political scenarios. The group I led had the task of preparing opposition to a local religious group's attempt to have trans people's recently won legal protection rescinded. There was to be a public hearing and both sides had been invited to speak. This was a situation that could play out on both sides of the border. We determined that in order to mount a successful defence, we would need to:

1. Organize and mount a publicity campaign to contact as many potential allies as possible; research successful campaigns in other parts of the country.
2. Poll all local organizations to identify the fence sitters and target them for special attention (outreach).
3. Know the enemy, their objections and arguments. The religious group, their supporters and associated allies, should be identified by the polling and thus avoided. It would be a waste of time and effort to engage them prior to the public hearing
4. Know all our supporters and maintain close contact to ensure continued support. Encourage them to spread the word (nurture).
5. Have eloquent speakers give talks to groups identified in items 2 and 4 (education).
6. Organize knowledgeable public speakers to spearhead the presentations at the hearing.
7. Make sure as many supporters as possible attended the hearing, ensuring they were there early enough to occupy as many seats as possible.
8. Maintain an easily accessible web site with a clear message answering all the objections raised by the religious group.
9. Maintain close and regular contact with all local media outlets, friend and foe, so that the same message is broadcast to all regardless of political and religious stripes.

All in all it was a very educational, exciting and intense weekend. In closing the conference, the organizers promised more events in the future including an event in Canada. Stay tuned!

## TRANSGENDER/TRANSSEXUAL WEB SITES

(Extracted from my own extensive list)

LYNN CONWAY <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/conway.html>

*(Check out her "Success Stories" pages.)*

ANDREA JAMES <http://www.tsroadmap.com/> *(One of the most extensive lists on the web.)*

LINKS TO OTHER IMPORTANT SITES: <http://www.tsroadmap.com/info/links.html>

ANNE VITALE <http://www.avitale.com/>

ANNE LAWRENCE <http://www.annelawrence.com/twr/>

SANDRA STEWART <http://www.gendertree.com/> *(A Christian perspective.)*

ACTIVIST/INFORMATION SITES:

<http://www.pfc.org.uk/> *(One of the oldest sites and most informative.)*

<http://www.gender.org/>

<http://transsexual.org/index.html>

<http://www.genderpsychology.org/>

<http://www.antijen.org/> -- Specifically for young people (trans kids).

<http://www.drbecky.com/trans.html>

<http://www.trans-health.com/>

As you browse through these sites you will soon see just how many of these sites are linked to each other. You will also notice that there is some dissension in the ranks. Have you ever known anyone agree with everything anyone else says? Transsexual people are, like cats, notoriously difficult to herd. Consensus is simply not part of their vocabulary.

As always, when browsing, be aware that there are many sites that purport to be trans friendly. Unfortunately it is a fact of life that many do take advantage of the word "transsexual" to lead you into pornography sites. Some of these are downright dangerous in that they "capture" your contact information, resulting in your computer being used as part of their transmitting network. Never, ever, click on a link if you inadvertently find yourself on such a site. Exit immediately.

All the links to be found on the above noted sites are rigorously tested out and checked by the site managers. They too are very aware of the threat from porn sites.

***Enjoy your browsing and please pass on what you learn to your friends and families. We in the trans community need all the help we can muster to counteract the lies and innuendo broadcast by right wing political and religious organizations. We are people too.***