



# crossbeams

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[www.gladalliance.org](http://www.gladalliance.org)

## Historic Cleveland Congregation "COMES OUT!"

On Sunday, October 12, 2008, one day after National Coming Out Day, Franklin Circle Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), located on Cleveland's Near West Side, voted without dissent to become an Open & Affirming, Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciling, and Accessible to All Congregation. A revised mission statement now intentionally claims the church's calling to welcome and affirm all persons in the life of the church, regardless of gender, race, age, culture, ethnic background, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, or difference in ability. In this way it is living into the church's motto, "Widening The Circle For All God's Children."

In fact, this historic congregation - 166-years young - has been a diverse community of faith for many years. In the early part of the 20th century the church's "Chinese Sunday School" taught life-skills to the Chinese immigrants who moved to the mid-west at the conclusion of the industrial revolution. In the 1960's and 1970's, when the neighborhood around the church and the city of Cleveland experienced rapid urban decay, the congregation's leaders stood firmly to their commitment of maintaining a vibrant urban faithful presence in the midst of the changing population and the shifting needs of its neighbors. Persons of color joined and became leaders of the congregation, serving as deacons, elders, trustees, and pastors.

Following Christ's call for compassion and justice, the church in the 1990's reached beyond fear and welcomed visitors and family members of the church living with HIV/AIDS. In 2001 the congregation called the Rev. Allen V. Harris, an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to be their pas-

tor and teacher. Rev. Harris, a person with a contagious passion for community ministry and ten years of experience in urban ministry, is the first openly gay pastor to serve the church. He and his partner, the Rev. Craig Hoffman, have been together for 19 years.

Under Rev. Harris' leadership the church has already begun responding to the various needs of the church and surrounding community through the Circle Project. This campaign to raise awareness and funds began in 2005 with a goal to make the church's historic edifice handicap accessible so that members of the church and community alike would not face physical barriers to their participation. Within two years the church was able to complete the installation of two lifts and a sanctuary ramp, making the building accessible to all.

For nearly three years the church has hosted a series of occasional discussions, called Widening The Circle Forums, to engage its members and others in the community in exploring in creative and personal ways what it means for a faith community, as well as a neighborhood, to live out diversity with integrity, thoughtfulness, and harmony. These forums have included viewing films such as the academy-award winning "Crash," the delightful children's story-book recreation of "Oliver Button Is A Star," the thought provoking documentary, "The N-Word: Divided We Stand" and the compelling story of gentrification in a Columbus, Ohio neighborhood, "Flag Wars."

Most forums also included personal stories. For example, a transgender member of the congregation, Jay Cheiky, shared his journey of living "between two worlds." Laura A. Gold, Director of ADA/Accessibility Services for Independent Living, Inc. encouraged the church and community to think more broadly about accessibility. After watching a film

about lesbian and gay Latinos, City Councilman Joe Santiago shared his perspectives on being gay and Hispanic. More recently, Charles R. See, Executive Director of Community Re-Entry of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, urged participants to take action to bring justice to formerly incarcerated individuals.

Feeling as if the church had been living out the call of Christ to serve "the least of these" for many years, the Elders of the congregation began a conversation in January of 2008 about putting into words the deeds they were already living. Sharon Thomas, chair of the Board of Elders and a 20-year survivor of AIDS, led the process. After much prayerful consideration and research into other congregations in many different denominations which have also affirmed the worth, dignity, and full participation of God's diverse people, the Elders adapted the existing Mission Statement and sent it to the Board for consideration. On September 21, 2008, with minor changes, the Board approved the Mission Statement and forwarded it to the congregation, which voted On October 12 to approve it, without dissent.

The new Mission Statement reads:

Our Mission is to empower disciples to serve and glorify God. We care for the spiritual needs of a culturally diverse community, encourage creativity, and awaken people to the joys of life with Jesus Christ.

We are open to and affirming of all people regardless of gender, race, age, culture, ethnic background, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, or difference in ability as we continue to embody our vision of God's peace and justice.

Thomas said of the need for the vote, "Many churches say they 'welcome all' but really don't." The specific language in the statement is so that "people can be honest about their circumstances while we help to

nurture the joy of Jesus Christ in their lives," she proclaimed.

Chair of the Board, Al Betts, noted that he had come to see the congregation through the image of an RTA bus, which he rides frequently. "Both the bus and our church are diverse, just like Cleveland, and we're going places!" A five-year old boy who kept raising his hand was asked what he wanted to say. He exclaimed, "What would Jesus do?"

Franklin Circle Christian Church becomes the eighty-first congregation or church organization in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada to become Open & Affirming, and the first congregation in Ohio in the Disciples of Christ to do so. There are

over 3,100 congregations of various denominations throughout North America that have taken a faithful and public stance on welcoming all persons, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons into the life and leadership of the congregation.

The church also is one of 2,292 congregations in the United States to have signed onto the Accessible Congregation Campaign of the Religion & Disability program of the National Organization On Disability.

Since 2007 the congregation has officially been committed to engaging in Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation training through the Ohio Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), although the entire denomi-

nation for decades has been deeply committed to eradication of racism, the transformation of individuals and communities, and the fostering of dialogue among people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures.

In all these commitments, the congregation is well aware that voting on such a statement is neither a completion of a process nor an excuse to become comfortable. In fact, naming them sets a challenge for the congregation to live out more fully and deeply the call its members feel from Christ to be and spread the Good News of God's love to "the ends of the earth."

The church's website is [www.FranklinCircleChurch.org](http://www.FranklinCircleChurch.org).

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## Good News from the Upper Midwest Region

Dennis McKee from the Upper Midwest Region tells us that "the Upper Midwest Region of the Christian Church (DoC) voted at their assembly last Saturday to remove from the by laws the statement that says "The region will not ordain open and practicing homosexual people" and to leave that decision to each congregation--good Disciple polity! They have not worked toward being open and affirming, however, now they can ordain GLBT people!"

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## Bulletproof Faith: A Spiritual Survival Guide for Gay and Lesbian Christians

The new book *Bulletproof Faith: A Spiritual Survival Guide for Gay and Lesbian Christians* is described as a thoughtful, practical guide that shows readers a way through the minefield of condemnation and persecution faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians and helps foster a faith that is bulletproof—impervious to attacks, yet loving

and savvy in its approach. *Bulletproof Faith* is filled with useful insights and proven spiritual practices that deflect attacks and enhance and strengthen faith by turning attacks into opportunities for spiritual growth.

You can purchase this book by linking from [gladalliance.org/resources.html](http://gladalliance.org/resources.html) to GLAD's on-line bookstore at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

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