

Communing with Our Trans Kindred — A Conversation for the Black Church

PHILADELPHIA, PA -- On Saturday, March 24, 2012, pastors, church folk, and family members will gather at St. Paul's Baptist Church, a few blocks north the Pennsylvania Convention Center, to hear the stories of African-American transgender people who are either active in Black church communities or who come out of those traditions.

"*Communing with Our Trans Kindred — A Conversation for the Black Church* is not for activists," says organizer, the Rev. Gwen Thomas of the African-American Roundtable, "it's for family."

TransKindred is framed as a heartfelt worship experience, with prayer and music central to the experience. Ministerial reflections will be offered by two local pastors to start the conversation. Story-telling and personal sharing will be encouraged over lunch and in small-group conversations with transgender speakers. The day will conclude with networking resources and a toolkit that participants can take home to continue the conversation.

"We want to create a friendly space for real dialogue about the transgender experience and how it impacts our families and church communities," says the Rev. Cedric Harmon of the Many Voices project, which is co-sponsoring the event.

The Rev. Donna Jones was serving Cookman United Methodist Church in North Philadelphia, when homeless transgender youth started showing up on her doorstep. She reached out to white United Methodist colleagues for support but was mostly on her own to find creative ways to meet the needs of the community around her congregation. The Rev. Dr. Mark Tyler of Mother Bethel AME will also be reflecting on his experience.

Minister Louis Mitchell describes himself as an "intentional man." He was assigned a female gender at birth but is now legally male. After many years of "ministry" in city hall, health clinics, and bars, Minister Mitchell returned to church ministry and co-founded Recovering the Promise ministries in Chicopee, MA. However, his Baptist mother has long struggled with LJ's transformation into Louis, with no support from her church family. "If my mother and her pastor had an opportunity like this one, then perhaps he'd have been able to better minister to her needs and fears about my transition. I believe he meant well, but there was no place for him to get informed or ask questions," says Mitchell.

Louis is just one of many African-American transgender people currently involved in Black Church ministries, and about a dozen will be available for conversation during the *TransKindred* event. "The African American church has a long, rich history of loving and committed people who live on or cross gender lines," reminds Bishop Yvette Flunder of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, "We have found ways to make a home for these

unique and colorful brothers and sisters. It is time to bring them fully into the light, to hear and learn from their stories and to stand with them in solidarity."

"The Historic Black church has often been the place where folk who had been marginalized, ostracized and oppressed could find solace, hope and healing," notes Bishop Dwayne Royster of Living Water UCC. "The [transgender] community has been beaten by the world and often the church. It is time for the suffering to end. We must welcome our sisters and brothers in the love of Christ as full members of the community of faith. Then we must grow together."

Chris Paige, founder of TransFaith Online, is asking for help in reaching out to potential participants. "If all you know about the transgender experience is from watching Chaz Bono and the Jerry Springer Show, you may not realize just how many African-American trans people there are—and how important the Black Church is to them. I've never heard of an opportunity to dialogue like this. The hard part is getting the word out to the people who might benefit the most. Please tell somebody about it!"

The Rev. Leslie D. Callahan of St. Paul's Baptist Church is glad that her congregation is hosting the event. She says, "In the church, the time has come [for this conversation with] our transgender brothers and sisters."

If you are interested in participating in *TransKindred*, you can register at <http://transkindred.eventbrite.com/>. Questions can be directed to the Rev. Gwen Thomas at gthomas@clgs.org or 404-551-8225.