



LAMBDAWEST

25 Years at a Time

Celebrating a quarter century of sobriety
Wednesday, 24 February 2010

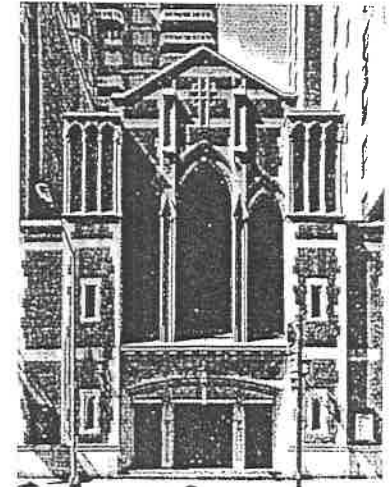
A Message From Rutgers Church

How grateful we are to Lambda for your presence in our midst these 25 years! You have enriched and strengthened our life as a community. Since the prophetic invitation of the Reverend Mark Coonradt to host your meetings, through the turbulence of the 1980s and early 90s, we have been proud and humbled to host you at Rutgers Church.

The relationship that we have formed over these years has challenged and nurtured us and enabled us to live out our faith in authentic ways. It was our tragic privilege to accompany so many of your members during the virulent period of the AIDS epidemic. We have witnessed the power of community as LGBT people came together in response to that heartbreaking and devastating era.

We thank you for allowing us to be part of this journey and send you our deepest blessings for the years to come.

The Rev. Andrew Stehlik, Pastor
The Rev. Charles Amstein, Parish Associate
The Rev. Laura Jervis, Parish Associate



Rutgers Presbyterian Church

Our Hosts

Usually, A.A. groups come into existence and then look for a home. In the case of Lambda West, the home was already in existence (for 187 years, in fact). And *it* came looking for an A.A. group.

Rutgers is the third oldest Presbyterian congregation in New York. Its first and second church buildings were at Henry and Rutgers Streets, on land that Col. Henry Rutgers carved out of his farm and donated to the church. (He is the same Rutgers for whom Queen's College in New Jersey was renamed in 1825.) The second Rutgers Church, an early work of Gothic Revival, opened in 1842 and still stands; in use since 1863 by the Roman Catholic Church of St. Teresa.

The current church complex, designed by Henry Otis Chapman and finished in 1926, includes a mid-block sanctuary and the adjacent commercial building. The fifth-floor assembly hall in which we meet was once known as the Roscoe Garber Auditorium, after a trustee and elder of the church. In *The Story of Rutgers Church*, Vera Mowry Roberts noted that the assembly hall served as the birthplace in November 1967 of Christopher Martin's Classic Stage Company.

Rutgers describes itself as a strong advocate within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination "for full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the church." Rutgers stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Lambda in the depths of the epidemic. "I particularly remember the many funerals we had at Rutgers,"

the Rev. Laura Jervis said. "Because of Lambda, we were known in the community as open and loving for those who died as a result of AIDS. Sometimes the many funerals are a blur to me, which I regret because each one represented a particular story of a heroic person. Because of Lambda, our ministry was authentic during that poignant period."

Since 2001, the face of Rutgers for most of us has been that of Ryan Greaves, a member of the building staff whose presence makes possible our use of the Church House after hours on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Ryan came to the U.S. from Barbados and now lives in Brooklyn with his daughters, who are 1 and 9.

Greek to Us

You can't spell Lesbos (Λεσβος) without lambda, the Greek letter L, but lambda's role as a symbol of gay liberation has nothing to do with its Hellenic heritage.

Rather, it was adopted in the early 1970s by the Gay Activists Alliance, based in SoHo, "because it was the physicist's symbol for change," Daniel Hurewitz wrote in *Stepping Out*. In 1973, when Dr. Howard J. Brown announced the formation of the National Gay Task Force, *The New York Times* reported that he wore "a navy blue suit, rep tie and the distinctive Lambda Greek-letter button on the gay liberation movement." (No word on his shoes.) By the mid 70s, it was in widespread use, from the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund to the Lambda Rising bookshop near Dupont Circle in Washington.



Ryan Greaves



Ancient lambda in Athens



Former Rutgers Church on Rutgers Street

LAMBDAWEST

Out of a Crucible, Through the Years

As 1985 began, there were a half dozen places on the Upper West Side where gay people could go get drunk. But there wasn't a single place set aside for them to get sober and try to stay away from a drink a day at a time.

That was when the Rev. R. Mark Wallace Coonradt, newly installed as the pastor of Rutgers Presbyterian Church, accompanied by Robert Bruce Holley, an elder and trustee of the church (and the living image of Santa Claus, whom he played every year at the South Street Seaport), arrived at the Live & Let Live A.A. meeting in Gracie Square Hospital on East 76th Street.

At the break, Bob introduced Pastor Coonradt, who had a remarkable offer to make: his church, as a sanctuary for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting especially for gay men and women.

"Would you people consider moving west?" he asked.

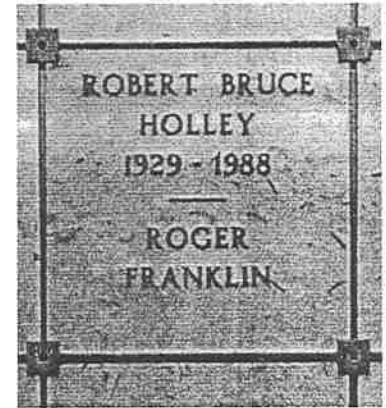
Pastor Coonradt was in the right place, since Live & Let Live was itself a transplant. It started on Fire Island, said Cyril B., who has been sober since 1975, and enjoyed such robust attendance that it scouted out a Manhattan home in the fall, "when the ferries were no longer running -- at least on the water." For a time, it was housed at

the Jan Hus Presbyterian Church on East 74th Street, another welcoming institution. "Within a couple of weeks, they were hanging from the chandeliers," Cyril said. "I suggested they call Bob Campbell, who ran Gracie Square."

Pastor Coonradt had come to Live & Let Live via San Francisco. There, he enjoyed a civic reputation of such consequence that *The Examiner* had named him one of the Bay Area's "Most Distinguished 10," Mayor Dianne Feinstein saluted his "invaluable" contributions and -- when he was called to Rutgers -- the California Senate passed a commendatory resolution in his honor. With all this to his credit, he told Live & Let Live members that one of the best things he had done during his pastorate at St. James Church in San Francisco was to inaugurate a gay A.A. meeting.

While Pastor Coonradt's invitation to Live & Let Live was an extraordinary gesture for a mainstream church, particularly one with a 187-year history, it was not without context. AIDS, which *The New York Times* had described only three and a half years earlier as a "rare cancer," was now ravaging the gay community unchecked. A diagnosis was almost synonymous with a death warrant. Medical science seemed to offer no hope -- sometimes, not even much interest. Gay men (and their friends and families) faced the appalling prospect that they would be picked off, one by one, in what amounted to annihilation.

Some churches resorted to ever more strident preaching against homosexuality, seizing on the epidemic as evidence of God's wrath. But others, like Rutgers, understood that they'd been handed a pastoral mission unlike any in memory. Even



Bob Holley's niche



Rev. R. Mark Wallace Coonradt



Frank Fedornock

those who had held the gay community at arm's length saw the opportunity to reach out to this devastated, dazed, hopeless and largely unloved population.

"The epidemic -- or plague -- brought into visibility a whole set of social circumstances that had to be recognized, whether you liked it or not," Cyril said.

Cyril was among the West Siders at Live & Let Live that night who greeted Pastor Coonradt's offer warmly. Also present were Brooks P., then two years sober and Andy T., in his fourth year of recovery.

They responded quickly to the pastor's hospitality. On Feb. 7, 1985, about 15 to 20 A.A. members gathered at the Rutgers Church House (either in a third- or fourth-floor study) to organize a new gay group on the West Side. Among those joining Cyril, Brooks and Andy were Frank Fedornock, with five years of recovery; and Trey Hunt, who'd been sober two or three years. Then there was Adam S., who had put down his last drink only 48 hours earlier. (Imagine attending a business meeting on your second day!)

Brooks was asked -- probably by Bob Holley -- to lead the meeting. "And I did," he said. "Happily. Although I had never chaired anything ever before."

No one recalls exactly who suggested the name Lambda West, nor precisely why the seemingly superfluous "West" was tacked on, since there was no Lambda East. Or North. Or South. "The name just came up at the meeting," Brooks said. "I don't think Mark suggested it. I remember

having to explain that Lambda was a symbol of the gay liberation movement. Someone else appended the West. Which is how we got Lamb Chops and Lambada, et cetera."

"Chelsea was not yet the gay mecca that it became.," Brooks added. "The Upper West Side was the hub of gay life in New York City at that time. Which is probably why we appended the West."

Before he stopped drinking in 1980, Walter B. recalled, "There was a rotary of gay hot spots just a block from where Lambda meets. Between 73rd and 75th, between Amsterdam and Columbus, you could circle those blocks and go from Boot Hill to the Candle to the Wildwood, and finally, the porno bookstore, which didn't serve alcohol, but certainly scored drugs and was the last ditch for getting laid when the bars failed. Farther north was the Works, as well as a sprinkling of less popular bars along that north-south trajectory of the Upper West Side. And like many gay men of my generation, my drinking was in lock step with my sexual obsession. I made a nightly survey." Depending on your tastes and traffic pattern, the circuit might also have taken in Cahoots, Numbers, or the Bicycle.

Rutgers Church, in other words, was perfectly situated.

Memories grow a bit hazy on specifics, but it seems as if Lambda either began with two meetings on Wednesday nights, at 6:00 for beginners and 7:15 for open discussion, or adopted that format soon after its founding. An urban legend has grown up that the meetings were set to end at 8:15 so that *Dynasty* fans

RARE CANCER SEEN IN 41 HOMOSEXUALS

Outbreak Occurs Among Men
in New York and California
— 8 Died Inside 2 Years

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer. Eight of the victims died less than 24 months after the diagnosis was made.

The first mention of what would be known as AIDS in *The Times*, July 1981. By the time Lambda began, about 1,200 gay men had died in New York City.



could get home in time to watch this over-the-top, nighttime soap opera. A favorite of gay audiences, it was broadcast by ABC at 9. (The plot line for the episode of Feb. 13, 1985, tells you just about all you need to know: "Amanda is devastated to learn that Prince Michael is engaged to be married. Meanwhile, Claudia sees Adam and Luke together.")

Brooks insists that the timing probably had more to do with the work schedule of the man who ran the elevator, which was then a hand-operated

contraption. "But someone did mention *Dynasty*," Brooks said, "and the joke stuck."

Carole B., a straight woman who had brought her friend Adam to Rutgers, was offered a role in the embryonic group. She declined. "It was funny," Brooks said, "because I assumed she was a lesbian -- and it was important that we include women -- and asked her to take a position. She explained graciously that she was only there to help bring Adam to a meeting, as he was just starting out."



Trey Hunt

Andy recalled fondly: "After the organization meeting, we decided: 'Hey! We're all here! Let's do what we have set out to do, and have a meeting right now.' We chose Trey as our first speaker, and I remember a feeling of great satisfaction about his talk, which was a thorough and committed 'what happened, how I got sober, and what it is like now' qualification."

Trey was followed by more than 5,200 other speakers over the last quarter century.

His close friend Richard M. said, "I do remember Trey always saying he was the first speaker and had been in the group of people who had started Lambda." Trey also said that "the only problem with an Upper West Side meeting was that so many of the people there would have seen him naked already at the Paris Gym steam room. He hoped that would not distract them from their sobriety."

Adam, as a complete newcomer, found himself distracted by almost everything that night. "I remember the serenity prayer being said," he recalled. "I remember holding hands. Of course, I couldn't get out of there fast enough."

But he came back the next week, Feb. 13, 1985, when Lambda met officially for the first time. And he asked Frank to be his sponsor. And he kept coming back. "I do remember a real sense of family," he said. "It was camaraderie. It was home."

And not just for men. Women like Dolores M. (who helped organize tonight's celebration) and Jane T. (who spoke at Lambda's 10th anniversary) played an important role from the

beginning. Jane welcomed Lambda as an addition to old stand-bys like Hargrave House and Ansonia.

Soon, people were hanging from the chandeliers at Rutgers. A Wednesday topic meeting was added. An on-stage interpreter for the deaf and hearing impaired attended the 6:00 meeting. A rotating step meeting was in place on Saturday evenings by the summer of 1985, small enough at first that it could gather in the pastor's study. In late 80s and early 90s, Lambda also sponsored a 7:30 meeting on Mondays especially for recovering alcoholics dealing with HIV and AIDS.

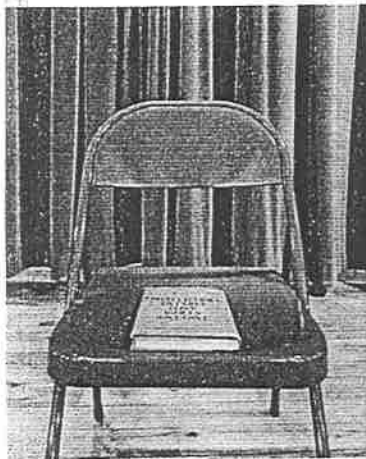
And their number was legion. AIDS and other illnesses took a heavy toll of the young Lambda West group. Frank Fedornock. Trey Hunt. Dan Cronin. George Nowicki, an elder of Rutgers who is immured in the narthex alongside Bob Holley. Michael Fritchie. David Steiert. Robert Kern. Bart Gorin. George Anton. Jack Ethridge. Scott Schutz. John Robbins. Skip Gindhart. Frank Mauser. Eddis Rudzats. Don Rogers. Duncan Reid. Bruce Steir. Jarvis Cushing. Andy Olkowsky. Among others. Many others. Pastor Coonradt himself died within two years of extending his hand to Live & Let Live. He was 52 years old.

There could not have been a more awful but eloquent testament to the power of life in recovery than the example of dozens of men choosing to spend their final days sober. And that was not Lambda's only lesson.

It's hard to imagine today just how much it meant to call a meeting "Lambda" in 1985. You could say that it was the first A.A. group in New York to



George Nowicki



proclaim, with its very name, that it was a special interest group for lesbians and gay men. (To which, as the third tradition ever reminds us, all are welcome.) For instance, the Saturday-night meeting known as the Follies, held at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in the Village, was simply called Sheridan Square in 1985. There was no indication in the meeting book -- as there is now -- that it served gay alcoholics.

"It's all been in my time," Cyril said. "In the late 70s and up to the middle 80s, the words 'gay' and 'homosexual' were used judiciously -- and not very politely -- especially in the basement of an R.C. church. I remember all the excitement about getting a listing in the book as a gay meeting."

Andy, too, remembers the thrill of those early days at Lambda. "The church was so open and welcoming, The feeling was, with a brand new meeting, that we were pioneering, because this was the moment that the gay movement was redefining itself."

At Lambda, Cyril said, he found "an extraordinary comfort about being a gay person, an enormous weight of shame and duplicity being lifted."

"When my own fumbling journey was at the lowest -- and there have been incredible lows -- the constancy and availability of the fellowship was the only thing, I can say, that made it possible for me to be alive and well."

Lambda was not without flaws. Conscious of that, 30 to 40 members joined in June 1993 to undertake a group inventory, guided by Helen T., an experienced moderator from the General

Services Office. The frank discussion covered many areas of concern, among them that Lambda was not the easiest meeting for newcomers to navigate, that it scarcely reflected the city's ethnic diversity (as Paul M., a Puerto Rican member noted, one of the more astringent nicknames for the group was "the Blond Leading the Blond"), that some members felt their shares were vulnerable to coffee-shop gossip, and that interim sponsorship wasn't explained or emphasized nearly enough.

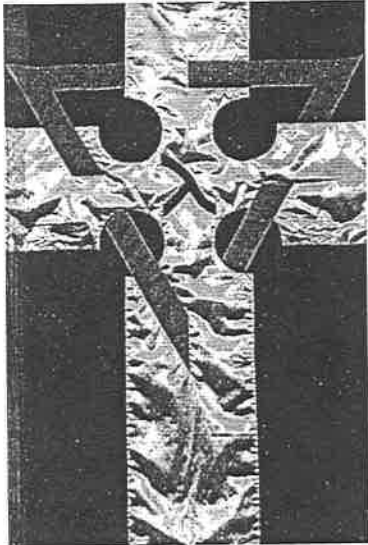
On the question of diversity -- with which Lambda wrestles to this day -- the moderator pointed out that the question G.S.O. asks in its suggested inventory is, "Are we seeing a good cross-section of *our community*."

Depending on how that's defined, the answer might be yes. As Dan Cronin said that night: "Look at the Works, the Bicycle, the Candle. They look pretty much like Lambda. That's what this neighborhood is."

As a result of the 1993 inventory, and subsequent discussions of how Lambda could do its job better, the beginners' meeting was moved to the 7:15 slot, in the hope that a slightly less crowded room would not be as intimidating, and time for sharing was set aside especially for newcomers; the reading of "How it Works" was instituted at that meeting and a reminder of the importance of anonymity was added to every meeting; the topic meeting adopted a round-robin seating arrangement; and members with a year or more of sobriety were encouraged to raise their hands at the break to make it easier for newcomers to find prospective sponsors.



Dan Cronin



Banner of the Gay & Lesbian Concerns Presbytery of New York City hangs in the narthex outside the main sanctuary, where the step meeting occasionally gathers

We also heard a very encouraging word from Helen, the moderator, after the two-hour inventory taking had concluded. "I think the Lambda group is alive and well," she said. "I don't see it as having major problems that are going to force you to close the doors. You've certainly made this gay, alcoholic female feel welcome."

Though speaking for himself, Walter B. expressed the feelings of many members as he reflected recently:

"When I heard that Lambda was one block from my apartment and one block west of my old drinking haunts, I went. I have happily stayed, and hope to celebrate 30 years there this June.

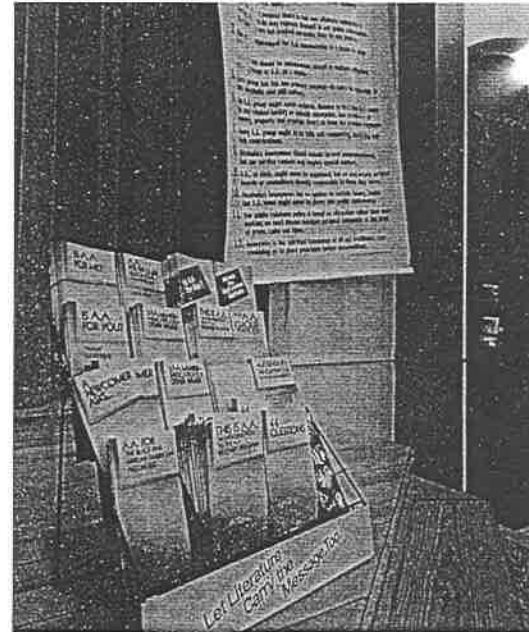
"I have never felt more comfortable at a 'special interest group,' and I have been to many. At Lambda, I saw old friends, neighbors, drinking pals, even (forgive me) tricks, and most importantly, new sober friends. Daily, it brought those special 'hellos' of recognition you get at Fairway and the bank and Utopia coffee shop. I have been to meetings in many parts of the world, but there is nothing like walking your own streets and bumping into decades of your own history -- drunk and sober, reminded of you who are by both the friends who are not yet sober, right along side the blessed friends who are -- at least for today.

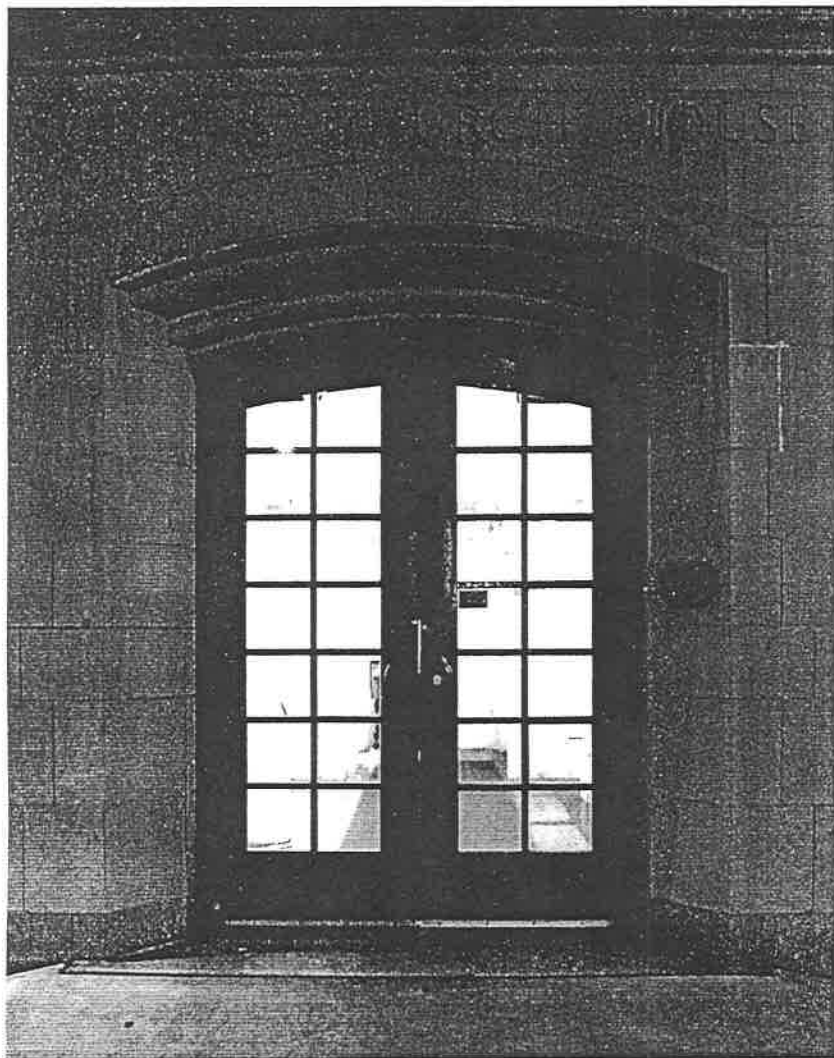
"Lambda is home," Walter continued. "It is where I celebrated the relationship with my sober partner Michael Fritchie for nine years, and where we were supported during his illness and passing. (The AIDS crisis in A.A., and Lambda in particular, is worthy of a book: about the A.A. fellowship, the medical community, compassion,

politics, and vigilance, to name a just a few themes.) Lambda has been a home where understanding surpasses explanation for the unique issues that gay men and women address in facing social and political challenges where we must practice our sober principles. And most importantly, I laugh at Lambda meetings the way I laugh at no other A.A. meetings. I knew we could all be bitches, but we've been transformed into wits.

"I just adore being a West Sider in A.A., and most especially for the particular comforts and wisdom I find at Lambda."

Or as Pete put it recently, on his 111th day, "Wednesday night is the highlight of my week."





Booklet edited by David D. and designed by George H.