

Opening welkomstbijeenkomst 'Across the border 2014'

Welcome to you all this evening,

First of all I would like to welcome all those who have travelled quite far to be here: all our guests for the coming days from Russia, the Ukraine and Poland. You are here as part of the ongoing training which we can offer you on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and the Sciences and which are a part of the so called LCC Plus Projects that have been executed for the last six years. We met most of you for the first time, in this capacity, in Moscow two years ago and last year all of you in Kiev. We planned to visit you 'on location' again, so to speak, until it came to our minds that we could also very well invite you here and what better week to this in than the annual Amsterdam Gay Pride Week. We hope you will enjoy your stay in Amsterdam in the coming few days. The preparation committee of the training program has done its utmost to organise an interesting, meaningful and pleasant time for you. We hope you can leave again feeling enthusiastic, inspired and uplifted. We know we will, because we already experienced also learning a lot from you. As late as last Monday we were able to get you on one of the boats of the Canal Parade next Saturday, which we hope will be one of the highlights of your stay here. You will be met with half a million people waving at you from the sides of the canals. That is a bit of a scary idea now maybe, but you will love it, I promise you.

I also would like to welcome the Reverend Karin van den Broeke, chairperson of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands, the biggest protestant church in our country. We are very honoured to have you in our midst. It is true that even in The Netherlands most national leaders of churches will and would not be willing to come to this meeting that quickly. Your presence is much, much needed and appreciated and it is very inspiring and uplifting to enjoy your presence and participation this night. The same can be said for your presence Mr. Rijk van Ark, chair person of the Protestant Church Amsterdam. A very warm welcome in our midst. We will hear some words of welcome from you after I am done. Thank you very much for accepting our invitation. A warm welcome too for Mr. Ben Baks, representative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and the Sciences. We would not be here tonight in the first place if it was not for all the energy you have spent on the cause of LGBT-people around the world. Your continuous work and effort can hardly be exaggerated. Thank you very much for being with us tonight. And of course a warm welcome to Mr. Marco Derks, chairperson of the Association of Queer Theologians, Mr. Jeroen Windhorst, chairperson of CHJC, organization for Christian gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and also representing the steering committee of the LCC Plus Projects here tonight and Mrs. Heleen de Boer, chairperson of the LKP, the national umbrella organization of the Christian LGBT movement in The Netherlands. We hope to have a good, meaningful and challenging evening together.

The theme of the Amsterdam Gay Pride is 'Listen'. Maybe listening is at the very heart of all our work as LGBT activists. Dialogue without listening is impossible. Effective, relevant and heart changing dialogue with our partners, whoever they are, is only possible if people are able and ready to really open up and share their own personal stories. Sharing stories is sharing lives and when lives are shared exclusion, isolation, violence and harassment start to crumble and break down. Listening and sharing our lives is what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ who listened to all of His people in love and mercy, accepting them and welcoming them on the road to the kingdom of God. As all of you know we are still a long way from that ideal situation. We have to do everything that is in our power to listen closely to what our partners in dialogue, sometimes our adversaries, say and do. This way we can truly understand them and also counter what is harmful and sinful and what makes it impossible for some of us to participate in church and society in an equal and dignified way. We also have to listen closely to our own voice to discern what can be helpful to build lives for ourselves that are healthy, both bodily, mentally as well as spiritually.

For you, our foreign guests, we hope the training, the meetings and the activities that are arranged for you, will help you to listen closely and to find out what is most helpful in your own situation. We are convinced that also God will be 'listening in' to the training, that the

holy Spirit will be with us as we share our sorrows and our joy, our incompetence and our gifts and talents. So, listen up and enrich yourselves the coming days!

We are together in a church this evening. In The Netherlands LGBTs are welcome in a lot of churches. Still, it is special that we can be together here and also a little heart breaking, because what we are doing here tonight is living up to our destination, living up to the people we are, created by God in her very own image. I am grateful that we can end our night together as LGBT and heterosexual people with an evening prayer, in this church. We are grateful for the Eltheto Church to have made this space available for encounter, debate and worship.

But now it is time to give the floor to the one and only Mariecke van den Berg, our staff worker of the LCC Plus Projects who will continue leading this evening.

Thank you for your attention and welcome once again.