



# First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor

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## Transcript of a discussion with Randy Roberts Potts Saturday Evening, March 10, 2012

### **Rev. Bob Roth:**

“It’s so great to be together on a sunny day, can’t quite say spring time yet, but the events of today make it feel like spring. I’m Bob Roth, and I’m on pastoral staff here at First United Methodist Church, and also the chaplain Director of the Wesley Foundation, our campus ministry. We are so pleased that Randy Roberts Potts that here with us today, who will be newly introduced shortly by Steve Sarbaugh. I’m just welcoming you to the whole day – to the speech and meal and concert. I want to share with you that Rainbow Crossing committee of the First United Methodist Church, and the Music and Liturgical Arts forum of the First United Methodist Church, have done a lot of work for this day to be possible. I wonder if the Rainbow Crossing members could stand up, go ahead and stand up, and also the members of the Music and Liturgical Arts please stand. (Audience applauds). This is how a day like this happens, many weeks of work with many folks, and we sure appreciate it. This church took a very important step forward in January 2007, right Linda? And that step forward was after a process of discernment and learning and growth as a congregation. To begin, - not to begin -, to use, at that point, our welcoming statement, which is in your program, it’s in all materials of our church now, that this church would be fully welcoming and inclusive of all folks in the GLBTQ community. And that we would affirm this as an open and fully inclusive congregation. Once we made that statement – I’ve only been here 2 ½ years, that was before I was here – having made that statement, we keep asking ourselves what are next steps, how do we make this real. And through Rainbow Crossing that’s how this day came about. To have events, and to continue to learn and grow and make real the stand that this church has taken. I hope if you’re a visitor here you’ll pick up one of these brochures, Spring 2012, they’re on the table out here, after the talk this afternoon, that really talks about all the ministries of this church, and help spread the word that this church is open and inclusive. Before Steve Sarbaugh introduces Randy Roberts Potts, Ann Marie Kukios, Dr. Kukios is our music director; she’s going to share with us a word about the concert this evening. Ann Marie (comes forward).”

### **Ann Marie Kukios:**

“What an honor and privilege for our partnership, for Rainbow Crossing and the Music and Liturgical Arts to come together for the first of such event. In addition to all of you who are here, we thank you in advance for your attendance, we’ve gotten some emails in support of what we’ve done, we’ve gotten some emails not in support of what we’ve done. Which tells us we are doing the right thing. Such a small thing to encounter when there are those who walk a journey that deals with much much more on a daily basis. So, God bless all of you, and thank you all for being here. About the concert, I just want to say we are blessed, obviously to have speaker and author Randy Roberts Potts, and also later, the exciting Muse Cincinnati Women’s Choir, under the direction of Dr. Katherine Roma. Since her inception Muse has remained true to its original vision – to strive in diversity in membership, musical repertoire, and performance venues. Muse is both a supporter and

change agent offering inspiration and support for women's groups, human rights concerns, peace and justice movements, lesbian and gay issues, and multi-cultural community building alliances. It's not just that they all of these incredible things, they are also a superb ensemble, so I hope you stay- we still have a few seats for the dinner, tickets available – and we invite you to stay for the concert as well as our continued celebration for this entire evening. Again God bless, and thank you for coming.”

**Steve Sarbaugh:**

“We decided that Randy was the best person to get. I also want to thank Bob Roth, Doug Paterson, who is the senior pastor, Nancy Lynn, who I hope will be here soon. We also have to thank Suburban Cadillac, and the Air Magazine, for their continued support of the music department. There are a couple of other things I am going to tell you. Anything that's on those tables in the back or over here, you're welcome to. There's a rainbow colored slip that's, like a contact sheet, if you're interested in anything that's going on with Rainbow Crossing, or leave your email address, or contact us for anything, what ever you need, we'll try to find help for you. About 4 years ago, I was in San Francisco about 19-, I want to say 1977, I had the opportunity to meet and listen to Harvey Milk. Of course, we all know what happened – he was assassinated – about three months after I heard. His speech changed my life. I was a young gay man that didn't know if it was the right thing to do or not, so his speech changed everything. For about 40 years I've been thinking who's going to replace Harvey. Well, about a year and a half ago - I was on Facebook, like everybody – and somebody sent me something from Randy. I read his stuff and saw his *It Get's Better* video, I talked to him, kind of. This kind of fell into our laps. I said hmm... Randy would be an excellent speaker. So Rainbow Crossing, we got in contact with him, asked him if he would come and speak, and he agreed. So, with out any further ado, it is my pleasure and my honor to introduce to you my friend Randy Roberts Potts.” (Applause. Randy comes to the podium)

**Randy Roberts Potts:**

“Good evening. Can everybody hear me? All right, I'm still a little nervous as a public speaker. I guess I've been doing for about a year. In my early 20s, I was so nervous when I got up in front of people that I would literally shake. As a teacher I speak once a year to all the parents of my students, and it was crowd about this big (motions to the audience). Every year it was 3-minute speech, which I had written down on this little piece of paper, and I would stand there like this (shakes) – and I'm really not exaggerating. The principal and other teachers would be like oh god Randy... (Audience laughs). But the amazing thing is when I came out of the closet that fear, kind of, vanished. All of the sudden I can get up in front of people shake a little bit, but I can actually talk. I think when you come out of the closet and step into your own being for the first time, it kind of allows you to be something you never were before. It's something that happened, I guess by accident. Before I start I'm going to tell...I'm going to go back to 1974, and tell a little story about when I was a boy in Tulsa, Oklahoma in a pink hospital on a hill that's called Saint Francis. A man donated all pink marble to where they were building it, and he said this is what you've got. So they have this huge pink hospital in south Tulsa. My mother and her father Oral Roberts, they've never been, they were never extremely close. She was in labor with me, the labor lasted 12 hours. Here she is in the hospital, pushing and everything, and he comes to the hospital

room and since he doesn't have a male heir with the Roberts family name, he wants my middle name to be Roberts. Well, she already decided to name me after my father, Ronald Stephen Potts II. So she said, no way. So, he stayed, a very persistent salesman if you haven't noticed (Audience laughs). He kept pushing and twisting her arm, and pushing and pushing. Finally he sweetened the deal. He said, I'll give you a thousand bucks. In 1974, that was pretty good money. So, she finally said yes. She just pulled the name Randy out of a hat, and my name became Randy Roberts Potts. I'm still the only male in the family – male grandkid – that ended up with the Roberts name. That name was a big deal to my grandfather. When I was a kid I kind of hated it. I thought it was weird to have a last name for your middle name. For him it was a big deal that I was carrying the name, or whatever. Well, in my 20s I was embarrassed in being a Roberts. I didn't like being associated with this TV preacher – I kind of ran away from a lot of what my family was about in my 20s. I tried to be very cool and hip and that kind of thing, and really ran away from the Roberts name. Then, after he passed - I'd been writing in a diary letters to my uncle for a while - I saw these *It Get's Better* videos, and decided to make one. When I made it I had to put my name out there and I decided I'm going to do this with my full name that Oral gave me. So I put Randy Roberts Potts for the first time, and I kind of think, somewhere inside of me, he's up there looking at me proud I'm carrying on his name, and now helping gay people. Anyways...now I'm going to go back to the 1960's - a little further back – to a movie called *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. If you haven't seen it you need to watch it, it's an amazing movie. In the movie *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the main character Brick, says this, "Mendacity is a system we live in. Liquor is one way out and death's the other". If you remember the film at all, you remember Brick's father, Big Daddy. The fat, loud mouth, belligerent, southern father figure, used to getting what wanted – quite a bit like Oral. Brick's mother was no slight southern belle either. She was Big Momma – a wiry southern belle who told her daughter-in-law, "When marriage is on the rocks, the rocks are there, right there." In a pinch, the only thing you have to depend on, according to her, were the rocks. Then there's Brick, the main character, a man who all gay men we knew, at the time, watched and knew instinctively that he was one of them. Brick rails through the whole against the poker face he's required to wear, the woman he's required to marry, the whole fake system that keeps a gay man locked into a situation he hates. My uncle, like Brick, like myself, married young, had children, and in his late 30s, drove himself out to a country road and shot himself in the heart. For Brick, liquor was the escape, for my uncle it was a 25-caliber pistol. Mendacity...mendacity. According to the dictionary, mendacity is a word that means deceit, bluffing, slay of the hand, camouflage, concealment. It comes from the Latin root Mendac, which means to put right, to make amends. How can mendacity be an attempt to make things right? Even in mendacity, and even especially in mendacity, there is a belief that things can better. Liars are optimists, not pessimists. They want so fervently to believe in their values, and their moral view, that they will lie and deceive to prop things up. Big Daddy and Big Momma are true believers. Oral Roberts, another true believer. They fervently believe that if they push on past the rough parts of life, and lie a bit along the way, things will eventually get better. They hung on by the skin of their teeth. Even so, there is a way out of Mendacity. A way to make things right without lying, without camouflage, without hiding in closets, or the liquor cabinet, or behind a gun. Brick was wrong. Death and liquor are not the only way out. My mother did everything she could to raise me in the world portrayed in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Even though I was born in 1974, in our house the

clock stopped in the 1950s. (Randy and audience laughs). Its true. Most of the movies we watched at home were from the 1950s. I knew more 1950s movie stars than current ones – that’s still the case. The music we listened to, the books we read – it was as if time stopped still and the present didn’t exist. MTV wasn’t allowed in my house. Instead we had the early Beatles - not the late -, The Beach Boys, Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. If my mother had been successful in creating the 1950s for me, I might have followed the same path that she did. I did however, finally, in my mid 20s come out to myself and admit openly that I was gay. I was also married, with children, and I was stuck in that system of mendacity, waiting, literally for death. This was in my mid 20s, but let me back up a little bit to 1987 when I realized for the first time what the family I was growing up in was really like. So, in 1987, I was 12 years old in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade attending [a Christian middle school], and my grandfather climbed up in a tower, and told the world on national television, that God had commanded him to bring in 8 million dollars to further his work on earth. If he didn’t come up with the cash, the Lord, my grandfather said, would call him home. I was 12 years old, and in the world I was living in this wasn’t as unusual as you might expect. I was told there was a rhyme and a reason to everything in God’s word. If you had a question, the bible always had the answers. So, when my grandfather climbed up into the tower, I randomly opened the bible for guidance, and my fingers landed on this passage from the book of Isaiah. “Behold I have given him for a witness to the people. A leader and commander to the people. Behold thou shalt call a nation thou knowest not, and nations that knew these not shall run to thee because of the lord thy god.” I was 12 years old and this tower business didn’t really make much sense. But, then again, there was that passage in Isaiah, which seemed like God speaking directly to me. That night I had dreams of the 8 million dollars in donations wouldn’t come in. My Grandfather would be taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot like Ezekiel. Once at school I overheard two teachers talking about how Oral was a Cherokee Indian and how it was a long standing tradition for Cherokees and their chiefs to declare the day of their death as a way to get the tribe to something it didn’t want to do. The teachers said that if the tribe didn’t incorporate, the chief literally fell over and died on the promised day. Well it turns out there is no such tradition. Even so, at 12 years old, I imagined my grandfather, who at 70 years of age with his long hanging ears and his baldest nose – he really did look the part of an Indian chief – I imagined him sitting up there in his prayer tower on his prayer rug just expiring. I imagined a lot of things, they seem far-fetched now, but in the culture I lived in they were par for the course. Oral Roberts began preaching the word in the late 1930s as a 19 year old during the Great Depression. My grandmother used to tell me that when food was scarce, Oral would go out and shoot, what they would call ‘swamp rabbits’, she would clean them and bring them downtown where you could rent communal freezer space. Oral’s ministry grew slowly, reaching its prime in the 60s and 70s, when he built Oral Roberts University and pioneered what they often called ‘The Electric Church’, becoming the first television evangelists. His television programs came out of studios in Burbank, California, and his message was simple and contrary to what priests and preachers have been telling us for thousands of years. God, according to Oral, wasn’t very interested in punishing us. In fact, God wanted to heal us. All we needed to do was stretch out our hand in faith and believe, and God would bring healing – healing to our bodies, healing to our minds, healing to our loved ones, and, yes, healing to our pocket books. It was a revolutionary message, and one that hadn’t really been heard in quite the same way before. “God is a good God,” - Oral in tone on national

television – (Randy pauses between each word) “something good is going to happen to you”. By January of 1987, when Oral climbed into that tower, donations had been falling off for years. There was the fall of Jim Baker, Jimmy Swaggert, the failure of his hospital the city of faith, and all the money was drying up. But, Oral kept using that phrase – “Something good is going to happen to you”. I can see the appeal in those words. “Hope is a thing with feathers” – Emily Dickinson once wrote – “that perches in the soul, and sings the word without the tune and never stops at all”. These days selling hope is a well-worn path. Barack Obama, for whom my grandfather voted, inspired the nation by blanketing walls of subway stations and billboards with this one powerful word. It’s surprising I’m sure that Oral voted for Barak Obama, but given a choice between a man selling fear and a man who simply said, “Yes We Can”, I think it was an easy choice for Grandville Oral Roberts, who grew up in a shot gun shack in southeastern Oklahoma. He ended up building a 500-acre kingdom, on the banks of the Arkansas River, kingdom funded by faith, and faith alone. “Something good is going to happen to you”. But at this point, I’m not 37, an out of the closet gay writer, happily raising his kids in Dallas. I’m just 12, and my grandfather just climbed up into a 200 foot tall tower saying if he didn’t get 8 million dollars the Lord would take him home. The whole city of Tulsa, Oklahoma and the Evangelical reaches in the entire world, with numbers in perhaps the hundreds of Billions, were holding their collective breath, awaiting the outcome. And me, I actually wasn’t so worried about Oral. I figured either he would get the money and come down, or he wouldn’t and God would take him to Heaven. Either way, if you believe the hype, it was a win-win situation. When you’re 12, you buy just about everything your family tells you, so I really didn’t worry that much about Oral. What I did worry about, and continued to worry about for at least the next 15 years, was the condition of my soul. While everybody else was worried about Oral, I was worried that Jesus would come down, perched on a cloud in the sky, and whisk all the Christians up to Heaven in the twinkling of an eye. Like the title of a popular Evangelical novel blares loudly from its cover, I was really worried about being left behind. The prayer tower, as Oral called it, was for me a symbol of the second coming of Christ, and that’s exactly how Oral planned it. The prayer tower was build long before most of the other buildings on the Oral Roberts campus in the late 1960s, a symbol of hope. In the tower he installed two things, a phone bank manned by little old ladies, who would answer your call, day and night, 24/7, and pray with you. He also installed a gas flame on the top of the tower manned at all times by a born-again Christian whose heart was right with God. This tower became the focus of my fear of the rapture. We were living on the Oral Roberts compound off of 75<sup>th</sup> street in south Tulsa, a 3-acre piece of land surrounded by a stockade fence and barbed wire and security guards. I would walk my dog down our 50-yard long driveway out the first gate, and the second gate, across the street and through another gate, finally to the campus of Oral U[niversity]. As soon as my dog Samson and I walked through the final gate, we could see the prayer tower in the distance, and that gas flame shining brightly on top – or at least I hoped it was. On bright sunny days it was almost impossible to tell, and that’s where the fear crept. The whole point of having that gas flame manned by a born-again Christian whose heart was right with God, was this: If Jesus were to come down perched on a cloud in the sky and whisk all the Christians away, the flame would go out. That flame, perched on top of a 200 tall tower in the center of the campus was both a promise and a threat. Jesus is coming back - but he’s not here yet - so if you sin, get your heart right with God, because he might come at any moment. Well what I always wondered

is how do you know if your heart is right with God? So, while everyone else was worried about Oral up in that tower, I was worried about that gas flame operator, looking everyday to see if that flame was still there. On weekends the campus could be really quiet and still, and if the sun were at just the right angle, and I couldn't tell if the flame was lit, chills would go down my spine. I was 12, my grandfather was up in a tower, I was worried about the rapture – but I was also a 7<sup>th</sup> grade gay kid in an evangelical Christian middle school trying my best to develop crushes on girls. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade I went through a series of crushes on boys, 5 of them to be exact – each one more painful than the one before. I would fall for them, spend a lot of time looming around them, then eventually realizing they would never feel for me the way I feel for them, I would suddenly stop talking to them. The last of the 5, in April of 1987, called me up, mad as a hornet, asking why I wouldn't talk to him anymore. "You just go through boys like Kleenex", he said. "You blow your nose on them and throw them away". Neither of us really understood what he was talking about, (Audience laughs) but we both knew he was right. So, I did the mature thing – swallow hard and quickly hung up. I swore off boys then and there, and didn't have a close male friend for a long, long, long time. When I was 18, I met a girl, the first week I arrived at the University of Oklahoma, and she reminded me of my grandmother Evelyn – graceful, witty, intelligent, always free to speak her mind. I told her I liked men, but that I didn't want to be with one, which was exactly what I felt was the right thing to do at the time. Two years later we were married. Six years later we had our first daughter on Father's day. 5 years after that – after having 3 kids, trying our best to build the perfect little picket fence, we were divorced after 11 years of marriage. I cried for at least a year and a half at that great, great loss. There was nothing I wanted more on Earth, than to give my children a loving, happy, stable home with a mommy and a daddy and a dog and a garden – the whole nine yards. Sometimes in a relationship between 2 people a ghost from the past intervenes and starts shaking things up. Sometimes in the aftermath there's nothing left but a wrecked marriage and a chance to start all over again. In my experience, there were several ghosts that wrecked our marriage – things that happened in the Pentecostal compound I grew up in, that came back to haunt me. One of them was the ghost of a man who killed himself in 1982. That ghost was the presence in my mind of Ronald David Roberts, my Uncle, Oral's Eldest Son and at one time a man Oral hoped would inherit the kingdom. Ronnie, to the family, who was by all accounts one of the most brilliant men anyone ever came across his path had met. He taught English as well as Russian and Chinese. In his mid 30's, my Uncle Ronnie was divorced and committed suicide soon there after - 6 months after coming out to Troy Perry, who founded the first gay-friendly congregation in Los Angeles, and 4 months after he was arraigned in court on prescription drug charges, leaving his 2 children, ex-wife, and extended family to bear an unbearable burden. Growing up, I didn't know any of this about my uncle, but I always wanted to be like him. Every time my mother mentioned him I noted 2 things – one that she had probably loved him more than she could ever love anyone else, and 2, that his memory caused her more pain than any other memory. And still in my family, a quote unquote secret that my uncle was gay. My family tells me that I'm dishonoring his memory by saying so. My mother leaves voice mails telling me that (pauses) I'm disgusting for linking the family name to homosexuality, and that by being openly gay I'm being cruel. Once again, mendacity, but once again I believe an attempt, in her own way, to make things right. Back to the story, my wife and I spent a few years while we were married in spiritual transition – we both had rejected our evangelical pasts, but

we also wanted to still be Christian. So we found ourselves attending a liberal Christian church in Oklahoma City. We were there when Carlton Pearson came to speak. My family and I had attended Carlton's church in middle school and high school, and in fact my parents went to Oral Robert's University with him in the early 1970's. At one time Oral had publically referred to Carlton as his son, so you might say he felt like an uncle to me, even though I hadn't seen him in years. Carlton preached an amazing sermon that day and it brought me to tears. Hearing him was like hearing my grandfather all over again. Here was a man that, instead of preaching God was sending gays, Catholics, and anybody else to hell, said there was no God, and no mean, angry God dying to punish us. He might have well said God was a good God or something good is going to happen to you. I had finally admitted to myself a year before that I was gay, but being gay, Christian, and married with children does not give you many good options. During that year, I had often wished I would die, but hearing Carlton's message gave me hope. After the sermon, my wife and I waited in line to get to say hi to him, and it had been a long time since we had seen each other. The last time he'd seen me I was in high school, and here I was now a 28-year-old man with my children in tow. We waited about 10 minuets and finally there we were, my wife and I standing there just in front of Carlton, and I smiled and moved as if to hug him, but his face darkened immediately and I held back, and a chill passed through me. We might have only stood there for 20 seconds, but it felt like an hour – me looking at Carlton with a silly grin on my face and him looking back at me like he'd seen a ghost. "Which one are you?" he finally asked. He said, "You're Ron and Roberta's kid aren't you?" and I said, "Yes I'm Randy." He nodded. Then he said, "I thought you were Ronnie". We both stared at each other and finally hugged. Sometimes a particular mantel is thrust upon you whether you like it or not, and I confess that I feel the burden of my uncle's death each and every day. I know I can't fix it, but I almost re-lived his life in every way – marrying young, having children, becoming suicidal – all because I was never told his story, because his story as a gay man was has been hushed up by my family. This system of mendacity, of bluffing, of pretending, of trying to *Pray the Gay Away*, has already left one casualty in my family, and almost caused another, and there are countless other families out there with the same attitudes. I hear from there children all the time. I get a lot of emails from young gay men and women saying things like this: "My family won't speak to me anymore. My sister tells me I'm going to hell. I cry every night because I hate myself for being gay." A young gay kid that wrote me from North Dakota told me that the [mid-sized] Catholic Church told the layman to stop talking to him because he was gay. This system of mendacity is still with us, it's still alive and well – but we have to remember mendacity, even in it's most extreme form, is an attempt to make things right. So how can we make things right? My grandfather with all his faults, and he had plenty of them, also felt the mantel thrust upon him. He was a heartened man who wanted to spread a message of hope, and while it's likely that many of the decisions he made later in life were motivated by money, it's not my impression that that's what he was thinking when he was 20, 21, 22 years old, and standing in healing lines and touching for hours and hours people with Tuberculosis, Cerebral Palsy, and cancer. It's not my impression that a man that starts out doing that wanted to make a quick buck. He started out as a preacher in tiny towns in southeastern Oklahoma, convinced that the mantel thrust upon him was to encourage the poor Pentecostals around him that Cod was a good God, that God did not want them to be poor, that God did not bring on diseases that some evangelicals have cynically suggested that God brought HIV to kill off gay men. Oral's

mantel was one he felt thrust upon him and his message of hope transformed the Evangelical Church. (Randy sighed) 6 months before Oral passed away, I took my children to Los Angeles for spring break. For then it was a chance to go to Disney Land and see Universal Studios – [they] hoped to see movie stars, we saw Leonardo Dicaprio (Randy smiles and Audience laughs). For me, I knew my grandfather was getting old – he was 91 – and it was a chance to pay my last respects to a man who had overshadowed almost every memory of my childhood. Oral never could remember my name when I was growing up, even though I lived just down the hill from him. I ran up to see my grandmother several times a week. “Boy” and “Son” were the only things he called me, if he called me at all. But in the spring of 2009, he eagerly played a great-grandfather. Showing off that he had done his homework by greeting each of my 3 children by name, and because he was no longer the scary grandfather I remember, but now a 91 year old man, barely able to hear and completely unable to leave his chair without assistance, I gladly played along. Although we never spoke of it, Oral knew I was gay. Yet, that day, it didn’t seem to matter. He signed a copy of his newest book for my children, gave each of them a \$20 bill. [Audience laughs]. The hour-long visit passed quickly. I’m really grateful for that day with my grandfather because, frankly, the man I grew up with on the compound was not a kind warm grandfather. He was a driven man who slept may be 4 hours a night and spent the other 20 working. Even while relaxing on the golf course, Oral would be processing his next sermon or networking with business partners who might be able to help keep his ministry alive. There was always another tower to build, or another tower to climb into. There was never any time for children, but this day was different. Oral seemed at peace, happy to sit in his armchair and play great-grandfather. He looked at me several times and sighed. I almost thought he was looking right through me. I almost thought he saw my uncle in me. That here was his chance to make amends, and to accept me, and love me like he was either unable or unwilling to do with his own son. Before we left he asked me to come over to his chair. My children were watching their cartoons in a spare bedroom – the living room was quiet. As I knelt down beside him, I held his hand. Oral had very large hands. If you’ve ever seen it he built a 60 foot bronze sculpture – perhaps the largest bronze sculpture on Earth – of his hands in a praying position (puts hands flat together in a praying position) in Tulsa. I noticed that day holding his hands that they also looked a lot like mine. I was a little shaken up. We both knew that this was likely to be our last visit. As I stood up to leave, he held my hand tightly, looked up from his chair - with that twinkle in his eye - and said, “Son, something good is going to happen to you”. My grandfather had a lot of sayings he was famous for and one of them was this: “Expect a miracle”. My grandfather lived in a system of mendacity – a system in which, if you had a son that was gay, who was depressed, who was addicted to pain medication, you just hushed it up, and you lied about it hoping it would go away. But in his heart, like all of us, Oral wanted to make things right. If we can’t forgive Oral Roberts and men like him, how can we forgive ourselves? My parents have told the press often they have an open door policy – and yet, they haven’t invited me or my brother, who is also gay, home for Christmas in over 7 years. Yet, once again, in this lie there is a truth that we all want reconciliation, we all want a world where things are better, and some of us will lie if we think that’s the only way it can happen. I know some of you out in the audience are gay and there is probably someone in your life that has rejected you – I know there is for me – or some of you grew up Evangelical who are no longer religious in the way that your family was, and there is someone in your family who is angry at you or



your choices or your beliefs. May be it's your mother, your grandmother, your nephew, your son. Many of you, me included, have family who lies about us – hides who we really are – because it makes them uncomfortable. We have to forgive them, because in every lie there's a yearning for the truth. In every lie, there is a yearning for a world in which things are better. In every system of mendacity, there is an optimism that is expecting a miracle – there's a sense of hope. You have to hang onto that hope and live in your truth openly and honestly. I'm going to close with a poem that you're all familiar with, I'm sure, by Emily Dickinson. It goes like this:

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all  
And sweetest - in the Gale is heard  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm  
I've heard it in the chilliest land  
And on the strangest Sea  
Yet never in Extremity  
It asked a crumb of me*

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all. Thank you." (Audience applauds).

### **Question and Answer Session with Randy Roberts Potts**

#### **Steve Sarbaugh:**

"Just so you know we are going to do a free will offering. If you have, fine, if you don't fine. All the money will go to other projects for Rainbow Crossing. Randy has agreed to answer any questions anybody has."

#### **Randy Roberts Potts**

"Just about..." (Audience laughs)

#### **Steve Sarbaugh**

"Anybody have a question?"

#### **Question 1:**

"Thank you so much for your thoughts. It really resonated with me. I was also raised in a Pentecostal movement, but I can one up you on the conservative part. We thought your grandfather was going to hell in this situation and then on television (Audience laughs). It's real easy for those of us in more mainline context to think about folks in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas as these [people] who call themselves Pentecostal, Evangelical. You mentioned Troy Perry who came out of the Church of God of the Prophecy and I'm struck that it took a Pentecostal man to answer the call to form [The Metropolitan Community] Church and be the leader he's been. So my question is do you think there are aspects of the Pentecostal experience and insistence on the Spirit that gives the charisma that can equip

Gay and Lesbian folks to open up in ways, perhaps, their denomination may not want them to, but what is there that is rescuable from that tradition back then?"

**Answer:**

"Growing up Pentecostal, in my 20s really rejected almost all of it and just didn't want anything to do with it. In my 30s I really tried to look at what I threw away, there were a lot of things that I miss, and I think there are obviously some beautiful things about the Pentecostal Church or people wouldn't be going there still. There's a really beautiful acceptance that God can move in our lives spontaneously that is not always planned. I think the Pentecostal Church really stresses that especially - people make fun of them for being very spontaneous - but I think there is something to that, to allowing a higher power like God to rule the day instead of the program. So, I don't know. What's interesting to think about is Troy Perry's church, now the MCC, is now very far away from the Pentecostal groups that he started with - that really didn't have a lot to do with him, so much as [the people] who joined it later. He's a really great guy, I got to have lunch with him, I guess last summer, he's pretty amazing, really sweet guy. I'm going to talk about him tomorrow morning. I hope that answers a little bit [of your question].

**Question 2**

"Would you talk a little bit about the experience of your children - when, how old they were, what their reaction was when you came out?"

**Answer:**

"Sure. I was fortunate that my oldest child when I came out was only 6 years old, at that age kids don't have any clue what sex or marriage or anything is really. So when I came out I was going on dates now and then, so I would tell the kids that when I go on a date with a boy. Fortunately they were young enough to not really have to think of what that would mean for the relationship with their mom whom I really loved. It really wasn't, because they were so young it went really smoothly. Unfortunately my ex-wife did go on to marry a very homophobic man, so we've been in court before - it's been an ongoing process - but the kids are doing great. The way I talk about it with them is, they go to a white suburban school in Texas that there's 2% minorities, white flag type school - it's a very good school - but I tell them if I were to marry a black woman in your school that would be seen as kind of weird. People would whisper about it, but it wouldn't be a bad or good thing, it would just be the person I fell in love with and married. I encourage them to look at it in the same way, that me being gay does make their dad a little bit different than their friend's dads - but it's not a good or bad thing, it's just what it is. I think kids get stronger with things like that if they have the right support to go home to, and they do. My kids are...I'm actually surprised...they're awesome, they seem really happy and all that. "

**Question 3**

"Randy can you say a word or 2 about your living art project and tell us how the reception was, how the experience of doing that was - I'm sure a lot of people don't know about it - talk about that a little and what your plans are for the future?"

**Answer:**

"Sure. Yeah, so I have a new project I call *The Gay Agenda Project*. I had a dream, I guess almost a year ago. I woke up and I told my boyfriend that I had this weird dream that he and I were living in this glass box in Central Park in New York and that we were doing

weird things like cooking, sweeping and just what you do at home, and that people were walking by and looking at us and it was like a gay couple on an exhibit. (Audience laughs) He was like that is a really weird dream. Then I thought in somewhere like New York no one would care at all if you did that (Audience laughs) it's old news. Then I was thinking if you go to smaller towns its not old news at all. I started talking to people and eventually came up with this project that we were calling *The Gay Agenda*, where we are going into conservative towns – through the south and the Midwest, and even places like New York there are plenty of smaller towns that are not used to gay couples – and what we do is we set up in a store front for a few days and we have a little kitchen area and a little living room area – we don't spend the night there – but everything else during the day we live there and all we do is what you do at home. So, it's incredibly boring to watch (audience laughs) we watch TV, we have our friends over for pizza, we work on puzzles, we cook. It's called *The Gay Agenda* – it has a big banner that says *The Gay Agenda* to get some attention and people walk up and they're like, "well what's this?" To me, it is the gay agenda, we just want to live and be happy and love each other, and that's the extent. People say all the time we have this gay agenda, and I think for so long we've run away from that, "Oh no, no we don't". I think actually we do, but it's just the human agenda of being loved and acceptance – not very complicated. So that's the project, we did it in Oklahoma City a few weeks ago and the reception was really good. We even had some Baptists who were going to come protest but then it went down to 17 degrees (audience laughs) we didn't make it up. It never get's that cold in Oklahoma City. Our next stop is Jacksonville, Florida. What we're doing is we are starting in bigger communities – conservative but larger – and we'll get progressively smaller – see how safe it is. I know in some smaller town, one of the cities we wanted to go to is Jackson, Mississippi and just recently there was a protest with gay and lesbians in Jackson – they even had a permit for it – and the police busted it and sent everybody home refusing to allow them to protest because they were gay. So, that's definitely a place we want to go, but we also want to make sure we are safe while we are there. The first one my boyfriend and I, or my fiancé, were the first ones living in the project, but in each town it'd be a local couple that lives there. I'm really excited about it because I think it's a really simple way to get our message across to people, that if you really look closely at how we live our lives there's really nothing to it. I have a friend, he does drag 2 or 3 times a week – very flamboyant and all that – but when he goes home, if you go see him at his house, he's wearing a wife beater and gym shorts drinking a Coke. So, even though he's flamboyant at night doing drag and stuff, when he goes home he still just looks like joe blow down the street. So, I think the point of the project is that all of us when we are sweeping and making coffee we pretty much look the same."

#### **Question 4**

"What's your relationship with your parents now?"

#### **Answer:**

"Umm... there isn't one unfortunately. I even invited my parents to my wedding, I'm getting married in May to my fiancé (audience applauds) and his family is amazing – his dad's side is all Mormon and most of them are coming. His dad is helping pay for the wedding and didn't balk at anything for his son's gay wedding except for, "Oh I can't pay for the alcohol" (audience laughs) - of all the things to object to at his son's gay wedding. At any rate, my family's response was to legally disinherit me and my brother. So, they're not happy about

us being openly gay. To me, I think that's their loss, and I empathize with where they are because in their community they would be rejected completely if they accepted us openly – so there's a lot of bullying with in their own community. I think you have to look at people who do those things with empathy and realize they have tough decisions to make as well – I'm not angry, even though of course I was hurt."

### **Question 5**

"Are you still Pentecostal or are you another faith now?"

#### **Answer:**

"I don't really use a label, I'm spiritual, I go to church all the time, but I'm not a member of one church. I think I (sigh) I guess because of my background I like to go to different churches. There was a Buddhist temple I went to for quite a while. I love Unitarian churches. I actually love the Pentecostal church, but specifically the Pentecostal churches and some of the Baptist churches they are harder for me because I know that if they know I'm gay they're not going to accept me. So that's a, for me, that's a thing that makes me uncomfortable there. Another project I want to do, a few years after *The Gay Agenda Project* is a thing where we go as gay couples to Baptist churches and we sit everywhere, and we hold hands or may be put arms around each other – nothing more – and that's it, and just do that now and then. Just to let those churches that we're there, that we exist, but be very casual about it. That's another down the road project. We'll see."

### **Question 6**

"Have your parents been able to have a relationship with your children?"

#### **Answer:**

"They didn't even send gifts for years and years, the last 2 years they've been sending gifts to my kids through my ex-wife who they'd rather deal with. So, that's I guess better. It is what it is."

### **Question 7**

"I wonder if you have a relationship with your cousins, the children of Ronnie?"

#### **Answer:**

"Unfortunately, across the board the Roberts family is very angry that I'm openly talking about my Uncle Ronnie being gay. To them it's a shameful thing. I even have Robert's family even in Ann Arbor that won't even answer my phone calls. I understand it's hard to have your family out there in the public eye, so I empathize with that. At the same time I think being gay is not a shameful thing. If my uncle were an astronaut and I was a trumpeting that they would be proud, and to me him being gay is a beautiful part of who he was as a human being, so it's not a dishonoring of him. I just say that the Robert's family – I have a second cousin who is Greek (audience laughs)."

### **Question 8**

"How did you and your brother come out to each other?"

#### **Answer:**

"Well my brother came out, my brother was just asexual through high school and college – he went to air force academy – he had never been on a date or anything like that and so I thought that was kind of weird he didn't express any interest in anybody. I gave him this

book called *Men in Love*, this psychiatrist had taken all different kinds of men's fantasies – what men would tell him they would dream about or what ever – the whole spectrum, and I just said here's a book about men's fantasies gay straight everything whatever. I gave him that, I think he read parts of that and he visited me in Connecticut and then he went by himself to New York, sat in Washington Square Park, and he told me what he did, he just looked at everybody going by to see if he had a reaction (audience laughs) openly allowed himself to do that. Coming from my background that was something you weren't supposed to do was to sexualize people. I thought I was great person for not sexualizing women and you know umm... (Audience laughs). So, my brother came back and said, "well I guess I'm gay because were a lot of hot guys" (audience laughs). So that's how he came out to me. He was in the air force at the time and he was pretty careless – he would hold hands. Fortunately he got out without any problems. When my father found out my parents stopped talking to him. They feel that if they accepted it sort of like aiding and abetting a murderer – it's helping someone in their sin and helping them go to hell. Within that framework it (quote unquote) sort of makes sense. I think that's there standpoint. He came out before I did, I think I was jealous because a part of me also, I just wasn't ready to deal with it."

### **Question 9 part 1**

"Are there films or books – recently we showed *For the Bible Tells Me So* – are there other films or books that you would recommend we use?"

#### **Answer:**

"Yeah, one that is just out is *A Right to Love an American Family* – can you get it on DVD? I'm not even sure. I just got to see the premier may be a few months ago. I think it'll be out on DVD in a few months. It's an amazing story. It's a gay couple who are friends of mine, they live in California – they actually got married during the whole Prop 8 window and Prop 8 was passed and their marriage was put on hold, or what ever weird limbo it's in – they decided to start making YouTube videos of them and their family. They are foster parents, they've actually adopted 2 kids – won awards in their county for being the best foster parents in the county – and now they foster agency is always calling them saying, "Can you please take this one". Right now I think they have 5 kids in their house, they never feel like they can say no, but they did adopt 2 already. So they kept making YouTube videos for when ever Prop 8 passed, that was 2 years ago or so. Then a filmmaker approached them to talk about putting these together into a movie. It just came out, it's a really well done movie. It even addresses spirituality and legal matters, how the family works together – it's really great."

### **Question 9 part 2**

Any particular authors or books you recommend we get in our library?

#### **Answer:**

"As far as books and authors, I like the really old stuff, I like poetry. Oh yeah, Troy Perry's books are wonderful. I blazed through all of them in about a year several years ago and there are 3 or 4 that really stand out. One is called *The Lord is My Shepard and He Knows I'm Gay* (audience laughs). Troy Perry – I'll be talking about him tomorrow – he's an amazing man and went through, people wanted to burn down their churches when he was

starting them. He said no and kept building them, and now their congregation has hundreds of churches around the world. Pretty amazing.”

### **Question 10 part 1**

“Have you dug in to the genetic potential?”

#### **Answer:**

“Yeah I thought about it when my uncle and me and my brother are gay and there are rumors that other Robert’s family are (audience laughs). I personally think that it’s very likely, mostly genetic, there may be a mixture of things I don’t know. It’s clear that there are gay men and women of all backgrounds so it’s hard to say if it’s your background or not that causes you to be gay. To me, no matter what, it doesn’t really matter. Whether it’s genetic, your eye color, or your height it’s just who you are. But I think it’s genetic.”

### **Question 10 part 2**

“But doesn’t that give you hope that some other outside people will begin to understand that you are what God made you and not something that you’ve done?”

#### **Answer:**

“Yeah, I guess I’m not...for me I think a lot of homophobia comes not from the Bible from a logical position, but from the unknown fear of the unknown fear of 2 men kissing looks weird and I don’t know what to do about that and it’s threatening. The Bible is not really clear about – it doesn’t say anything about 2 gay men who are in love with each other, 2 women who are in love with each other it has no comment on that at all. So, I don’t think that homophobia comes from the Bible, I think it comes from people because it’s different and we are inclined to think people who are different than us are bad.”

### **Question 11**

“Is there a theologian who really influenced you?”

#### **Answer:**

“I probably read 10 different books of that nature of theology of gay affirming in the Bible and that kind of thing. I would say honestly, for me, I came away from reading all those books with the feeling that you can run circles around trying to [push] scriptures this way or that way to prove your point, and I think you can prove almost anything that you want to using the Bible – you can prove that you should be able to own slaves or you shouldn’t – you can go back and forth. So, to me I came away from all those books feeling like I didn’t feel any richer in my spirit at all. It felt like a factual exercise that didn’t really stick with me. I don’t think those books are bad, just for me it didn’t really stick to my ribs I guess. But there are a lot.”

### **Question 12**

“Are you actively involved in helping younger people – basically getting out the youth vote against these anti-LGBT laws that are up for consideration?”

#### **Answer:**

“I’m not actually involved in that, I know there are lots of groups that are, but that’s definitely something...I’ve done a little bit of work with Youth verses Texas specifically, but the places like Iowa, Minnesota, and North Carolina’s coming, the polls are looking good right now for us, but unfortunately before Prop 8 the polls looked good for us as well and I

think people are a little more generous on the polls than they are with the ballot box which is unfortunate. It does look like in Maine marriage equality will pass. That's a really good thought though.