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Contact: Dr. Donald E. Messer
Email: globalaids@gmail.com
Phone: 303 877 1955

Award to Reconciling Ministries Network, Combined Choir in Rainbow Colors, and Bobble Head Highlight Celebration of Bishop Karen P. Oliveto’s Leadership by Donald E. Messer

June 10, 2024, Centennial, Colorado—“Local United Methodist churches and pastors, organized via the Reconciling Ministries Network, have long resisted church polity that dehumanized the LGBTQ+ community,” declared Rev. Dr. Harvey Martz, Highlands Ranch, Colorado, Co-Chair of the United Methodist Association of Retired Clergy and Friends (UMARC).

When UMACR presented the inaugural Karen P. Oliveto and Robin Ridenour Award to the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) on Saturday, June 8, 2024, Martz further noted that “Forty years of grassroots advocacy and witness helped create the foundation for a new transformed United Methodism.” Accepting the honor on behalf of its 1,400 member churches and ministries, was Ms. Jan Lawrence, RMN Executive Director, Rome, Georgia, who emphasized RMN’s “commitment to full participation of all LGBTQ+ persons throughout the life and leadership of the church.”

Nearly 400 United Methodist laity and clergy gathered at St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, to celebrate Bishop Karen P. Oliveto’s leadership of the Mountain Sky Conference since 2016. A combined seven-church choir of over 100 voices, accompanied by organ and brass ensemble, and dressed shirts and blouses reflecting the colors of the rainbow, was directed by Mark Zwilling, St. Andrew UMC Director of Music. The choir sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness” and led the congregation in singing the nine verses of “In the Midst of New Dimensions,” a hymn composed by the late gay rights Mountain Sky United Methodist pastor and church composer, Julian Rush.

After being described as an “icon of inclusiveness” and “a living legend” in the tradition of John and Susannah Wesley, Bishop Oliveto was given a custom made “bobble head” of herself, reminiscent of bobble heads marketed of the Welsey’s. “I love it! I love it!” she quipped.

Rev. Ann Lantz of The Estes Park UMC, Estes Park, Colorado, also announced they were building six “grandmother” houses to care for AIDS orphans in Maua, Kenya, in cooperation with the Center for Health and Hope, Centennial, Colorado. The homes will be dedicated in honor of Oliveto and Ridenour.

A panel of women speakers, led by Rev. Dr. Joretta Marshall, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Retired Vice President/Dean of Brite Divinity School, described how Bishop Oliveto had effectively “shattered the lavender ceiling” in the church. Other speakers included Ms. Lawrence, Rev. Dr. Valerie Jackson, Lead Pastor, Park Hill United Methodist Church, Denver, Colorado, Rev. Beth Richardson, Retired Dean of The Upper Room Chapel, Nashville, Tennessee, Rev. Jessica Rooks, Front Range District Superintendent of the Mountain Sky Area, Denver, Colorado, and Rev. Amy Stapleton, Pastor of Care and Justice, St. Andrew UMC, Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

Dr. Mark A. Miller, Professor of Church Music, Drew University, shared a personal video version of his song, “A Child of God,” dedicated to Oliveto and Ridenour.

Senator Lucia Guzman, a retired United Methodist pastor and former Minority Leader of the Colorado State Senate, spoke of the impact that Oliveto has made not only on the church but the states in which she served. “God became incarnate again when Oliveto was consecrated as a bishop,” said Guzman, “bringing liberating love and hope to the vast episcopal area of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming.”

The Co-Chairs of UMARC, Rev. Martz and Rev. Dr. Donald Messer, Centennial, Colorado, both eulogized Oliveto’s global influence as well as her impact on the direct region she was assigned. They indicated the Oliveto/Ridenour Award would be awarded in future years to laity, pastors, and organizations that reflected “the inclusiveness and hope embodied in these two courageous United Methodist women.”

“As the first openly lesbian bishop in a same gender loving married relationship,” said Martz, “Bishop Karen with Robin faced threats of physical violence and experienced harassment and hatred, along with public efforts to remove her from the episcopacy and ministry. Yet they prevailed, continually sharing a theology of love and a ministry of joy and acceptance for all.”

In closing, Bishop Oliveto presided at serving Holy Communion and preached about “Always Making Sure There Is More Room at the Table.” She indicated she learned from her late mother to include, never exclude others. “The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand with a few fishes and loaves of bread was really the divine miracle of human sharing.”

Rev. Dr. Donald E. Messer is Co-Chair of the United Methodist Association of Retired Clergy & Friends (UMARC) Chair, Centennial, Colorado, and Executive Director of the Center for Health and Hope.

Video link to Oliveto Celebration: [Celebrating Bishop Oliveto's Leadership - June 8, 2024 - St. Andrew United Methodist Live - \(youtube.com\)](#)

