In February of 2016, the Board of Directors of the Religious Institute announced that, after a national search, it had selected Marie Alford-Harkey as its second president and CEO, effective May 1, 2016. In April of 2016, the Religious Institute celebrated 15 years of sexual justice and the retirement of its co-founder, President, and CEO, Rev. Dr. Debra W. Haffner, who had led the Religious Institute since its founding in 2001. The celebration acknowledged the work done by Rev. Dr. Haffner to found and guide the Religious Institute for 15 years, celebrated the Religious Institute’s accomplishments over the last 15 years, and looked toward the Religious Institute’s future under the leadership of Marie Alford-Harkey.

In June of 2016, the Religious Institute welcomed Kentina Washington, M.Div. to our staff as Director of Programs for Reproductive Justice and Sexuality Education. A self-identified womanist queer laborer for the Jesus Project, Kentina earned her Master of Divinity degree from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2013. At the same time, Drew Konow, who had served as Scholar in Residence since October 2014 was promoted to the position of Director of Communications and LGBTQ Programs. Drew is a 2014 graduate of Yale Divinity School, where he received his Master of Arts in Religion.
The Religious Institute’s year began with a trip to the Supreme Court. The Religious Institute submitted the largest pro-choice faith amicus in history in response to Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt, a case which sought to limit access to abortion services. Seventeen religious organizations and nearly 1,300 religious leaders signed on to the brief. The weekend before oral arguments more than 80 religious congregations, representing over 10,000 people of faith participated in a National Weekend of Prayer for Reproductive Justice. On the day of oral arguments, Religious Institute President Rev. Dr. Debra Haffner was one of four faith speakers at the rally on the steps of the Supreme Court. Ultimately, the court decided in favor of Whole Woman’s Health, striking down laws restricting abortion access and delivering a decisive victory for advocates of access to abortion care.

2016 was a year filled with legislative attempts to restrict justice, dignity, and equality for LGBTQ people. More than 175 anti-LGBTQ bills were filed in 32 states. The Religious Institute responded by working with partners in Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee to help bring a religious voice to fighting anti-LGBTQ laws in those states. The Religious Institute coordinated a petition, signed by more than 4,000 people of faith. In April, the petition was delivered to lawmakers in Tennessee and North Carolina.
Embracing Our Prophetic Vision

In May of 2016, 111 LGBTQI clergy in the United Methodist Church (UMC) came out in advance of their quadrennial General Conference. Their coming out defied the UMC Book of Discipline, which considers homosexuality “incompatible” with Christian teaching and prohibits the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” Their prophetic action challenged the UMC to acknowledge the LGBTQI clergy already serving in their churches. The Religious Institute worked in collaboration with these clergy to organize support from outside of the UMC. The Religious Institute created a statement of support that was signed by over 1,200 religious leaders from more than 15 denominations outside the UMC, including over 70 national religious leaders.

Throughout 2016, the Religious Institute presented five interactive workshops around the country designed to educate faith leaders about bisexuality, help their congregations be more welcoming toward bisexual people, and empower them to educate their own faith communities about bisexuality. Workshops were presented at the Metropolitan Community Churches General Conference, the United Church of Christ Open and Affirming Congregations national gathering, Sunshine Cathedral MCC in Ft. Lauderdale, and in conjunction with the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly.

Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey presenting on bisexuality.
On the morning of June 12, 2016, we woke up to the heartbreaking news that 49 of our LGBTQ siblings had been killed in a shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. In the wake of this tragedy, the Religious Institute released a statement calling people of faith to “change our culture of fear and hate to one of love and understanding.” In the days that followed, the Religious Institute joined with a range of faith organizations to write a statement from people of faith in response to the Pulse shooting. The statement reads, in part, “As we seek to respond to this tragedy, we celebrate the lives of those who were killed and the gifts of their sexual and gender diversity. Our faith traditions draw us closer together—not to further exclusion, fear, or enmity.” More than 1,400 people of faith and religious leaders signed on to a multifaith statement in solidarity with the LGBTQ, Latinx, and Muslim communities. The following month, the Religious Institute co-sponsored a panel at Union Theological Seminary about faith communities and the aftermath of the Pulse Shooting. The panel included local faith leaders and a survivor of the shooting. In November, Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey visited the Pulse Memorial in Orlando with members of the National Religious Leadership Roundtable.
In the fall of 2016, the Religious Institute collaborated with Texas Freedom Network to create Abortion+Faith, a three-hour story-based, interactive training for faith leaders on access to abortion. Kentina Washington offered the first two trainings in Houston and Austin, Texas. The training provides faith leaders with information on legality, medical science, and safety of abortion. It also addresses barriers to access and introduces participants to the reproductive justice framework. During the training, attendees engage sacred texts and religious values in order to begin to formulate their own theology of abortion. The training also provides a model and practice for providing pastoral care to people who have had or are considering an abortion and helps attendees identify ways to address abortion in congregational life.

In 2016, the Religious Institute began its Seminary Sexuality Survey to update and expand data first gathered in 2007 about the sexual health of seminaries in the United States. Religious Institute staff moderated a panel at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) meeting in San Antonio on the state of sexuality education in seminaries and presented preliminary findings from the study there. The Religious Institute engaged 65 Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian Universalist clergy and religious leaders in its online sexuality issues courses in 2016 and continues its partnership with Metropolitan Community Churches to be the provider of its required sexuality studies courses for future clergy.

Throughout 2016, the Religious Institute provided its network with monthly updates, action alerts on public policy issues, and theological analysis of contemporary sexual, gender, and reproductive justice issues. Our staff gave speeches at congregations, seminaries, national gatherings, vigils, worship services and panels. In addition, Religious Institute staff provided technical assistance on religion and sexuality to more than 40 individuals and organizations.
Throughout the 2016 election season, the Religious Institute joined faith leaders and people of faith in calling for social change. Together, we put forth a moral vision for our future, challenging political leaders to create policies that strengthen the common good. Weeks before the election, Religious Institute staff participated in a Moral Day of Action, where the Higher Ground Moral Declaration was delivered to state legislatures across the country. In the weeks leading up to the election, Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey published an op-ed calling faith leaders to “speak up for our religious values and to challenge hateful rhetoric.” Immediately after the election, the Religious Institute released a statement titled “Grief, Commitment, and Justice After the 2016 Election.” The statement read, in part, “Our faithful voices will be needed now more than ever...May we move forward together and may we join together, as people of faith, to bring hope and justice to the world.” The day after the election, the Religious Institute co-sponsored "Songs for the Soul," a post-election multifaith gathering which took place in New York City. The event featured religious song and dance inviting all into a moment of prophetic respite and healing following the tumultuous election season.
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