Throughout 2017, we saw unprecedented attacks on our rights and our communities. And yet, in the face of injustice, people of faith and religious leaders were at the forefront: speaking out, advocating, and resisting.

Time and time again, people of faith took action to support our collective vision of sexual, gender, and reproductive justice in faith communities and society. Thousands of people signed friend-of-the-court briefs, spoke out for protecting reproductive healthcare, and responded to our action alerts throughout the year.

A prophetic resistance is awakening. People of faith are showing up at protests, writing op-eds for newspapers, and speaking out against injustice because our faith and our consciences call us to do so.

As congregants are justifiably worried about the erosion of LGBTQ rights, attacks on healthcare, deportations and ICE raids, and rising rates of racist violence, religious leaders are holding space for their members and speaking love and justice in public.

In ways large and small, people of faith, religious leaders, and activists for justice are boldly taking action amidst even their own fears, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress.

The prophetic resistance has awoken, and we will not go back to sleep. We will not turn around.

From Drew, Kentina, Lewis, and me, thank you to everyone who supported the Religious Institute in 2017. We are truly grateful to be in this justice movement with each of you.

In faith,

Rev. Marie Alfred Haley

"THE PROPHETIC RESISTANCE HAS AWOKEN, AND WE WILL NOT GO BACK TO SLEEP."
A YEAR OF MARCHING

In many ways, 2017 was the year of the march. It began with the historic Women’s March and continued with protests, rallies, and marches throughout the year. Recognizing the urgency of the moment, people of faith and religious leaders took to the streets throughout the year. Thousands of people of faith flocked to protests at airports when the Trump administration issued its so-called “Muslim ban.” People of faith joined hundreds of actions and protests in response to the attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Faith leaders held the frontlines of the counter-protests against white supremacists in Charlottesville, VA and Boston, MA. The Religious Institute staff and the members of our network were present at many of these marches. You can see some photos highlighting our participation on the following page.

Over the summer, our staff organized a faith-rooted health care action in Washington, D.C.—delivering a statement to lawmakers before a key Senate vote. Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey was arrested in June during a planned civil disobedience with Moral Monday CT, protesting state budget cuts that would impact the most vulnerable. Rev. Marie also marched in the Minister’s March for Justice and joined counter-protests against white supremacists in Boston, MA. By participating in these actions—rooted in our faith traditions—we and the people of faith in our network strive toward a society that embodies sexual, gender, and reproductive justice.

OUR NEW LOGO AND WEBSITE

In September of 2017, the Religious Institute debuted a completely redesigned website and a new logo (see below). As we approached both of these projects, we wanted to honor the history of the Religious Institute. Our new logo has a three-tiered flame to honor the three candles from our original logo. We kept purple as our base color, adding two new shades and a blue accent. Similarly, our redesigned website grows out of the previous website. It still features the latest news and updates about the Religious Institute and the same rich library of congregational resources, now easier to find and access.
In March of 2017, the Supreme Court was scheduled to hear its first-ever case on transgender rights. The case centered around Gavin Grimm, a transgender high school student from Virginia whose school barred him from using the boy’s restroom. The Religious Institute mobilized people of faith to lift up a faithful voice in support of Gavin, the right of transgender people to live free from discrimination, and a society that embodies transgender justice. In preparation for oral arguments in the case, the Religious Institute partnered with the legal firm representing Gavin to submit a friend-of-the-court (amicus) brief in support of transgender justice. The brief brought together trans theology, the experiences of transgender people of faith, and the positions of trans-affirming religious traditions. Nearly 2,000 religious leaders signed the brief, including the leaders of nine religious denominations, six seminary presidents, and the leaders of 49 religious organizations. In an unexpected turn of events, the day after the brief was submitted to the Court, the justices decided to remand the case to a lower court, in response to the executive branch’s decision to rescind Obama-era guidance requiring schools to accommodate transgender students. Despite the Court’s decision and given the ongoing climate of hostility toward transgender people, especially under the Trump administration, the Religious Institute decided to go forward with the National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice it had planned for the weekend before oral arguments. Partnering with the Transforming Hearts Collective and more than 25 co-sponsors, the Religious Institute curated an expansive library of congregational resources for the National Weekend of Prayer, including prayers written by transgender religious leaders, educational resources, and an advocacy guide. More than 150 congregations in over 35 states observed the weekend of prayer, honoring the gifts of transgender people and committing to working toward a society where transgender people can live and flourish in all aspects of life.
Throughout 2017, the Religious Institute continued to offer courses, workshops, and trainings on gender and sexuality at graduate theological schools. Kentina Washington-Leapheart returned to her alma mater Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, preaching in chapel on Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ liberation and presenting two workshops for students on bisexuality and on sex as self-care for ministers. Drew Konow spoke in Justin Tanis’ course ‘Transgender Theology and Liberation’ at Brite Divinity School, presenting about the Religious Institute’s work advocating against anti-LGBTQ laws in Texas. Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey spoke to a group of 25 future Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) clergy at a retreat, provided a lecture in MCC’s “Queer History” class, and taught a two-day course at Union Theological Seminary on “Sexuality and Gender: Real Talk in Faith Communities.”

Additionally, the Religious Institute continued to develop and update its online sexuality issues for religious professionals courses, adding new units to its Christian and Jewish courses. In 2017, our staff released four new editions of “Sexuality: From the Seminary to the Sanctuary,” our newsletter on religion, sexuality, and graduate theological education and interviewed four scholars of religion for our Seminary Spotlight feature.
Throughout 2017, there were unprecedented attacks on sexual, gender, and reproductive health, rights, and justice. In addition to sign-on statements, statements from national religious leaders, and amicus briefs, the Religious Institute released a number of statements at moments when our rights and our communities were under attack. In a year marked by such unbridled attempts to undermine justice, these statements were a way to offer moral grounding, pastoral care, and theological counter-visions in troubling times.

01.30.17  Religious Institute Condemns Executive Orders on Refugees, Immigration, and Border Policies; Calls People of Faith to Action

03.01.17  Religious Institute Releases Statement from People of Faith in Support of Planned Parenthood

05.04.17  Religious Institute Decries Executive Order on Religious Freedom

06.20.17  Religious Institute decries murder of Charleena Lyles and acquittal of officer who murdered Philando Castile

07.28.17  Religious Institute Condemns President’s Attempt to Ban Transgender People From Serving in the Military, Calls for Action

08.14.17  Religious Institute Releases Statement Condemning White Supremacist, Racist, Anti-Semitic, Neo-Nazi Demonstrations and Violence in Charlottesville, Virginia

08.30.17  Statement on the Divine Gift of Sexual and Gender Diversity

09.06.17  Religious Institute Responds to Decision to End DACA

10.05.17  Religious Institute Responds to Rollback of Contraceptive Coverage
RESISTING ANTI-LGBTQ LAWS

2017 was another year when state legislatures across the country put forward bills designed to harm LGBTQ people and curtail LGBTQ rights. In response, the Religious Institute organized national religious leaders to speak out in opposition to these anti-LGBTQ bills. The national letter, which was signed by the heads of seven religious denominations, the president of eight seminaries, and the leaders of more than 40 religious organizations, among scores of other high-level leaders, asserted that the proposed bills “threaten the dignity and equal treatment of LGBTQ people and violate the very tenets of love and justice that are the backbone of our religious traditions.”

ANTI-LGBTQ BILLS “VIOLATE THE VERY TENETS OF LOVE AND JUSTICE THAT ARE THE BACKBONE OF OUR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS.”

Along with a letter from Texas religious leaders, organized by the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), this national-level letter was hand-delivered to legislators in Texas, where more than a dozen anti-LGBTQ bills were being considered. Religious Institute staffer Drew Konow gathered with local clergy and TFN staff at the Texas State Capitol to pray, sing, and share their message opposing discrimination directly to legislators. The letter from national religious leaders was covered by local and national media and was used to help defeat anti-LGBTQ bills throughout the country.
The Affordable Care Act (ACA), a law which provides health care to millions of Americans, was under constant attack in 2017. Congress made numerous attempts at appealing, replacing, or sabotaging the ACA, and, at every turn, people of faith were resisting, speaking out, and putting their bodies on the line in support of comprehensive, affordable health care. The Religious Institute issued numerous calls to action, mobilizing people of faith to contact their elected officials, show up at town halls, and organize their local community. At the end of July, the Religious Institute staff delivered the signatures of nearly 1,000 people of faith to several key Senate offices on Capitol Hill while the Senate debated its latest repeal bill. The Religious Institute’s statement was the only coordinated effort by people of faith in support of the ACA that also explicitly mentioned support for reproductive health care and support for Planned Parenthood. When some in the Senate tried to tie the ACA repeal to the defunding of Planned Parenthood, the Religious Institute organized people of faith to speak boldly in support of both. On the same day we delivered our petition.

“OUR FAITH TEACHES US TO PURSUE JUSTICE FOR ALL PEOPLE.”

Rev. Marie Alford-Harkey spoke alongside faith leaders at a rally in support of Planned Parenthood, saying “Our faiths teach us to care for people in need, to work for the health and wholeness of all, and prioritize the needs of people who are poor and vulnerable. Our faith teaches us to pursue justice for all people, and that is why people of faith support Planned Parenthood.” Ultimately, the July repeal bill was defeated, and throughout 2017, the moral leadership of people of faith and our relentless advocacy in support of comprehensive, affordable health care led to one victory after another.
BLESSING A TEXAS CLINIC

“THIS IS AN ANSWERED PRAYER; WE’VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS FOR FIVE YEARS.”

The Religious Institute’s work for reproductive justice continued to grow this year. In addition to resisting the attacks on Planned Parenthood, the Religious Institute celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, offered three sessions of its Abortion+Faith training, hosted a four-part webinar series on reproductive justice and religious resistance, and helped organize the blessing of a Whole Woman’s Health clinic in Fort Worth, Texas. Religious Institute Director of Programs for Reproductive Justice and Sexuality Education Kentina Washington-Leaphart gathered together with clergy, abortion clinic providers, and staff to bless and affirm the clinic’s challenging, deeply sacred work.

Wearing collars and stoles, invoking scripture, and singing songs of justice, a group of clergy held the hands of clinic workers, blessed the sacred work they do, and offered words of prayer. After the blessing, one of the staff members said, “This is an answered prayer; we’ve been waiting for this for five years.” Reflecting on her experience, Kentina said, “reclaiming the narrative about people of faith and reproductive justice from the extreme religious right has been the fuel that has powered my work in this program area for all of 2017. Taking a stand—literally and figuratively—in a state where restrictive policies related to abortion are harmful and in many cases death-dealing was an act of resistance.”
Over the past several years, a vocal religious minority has adopted the concept of religious freedom as a weapon in their fights against sexual, gender, and reproductive justice. Claiming to defend religious freedom, they have sought to curtail the rights of others, justify discrimination, and receive overly broad exemptions from existing laws. In 2017, the Supreme Court agreed to hear Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission, the most high-profile case about religious freedom since the now-infamous Hobby Lobby case. The case began when a baker refused to bake a cake for a same-sex couple’s wedding, claiming to do so for religious reasons and seeking a constitutional right to discriminate on the basis of his religious beliefs. Acknowledging this case’s potential to shape the landscape of LGBTQ and civil rights for decades to come, the Religious Institute helped mobilize progressive people of faith to speak out in the months leading up to the case. More than 1,200 faith leaders joined an amicus brief to the Supreme Court supporting justice, dignity, and equal treatment for LGBTQ people because of, not in spite of, their faith traditions and calling businesses open to the public to be open to all. The religious leaders brief was covered by more than forty news outlets, and the weekend before oral arguments the Religious Institute organized a National Weekend of Prayer for LGBTQ Justice which was observed by thousands of people of faith. On the day of oral arguments, Religious Institute staffer Drew Konow spoke at the rally on the steps of the Supreme Court, proclaiming that “religious beliefs do not give anyone the right to discriminate” and that “LGBTQ people have inherent dignity and sacred worth.”
2017 BY THE NUMBERS

GETTING THE WORD OUT

95
MEDIA APPEARANCES
The Religious Institute’s work was covered by the media more than 95 times in 2017.

35
SPEECHES
Our staff gave over 35 speeches or workshops at seminaries, congregations or conferences.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

8500
OUR NETWORK
The Religious Institute has a network of more than 8,500 religious leaders and people of faith.

4500
TAKING ACTION
Over 4,500 religious leaders took action in 2017 by joining a sign-on statement or amicus brief.

SHIFTING THE CULTURE

250
CONGREGATIONS
More than 250 congregations observed one of the Religious Institute’s weekends of prayer.

31
SEMINARIES
Thirty-one seminaries now have the designation as “Sexually Healthy and Responsible Seminaries.”
ORGANIZATIONAL UPDATES
BUILDING A STRONGER RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

In 2017, the Religious Institute worked intentionally to strengthen the organization, improve accountability, and ensure our policies reflect our organizational values.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS
Knowing that our movements must be collaborative, the Religious Institute intentionally partnered with other non-profit justice organizations in developing projects and seeking funding for them.

IMPROVING OFFICE SYSTEMS
We developed an employee handbook that includes family leave and bereavement policies that align with our values. We hired a part-time bookkeeper and introduced regular staff check-ins.

IMPLEMENTING ACTION ALERTS
We started sending regular action alerts to our network as a way to issue timely, immediate calls to action.

COMMITTING TO ANTI-RACISM
As a staff and board, we committed to becoming an anti-racist organization and began that process, which will continue in the coming year.

MOVING OUR OFFICES
Our offices moved to a new space in Bridgeport, CT. Several staff members now also work remotely some or all of the time.
REVENUE

Organizational Consultancies 15%
Donations 7%
Publications Honoraria & Fees 4%
Other 1%

EXPENSES

Program Services 84%
Management 10%
Fundraising 6%

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT IN 2017

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THE E. RHODES AND LEONA B. CARPENTER FOUNDATION
EMBREY FAMILY FOUNDATION
GILL FOUNDATION
LELAND FIJKES FOUNDATION
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DREW KONOW, Director of Communications and LGBTQ Programs
KENTINA WASHINGTON-LEAPHEART, Director of Programs for Reproductive Justice and Sexuality Education
LEWIS WHITAKER, Office Manager

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