

BUILDING A KIN-DOM FOR THE COMMUNITY

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Kin Dom's new camp program creates a space where LGBTQIA+ youth can experience a week of affirmation, celebration and fun. While there is a faith component to the camp, there is not a faith expectation.

When Pepa Paniagua felt called to a job that didn't exist, she set about creating it. What resulted was the "kin-dom community," a new approach to a term adopted nearly 40 years ago.

An ecumenical partnership that includes the ELCA Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod and the Presbyterian Church (USA), the kin-dom community says its mission is to be "an intentional, brave space for all people to explore and cultivate spirituality." The community is committed to inclusion, integration and love and to affirming all gender identities and sexual orientations.

The 2-year-old community operates under the direction of Paniagua, who is a Presbyterian pastor, and a board that includes Irma Bañales, the synod's director for evangelical mission.

goal was that neither type of belief nor lack of belief would discourage participation.

Paniagua, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area as a "cradle Presbyterian," has spent most of the past two decades in Texas. Following seminary studies in Austin, she served a postgraduate residency in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and since 2008 has been a pastor in northern Texas, where she lives with her wife, Kelli.

Knowing that people who don't fit into the heterosexual or cisgender boxes have often been hurt by churches and other faith groups, Paniagua felt called to create a model for ministries fully welcoming of the LGBTQIA+ community.

After four kin-dom community meetings the pandemic struck, forcing the group into a Zoom format. Ultimately community members decided they didn't want one more aspect of their lives happening via teleconference, so kin-dom was reconfigured as a creator and curator of video and other content that members can access as best fits their schedules.

kin-dom board member Corey Wallis, who was born and raised in Texas in a Southern Baptist environment.

Now a communications specialist for Trinity Presbyterian Church in McKinney and a student at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Wallis got involved with kin-dom to use her "privilege" to "invest in places that are safe and warm and welcoming."



The camp allowed kids to experience a space designed for them, full of love and welcome, where they can come and truly be themselves.

At this point in its evolution the community is united largely through the content and resources members access from its website. But this summer the community branched out to host its first kin-dom camp and provide LGBTQIA+ youth with a week of affirmation, celebration and fun.

Funded in part through Mission Support and a \$10,000 grant from the synod's mission endowment, the camp included a faith component but no faith expectation—a specific

By April 2019 she was exploring possibilities with 1001 New Worshiping Communities, which helps pastors create and execute novel initiatives. By the following year, Paniagua was ready "to stop talking about it and start doing it. The goal was to be in restaurants or bars or other community spaces. In this part of the country people have suffered a significant amount of religious trauma."

"I'm a straight, cisgender white woman," she said. "Church has always felt comfortable to me, it's welcoming for folks who present like I do—but not for all Christians. My three closest friends are gay."

I want to see this place flourish, so I'll know my friends who've felt on the outside have a spot to belong somewhere, to feel loved somewhere, to be in a safe environment."