

Rev. Peter Laarman became executive director of Progressive Christians Uniting, a California network of individuals and congregations, in April 2004. Prior to accepting this position he served for ten years as Senior Minister of New York City's historic Judson Memorial Church.

In California Mr. Laarman has led Progressive Christians Uniting into significant working partnerships with other justice-centered organizations, expanded the reach of the PCU network throughout the state, and added promising new program initiatives in the arenas of LGBT advocacy and eco-justice activism. He also conceptualized and secured funding for an experimental campus outreach project, called the Faith/Activism collective ([www.faithactivism.com](http://www.faithactivism.com)), for the purpose of discovering what kinds of experiences and approaches are effective in helping today's super-stressed undergraduates link their justice commitments to their core spiritual values.

PCU's budget has tripled and its core staff has expanded from two persons to nine persons during Mr. Laarman's first four years at the helm. In addition to building up PCU, Mr. Laarman has been involved in the founding of the Center for Faith in Public Life in Washington, D.C., in the creation of a new national Progressive Christian Initiative, and in the management of large-scale strategic research project dealing with the challenge of LGBT inclusion among Mainline Protestant bodies.

Peter Laarman commenced his training for the ordained ministry in 1990 following a fifteen-year career as a strategist and communications specialist within the U.S. labor movement. He worked first as a community organizer in Brockton, MA (1971-74), then as a field organizer and lobbyist for the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers (1974-75), then as public relations director for the American Federation of Teachers in Washington, DC (1975-82), and finally as public relations & publications director for the United Auto Workers (1982-1990). His life partner's death in 1988 caused him to explore in more depth a possible calling to ordained ministry.

From his first day at Yale Divinity School, Mr. Laarman continued to weave his passion for workplace and economic justice into his new vocational path. He was recruited to serve as an advisor to the unions representing Yale employees, even as much of his YDS coursework focused on the spiritual and ethical foundations of organizing for social justice. He was graduated *summa cum laude* from the School in May 1993.

Following his ordination by the United Church of Christ, Mr. Laarman left New Haven for New York to take the pulpit of Judson Church, where he faced the daunting task of reshaping that congregation's mission and brand in the aftermath of a legendary predecessor's 37-year pastorate. He also continued to maintain some degree of involvement with the progressive part of the labor movement, helping immigrant food service workers win contracts at some of Manhattan's largest investment houses. Following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, Mr. Laarman agreed to serve as volunteer president of a special relief fund for over 500 surviving "back of the house" employees at the Windows on the World restaurant, whose workplace was destroyed that morning. This special fund raised and disbursed nearly \$3 million over two years.

When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani imposed an unusually harsh version of workfare, called the Work Experience Program, Mr. Laarman organized a citywide Workfare Campaign of Resistance, which involved over 300 churches, synagogues, and other not-for-profit organizations signing a pledge not to participate as placement sites and denouncing the program on moral and religious grounds. The Campaign of Resistance was featured prominently in the *New York Times* and on ABC's *20/20* program and involved Mr. Laarman in extended debate with pundits and preachers who claimed that the only moral issue in workfare is the lack of a strong work ethic on the part of poor single mothers.

In leading Judson Church, Mr. Laarman also nurtured and supported a "safe space" program called The Employment Project for middle-class congregants and others experiencing downward mobility in the new ruthless economy. This program was praised by Bob Herbert in a *New York Times* column.

Mr. Laarman revived Judson's historic involvement in the downtown arts scene by inaugurating a free series of dance workshops and performances curated by African American choreographers Aziza and Ronald K. Brown, by providing a workplace and fiscal sponsorship for Macky Alston's documentary film projects, and by opening church spaces to hard-edged multimedia spectacles organized by Rev. Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping

and by political cartoonists Ward Sutton and Peter Kuper. He also brought back artists whose youthful careers had been forged at the church — Kate Millett, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneeman, and Nam June Paik among them — to reflect on continuities and discontinuities in the challenges facing *avant garde* artists in the 1960s as against artists at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before leaving the church he arranged for Judson’s rich trove of mid-century arts documents to be preserved at NYU’s Fales Collection.

During his tenure at Judson Church Mr. Laarman organized and guided a \$3 million renovation of a splendid Stanford White and Augustus St. Gaudens-designed sanctuary, using monies principally raised from foundations and individuals committed to the preservation of landmark New York spaces. The renovation included the complete restoration of the only complete suite of church windows in New York created by painter and stained glass innovator John La Farge, the inventor of “opalescent” windows and precursor to Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Raised amid Dutch Calvinists on a small Wisconsin farm, Peter Laarman is a *summa cum laude* graduate of Brown University. His original dream was to teach American literature at the college level, and he continues to take pleasure from the complex intersections of politics, poetry, and the lively arts. He writes and lectures frequently on the prospects for a present-day revival of prophetic religious leadership in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel. During a Spring 2001 sabbatical leave he accepted a Merrill Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School where he explored the ideas of Michael Sandel and others for resuscitating small “r” republican values in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. His articles and commentaries have appeared in *The Nation*, *Sojourners*, *Dissent*, and elsewhere. He was the first commentator invited to blog on faith matters for HuffingtonPost.com

In 2006 Mr. Laarman published a book of essays by writers and thinkers including Bill McKibben, Joan Chittister, Marilynne Robinson, and Garret Keizer on authentic Christian moral values as against a corrupted American “Christianism.” The book is titled *Getting on Message: Challenging the Religious Right from the Heart of the Gospel* (Beacon 2006).

