**Summer Institute 2016**

**Bios for Invited Plenary Speakers**

**Tuesday Morning Plenary, May 23**

**Western Theological Seminary Faculty**

**Tom Boogaart, Professor of Old Testament**

In all his scholarship and teaching, Dr. Boogaart is committed to helping the church recover the Scriptures as a spiritual resource. He tries to show his students how delving deeper into Scriptures brings them closer to God. Most recently he has worked on writing a new curriculum for teaching Hebrew in which students take the words into their hearts through various practices, such as singing, memorization, and enactment

**J. Todd Billings, Professor of Reformed Theology**

Dr. Billings approaches the discipline of theology with a commitment to the ministry of the church. His varied experience in Christian ministry includes work in community development in Uganda, teaching theology in Ethiopia, and working on staff at a Boston-area homeless shelter.  His most recent work is Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ.

**Randy Smit, Artist, Poet, Author, Minister**

Randy Smit is founder and director of Compassionate Connection, an organization offering pathways of practice to creative renewal.  He and his wife live in Holland, Michigan where he continues to explore poetry, essays and short fiction as a freelance writer.  Randy has spinal muscular atrophy.

**Ben Conner, Associate Professor of Christian Discipleship and Director of the Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry**

Ben has ministered to and with high school kids for nearly twenty years and currently serves on the Young Life Capernaum Mission-wide Board.  His teaching and research interests include practical theology, youth ministry, discipleship and Christian practices, mission studies, evangelism, disability studies and Christian history.  His wife, Melissa, works in therapeutic horsemanship (and he mucks stalls).

**Wednesday, May 25**

**Rabbi Darby Jared Leigh** is a native New Yorker who loves mountains. He is the Rabbi of Congregation Kerem Shalom in Concord MA and is committed to creating an inclusive, caring community with intellectual honesty and spiritual depth. Recently honored as one of The Forward’s “most inspiring rabbis of 2016,” Rabbi Leigh is a Truth seeker, a passionate snowboarder and a former leading actor with the Tony award-winning National Theater of the Deaf. He was featured in the televised, Emmy-nominated documentary *A Place For All: Faith And Community For People With Disabilities*. He has performed on stage with rock and roll bands, Jane’s Addiction and Twisted Sister! Rabbi Leigh also served as a consultant for the Oscar-nominated documentary *Sound and Fury* and for “Hands On,” an organization that provides sign-language interpreting services for Broadway and off-Broadway productions. He has been a speaker for the New York City Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities, and other organizations where he has taught on issues related to Deafness and disability access.

Rabbi Leigh was selected to be one of the first fellows of “Rabbis Without Borders,” an initiative of CLAL (National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.) Rabbi Leigh has taught at the Academy for Jewish Religion in NY, Hebrew College in MA and is invited to lecture internationally. Rabbi Leigh has served as the associate/sabbatical rabbi at Bnai Keshet in Montclair NJ, rabbi of The New Shul in NYC, student rabbi of Or HaNeshamah in Ottawa Canada, rabbinic intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in NYC, and as a rabbinic educator with Hillel at Temple and Drexel Universities in Philadelphia, PA. He holds a BA in religion, *summa cum laude*, from the University of Rochester, an MA in religion from Columbia University and received Rabbinic Ordination from the RRC. He is married to Dr. Randi Leigh and they have three daughters.

**Sharon Shapiro-Lacks,**

Founding Director of Yad HaChazakah-The Jewish Disability Empowerment Center, is

well known in national, state, and local enclaves for her leadership and work in the

independent living self-empowerment and disability advocacy movement for over 25

years.  In 2006, Ms. Shapiro-Lacks decided to establish Yad HaChazakah-The Jewish

Disability Empowerment Center, Inc. in order to bring the independent living grassroots

advocacy and peer-to-peer approach to Torah-observant communities, as well as to the

wider Jewish world.  Having had served on 15 or more governing boards as well as on

state and local councils and taskforces, Ms. Shapiro-Lacks currently serves as vice

president of theboard of the Yaneh Minyan of Flatbush, as the secretary of the Disabilit

Network of New York City, and as a member at large of the Brooklyn Center for

Independence of the Disabled.

Her most notable accomplishments have been leading coordinated efforts to implement the Help America Vote Act and to extend rent increase exemptions to people with disabilities in NYC (DRIE), after a 20-year struggle. Most recently, Ms. Shapiro-Lacks authored the primary draft of the Resolution on Disability Access and Participation in Orthodox Communities that was passed by the Rabbinical Council of America in July 2014.  A cum laude graduate from Hofstra University, Ms. Shapiro-Lacks now brings the disability self empowerment and advocacy approach to traditional Jewish communities.

**Jeff McNair**

Jeff McNair is a professor of special education and disability studies at California Baptist University. He arguably developed the first graduate degree in disability ministry which is, by the way, entirely online. He also is the director of Church Relations for the Christian Institute on Disability, an arm of the Joni and Friends organization. He and his wife Kathi have facilitated inclusive ministry for adults with disabilities at the local churches they have attended for nearly 40 years. Jeff is a writer and speaker who also hosts the weblog disabled Christianity. He has also served as a consultant and trainer in the area of disability ministry and special education in countries around the world.

**Thursday, May 26**

**Jill Harshaw**

Following an early academic background in Law, Jill undertook research into the experience of families who have children with severe physical, medical or intellectual challenges on behalf of the Health Service in Northern Ireland. As a result of this work, she wrote a book for families and presented her findings in a paper to the government of Northern Ireland. Following a divergence into theological studies, Jill joined the faculty of Belfast Bible College - part of Queen’s University Belfast – where she teaches in the areas of Pastoral Studies, Historical and Contemporary Spirituality, Ecclesiology and Disability Theology. she completed her doctoral work on the spiritual experience of people with profound intellectual disabilities. Her primary research interests are in the area of disability theology and intellectual disability theology in particular; her doctoral work was an exploration of the spirituality of people with profound intellectual disabilities. She has spoken on the subject at conferences in Zurich, Durham, London and Atlanta. She is also interested in questions concerning the relationship between academic theology and spirituality and the relationship between the Academy and the Church. Jill is particularly passionate about the College’s new and innovative Centre for Intellectual Disability Theology and Ministry which, in addition to offering academic opportunities in disability theology, works with families, professionals, organisations and churches to help promote the integration and support of people with intellectual disabilities and their families within faith communities. She is married to William, a Christian minister, and they have three grown-up children. Ben works as a soccer coach on Long Island, New York (you can’t really call that work!) Alex lives in Madrid where he is an interpreter and translator. Both boys are reasonably handsome but Rebecca, who has profound intellectual and physical disabilities, is absolutely beautiful.

**Luca Badetti, Jean Vanier Emerging Scholar Lecture**

Luca Badetti, PhD in Disability Studies, is the Director of Community Life at L'Arche Chicago.

He examines human experience and disability's place in it from a scholarly interdisciplinary background and his communal journey. Before his doctorate from the University of Illinois at Chicago, he obtained a MS in Clinical Psychology and a BA in Theology with studies in Philosophy. Luca is a fellow of LEND (Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and related Disabilities), has been a research assistant at the Institute on Disability and Human Development in Chicago (working on projects related to Special Olympics, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, The Autism Program, etc.), has taught on disability and human development at UIC, and has provided mental health therapy at the Developmental Disabilities Family Clinics.

Luca is a Scientific Committee Member for a Disability Studies book series (Erickson editions) and is on the Advisory Committee for the Italian Journal of Disability Studies. He has recently given a TEDx talk on embracing (in)abilities.

In his current role at L'Arche Chicago, Luca oversees and supports community life. He has been a live-in assistant at L'Arche Irenicon, L'Arche in Rome (Italy) and L'Arche Trosly (France), and has co-chaired L'Arche USA National Inclusion Team.