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Title

Rabbi Allen Bennett Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

May 3rd, 2009

Extant

1 hour 56 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

Rabbi Allen Bennett discusses his early life and the discrimination he faced, both before and after coming out, as well as his struggle to minister to a Jewish gay community in the midst of the AIDS epidemic.

Biographical

Rabbi Allen Bennett was born Allen Blumenstein in 1946 in Akron, Ohio. Shortly thereafter his father legally changed the family name to Bennett. From a young age, Allen was identified by his peers as a prospective rabbi. A critical part of his early formation was his participation in summer camp every year at Camp Nebagamon in Wisconsin beginning at age 11. He continues to relate to the camp to this day.

Allen attended Western Reserve University (later Case Western Reserve University) in Cleveland, Ohio, where he earned a B.A. with honors in Psychology in 1968. He attended the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform Jewish seminary) in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he earned a Bachelor of Hebrew Letters in 1972 and a Master of Arts in Hebrew Letters as well as rabbinical ordination in 1974.

Allen's first inklings that he might be homosexual emerged in his late teen years and grew to fruition during his years in seminary. However, because of strong antigay policies at the seminary in those days, he remained closeted.

Upon ordination Rabbi Bennett moved to Rochester, Minnesota, where he began a one-year residency program in Clinical Pastoral Education, leading to his certification as a hospital chaplain. He served two more years there as Jewish chaplain for the two hospitals affiliated with

the Mayo Clinic, while serving as rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel, the multi-denominational synagogue in Rochester. He married there in 1976 and separated less than a year later and divorced.

In 1977 Rabbi Bennett began a doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he began work towards a Ph.D. in Theology, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology. During this time he also taught courses in various Jewish-related subjects, first at Emeritus College at the College of Marin, and later at other colleges and universities in the Bay Area. During this time he also connected with gay synagogue in San Francisco, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, that was founded in 1977.

In 1978 Bennett was invited by an activist friend to come out as a gay rabbi in the media as part of the campaign against the Briggs Initiative in California. Even though that strategy was nixed, Bennett was interviewed by a The San Francisco Examiner reporter who wrote about Bennett following the election. He subsequently was identified in other media, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Advocate, as the first openly gay rabbi in the U.S. In 1979 he was elected Rabbi at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav. Early in his time at the synagogue he officiated at the funeral of Harvey Milk. There he met Stephen who was the sign language interpreter with whom he developed a partnership for the next several years.

Following his service at Sha'ar Zahav he was appointed Assistant Director of the Northern Pacific Regional office of the American Jewish Congress, a position he held for five years, until becoming Regional Executive Director in 1989. From July 1993 until August 1996 he served as the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of the Greater East Bay, headquartered in Oakland, California. At the end of September 1996, Rabbi Bennett became the Rabbi at Temple Israel in Alameda.

Active in interfaith and other civic activities, Rabbi Bennett has served on the Executive Board of the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition of Minnesota, the Task Force on Self-Esteem of the City and County of San Francisco, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, the Intergroup Clearinghouse, the Mayor's Committee for a Living Holocaust Memorial, the Mayor's Committee on Continuing Education against Nazism, the Conference of Black and Jewish Clergy, the San Francisco Interfaith Coalition on AIDS, the Coalition for Civil Rights, the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns, the Northern California Martin Luther King, Jr., Birthday Observance Committee, the San Francisco Interfaith Council, as Chair of the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, the Interfaith Voice for Religious Liberty, the East Bay Interfaith Coalition on HIV/AIDS, and "Yet Another Jew for Affirmative Action". He was the Jewish representative taking testimony at the U.N.- sponsored Oakland Hearings on Racism as a Violation of Human Rights and served on the Religious Service Providers Task Force of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission and the Board of Most Holy Redeemer AIDS Support Group in San Francisco. Bennett currently serves on the Alta Bates Hospital Chaplaincy Advisory Board, the East Bay Council of Rabbis, the Editorial Council of Sequoia Magazine, and the Leadership Team and the Race and Community Relations Planning Team of the FAITHS Initiative of the San Francisco Foundation

Rabbi Bennett lives in San Francisco and his hobbies include sailing, socio-linguistics, playing keyboard instruments, computers, music and the other fine arts.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBT-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Scope and Content

The first openly gay rabbi in the USA, Rabbi Allen Bennett came out in 1978, and worked, through numerous leadership positions, to advance LGBT acceptance, among other activist causes. He discusses his early life and the discrimination he faced, both before and after coming out, as well as his struggle to minister to a Jewish gay community in the midst of the AIDS epidemic.

Access

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

Jewish (Reform)

AIDS

Clergy Activist

Ordination/clergy

California

Bennett, Allen