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Title

Allyson Nelson Abrams Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 5th, 2019

Extant

1 hour 30 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

Bishop Allyson Abrams reflects on her Baptist upbringing and the barriers she faced to becoming a pastor as a woman, as well as her experience as a pastor, including her cooperation with local politicians and her work for social causes such as immigration, as well as being outed for her marriage to Bishop Emeritus Diana William.

Biographical

Allyson Abrams grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama. Her parents were both highly educated; her father had a Bachelor's degree and her mother had two Masters. The family attended many arts and cultural events. They would also travel, both with her mother's sorority and later with a choir group. She was heavily involved in music and was also in band and took piano lessons. Her family also spent a lot of time at church and she recalls being involved in many church activities throughout her childhood and into her college years. Her mother was often a "speaker" at their church, as women were not allowed to be preachers in the Baptist denomination. Around the age of seven or eight, she remembers God spoke to her and said that one day she would preach.

In high school, Bishop Dr. Abrams excelled in math and was also good at science. Her passion however, has always been music. When it was time to go to college and pursue a major, she wanted to apply to Howard University's music program to become a concert pianist. However, after missing the deadline for the music program, she was accepted for Howard's engineering program. Still, music was never far from her heart and during her coursework for engineering, she decided to switch to the Fine Arts program. Unfortunately, the Dean of Engineering would

not release her from the program to pursue music classes and she would later graduate Howard with a degree in mechanical engineering.

Later after graduating and working in Washington, D.C. for the government, she moved back to Alabama and went to law school. While she enjoyed law school, it was during her second year that her encounter with God as a child came back to her. She began to have feelings about the path she was on and would also start to have dreams about preaching and being in the pulpit. After much contemplation and prayer, Abrams could not ignore what God had put on her heart and she would leave law school and begin attending United Theological Seminary in Ohio. She and her husband would divorce during her time in seminary.

Once graduating from seminary, she would have a difficult time finding a church home as many Baptist churches did not believe in women pastors. However, Dr. Abrams was voted upon and called to be the first female pastor of a church on the East Side of Detroit. Zion Progress Baptist Church. Zion Progress Baptist focused on African American issues, social justice and worked to help those in need in an impoverished part of Detroit. During her time at Zion Progress, Abrams would obtain her Doctorate of Ministry. She would also be involved in NAACP, the local school board, and a fellow of Michigan Political Leadership Program. She would also develop relationships with Congressmen and Senators for her state and district and ask them to come and speak to her congregation as a means of community involvement and connection. In 2012, Dr. Abrams was consecrated as Bishop at Pneuma Christian Fellowship. In 2013, she resigned from Zion Progress Baptist Church after it was announced that she had married Bishop Diana Williams.

After her resignation in Detroit, Abrams wanted to reside in a place that had legal protections for same sex couples and families. She and Williams would move to the D.C./Maryland area and Abrams would found Empowerment Liberation Cathedral (ELC) in 2014.

As the head of ELC, Bishop Dr. Abrams seeks to work with those that have been outcast and hurt by the church in the past. She wants ELC to be a safe space for all congregants. Much like her work in Detroit, Abrams focuses on justice and gender equality, but has also now expanded into LGBTQ, immigration, and mental health issues.

Bishop Dr. Abrams and her wife, Bishop Diana Williams live in the D.C./Maryland area and have three college-graduate children

Scope and Content

Bishop Allyson Abrams founded and established Empowerment Liberation Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in May 2014, after being outed for her marriage to Bishop Emeritus Diana Williams in Detroit. Abrams reflects on her Baptist upbringing and the barriers she faced to becoming a pastor as a woman in a Black church, as well as her experience as a pastor, including her cooperation with local politicians and her work for social causes such as immigration.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Monique Moultrie, an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, and author of *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She conducted this interview as a consultant of LGBTQ-RAN as part of the oral histories project.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/allyson-nelson-abrams>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

This tape was given to LGBTQ-RAN archives by interviewer.

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Tags

Abrams, Allyson Bishop