

- Bishop Dr. Abrams: I had a gentleman who was coming to our church, just visiting. His friend is a very good friend of ours, and he goes to Howard Chapel usually on Sunday, Rankin Chapel. And so he used to visit our church maybe once a month or something like that, but he sent me a text message and said, "Bishop, I also work with kids in the schools." He said they were honoring, I don't know if it was black women or something that day, and he showed me a flyer where somebody had brought it to school and said, "This is the person I'm honoring." It had my picture on it.
- Monique Moultrie: Aww.
- Bishop Dr. Abrams: It said, "Bishop Abrams you know, visit us at Empowerment Liberation Cathedral." And so I was like, "Oh, wow. How did the kid get my ...?"
- Monique Moultrie: Yeah.
- Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so you never know how people find you. And then I had some other kids once about three years ago that wrote me a letter and told me they wanted to come to the church and interview me. They were from high school. They were having a project at school and they wanted ... I'm like, "Okay, how do these kids even know about me?" And so I think it's important where the information's out there so people who are maybe queer, people who are questioning, people who are trying to find themselves, their identity, that information's out there and they can listen to people's stories and know that things do get better.
- Monique Moultrie: Absolutely.
- Bishop Dr. Abrams: If this is who you are.
- Monique Moultrie: Absolutely, and I really, for my project I've looked at different formats of public-facing versions of this particular project just for that very reason. I think that the academy mostly speaks to itself, and so I'm going to publish with the University Press. They're going to set a price point. It might price itself out from being widely accessible because of that reason, but the democratization of information really comes via the web and social media, and the ability to ... One of the things Mark wants to do from these oral histories is to make snippets, podcast snippets, so that they could be used in educational purposes for like five-minute segue into talking about intersectionality, and then you hear some person speak about that. That's his hope for the future of the website. Originally it started with an idea of chronicling, both like the actual physical papers that people were dying and leaving behind like, "Here are all the first minutes of the meeting, and this first group that we recognized."
- Bishop Dr. Abrams: Right, exactly.

Monique Moultrie: And their family members didn't know what to do with them, or didn't value them. And so the website became a way of, "Let's just not have another library where you have to get off time from work and go be stuck by a library schedule to access the material, but let's digitally scan everything, and just no pay wall, just have you come to the site and be able to use it."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: And so that's been the plan for the future of the project. But I really liked my working relationship with Mark so well that I trust him. He doesn't put up anything that hasn't been approved, and that's important for me for my own integrity as a scholar, is that if someone has trusted me with their story that I don't abuse that trust by not giving them the rite of passage. If someone, "Hmm, changed my mind. Don't really want to share that," and Mark doesn't put up anything until he's been given the go-ahead by me, and I've been given the go-ahead by the person that I interviewed.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: And so I'm in that sense kind of more confident that what's up there will be the best representation the person wants for perpetuity, for as long as we can keep the website going.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay. Okay, good.

Monique Moultrie: He's working on endowing it, so ...

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay. Well, can we pray before we start?

Monique Moultrie: Absolutely.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I just want to make sure that my mind is able to be clear and give you what it is that you are trying to get from me, okay?

Monique Moultrie: Yes.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So let's pray. Precious God, we just thank you for this time. God, we thank you for traveling grace and traveling mercy for Monique. God, I ask that you will continue to bless the project, the book project which she's doing, and bless all of those who have been a part and those who will be coming to be a part of this project. God, cover our time together. I ask that your spirit would move in a mighty way. I ask that you will speak volumes, and God I ask that we might both be pleased with the results that you give us on today. God, this is our prayer. We look to you in Jesus' holy name we do pray, amen.

Monique Moultrie: Amen.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Amen.

Monique Moultrie: Thank you so much. So I'm going to put us on official record. We are here together. My name is Monique Moultrie, and today is October 5th, 2019. I'm here with Bishop Dr. Bishop Dr. Abrams to conduct an oral history for both the LGBT-RAN website and my research project. Tentatively right now it's called Hidden Histories: The Faith Activism of Black Religious Lesbians. And I'm going to start with some questions, and at any point you want to pass, feel free. That is more than normal.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: Lots of people do that. And if you get questions that you want to elaborate more on or you want to go more in depth than what I specifically asked, feel free to do that. Oral histories tell the life span story, so I'm going to start early on.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: And I'm going to hit some milestones, and then we're going to move to certain segments that I want to amplify both for the project and I think for your audience to know. And so as we do that, I'm going to ask some questions about dates so that we can chronicle this in the best way possible. So I start it, as I said, early in the beginning. I read that you were baptized in Birmingham, Alabama, so-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: You start there.

Monique Moultrie: I'm starting early.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: Even before the baptism.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: I want you to talk about your early life. What type of neighborhood did you grow up in? What was your family life like?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. I think when I look back at my childhood time, whenever I go back to Birmingham I actually drive on the street just because I want to see my mom's old house and my old house. But growing up, I was always in church. I heard somebody say last night at a conference I was at, if there's such a term as born in the church, I would say I probably was born in the church. I was always there. My parents were educated. They both were college educated. My father had a bachelor's degree. My mother had two master's and had hours towards a doctor's degree, so very well-educated

parents. Middle-class neighborhood, a very good school. Even though we lived in the city of Birmingham, it was not like the inner city, if I can call it that. And so we were very church-oriented, very culturally diverse, went to arts-type events.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: My mother was a part of a sorority and so we traveled some with those who were a part of her sorority, and I traveled some with the school. I just did all of those types of things, even as a young person. So typical piano lessons like most ... I guess I don't want to say everybody, so middle-class people I guess would take some type of music instrument lesson. I was in the band, did choir, those types of things. So being in the church, hearing my mother speak on many occasions ... My mother was a speaker back then. In the Baptist church you could not be a preacher. You had to be a speaker in the black Baptist church in the South, so she was a speaker, per se. And she would go around to many churches speaking when I was a child, and I remember thinking, "Oh, I would not want to do that." So I remember sitting in the back of many churches hearing her speak. She was a great speaker, but I was just thinking, "I am not doing that."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I remember God spoke to me. I must have been about seven or eight. We were in a church, and it wasn't until many years later, probably I was in my 40s when it came back. God spoke to me. No, I was in my 30s when I had to deal with this. In the back pew of a church in Birmingham, that was my mother's church she grew up in, she went back to speak I think for their women's day or something like that, and God spoke to me. I think I was eight, maybe. He said, "You'll do that one day." I said, "Oh no, God, I'm not doing that." So that was where I was, and so that was before I even got baptized or any of that stuff. But I remember God clearly speaking to me in that church and telling me what I was supposed to do.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so talk to me about your extended family. Did you have siblings? What did you all do for fun?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Most of the time I was with my cousins and my grandmothers. I did have friends on the street. My father had a son who was much older than me, and so we did not grow up in the same household. I actually think I was maybe 12 or 13 when I met him, so we did not grow up in the same household, so I didn't have that experience. So basically, my friends or the people that I would do things with. My cousins were the people I was always allowed to spend a night with and do things with, because we would be at my grandmother's house.

Monique Moultrie: And what was fun? What was a typical fun activity?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Oh, a lot of stuff we did was church, so a lot of activities we did with church. But we would go to the State Fair. We would go skating, to the skating rink. Back then, kids would do that kind of stuff. We'd play outside. I loved being outside. The only problem was, outside often times did not like me because I had a problem with playing in the grass or red bugs and all that kind of stuff. So, and then I was allergic to mosquitoes and so it would not be a good time, but I did

enjoy being outside, but I would have problems by the time I got back inside. So those types of things, you know, we just had good, clean fun, I would say. We played football. We played the kickball in the middle of the street. We played basketball. I loved basketball. I've always played basketball with the boys, for those who had basketball goals at their house. Soccer, I mean we just had good, clean fun.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so those type of things we did. Now when it rained, there were some problems. So we would play jacks on the porch, because some people had enclosed porches. Back then we had that at my house, and some other people on the street. And then I think somewhere along the way, Atari or something came out and so people started doing the Atari stuff. And so kids on the block had the Atari games, and we would play that. That seems so ancient, but we would play that. I think it was Space something and Ms. Pac-Man, so those were the types of things that we did for fun. But most of the time, the church had events and the youth would go there. I was always an usher, always sang in the choir and whatever else they made me do. You know, as a child you were made to do things.

Monique Moultrie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bishop Dr. Abrams: You didn't have things like there are today where you say, "Oh, I don't want to do that." So they said, "Oh, you're doing such-and-such." That's what you were doing, so that's the kind of way I grew up.

Monique Moultrie: And what were some of the values that you were given? What were core messages of who you should grow up to be that you were given as a child?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, one thing which my wife and I talked about a lot is, you basically were raised to be heterosexual. You definitely were taught that you were going to marry a man and have children, and so there was no thought that there was anything else that was available to you. But you were also taught to be committed to your faith and to practice that regularly. To also use your gifts and talents for the church, but to be an honest person in society. I would say I definitely was taught that by my parents. You were also taught to do what was right by others, whether you knew them or not, and to follow the laws. So whatever the laws are, I look at what's happening today in the country and you're like, "Okay, well, this person missed this lesson." So whatever the laws are, that's what you were supposed to be following to be an upstanding citizen.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But mostly to love people and treat people right, and to not look down on people. Sometimes people look at me like, "Well, how are you not looking down on this person? This person has this problem, that problem." But I was never taught to look down on people, because people have challenges. People have different things they have to work through, and so that's just a part of who people are. I had a cousin, it was my mother's first cousin so it would be my second cousin, that I don't even know what to say his diagnosis would be. We just knew that he had some challenges, and I think all families when I look at it

have a person that may have some challenges. But we were never taught to mistreat him, talk to him in any negative or derogatory manner. We were never taught any of that, so we treated him as one of the family members. We loved him, and we still love him today even though his mother died about five years ago, our great-aunt.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So respect people, honor family. We were taught to be family-oriented, but to be respectful in what you do and what you say. Definitely don't burn your bridges, because you never know who you might need. So those are the types of things that I was taught. And I never realized it, but I grew up in the Bible Belt so I never knew how much Bible was instilled in us, and how much we were taught to just simply go with God, until I moved to other areas of the country and realized, "Everybody doesn't have this same type of teaching." So that was an interesting piece for me to understand that I was in the Bible Belt where they ingrain everything in you, and pretty much it's an evangelical area, you know?

Monique Moultrie: Right.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And it's a red state, and so but also to speak up for what's right. Don't just allow things to happen. It's important to speak up, and so I think that's why I've always been an advocate. I was an elected official for a while, and I always wanted to make sure that others receive the justice and equality that they're supposed to receive.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so let's jump ahead to high school. What was high school like? What were your favorite classes? What did you do for fun?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: High school I would say, I got into a high school sorority I think in 10th grade. We had those in Birmingham. I'm not sure if everybody has those. And I think for fun, well, the class that I always loved was anything with mathematics. My father was a mathematician. They tell me he graduated two years ahead of time. Both my parents are deceased, so it's not like I can go back and ask them. But he was a mathematician, so math came very easy to me. So I would say possibly trigonometry was one of the classes I really enjoyed. Algebra one and two, I really loved those classes. Band and choir was my thing. I loved to sing, and I'm a music person. I'm musically inclined. My father played many instruments, so those were the ones that I really, really enjoyed.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Science, yes, my mother was a scientist and she had all her extra degrees in science. So science I was good with, but that wasn't my favorite. So that's why I went ahead and got an engineering degree, because those two together. But I would say the most fun things that I did was with my sorority sisters. You know in high school, you've always got to have a fit-in type of thing, and you've got to be a part of a group. And so to be a part of the sorority, and then to be the dean of pledgees, and then to get to be the vice-president of the sorority and to have this camaraderie with all these people who had graduated that were a part of the sorority that had come back, it was a great feeling. We would march in parades and those types of things, and it was just, it was a lot of fun.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: The choir I would say would be the most culturally diverse experience for me, because our choir, we traveled across the country. Like during spring break we would travel to other parts of the country and do performances for alumni that would invite us to their area. So every year, everybody would look forward to this. You know as a young person, "Hey, we're going to sing in Cleveland, then we're going to Detroit, then we're going to New York," or we're going to all these different places. It was very exciting, and you had so many people who wanted to be in the choir, but you can only take a certain number of people when you go on these types of trips. We were actually invited to Australia, but we were not able to raise the money to go to Sydney, but that would have been an awesome experience for some black children from the South, to be able to go and sing in Sydney, Australia. So those were some great experiences that come to mind.

Monique Moultrie: During your high school years or earlier, did you experience any knowledge of an attraction to girls?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: No. Now what I did I would say notice is I always felt women were very beautiful. I was very attracted to women I would say, but I would not say attracted to the point where I wanted to be in a relationship with them, attracted to the point where I touched anybody inappropriately or had them touch me or say, "Hey, let's try this," or, "Let's try that." Never at that point had any of that, because like I said, we were strictly taught, "This is what you are. This is who you are going to be, and this is what you shall do." And so really, I think maybe we talked about the choir director. People in the choir said, "Oh, he's gay." And so it was like, "Oh, okay." But none of the people around me that I knew of, because I realize today you never know what people are doing. But none of the people around me were experimenting or doing anything in any type of same-sex relationships, so it wasn't as if I even had friends to have any of those discussions with.

Monique Moultrie: Okay. So let's talk now about what led you from Alabama to D.C. What was appealing about Howard?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I guess one of the things I had always heard was that this is the institution that puts out dynamic African-Americans that contribute a lot to society. And so being that I was studying to be a concert pianist, even though my school wanted me to be an engineer, they said, "You've got the mind. You can't waste your mind." Because I ended up graduating as salutatorian from my high school class, and I think there was 0.03 or something difference between me and the valedictorian. So, and me and the valedictorian it turns out, in elementary school, we went from K through eight. Elementary school, I was the valedictorian and she was salutatorian, so now we switched up. I was salutatorian and she was the ... I'm sorry, I can't believe that happened.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But I really wanted to do music. That was my love. That was my heart. That was my passion, and so I had been studying music the entire time I was in high school. I think I started taking piano when I was maybe 12, 13, somewhere

around there. So I really wanted to go there, because they had produced some great people in music, some legends. So I was preparing ... My piano teacher was working with me to prepare a piece to play for the competition, because to get into Howard's music department you have to have a piece prepared and send it in, and then they review it and decide if they're going to accept you. But I also felt Southern University was a place I wanted to go, because I used to be a majorette in high school and I was part of the band, the marching band, and I loved their Dancing Dolls. So I was kind of like, "Okay. Well, do I go to D.C. or do I go to Louisiana to go to be a part of the Southern band?"

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I think what happened was I missed the deadline to submit my tape or something for Howard, but I knew I still wanted to be in the vicinity. So if I don't go to the music department, I could always apply for engineering, because I knew I had the grades to do that but I really wanted to do the music. So my counselor advised me to submit an application for the music department, I mean for the engineering school. So I did that, knowing that in my heart I still really wanted to do music, but I got accepted probably before Christmas to go to Howard the following year. So Southern and Hampton, I had written them, accepted me I think it was much later. It was probably like in February or something like that. So Hampton, I had a teacher who had gone to Hampton who had talked about, I need to go there. "Don't go to Howard. It's not the real HU," and I should go to Hampton.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I said, "Well, you know, no. I think I'm going to go to Howard," because so many people at the church that I had changed to had children or nieces and nephews that had gone to Howard, and they all talked about the reputation of the school, the vigorous training and teaching to get there, and once again all the top people that are African-American that had come out of this institution. So I said, "Okay, this is what I want to do." My mother, she was okay with that. She was very supportive. She was an educator. Like I said, she had hours towards a doctor's degree. She just wanted me to go to the best place for me. So with that, I decided to go to Howard and she had my aunt's husband to drive me up to Howard University that summer. I didn't go to summer school, but on time for the fall session to start.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so that's kind of how I got to Howard University, plus I think one of the girls in my high school sorority was at Howard as well. She was two years ahead of me and she was currently there, so her mother talked to my mother and told her about her experience and everything. So everybody kind of put in a good word here for me to go to Howard, so that's how I ended up there.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and so you decided you were going to stick with the engineering even-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well-

Monique Moultrie: Though you had music on your mind?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Two years later I had a real unrest in my spirit, and I told the dean of the school of engineering, "I really, really want to go up and talk to the fine arts people." Because what I was doing was, while I was still there at engineering school, I still took piano class. I was taking piano class in the fine arts department. So the fine arts people, I told them, I said, "Look. I really want to major in music. I want to be a fine arts major. I know this is who I am, and I just, I've been in engineering for two years and this is what I want to do." So they gave me a paper. Their dean signed it and said, "Okay, you've got to get the engineering people to release you, and then you can be a fine arts student." I said, "Okay." I walked down the hill. If you know anything about Howard, the engineering school is what's in the valley, so the fine arts school is up near Blackburn, on the hill.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I said, "Let me walk down here and get my paper signed." So I went to the school of engineering. They said, "We're not letting you out of here to go to talk about playing no music." They said, "Now, if you go to the school of business, yes, but you've got too much brain to be over there talking about just music." I was crushed. I was like, "I've done all ..." I even talked to my mother. I had my mother finally be okay with that. You know, she's a scientist. She felt like I should be an engineer, too. But I said, "This is who I am. This is what I want to do." And so they said, "No, you're not doing that." And I'm like, "I don't want to be in the school of business. I have no desire to be in the school of business." They said, "Well, we are not going to let you out of school of engineering to go over there." So, I graduated with an engineering degree.

Monique Moultrie: Okay.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Because they refused to let me out.

Monique Moultrie: Okay.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So that was very interesting. Because I'm like, "Okay, if I come to you and say this is who I am and this is what I want to do, y'all should be able to sign the paper." But no, they would not.

Monique Moultrie: So how do you go from being trained as an engineer, but not having that really be what you're passionate about, to what you decide to do next?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well-

Monique Moultrie: Because I've read that you decided to go to law school, which-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I did. You've got the whole story, don't you?

Monique Moultrie: Which seemed to be an odd segue, but tell me how that segue occurs.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, how that happened is when I graduated from Howard I knew either I wanted to be an obstetrician, because I knew I wouldn't do engineering. That

was just like, "Oh, no. I'm not doing that." So I wanted to be an obstetrician or be a lawyer, and I had taken a pre-law class while I was at Howard. So I felt like, "Okay, I'm very passionate about a lot of stuff, and so this could be me." So because I had seen some other people who had really struggled in the area of music so I was like, "Okay, maybe I need to be doing that." So to go to medical school, you had to take organic chemistry. All the people were complaining about organic chemistry, how difficult it was. Now, I was an A student coming out of high school and I think I was a B student at Howard, because sometimes I was doing other things, like a lot of other kids do.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But the thing is, if everybody's complaining about it, I should have taken the challenge on versus let them discourage me from taking the class. So they were all griping about how hard it is, how many times people had to take it to try to pass. I was like, "Well, I'm not going to be taking the class two or three times just to pass it, so no." So I decided I would let the medical school go, and I would go to law school. So my mother passed. I went back to stay in her house in Birmingham for a little while, and went to law school there. I was in the top I think three or five in the class, so I didn't realize I was going to enjoy law school, but I really did enjoy it. And I got picked on a lot, because the dean used to always say, "Oh, Ms. Howard University, I'm sure you've got the answer to this."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so it was funny because a friend of mine who the second semester after I had been there for a semester from Birmingham decided to come and go there, too. So then she moved back to Birmingham before I did, and so she decided at the same time she would go to law school, so we were there together. And my roommate from Howard University decided to go back to Houston, where she came from, and she went to law school at the same time. So it was like all three of us were in law school at the same time. So I really had this something that was bothering me continuously about changing my course. I started having dreams, and I started feeling like I was hearing God speaking to me about, "That's not what I'm supposed to be doing." So finally, I decided I was going to talk to somebody. It was a trusted friend who later became the president of the school where I went to law school, of the undergraduate piece there.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so he was a minister. He was a CME minister. He told me, "Oh, I wouldn't trust a dream. I would go back and ask God." So I felt it was kind of derogatory, but sometimes men can be derogatory if you tell them about your call to ministry. So I did go back and I asked God. I said, "God, you know, is this really what you're saying for me to do? I need to know, so can you show it to me again?" So I had a dream that was very clear, to where I could see me in the pulpit preaching in the church. I could see the pews. I could see the pews had crosses on it. I could see the stained glass windows, and it was like people were sitting in the pews and I was talking. I had on a robe, and I had on some kind of stole or something. There was a Bible up there.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I was like, "Okay, God. I'll never ask anybody again about what it is I'm supposed to be doing." And so I never went back to him; didn't need to, because I felt that as a male, he was not supporting what I knew God said for me to do. And that

might have just been my own perception, or it might have just been how he talked to people. I don't know, but at that point I said, "No, I'm definitely not going to go back to him again." So at that point, I knew I needed to make some type of transition because it's important I think to be trained and educated in the field that you want to go in. So many people feel like they could just get up and preach and don't have to go to any type of school, seminary or anything like that. But I feel that it's important to be trained, so I told the dean, but they gave me a hard time. It was all good though, but they gave me a hard time.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I told the dean, I said, "Well, look. I think I need to leave law school because I believe God's called me to preach and I'm going to go ..." He's like, "What? Who leaves law school to go preach?" I said, "Well, this is what I believe I'm supposed to do." He was like, "Are you going to make any money doing that?" And so that's kind of the mindset he was in. And I was like, "Well, look. I'm just letting you know I need to withdraw so that I can do what God's called me to do." He was like, "Okay. Well, if you ever need to come back, you can." So I said, "Okay." So I-

Monique Moultrie: What year of law school was this?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Second year, after ... It was almost the second half of the second year. So I thus left the law school to go pursue ministry.

Monique Moultrie: So let's backtrack. You spoke about having this vision, this dream, and seeing very clearly that you were going to be in a pulpit. Talk about the spiritual practices you maintained in college and then in law school.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Oh, okay.

Monique Moultrie: Were there ways in which you knew to trust this voice within?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yeah.

Monique Moultrie: You felt a deeper connection to God in some specific way?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: When I was in college, I knew that I needed to find me a place of worship, because I did not want to be one who falls off or goes astray. And I talked to my family about that and they said, "Yeah, you've got to find your church." And so I did. I found one church that was close, kind of what I felt was close enough to the school for me to get to, that was African-American, that still kind of resembled my church I came out of. It was a larger church. They had different ministries they offered, different choirs, and it just seemed like it was a fit for me.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I went there, I don't know if it was four months or six months. And so my mom's principal at the school where she was teaching, his nephew was at Howard as well. So he also was two years ahead of me, so they made sure that

we were connected. So he, one week when I saw him he said, "Well, what church you been going to?" And I said, "Oh, I've been going over such-and-such." He said, "No, you need to come to my church." And I said, "Well, what church you go to?"

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I then went to his church, and that was the church that I stayed at for the rest of the time I was at Howard, even the church I was licensed and ordained in and my pastor installed me as the pastor of a church in Detroit and all of that, so that was the church I stayed at and had the relationship with. So with that, I went to a lot of the training classes on different parts of the Bible, and one Sunday when I was sitting in the church the pastor ... It was somewhere near Easter. He was preaching and it's like I had this profound experience. It's like I understood Jesus on another level. I don't really know how to explain it, but it was something that happened to me when I was sitting there in the pew that made me feel totally different from the way I had felt any time before. It's like I was able to connect or something with Jesus and the spirit on another level.

Monique Moultrie: So while you were at Howard you were licensed, or you came back and were licensed at that congregation?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yeah, I came back.

Monique Moultrie: And that congregation was in D.C.?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: And you went to seminary in Ohio.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes, but I couldn't go to seminary without my pastor saying that it was okay. And then you have to come back to the church and make an announcement that you've been called to ministry, so I had to come back and make that announcement. Then you have to come back and do your trial sermon, so I had to come back and do that. So yes, I was still under his authority even though I went to seminary over there.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so you're in seminary being trained.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: But you're still going back to D.C. to follow the-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: Rubric of what you needed to do in order to be licensed.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and were you licensed in a timely fashion?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yeah, I was licensed.

Monique Moultrie: Was there any sexism involved in delaying?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-mm (negative). He previously, I don't know if it was 10 years before I got to the church, somewhere he changed in his theology and belief about women being able to preach. Initially, it was a Baptist church, he did not believe in women preaching or being in the pulpit and all of that, but he did change in his theology. So by the time I got to the church, there was a woman who he had licensed to be in the pulpit and to preach. And then my church in high school, there was a woman ... This was my first time seeing a woman in the pulpit. But my church in high school, there was a woman there that was licensed to preach and so I got a chance to see a lot of women who were doing ministry. So I didn't come from necessarily that place where I had not seen women who were licensed and ordained to do ministry.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so in the process of being licensed and ordained, the calling, the vision that you had was to preach. Did you think that vision was also calling you to pastor?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I did. At one point, at first I was like, "God, isn't most people doing evangelism and stuff? Because I know you called me to pastor a church." But the more and more I prayed about it and tried to get clarity about it, I felt that God was saying for me to pastor a church.

Monique Moultrie: Okay. And so let's do some time markers. So you've left law school. You enter seminary round about when?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Seminary I went to in '98.

Monique Moultrie: And so you were licensed and ordained when?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I started seminary, I believe I got the license in '99. I know I was ordained in 2001. Because what happens with our church under our pastor, you know all pastors are different and all denominations are different. Once you finish seminary, he believes that you need to have a seminary degree before you are ordained for ministry. So once you finish seminary, then you would qualify to be ordained. I finished seminary in December 2000, so 2001 in June I was ordained along with six other people.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so after seminary you now believed you have a calling to preach, and you are still-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, before seminary I knew I had a call to preach.

Monique Moultrie: Well, to pastor, excuse me.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: To pastor, so you start the process in the Baptist tradition of applying for these positions that clearly say, "We want a married man of God."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: A man, exactly.

Monique Moultrie: So ...

Bishop Dr. Abrams: That was really a very hard time, because I went to United Methodist seminary, and most of those people who come out of United Methodist seminary are thus placed in a church. So they go from seminary to, "Hey, I'm pastoring this church." I don't care if there's 20 people over there, they get to pastor that church. So in the Baptist sense, it was very different because you had to apply and candidate for different churches. A lot of churches, when I was looking down the list because they were also part of American Baptist, American Baptist has a listing of churches that are open and available. So when I would look down the list and it would say, "Looking for a seminarian to blah, blah, blah" or whatever, and they didn't say, "Looking for a man" specifically I'd say, "Okay, maybe this church is open."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So you would turn in your information to them, and a lot of those people don't even give you a call, don't send you a letter, just kind of act like you didn't even send them anything. And then some of those that you do send something to that do respond, they say, "Well ..." They give you the scripture, I think it's Timothy and, "This is what we're looking for." So I have so many of those, I really should have kept them all and put them in a big stack so I could show them to somebody one day. But I had so many of those. I was very discouraged for a long time, because it just seemed like, "Okay, now. If God has called you to do this, why are you not able to do it?"

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So there was a church in Ohio. It was a Baptist church, and this particular gentleman did ordain his first woman. And so with that, he had me come over to their church sometimes and do some things, but that's not the same as having a placement. So when I got out, I got so many of those letters delivered, so like I said, it was very discouraging. However, you keep believing and keep sending the stuff out, and just believed that something would change. So while I was in seminary right before I finished, I was at a church in Detroit, Second Baptist Church, which was, he was open. If he wasn't a Harvard grad or he was a Princeton grad, one of those, and so he was very open to women. But when I finished, it wasn't that they were still trying to pay me and keep me on. So when I sent out all these letters, nobody received me, then I started my own church. And I did not want to do that, but I did that in an effort to go with what I believed the call was for me.

Monique Moultrie: So was this church in Detroit or Ohio?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I did start that church in Detroit. Yeah, because once I moved to Detroit and I stayed I think at that church maybe three months after I finished seminary, the church where I was serving while I was in seminary. So I never did leave Detroit after that. I stayed there. Ohio, when I was working in Detroit I would drive back and forth for like a year or so, on the weekends, to Detroit. So I just moved to Detroit after I finished.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and I saw that the church was Baptist too, that you started.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: Why?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, because I was a part of the Baptist denomination, my ordination was Baptist. All of my credentials were Baptist, so that's why I did that. I was part of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and they had a move. Their mission department wanted to have pastors start churches, so they did give us the small amount of \$5,000 as a seed to help you go out and start your church, and so I was one of the churches. Most of those people who got those were Africans, and they were starting African churches in different parts of the United States. But they gave one to me as an African-American to start a church as well, so that's why it was still Baptist. It was with the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and what did you see as a social issue, or what were the things you were wanting your church to be known for when you first started the church?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I was always an advocate for justice for African-Americans, and I still am an advocate for that. Because coming from the South, I had seen the deep racism, experienced it firsthand, and so that was a very big issue for me as well as the gender equality. So those were two that were on my radar, but when you talk about church, more so African-Americans. Because in Detroit, when I started my church I was on the east side of Detroit, which is a very impoverished area. We were in one of the empowerment zones, what they called empowerment zones back then, and those are the zones that get all the money because the people are so marginalized in those areas, so that's where we were. So you have to deal with racism, and why are the people institutionally being treated this way, and what can we do to help black people to be able to be empowered and come out of these types of situations?

Monique Moultrie: So the point in which you started your church, were you a mother then?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: And were you still married?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: No. I divorced in seminary.

Monique Moultrie: And so as a single mother pastoring this church that's focused on these holistic sort of poverty, anti-racism work, what then made you decide you wanted a DMIN?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well-

Monique Moultrie: With all the copious time you must have had?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Oh gosh, yes. Well, let me just be transparent. A lot of the jobs that I was looking at often times said they wanted a pastor with a doctor's degree. And then I know that sometimes it was helpful if you had the area that you specialized in, and so with that, worship music was again my interest. And so I had a friend who was working with a doctor's program, who called me on the phone and said, "You really need to be a part of this." And I said, "Honey, I really ain't trying to go back to nobody's classroom." That's really what I said. So he then said, "No, no. This is a great group, and it's dealing with intercultural communications, and I think this would be very good for you to be a part of this over-arching group."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I said, "Okay. If you can make sure that I get accepted to the program, then I'll go ahead and do it." And so he did, and unfortunately he died a year after we got in the group. I was like, "Wow." Now, he wanted to make sure I'm in the group and then something happened to him. So that's really how I got to the DMIN program, being that one, I knew you needed that in order to look a little bit better on your paper, but secondly, a friend of mine called me and said he really wanted me to be a part of the group.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and so that's what made the decision?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: For why to stay in the same program.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yeah, but I really also knew that it was important for me to have education and to make sure I'm honing in on a specific part of ministry. And then like I said, I had an interest in worship, wanted to know more about it because that's been always a passion for me, and so therefore when I got there, I already knew what I wanted to look at and focus on.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so when I was doing ... I looked at your LinkedIn page, and so I was trying to chronicle the different moves your life had made, in trying to prep the questions and have them go sequentially. I saw that you had been a realtor, that you were a chaplain, that you had worked for the school board, that you were a part of the Michigan Political Leadership Program.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: You were a part of the NAACP. So it seemed to me that you had some civic-minded ...

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: Organizational skills that you were putting at work.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: What needs were you meeting, or parts of your destiny were you fulfilling by taking on those various things?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, I guess when you look at the NAACP and the Michigan Political Leadership Program that trains you for public office, I did not like where I had come from with whites showing supremacy over blacks, nor did I like people being minimized or treated as if they were nobody, and treated as if they were not even human and not being allowed to be heard, and to also be disenfranchised to the point where y'all all have to be on housing assistance. You've got to be on ... Even though we were never on that, but I had a cousin. There's always a cousin. I had a cousin whose cousin was a part of the system, and so she was getting the food stamps. She had five kids and was getting money for them. She was getting, anything that they was giving, she was getting it.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so I would always hear about this stuff from my cousin, and so I was always like, "Well, why is she doing that?" You know, I never could really understand that until my godsister, who had gone to college, then left college because she became pregnant, and then started doing drugs. And she became a part of the system where she was getting food stamps and she would bring friends over from the community where they would talk about, "Well, you know if you have this amount of kids you get this amount of money," and all that kind of stuff. And I'm saying, "Well, where are our minds, we are in this particular place?" And so to me, a culture had developed and so how can we break that mindset? How can we break this poverty train that's driving our people?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so being a part of that, especially NAACP, when people call in and say, "This is what's happened to me," you get the calls and then you try to best figure out how to best support them, get the lawyers to work with them and try to bring justice in those type of situations. And so to me it's always been about trying to help people, and trying to help equality to manifest at some level, and to do justice and justice work. So if I can help anybody, then I'd be doing the job that I believe I was called to do.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so let's move from there, because we're at an hour. Let's move from there to your call to Zion Progress.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Monique Moultrie: And in breaking through the stained glass ceiling there to be called to a congregation, it seemed that you were still vocal about sexism in religious spaces, in the work force in general. Why was this important for you, and if that wasn't one of the things you saw as a signal concern that you were addressing in the congregation, what do you think some of the central focus points of your ministry there were?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, I think that that gave me a great platform because we were in a neighborhood right very close to downtown Detroit, and I established relationships with senators, congresspeople, state reps, and I would invite them in to come and talk about, what are the issues? What is your platform for the people? What is it that you plan to do for the people? Even the prosecuting attorney, I was friends with her. I had her cell phone number. I would call her and tell her, "You know, hey, come and talk to the people. Let them know what's going on, and how can we help with anything that is going on?"

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so that church I think really helped me to be able to bring in people of that magnitude, helped me to demonstrate that those people are not all the way out here. They do want to come in and talk to the people, and inform the people of the things that are happening, what's going on. Plus, they represent you. You have every right to call them in to say, "Hey, what are you doing for us? And these are our issues, and what can you do to help us with these?"

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so that's what we would do there on many occasions. We had political forums. We would have rallies at SECU, SEICU I think it is, would come there. We participated with the National Action Network also, so we did a lot of those things, and I wanted people to be more engaged as opposed to just sitting in the sideline looking at what's happening to people, as opposed to being a part of the solution. And so often times we have people in our community that just get kind of numb to it. "Oh, this is how it is." No, I want you to be a part of the solution. What can you do to help change some things? And so I was able to really bring that to the forefront there, and to expose them to that, because they had not done those types of things before, even with donating to the community.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: We had, at Christmas we would get people to bring in clothes right before Christmas, and kids' clothes, adult clothes, men's clothes, whatever. Bring them in, babies' clothes, and so we just gave stuff to people. People were like, "Do we need a voucher or something?" "No, we're just giving it out," you know? And so one time I showed up, and I think this was Christmas. The line was around the corner from the church, of people waiting for us to open the door, and there was snow outside on the ground. People were waiting for us to open the door, because they knew that they could have stuff for free. My thing was, "We're not charging anything. We're not playing any games." And people were like, "Well, do you need to see our ID card?" "No." I probably should have seen that, because some people do still have some game with them.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But our purpose was to show the community that we're about giving and helping, and making sure everybody has a good holiday and a good experience. So if you're not able to get clothes for your kids, you can definitely get some from here. If you're not able to buy anything for your husband, boyfriend or whatever, you can definitely get it from here. We just told people, "You need to have a bag so that you can put your things in," you know. So, we did those types of things when I was there.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so much has been reported. I had my work studies students give me a sort of biographical timeline for you so I could prep for the questions. And much as been reported about your resignation from the church in 2013.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yeah, so you don't need to ask me about that, do you?

Monique Moultrie: So I was going to ask, is there anything that you want actually on this record about that time or before that time that you want to say?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, let me just say right before that, I had already talked to the deacons and told them that I had married. And so they had said, "Well, whenever you are ready to talk about it, you know you can." And so I said, "Okay, well, we'll wait until after these big days we have coming up." I think we had women's day and some other kind of big day for the church coming up. So I said, "After that time, I'll bring it to the church but we won't talk about it before then." However, there was someone who was looking to undermine me in an office that I had, because he wanted the seat that I was up for, or to move into. And so he had sent out I think a mass text message and a mass email to tell people that I had married a woman.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And when people don't have anything on you, because I'm not the type of person who was sleeping around, going out being drunk or any of those types of things, then they look for, "What is it can I find on this person?" And so he felt a need to send that out. Somebody called me and said, "Hey, I don't know if you know about this." It was a male preacher. "But, this is what is going out about you. I don't know if it's true. You don't even have to tell me about it, but I just want you to know what's being said." So I said, "Okay." So I called the deacons and I said, "Look, I think my time is almost up for me to wait. Let's talk about this. I need to go ahead and talk about it."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I did talk about it on that Sunday in the church, in the pulpit, instead of preaching that particular day. And the people left the church, and I guess got on the phone by the time they got out of church, and they started calling everybody. And next thing I know, they were talking to people who hadn't been a member of the church for five years, 10 years, but-

Monique Moultrie: It's amazing.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Everybody's talking about it, yes. So they're saying, "Oh, so-and-so said this is it, then." And I'm saying, "Well, how did this whole thing spin out of control like that?" So they didn't want me to come back for the big day, which I'm always there for our big annual days, but they didn't want me to come back, some of the older members. So I said, "That's fine." And so as time went on I said, "You know, I can always resign because I have my ordination. I have my consecration as bishop. I also have an MDiv and DMIN, so it's not like I can't go anywhere else." You know, I could understand if I didn't have any of that, but I had to wake up and realize, "I can go somewhere else. I can do something else." So that's what happened for me. So I just sent them a resignation, and some people were not happy but some people were. So that's kind of what happened with that.

Monique Moultrie: Let's backtrack, because I forgot to ask you about being consecrated as a bishop. Can you talk about Pneuma Christian Fellowship, and what was its purpose and why you wanted to found it, and why you wanted to be involved, and how it was different than some of the other fellowships that were starting? And as a Baptist?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: Why you felt called to a bishopry?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, I think probably around 2010 I had noticed that there were a lot of preachers calling me for different things, who were pastoring churches. And I was always kind of giving people advice and telling them what to do in their ministries and different things that I felt would possibly work. In 2011, I had a gentleman who was a bishop who called me and asked me to become a bishop as a part of his fellowship that he had. And I said, "Well, I need to talk to my church and see how that would work." So in the time of me preparing to talk to my church about becoming a bishop with his organization, something happened with him. I don't even remember what it was at this point, but it was like a red flag for me. So I said, "Okay, we don't even need to go there."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So but then I said, "Let me continue to pray about it," because I had been praying about it, been thinking about becoming a part of his fellowship. "Is this something that God will still have for me to do?" And I believed that it was, because I also, in going around to different people's ministries, had seen so many needs that people had for training and for helping them with the different ministries that they were trying to accomplish and do, that I said, "You know, this seems like what I should be doing at this next level." And so with that, I had two bishops that worked with me to become a bishop-elect, and then we had one other person that helped me to become a bishop-elect. So I knew it was going to be ecumenical type of thing, because I always work with people from different denominations.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I had AME friends. I had CME friends. I had United Methodist friends who were pastors. I had Baptist friends who were pastors, who would all call me. So if I

was to do something, it would have to be something that didn't necessarily focus on one denomination. So when I got to be bishop-elect, one bishop became kind of a little fuzzy. So people, I don't know, they have a way of kind of weeding themselves out, so this bishop, some strange stuff started happening with him. He was in Detroit, and I started hearing some things that were not the best about this particular person. And so I said, "Oh, Lord. I'm out here now, so how am I going to continue to move forward with this, if this is what you would have for me to do?" So I was at a conference, and I was talking with another person who was there and they told me ... Am I allowed to tell this story, honey?

Diana Williams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay, so they told me that, "You know, well, I have a friend that could possibly help you to work through that." And so I said, "Okay." So we talked that night, and that's my wife. And so we talked about it, and she said, "I believe I can help you to resolve that and to move to the level to where you're trying to get to." And so she did. We actually got a person out of Louisiana to be the chief consecrator, and we worked together for many months in preparing for that Episcopal office. And another person who was friends with my pastor, we got him to be a part of the bishop's college. Another person who was friends with or grew up with some of my family members, we got him to be a part of the bishop's college, and these people are from different denominational backgrounds.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And then the person who said to me, "I've got a friend who would help you to do that," naturally he would be a part of the bishop's college, and I had one other person who was a friend of my pastor's that was in Ohio. He was a part of the bishop's college as well. So we brought together this ecumenical body, and like I said, the chief consecrator was from Louisiana and my wife served as the secretary, and so that is how I was consecrated bishop. My church, I did tell them about it, talked to them about it, told them what a bishop does and let them know what it was I was supposed to do, and how it was not going to stop my duties that I would be doing with them there at the church. So that was 2012 when I was consecrated bishop.

Monique Moultrie: So I think that's a good segue to talk about, you talked that there was an attraction, but nothing you talked about with anyone. Talk to me about the decision to stand more fully in your truth, and what that truth was for you as it related to who you should spend your life with, who you should partner with, et cetera.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: That was, I don't think it was an extremely hard decision. I think I just was not expecting people to change and act the way that they did, on the level that they did. Like I said, I was always raised to tell the truth, be honest, and have a moral standard. And so with that, when I had discovered that I was ready ... Because for a long time after I divorced, I was not ready to be in any kind of relationship with anybody. I just had a real deep wound, because my ex-husband did try to ...

I'm trying to think of the best way to say it. There was violence there at the end, and so I had such a great wound with that. I don't think I was ready for many years to talk with anybody.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And then after seminary, when I was at seminary, United Methodist Seminary, I saw same-sex relationships. At that point, I still was not really ready to even wrestle with who I was. And then when I was doing my doctoral program, and I think this is important to chronicle, there was a gentleman there who was my faculty advisor, Dr. Dwight Hopkins, from The University of Chicago, a professor there. And so one night, we got into I wouldn't say an argument but a small debate about LGBT and LGBT Christians, I guess. And so naturally, as one who's been in the Baptist church, and like I told you, I didn't realize that was the Bible Belt until later on. But one who comes out of the Baptist tradition, I was naturally going to say all those things that we were taught in the Bible Belt.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And so he's saying all of this other stuff, and so it kind of shook me, and I think it shook me to the point where I went home and I said, "Now, God, you know I definitely have great respect for Dr. Dwight Hopkins. And so if there's any truth to what he is saying, I need you to reveal it to me." And so at that point, I got revelation on the scripture that I had been standing on for the longest, which was Romans 1. At the moment I don't remember the verses, but that particular text, even in seminary I'd use that text to talk to people. And so that changed my whole point. That's when I began to evolve at that point, after having that discussion with Dr. Dwight Hopkins.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So later I began to say, "I'm open to love whatever way God sends it." And so in my evolving, I realized it doesn't have to be a man that you're talking to, to experience the love that God would send your way. It could be whomever God decides to send. So I began to be at that place, whomever God decides to send to me, and so that was my own, as we might call it, conversion or evolving. And so when I got to that point, I think I was very open after having to wrestle with some things and theology that I had, that I had to work through. I was very open to being with whatever was the best fit for me. So I found, once again back to how I always thought women were attractive and were very beautiful, and that I always kind of looked at women, found that, "Okay, maybe that might be for me."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So in staying up many nights talking to my brother on the phone, telling him about, "I think I have an attraction to women." I didn't know if I was going to die or what was going to happen, but I really needed to work through that. But he was willing to support me those many nights when I was working through that. He was never judgmental, never discouraging. He just always listened and said, "Well, you need to do whatever is best for you." And he's still that way today, so I at least had somebody to bounce it off, because if you're in ministry a lot of times you don't have people you can really talk to, because you don't know who's going to say what. So he was the person that at one o'clock in the morning I could call, "Okay, this is what I feel. This is what I think." What do you think about it?" So he was the person that I talked to.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so speak about moving from the intellectual, "I have made peace. I am open," to the embodiment of like, "I'm ready for a relationship."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay, I think my wife needs to leave the room, because she's probably not going to agree with my side of the story.

Diana Williams: Oh, I'm not ...

Bishop Dr. Abrams: You're not here?

Diana Williams: I'm not prejudiced, but they've got too much going on out there.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay. All right, because I don't need her being-

Diana Williams: This is your interview.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I don't need her making her comeback] if she talks to you.

Diana Williams: This is your interview.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So let me say, later on I said something to her in my own confidence. I've always been a very confident person. I wouldn't say arrogant. Some people might take it that way, but I don't think that's what it is. But in my own assertiveness in confidence, I had said something to her, and it was something about her. And I still today say I can't really explain it, because she would say ... We're going to act like she's not here. She would say, "Did I say something or do something to make you know that I would talk to you?" And I would say, "No, she did not," but it was something spiritual that I really could not explain. And so I said something to her about having a relationship, and she then puts me on hold, says that she needs to think about it.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So you know, she took forever to think about it, probably two weeks or whatever. And to me, that was too long. But she took her time thinking about it, and she finally calls me back, and so she was open to us talking and having a relationship. But I will say, we did talk about God. We talked about what we believed about Bible, and where our own theologies were, and how that would I guess best work with what we believed.

Monique Moultrie: Excellent.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So we did have that conversation.

Monique Moultrie: Excellent. I always ask this question because in half of the interviews I've done, people come to an identity formation first so, "I am a lesbian. I am attracted to women, and that's what lesbian means, and so I am a lesbian." And then they find someone that affirms the identity.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Yes.

Monique Moultrie: In other cases where I've interviewed people, that hasn't been the strongest identifier. Like I interviewed Cari Jackson and she said she's a woman who has never been attracted to maleness.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Oh, wow. Okay.

Monique Moultrie: And for her, that lack of attraction didn't make her a lesbian, so that is not the category formation she finds significant or important. She found a wife, and she's very clear about when finding her wife then gave her a new label that wasn't of her own choosing. But it wasn't a lesbian, it was wife, so she is meant to partner with that person. So I asked the question so that I could get to sort of the chicken and the egg. Did your identity formation come first, and if so, what was that identity, and what is that identify formation?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I think it has evolved, because initially when I first came out, and I had this major coming out experience, I'll tell you, to be all over the newspapers and everywhere. But then I also before that even happened called many of my family members and told them I had married Diana. So, I would say after about the fifth or sixth phone call I was tired of telling people. I was like, "Okay, can y'all get on one phone call, and I'll just say whatever?" But I felt it was important to call certain people. It was important to me. And I didn't know what I was going to get from them. Some of them I did not get the response that I wanted, but it was still important to call them. And so with that, I think initially I started on the page of same-gender-loving, because I just could not my head wrapped around lesbian for a minute.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But, I think when I look back at it and look back at my own attraction for all those years, even though I was taught and told that, "This is who you are. This is what you do, and this is who you shall be with," I think that there was always an attraction there. So I think at this point, I've evolved to say that I am a lesbian. Not that I'm out here looking at a whole bunch of women, trying to talk to a whole bunch of women, because that's definitely not me. I'm always very committed. But, I think that that term would be appropriate, as well as same-gender-loving.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so at this point I'm going to move us, because I've got 30 minutes left and I've got about six questions.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: So I'm going to collapse some things-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Okay.

Monique Moultrie: That maybe will not make sense, but this is why. So I want us to move to the move here, the move both to start Empowerment Liberation Cathedral in 2014, and the move for you to pastor again, and to pastor a church that was going to be-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: LGBT?

Monique Moultrie: Affirming and radically inclusive and all of these things.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, let me say the move here was important to me because at time there was not marriage equality in the country. DOMA had not been struck down, and so it's important as one who has been in politics, as one who has done policy and those types of things, for laws to cover. And so I felt like, and I told my wife, I said, "I need to be in a place where the laws are covering us, and so we need to find that place." So initially we were going to ... We had been asked to come to Las Vegas. I had some people there who wanted me to start a church, and then I was very hesitant about Las Vegas, because Las Vegas didn't have no laws in place. So I was like, "Okay, I don't know if we really just want to go over there."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: California, we were going to go there but it seemed like we kept kind of getting runaround when it came about trying to see where we could possibly have a church and those types of things. So it just seemed like things were not falling in place. So we came back here, because we had both lived here. And so D.C. has lots of protective class laws, and Maryland had laws in place as well, so that's what made this the best place to be, because of the laws that cover same-gender marriages.

Monique Moultrie: Okay.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So you said what, to start ELC? Well, I knew just because I had come out, the call to pastor had not left me. The call to work with ministries had not been removed from my life, and so I still had that. And so with that, what do you do? Just because somebody says you're gay, you can't be in their pulpit, doesn't mean that that's what God is saying. That's people. So I knew I still needed to have a ministry, and the cause had now changed. Because initially, I thought that I would be pastoring traditional church with traditional people. I had pastored heterosexual people for many years. However, the need was to be with people who had been wounded, who had been hurt by the church, who had been outcast by the church, who had been basically told, "You can't be in the church, and that God does not love you."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So that to me seemed to be where God was shifting me. And so with that, okay, how do we bring these people in their place of hurt back into God's house? And so we started, or I started ... My wife is retired, so it's like she's retired. So I started Empowerment Liberation Cathedral in May 2014, and we've had numerous people to come in to join the church, to be baptized. So some people wanted to be baptized again in their authenticity, because we do encourage

authenticity here. Some people who have transitioned, and they were baptized as their birth gender and now they wanted to be baptized as who they are now. We've even buried some who have transitioned on, and we've done baby blessings and all the things that the church would do, but were helping to bring healing and wholeness to those in the LGBT community. But also, I would say to correct some of the erroneous teaching and doctrine that they've gotten in some of these other houses of worship and in the community.

Monique Moultrie: Mm-hmm (affirmative), so what are you saying your main priorities are for this space, for this church?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: First, to let people know this is a safe space. Secondly, to let people know that God loves them, and thirdly, to bring them back into relationship with God and let them know that you can serve God in your authenticity and in your truth, and to also be mindful of what's going on with other people. Don't just stay in the four walls, but be out in the community to help those who may never come in here.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and so when you're encouraging them to be out in the four walls, I have a long list of things that the Empowerment Justice Center focuses on. What are you equipping them to go and-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, we do a lot in the community but justice has always been something that I hope to see happen. But we have been I guess at the forefront with some immigration things. We also, there was an issue with people who were not allowed to vote, who had served their prison time, so went to the capitol building in Annapolis to be out front with that. We participated with the Poor People's Campaign to try to bring I guess some of that to the church and into the community about the moral corruption in this country. And we also now are dealing a lot with mental health and trying to bring healing and wholeness there. That's why we have the wellness center. Also, we still always have African-American issues to deal with, racism. We've also been a part of most LGBT things that take place.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: As a matter of fact, on Tuesday we'll be at the Supreme Court with the equality issue that will be heard there. I believe it's about the jobs. So you know, we have to let people know that we don't live in just this box. There are many issues that are going on around us that we need to be a part of, and we need to make sure that we are raising our voices and standing in solidarity with those who are trying to bring about change. Always, we've got to fight for higher pay and D.C. I think has done a good job with that, with trying to make sure that minimum wage is increased. Other people have to do a lot to catch up. And just also, we want to see people understanding that there are people who are standing with them and fighting for them.

Monique Moultrie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So can you talk to me, as you just made that claim about how you understand the balance between social organizing and religious

activism? Do you feel they are inseparable? Does the spirit animate one and push you to do the other? What's the basis for you for doing the work?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I think looking at the model from the civil rights era, the church was at the forefront of fighting for many things and for bringing the people together to galvanize, or galvanizing the people to bring about change, and being a catalyst for change. And so I don't believe that today would be any different. There is still a call for people to lead the fight and to be a part of the voices that are heard, and to help to make sure that these people, the legislators, know that this is what we want to see happen for the people, and that these are the changes that we are requiring. And if you can't make that happen, we need to get somebody into office who can. And so often times that has a start in the pulpit, a start in the church, and then the church members go out in the communities and help to get the people to gather, to rally together to bring about change.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, so-

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So I think the church, yes, I don't want to say it's totally inseparable, but I do think that they can go hand in hand.

Monique Moultrie: So talk to me a bit about your own spiritual practices, both as a pastor and as an activist leader. What sustains you? What keeps you grounded?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Well, definitely a lot of prayer but I do try to make sure daily that I read scripture. And believe it or not, being ... I told you music is at my core, and I love music. To listen to some type of gospel music or spiritual music, Christian music, really helps me just stay centered. But also, spiritual conversations is good. And to have a spouse that can have spiritual dialogue, we don't have to always agree, but to have spiritual dialogue or spiritual conversation is always great. It helps to keep you grounded, helps to keep you centered, and it helps you maybe to hear God in certain situations. So that helps me, but I think I have to be intentional about making sure I take time to read some type of text, and some days I do affirmations.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I do like the meditation. I don't do that as often as I would like, but I do like that. I remember Oprah kept talking about meditating, clearing your head. I need to clear my head mostly every day, so I feel like most days I need to do that more. I even downloaded the apps that will help you do the meditation, but some days I get busy. I don't do those, so you just have to take a moment to breathe. And so when you talk about activism, there's so many issues, I think you have to realize you cannot tackle all of them. And I always tell the people in the church, "You can't help everybody." So we have to decide, what is our issue? And so so far I've told them, "You know, we definitely deal with any LGBT issues. We deal with African-American issues, definitely."

Bishop Dr. Abrams: And then immigration just kind of has come to us. Even with the sanctuary spaces, there's a church that we visit with often that is a sanctuary for those people who are seeking asylum but may not even have anywhere to go. And that is a sanctuary church, and so we've been on several of their programs that they've had, so that kind of came to us, the immigration issue. Even with the wellness center that's located in a building where there are lots of immigrants, and so once again that immigration issue came to us. And so with that, now we participate also with the person who deals with older adults, so we now have that on our list of things as well, ageism, because we do know that that's an issue as well. And so those are pretty much the ones that we deal with currently, and mental health.

Monique Moultrie: Okay, and two final questions. What motivates your courage, your Christian witness, and where do you find joy?

Bishop Dr. Abrams: I don't know what motivates me. I guess some days I think about my mother. I say, "My mother would choke me if I wouldn't do this." I don't know. I guess I think that people actually need somebody who can speak up for them, and sometimes they may not have anybody else who has the voice and platform. And so when you have that, you have to be willing to step out and sometimes speak out on the difficult issues, and to be willing to risk some things to bring about change. And so I think it's important to always do the right thing, do it for the right reason, and knowing that you've done it in good conscience. So I think that that helps me, and to know that I might be able to help somebody always is going to motivate me.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: But to know that you could help change a culture, change a policy, to change the way people are looked at and treated, that definitely does motivate me. And to also know that you can bring people back into a right position with their creator, and to bring them back to a place of love and bring them to a place of healing, and bring them to a place where they're excited about God again, and excited about the church, and excited about worshipping, that definitely motivates me to get up on Sundays. Some Sundays, I'm tired. I don't want to get up. But I do, because you know that this may be the day you're going to change somebody's life. So, you have to get up and do it.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: So joy, what gives me joy? I would say my wife, especially when she does certain things. But I would say just being able to still be here in the land of the living, to be able to gain some small level of reward for my labor. To be able to see how many lives are impacted or changed from the work that I have done, and to know that other people are deciding to join in the work. You know, somebody can see it. The Bible talks about write the vision, make it plain so that others may run with it. And so when somebody can see what you're trying to do, and see the change that you're trying to make, or that you're working towards, and decide to join you in that, and they get excited about it, then that's a great thing.

Monique Moultrie: Absolutely. I think that's an excellent place to pause and say thank you.

Bishop Dr. Abrams: Thank you for what you're doing.