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Title

Annabeth Roeschley Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

September 5, 2017

Extant

1 hour 54 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Annabeth Roeschley, a queer abolitionist theologian, feminist, and activist in the Mennonite Church, discusses her early disillusionment with the white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy imbedded in dominant Christian theology, before seeking her call to ministry at Madison Mennonite Church. She recounts her work at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), the Pink Menno Campaign, and work in numerous social causes in DC as well as her position as executive director of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT interests.

Biographical

Annabeth Roeschley (she/they) was born in 1985 and grew up on a fifth-generation farm in central Illinois on the traditional lands of the OčhéthiŠakówiŋ, Myaamia, Kaskaski, Peoria, Kiikaapoi peoples. She is the oldest of three children, with a younger sister and brother. She was a member of Flanagan Mennonite Church (General Conference), which merged with Waldo Mennonite Church to become Prairieview Mennonite Church in 2001. In the late 1990s, her mother received a call to ministry at Mennonite Church of Normal where Annabeth would also worship periodically. She graduated from Flanagan High School in 2003 and from Bluffton University in 2007, where she was active in campus groups and majored in Communications in Church and Non-profit Organizations with a minor in Peace and Conflict Studies. She studied abroad at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland for a semester as part of her college years, interning at the Corrymeela Community peace and reconciliation center.

During university, Annabeth found herself in Madison, Wisconsin at Madison Mennonite Church (MMC) in the summer of 2006 as part of the Ministry Inquiry Program. Annabeth would describe this period as a touchstone of her path to ministry and her faith. Her experience with the congregation in Madison helped her realize that there might be an Anabaptist/Mennonite faith community in which she could find a home, amidst a long period of disillusionment with organized religion and wrestling with the white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy imbedded in dominant Christian theology. Her time at MMC also urged her to seek her call for ministry, despite knowing her path to ministry would not be the typical route that most people experience. Annabeth would recognize Camp Friedenswald as another formative place on her faith journey, especially her years on summer staff in 2004 and 2005. In her search for more liberative theology and expansive faith community, the communities that held her at MMC and Friedenswald felt like salvific reminders that she was not alone.

After college, Annabeth moved to Washington, D.C. As part of Mennonite Voluntary Service she would spend two years as a staff associate at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), where queer feminist theology and ethics would really deepen and take shape for Annabeth. Over the course of her decade in D.C., she became an active member of Hyattsville Mennonite Church (HMC). Cindy Lapp, the lead pastor at Hyattsville, had been a significant influence in initially connecting Annabeth with WATER, as well as in encouraging her leadership gifts at in the congregation, including as chair of the Pastorate Team, youth sponsor, and worship leader. At HMC Annabeth was also grateful to have an openly queer pastor, Michelle Burkholder, an experience she never would have imagined earlier in life.

At the 2009 biennial Mennonite Church USA convention in Columbus, OH, Annabeth became involved with Pink Menno Campaign, a movement that seeks to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the Mennonite Church and advocates for queer justice. She remained involved as a core leader as Pink Menno evolved over the next ten years. In addition to co-facilitating Pink Menno events and actions at MC USA conventions, Annabeth was a key organizer for the Fabulous, Fierce and Sacred (FFS) conference held in Chicago, IL in 2014, a collaborative effort of Pink Menno, the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGTBQ Interests (BMC), and Inclusive Mennonite Pastors. (FFS marked the first time that these groups had come together outside of an MC USA national convention.) Annabeth was also on the worship planning team for BMC's 40th Anniversary weekend celebration in Chicago, IL in 2016.

Annabeth has served as an advisor for various Mennonite Church USA projects related to LGBTQ+ justice and inclusion, including on the 2017 Future Church Summit Process Design Team and the 2019 MC USA Membership Guidelines Advisory Group.

While living in Washington, D.C. Annabeth was engaged locally in her neighborhood around efforts to transform injustice and build community resilience. From 2009-2014 she worked as a Resident Advocate and Wellness Program Coordinator with the newly formed District Alliance for Safe Housing, providing direct support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in a two-year residential housing program. Utilizing a harm-reduction and voluntary services model, she accompanied survivors in directing their own healing and recovery. Annabeth also worked with the Washington Youth Garden at the National Arboretum and went on to co-found Beet Street Gardens in 2011, a trauma-informed community garden collective. She supported anti-oppression activism in D.C. around local food access, housing and racial justice, and ecological sustainability. Passionate about the empowerment of safe accessible land and community space in a rapidly gentrifying city, from 2014-2017 Annabeth helped run a local lesbian-owned hardware store as the Director of Business Development. Annabeth credits her

D.C. communities as very formative in helping shape her social and political consciousness, as well as her queer identity.

In 2018 Annabeth returned to her Midwest roots to begin attending Chicago Theological Seminary(CTS). She would complete her Master of Divinity degree in 2021 with a concentration in LGBTQ Religious Studies. While at CTS Annabeth served as a chaplain for students and as an assistant to faculty. She was honored to receive the 2019 G. Campbell Morgan Preaching Award and was also named a 2019 Gilberto Castañeda Scholar and Awardee. Grounded in fifteen years of leadership and learning within liberatory justice movements, Annabeth's scholarship and writing situate queerness as an orientation to power, with an aim to queer the beliefs, economies, and theo-ideologies that undergird systems of domination. Annabeth's thesis, "Healing Ourselves and Our Communities: A Queer Theology of Abolition," focused on the theological significance of Politicized Healing, an approach that understands the systemic and generational impacts of trauma and recognizes healing is political, just as political work can be healing. This praxis emerged out of her field work and Clinical Pastoral Education with the Chicago Torture Justice Center (CTJC), where she was honored to serve as a chaplain alongside survivors of carceral violence in 2019-2020. With CTJC Annabeth conceptualized and designed a Politicized Grief Healing framework and facilitated local partners to build and implement ongoing grief healing programs and resources during the covid-19 pandemic.

Currently, Annabeth locates her ministry and activism at the intersections of individual and collective healing, often occurring on the edges of institutional church settings and/or in community-based organizations and movements. Annabeth serves as spiritual caregiver and resource within her communities, embracing her call to accompany people through grief and loss, dismantle toxic theology, and nurture paradigms of liberative relationship.

With regards to moving forward in ministry specific to Mennonite Church USA, Annabeth identifies a great need within the church for this kind of work that connects trauma healing (especially religious trauma), queer theological insights, and abolitionist justice. She continues to be a voice for intersectional queer justice in MC USA, one who calls for truth-telling, institutional accountability, and repair. While significant strides toward LGBTQ+ inclusion have occurred in recent decades, Annabeth is disheartened by MC USA's unwillingness to truly reckon with historic and ongoing patterns of harm. Despite participation in various denominational processes designed to bring about transformation, renewed vision, and greater equality in the church, Annabeth continues to bear witness to minimization, tokenization, and MC USA's refusal to fully value—as a denomination—the sacred worth and gifts of LGBTQ+ people. With little trust left between LGBTQ+ people and MC USA leaders, Annabeth laments the generations of queer folk and people of color who have been disappeared from the church in the wake of ecclesial and spiritual violence. Her primary focus now is being a catalyst of liberatory healing for queer, trans, and nonbinary kin within, adjacent to, and beyond the Mennonite Church.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Annabeth Roeschley, a queer abolitionist theologian and activist in the Mennonite church, discusses her early disillusionment with the white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy imbedded in dominant Christian theology, before seeking

her call to ministry at MMC. She was a staff associate at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), where she was involved with queer feminist theology, and part of the Pink Menno Campaign, a movement that seeks to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the Mennonite Church and advocates for queer justice. She has worked in numerous social causes in DC and is executive director of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT interests.

This interview was conducted by Rachel Waltner Goossen, professor of history emerita at Washburn University in Topeka, Kan and author of *Women against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941-1947* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Access

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<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/annabeth-roeschley>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Cite as

"Annabeth Roeschley | Oral History", LGBTQ Religious Archives Network,
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Digital finding aid created by Sarah McCall, 2023

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Mennonite Church USA

Author/editor

Washington, D.C.

Chicago

Illinois

Pink Menno

Roeschley, Annabeth

