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**Title**

Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson Oral History Interview and Transcript

**Date**

May 9, 2018

**Extant**

2 hours 3 minutes interview (three files) and 1 transcript

**Abstract**

In this oral history, UCC minister Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson reflects on her path, often being the first gay, Black female person to serve in the roles she has taken and having been discouraged during her early life in the Pentecostal Church on the basis of her sex and sexuality.

**Biographical**

Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson was born in 1956 and grew up in Baltimore, Maryland as the youngest, and the only girl, of four children in a devout Christian family. Her childhood was rooted in the Church and its strict teachings. Her parents were heavily involved in their all-Black Pentecostal Church and its community service orientation. Her father was a Boy Scout master and her mother was involved in parent-teacher school activities. Both her parents were committed to lifelong learning: her mother completed high school and began college as an adult and her father learned to play violin in his adult years. This instilled a deep commitment to help others and to continue her own personal growth. Her first community volunteer experience was as a young teen at a children's hospital, where she witnessed the effects of child abuse and her eyes were opened to the realities of life beyond what she had known. This experience served as a seedbed for cultivating deep compassion for people who have been marginalized or whose pain has been ignored in society.

Throughout her childhood and teen years, Cari often felt she did not "fit in" as a Black Christian who had non-black and non-Christian friends. Also, many of her Black neighbors and friends thought she was weird for enjoying school and being concerned about environmental issues and voter registration rather than only racial issues. At age nine, Cari first realized that her

crushes were much more on girls than boys. As she saw how harshly her parents dealt with one of her brothers who also had same-gender attractions, she decided to conceal her feelings, which further amplified the feeling of being an outsider.

From an early age, Cari felt that God was bigger than what was being taught in her church, yet she tried to make herself fit the teachings. During a youth conference she attended, Cari watched as other youth “shouted” and “spoke in tongues”; but she felt nothing. She was convinced this lack of spiritual connection was a result of sin in her life – that is, her attraction to girls. One night, she walked out of the church service and stood crying outside alone. As she looked at the starlit sky, Cari felt ushered into God’s presence. This moment was a spiritual turning point as she began understanding that God expresses in multiple ways, not only in clapping, shouting, and speaking in tongues.

After high school, Cari attended Oberlin College in Ohio. College was a great awakening experience spiritually, sexually and racially. Being away from her family for the first time, she began exploring her sexuality in earnest and began wrestling between what she was being taught in church and God’s embrace that she experienced. She deepened and expanded her spirituality, as she came to know not everyone needed to speak in tongues in order to have a right relationship with God and to hear God calling her to preach. Also at Oberlin, a bastion of liberal academics that she experienced both veiled and not-so-veiled racism from professors who told her (and other black students) she was not intellectually gifted enough to be admitted to and excel in law school as she was planning.

In her 30’s, after career success with Prudential, United Way, and AARP, Cari attended and graduated from law school with the intention of focusing on civil rights for LGBT parents. Yet, during her final year of law school, Cari’s focus shifted from legal to spiritual.

From age 19 (when she first heard the call to ministry) to age 35, Cari persistently ignored that call for three reasons. One, as a gay person who refused to live closeted about her sexuality, she knew her church would not acknowledge her calling. Two, because women ministers in her Pentecostal church were relegated to “second-class citizenship” of being licensed but not ordained, Cari was not accepting of this path. Three, her experiences with ministers (mostly male) left her with the mindset of not wanting to be a minister because ministers hurt people.

Despite her steadfast efforts to run from her call, three years after graduating from law school, Cari enrolled in seminary.

What had helped Cari step into her spiritual calling was becoming a member of Metropolitan Community Church of Washington DC. At age 29, Cari made the huge decision to leave the Pentecostal Church and to join MCC. It was there, Cari became involved in the church ministry, including singing in the choir, coordinating leadership training, leading a bible study group, and preaching. As she became more involved in ministry, Cari knew it was time for her to come out to her family. When she did, she experienced the emotional pain she had attempted to avoid – being judged by her mother and not supported by her brothers. Experiencing that pain made Cari more resolute to live boldly unapologetic and authentic about her sexuality and all aspects of her life and to support others in doing so as well.

When deciding where to attend seminary, Cari knew she was being directed by God to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Because she did not want to live in New York, once again she wrestled with God. However, when she accompanied with a friend who was considering applying to Union, immediately upon stepping onto Union’s campus, Cari felt the

Spirit affirm that was where she was supposed to be. One year later, she moved to New York and began her Master of Divinity degree studies at Union. Not long after her arrival in New York, she heard the Spirit telling her to join The Riverside Church (affiliated with United Church of Christ and American Baptist Church). Once again, Cari wrestled with God, because did not want to leave MCC. Soon after joining Riverside, God directed Cari to work as a student intern in the Riverside worship office, where she was instrumental in creating and coordinating a Wednesday evening worship service, "Space for Grace". After her internship, she became staff at Riverside.

After graduating from seminary, Cari was admitted to the doctoral program in Christian social ethics at Drew University. While working on her doctorate, Cari became an ordained minister in United Church of Christ and has served in a few positions: interim seminary pastor at Union, associate pastor at St. Paul and St. Andrew's United Methodist Church, interim senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn and Pastor at First Congregational Church of Stamford. In each of these positions, she was the first gay person, black person and/or woman to serve as pastor. In these ministry roles, Cari's focus was on addressing several social issues, including homelessness, income inequality, criminal justice reform, racism, homophobia, and Islamophobia. She currently serves as director of spiritual care and activism at Religious Coalition of Reproductive Choice, mobilizing faith communities to advocate for reproductive dignity and justice.

For more than 30 years through her business Excellent Way Consulting, she has provided capacity-building consulting services to faith-based and community service leaders and organizations. Cari established Center for Spiritual Light, an interspiritual space for spiritual exploration, empowerment, and healing. Cari has published five books, including *Love Like You've Never Been Hurt* and *For the Souls of Black Folks*. She is co-author of a new anthology (to be released in 2021) about women caring for and grieving mothers.

Cari says she is in the "third act" of her life. During this "act", she is focusing on using creative writing as an entertainment vehicle to bring messages of empowerment, justice, healing, and transformation to reach people often not reached by traditional ministry.

Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson currently lives in the Phoenix metropolitan area with her wife, Zoraida Saldaña.

## **Scope and Content**

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson discusses her path to becoming a minister in UCC. She reflects on often being the first gay, black or female person to serve in the roles she had taken, and on feeling discouraged from her call to ministry on the basis of her sex and sexuality during her early life in the Pentecostal Church. Jackson discusses establishing spiritual spaces for healing such as the Center for Spiritual Light, as well as mobilizing faith communities to act on reproductive justice and other social issues.

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/cari-jackson>

## **Physical Access**

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## **Languages**

Collection material is in English

## **Custodial History**

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

## **Cite as**

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## **Tags**

Jackson, Cari

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Black

Union Theological Seminary

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