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Title

Rev. Elder Freda Smith Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

February 24, 2007

Extant

1 hour 32 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Elder Freda Smith, an MCC elder and feminist, discusses advocating for women's ordination and inclusion through MCC. Pre-Stonewall, she recalls struggling with her lesbianism. She came out after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, whose campaign she was involved in, and lobbied for the Consenting Adults Law.

Biographical

Freda Smith was born Mary Alfreda Smith on November 22, 1935, to Alfred and Mary Smith in Pocatello, Idaho. Alfred and Mary had married while at college in Enid Oklahoma, and moved to Idaho shortly before was born. (Alfred was 21 years old and Mary was 20 years old). This was during the depths of the Depression and Alfred found work as a mechanic at the Union Pacific Railroad. Later he would be employed as a language teacher (German, Spanish, French, Italian) and Mary would fulfill her early aptitude and education in math and science working for the U.S. Navy.

However, the early years were difficult. Three children--Freda, Lydia and Alfred, Jr.--were born in the first four years of marriage. The small family moved to a remote rural area south of Pocatello. They were accompanied by Alfred's grandmother, Nazarene preacher Lydia Harriet Smith, who had rescued Alfred from a Denver orphanage and raised him in the small churches where she served. The Nazarene Church and its ministry was the focus of Freda's early life. Rural southeastern Idaho, in the late thirties and through the war years, was largely a LDS (Mormon) settlement. The Smith family was the only "Gentile" family "south of town." However all families--both Mormon and Nazarene--were church-goers whose religion dictated the customs of life.

As Nazarenes, the Smith family (shepherded by Freda's great-grandmother) avoided liquor, smoking, cards, dancing, profanity, and any "near occasion of sin." Mormons danced, while to Nazarenes dancing was a sin. Nazarenes drank coffee, which to Mormons violated the "Word of Wisdom." Aside from these and other surface differences in religious practices and beliefs, the rural southern Idaho community members were united against sin in any form and for chastity, holiness, and a strong work ethic. They had no apparent knowledge or understanding of alternate lifestyles.

Freda attended church Sunday mornings and nights and the Wednesday evening mid-week services, as well as weekly home prayer meetings and a home atmosphere of hymns, Bible study, and prayers. The Nazarene theology embraced salvation and sanctification (the second work of grace), eschewed worldliness (i.e. movies, etc.), yet presented a joyful, optimistic faith and an abundance of musical celebration. Altar calls were regular Sunday night occasions where kneelers struggled against temptation and despair, wept, and were blessed by rapturous renewals of faith and a sense of the undeniable presence of God. These themes of great spiritual striving, the poetical thrust of Biblical drama presented in word and song, and the sense of a divine providence became a sacred "calling" very early in Freda's life. She determined that she would either be a preacher or a poet.

Freda entered the first grade in 1941, shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The war years had a profound effect on her as they had on so many that experienced the heroism, and sacrifice of the times.

Following the war years and the death of Freda's great-grandmother, the family began to drift from the Nazarene Church and she independently left to become a member of the Salvation Army. The fire and passion of the Salvation Army, preaching "with heart to God and hand to [man] humanity," coupled with the familiar hymns and the salvation/sanctification struggle for souls and a compassion for the lost, the least, and the forgotten, stirred her early "call" and she began the process of becoming an officer.

It was also at this time that Freda realized her lesbianism. True to her early training and upbringing she entered into spiritual battle, seeking to overcome her nature and to find a state of sanctification where all of these feelings of love would be taken from her. During this struggle she left Idaho to live with her aunt and uncle in Texas. While there, she read every book in the library she could find on the subjects of homosexuality, lesbianism, inversion, sodomy, and other names given to the "disorder." Each book seemed more condemning and frightening than the one before. There was no account of a sane, healthy gay or lesbian person; all were criminal, insane, perverted degenerates. Homosexuality during the early 1950s was universally condemned as criminal and sinful, as well as a mental illness. Freda spent long evenings on her knees at home and at the altar in the Salvation Army Citadel where she worshiped. Nothing changed her heart.

Freda now looks back and sees that God was in the prayer-answering business. However, God did not want to change her heart. God wanted to use Freda's passion – along with the passion of others who were similarly struggling – to change the church and the world.

Leaving Texas, Freda returned briefly to Pocatello for a term at Idaho State College (now ISU) majoring in speech/journalism. She was still praying for a "cure" and was a passionate speaker and a part of the debate team as she had been in high school. She had a strong calling to preach and like Jeremiah there was a fire in her bones: "Then I said, 'I will not make mention of [him]God, nor speak any more in [his] God's name. But [his] God's word was in mine heart as

a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.”
(Jeremiah 20:9 KJV)

However, the fire in her bones ultimately gave over to a realization that she could no more change her orientation than she could change her height, eye color, or humanity. Following the biggest gay witch hunt in U.S. history in Boise (1955-56), she determined to leave Idaho and find "others like her." In California, Freda found the gay community and became a closet Christian. As she once hid her lesbian identity from the church, now she hid her sense of God's calling upon her life from her friends in the gay community.

Freda Smith entered California State University in Sacramento, majoring first in language arts (English, speech, journalism) and ultimately graduating with a master's degree in Counseling Psychology. She was licensed by the State of California as a Marriage and Family Therapist. Passionate about human rights and activism, Freda was active in Bobby Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign and, after his assassination, decided to "come out" publicly as a lesbian as well as a feminist and to work to change laws in California. This was "before Stonewall," and very few members of the gay community were open about their orientation. Homosexuality was a criminal offense in California, as well as condemned by the church and diagnosed as a mental disease. Freda became co-chair of the California Committee for Sexual Law Reform and worked for the passage of Assemblyman Willie Brown's consenting adult law. It was during this lobbying effort that she wrote her narrative poem Dear Dora/Dangerous Derek Diesel Dyke which she read to a group of legislators which included Lt. Merv Dymally who voted to break the Senate deadlock to pass the legislation.

Early in the law reform lobbying effort, Freda learned of the Metropolitan Community Church which had been founded by the Rev. Troy Perry in 1968. Realizing that she could fulfill the calling to preach and to minister which had never left her spirit, Freda became active in MCC. Troy and Freda were featured speakers at the capital building in Sacramento in 1971 when Willie Brown introduced his consenting adults bill. Freda was the feminist speaker and Troy was the religious leader who had just led a march from Oakland to publicize the event. The bill was introduced repeatedly until it passed in 1975.

When Freda entered MCC the leadership was overwhelmingly male and as a feminist Freda went to work to encourage women to become active and to change the church by-laws to include women. MCC eventually became a leader in Christian social action, championing the ordination of women, inclusive language, and a theology of inclusion for all people. Freda taught Christian Feminism at Samaritan Theological Institute, a religious institution established to provide instruction to MCC ministers and lay people before seminary doors were open to open LGBTI people.

In 1973, Freda was elected to the Governing Board of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (Board of Elders) where she served as World Church Extension Elder and Vice-Moderator for the next 20 years. During that time Freda was pastor of MCC Sacramento – from 1972 until she retired in 2005 to become an Evangelist for the denomination and an activist to preserve the early history of the LGBTI Christian Church.

Freda and her life partner, Kathleen Meadows have been together since 1974.

Freda calls the MCC movement the most exciting church since the book of Acts. In an address to the 2007 UFMCC International Conference in Scottsdale she spoke of the relationship between the church in the book of Acts and the history of the LGBTI Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches:

"[The] achievement of the church in the book of Acts was accompanied by passionate, theological clashes over scripture, over custom, over all of the isms: racism, sexism, classism, over intense personal disagreements and rash actions; certainly often biting off more than they possibly could chew, facing opposition and persecution from "powers and principalities and the forces of evil in high places." All the while rushing headlong into history. We can know this because the Book of Acts was written down...

We can write our history. How like the early church in the Book of Acts we were joined together in our many differences by the Holy Spirit to become a church reaching out to a fragmented, disenfranchised, closeted community.

While we still have the voices to tell; let us tell of working, marching, fasting, praying, blending our spirituality with activism in order to change unjust laws, struggling to turn our isms into wasms (sexism, racism, elitism), to be inclusive, not only in language, but in every sense of the word, striving to educate our clergy when so many seminary doors were closed to them straining to reach our people where ever they were... Struggling to balance all of our theological understandings to become ecumenical in our worship. As Troy Perry was wont to say: "We're going to treat you in so many different ways you're bound to like some of them" (and dislike, too.) We can tell our personal stories of those early, tempestuous years..."

Freda is dedicated to telling that story.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Elder Freda Smith, an MCC elder and feminist, discusses advocating for women's ordination and inclusion through MCC. Pre-Stonewall, she recalls struggling with her lesbianism, as homosexuality was illegal and gays were presented as mentally ill. She came out after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, whose campaign she was involved in, and lobbied for the Consenting Adults Law.

This interview was conducted by Melissa M. Wilcox, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside and the author of several books on gender, sexuality, and religion.

Access

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<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/elder-freda-smith>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

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