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Title

Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

November, 2017

Extant

1 hour 26 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson, the first Presbyterian minister to gender transition while sustaining ordination, discusses co-founding the Southern Association for Gender Education, Inc. (SAGE) and converting her psychotherapy practice to gender medicine following the controversy around her own transition.

Biographical

Erin Swenson broke new ground within mainstream Christian Protestant faith groups on October 22, 1996, when the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, by a vote of 186 to 161, sustained her ordination as a Presbyterian minister. Erin had transitioned from male to female in 1995/96 after 23 years of ordained service, and with the Presbytery's vote in 1996 she became the first mainstream minister to make a gender transition while remaining in ordained office.

Erin was born Eric Karl Swenson in Buffalo, New York, in 1947. She moved to Atlanta, Georgia with her family in 1957 and attended Sandy Springs High School before entering the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1965. She met her wife in 1967, and entered Columbia Theological Seminary in 1970, just four months after the birth of their first daughter. After graduating from Columbia with honors in 1973 and completing a clinical internship, Erin became Minister of Education at First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia. After the difficult birth of their second daughter in 1976, which left her severely disabled, the family moved back to Atlanta where Erin completed a graduate degree in Pastoral Counseling while working as a Clinical Chaplain at the Georgia Retardation Center.

Erin joined the staff of the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic and Center for Personal Growth in 1981 as a pastoral clinical psychotherapist after completing her Th.M. in Pastoral Counseling at Columbia Theological Seminary. In 1984, she became Director of the Center for Pastoral Care, a joint ministry of Peachtree Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta. Erin co-founded, with Karen Faulk, the Brookwood Center for Psychotherapy in 1987, where she kept her practice until her gender transition in 1995. In 1995, Erin was awarded the Distinguished Service to the State award by the Georgia Association for Marriage and Family Therapy for her work in advancing Georgia's professional licensing legislation. She also co-founded, and for ten years led, the Premarital Workshop, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, during which time nearly 1,000 couples were assisted in preparation for life together.

While studying for her doctorate she was listed in Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities, and completed her Ph.D. in Psychological Services at Columbia Pacific University in 1989.

Erin's gender transition was a turbulent time for her personally. Her marriage ended in 1995, at about the same time that the church challenge was beginning. Her clinical practice took a sharp nosedive because of the local publicity of her gender transition, and by the end of 1996, she was all but unemployed. She began the slow reconstruction of her counseling by specializing in gender and gender identity issues for individuals and couples.

In 1999, Erin co-founded, with Raja Qasim, the Southern Association for Gender Education, Inc. (SAGE), an interfaith educational agency devoted to providing gender education for colleges, universities, medical groups, and faith organizations. Through SAGE Erin has presented her program across the country since 1999 in settings both large and small, from Massachusetts to San Francisco. In 1998, she was elected to the Board of More Light Presbyterians, an organization devoted to the full inclusion of GLBT people in the life and ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She served as co-moderator from 2000-2002. Erin continues to maintain warm relationships with her former spouse and their two daughters as well as her extended family. She also continues to practice as a gender specialist in her practice in downtown Atlanta. According to Erin, "My ministry is about bringing full understanding and compassion not just for people who are differently gendered, but for everyone who lives in a culture where rigid gender roles impose unhealthy and unrealistic expectations for abundant living."

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson, the first Presbyterian minister to gender transition while sustaining ordination, discusses co-founding the Southern Association for Gender Education, Inc. (SAGE) and converting her psychotherapy practice to gender medicine following the controversy around her own transition. Through SAGE she provides interfaith gender education for colleges, universities, medical groups, and faith organizations.

This interview was conducted by David Weekley, the only openly-out transgender elder appointed to a UMC church, and author of "In from the Wilderness: Sherman: She-r-man."

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/erin-swenson>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Cite as

“Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson | Oral History”, LGBTQ Religious Archives Network,

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/erin-swenson>.

Digital finding aid created by Sarah McCall, 2023

Tags

Presbyterian Church (USA)

More Light Presbyterians (formerly Presbyterians for LGBT Concerns)

Clergy Activist

Ordination/clergy

Trans activism

Atlanta

Georgia

Swenson, Erin