

Interviewee: Jason Frey
Interviewer: Rachel Waltner Goossen
Date: November 13, 2017
Place: Chicago, Illinois / Lawrence, Kansas (via telecommunications)

Interviewer: Okay, and I'll just say for the record, because eventually I'll probably get back to doing some transcribing here, but this is Rachel Waltner Goossen, and the date is November 13, 2017, and I'm interviewing Jason Frey on Skype, and he's in Chicago and I'm in Lawrence, Kansas. So yeah, thanks so much. You're the director of admissions and recruitment there at the theological school?

Frey: Yep, that's correct. So it's my second year in that position, fourth, fifth year at the seminary—

Interviewer: Yeah?

Frey: —[so it's] been a while.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you pretty close to being done with a doctorate there?

Frey: I'm actually maybe a couple years out. I've finished all my coursework, my language exams and one of my comps, so I have a few more comprehensive exams to do and then my proposal, dissertation and defense.

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Interviewer: Okay, very good. I'm going to be real interested in what your project is. I read somewhere, or probably Annabeth Roeschley, who told me about you, told me it's in queer theology. Is that right?

Frey: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So let's get to that. But I don't really know anything about you background-wise or anything, so it might make more sense to start earlier back in your life, if that's okay.

Frey: [Certainly.]

Interviewer: And, for example, I don't even know where you grew up and so forth, so give me a little bit of biographical information and then we'll go from there.

Frey: Definitely. So I was born in northwest Ohio, but grew up most of my life in eastern, or mid-eastern Pennsylvania, kind of in a very coal mining

region. My family moved out there for job reasons. Grew up Mennonite, but while I was in Pennsylvania, because there wasn't a Mennonite church nearby, my parents and I, my family attended an evangelical church which was very large in that area.

0:02:09 Also it's how I grew up to be able to question the church because the evangelical church would do things that my parents weren't always affirmative of, including, you know, around Veterans Day, Memorial Day, altar calls, things like that, so there were many times after church that my parents would be like well, you know, I'm glad you had fun at the youth group, but let's talk about the church service and let's pick things apart, why we don't agree with them.

Interviewer: Okay. [*Laughs.*] Not all parents do that. That's interesting.

Frey: Yeah. I think my parents wanted us to go...wanted to grow up in a Mennonite tradition, but were just, where we were at there was no church nearby that had a strong youth program.

0:03:00 And that kind of starts out my Mennonite identity as being on the margins of Mennonite traditions, not growing up in a Mennonite community, but definitely having the background and family history, so I've always had to kind of work my way to that identity.

Interviewer: Were both of your parents Mennonite by background?

Frey: Only my father was. My mother grew up Methodist.

Interviewer: And you went to public schools there. What community were you in in eastern Pennsylvania?

Frey: Yeah, I went to a public high school. It was a very... In that area it was probably one of the more well off school districts. Had a very diverse friend background, friends who were Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist.

0:04:00 I was the only Mennonite, so I kind of stuck out in that position. But definitely was, you know, a typical high school with the different groups and cliques, you know, people that were interested in college, people that were interested in vocational careers, band kids, drama club kids, all of that, yeah.

Interviewer: And it sounds like your parents and you, did you have siblings, too, growing up?

Frey: Yeah, two older brothers.

Interviewer: It sounds like your family did identify as Mennonite in that context, even though you were going to this evangelical church. Is that right?

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Frey: That's right, yeah.

Interviewer: And did you stay on the margins or did you move to some a little more centralized Mennonite identity at some point?

0:04:56

Frey: Yeah, so both my brothers attended Eastern Mennonite University. One graduated, the other dropped out halfway through. But I wanted to kind of reach into that community, and so I attended, actually, Bluffton University. And as I reflect back, it's kind of funny because Bluffton tends to be the one Mennonite school that is also on the margins of Mennonite perspectives. It's always usually dominated by Goshen or EMU.

So but I was at Bluffton, and for me that kind of felt like intensely Mennonite because of just the small community that was there, the First Mennonite Church that was there, and just my friend group became more, you know, Mennonite concentrated. Even though maybe compared to other schools, you know, it wasn't as Mennonite.

Interviewer: So when was this that you were there at Bluffton?

0:05:56

Frey: That would have been 2006 to 2010.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you liked it well enough to be there all four years, right, and to graduate?

Frey: Yeah.

Interviewer: What were you studying there?

Frey: Was studying religious studies there. While I was there, there was actually a very strong religion department, like a very diverse faculty, where they came from different schools, and actually very formative in my educational and theological background.

Interviewer: Were you identifying as Mennonite there at that time or what was happening with you in terms of your own sort of affiliations?

Frey: Yeah, I was identifying as Mennonite and was attending First Mennonite Church there locally. Got very involved in the spiritual life community of Bluffton. Was a hall chaplain for a year, a residential advisor for a year.

0:07:04 Was involved in chapel planning. There was a music ministry group and a drama ministry group, so I became over involved in a lot of those different areas. Maybe as a way to defend my own Mennonite identity.

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Interviewer: I don't know how you identify in terms of sexuality, queer or gay or what was happening at that point in your life when you were, I don't know, either high school or Bluffton, or does that enter into the story yet or not yet?

Frey: I mean, I've always known, for a long time, probably since I was a child, but the one thing that you kept hearing at that time was, you know, you never know until you get older how it's going to land.

0:07:58 So I actually didn't come out until my final year at Bluffton. And actually, because of that had a lot of damaged relationships with women who I, you know, I was trying to, you know, date women and this and that, and then somehow self-sabotaged the relationships, and ended up hurting some people.

But I was actually, while I was doing the ministry and career program at Silverwood Mennonite Church, I was doing kind of a summer internship. As part of Bluffton's program they gave me a stipend for the year and I was an intern at a church in Goshen, Silverwood Mennonite, and that summer, actually, I was dating a woman who I thought was perfect, checked all the boxes, and made sense that it would work. But then it just wasn't clicking. And that summer I actually ended up coming out, meaning saw someone who kind of encouraged me to come out.

0:09:03 And then as I came back that next year my mindset was well, you know, my parents weren't always negative about lesbian and gay people in their conversations, and my family wasn't, like my brothers weren't, and a lot of my friends, I didn't hear a lot of negative speak about it, so I thought, you know, coming out, I might as well come out all the way rather than hide a part of myself, it's nothing to be ashamed of. And so I came out that final year of my school at Bluffton.

And ironically, it was kind of funny, ironically or maybe providentially one of my friends who I had kind of tried dating and it didn't work out, actually that final year where we were all living in a community housing cohort, and she was working on a project around LGBT inclusion at Bluffton University, so it was a year of a lot of reconciliation with some of these past relationships that I'd had.

0:10:00 And it was the kind of thing where like oh, that makes sense. And I think that might have been a very maybe transformative time at Bluffton. There was a lot of other activism going on around that issue as well.

Interviewer: Was there like an allies group or something?

Frey: There wasn't at that time. And I think part of her research was how do we, examining the culture and community of Bluffton and then as a conclusion, how do we start to form a—I think right now they have a safe

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space group. So I worked with her in kind of establishing some kind of ally group for students and faculty members and staff to have some support in that community. I think it might still be going on today. It's probably changed a lot since we were there.

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Interviewer: It sounds like you had a lot of support, and if you were coming out and your friends were talking with you a lot about this, and you were able to do some reconciliation, that must have been overall a pretty good experience. Is that...?

Frey: Yeah. It was an experience of extreme vulnerability. Reflecting back, I can tell it was probably exhausting for me emotionally and spiritually, but it was also very transformative in that sense. But on the other hand, my parents, who I came out to, kind of had the opposite reaction of a lot of my friends and community at Bluffton, where they were somewhat supportive, or it was like supportive until it was their own child.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Frey: And I think a large portion of that was the communities in which they were involved. Because when I was at Bluffton they actually [*unintelligible*] 0:11:58 with a Mennonite congregation that was a little bit more conservative, more conservative than my parents, and they didn't have the support.

0:12:09 Like they, you know, by me coming out they were put in the closet. It was something that they knew that they couldn't share with the church community.

Interviewer: I see. Was that still in Pennsylvania or was that somewhere else?

Frey: That was still in Pennsylvania. And actually, that church is no longer a part of any Mennonite denomination or conference.

Interviewer: They've pulled out of Mennonite Church USA, that kind of thing?

Frey: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are your parents still part of that church?

Frey: No. Actually, unfortunately, my father passed away a couple months ago, And since then they actually came around quite a bit in the past three years and have been very open and affirming. And that was kind of my dad—my dad died of pancreatic cancer after about a year of cancer treatment—and that was one of his kind of maybe most memorable things, is how he kind of came around and then became very, ultra supportive.

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0:13:13 And they moved down to the Ephrata, Lancaster area and attended a church there, and when they were looking at churches that was one of the main questions that my dad was kind of asking pastors, is what's their stance. And he was basically setting the groundwork that my mom would have a supportive community after he died.

Interviewer: Wow. That's pretty powerful, yeah. Did they land up at a particular church in the Ephrata area then?

Frey: Yeah, they ended up at Forest Hills Mennonite Church, which is still part of the denomination, but it probably is a little bit more conservative of the churches that are left in the denomination.

0:13:57

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. It's been sort of spawning off a lot of the conservative groups, I guess, especially in the last two or three years, so yeah. Well, that's great about your dad's coming around then to be ultra supportive when that had taken a little while. That must have been a powerful thing for you, for sure, especially coupled with him dying over that time.

Frey: Yeah. And it was a lot of kind of hard conversations where it was like you're either part of my life or you're not, and I think they had a real, like a strong realization that they wanted to remain part of my partner and my life. And my brothers were also very supportive, and so they were kind of encouraging my parents along.

Interviewer: So it sounds like at Bluffton you were about as active as you could have been in religious studies and all the activities that went along with that. So were you thinking vocationally that you wanted to be in ministry, or what was your idea there?

0:15:10

Frey: Yeah, I think I went into Bluffton thinking that I wanted to do pastoral ministry, and while I was at Bluffton, before I'd come out, every summer I was going back to this Mennonite congregation and leading their youth ministry programs and outreach during the summer, and preaching, and getting involved, and had kind of gotten at home in that environment, which supported my studies at Bluffton and encouraged me to consider pastoral ministry and things like that.

On the other side of it, I was also interested in the academic study of religion. And that actually emerged more my last year because of where I was experiencing a lot of support in coming out tended to be more from the religion faculty than from the church community or from even the campus pastor and hall chaplains and things like that.

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0:16:07 So I felt more at home in the academic theological studies, religious studies departments than in the church, which then kind of shifted my vocational career. And noting that a lot of Mennonite communities weren't interested in having LGBTQ pastors, and so I thought I would [turn] my vocational externally on the outside in the academic setting.

Interviewer: So knowing that—and you were pretty steeped in Mennonite churches by that time, so you were thinking if you were going to be a pastor a Mennonite church would be the place for you, but you just didn't see a lot of openings. Is that accurate?

0:17:00

Frey: Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: So being interested in the academic side, were you thinking then about becoming a theologian or a professor of religion at a college or something like that?

Frey: Yeah, and I kind of wanted—I saw my new vocation as kind of occupying or being in academic spaces where I can actually pursue this theological interest in academic studies, but also in a way care for students—have the liberty to care for students who were struggling with some issues like sexuality or gender, where, at that time, I saw it as more complicated to do it as a pastor.

Interviewer: So it sounds like—well, [we] use the language of feeling called. Were you using that kind of language at that time, or does that language fit or make sense, to feel called to ministry?

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Frey: I would say at that time I was actually attending a conference—or I was attending Central District Conference when I was interning at, I think it was—my first year in seminary I was actually interning at First Mennonite Church for my field placement, and went to the CDC conference and remember talking to another pastor there about feeling called to a place that doesn't exist yet.

Interviewer: Oh. [*Laughs.*]

Frey: But it definitely was an experience of where I was feeling drawn to areas, and as I would approach it, doors would open. And it happened quite a bit in my internship at First Mennonite Church.

Interviewer: In other words, that you felt affirmed? Is that what you mean by doors opening, or...?

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Frey: Yeah, or it would be a lot of kind of intense experiences, and then thinking that it would end there, and then somehow it would open up and I would keep moving on.

0:19:04 That happened... After I graduated Bluffton I was looking at different schools and I was looking at Princeton Seminary is where I ended up attending, but I also looked at AMBS and Chicago Theological Seminary. AMBS at the time, it's kind of funny, I was talking to my professor there, and he had heard some stories about LGBT people attending there, and actually at that time called the—I don't know if he called the president's office or another faculty member there and said that—and he was basically one of my largest advocates at Bluffton—and said if AMBS didn't amend their stance on sexuality and gender that he would not feel comfortable recommending any of his students to go there.

0:19:59 So he kind of made that stance and said if they don't change it... Because I was seriously considering that school, and he was kind of cautioning me about it.

Interviewer: Do you mind telling me who that was at Bluffton? That's really interesting that he took that position.

Frey: Yeah, it was Trevor Bechtel. He was a professor of ethics. I think he's now in Canada either at Conrad Grebel or—

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I don't know him personally, but I know his name and I associate him with Conrad Grebel College now, so yeah.

Frey: And I think a lot of it stemmed from his sister is LGBT, so...

Interviewer: I see, okay. So he had a personal stake in it, but was kind of looking out for his students, it sounds like.

Frey: Right.

Interviewer: Okay. I'm thinking that was in about 2010 where you all were having these conversations. That was like your senior year at Bluffton?

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Frey: That's right.

Interviewer: And was the concern that he had that they weren't granting MDiv's to people who were out as queer, or was it a sort of broader...?

Frey: I think his concern was more about maybe a sense of safety and community and whether LGBT students would thrive and do well at AMBS. I think there were then kind of stories that I'm not aware of of

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students, LGBT students there who maybe the community kind of pushed them out or they didn't feel safe there, not physically, but maybe more spiritually or emotionally safe there.

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Interviewer: So how did you end up choosing Princeton then at that point?

Frey: Yeah, I was looking at a few schools. Definitely was interested in schools that were strong academically, but also would support my process of coming out. And was really challenged by my other religion professor, Alex Sider, who, I was looking at other schools that maybe were lesser well known, and he just said flatly, he's like I don't know why our religion students don't think that they can make it at these bigger schools, at these more academic schools. I was like well, I'll show you. And I applied and visited.

Unknowingly to me that Princeton Seminary also had a very complex history related to LGBTQ issues, but by the time that I was looking there, you know, the previous president was very anti...or was very homophobic, anti LGBT, and kind of created a very violent culture there.

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But the president who was there when I was attending, and when I was looking at it, kind of swung the opposite direction and strove to make it a very inclusive, welcoming, almost like over welcoming, overly inclusive, like if you were LGBT there you were like...people made a way for you to feel welcome. And so to me, when I went there, I was like oh wow, this is what a very, you know, I was connecting academic world with very inclusive, welcoming stances. And it was a residential community, and it kind of fit all these different things that I was looking for.

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And also at that time I'd only been out maybe eight months to a year, and I was actually deciding between Chicago Theological Seminary and Princeton Seminary, and at that time I'd visited CTS here and it was kind of funny to think about it, but it was a little bit more progressive than where I was at in my life at that point as far as theologically, ethically, things like that, so it was kind of nice to move to Princeton and then have a chance to grow there and experience a non Mennonite world, non kind of...

Interviewer: You probably had some residue of having been at youth groups in an evangelical background even as a teenager and so forth, right?

Frey: There was definitely, yeah, kind of a... I actually critiqued it later in a paper, this kind of purist ethic of kind of living up to these highest expectations. And even when I was coming out I had this kind of sexual ethic that was very, you know, wait till marriage kind of idea, which was

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supported by both my evangelical background and a lot of the Mennonite, what I was hearing from the broader Mennonite church community.

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Interviewer: Yeah, that's still prominent in Mennonite doctrines, that's for sure. Okay, so you went to Princeton. I'm sure your profs at Bluffton and people around you were happy for you, it sounds like. I mean, you're sort of describing having had really quite a lot of support, although maybe not personally so much from your parents right at that particular time, but in other ways you had support from people, it sounds like.

Frey: Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: Okay. And at Princeton you went for an MDiv?

Frey: Yep, that's what I worked on. At that time that's the only kind of academic master's degree that they had.

0:26:02

Interviewer: And was your goal there to eventually go on in theological studies like you've obviously done since then or were you still toying with the idea of pastoral ministry, or what were you thinking?

Frey: I was kind of toying with both at that time. At that moment there were definitely some rumblings about the future of theological education and the decreasing faculty positions, and so I was just very cognizant of that, those limited positions. But I was also still deeply interested in pastoral ministry and connecting with faith communities, particularly in the Mennonite world. And part of Princeton's model for their MDiv required two field education sites, one of which I did at First Mennonite Church back in Bluffton, so that was my first summer out of seminary.

0:27:01 And then my second site I did a more academic one at a Presbyterian church. They had a teaching ministry internship, and did a lot of Christian education, teaching, yeah, those kind of formats. Still kind of occupying both worlds at that time.

Interviewer: And Princeton was and is Presbyterian, right, so you were kind of moving into more knowledge of that denomination, Presbyterian USA?

Frey: Yeah, exactly. And that was kind of my first time being at a school that wasn't Mennonite. Or actually, there were a few Mennonites who were there, and we had our own little community, but it was also where I was being exposed to other theological and church traditions and realizing that Mennonites don't own peace theology or discipleship, or community, or these other things that I thought were distinctly Mennonite.

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Interviewer: I happen to know John Tyson, who lives here in Kansas and is a minister at Bethel College Mennonite Church, and he went to Princeton. Did you overlap with him?

Frey: I'm not sure. I would have been there 2010 to 2013. The one thing about Princeton at that time is there was a—if he was married they had married housing that was kind of off campus. Single students were kind of on campus. There was always a division between them.

Interviewer: I don't know him well enough to know exactly his years. He had come out of EMU and went to Princeton. And he actually was not a guy from a Mennonite background, but I think he became Mennonite at EMU or something like that and then—he might have overlapped with you, and I don't know about the married housing thing. Is that a pretty size—like that has to be a way bigger seminary than a place like AMBS, right?

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Frey: Yeah. I think they bring in about 150, 200 students every year, so I think the... And they have a PhD program. I think every year they have about 500 students.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. And what was your academic focus, or did you have to write a thesis or something? What was your theological thing you just sort of veered toward?

Frey: Yeah, I mean, for their MDiv program there was no required thesis, but I geared my program to focus more on theological courses, ethics courses. And then during my second year—I'd kind of gotten very well connected with some of the faculty there and was very strategic in the courses that I was taking to make sure that I could get reference letters and this and that, knowing that I would eventually apply to PhD programs. And instead of a thesis I actually did an independent study with a professor there on Augustine's *De Trinitate*, his work on the trinity.

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Because I was also at a point where I was thinking about how I had to apply to PhD programs. And usually for the religious studies world you've got to figure out which faculty and which schools you want to apply to, figure out what they're teaching and doing, and whatever you want to research and study, kind of put that aside and then maybe take a piece of that to fit under what they're already studying.

So I was always interested in queer studies, disability studies, critical race theory, but I knew that I had to fit within a traditional religious studies model, so that's where I picked up my interest of Augustine. And it was actually a little bit transgressive because here's a Mennonite studying

Augustine, who Mennonites, for some reason, absolutely abhor. So I thought it was... Like I wanted to actually study and research areas that I kind of wasn't introduced to before.

0:31:01 And so I did a project on that instead, kind of thinking about his psychology and how the trinity is kind of a psychological approach to religion.

Interviewer: It sounds like you've gone sort of academic at Bluffton to academic at Princeton, then to academic stuff at Chicago Theological Seminary, so it's been a straight trajectory, right?

Frey: Yeah, it was kind of a trajectory, and it was also kind of side projects of working on congregations, and also, I mean, when I was at Princeton it wasn't part of my field education component, but one summer I was spending it in Boston, and I was doing a language course there at Harvard Divinity, and then happened to email the pastor at the Mennonite congregation there, Mennonite Congregation of Boston.

0:32:00 Her name is Nancy Frey, but there was no relation, but it's still kind of funny to have that connection. Was talking about possibly interning there, if they ever had an intern, and they hadn't. And she came back to me and said I'm actually leaving halfway through the summer, so we'd love to have an intern. And the church doesn't normally meet in July or August. They want to start meeting throughout the summer and asked me if I would be interested in being an intern, studying under her for those first two months, and then leading the congregation as an interim the final two months.

And of course I agreed to it. And it was actually one of the best congregations I've actually engaged and helped lead. It was also very intimidating. It was a congregation where about 80 or 90 percent had their master's or doctorate. But it was a fun congregation, and they were very supportive.

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Interviewer: I'm smiling because I know that congregation pretty well. I used to go there. In the mid 1990s my husband was at the Kennedy School of Government for a master's and so our family moved there, so we went there. And then more recently my son Ben is a doctoral student in history at Harvard, and Ben's quite involved in this congregation, so whenever we go visit him we come back to the church. They're just such a great group. But yeah, I can see the intimidation factor when you're pretty young. And yet they're so supportive. I mean, they're just absolutely supportive, from what I've observed.

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Frey: Yeah, it was a beautiful community. I was happy to be connected there. It definitely still, like Gordon Kaufman wasn't there, but I could still feel his theological presence in the congregation.

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Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Frey: But it was also...later I would come to know the conference minister, and he was like—because it's kind of a weird round circle. The conference minister at that time later moved to the Ephrata area and knew my parents very well, and actually kind of sat with my dad as he was battling cancer. He's like I remember your son. He kind of went around all the correct tracks to be interim pastor there.

Interviewer: That's great. So that would have been like summer of 2012 or 2013 or somewhere in that neighborhood?

Frey: Summer of 2012.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. Well, that's cool. Yeah, I think that congregation is...I don't know if they'd say they're thriving. When I go visit it feels to me like they're thriving. So yeah, that's great. And so then you were applying to PhD schools, or you definitely wanted to go to Chicago, or what was your thought there?

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Frey: I was applying to a bunch of different schools, trying to fit into that. Did some research into those different schools. So it was Harvard Divinity, Drew Theological School, Duke Divinity, I think maybe Yale Divinity. And so at those schools I was having to fit whatever I was interested in into what was already happening there.

The one thing at CTS, when I was visiting, talking to the faculty here, they were actually really excited with what I actually wanted to research and study, and so rather than me trying to fit my research into their models it was almost the reverse. They were saying like well, I teach this area and research this area, so I could support your research from this perspective. And so the faculty were trying to fit what they were already doing with what I wanted to do and research.

Interviewer: Was that something in queer theology or how would you describe that?

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Frey: I was interesting in the experience of vulnerability and embodiment and its importance in theological ethics, which was stemming from my interest in

queer studies, disability studies, and then gender and race. And actually as I reflect on my own research interests it stems from my own coming out experience and how vulnerable that experience was, and how transformative that experience was to think about, you know, how do we...how does one kind of embody that vulnerable experience and allow it to be transformative, recognizing kind of the risk. So in another sense I wanted to challenge the ways that we traditionally think about theological ethics and focus on the importance of embodiment theologies and theories.

0:37:05 Because I kind of believed—and I still believe at this time—that vulnerability is what makes us human, and what makes us creaturely and good, and enables us to thrive and build communities across difference. But it is also very complicated because of systems of oppression and violence. And kind of setting vulnerability in this political context is very trying because people experience vulnerability differently, and to say oh, we all just need to be vulnerable is easy to say to someone who's white, because of my white privilege, but I also still want to stand by that transformative experience. So kind of wanting to recognize what does that look like in different communities.

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Interviewer: Neat. Yeah, you've got a lot of material to work with. *[Laughs.]*

Frey: I wish I didn't, but I think it's...

Interviewer: Yeah, the idea of vulnerability filters into lots of areas of life, doesn't it?

Frey: Yeah. And I think a lot of that stemmed from, as I was studying different silos in theology I was really interested in the intersections of them and trying to figure out what connects all these different areas. And it was definitely the experience of the embodied human and person, but also this experience of, maybe this weaving of vulnerability throughout all of them, and people's navigation of how we are vulnerable in systems of oppression and violence, but also liberation.

Interviewer: Well, cool. I hope you have some time off from your day job to think and write about all of that.

Frey: Oh, yeah. It's kind of difficult to do it.

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Interviewer: If you're like me a person who's more tired in the evenings, and... *[Laughs.]* Yeah, well, that's great. I'm glad to hear about that. Have you published anything yet along these lines, or are you working on your unpublished doctoral writings at the moment?

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Frey: I haven't published anything related to that other than a few...like a book review. And then I published something a long time ago for *Princeton Seminary Bulletin Review* or something, and I was kind of engaging, what was it, queer theology and the story of Babel, and thinking about what does vulnerability look like in that narrative of the tower of the Babel, and how God almost creates difference there by scattering people's languages and abilities to kind of have this uniformity. So God creates almost a sense of diversity in that story.

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Interviewer: Do you have opportunities there to preach and that kind of thing, or have you moved less into faith communities and more into really academia only?

Frey: I've had maybe a few opportunities to preach, but within my role here at CTS it's been more in like UCC settings and congregations. Often in connection to the work I'm doing I kind of get asked hey, can you preach at this church, can you preach here. Not as often as before. But I do more kind of academic or theological engagement with Pink Menno circles, with conventions, I've done some things there.

0:41:01 I've done some more work with Toronto Mennonite Theological Center. They have a conference every other year, so I try to get involved there and do some presentations and paper presentations there. But as I've kind of gone through these different schools and communities and being kind of on the margins of Mennonite communities, now I kind of more or less self-identify as a promiscuous Mennonite who, I really enjoy connecting with non Mennonite communities, and then going back into Mennonite communities and kind of challenging maybe traditionally held beliefs to kind of get us thinking outside of ourselves.

And that's one thing that I found as I started studying other theological traditions, is that at least in the Mennonite communities that I've observed or been engaged with, it's been more of an echo chamber rather than inviting other theological voices in. And I think that's been to a lot of Mennonite detriment, too.

0:42:17

Interviewer: You think about that in terms of what Mennonite theologians have been writing, or what kind of stuff gets talked about at MC USA conferences, or can you give a concrete example of that echo chamber idea?

Frey: Yeah. I think it's more at like the convention standards or maybe more culturally held views of what church is or what these big communities are. And even now what does it mean to be the church in this political culture and feeling very, at some points very angry at the non-stances the

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denomination or local churches make on political issues because of this idea that we need to be separate from all the...

0:43:07 I mean, there's certain theological beliefs that I would say are strongly Mennonite, but I also think are very problematic, especially for queer communities and non-white communities.

Interviewer: You're thinking especially of two kingdom theology, this idea of being separate from the world, that's what you're critiquing?

Frey: Yeah, and I'm actually kind of—I've done some writing on it about almost queering, I say queering, this idea of queering purity, or challenging the separation, that there's the church which is pure and separate and the world which isn't. And I think that's done a lot of damage in Mennonite communities, especially for LGBTQ folks who tend to occupy the middle ground between that.

0:44:05 And also recognizing that as much as we strive to be a nonviolent, peacemaking church, by creating this dichotomy we're actually ignoring the ways in which the Mennonite church and Mennonites in the congregation are already caught up in systems of violence, and racism, and oppression. So by upholding the stance we are almost excusing our responsibility to dismantle those systems.

Interviewer: Are you part of any church or faith community right now or while you've been in Chicago?

0:44:57

Frey: Been connected to the Chicago Community Mennonite Church here, but I also a lot of my work involves traveling, and for some reason it's usually on weekends. And it's always going to church conferences, so I feel like I'm always—and UCC conferences. So I always feel like I am at a church or connected with church folk, even though I'm—I would see myself more in a chaplain position as I kind of minister to folks who are doing discernment around their vocation and if seminary's right for them, but also as I connect with pastors, particularly in the UCC traditional, who are looking for continuing ed or this or that. I try to get to the Chicago Community Mennonite Church when I can, but it's often I'm going to church, but at many other churches.

Interviewer: Understandable. Yeah, well, that has to be really interesting, too. That's probably both in your local area of Chicago, but far and wide, right? I mean, Chicago Theological Seminary probably has a pretty broad reach of people you're recruiting and pulling in.

0:46:06

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Frey: Yeah, and it's actually been, I mean, it's one of the things I've come to enjoy about my position is recognizing how my community of friends has grown, and it involves a lot of pastors, actually, and pastors who are Mennonite and pastors who are non Mennonite, UCC, Lutheran, Episcopalian. And so it's kind of strange to be kind of caught up in this world of religious leaders and also not, you know, and not be one or something, or be one in a different sense.

Interviewer: Well, I mean, you're in the field of religious leadership, so... I mean, do you identify that way?

0:46:55

Frey: Yeah. It's been something that's kind of... That I've never thought, you know, I always thought it was beyond until maybe I moved into this position as director of recruitment. [*Loud whistle.*] ...already there. There's still something for me to keep moving forward, but then [some part of] kind of this realization.

And that actually emerged in my position here at CTS where, I mean, I was in the middle of my doctoral work, I was getting ready to start my dissertation proposal, and then I was encouraged to apply for this position by the, actually by the president of the seminary. And was working in different, almost all the different departments at the seminary as a student worker and just getting involved. And I wrote some policy around—it was really boring—around record retention and this and that. And then moving into this position. And then about six months later was brought up into the leadership team.

0:47:59 And so my fellow colleagues are like the VP of finance and the academic dean and VP of [students], so I've kind of had this realization that I, you know, was in a position that a lot of people get after their PhD or after *unintelligible*] 0:48:16. It was just, I don't know, by coincidence or connection here at the seminary.

But it was also while I was discerning I kind of realized that it's kind of important to my own, if I want to be a faculty member somewhere, there's a ton of administrative work that has to be done and a lot of positions that are opening up are well, you teach some courses here, but we also want you to handle enrollment management, or student life, or be a dean in this area. So I'm kind of using this as a way to expand my kind of administrative experience and background.

0:49:00

Interviewer: You must have some gifts in that area or I doubt that the president of the seminary would have encouraged you to apply. [*Laughs.*]

Jason Frey

Frey: Yeah, I mean, it's something I didn't recognize in myself, I think. And I always thought of myself as one who wanted to teach and engage, but then getting involved in this also realized that some people hate administrative work, and in some ways I don't always mind it. Other times it gets a little bit too much and I'd rather be doing something else. But I've kind of enjoyed to be engaged in higher ed administration and think about that.

Interviewer: That's great. Yeah, it sounds like you have some rare opportunities that actually not many doctoral students in almost any field have, where you're an insider, really, to the institution as well as someone coming up with the idea of maybe moving on and moving out and doing something else somewhere else at some point, right?

0:49:56

Frey: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's great. So you mentioned earlier, kind of in passing, that you had or have a partner, and is that continuing these days?

Frey: Yeah, so we actually met my first year in seminary at Princeton Seminary, and he's Presbyterian. And it was kind of an interesting thing that kind of broke me out of my Mennonite bubble, I would say, is it was very challenging, and I think in some ways rightly so, and in other ways I kind of pushed back, but of this kind of obsession with Mennonite identity and culture and this and that.

He was...he... You know, we have Mennonite friends he loves, but it's also like he will not attend a Mennonite church, he won't go to any Mennonite things because he feels Mennonites only talk about themselves. They're always talking about themselves, and how good they are, and how they've got things figured out.

0:50:56 He's always like whenever I've seen it, like... I think he had some experiences when he was attending with me with two churches that he felt as an extreme outsider because he wasn't Mennonite or grew up Mennonite, and so he challenged me to kind of think outside of that. And so we've been together about six, seven years now.

Interviewer: And during that time, you know, marriage became legal, and is that something that is part of your life or not?

Frey: Yeah, we actually recently got engaged a few months ago, and are in the plans of getting married. We got engaged out in Princeton Seminary a couple months ago and are planning to get married out there. And we'll actually be the first same sex couple to get married on campus.

Interviewer: Is that pretty easy to navigate there at Princeton now or...?

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0:51:57

Frey: Oh, yeah, yeah. I think it's...I mean, since they're PCUSA it's been...their church has allowed it for the past [three] years. And then [the seminary] was kind of questioning it, and then they were like well, I guess the denomination is there, so we don't see why—you're both alums so we don't see why this is a big issue.

Interviewer: Is he pursuing education as well now or is he a pastor or...?

Frey: He actually—so when I was a PhD student here, he interviewed and works here in the seminary as well as the manager of alumni and church relations. So he actually had his job before I was brought on in my position.

Interviewer: Does he identify still as Presbyterian?

Frey: Yeah, and he's actually on the ordination track within the Presbyterian church and is hoping to get ordained to his position here at the seminary, kind of doing a lot of fundraising, church relations.

0:53:07 He preaches more than I preach because he's always getting invited out to go to churches—

Interviewer: Oh, I'm sure, yeah, in that—

Frey: —[and then] ask for some money.

Interviewer: And are you on some kind of ordination track or would you see yourself being on that at some future point?

Frey: I actually, after this last summer's convention, started the ordination track with the Mennonite church, and was really interested in pursuing that. And kind of my name's on the MLI getting spread about, and had a couple interviews with a church congregation, and in those interviews I was starting to realize kind of the position that I'm here at the seminary with my partner, kind of the future of my academic potential career, but also kind of recognizing that maybe my leadership in the Mennonite church and also my theological beliefs might skew more on the progressive end than a lot of even moderate or left of moderate congregations.

0:54:21 And I think that came about as I started to engage more at UCC congregations, kind of still holding onto some of those Mennonite beliefs and identities, but also recognizing that a lot of Mennonite [congregations] are still, even if they're accepting of LGBTQ folks, they're still kind of conservative on, you know, what people who are non-Christian or people who... So it was just kind of a very... It kind of was a lot of discernment

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and kind of thinking about what is my place in the Mennonite church, and also recognizing kind of the value of where I'm at already.

0:55:04

Interviewer: So could you see yourself switching to, I don't know, maybe pull back the MLI thing and do some kind of ordination track or exploration within the UCC denomination?

Frey: Yeah, I'm actually considering that. I actually considered it before, when I was still a PhD student, and kind of recognizing that the Mennonite church wasn't moving as successfully or as forward as I was hoping, and kind of was considering that option. That's always been kind of in my mind as a potential. And it kind of, and some of the UCC communities that I've engaged with there's a lot of, I would say, maybe theological equivalency between some of my more Mennonite [progressiveness].

0:56:01

Interviewer: So it's not hard to feel at home, in other words, in some of those UCC settings?

Frey: What was that again?

Interviewer: Are you saying—I think I lost you just for a second, sorry. Were you sort of implying that it's easy to feel at home theologically in some UCC settings?

Frey: Yeah. Whereas even though I went to a Presbyterian seminary and have a lot of friends who are Presbyterian, and I've gone to, actually, their—I forget what they call it—their general synod or their biannual conference, just kind of...yeah, I didn't...I never felt at home there, but more of the UCC tradition, their convention, their general synod felt more like a Mennonite convention. It was kind of a gathering of community and building relationships. And I think some of those traditions that are important for me from my Mennonite heritage would be more than welcome there.

0:57:02 And I also appreciate the commitment to the issues of social justice that the UCC is willing to kind of keep and take on.

Interviewer: This is reminding me that somebody I tried to reach out to this last summer for my project, I emailed but I never heard back from her, but I wonder if you might know her because she's there in Chicago and she's actually a graduate of CTS. Her name is Kirsten Peachey, and she's a UCC pastor. Kirsten Peachey. I think she grew up in Pennsylvania, and she'd be a lot older than you, I believe. I found her on the...I think I just was doing some internet search and it says she lives in Oak Park now.

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She's director of congregational health partnerships for Advocate Healthcare. And she has both a PhD and an MDiv, I believe, from your institution.

0:58:03

Frey: I wonder if... I can check. I just did a Facebook search here briefly. Is her middle name Eve?

Interviewer: I don't know about that. Peachey is spelled P-E-A-C-H-E-Y, and her first name is K-I-R-S-T-E-N. And she'd be someone that's kind of—I mean, I don't know her age, but she kind of, the picture I see here of her looks kind of like a middle aged woman.

Frey: I think this is her. Yeah, yeah, so she's a CTS grad. She did her dual degree here.

Interviewer: Yeah, so I—I mean, I just took the email I found on the internet and wrote to her but I never heard anything back. But she grew up Mennonite in Pennsylvania, and so she kind of fits my... I'm trying to find people, some of whom are still navigating Mennonite identity and staying in Mennonite denominations, but some of whom, like her, I think, moved out, moved from Mennonite to UCC.

0:59:16 And I don't really know her story. I think she grew up as a child with a father who was really prominent in Mennonite Central Committee, so I think she lived abroad some of her growing up. So I'd love to talk to her, but either I didn't have the right email address for her or else she didn't want to respond or something, I don't know. Sometimes what I send to people maybe goes in their spam filters, too. I don't always know. So anyway, just curious.

Frey: We have a lot of mutual friends, professors here at CTS.

Interviewer: I see, okay. Well, I may try just emailing her again sometime.

0:59:59

Frey: Or another option is if you're on Facebook sending her a Facebook message, too, could be another—

Interviewer: Yeah, I could try that. I may try that because yeah, it's so interesting to talk to people both who are sort of figuring out ways that they want to—well, sometimes people I interview are coming into the Mennonite tradition from some other tradition and wanting to be a minister, and they identify as queer in one way or another, and super interesting to talk to them. And then people like this person grew up cradle Mennonite and

moved on a long time ago, I think. But I don't know. I don't really know her story too much, so anyway. Yeah, I may try reaching out to her again.

I'm just going to look at my questions that I've not been paying any attention to while we've been talking. You said you had some dealings with Pink Menno. Are you still involved with either Pink Menno, or my related questions is Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT, did you have any dealings with them ever?

1:01:05

Frey: I had more connections with Pink Menno, kind of being on some of the conference calls and leadership in preparation for conventions. It was actually, when Pink Menno first started is actually kind of what got me to think about coming out, and that whole process. And then didn't really...I think it was...that was in Columbus.

And then at the second convention, the next one that they were at was actually the year that I was dating my partner, and his father—this is kind of weird—his father had passed away unexpectedly and had to get up and leave the convention. But it also revealed to First Mennonite Church that I actually had a partner, and so they—I mean, I wasn't hiding it, but they also didn't ask me about if I had a boyfriend or partner or any kind of relationships.

1:02:01 But that got that conversation started on their end. But then really got involved with Pink Menno when they were at Kansas City, and then this last year at Orlando.

Interviewer: So that's this year you've been involved, and both 2015 and 2017 in Florida. You were at the Florida conference then, I take it?

Frey: Yeah. Yeah, and it was...in those last two conferences I more or less went as a Pink Menno advocate and not representing any sort of church. At the last convention I was elected by Pink Menno to represent LGBT folks on the Future Church Summit, and so I participated in that as well.

1:02:53

Interviewer: One of my questions on my sheet here is what expectations do you have of Mennonite Church USA regarding LGBTQ concerns going forward? Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Frey: Yeah. I would say that I'm optimistic that some of these changes will eventually happen. But what I'm really afraid of is that it might be in some ways too little, too late. And I think there's just a lot of kind of systemic things that will keep pushing LGBTQ folks out of the Mennonite church unless something more radical happens either in the ordination process or

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within church communities. But my hope would be that, and my optimism is that the history of splitting and divisiveness within Anabaptist history is, you know, there's all these different splits.

1:04:06 Like from the very beginning it was a very diverse movement. My hope is that there would be some more progressive Mennonite denomination that folks can find a home in. I can actually see that happening. But yeah, it may look a lot different than what it does now.

Interviewer: You say progressive. Did you say progressive congregations where people can find a home, or what was it?

Frey: Denomination. And I think that stems more from...you know, why people seek out other denominations is that even though you might have a very good and progressive local church community, it's really hard to find a home when you're doing some work denominationally and through denominational organizations.

1:05:01

Interviewer: That's what you've experienced in the Mennonite church, like Chicago Community Church might be very progressive locally, but then when you try to do something broader it's still pretty hard to find a home?

Frey: Right. Or even when I was at Mennonite Congregation of Boston, that church looks extremely different than maybe the denomination, probably most other churches, so if I was in Boston that would be a great community to be part of. But it would be hard to kind of feel connected to a broader denomination.

And I think they even, when I was there they were even kind of expressing that being kind of the lone church in the northeast and being part of this huge conference that they had a little bit more liberty to do what they wanted, and also kind of felt—there was some connection to the denomination, but not as strong as maybe other churches in the Lancaster area or [Ohio] areas.

1:06:01

Interviewer: It sounds like you're appreciative that for Mennonites like yourself to move out into another denomination that there are welcoming places. The UCC would be one and obviously not the only one, right?

Frey: Right.

Interviewer: And also it sounds like you've been somewhat influenced by your partner, who's had a critique of sort of Mennonite exceptionalism, right?

Jason Frey

Frey: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: If people ask you now, do you identify now as a Mennonite or an Anabaptist, or do those labels mean a lot to you personally?

1:06:54

Frey: Yeah, I think they're helpful in describing what I'd say is my religious heritage and upbringing, but then I usually follow up with this idea—I guess the more acceptable term would be ecumenical Mennonite who engages other faith traditions.

And what I've learned is even within UCC circles that identity of religious heritage of Mennonite, it still would be very accepted, which is also really surprising to me, because other traditions are like, well, you have to identify as...once you become Presbyterian you have to be Presbyterian. You can't say I hold this tradition as important. But within UCC circles there's still this valuation of the heritage.

Interviewer: That's something you maybe value because you saw that wasn't the case in the Presbyterian communities you were in.

Frey: Right.

Interviewer: You see it as different, right?

Frey: Right.

1:08:01

Interviewer: That's interesting. I don't know that much about either one of those denominations, but that's interesting to hear.

Frey: Yeah. And I think it's just because of the, again the history of, I mean, the UCC is a bunch of different denominations that came together, which kind of matches how Mennonite church kind of, different—two different denominations came together.

Interviewer: So to value history and heritage is held up.

Frey: Right.

Interviewer: One of the things I've asked people that I've been interviewing is if you have suggested writings, either anything you've ever written, like maybe something kind of like memoir-like or personal about your faith journey or something like that, I'd be happy to receive that.

1:09:00 I don't know what all that would be for you. That could be a variety of things. And you have my email address, so if you think about it and think you'd like to put that in front of me, that would be great, because I'm just collecting whatever people send. And then I also am trying to check with people to see if you know of friends or colleagues that you think I should also interview.

So the way I got your name was I interviewed Annabeth Roeschley, and she told me about—and she's so excited about moving to Chicago in November, I guess this month. So your name immediately came up when I was interviewing her, and she gave me your contact information. So that's part of how I'm finding people, is sort of that kind of snowball effect of people just giving me contacts. And my approach is if I write to somebody and I don't hear from them I'm not really going after them particularly.

1:10:01 You were very willing to have your name used and all of that, but for some people, especially people that have their MLI out and are thinking about jobs in Mennonite churches, they are...it's sensitive what I might do with their information, and so in many cases people have asked me to not write about their story with any identifying information, or I should use a pseudonym. And I'm not sensing that from you. But there have also been people that I've written to that I just haven't heard back from, and I usually assume then that means they probably don't want to engage, which is fine and understandable, too. But if you have names of people...

Frey: I could put some feelers out. There's a couple names that I know just from the Chicago area connection. One is Luke Miller, who's been engaged within Pink Menno. He would affiliate with Chicago Community Mennonite Church, but I don't think he goes often or at all.

1:11:10 I only know how he identifies religiously. But I can get you his contact information.

Interviewer: One of my criterion that I'm using is people that have sort of aspired to theological leadership. It sounds like—I mean, he maybe didn't necessarily—I don't know much about him except I do know his name is associated with Pink Menno, but I don't think I've ever met him. A lot of people I've interviewed have theological training, but they haven't all had the same vocational pathway, right? So some people are chaplains, and some people are administrators, and some people are ministers, and some people are theologians. So I would especially be interested in him if sort of... But being part of Pink Menno is a kind of theological leadership, right?

1:12:06

Jason Frey

Frey: Yeah. I mean, he just stuck out to me because of his...actually, his training. He's a doctor, a medical doctor, but his involvement in Pink Menno has just been fascinating because he has no...he's committed to the advancement of LGBT people in Mennonite Church USA even though he has no...I mean, not commitment, but he's not involved with being ordained or he has no—

Interviewer: Sort of a, more of a lay leader, right? The idea of a lay leader?

Frey: Yeah. The other person I'm thinking of is—their last name is Klaassen, and there's a Sarah Klaassen.

1:13:01

Interviewer: I know her. Yeah, I interviewed her.

Frey: Okay. I think she has a sister or relative. Oh, no, okay. I know her partner better than I know her.

Interviewer: Okay. Sarah Klaassen lives in Missouri now. She's originally from Kansas. But interviewed, actually, both her and also her mother, who is a strong ally, like through Brethren Mennonite Concerns, that organization. So yeah, Sarah was really helpful. She's pretty well—she's left the Mennonite church herself, but she's still pretty well connected, so she gave me a lot of people's names and so forth. She's really been great.

Yeah, very good. So you can think about it. If other people pop into your mind that would be good as well. And then the other thing is on my sheet there's a kind of a very open-ended sort of ending question which is are there some questions I didn't ask that you wish I had or are there...is there something you'd like to say yet that hasn't come up in our conversation?

1:14:12 Because my study really is about inclusivity and also the barriers for LGBTQ people in the Mennonite church, especially people with some theological leadership training and aspirations. And so I'm trying to pull people's stories together that tell us both what is the Mennonite church losing by having people like you sort of look elsewhere, but also what kind of things do people like you gain by adding theological training from other traditions and other denominations on top of Anabaptist and Mennonite understandings that you had early in your life.

1:15:01 And I'm also trying to shed light on where there are sort of places of hope in the Mennonite church to become more inclusive. So all of those are things I'm really interested in. So I don't know if there's anything that...thoughts you have about any of that that you want to comment on yet.

Jason Frey

Frey: Nothing that immediately comes to mind. I do think it's kind of interesting to see some of the Mennonites who I've interacted with who are no longer connected to the church and still kind of identify as Mennonite, which is really interesting to me, the importance of that term for their describing their identity, even though they might say I'm no longer Mennonite, I grew up Mennonite. Like there's some desire to connect back. I also think there's definitely interesting history in the ways that Mennonites have found sanctuary in non-Mennonite spaces.

1:16:01 And at least for my own journey—and I think this kind of kept going until I had this recent interview with a church for a pastoral position—of LGBT Mennonites who strive to defend their own Mennonite identity and upbringing and then at some point realizing, or coming up with the question what does that even look like to be Mennonite.

And I think a lot of—I mean, that might be the gift of a lot of LGBT Mennonites, is that we struggle with that question of what it means to be Mennonite that a lot of, I think, Mennonite identified folks who are straight or who are in dominant communities might not have to ask that question. And I think it's an important question for the denomination and the church.

1:16:52 And I think it's one that is becoming more and more apparent, and I think it even came out at this last convention, the struggle of what does being Mennonite or Anabaptist mean or look like.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's interesting, the idea that that's a gift. That's a gift to the broader church, right?

Frey: Yeah.

Interviewer: All right. Okay, that's a good note to end on, I think. This was really great to meet you.

Frey: It was great meeting you, and thank you for including me in this work and research. Yeah, and if I can think of anyone else or any other things that come up I'll send you an email.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's very nice to stay in touch. We could also connect on Facebook. That is actually one way that I've found has been handy for me to stay in touch a little bit with people I've interviewed, because then if people move or whatever I still can be—

1:18:00

Frey: [*unintelligible*].

Jason Frey

Interviewer: Yeah. *[Laughs.]* So if you're willing that—maybe you're one of a billion Jason Freys on Facebook and I won't know which one, but... *[Laughs.]*

Frey: I can do some searching for you.

Interviewer: There's probably only two of us with my name, so yeah. That might be helpful. I've never been up to... I grew up in Illinois, actually. I'm from the Normal, Illinois community downstate. But I've never been up to the Chicago Community congregation. And I have interviewed one other person who has connections there, so it's one of the things I've thought sometimes I should go visit there. I still have some relatives in Illinois. So hopefully our paths will cross at some point. That would be great, Jason.

But yeah, anything you think of, either writing or that you want to send me or for people that you think, names I should know about, that would be great as well.

1:19:00 And I wish you all the best. You've got a lot of stuff to do in the next couple years to get your dissertation out, and then probably some other job searching and all that, too. But it sounds like you're at a really good place right now.

Frey: Yeah, it's a wonderful community here at CTS, and yeah, it's been great.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. I really appreciate this a lot.

Frey: Yeah, thank you, Rachel.

Interviewer: Yep, bye.

1:19:26 *[End of recording.]*