

Oral History Interview: Joanne Carlson Brown

Interviewee: Joanne Carlson Brown

Interviewer: Ashley Boggan

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Ashley B. All right. At the beginning, before you start your story, if you will say your name, and your status, and your location, just for the record. Tell us about your call to ministry, Joanne.

Joanne B. Sure. I'm Joanne Carlson Brown. I'm a retired elder in the Pacific Northwest Conference. I live in Bellingham, Washington. This is an interesting story. I was a biochem major for two years in college because I was going to go to med school, and I was having more fun in my history and English classes, and I'm like there's something wrong with this, so I changed my major to Renaissance studies. I made it up. And I promised my parents I would do something meaningful, if not marketable, with things like Medieval Latin and being able to run down the English rulers from Alfred.

Then senior year I was offered a job at Holy Name of Jesus Catholic High School in Worcester, Massachusetts, to organize their humanities department. And it was like okay. And I thought about it long and hard, and then I turned it down. And my friends were like, you're an idiot. It's a job. You just turned it down. It just didn't feel right. So I said, well, maybe

I'll take the MCATs. Well, that didn't feel right, either. And then I'll take the LSATs, and that didn't feel right, either.

So then I took long walks around the college campus wanting somebody to tell me what to do, but nobody would. And then all the people, when I was in high school and growing up, who told me I'd make a good minister came to me, so I applied to one seminary, and after the deadline. I figured if I was supposed to be admitted—I made a bargain with God. I don't really recommend that. That's how Luther got into ministry. He was caught in a thunderstorm and prayed to St. Anne, and if he was safe he'd go into the monastery. Well, I told God if you want me to be a minister, get me in.

So I got into Garrett-Evangelical and got the presidential scholarship, so I had to interpret that as my direct call from God. We used to joke at seminary that, you know, somebody talked about getting a direct call from God, and I would go yeah, that's funny, God called me collect, you know, so it's like... So that's it.

And I loved seminary, had a wonderful time. I went there in '75. There were like 10 women in the whole school when I was there. We had a group called the Venom Sisters. We rewrote hymns, and we went to chapel every day with our little yellow hankies, and anytime anybody said anything non-inclusive we'd wave our little hankies, and we got the men so nervous.

So just for practice I sent in my ordination things in 1976. I'd only been in seminary a year. And I went to the Board of Ministry, and my Board of Ministry interview was very interesting. I could have believed in Buddha and these people never would have known because they never asked a theologically relevant question. It was a bunch of guys. And I was the first woman going through—the first single woman going through Western Pennsylvania.

So the first question they asked me was, you don't drink, do you? I was like oh, dear, they're going to ask me questions like this. So I said, you know, water, on occasion. And they said do you smoke—this is just right after the prohibition in the Discipline about ministers drinking and smoking. So then they said do you smoke? And I said, well, only when on fire. And do you go out? I said, I got here, didn't I? And do you like boys? I said isn't that illegal? And then they said, well, do boys like you? I said I don't know, you're going to have to ask them. And then so are you engaged? And I said engaged in what?

Finally, one old guy leaned over to me and said do you want to get married? And I said, is that a proposal, sir? It's the only time anybody else laughed. But I said no. Are you one of those? I said one of what? He said, mm. He couldn't even say it out loud. I just was like yeah, I'm not answering this question, I'm done. If you want to ask me about my Christology or anything I'll be out in the hall.

So they went and told the bishop, Roy Nichols, who was one of the few Black bishops, and he knew what it was like to be discriminated against and things. So I told him, I said, I need to tell you about my interview. And he went in and told them it was totally inappropriate, and that no matter what they voted he was going to ordain me anyhow. And then at ordination there were 36 guys and me, and they wanted me to wear a black robe. I didn't have a black robe. I had a cream-colored alb—wheat-colored alb. And the bishop told me I could wear that. And when we were walking in he just said, nice robe, sister. And it was very nice. I love Bishop Nichols.

But when he called my name the guy next to me flipped open his Bible to I Timothy and read that women should keep silent in church, and said that my ordination was an abomination in the sight of God. I just wanted him to let go of my robe, so I just—*mwa*, let go of my robe! My mom said you could hear the smack in the back of the church. Poor Bishop Nichols standing up there going--the United Methodist Church has ordained women in full standing since 1976—1956. I felt so sorry for him. But then what made me angrier is that after I was ordained, they ordained that guy, who obviously was violating the Discipline.

So then I went into a Ph—I graduated from seminary, first in my class, and then I went to a PhD program. I got the university fellowship at Boston University, which was full tuition, and room and board, and a

\$3,000 stipend, which in 1978 was a lot of money. So they bought me.

[*Laughs.*] It was very clear. I was involved in all kinds of activities.

I should say that at Garrett, it's right after they wanted all... The Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Church had merged, so they wanted some of the seminaries to merge. The only two that did were Garrett and Evangelical in Illinois. And so...but they were just...they would hold over the funding threat for MEF funds.

And I was there. I got there in '75 and found out that the faculty had voted the spring before that no self-identified, practicing homosexual would be matriculated, so I got there and found out I wasn't supposed to be there. It's like there was nothing on the application that said hetero, homo, bi, sheep, you know, there just wasn't anything on the application. So I worked while I was there, and I was open.

I was always—I've always been open, since I was two. I mean, if somebody asked. I didn't, like, the first thing I said wasn't like hi, I'm a dyke, you know. That's not what I do. But if somebody asks I've always been honest. I'm not going to ever deny myself. So I was very open there.

But then there were two guys—my senior year there were two guys, first years, that came to campus, fell in love, their Board of Ministries found out, and they were kicked out of school. It was towards the end. And I was so angry. I'm like here I am, the most open person you've ever seen, and you kick these poor two guys out?

So I organized this big protest, because I was active in the gay and lesbian group at Northwestern, and I knew some faculty there who read Garrett PhDs, and so I told them what was happening. And they all signed a letter saying they were going to refuse to read Garrett PhDs until it was changed, the faculty decision was changed, which crippled the PhD program. Also had a big protest out in the front.

And I got a call, and it was from the *New York Times*, and I said I'm moving, I can't do a subscription now. And he said no-no, we want to interview you for the paper. And I was like, oh, cool. Okay, so I gave this big interview, and I called my parents and I said it's going to be in the *Sunday Times*. So my dad went out and bought a bunch of copies and sent them to people. My parents obviously were very supportive.

And then like two weeks before graduation I was out in the hall talking with a bunch of people and Merlyn Northfelt, who was the president—we used to call him Magic—Merlyn heard me, came out of the side door of his office, and he pointed his finger at me and said, “You castrating bitch, it's because of women like you that men are gay.” I had a number of men come up and thank me—always wanted to know why they were gay. Now they knew. Yeah, I have witnesses.

So I went to graduate school. And basically, they fired one of the administrators at the seminary. I was at the graduate school, but it was really connected to the seminary. And so we did protest for that. It was the

'70s. We did protests for everything. Like now we do protests for everything. And I got a job as a three year fill-in, so I was filling in for one of the history professors, and so I taught at the School of Theology and Ministry, church history and historical theology while I was doing my graduate work and writing my dissertation.

So in 1980 I got a summons to Western Pennsylvania to come meet with the Board of Ministry, and I thought it's just a check-in, you know. Got there. It was a trial. There were ten guys, all men. I didn't know about it. I didn't bring anybody with me. I was there by myself. And they had gotten a letter that they would not tell me who wrote it, that accused me of being a bar maid, a communist, and a homosexual.

So I'm like okay, not a bar maid, I'm a bartender. There's a difference. Who better to be behind the bar at 2:00 in the morning than someone trained in pastoral counseling? Because they're not there because they want to drink. I said I even have a degree from the New England School of Mixology. I am a bartender. I did. I earned my way through seminary and graduate school as a bartender.

So then I said I'm not a communist, I'm a Marxist socialist, and there's a difference. And I refused to answer the third question. I said it has nothing to do with my ministry. They asked three times, and three times I just was like I'm not going to answer this. And I felt like Peter. And I was waiting

for the cock to crow. And one of my friends said, well, all ten of them probably did. So that's probably not to be in here. [*Laughs.*]

And at the end of the—and then I finally said I am... Because they were looking at me like of course nobody's going to admit this, so I just had it. I just had it, and I said yep, I am, and it enhances my ministry. So at the end of the meeting they told me they were going to remove my orders, my deacon's orders, at the next annual conference.

So I went home, tried to figure out what to do, and I called a couple bishops that I knew personally, including Marjorie Matthews, first woman ordained bishop. But she'd just been ordained and in place in 1980, and it's 1980, and I was too hot to handle, they all said, too hot to handle. And I didn't really want to put Marjorie's ministry in danger, but I was trying.

And then I finally said I don't care. I can go ahead and teach without being ordained. You know, it's the way it goes. I can do what I'm called to do anyhow. But I was working in New York City with Paul Abels, who was one of the first openly gay people, but it was after he was ordained, and he was at Washington Square Church in the Village. And so I was working with him as the development director. They were restoring the church.

And he called Bishop Wheatley, and Bishop Wheatley called me and said do you want to be part of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference? And I was like, sure. He said, well, can you come down tomorrow, because the committee on recruitment is meeting. And I just joked with him. I said I

thought we were the only people that recruited. So I got on a plane, flew to Denver, the Wheatleys picked me up, I stayed at their house, and he brought me to the committee on recruitment, intentional recruitment, which was all the district superintendents.

And I looked out, and there was a person of color, there was a woman. There were five district superintendents, a person of color and a woman, and I was like two out of five, that's pretty good. That's better than most of the places in 1980. And so Bishop Wheatley introduced me and then said, you know, there are very few things that a bishop can do by themselves—transferring people is one of them. I intend to transfer this woman with or without your permission, but I would prefer to do it with. And after that, the conversation was only not whether to, but how best to do this.

So I went to annual conference at Rocky Mountain that year, and I was transferred into the Rocky Mountain conference, so that my—and it met before Western Pennsylvania, so they met before they could take away my orders, so my orders were just transferred into Rocky Mountain before then. So then Bishop Wheatley said you're on your own, you know, you've got to go through the Board of Ministry and stuff by yourself. I said no problem, don't worry.

So for two years—the only thing was that I had not served a church. My appointment was to go to school, and then it was to teach. And that was a

time when people really wanted you to go to a local church. So the chaplain at BU just hired me as the associate dean of the chapel, so I had a ministry thing going. It was Bob Thornburg, who was a big guy in the church and was like responsible for a lot of the stuff in the Discipline. I loved working with Bob. It was great. And so that's what I had as a ministry option, and my teaching. That was during the two years that we were going through the board.

At this point I was teaching history of Christian doctrine, so when I wrote my ordination papers I think I intimidated them. [*Laughs.*] And when I went to the interview, one of the guys said I really liked your sermon, can I use it? I was like, not in its entirety, but if you would like to use part of it, that's fine.

And so I was meeting with them, and just as I was meeting with them Bishop Wheatley came in and he said, I just want to tell you a story. I was the pastor at Westwood United Methodist Church in L.A., and our organist was gay, and we had a good relationship. And then I got elected bishop. And in 1980, or I'm not sure when, but I think it was '80 or '70s, the bishops came, Council of Bishops met in Denver, and I was the host bishop, and it was the first time that they had written a pastoral letter about homosexuality and saying it was not appropriate in the church. And it was after '76, so it was incompatible with Christian teaching. So I got...

And he said my organist felt betrayed because it came out that it was a unanimous decision, even though I abstained because I was the host bishop and I didn't think I could vote against it. And it caused a rupture in our relationship. But then the young man was dying of AIDS, and he asked if I would come and see him. So I went to see him and we reconciled when I was able to tell him what happened. And he took off the ring off his finger and he gave it to me and he said it's this ring right here. And I never take it off to remind me never to be silent again. But now go ahead and vote on her. He left. [*Laughs.*] It was like that's my bishop. Excuse me, I have a cold. And then they voted to ordain me.

So that annual conference in '82 I wasn't allowed to wear my name tag because there had been death threats, because it had gotten out in the press. The people that were not happy about it leaked it to the press. And I had two very large male ministers with me at all times. And it was really nice. The class I was being ordained with kind of crowded around me in groups when reporters were around—because they did know what I looked like—trying to find me. And they were like oh, we don't know her, you know, just... It was very nice of them.

So we got to the executive session, and I'm a "B." They were going alphabetically. So one woman went in front—or one person went in front of me and everything, you know, we'd go in, clap-clap-clap, you leave. It's not a big deal. I went in, came out, and wasn't getting called in, and wasn't getting called in, and wasn't getting called in. They broke for

lunch, and I still hadn't been called back in. And the friends behind me were like losing their minds, and I'm like oh, no-no-no, I'm a special case. When they're done with me, you'll just go through like this—[snaps fingers]—it'll be fine. So they came back from lunch, and then they took a paper ballot and voted to ordain me. So I'm deeply appreciative to the clergy in the Rocky Mountain Conference.

But some people were upset about that, and appealed it to the Judicial Council. And the Judicial Council, in emergency meeting, ruled that there was nothing in the Discipline barring gay and lesbian ordination, that every annual conference had the right to judge the gifts and graces of its clergy. And so people were like what, there's nothing in the Discipline? Hence 1984. All the, like, thousands of petitions that went in to get in those words of "self-avowed, practicing." And my friend said, it's your fault, Joanne, we got that stuff in the Discipline because of you. Like, eh. And that people were going to boycott ordination. But ordination is so popular nobody noticed.

And I had a friend fly in from Boston who was one of my colleagues, and he carried my stole for me to go up. And then Bishop Wheatley got to the point where "anybody object?"—didn't even pause. I don't think he took a breath. He just kept going. So he ordained me. And then he was accused of heresy and maladministration for saying homosexuality is not a sin and for ordaining me and appointing Julian Rush that year to an appointment.

And then he was acquitted, which was very nice. Western Jurisdiction. Of course he was acquitted. So it was a done deal.

And then I didn't want to stay in Rocky Mountain because I got a job, in '83 I got a job teaching at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. And so I was up there, and I was more engaged with the Pacific Northwest Conference. And I was only ever going to be an issue in Rocky Mountain Conference. I wasn't going to be able to be my...me. And I never did serve there. So Mel Talbert, of blessed memory, transferred me into the Pacific Northwest Conference. Not a big deal, not a big anything.

And so every bishop we've had since then I've gone up and introduced myself. Well, the next one after that was Cal McConnell. He was part of the Rocky Mountain Conference, so he knew who I was. Then Bishop Galvan, and then Bishop Paup, who was also a member of the Rocky Mountain conference when I went through the ordination.

So they already knew, and I just met them and I said you need to know who I am because I'm kind of a poster child, and when you appoint me, if you choose to appoint me, you are committing ecclesiastical disobedience, and you need to know that. And if you choose to say you don't know any of your clergy are gay and lesbian, that's up to you, but I will never blindside you. If anything's going to happen that's going to be a big public thing, I will let you know. I will never blindside you.

So anyhow, that's my ordination story. And I've been in Rocky Mountain—I mean, in Pacific Northwest ever since. I went up to Canada for nine years to teach at the University of Saskatchewan and St. Andrew's College, United Church of Canada seminary. And when in Canada, you are United Church of Canada as a Methodist here, just like the queen, when she goes to Scotland, is a member of the Kirk of Scotland. So I've served...

And then when I came back from Canada, teaching in Canada, the bishop wanted me to do this special project at First Church Seattle to start a ministry, a celebration ministry, for people 18 to 30 living in downtown Seattle, because First Church is right in downtown. So I did that.

And then I was appointed to Eatonville, God help me, for a year. A pretty long year. Well, I had short hair, I never wore a dress, and I drove a Jeep, and so people were like, we know what you are. Yeah, you do. But Mrs. Van Eaton of the Eatonville family came in and asked me, and I told her yeah, I am, and that's fine. So then she left and she told everybody not to send their children to church because I was the pastor, and their children were not safe. It affected some people, but not all. The lay leader, particularly, a very supportive woman, and her grandkids came. She had no problem. She was just fine. And her daughter was fine.

But I lived in the parsonage, and it was on a corner on the main road, and people kept track of how many cars were in my driveway, and particularly

if they were there overnight. There were five bedrooms in this parsonage. It's like there were so many places they could be sleeping, and not with me. I mean, some of them were couples. Like what, are we have a ménage à trois? And everybody had keys to the parsonage, and everybody used them. And so there were, you know, I don't sleep in much, but I heard people in the house, and I'm like, what? I went out and they said, well, we're just fixing the furnace. It's like well, you could have told me. So that was very intrusive.

I had one really good friend in the neighborhood, and when I first moved in she came down, Nancy came down, and she said I don't know if you drink, but if you do, don't put your alcohol bottles in the recycling because they talk, and you can't be the minister, Methodist minister here, and drink. So midnight, before recycling day, I would be—she said just bring them down and put them in my recycling. So at midnight I was padding down to put my bag of bottles, to put them in Nancy's recycling, and I was waiting for the Eatonville police to pull me over because they had nothing better to do than patrol that.

But that was...I was there for a year, and I literally begged the district superintendents to move me. I didn't mind being in a small—I wouldn't have minded being in a small town if they would...if I could just be myself. I mean, I joined the Lady Lions. I was in Eastern Star. I did everything I could do to fit into the community, and...because my dad's a Mason, so joined Eastern Star.

And so I got moved after a year and I went to United Church in University Place, and I was there for eight wonderful long years, eight and a half.

And I got moved in September, which was unfortunate for me and the church. They didn't want me to move, I didn't want to move. But I got a call from a district superintendent who said do you want to take a call from another district superintendent? And I'm like, uh, no, as a matter of fact, I don't. And I was going into a meeting where I was going to give a presentation. I remember nothing about the presentation. Don't know what we had for lunch. And I said I need about an hour and a half, and then I can talk to whoever it is.

Well, I'm driving home, and it's 2007, and I had a cell phone, but not hands-free or any of that stuff that was—it wasn't available. And the phone rings, and I answer it, and it's Elaine Stanovsky, and she wants to know if I will take the church at Tibbetts in West Seattle. And I was like Elaine, I'm driving. She didn't care. She just kept going. And then I said okay, um—and I gave her all the reasons I couldn't leave United Church. It was going really well, we were growing, we had a five year plan going. And she gave me all the reasons that she thought I needed to move to go to Tibbetts.

I have never turned down the bishop, but I really did not want to go. And so I did the last resort of every pastor who gets asked to move—can I pray about it? And Elaine said, well, of course you can, but the bishop wanted me to let you know that the bishop and cabinet have already prayed about

it. I'm like well, might as well save my prayer. So I had 24 hours to make a choice, and so I said yes, because I've never said no.

It's the...I'm committed to the itineracy system. It's the tradeoff. We get a guaranteed appointment. There's not a time I have to go hustle a job. And in return you go when and where the bishop wants you to go.

And it actually worked out well. I was at Tibbetts for 11 years. And it went really well. I did admit to Elaine at one point that sometimes the bishop and cabinet do know what they're doing. But I felt badly because the church I was at foundered for the next number of years, and that, you don't like to...because they had the...they were a joint UCC/UMC church, and so they took turns. So I was a Methodist, so they were going to hire a UCC pastor.

Well, it takes some time, because it's a call system, and they finally called somebody who was unfortunate, and things did not go well. And the next person they called also didn't go well. So they finally got a Methodist appointed again and it went swimmingly well, so I don't know.

And then I... During that time at Tibbetts I got married to my wife. It was 2013, because we waited for it to be legal nationally. And we broke every rule in the Discipline. Two lesbian clergy being married at Tibbetts United Methodist Church by our district superintendent. [*Laughs.*] Every rule in the book we broke. And it's funny, the one person who was charged in all of that was the district superintendent who performed the wedding. I'm like,

really? You didn't take the two most prominent people in the wedding?
And so that was 2013.

And my wife died in 2018 of a rare brain tumor that came on very suddenly, and I was her caregiver, full-time, 24/7 caregiver for a year. She got sick in February 2017 and died in March 2018. And I fell apart physically, emotionally, spiritually, everything. And the district superintendent didn't think I'd be ready to take another church, and...

Well, because Tibbetts, it went really well for 11 years, and then Christie was sick, and I was doing a lot with her. I had hired a care person to come so I could go to work from 8:00 to 3:00, but they didn't think I was paying enough attention to the church. And I'm like, my wife is dying.

And so in January I went back. There was a...we had a board meeting, I mean, an SPR meeting Wednesday night. Thursday morning I came in and there was a piece of paper in my box, and it was the paper that we get sent all the time, do you want to be reappointed, and the church gets it, do you want a new appointment, do you want to keep your pastor. And I assumed it was going to be, because every year it had been, and they had ticked off they wanted a pastoral change. That's how they told me, on a piece of paper. We had just had a meeting the night before, and they didn't have enough guts to tell me to my face. I was devastated. Like my wife is dying, and you do this to me now? So I was pretty *nnee* about the church in general.

And so then I got appointed—bless Rick...oh, Rick. Sometimes my memory is... Rich Lang was my district superintendent, and he created a place for me to go. The pastor at Des Moines had had breast cancer, and she was trying to go back, but it was not working, so he appointed me there three-quarter time, and left Gloria there for a quarter. And things had not been going well with Gloria to begin with at that church.

And so I came and people were really glad. They said I was changing the culture and all that stuff. We were going really, really well. And then I got appointed full-time to the church, which was great. And I had committed to be there till I was 72, because the church really needed some stability. They'd gone through a couple of pastors.

Then COVID hit. COVID was awful. And we didn't have any equipment. So those first couple weeks—so March 8th we had a service. We got the message from the bishop that we had to shut the building for the next Sunday. And I'm like, eh, what do we do? But I wouldn't—we were supposed to put signs on the church, and I put a sign on the church that said the building is closed, but the church is not, because the church is the people, and the people don't close.

So the first, oh, long time, it was me and my secretary holding a phone, and that's—and then we put it up on the internet. It was awful. I mean, I will admit it was awful. And I wasn't feeling well. And I got sick, and my blood pressure went up to like 200 over 100, and I had to stay in bed for a

while to get it down, and then they couldn't bring it down, and it just caused all kinds of problems. And so whatever was wrong with me, they put me on steroids, 60 milligrams of steroids for six months. Hence the body you see. I gained 75 pounds. And they promised me I'd lose it, and I'm like, yeah, no. It also gave me congestive heart failure and chronic kidney disease. Thank you, steroids are the gift that just keeps on giving.

So I was kind of sick, and I took some time off, and I got somebody to fill in for me, so I thought that was better than me being sick trying to do this. I came back and I got them to hire an AV person who knew what we needed, and we got the equipment we needed, got everything set up. She even had a teleprompter for me so I could look at the camera and look at the sermon, and it would go as fast or slow as I wanted it, and she made it in big letters. It was really helpful. It was really good. And so things were going okay.

But while I was gone there were three women who kind of took over, and when I came back I couldn't do anything right. Whatever I did was wrong, and whatever I was not doing was also wrong. And I just, I'd had it. I'd had it with the church, I'd had it with...not just Des Moines, just the church, big "C" church, that it was...it had been my life. It was a lot of joy. It was my calling. But I experienced the most pain I've ever experienced from the church, all the way through.

So by November of '20 I was done. I decided I didn't have to put up with this anymore. And so called the benefits officer and said, Bruce, I need to retire now. You need to figure out how I can do this. And so I retired in December of '20. But then my body continued to go downhill, and now I'm in an assisted living place in a wheelchair, and not the way I'd intended to spend my retirement. Christie and I had all kinds of travel plans and everything, everything we were going to do. But that kind of...that died with her, and so did any kind of future that I thought of at all. So anyhow, that's it, Ashley. Anything else you want?

Ashley B. I'm curious—first, thank you for sharing.

Joanne B. I hope I didn't go on too long.

Ashley B. No, no, not at all. But for being open and vulnerable. It's very humbling to be privy to your story, so thank you.

Joanne B. Thank you.

Ashley B. I'm curious, you know, as one of the few persons who was able to be ordained, and out, and appointed, what was it like kind of still—or I guess seeing everything that was going on within the United Methodist Church, particularly for your queer colleagues?

Joanne B. It was painful. I lost some of queer colleagues who committed suicide. You know, I will never forgive the church for that. They took perfectly wonderfully qualified people and, because they were turned down, or

because they were persecuted by—it just...they committed suicide, and that's as painful as it gets. It was painful to see my colleagues being brought up on trial for...not for being gay, but for doing same gender weddings. I'm like I can bless somebody's frog, but I can't bless their wedding? It's like this is stupid.

But all during my ministry, the general church or whatever, did not go, but General Conferences were just too painful, because every time I went more restrictions, more restrictions. And I'm like isn't it interesting that the only thing in the Discipline other than homosexuality that is said to be incompatible with Christian teaching is war? I don't see you charging the chaplains. Or George W. Bush, or Jeff Sessions, or any of those folks that are in the government that are United Methodists.

So it was hard. It's very painful. It still is. We've had a safe harbor program at the Pacific Northwest for folks from other annual conferences, and we've got money in it to help them transfer over here, and so there's a number of younger gay clergy that are here. In fact, one of them is in Bellingham now, just was appointed to Bellingham.

And I was at a funeral Saturday, and Jason was coming down the hall, and I knew who he was, and I wasn't sure if he did. And we'd had some gatherings of gay clergy, but... And I introduced myself. I said Jason, hi, I'm Joanne Brown. He said I know who you are, you're a legend. And it was like oh, I'm not even dead, you know, just...

That was kind of...that was kind of—actually, it was, it felt good because it meant that somebody remembered in this generation because, you know, I was the first openly gay or lesbian person to be ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church. And it's because of me that y'all get to go through now. Or even though it was because of me that all that stuff got put in the Discipline. But anyhow, it's...

So guess what? I don't care if you run this now. I want it run now. I want the clergy in your generation to know that there were clergy before. And there were some of us that were pioneers and some of us that were martyrs. And too many people hiding who they were. And that just...that does something to your soul, as you know. It does something to your soul to deny yourself, hide who you are, pretend to be something else.

That's what all my colleagues were doing. They were like ah, you're really good, but we can't do that. Can't do that yet. There are still some, even though now the church has split and we're in the part that says it's okay. There are still people that are too nervous, because there are some local churches that will not accept a gay or lesbian clergyperson.

Ashley B. What kept—

Joanne B. When Jason came, his first Sunday here was about a month and a half ago. His first Sunday he was very clear that he was gay. And I was like yeah, this is very nice. Things have changed. [*Laughs.*]

Ashley B. What kept you going in your ministry across those 40 years?

Joanne B. Actually, I was, because I was ordained in '76 I was in ministry for 46 years.

Ashley B. 46 years.

Joanne B. That's okay. I... Because I did feel this is what God wanted me to do. You know, I'd made my bargain with God, and I had to follow up with my bargain, my side. God kept up their side of the bargain and I needed to keep up mine, so... But also, I was convinced that the church is the only institution that can deal with people's inhumanity to each other because of Jesus' core teaching of love, radical, transformative love. And there aren't any other institutions that can do that.

And as long as it was doing that, I was feeling like I needed to participate in the institution, because I wanted... I'm a leftover '60s social gospel person. I believe in the transformation of society through love and action, which I'm trying desperately to hold onto now. And there were times when the church failed, or fails. It continues to fail to do that. And now it has another chance to stand up for love and justice, democracy, separation of church and state, all those things.

But I have joined Ron Reagan's organization, Freedom From Religion organization. I liked his ad, because at the very end of his ad he said Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell. [*Laughs.*] Which, I

love that. And there are times when I... And so a lot of times I think that religion does more harm than good. Although wars these days are almost all, are religious wars. The Middle East is never going to settle because you can't compromise on faith. Religious wars are the bloodiest and the longest because you can't compromise on faith. You can compromise on land, you can compromise on other things. Israel is talking about land, but they're talking about it because that's what...it's the land God gave them, so it's a matter of faith. And so sometimes I look around and religion has done horrible things. I'm an historian, you know, I know everything the church has done. But I still had hope.

There's a wonderful book by Duncan Howlett that's probably out of print by now. He was a Unitarian pastor. And it's called "The Critical Way of Religion." And he talks about all the way through history there have been people that have held onto the spirit of the church and the spirit of Jesus, and even though the institutional church was trying to suppress them, they held the spark, and that you can see people all the way through. Most of the time they got labeled heretics. But you can see it all the way through history. And I love that book because that's what I hold onto, is that those people who have that, the spark, it's amazing that the Holy Spirit has not died. But it's because of those people with spark.

And I just want to... So even though I've left, pretty much, the church, because I've like had it with the church, I haven't stepped foot in a regular church service since I retired. And my friends are sad about that. But

I'm... It's not just because I'm tired of going, it's because I can't do it anymore, it's too painful. So ultimately, I'm here. I do what I can.

Ashley B. And I think my last question would be what advice would you give to persons who are thinking about ordination or are in the middle of the process within the UMC? What might you tell them?

Joanne B. Keep your integrity. Keep your own integrity. Because they're going to try and take it away at some point, sometimes. So hold onto your integrity, hold onto your understanding of your call from God. And never compromise on that. And use as your guiding stone not Christianity, but the teachings of Jesus. I've long since stopped calling myself a Christian. I call myself a follower of Jesus. And there's a difference. And so Jesus had some very radical teachings. Very radical. I don't think Christianity was ever intended to be a universal religion because it's too hard. If you really follow Jesus, it's too hard to be universal. So hold onto those—your integrity, and knowing that you are a beloved child of God, and no one can take that from you.

There's a great song that was by Tom and Claudia, who are members of this conference. It's called "Child of God," and the chorus is—I mean, they have...the verses are different people that have been...my name is Marie, last night he hit me on the floor. It's about domestic violence. And then the chorus goes, "But I am a child of God, no one can take my inheritance; I am a child of God, no one can shake my confidence; never

alone, I'll stand strengthened by God's own hand; I am a child, I am a child of God."

And the last verse, "My name is Jerome, last week I went home and told my parents truthfully who I am. My father walked out, my mother broke down, and my father asked me how I could say I was a man." And then it goes into the chorus, "But I am a child of God." So each one of these. There's another one where it's a farm worker. And so it's a great song. Tom and Claudia Walker. I used to use it when I did a lot of speaking around, and I always incorporated music in my talks, and I would use that all the time, with their permission.

Ashley B. Thank you, Joanne. I'm going to stop the recording real quick.

00:55:51 *[End of recordings.]*