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Title

Karen Ziegler Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

November, 2017

Extant

1 hour interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Karen Ziegler, an early pastor of MCC New York, reflects that she was nearly not ordained, due to the committee's reaction to her feminist writing, at a time when there were very few women pastors at MCC. She discusses her involvement in the 1980 gay rights Trek march and the formation of Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center in Greenwich Village. Ziegler ministered to AIDS patients through MCC and later People with AIDS Coalition.

Biographical

Karen was born in 1953 in Pennsylvania and grew up in very white suburbs remarkably unaware of white supremacy and the Civil Rights Movement. She escaped a sense of unease by developing a pious, private Christian spirituality. Early in her time at Allegheny College, she decided she wanted a different life and began to volunteer at a community center whose purpose was to bridge racial division. Shortly after that she fell in love with Colevia Carter, who began Karen's education on racism. The two of them thought they did not know any other lesbians. Then they found out that Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, who had just graduated from Allegheny, was starting MCC Boston with Rev. Larry Bernier. Nancy invited them to visit her, and this visit changed both their lives. The experience of attending church with other lesbians and gay men "put at rest forever the question of whether a person can be gay and Christian."

Also, it was the first time Karen had ever seen a woman minister.

Karen served MCC Philadelphia as an Exhorter (Student Clergy) in 1975-1976 while working at Jefferson Medical School. She was licensed as an MCC Minister in 1977 and served on the staff of MCC New York while attending Union Theological Seminary, becoming Worship Coordinator of MCC New York in 1978. In 1979 she appeared before the UFMCC Credentials

Committee in Los Angeles having graduated from seminary and having been called to serve as Pastor of MCC New York, but she was very nearly not ordained. The only woman on the committee was Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey, who later told her that half of the large committee had decided on the basis of her ordination thesis, "A Radical Feminist Theology of Ministry," that she was a heretic. It did not help that she suggested in an article called "Creation Myths: Bridge to Human Wholeness" (The Gay Christian, April/May 1979) that, "An end to patriarchy would mean not a reinterpretation of the Yahweh of the Bible, but an end to this father god. If the Bible records a continuing battle to suppress female religion, and thereby to oppress women, unless we come to understand biblical religion in a radically new way, there is no hope for real change. Our entire sacred story needs to shift." (p. 24)

Karen was ordained by one vote and the lengthy ordination process was later seen as a kind of heresy trial. Jeri Ann let her know that without that one vote, her credentials would have been removed entirely. In a second The Gay Christian article in 1980, "Jesus According to a Lesbian," Karen wrote, "Our spiritual survival may depend upon our rejection of traditional theology." (p. 8) This article too generated considerable controversy.

With the benefit of hindsight, these theological arguments can be understood as a class conflict as well as a struggle to apply the insights of feminism to Christianity. In those days, seminary-educated clergy and women clergy were a minority. Some clergy had very little formal education and others had graduated from prestigious seminaries. The entire spectrum of theology was represented in MCC, from the most liberal to the most conservative. Also for a long time there were very few women pastors. The rich diversity of MCC was a great gift and at the same time creating church in such oppressed communities was stressful. District and General Conferences became theological battlefields.

One extraordinary example of MCC's great strength and struggle in those days was the Trek, a gay rights march from Jacksonville to Tallahassee, Florida which took place in the spring of 1980. The Trek was jointly called by the Board of Home Missions of the Southeast District and the Florida Task Force and led by Florida clergy and laity including Rev. Joseph Gilbert and Rev. Lee Carlton as a political and spiritual exercise. MCC clergy and laity from several other districts came to Florida to do the 168-mile walk, including Karen, Rev. Shelley Hamilton, and Rev. Edward Hougan who was then District Coordinator of the Northeast District. Rev. Elder Troy Perry, Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey, and many others eventually joined the group. From the first day there were logistical and theological arguments, however, during the 8-day march while singing every day, attending to blistered feet, and enduring the harassment of people who passed by shouting obscenities and sometimes throwing things out of passing cars, the group bonded in a very deep way. Arguments did not end, but unlikely and enduring spiritual friendships were cemented.

Karen served as Senior Pastor of MCC New York from 1979 until 1988 and was joined by a remarkably gifted staff, including Rev. Renee McCoy, Rev. Elder Jim Mitulski, Rev. Elder Pat Bumgardner, Rev. Susan Eenigenburg, and Rev. Janine Dietz, and Rev. Jill Thompson. During this time Karen served on the steering committee of the Commission on Women in Ministry of the National Council of Churches and was involved in UFMCC's prolonged and unsuccessful application for membership in the National Council.

In 1982, the City of New York evicted MCC New York and other occupants of 208 West 13th Street. With a few other community activists and with the full support the congregation, Karen resisted this effort and eventually became one of the founders of the Gay and Lesbian

Community Services Center in Greenwich Village. Initially, members of MCC New York served as the staff of this Center.

Meanwhile beginning in 1981 the congregation and community were devastated by what came to be known as AIDS. Dozens of members of MCC New York became sick and died. Members of the community who had not been interested in church sought spiritual counseling and arranged their funerals. The young men facing death in those days did so with grace, courage, and often astonishing humor and creativity. Karen's interest in all aspects of healing deepened. Seeking help in learning to pastor led Karen to completion of a D.Min. program at New York Theological Seminary in 1986 with a thesis entitled, "Empowering People to Do Ministry." In 1988, Karen resigned from MCC New York and was subsequently invited by Michael Callen to work for the People with AIDS Coalition. She then developed citywide interfaith networks to provide pastoral care for people with AIDS through the AIDS Resource Center and AIDS Interfaith.

Karen began studying meditation in the 1980's on her own and began the search for a teacher. She traveled to India three times to study at a Siddha Yoga ashram in Ganeshpuri, and in recent years has been studying Buddhism.

Observing the hideous physical suffering endured by friends with AIDS as well as her interest in healing led Karen to nursing school. She completed her BSN at Columbia School of Nursing in 1990 and her MSN from Duke School of Nursing in 1994. She worked as a nurse and a nurse practitioner and taught for 15 years in the School of Medicine at Duke University.

Karen married her life partner, singer Randa McNamara, after 30 years together. They live in Durham, North Carolina. She currently works as an activist through Indivisible Triangle, participates in Triangle Insight meditation community, serves on the Board of Trustees of the Resource Center for Women in Ministry in the South and volunteers in the acute psychiatry ward at the Durham Veterans Administration Hospital.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Karen Ziegler, an early pastor of MCC New York, reflects that she was nearly not ordained, due to the committee's reaction to her feminist writing, at a time when there were very few women pastors at MCC. She discusses her involvement in the 1980 gay rights Trek march and the formation of Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center in Greenwich Village. Ziegler ministered to AIDS patients through MCC and later People with AIDS Coalition.

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

Access

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Cite as

“Karen Ziegler | Oral History”, LGBTQ Religious Archives Network,
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Digital finding aid created by Sarah McCall, 2023

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MCC
Mitulski, Jim
Perry, Troy
Wilson, Nancy
AIDS
Clergy Activist
Feminism
Women and Religion
New York
New York City
Ziegler, Karen

