

**Interview with Deen Thompson**  
**March 6, 2026**  
**Beth A. Richardson**

**Beth:** I'm so glad to be here with Deen Thompson talking about his life for the history project. So when you were growing up did you ever hear about gay? Did you know anything about that?

**Deen:** Gay was being happy. And, no, then, and even in high school, you didn't have it, and, of course, we didn't. Even back then, we didn't have television.

**Beth:** So you didn't hear about [being gay]?

**Deen:** Didn't know anything about it. And it wasn't discussed. You know, in regular conversation. And even in college, the first time I heard about it was someone said that basketball player was kicked out of school because he was gay. And you just said, Huh? You know? And that's all we heard.

And in seminary, it wasn't a subject, or a discussion. And it wasn't until later on in ministry. Even in the local church, you didn't talk about. It wasn't a subject that was discussed. Of course, you know, in the church, you don't discuss sex there much.

**Beth:** When did you first start realizing that for yourself?

**Deen:** After I got married, and I'd been married 15 or so years. I begin to question my sexuality. I did not act upon it until, maybe, after I was married 20 years. And then I began to find out if you wanted to meet someone who was gay, you go to a park, or you go to a bar. And being a minister, I didn't drink. I don't go to bars. So, I went to a park.

And for the first time I met someone. You'd just sit around and have conversation. And then, oh ... later, when I met someone to have a date ... on one of those occasions, I was arrested. It was a sting. And then it became public.

I took a year off from ministry. It was a medical leave, and I came to Vanderbilt, and took a year's study at Vanderbilt, and then went back. And I went to New Orleans. And that wasn't really a safe place for me.

When I was in Nashville, I went to counseling and the counseling dealt more with the pain that I had of losing the ministry and did not really deal about what it meant to be gay. And when I did finish the year at Vanderbilt, and the year of counseling, the counselor gave a report to the conference. And what it really said was that Deen has been in so much pain that he would be safe to return, because the pain would keep him straight. And I was sent to New Orleans, appointed to New Orleans and started a ministry there. But I went to a park one day to meet someone, and it was another sting. That was when I began the journey of having to leave the ministry.

I got to thinking about the two times that I was in a sting. I was arrested and put in jail. The first time, overnight, and the second time, maybe eight hours. But in jail, I felt like Paul in prison.

Because I was scared, but there was always someone in the cell who spoke to me, and that made me feel comfortable. I felt as if those people were there as instruments of God's peace for me. And so even being in jail was not a negative experience. Except when you get out and people make it negative towards you. But it wasn't a negative experience. I felt God even in jail.

**Beth:** So you were forced to turn in your orders at that point?

**Deen:** Yeah. The District Superintendent came to me the second time, in New Orleans. I had to give him my ordination papers. But he never did really judge me. We're getting rid of you, but there was no anger towards me. And I really appreciated that. Appreciated that later more than when it was happening.

**Beth:** So what happened next in your life, then?

**Deen:** Then I went back to a town where I had served as pastor for eight years. It was Monroe and I rented an apartment. And then from there, I had friends in Nashville. I came to Nashville, for months at a time, looking for work. And when you have a degree in religion and seminary, that doesn't qualify you for too much. And finally, I did get a job at The Upper Room. I knew how to type. Typing bulletins came in handy, so I took a typing test, and then I began my journey at The Upper Room, and the Board of Discipleship.

**Beth:** When you were going through all that trauma of being in the closet, losing your orders, and then coming out, where was God in all of that? What kind of relationship did you have?

**Deen:** My relationship with God never wavered. Not because I held on to God, as much as God was holding on to me. And I never felt, at any time, in my pain, that God was at a distance. God was with me in my pain. God was with me, would always be with me. I never questioned God. And my image of God, from childhood, was the God of love. And that just stayed with me. And that's the one reason I stayed within the Methodist Church. Because that's where I found God, and I stayed. I might have lost some relationship with the church, but not with God. In the relationship with the church, that was, I don't want to say "lost." It was strange. It was tension. And then when I found out more about Reconciling Congregations, then it gave me an avenue to work and to build a healthy relationship with the church.

**Beth:** Did you ever stop going to church?

**Deen:** No. When I came back to Nashville, after I had to leave, I came back to Nashville, because I had friends here. I went to a Methodist church on Sunday morning. But on Saturday night, and Sunday night, I went to a Metropolitan Community Church. That was where I learned about gays and religion in the gay community, and it was very powerful for me.

We had communion every Sunday night at Metropolitan, and because I had been a pastor, they recognized my ministry. And most of the nights, I helped serve communion. The individuals would come up. There would be three or four people serving, and they'd come up, and you would serve them communion. And then you would have a personal prayer with them. And that was the most powerful for me, because I was able to say to them, as a minister, "God loves you.

You're a beloved child of God. There's nothing you can do that would make God love you any more than God already loves you. God loves you unconditionally. All you can do is add your love."

And to feel and to see the power of those words being heard for the first time for many gay persons or lesbians ... It was holy ground. And I really appreciate being able to be God's instrument of grace for that person.

**Beth:** So, you've been a part of Edgehill United Methodist Church in Nashville for many years. How did you end up there? Do you remember when you, how you found Edgehill?

**Deen:** At work I heard about Edgehill and I went. It was probably because you were going there, and I went and I joined Edgehill after a few weeks. I'd been going to another Methodist church, not as a gay person. I was just another member of that church. And when I joined Edgehill, I became a member of the church, and they recognized me as a gay person, beloved child of God, and my faith was able to grow in a deeper and more inclusive way.

**Beth:** So, you've had quite a journey there at Edgehill. Weren't you the delegate to annual conference?

**Deen:** First was active in the local church, and then I begin to be active in a small way in the district, and then I went with you, Beth, to an annual conference for the first time since I left the ministry. When you became a Deacon.

And then I started going to the Tennessee Annual Conference, just to go, because I missed Annual Conference. But I would sit up in the balcony and cry. When we open the conference we sing, "And Are We Yet Alive." The tears were just because I had sung that for twenty years in Louisiana.

And then I became active in the conference. I became a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry as a lay member, a gay ex-minister. And people would ask me, some of my friends would say, "Deen, what are you going to do when you're on a committee with someone who's really anti-gay?" I said, "I'll just be me, and they'll have to deal with me, and I'll deal with him or her.

And it so happened that I was put on a small committee with one of the most anti-gay ministers of the conference. And we became friends. One night, after having dealt with some pressure dealing with some of the candidates, we were walking back to the bedrooms, and he said to me, Deen, you have a way of asking questions and dealing with these people in such a Christlike manner. And that was a gift he gave me by saying that. Because he recognized me as one of God's children.

And we became friends. And when he had to come to Nashville, we'd have a meal together. His wife had surgery, and I went and sat with him at the hospital while she had surgery and had prayer with him. And later, he had cancer, and he died, and his wife, the night that he died, called me to tell me that he had died, and that was gift of her recognizing our friendship.

Being able to be on the Board of Ordained Ministry as a gay person, to share that news with other conferences and other gay people, as they were dealing with their relationship with a Methodist Church. It was a positive thing, because they couldn't understand it, and then they couldn't believe it. That a conference would do that. And I said, "The conference didn't do that. The bishop had enough faith and trust in me to okay that, because the Board of Ordained Ministry is not a committee that gets appointed without the knowledge of the bishop. And so, I appreciated the bishop. And when I did have my orders restored, I told that bishop he had a part in restoring that. Because he gave me a place.

When General Conference took out all the ugliness out of The Book of Discipline and then went ahead and made an amendment, saying, not only can gay people and lesbians come to ask for ordination, those who lost their orders can have them restored. And I said, I never thought about restoring my ordination.

When they were taken away, they were gone. Though I continued to be the spirit of a pastor. I didn't have ordination. And I said, I did not know if I wanted to ask for them back. Not that I didn't want them back. I didn't want to ask for them back and be rejected. I didn't want to have to deal with rejection again. And I asked Edgehill Church to pray with me.

And I did talk to the bishop in Louisiana. She was a woman of color, a woman who was ex-military, and I didn't know where she would stand. And she was the most gracious bishop and encouraged me the whole time. And so, it was a good journey. I had tension waiting for the answer. But when she called me, she said, "Deen, I've got good news and bad news." And she said, "Which, do you want?" I said, "Oh, good news." And she said, "The conference voted to renew your ordination." I said, "What's the bad news?" And she said, "You don't get any money." And we laughed.

She wanted me to come to Louisiana so I could receive my ordination, but it didn't work out for the time. And she said she could come to Nashville. And she said, "I'd like to come to Edgehill, on the first Sunday in Advent and restore your ordination." And I said, "That'd be just fine."

I knew that we were having special speakers for Advent, women speakers, and I said, oh, it would be nice if it would be a woman pastor of color. And so, I talked to the pastor, and he said, no, it was a white woman. And then I found out it was a transgender woman. And I just laughed out loud at the joy that God would allow such a thing to happen. And it just made the restoration of my orders an even holier occasion.

**Beth:** I was so happy to get to be there that day to see that ritual, and to have your spouse, John, up standing up there with you.

**Deen:** To see the bishop and her assistant mingle with a congregation, as if they had known each other forever, it was just a homecoming in a way.

And then a year later, I was invited to go to Dallas for a celebration of having the language removed. And there were four of us ministers who'd had ordinations restored. And we were able

to serve communion; celebrate and serve communion. And my special guest at that service was my freshman roommate in college, and his wife. And I was able to serve them communion.

Then afterwards, we went to a reception. The first church reception I ever went to that was held at a gay bar. They had leased the bar for that night and had food and time for us to have a reception. The entertainment that night was a drag queen. And we just sat at the table and laughed — having a church reception with the drag queen. I said, you know, it feels strange, but you know, it feels good.

And then the drag queen took a break to change clothes, and she came back, and she said, these are the outfits that I will be wearing in New England, in a couple of months. I'm going up there to do a charity drag show, to help raise money for AIDS. It was just perfect. It was just icing on the cake.

**Beth:** You were already at The Upper Room when I came on staff there as a young person, and I just have always considered you the “gay icebreaker” that went ahead of me to prepare the staff to accept me. You were just being yourself there. What was that like to be the first gay person at The Upper Room?

**Deen:** I said to myself, when I got the job, that I would not parade around as a gay person. But I would be a gay person and open as a gay person. And within the first few weeks, different people would come up to me and say, Could I ask you a question? One person had a brother who came out as gay, and they want to know how to deal with that. And different ones would come because they felt safe, and because I wasn't judgmental, and because I was open, they could do that.

There was a gay man working in marketing, who died, and the chaplain of The Upper Room chapel, came and asked if I would have a part in the service for him as a gay person. And then just last year after I'd been retired for many years, one of the workers at The Upper Room that I had known all those years working together. She came to me and said, Deen, could I share something with you? I said, yes. And she said, you're the first gay person that I ever met. And I want to thank you for being open and being gay, so I could know a person that was of a different sexual orientation. And my friends now are more diverse than ever before. So, God uses strange situations to become holy situations.

**Beth:** What was the process like for you to get your get your orders back?

**Deen:** When the general conference voted to remove all the other language, there was an amendment made that those who lost their ordinations because of their sexuality, could ask for them to be restored. I never thought about having my ordination restored, my ministry continued, but as a layperson. And that ministry was deep, and broader than even when I was ordained. I was afraid that if I got rejected, I'd have to deal with a pain of rejection. And so, I asked Edgehill to pray with me, to see what where God would lead me. I did ask for my ordination to be restored. And my bishop in Louisiana was just so gracious and so supportive, and she, and her assistant, just led me every step of the way.

After my ordination was restored, people would come up to me and say, Oh, Deen, I'm so happy for you. And then they would say, I wish you never had to go through that. And I'd have to say no. I don't want to go through that again. But if I had not gone through that journey, I would have never been in Nashville. I'd have never known the ministry that I found in Nashville. I may have stayed hidden the rest of my life. I found freedom and wholeness as a child of God on this journey. And I don't want to have to go through that rejection again, but I thank God for being with me on this journey.

**Beth:** I'm just so grateful to be, to be on this journey with you. You've been such a part of my life for ... I think we're at 40 years now.

**Deen:** A long time. And I'd have to say this, that my family breaking up because of my gayness was difficult, but we did not lose contact. The mother of my children and I have a good relationship, and John, my husband, has the same relationship with them as I have. And this is good. God is good in so many healing ways. And I rejoice in that.

**Beth:** Before we close, I was wondering if you could tell the story of when we first took the Edgehill Banner to the gay pride march.

**Deen:** The first time they started gay pride, the church leadership decided we would not have the banner at Pride because they were afraid. But they gave us a stole to wear.

The second year, as we were standing at the Dragon Park getting ready to start the parade, someone says, we need a banner. And someone said, well, the church won't give us the banner. And I said, well I've got the keys to the church. Maybe we can ask forgiveness. And we went and got a banner and carried it, and we have carried banners every gay pride parade, since then, and no one has said anything but joy from the church. Some people from the outside look at us and had a hard time dealing with God's beloved gay children and lesbians.

And I have pictures of me standing with our banner next to someone with a banner saying, you gay folks are going to hell. And I love my banner a lot better than his.

**Beth:** Oh, thank you, Deen, for this, for sharing your stories, and for who you are in the world, as one of God's beloved children, and carrying that message to all those you meet.

**Deen:** Well, I thank God for loving all of us. Unconditionally. And giving us time and experiences, good and not so good, to grow in God's love and God's grace.

**Beth:** And all of God's people said... Amen.

**Deen:** Amen.