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Title

Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

January 6, 2021

Extant

1 hour 53 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, the first out Black lesbian elder in The United Methodist Church, discusses growing up during desegregation in the 1970s, and coming to terms with her sexuality after leaving the Pentecostal church. She discusses her study of liberation theology, and her activism against homophobia in the military and church.

Biographical

The Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, the first out Black lesbian elder in The United Methodist Church, was raised in West Palm Beach, Florida, in the 1960s. Her father was a day laborer and her mother a domestic worker with limited financial means. Her upbringing was filled with rich cultural teachings at a time of national turmoil. After Dr. King's assassination, the burgeoning Black Power Movement in the U.S. led adults to instill in their children a deeper and more powerful sense of pride in being Black. In addition to her parents, her godmother, an educator who was influenced by such scholars as W.E.B. DuBois, helped Pamela realize at an early age that the way to improve one's life was to learn, learn well and to remember that your learning must excel your White peers to be considered on par. This was the way of the segregated South.

The religious affiliation of Pamela's extended family was Missionary Baptist. They attended a local silk-stocking church of that denomination though Pamela's immediate family attended only episodically because being poor, her parents felt it required too much of their personal income "just to be seen." So even though church was not so important in Pamela's early years, her parents ensured that God definitely was. She remembers fondly her father cooking on Sunday mornings while quoting and interpreting scriptures for her and her siblings.

By the time desegregation laws were finally implemented in the early 1970s, Pamela was among the first group of Black children admitted to previously all-White schools. She was bussed to school starting her first year of junior high in this tense social environment and recalls sometimes being fearful to go to school. Yet she always found affirmation and support in her own community. At that time the Black neighborhood was not divided along economic lines so professionals lived alongside low-income persons. Her activism and commitment to social justice can be traced back to these years.

After graduating from high school in 1977 Pamela did not know how she could finance enrollment in college. Her parents could not offer any financial support and she did not know where else to turn. So a military recruiter's offer that the Army would pay for college if she only enlisted enticed her to do just that. Only later did she learn that that offer of "free college tuition" came with a lot of strings attached.

s Pamela's permanent duty station was Fort Lewis, Washington. Prior to that assignment, while attending advanced individual training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina people learned that her oldest sister had been "saved", was no longer addicted to heroin and had become a preacher.

Having no formal church upbringing this language of "being saved" and "conversion" peaked Pamela's interest. She had arrived at Fort Lewis near the holidays, so she requested and received approval to take vacation. While home she accepted an invitation to hear her sister preach which pleased her sister who was then witnessing to the rest of the family so they could also find Jesus. Pamela had a mystical conversion experience listening to her sister preach at that tiny Pentecostal church. She returned to Washington and found a Church of God congregation (same denomination as her sister's church) there in which she got very involved. Pamela was a gifted vocalist so she sang in the choir and also taught Sunday School. She started to feel a call to ministry at this young age of 19. Pamela started dating one of the much-loved ministers of the church and they married soon thereafter. The pastor of that church was a woman and just before the wedding she told Pamela that she would never be a good "first lady." Pamela immediately thought: "You're right....I'm going to be a preacher."

Because Pamela's husband was also in the military she decided, during her first pregnancy, to leave the military and therefore took an honorable discharge. Her family moved often: New Jersey, Belgium and Frankfurt. They lived in Europe for seven years. During that time, Pamela continued to pursue her calling by singing and preaching in different military chapels. Her older brother was gay and had also served in the military, playing in a military band. He contracted HIV and died while Pamela was still in Europe. Pamela was still viewing the world through the Pentecostal lens and so blamed his death on his being gay.

Pamela and her husband returned to the U.S. in 1991 and were stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. Pamela had finally come to realize that the racism and sexism endemic in so many Pentecostal churches was contrary to the way she had been raised and her core values. So she decided to try a different religious path and joined St. Mary's Road United Methodist Church in Columbus, Georgia. The pastor at the time was James Swanson who later became a bishop.

Pamela's marriage was also dissolving and the congregation and her family supported her through the divorce. The church encouraged her to continue her formal education so she went back to complete her undergraduate work at Columbus State University. She developed a connection with one of her professors, Dr. Horowitz, who was a bisexual Jewish man. The divorce had been liberating for Pamela and gave her the opportunity to explore her own identity

and being. In one of her provocative class sessions with Horowitz, he introduced the class to the Kinsey Report. Pamela recalls that being an “aha moment” that helped her connect the dots in her past.

The church also supported her call to ministry and Swanson gave her opportunities to preach. Pamela enrolled in seminary at Gammon Theological Seminary, part of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). The ITC was an excellent setting for engaging liberation theology. However, at that time it was not so strong on LGBT concerns and liberation. Yet conversations were happening and Pamela and some other students were at the cusp raising questions about human sexuality.

Bishop Joseph Sprague from the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church came to the ITC on a recruiting visit during Pamela’s last year of seminary. She had read up about Sprague and knew that he had taken risks on behalf of LGBT persons, even been arrested in a demonstration. Even though Pamela was not intending to pursue local church pastoring, she decided to meet with him. In that conversation, Sprague essentially asked, “What can I do to convince you to come to Chicago?” Pamela, who was interested in further academic study and knew Chicago would offer such opportunity, replied “I need to be able to go to school and pastor.”

In 2001 Lightsey was accepted in the Ph.D. program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (GETS) and appointed to be pastor of Southlawn UMC on the South Side of Chicago. Her academic interests were now focused on Church History, Black Theology and human sexuality, LGBT rights in particular. Though her specific dissertation work was on just war theory, Lightsey was also writing, teaching and speaking on the intersection of her concerns about liberation and equality—in her congregation, at school and in other settings. She completed her Ph.D. degree in Theology & Ethics in May 2005. The following month, she was ordained elder in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference. Her commitment to children and their families spurred church growth so much so that in 2006 she was honored with the Harry Denman Award for Evangelism from the Northern Illinois Annual Conference.

Dr. Lightsey was appointed first to be Dean of Students at GETS in 2007 and because of excellence in her work was later promoted to Vice-President of Student Affairs. In August 2011, she took the position of Associate Dean for Community Life and Lifelong Learning and Clinical Assistant Professor of Contextual Theology and Practice at Boston University School of Theology.

From her position in academia, Lightsey has become a prominent activist, educator, author and blogger on a range of social justice issues. Lightsey has advocated within the LGBTQ community for the end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell military policy and to ensure marriage equality.

As a board member of the Reconciling Ministries Network she has critiqued Christian churches for their homophobic policies and practices. She traveled to the 2012 and 2016 United Methodist General Conferences to speak out strongly for justice for LGBTQ persons.

As co-chair of the American Academy of Religion’s Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Group, Dr. Lightsey has helped lead that group to exploring the theological and ethical scholarship and experiences of Black women in America. She was among the first members of the Executive Committee for the Soul Repair Project, which studies the role of moral injury in veterans.

She was on the ground in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 to document and interpret the racial unrest following the killing of teenager Michael Brown. She was one of the livestreamers recounting these impassioned protests against excessive police force and blogged to audiences around the world.

Among her several writings Lightsey is author of *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Wipf and Stock, 2015). Her recognition as an inspiring preacher led to an invitation to offer a sermon for publication, "If There Should Come a Time," in *Black United Methodists Preach!* edited by Gennifer Brooks (2012). She contributed a chapter, "He Is Black and We Are Queer: The Legacy of the Black Messiah for LGBTQ Christians," to Albert Cleage Jr. and the *Black Madonna and Child* (2016).

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, the first out Black lesbian elder in The United Methodist Church, discusses growing up during desegregation in the 1970s, and coming to terms with her sexuality after leaving the Pentecostal Church. She discusses her study of liberation theology, and her activism against homophobia in the military and church.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Monique Moultrie, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, and author of *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She conducted this interview as a consultant of LGBTQ-RAN as part of the oral histories project.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/pamela-lightsey>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

This tape was given to LGBTQ-RAN archives by the interviewer.

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Tags

Methodist (UMC, United Methodist Church)

Reconciling Ministries Network (formerly Reconciling Congregation Program)

Black

Author/editor

Clergy Activist

Ordination/clergy

Racism

Theology

U.S. Military

Lightsey, Pamela