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Title

Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 29, 2016

Extant

1 hour, 45 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood reflects on growing up in a fundamentalist Mennonite church, which initially prevented her from seeing herself as a minister or from realizing her sexuality. She sought ordination after separating from her husband and being forced to out herself to the congregation. She subsequently has worked as both a Baptist and UCC minister.

Biographical

Paula Northwood, nee Paula Diller, was born and raised in Pandora, Ohio. Her mom was a homemaker and her dad worked as a farmer. Northwood grew up going to St. John Mennonite Church in Pandora, which was heavily influenced by fundamentalism. Due to her religious upbringing, her family was unhappy with her choice to go Bluffton College, as they thought it was too liberal. However, her experiences at Bluffton College, now Bluffton University, helped to lead her down the path of religion. Originally, Northwood went to Bluffton to become an Art teacher, but a mandatory religion credits resulted in her attending Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) for a January Interterm. Her eyes were opened to a number of things in relation to religion.

Paula never actually planned on going to seminary, but was unable to find a teaching job, so she tried a year of seminary where she met her eventual husband, Tim Lehman. Paula Diller added Lehman to her name and continued taking classes at AMBS with no intention of graduating, until her advisor informed her that she almost had a Master of Divinity degree.

Northwood never truly felt the call from God to serve as a minister. She grew up in a church where there were no models for women ministries. As of 2016, her childhood church had still never had a female minister. Northwood says, "it's hard to say that you have a call from God

when you don't see any modeling of who you are." Northwood remembers one specific incident at her church, when she was little. An elderly member of the church had approached her after she narrated a Christmas pageant and told her that she needed to become a minister, which she found rather odd.

In 1982, Northwood graduated with her Master's of Divinity and was hired by the General Conference Mennonite Church while her husband finished his last year of seminary. After he graduated, Northwood's husband became the campus pastor at Bethel College and so Northwood worked as the Secretary for Youth Education from 1982 to 1992. Eventually, the job title changed to Director of Youth Education and Service. This job required her to travel extensively overseeing youth service projects. She also wrote curriculum for the Mennonite church and was a sought after speaker. However, it was through this job that Northwood started to come to terms with her sexuality.

Northwood attributes her naivety about sexuality with the fact that she grew up extremely sheltered. However, she always felt that she was attracted to women and during her time working for the General Conference, she had two relationships with women unbeknownst to her husband. Eventually, Northwood decided to tell her husband the truth about her life and struggles. It was during this time that Northwood truly debated suicide because of her conflicted feelings about being gay, so her and Tim decided to get a divorce. However, this divorce heavily involved Faith Mennonite Church, where they were both working.

Originally, Northwood's husband was very supportive. However, as more church officials became involved, things got more complicated. Eventually, things came to a head when Northwood was asked to out herself to the congregation. Northwood decided to go through with coming out and then resigned from her position at Faith Mennonite Church. Northwood felt very alone and during that time worked a few odd jobs until she was able to get her credentials transferred into the United Church of Christ in 1998. During this time Paula also completed her Doctor of Ministry degree at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

However, Northwood applied and worked for Judson Baptist Memorial Church in South Minneapolis for five years and said that it was "the most healing experience" she probably ever had in a church. And even though she had such a wonderful experience at that church, Northwood felt that she should work in a United Church of Christ and so she applied at Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis where she retired from being Lead Minister December 31, 2020.

Even though Northwood felt totally abandoned by the Mennonite Church when she came out, she still considers herself ethically Mennonite, theologically Anabaptist, and then of course totally ensconced now for more than 20 years in the United Church of Christ. Paula continues to reside in St. Paul with her wife Andrea as she contemplates retirement projects.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood reflects on growing up in a fundamentalist Mennonite church, which initially prevented her from seeing herself as a minister or from realizing her sexuality. She sought ordination after separating from her husband and being forced to out herself to the congregation. She subsequently has worked as both a Baptist and UCC minister.

This interview was conducted by Rachel Waltner Goossen, professor of history emerita at Washburn University in Topeka, Kan and author of *Women against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941-1947* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/paula-northwood>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

This tape was given to the Mennonite USA Archives where it was transcribed and can be accessed. A digital copy was then transferred to LGBTQ-RAN archives by the interviewer.

Existence and Location of Originals

This recording was given to the Mennonite Church USA Archives by interviewer per their agreement to transcribe it and then allow LGBTQ-RAN to host the interview and its transcription on its website.

Cite as

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Tags

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