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Title

Rev. Randy Spaulding Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

December 8, 2017

Extant

1 hour 39 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Mennonite Pastor Rev. Randy Spaulding discusses coming to terms with his gay sexuality with the support of his then-wife and congregation and later being forced to leave his position in the Southeast Conference after marrying his husband. He served as a Unitarian minister after earning his M.Div before being invited to pastor to an affirming Mennonite congregation.

Biographical

The Rev. Randy Spaulding was born in 1965 to parents Loren and Joyce and grew up in a small Amish and Mennonite community in Kokomo, Indiana. He has two older brothers and a younger sister. His mother was active in the Howard-Miami Mennonite Church where she was the song leader. Randy's early life was immersed in this Anabaptist community and tradition. Later in life he noted three pillars of the tradition that were instilled in him during this time: community, nonviolence and service. His parents divorced when he was in the 8th grade. The congregation supported Randy and his mom through that time. The community nurtured Randy's musical interests and skills.

Randy studied music at Ball State University where he earned a B.S. degree in 1983. He met and dated Laura at the university and they were married in 1988. They moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where they both worked in small Mennonite schools.

In 1991, Randy was called to Bahia Vista Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Florida, as minister of music and Christian education. This was a large congregation with 600 persons in worship in the summer and two to three times that number in the winter. He was licensed and

credentialed as a minister by the Southeast Mennonite Conference. While overseeing a large music and worship program at the church, he earned a Master of Music degree in choral conducting from the University of South Florida in 1998.

Throughout these early years of successful ministry, Randy was aware of internal conflicts around his sexual identity. He shared these struggles with Laura and they sought counseling together. He even tried reparative therapy at one point without success. He finally found a supportive counselor in Florida who helped him start the long process of affirming his gay identity.

Randy left the Bahia Vista congregation in 2003 as he saw it becoming more conservative and not feeling like he fit in there. He was invited by the Covenant Mennonite Fellowship in Sarasota to become their pastor, even though he did not have formal clergy training or credentials. Covenant was a small, more progressive congregation that met in a storefront. They emphasized vibrant Anabaptist worship and social justice.

Randy continued to carry out his music ministry on different levels. He taught music and voice privately. He served as the project editor for two Mennonite hymnal supplements, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007). He led music and worship workshops around the U.S.

As Randy grew more comfortable in embracing his gay identity, he and Laura divorced in 2006. Over the next year he visited every family in his congregation and came out to them. The members of his congregation were largely supportive. However, other Mennonite colleagues generally responded negatively to the news of Randy's gay identity. He talked with his conference minister who proposed forming a small team to work with him on a discernment process. However, when the team convened, rather than engage in discernment together Randy was asked to sign a statement resigning from his church duties and relinquishing his credentials. Randy refused to sign this statement. A couple members of his congregation had accompanied him to this meeting. The following Sunday the congregation unanimously supported Randy. However, the Southeast Conference removed his church credentials and he was dismissed from all church duties, including his position on a U.S.-Canada commission on worship and music.

The Covenant congregation kept Randy on as their pastor in spite of the action of the conference. However, the conference maintained negative pressure upon the congregation and on Randy. In the meantime, Randy had met and started a relationship with Gary Stephens. They had a commitment ceremony in 2010 and were married in 2011 in Connecticut.

Randy decided to make a change and do seminary studies to be trained as a pastor. He enrolled in Yale Divinity School in 2011 from which he earned an M.Div. degree in 2014. During these years he broadened his theological understandings. He became part of the Unitarian Society of New Haven. He appreciated that Unitarian Universalists were open to receiving other traditions, including his Anabaptist identity. He began to understand faith more as relational rather than credal.

Randy became a board-certified chaplain in 2015 and served as the oncology chaplain at Yale-New Haven Hospital. He was ordained clergy in the Unitarian Universalist Association in 2016. In 2017, the Mennonite conference minister in the Mountain States Conference contacted Randy to ask if he would consider serving in a Mennonite Church again. He thought that Randy would be a good match for the Boulder Mennonite Church. After a series of interviews and conversations Randy accepted the invitation from the Boulder Mennonite Church. He was installed as pastor there in February 2018 and ordained as a clergy by the

Mountain States Mennonite Conference on February 17, 2019. As Randy recalled: A delicate, light snow fell that evening in Boulder, but that did not stop almost 120 people from gathering to sing, pray, hear the Word and respond to my calling with congregational responses and the laying-on-of-hands, led by Rev. Charlene Epp. The children and youth of the congregation presented a framed blessing and charge to the minister, and Boulder Mennonite Church presented a beautiful ordination quilt as a gift. Later we enjoyed a reception that included delicious food and a lot of homemade pies! As a pastor who is openly gay, I recognize the risk-taking decision of Mountain States Mennonite Conference to bless and ordain me to ministry. I stand, humbly and with deep gratitude, on the shoulders of so many who, for decades, have walked the hard road of advocating for full LGBTQIA inclusion and participation in the life of the church. It's been a long time coming.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Mennonite Pastor Rev. Randy Spaulding discusses coming to terms with his gay sexuality with the support of his then-wife and congregation and later being forced to leave his position in the Southeast Conference after marrying his husband. He served as a Unitarian minister after earning his M.Div before being invited to pastor to an affirming Mennonite congregation.

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/randy-spaulding>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

This tape was given to the Mennonite Church USA Archives for transcription on the understanding that LGBTQ-RAN would host the oral history on its website.

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.

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Tags

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