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Title

Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 29, 2017

Extant

1 hour 27 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy, the founder of MCC Harlem, discusses the organizations she led within MCC to respond to the needs of LGBTQ African Americans, particularly in response to the AIDS crisis.

Biographical

Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1951. She attended parochial grade and high schools, which served to shape her faith as a devote Roman Catholic. As a child of the Civil Rights Movement, her life had been infused with the certainty of God's commitment to end oppressions of any kind and trust in God's promises of abiding and unconditional love and acceptance. She had also learned from her parents and grandparents that actively participating in God's liberating and healing actions in the world was her responsibility. Her faith has remained grounded in the belief that God calls us to do simple things: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, and work to release those imprisoned by guilt, shame, fear, and despair. This laid the foundation for involvement in activities designed to fight discrimination. As a teenager she was involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Black Catholics in Action, programs of her local parish council targeting low income children devastated by the 1967 civil unrest in Detroit, and various university based political and social justice groups.

Her fidelity to the Catholic Church was eventually shaken by its rejection of homosexuality, its limited sensitivities to racial justice, and its unyielding refusal to empower women. Her faith in the power and love of God, however, has never wavered and she has tried to remain true to God's demand for continued social justice activism. In her search for community, she attended various churches looking for one that would affirm and empower her to answer God's call for her

life but finding none. One Saturday night in 1976 she met members of the Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit (MCCD) bar ministry team conducting outreach in LGBTQ bars. They invited her to their worship services so she decided to give organized religion one more try. If nothing else, she thought, there was the possibility of meeting a “good Christian woman”! She attended worship the following day and experienced a sense of belonging through the sermon of Rev. Nancy Wilson and the vision of denomination (MCC) that had been missing from her life for many years; she joined the church soon thereafter. When she realized the racism she had experienced in the bars had also seeped into the church, she became chair of the MCC Racism Task Force, which eventually became the current MCC People of African Descent. To continue addressing racism and homophobia, McCoy became a founding member of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG), an organization started in 1978 to address the needs and concerns of LGBTQ persons of color. She also decided to move to New York City to expand her life experiences and discover more diverse opportunities for ministry. There, she started the New York Third World LGBT Coalition, an NCBLG chapter focused on issues important to African Americans and Latino LGBTQ persons. Upon completing student clergy training and requirements for licensure and ordination at MCC New York, Rev. McCoy was ordained in 1981. In February of that same year she founded Harlem Metropolitan Community Church (Harlem MCC), the first Christian congregation in both MCC and the country openly governed by African American LGBTQ persons. Harlem MCC was also designed to address their concerns, encourage and empower them, and reflect African American worship styles. Regrettably, HIV/AIDS surfaced soon after the church began and by November this new congregation faced the daunting challenge of caring for persons dying from a new and mysterious disease. The disproportionate occurrence of HIV/AIDS among African Americans had a devastating impact and this new pastor found herself ministering to persons few wanted to touch. This challenge was further complicated by her secular job working with homeless mentally ill women at a shelter in midtown Manhattan. As pastor, she led a congregation truly charged with serving the most broken, providing encouragement and support for persons living with HIV/AIDS, substance abuse issues, and homelessness regardless of sexual orientation. Burdened by serious health issues, McCoy resigned from Harlem MCC after six years of service and moved to Washington D.C., where she worked as the Executive Director of NCBLG. When McCoy assumed leadership of NCBLG, HIV/AIDS was approaching the height of global devastation and the organization was forced to narrow its focus to this disease. It joined with others serving people of color to ensure equitable care and McCoy continued providing pastoral support through the ministries of MCC Washington D.C. Continual health and financial challenges, however, required her to move back to Detroit to receive support from her family and the local NCBLG chapter. NCBLG agreed to relocate the national office to Detroit and she remained the Executive Director until 1988. In 1988, she left NCBLG to work for the Detroit Department of Health AIDS Program, which had just begun providing care and support for persons living with HIV/AIDS. There, she worked as liaison to the LGBTQ community and provided HIV testing services and prevention education throughout the metropolitan area. That same year (1988) a group of African American LGBTQ persons requested that she start a church that addressed their particular needs and concerns. In response, Rev. McCoy founded Full Truth Fellowship of Christ Church, which will celebrate 29 years of life in September 2017. In order to address the needs of African American LGBTQ persons living with HIV/AIDS, she

also founded a secular organization, Healing Ourselves through Prevention Education and Services (HOPES) governed by church and community members. HOPES provided an avenue for federal and state funding, which was denied religious organizations at that time. Full Truth Fellowship Church and HOPES were then together able to provide both spiritual and non-spiritual care and services for persons affected by and at risk for HIV/AIDS. Under McCoy's leadership HOPES and Full Truth Fellowship gained great respect throughout the Detroit metropolitan area for the tremendous and powerful care their members provided. Eventually, Full Truth Fellowship purchased a building to expand its ministries and HOPES' HIV/AIDS services, making the church the first LGBTQ organization in Michigan to own land. While she was pastor, McCoy continued working for the Health Department and returned to Wayne State University to complete an undergraduate degree. After receiving a BA in anthropology, she decided it was time to address her own personal needs. She felt conflicted telling her congregation to follow their dreams when she was not doing the same. After leaving parish ministry she went on to earn an MA in anthropology with a specialization in medical anthropology in 1995 and a PhD in medical anthropology in 2005. Her dissertation was titled "African American Men who have Sex with Men: Meaning, Identity, and Risk". Since leaving parish ministry, Rev. McCoy has continued to work in HIV/AIDS related projects including the following: Consultant for the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency (CARE) Act Title I; Research Project manager for the Positive Care Project: Care Giving among African Americans with HIV/AIDS; Instructor – Women's Studies Department at Eastern Michigan University; Qualitative Research Consultant – Wayne State University; Lecturer/Adjunct Faculty teaching Business and Organizational Anthropology – Wayne State University; Program Coordinator and Evaluator at the AIDS Consortium of SE Michigan; HIV Behavioral Surveillance Coordinator for the Michigan Department of Community Health; Director of HIV/AIDS Programs at the Detroit Department of Health and Wellness Promotion; Lecturer at the University of Washington Department of Anthropology; Director of Prevention Education at Lifelong AIDS Alliance; and Director of Public and Private Grants at Lifelong AIDS Alliance. In 2015, Rev. McCoy served as interim pastor of Eastgate Congregational United Church of Christ for a year while the congregation searched for a permanent pastor. She continues to be an active member there and serves as a member of the MCC Public Policy Team. She has also been a potter for over 30 years and continues to make and market functional and ornamental pottery in her home studio. She recently joined the board directors at the Seward Park Clay Studio in Seattle. After being diagnosed with and surviving pancreatic cancer in 2016, Rev. Dr. McCoy decided to retire from fulltime employment and limit her energies to those with less stress and more joy. She looks forward to increased pottery making and other art projects, writing, and fishing. She has been married to the Rev. Dr. Patricia Hunter for eight years and lives in Seattle, WA with their dog, Baxter.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rev. Dr. Renee McCoy, the founder of MCC Harlem, discusses the organizations she led within churches to respond to the needs of LGBTQ African Americans, particularly in response to the AIDS crisis.

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/renee-mccoy>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

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National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays

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McCoy, Renee