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Title

Rev. Sarah Klaassen Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

November 16, 2016

Extant

1 hour 36 minute interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Mennonite-born and raised Sarah Klassen discusses how the study of religion helped her to accept her lesbian sexuality and her and her partners' search for a truly affirming denomination leading to her ministry at Rock Bridge Disciples of Christ Christian Church.

Biographical

Sarah Klaassen grew up in rural Kansas and was a member of Whitewater at Grace Hill Mennonite Church. Her family arrived in that area in the 1870s with other Mennonite settlers and has had a farm nearby ever since. Sarah loved her church and the deep sense of community in the area.

She did not see herself in ministry when she was younger. As a middle schooler and teen, she had a lot of questions around her faith. Also during this time, Sarah developed feelings for a female friend on her basketball team. Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone for her to talk with about these feelings and no real outlet for her, which led to intense feelings of grief and guilt.

This crisis of identity led to lots of questioning about God and her faith in her later teen years. Sarah would go on to study at Missouri State University on a basketball scholarship. She began her college career as an English education major but had no love for the subject material. The next semester, Sarah would enroll in some religion classes and she immediately fell in love with the study of religion. Sarah wanted to pursue the academic study of religion to tie in with her faith and justify belief. She still did not see herself going into ministry at this time. During her college years, her experience as a person began to match what she believed. She had professors that helped her and lesbian teammates also. She knew people in Kansas Mennonite Church had to be gay and were just silenced by shame and stigma.

Sarah came out while at college but she considers “coming out” as a lifelong thing that is ongoing. After graduating from Missouri State, Sarah immediately started classes at Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School. She completed a congregational internship at Seattle Mennonite Church in 2008. After her internship, the idea of a pastor/ministerial role was confirmed. Sarah graduated from VDS in 2009 and spent the next two years in Seattle, working briefly with a UCC congregation and then returning to Seattle Mennonite for a year as in an interim associate minister.

Unable to find continuing pastoral work in Mennonite Church USA, in 2011 Sarah moved with her then partner to Columbia, Missouri and started the credentialing process with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Sarah’s connection with the Disciples had begun in college when she attended National Avenue Christian Church in the early 2000s. A decade later, the Disciples welcomed her back, this time into ministry, and she was ordained in February 2015.

Sarah has maintained various connections with the Mennonite church, serving on the Board of Brethren Mennonite Council from 2012-2017 and sharing occasional fellowship with a small group of Mennonites in her current hometown of Columbia. She remains close with her family, many of whom are active in Mennonite churches in Kansas.

In 2016, Sarah was called as pastor of her new home congregation, Rock Bridge Christian Church, when their long-time pastor (also an out lesbian) retired. The church has joyfully welcomed Sarah’s ministry and in turn, she and her partner, Liz Lucas, enjoy welcoming the diverse group of people, including many who are LGBTQ+, who come through their doors. Sarah is also serving in a wider church role with the Commission on Ministry, the Disciples body that credentials clergy. In her current role as chair, she has had the privilege of telling other women and LGBTQ people they have been approved for ordination.

Most recently, Sarah was named one of 20 Under 40 by COMO Magazine in 2020.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Mennonite-raised Sarah Klassen discusses how seminary study helped her to accept her lesbian sexuality even as her church continued to reject it. She and her partner subsequently found a truly affirming denomination leading to her ministry at Rock Bridge Disciples of Christ Christian Church.

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/sarah-klaassen>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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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Custodial History

This tape was given by the interviewer to the Mennonite Church USA Archives where it was transcribed and is open for research. Permission to host the oral history on the LGBTQ-RAN website was given by the archives, interviewee, and interviewer.

Cite as

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Tags

Mennonite Church USA

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Clergy Activist

Brethren-Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests

Klaassen, Sarah

