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Title

Bishop Tonyia Rawls Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

June 1, 2018

Extant

2 hours, 6 minutes interview (two files) and 2 transcripts

Abstract

In this oral history, Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls, national LGBTQ-faith leader and social justice activist, discusses overcoming racism in her college experience, as well as her initial hesitance to become a minister in the United Freewill Baptist Church as a same-gender loving person, but later was ordained in the Unity Fellowship Church. She established two churches, as well as the Freedom Center for Social Justice (FCSJ) with the purpose of supporting LGBTQ and people of color, as well as other marginalized groups. She led the FCSJ Do No Harm Campaign, with the goal of providing a space for religious leaders to discuss challenging issues like marriage, religious refusals, and equal protection for LGBTQ citizens.

Biographical

Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls, national LGBTQ-faith leader and social justice activist, was born in 1958 in Newark, New Jersey. Her mother worked as a textile designer in Manhattan. Tonyia was young when the Newark riots happened following the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While her mother tended not to be overtly political, after the riots she walked Tonyia and her sister Sabrina through the burnt-out areas of their once thriving community and told them it was OK to be angry about injustice, but not to destroy your own community in the process. Tonyia's mother and father divorced when she was two. Her mother remarried and two more sisters, Cynthia and Jewell, came next. Like many young Black kids in her neighborhood, Tonyia spent summers with family in Georgia where her uncle pastored a small country church.

Tonyia was an excellent student in school who remained an honors student throughout all 12 years. During high school she played varsity tennis and was active in the chess club and was a member of the National Honor Society. Active in outdoor and conservation activities, she

served 3 years in the Youth Conservation Corps; her last year she served as a camp counselor.

She was also interested in science and medicine. Her mother instilled high expectations for her future education and advancement. She applied to and was accepted at several Ivy League colleges. The schools she attended were low performing with largely Black and Puerto Rican student populations, but she excelled in advanced and independent study programs. A chance meeting with a former elementary school teacher led her to apply to Duke University where she was accepted and enrolled as a premed student.

The move to Duke was a momentous challenge for Tonyia who had been a top student in her predominantly low-income elementary and high schools but was now at a predominately white elite institution. Integrated in 1963, she was part of Duke's 1976 class of freshmen. This was only their 13th class of Black students. To survive the move to North Carolina and the extreme racism and lack of general support offered students of color, Tonyia had to draw on yet undiscovered personal resources to keep up with the demands of schoolwork and the jobs she worked to pay her expenses. Faith was important to her and she found a supportive connection with a Black Baptist Church in Durham, NC. She shared that this college experience taught her bold audaciousness as she learned to navigate a much larger and different world.

After graduating from Duke in 1980, Rawls moved to Los Angeles, where her mother had relocated to continue her textile design career with a West Coast design studio. During a gap year break before law school (she shifted majors), Tonyia landed a job as an Account Executive at a large advertising agency where she worked on advertising campaigns for large aerospace companies and corporations. While living in Los Angeles, Rawls fell in love with a woman for the first time and found "home" with her partner and the local lesbian community. She also became a very active part of West Angeles Church of God in Christ. Tonyia became more involved and committed to her church life as the years went on. She became a Licensed Evangelist Missionary—the highest position that a woman could hold in the Church of God in Christ and left her relationship because she was led to believe God could not love or use her in ministry if she was same-gender loving. She ultimately resolved to live a celibate life for an extended period. She loved the church and ministry and spent most of her time either at work or church.

Tonyia moved back to New Jersey shortly after her mother left Los Angeles. She started working with an ad agency there to market, among other things, mortgages for real estate interests when the market crashed. She helped promote one of the first successful online sales of bundled real estate loans.

As she moved back east, Rawls became active in the United Freewill Baptist Church where she was later ordained a Minister. Rawls felt a call to preach but held back because she was once again in a relationship with a woman and she knew that after seven years of celibacy, she was not fully free. While she no longer believed God did not love her, she was not sure if she could minister as a lesbian. For that reason, she chose to not advance to Reverend yet, nor was she ready to come out for fear of the impact it would have on the ministry. She chose to keep her actual reason for not advancing to herself until one day, at the direction of a friend, she found Unity Fellowship Church in New York City. There she heard God, gay and good in the same sentence for the first time. She felt at home and could finally bring her whole self to church. At the urging of one of her clients, Rawls started an independent marketing and advertising consulting business in Washington D.C. called International Concepts Group. The business

was dedicated to supporting Black-owned and emerging businesses as they were expanding to the next level. As part of the strategy for advancing DC-based greeting card manufacturers Kuumba Kollektibles, Rawls organized an exposition of 50 Black-owned businesses in the basement of a church in D.C. in 1989. This new venture led to the two businesses partnering to start the International Black Buyers and Manufacturers Expo & Conference. That initial effort grew into a major annual convention with 1,000 businesses from the U.S., the Caribbean, Africa and other parts of the Diaspora gathering in the DC Convention Center for trade and classes on everything from merchandising to cash management.

Rawls moved to Washington, D.C. in 1994 and after some time in the Presbyterian church, she became active in the Unity Fellowship Church there. She was ordained a Reverend and served as Assistant Pastor of Innerlight Unity Fellowship Church under the direction of Bishop Rainey Cheeks.

In 2000, Archbishop Carl Bean commissioned Rev. Rawls to start a new church in the South.

After some consultation, she decided to move to Charlotte, North Carolina with her partner Gwendolyn. Together they founded Unity Fellowship Church Charlotte. The congregation grew quickly with some driving more than three hours each way just to have a safe space to worship. Rawls held varied leadership roles and in 2008 was ultimately consecrated as one of the first woman Bishops in Unity Fellowship history. The denomination went through a period of transition with the new leadership structure, but came through stronger than ever.

In 2009, Bishop Rawls founded and became Executive Director of the Freedom Center for Social Justice (FCSJ) in Charlotte. The Freedom Center was designed to work intersectionally to support the trans community, people of color, people of low wealth, youth and sexual minorities. Bishop Rawls was the architect of the FCSJ Do No Harm Campaign, which provides safe space for faith leaders to discuss challenging justice issues like marriage, religious refusals, equal protection for LGBTQ citizens and other current issues impacting communities of faith. Her team also created the "Yes, You Can Go" campaign which distributed trans-welcoming restroom signage in North Carolina. She was also one of the leaders of the North Carolina Moral Monday Movement which was created by Rev. Dr. William Barber II to combat injustice in the state.

As Bishop Rawls saw her ministerial work becoming more intersectional, she felt called to move on from Unity Fellowship to the United Church of Christ (UCC). In 2014, she formed Sacred Souls UCC, a progressive Christian community. In addition to her congregational ministry, Bishop Rawls is cofounder of the Charlotte Clergy Coalition for Justice and the National Trans Religious Cohort which provides training and support to trans and gender-variant seminary and religious studies students. She was also invited in 2021 to become part of the founding of The Black Mountain School of Theology and Community. This school is established to train community activists and seminary students together so they both can matriculate more prepared for the changing landscape of ministry in America.

Bishop Rawls has also been a reviewer for the Journal of African-American Studies and is published in Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies (released 2010), Sojourners, SAGE and other printed and electronic publications. She has been a frequent guest speaker and consulted with groups as diverse as the NAACP, PFLAG and leadership teams for varied corporate and community-based groups. Bishop Rawls is a two-term member of the Governing Board of the North Carolina Council of Churches, and currently speaks around the country on the power of intersectional organizing and culture

shifts. She is passionate about working closely with other local and national leaders and organizations to create a more just world for all.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Bishop Tonyia M. Rawls, national LGBTQ-faith leader and social justice activist, discusses overcoming racism in her college experience, as well as her initial hesitance to become a minister in the United Freewill Baptist Church as a same-gender loving person, but later was ordained in the Unity Fellowship Church. She established two churches, as well as the Freedom Center for Social Justice (FCSJ) with the purpose of supporting LGBTQ and people of color, as well as other marginalized groups. She led the FCSJ Do No Harm Campaign, with the goal of providing a space for religious leaders to discuss challenging issues like marriage, religious refusals, and equal protection for LGBTQ citizens.

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/tonyia-rawls>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

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