

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love Interview Series
A Ministry of That All May Freely Serve

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Susan: My name is Susan Andrews, I'm currently the General Presbyter of Hudson River Presbytery. Prior to the last nine years, I was a parish pastor for thirty-two years and also had the honor of serving as the Moderator of the General Assembly in 2003-2004.

This issue has been near and dear to my heart from the beginning of my ministry. I was ordained in 1974 in Boston Presbytery, and when homosexuality began to emerge as an issue in the late Seventies, I was quietly supportive.

My husband is also clergy, and our story included my brother-in-law, Greg - my husband's brother - who was three years older, who contracted AIDS, I guess it was in the early Eighties, and we followed that story and that pain.

My husband and his brother were the children of a Southern Baptist preacher who could not come to terms with Greg's illness or his lifestyle. His mother tried to intervene but couldn't change her husband's mind, so it was a very painful story. And my husband was the only member of the family who continued to be in touch with his brother. Our son and daughter grew up knowing Uncle Gregory and remember very very clearly when Greg died, which would have been in the early Nineties.

So, this was our personal story. But our theological perspective had opened us to this issue for years, because sexual orientation is part of creation - it's God's gift to each of us to be who we are. To be exclusive in anyway, be it gender, sexual orientation or race makes no sense to me theologically.

And then there was my own story as a clergy woman, being ordained in '74, and having all the horror stories that women in those years had of trying to receive calls and being turned down five times in a row. And, so I kind of get the story of being a minority and then being discriminated against, even though one has the gifts and the call to ministry. So that gave me a sympathy and a passion for the GLBT issue.

The next important piece of the story is when I was called to serve as pastor of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, a very progressive church, close to the NIH, with very progressive open-minded people.

And, we became a Covenant Network Church, fairly early in the Covenant Network Movement. I also was one of the original board members of the Covenant Network and was at the very first conference they ever held. And, over the years I served on that board, was a keynote speaker at regional conferences, preached at the national conferences – so the Covenant Network was my niche.

In 1996 or 1997, our church called an Associate Pastor, a young man named Scott Winnette, and he came and was called unanimously by the congregation and was ordained in our sanctuary. About three months later he came to me and he said, “Susan, I think I’m gay; I do not want to keep this a secret; what do we do?” And, so I knew we needed to do this carefully, because at that point, the church had not discussed this issue and we were not yet a Covenant Network congregation.

So, anyway, to make a long story short, I said to him, “Scott, why don’t we take some time to think this through.”

I talked to the GP, and she and I agreed to send (and pay for) Scott to see a really fine therapist to make sure that he was comfortable with what he was doing in terms of his life, his career, and his relationships. He came back a year later and said, “I need to tell the story.”

So, we went through a very careful process of gathering key leaders of the congregation, where Scott eloquently told his story. Then we went to the Session, and then to the congregation – and the congregation completely embraced Scott and renewed his call as our Associate Pastor (and sent him home to tell his family in Kentucky – who embraced him with love).

So, that was a very important piece of my story, because a couple of years later, I decided, in conversation with others, to stand for Moderator. And, that was one of the years when the motion was before the General Assembly to remove G-6.0106b from the Book of Order. And, I knew where I stood on it, and I knew that if I was going to be a moderatorial candidate I needed to be honest about where I stood. And, so, sure enough one of the first questions asked of the moderatorial candidates on the floor was, “How do you feel about G-6.0106b?”

And, I made it very clear that I was – I wanted it removed, that I had no problem with the ordination of gays and lesbians, in fact, it was a theological issue of grace for me, and that I had been an advocate for years and would continue to be so. But, that as Moderator of the denomination, I would also want to listen to voices that disagreed with me, which is what Moderators do - and that’s my temperament.

So, I was elected and I spent a great deal of time speaking about and interpreting the issue of the ordination of LGBT people. I was never asked to go to any Southern states the year I was Moderator, because of my stance, but I was able to bring opposing sides together for several conversations during that year.

The next year, when I was on my last day as Moderator, just before the new Moderator, Rick, was elected, I was handed my papers by Paul Rolf Jensen indicating that he was lodging a disciplinary case against me – because I had “ordained” my Associate Pastor who was gay. And, of course what was ridiculous because I don’t ordain anybody, the presbytery does. So that was the way I ended my Moderatorial year, with a judicial case ahead of me. Luckily, I went through an investigating committee, the charge was dismissed, and it was laid aside.

The other piece of this that I do want to talk about, is that as a member of the Covenant Network, as somebody who is straight, as somebody who has served as Pastor and Head of Staff of a 650 member congregation that has resources and diversity, I have always been somebody who has wanted to include all the voices, which means that sometimes you slow down the strategy in order to get to where you need to go. And that of course is where the Covenant Network was.

When I was involved in the Covenant Network, I was a speaker at several GA’s, I was part of the strategy, and, of course, Covenant Network on the one hand was trying to work with a broad spectrum of congregations, while More Light and TAMFS were advocating immediate action: “We need justice now!”

And, so there was considerable tension at several of those General Assemblies, between the Covenant Network strategy – and the TAMFS and More Light perspective. I understood those two perspectives completely, and I admired the folks who felt they needed to be the prophetic “Justice delayed is justice denied.” I also knew that Covenant Network had the money, it had the contacts, it had the strategy, and it had the stamina to do a long-range strategy that was going to eventually need to happen. And, so we needed both energies in this movement.

And, I don’t believe that we would be where we are today if there hadn’t been all that tension all those years. But, I have to say that being in the middle of that tension was very painful, and I was maligned, I was criticized - by both sides. But being a person who tries to bring both sides together – that’s sort of been my role in the church. It’s still my role as a General Presbyter. And so, I just need to say that I didn’t have the pain of being a GLBT person denied a call to ministry. There’s nothing that can equal that pain. And, I’m not saying that my pain is any big deal, but there was a struggle for those of us who chose the more strategic route, because we knew that in the long run that was going to be needed to get to where we needed to go.

So, I guess, if I have a perspective on this issue it would be to at least honor that tension and to say, “Yes, indeed, the More Light, TAMFS passion and “peopling” the issue and the longer-range strategic vision of Covenant Network was what together made this happen.” And the last few Assemblies, there has been joint action, which has been wonderful.

Warren: So, from that perspective on that point at this, at this point in time when the political social atmosphere has shifted, so there’s an inclusivity that’s part of our tradition now, this event has been called by some a “victory lap,” which has a legitimacy, I imagine. I’m wondering from your perspective though is the “now what clause,” it seems that this is not one group – this is a conglomeration of a number of groups and also individuals from the path along the way. So, I’m wondering your vision of what is possible in terms of taking the next steps in this conversation.

Susan: Well, I start at a place of hope, because I believe that the way the church has moved so quickly from the ordination vote to the marriage vote, with relatively little angst – and partly that’s because our brothers and sisters have left the denomination and that was a choice, and I’m sad about that - but it needed to happen. So, I think we actually start in a pretty strong place. But just as I was ordained in 1974, and it took me fifteen years to get a call to a church that matched my gifts, after having been turned down eight times – it takes time.

And, I remember at one of the early years of the Covenant Network, maybe three or four years in when the board was meeting, people were moaning and groaning because we hadn’t made any progress, and there were so many conservative churches, and G-6.0106b was never going to be out of The Book, and hopelessness, hopelessness, hopelessness seemed to be everywhere. And Oscar McCloud, from New York City, an African-American giant in our denomination, was on the Cov Net Board. And he said, “What’s wrong with you people? What are you talking about? Do you have any idea how long it took the Civil Rights Movement to make real progress?” “Be quiet! Let me tell you...”

And he then spun the story of his walk in the Civil Rights Movement, fifty to seventy-five years and saying: “If you think this is going to happen in five years – you’re wrong. Because this takes patience and persistence because evil and exclusion and sin is a very powerful adversary.” And, I will never forget that moment, because for me it gave me the perspective I needed.

So, in many ways I would hope nowadays we would say, “No, it’s not going to be perfect next year, or five years or ten years from now...” But, I look now, forty years into ordained female ministry at the relatively small number of women in positions of big churches and other competitive positions– it took sixty years after women were ordained for some of those doors to open up. That’s how slowly it takes.

So, first of all, I would hope there would be that perspective. But then, secondly, there need to be people who take risks, much like many of the Covenant Network pastors took risks with their money, their prestige, and their pulpits to begin to really call people into ministry and to open the doors. And, I know Hudson River is very unique, but we installed the first married Lesbian in our denomination as Pastor of a church in this presbytery. We called the first openly married Lesbian as our Stated Clerk, and those are visible things. And they need to be that visible.

So, I think people who have power in the system, people who have privilege in the system, need to use that in ways to open the doors for gifted people who are coming along.

But, I also have just a brief story of hope. My daughter is thirty-two and her husband is thirty-three. They just had their child baptized in St. Louis last weekend; and my husband and I were there (Trinity Presbyterian Church, which is a Covenant Network congregation). Anyway, Anna and Chris invited friends to be there for the baptism, all of whom are unchurched. And three couples came to support them. One was an Asian-Black couple, one was a Black-White couple, and one was a married gay couple. And, they asked the gay couple to be their sponsors - the two men, (who declined because they never go to church). But they were there. My son-in-law is a Southern jock - and when his best friend announced that he was gay and was going to get married, Chris didn't blink an eye. When Anthony and Cory got married at the courthouse in St. Louis last fall, Anna and Chris were the witnesses for that wedding. You know, my son-in-law would not have been there ten years ago, but times change. And it's all about relationship, it's all about their generation, it's all about the world changing. And, if we can somehow keep young people in the church, they're going to take care of this issue. I mean it's just not an issue for them.

So, I think the bigger challenge is how do we keep open-minded creative passionate young people in our churches? If we can include and honor these young people, the issues of exclusion and privilege and power are going to be mitigated. Millennials and many GenXers are simply a different breed.

So, at least that's what I hope and pray.

Warren: So, the strategy then, from a - so this gathering is a group of people who are in the midst of celebration and that will wane. From a perspective - from your system knowledge perspective what types of counsel would you give those who are looking at the next step of the strategy of this movement that we'll call the "Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement" and further talk about the possibilities that exist for connection across liberation movements that would add to the conversation...

Susan: Well, I would echo what several of the speakers, Janie and others said, about celebrating and moving forward. I think it's easy to be nostalgic about the "good old days" and nostalgic about the battle scars and nostalgic about those moments like I just talked about where I felt that I wasn't taken seriously.

I think we need to tell our stories, which is why this gathering is so important. And, we need to not forget them, and we need to pass them on; but we need to not stay there and we don't need to dwell in them and we don't need to make them bigger than they were – we need to be grateful that we were channels of God's changing grace in the world. And be grateful and give thanks that in fact the people's movement worked, just as it has in many other ways – so there needs to be celebration and gratitude and thanksgiving - not "Oh, wasn't I great?" or "Gee, look at all my battle scars," but more God has created a new thing through us.

And, then secondly, who are other people, other groups, other needs who aren't where we are? And, then, how can we, out of gratitude, offer our wisdom, our strategy, our body, our power – whatever we have – to welcome those who have been excluded. So, as many people talked about, I think the issue of white privilege and race in this church has not yet really been looked at. Or, in many ways in some of our more traditional churches not welcoming the wisdom, the creativity, the new vision of younger generations but sticking to the old.

So, how can those of us in this generation, who have been through this movement use that wisdom – not to pat ourselves on the back – but to lay the foundation for the next movement and to welcome more people in.

But, for me it starts with gratitude rather than nostalgia.

One of the things that I was really struck by at the last Assembly – I went to the More Light lunch, and I don't normally go to More Light things, but I just felt like I wanted to go and the fact that at that gathering, it was a celebration, it was, "We're the new leadership of the church. We're the – the church loves us! We're beloved children of God!" I mean the sense among these twenty and thirty year olds that they were incredibly beloved. Whereas in my generation, GLBT people were much more the ones who – they were the ones who were the victims. They were the ones who were abused. They were the ones who were not being honored.

So, yes, there was anger, there was sadness, there was grief, there was depression there was hopelessness in many ways over the years. But I compare that to what I experienced at that More Light lunch. It was just phenomenal. So I think that, again, the younger generations may take care of this because they feel gifted, they feel called, they feel beloved. They know they're leaders. They know they're welcome.

And, now we have to make sure that the system opens up to that, but the energy I think is there. At least, that's been my perspective.

Warren: So then the last question about the system part. So, the role then of those vested in the system, those with access to the system mechanics, what strategy would you promote among those places...

Susan: I remember when I was interviewed at Bradley Hills in Bethesda. They interviewed thirteen people, and I was the thirteenth person because National Capital Presbytery had a policy that you had to interview one Black or one woman. So, they had interviewed twelve white men. And, then they interviewed me, and I got the job - because they had to interview me.

So, I mean that's a very simple way that our system could change in order to mandate, and I think that would be hard to get through, because we are in an era now where affirmative action is not as much of an understood policy. But those kinds of systemic changes can make a difference.

And, you know, I think about the situation of Laurie McNeill at the Marlboro/ Highland Churches. And, Laurie is one of the finest pastors I know. It didn't have anything to do with me, it had to do with her. However, I was in a position of authority when this church needed a temporary supply pastor, and I was asked to give them one name and one name only. And, I gave them hers. And, I made it clear, I told her that I would appreciate it if she would share with the committee that she was a married lesbian. Which, she did. And they said, "Well, that's not a problem. it's only three months."

And, one month later they stopped their search for an installed pastor because they had found their pastor - they fell in love with Laurie.. I was in a position to make that happen. Not that, I'm all that heroic, but it raises the questions - who are the people in the system who have access to search committees, who have access to processes, to make sure they're open and that they're inclusive? Not to force a candidate necessarily, or a category of people, but to make sure there's a level playing field.

I thought some of the ideas expressed at this gathering about reparations were great. But that will never happen. I don't think, unless it is symbolic; but truth and reconciliation must happen.

But again, I think it's all about relationships; it's when the old conservative farmers in the Marlboro congregation met Laurie that their prejudices went out the window, because they met a human being.

In the situation at Bradley Hills with our Associate, by the time it came out to the congregation, he'd been there a year and a half. And, they had fallen in love with him.

And, some of them were concerned that he might turn their youth gay, because he was the Youth Pastor. And the youth said, "What?!"

So, again, they got to know him, and so there was no way that that congregation wasn't going to have Scott as their pastor, because, they loved him.

So, how do we set up the strategy of making sure that in an interview process people get to know gays and lesbians –

The other thing is that we need to create safe places in congregations so that gay members, gay elders, whomever, can tell their story.

I have a pastor in this presbytery, he's been in his church twenty-six years; he has been a closeted gay man the entire time. And, has not told his congregation. And, I think his congregation knows, everybody else knows. But it, somehow there wasn't that freedom.

So there is that fear built in, based on experience.

We had another tragic story in this presbytery. We had a gay chaplain with a partner - a partner for twenty-six years. The chaplain was killed in a tragic accident, where a gas pump blew up on him when he was filling his car with gas. And this was after 2010.

By that point, the Board of Pensions had opened everything up, but this chaplain had not named his partner of twenty-six years as the beneficiary on his pension application. So, all the money that man had earned for 35 years went to his sister, whom he had not seen in years. And, we tried to intervene to make sure that she gave some money to the partner. This chaplain had been scared that if he got married, or put down his partner's name on that form, that somehow his ordination would be in jeopardy- or the job at the hospital would be on the line...so it's was very sad.

So those stories are just tragic.

We need to encourage transparency, and story telling and safety, as much as we can.

Warren: That's very awesome! Thank you!

Susan: Thank you!