

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

Stony Point Center, Stony Point, NY  
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Kathy Dean and Susan De George  
Dobbs Ferry, New York

Kathy and Susan are married. Susan is currently serving as Stated Clerk for the Presbytery of Hudson River.

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**Kathy:** My name is Kathy Dean and I am married to Susan De George. We got married a number of years ago. And, I'm fairly new to this, and I've been impressed in the last few days with the fact that being married to Susan, I know how living with a minister who's out in the Presbyterian Church has affected her. She's had to work part-time jobs and hasn't been able to get a full time job with a congregation, but in this last day or two I've seen how other people have been absolutely crushed by this policy. They were drummed out of the church and weren't able to get jobs. It's really very moving, but with that, I'll let you tell, Susan, some of her story because she's been around for a while and even before me...and had to deal with a lot because of this policy.

**Susan:** So, I'm Susan De George and I am currently the Stated Clerk of Hudson River Presbytery. And, I think I'm probably the only out Stated Clerk who is in a same gender marriage. At least, whenever I go to any middle governing body organization that's my role. Everybody else will say, "Let's talk about LGBT issues..."

And, I'll say, "Well, no, there's somebody here who is lesbian, so let's talk about people..."

So, but before I became Stated Clerk two and a half years ago, I was the pastor at South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry, New York. South Church became a, well eventually More Light congregation, but a PLGC congregation back in 1984 when they passed a policy that said they welcomed everyone to the worship, the work and the leadership of the congregation. The catch was that in 1984, they didn't have anybody who was gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender. And, in 1990, we finally had some folks who came, who said, "We'd like to be married by you"-- two men, Harry and David, who said, "We'd like to be married by you." And my Session suddenly had to figure out what they were going to do.

The other pastor and I were very supportive of the idea but the Session-- it was really hard for us to work with them, and we had month after month of Session meetings and this couple were saying, "We found the trip-wire. You say you're LGBT-friendly, but we found the trip-wire!"

And, finally, we came back from a Session meeting one day and this one woman who has been on Session forever said, "I went home last night and I talked to my daughter who's a freshman in college, and she said to me, 'Mom, you're sounding to me just like you say Grandma sounded to you during the Civil Rights issues in the 1960's.'"

And, so, the next day, Linda Jo came back and moved that we begin to do same gender wedding services and we started to. And so, in the 1990's we did weddings and we ordained gay elders and gay deacons.

In 1996, I was a Commissioner to Albuquerque, the year that we passed Amendment B, and, it broke my heart. And, that same year, I went on the Synod of the Northeast's Permanent Judicial Commission. And, I spent my six years serving on that hearing one LGBT case after another: the Stamford case around the gay elder's position; Burlington's case for taking a position; at the same time, my congregation, South Church, was itself making clear its dissent to the denomination. And, in 1998, I married two men, Jeff and George, and they put their wedding in the newspaper. And, in 1999, the other pastor of the church, Joe Gilmore, and the Session and I were brought up on charges for doing same gender marriages and for gay ordination, as well.

Hudson River's a great place to be. I mean, they're willing to have me as an "out" Clerk. And, Hudson River stood by us. They investigated us. They asked questions like, "Do you know? Do you think you're giving the 2000 some-odd legal rights to these couples when you marry them?"

We said, "No, we know we can't do that, but we consider two hearts that are beating together and standing together on behalf of love and justice and mutuality a marriage."

And, they said, "But you know you're not doing these - giving these legal rights?"

And we said, "Yes, we do know that."

And they said, "OK, are you using the Directory of Common Worship for your services?"

"No, we're not, but we don't for our straight couples either."

“Well, but you’re not?”

“No.”

So, they went ahead and decided that they would not press charges any further against us. And, so, Marc Benton, one of the other members of this presbytery turned around and sued the Hudson River Presbytery instead. And that became *Benton v. Hudson River*; a decision that said you can only do same gender marriages if you call them Holy Unions, and if you make a distinction.

In the process, I was - when that case came up - in the process of - I had applied to a church in another presbytery and was in the process of considering moving, and of course I got stopped. You can’t transfer presbyteries when you have charges against you. So, that sort of threw my family off a little bit.

In 2000, in response to the *Benton (v. Hudson River)* case, we organized sixteen congregations in Hudson River, which we called the “acts of conscience churches.” We wrote statements again, to the denomination, ran ads in the newspapers, etc. saying that we were not going to abide by Amendment B, and we were going to continue to do these blessings for same gender couples, no matter what you’re calling them...

And, in 2002, as part of that, we organized a Reformation Service that brought people from all over the country to South Church to participate in it, and in which we nailed our dissent to the door of the sanctuary. And, we had everybody from West Coast/East Coast coming, and got a huge amount of coverage, and really annoyed *The Layman*. We got nicknamed after that, the Dobbs Ferry church was the...how was it put? “The Undefeated Alamo of Homosexual Activists.”

And, so, when (Paul) Rolf Jensen in 2002 and 2003 wanted people to go out after, the other pastor, Joe Gilmore, and I again went up on charges for doing same gender ceremonies. And, we got questioned again, and we gave the same answer that we’d given back in 1998. And, in this case, Rolf didn’t show up for any of, for his side of any of the investigations. And, so, eventually again, those charges got dropped. Because, by this point, it was very clear that the presbytery would have had a hard time to dance around what we were doing. We had been pretty honest with who we were and what we were doing by that point.

So, it’s...watching the changes in the last couple of year has been pretty amazing given where we were back in the 90’s and early 2000’s.

**Kathy:** General Assembly this time was amazing. This was my third General Assembly. And it went from anger, a huge amount of anger and rage - and, I’m sure a lot of it is still there. But people from both sides were talking to each other this time,

and I had not seen that at General Assembly before. It was just a completely different feel.

**Susan:** Four years before, when I'd been an Overture Advocate for same gender marriage, as I walked back to my seat people were cursing me out from the other side. And, this year, you know people were wonderful. So, it's just an amazing change – both the ordination change in 2010 and then the same gender marriage AI and overture in 2014.

**Warren:** Can I ask you some questions? So, from your perspective, Susan, the transformation you both speak of at this General Assembly, so it's a – the past General Assembly – what is your feeling about looking forward....

**Susan:** I think there's still a piece of work to be done, so I can sit, as I said, I can sit middle governing body gatherings and everybody assumes nobody there is GLBT. Nobody. And I put "G" first in this case because I – that's the way that in the denomination it's still referred to – the assumption is that if somebody is going to be there will be a gay man, first. But there probably won't be any lesbians, there probably won't be anybody bisexual and there clearly won't be anybody that's transgendered in the middle governing body. That's the assumption. So, there's a piece of work that's still to be done there. I miss being in a parish big time, but it is a piece of work that needs to be done.

I also think in congregations, you know, as Stated Clerk I get to know our congregations in this area and Hudson River's a fairly, on a continuum, pretty far left, as far as LGBT stuff. But even our More Light churches tend to think, when they think of their "standard pastor" – it's a straight man who's in his thirties with 2.5 kids. And so there's still a piece of work to be done there, as well. So, I'm hopeful, because I think we can - we continue to need to person the cause to say, "Here we are, here we....," but I'm hopeful that we can at least begin to move.

Now, we don't have to deal with, each time, my last two times I went to look for jobs in parishes, I got all the way through the clearance interviews, and I'd go back at that point and I'd say, "I just want to be clear with you that I am an 'out' lesbian pastor who is married." And the answer would be, "Well, we have no problem with that, but we can't ask our congregation to deal with possible charges, so we really can't give you the call then." And, now, at least that part is not in the way. Now, a congregation has to honestly say, "We're not ready to deal with it"; it's not "we could be brought up on charges and so we're worried. "

So, it's a real step. I'm hopeful. It'll take another 5-10 years for us to get where we really need to be and to catch up with society, which is a little further ahead than a lot of the country. But we're moving.

**Warren:** From your Stated Clerk spot, speak about your visions and dreams concerning the logistics of reconciliation in the larger church sense, and then if both of you could maybe speak about it – the reconciliation from a personal sense as it relates to this gathering here and the whole “healing of wound” aspect – and how you have made it to this point; what it looks like; what it feels like.

**Susan:** For the first one, there are a group of us who for the last three years now. Three years or two and a half years? We met for the first time at Stony Point. And it is a group of people - representatives from That All May Freely Serve, from More Light Presbyterians, and Covenant Network and from what is now The Fellowship, the conservative groups – they were several groups when we started--but we’ve met together for long weekends, extended weekends, to really dialogue honestly with each other and to say, “We want to understand each other.” And, we will never, we will never – Paul Detterman, for instance, the head of The Fellowship and I will never agree on LGBT things, but we – I think we really like each other a lot now. And we want to stay together in the denomination. And so I think efforts like that are really how we’re going to reconcile together. We have heard each other in those dialogues, we have cried because we’ve caused each other pain in being honest in who we are, but we’ve done it trying to be brothers and sisters together. And, I hope that, being as open as we can all be, it’s been a really amazing experience.

At the end of the 2014 General Assembly, the group of us went together to meet Heath (Rada) and to say we want to talk together about what we can do. We want to offer to you the fact that this dialogue has worked so well for us – we hope there are ways to do it across the country. And, to meet with him together rather than what’s apparently happened in previous years –where LGBT groups have gone and conservative have run in – we were like, “No, we really want to present ourselves together.” So, I think something like that may move the denomination ahead in a new way.

Here, reconciliation is a little harder, I think, because people, there are people here who have left the denomination in pain, there are people like – my life has been changed because of being out and having charges brought against me, but I’ve been able to piece jobs together in various ways. And I couldn’t leave the congregation I had, but it was a good congregation. And so twenty-five years in one congregation wouldn’t have been my choice, but I had a congregation with me. There are people here who don’t have that, and so the pain and there’s reconciliation that needs to happen – and the denomination has bent over backwards on behalf of conservatives to say, “We’re sorry you’re leaving.” We haven’t had that same kind of statement as far as people who are LGBT who have left, and I would hope that somewhere along the way, that kind of statement would be issued.

**Warren:** Kathy from your perspective, same question, like how do you....

**Kathy:** I've had my eyes opened here, because like I said, I've known Susan's situation - a few other people, but I've seen some here and I've really felt some of the pain that has been caused. It, as far as, for myself personally, though, I'd spent years in one congregation, just knowing one minister. I have a unique perch now, because I'm driving Susan around to all these different churches where she preaches on Sunday: some of them very conservative, some of them very liberal. It runs the gamut. I've probably been in, well half the churches in the Hudson River Presbytery. And, we go, and people know - we're going in as a lesbian couple.

**Susan:** I introduce her, "This is my wife, Kathy."

**Kathy:** Exactly. And, people are - you know nobody's throwing us out. People are friendly. Some people are maybe, a little, like, "Oh." But, we're doing that - in some ways we're doing that work. It is a piece of work that needs to be done, and I'm out there - I'm seeing - we're all just people. We have...it's a matter of -people need to get to know - people need to know us, we need to know them - you know, a lot of these -they're really not bad people out there, just people who don't understand.

**Susan:** It's a fear - when they have a face, it's not quite as fearful.

**Kathy:** Right. So, unfortunately, the time - I think people who maybe are 10-15 years younger than Susan, those people will be getting the jobs, hopefully, at some point. I think her generation, our generation - it's going to be hard to get the parish jobs. There are a few people who have them, but there's a huge number of people here who have left the denomination.