

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

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Helene:

I'm Helene Loper. I'm from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I was born, baptized, raised, confirmed and Presbyterian trained, but my own story is that I was outed while I was in seminary by someone who was in the closet. The Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry did not tell me that was the issue for why they were not wanting to approve my candidacy.

When I finally figured out what the problem was, it was right before I was starting my senior year. So, I came out, but in the process I had to leave the Presbyterian process. So I knew I was leaving the Presbyterian Church in order to follow my call to ministry.

I went that year to the Women's Inter-Seminary Conference that was held at San Francisco Theological Seminary and that was where I met Janie Spahr. I literally had just come out to my then-husband asking for a divorce the weekend before that. I knew I was going to graduate from seminary and that would be my last tie to the Presbyterian Church. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew that was where I was in the process. So as I was leaving, I was also meeting the movement, because I had just come out to myself.

I stayed in touch with Janie as I transferred into the Metropolitan Community Churches and was ordained there. When the General Assembly sent out yet another study in the Early Nineties, I was still in Alabama. I had gone back there because that's where I felt I had been called to do ministry. Our people needed pastors there and there really weren't any places where they could go at the time.

So, I was in MCC in Alabama. There was a presbytery – North Alabama was going to take seriously the instructions – to study again – the sexuality, but they could not find anyone to come to that committee who had been through the clergy process to talk about it.

So, I had a colleague in Huntsville who knew me, and she suggested that I come up. And that was where I began what I call my "Soulforce Process" of going back and telling my story and finding my own healing.

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So, I began doing that and I had several other opportunities with local congregations in the Nineties to go back and share my story, but I kept in touch with the people in the Presbyterian Church. I began to realize that really we both have important work to do, because there were so many who had left as I had had to leave. And there were many who had stayed and had given up, for at least for a time, opportunity to do ministry as ordained clergy or elders. So, we were working at the same time together, and so I was very intentional about coming to events when I could. Whenever Janie was in the Southeast, I would drive to Atlanta or wherever it was and try to connect up with her.

This all came to a real action in 2000 when my Soulforce involvement came to General Assembly at Long Beach (California), and I was one of the 99 who was arrested there. But, prior to that I had already done something very, very deliberately. That All May Freely Serve was forming its regional affiliates, and Atlanta was the center of That All May Freely Serve – South, but really didn't reach out beyond the Metro area very far. So, I challenged Janie to get together a group and I gave them their first road trip through Alabama!

We visited four cities: Mobile, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa and Huntsville. And out of that two More Light Churches emerged.

One of them was immediate; University Presbyterian in Tuscaloosa became a More Light Church. The pastor there had been very friendly. She has a gay son. The other church, ironically, has its interim pastor because they were between pastorates. Their predecessors had been classmates of mine in seminary and the pastor who was their interim had been in Mobile and I had spoken at his church before. And, he happened to know Mardee Rightmyer's father as their circles goes – it's really a small world as we began to share – and then when they called their next pastor who is still there, Elizabeth O'Neill, they then worked that process, because Sid Batts did not think it was appropriate for him to take them through that process. He said that they needed to do that with their new pastor.

There was a lot of integrity in that. We had a grand time. I could tell you stories, but I'll spare those. But that was the first That All May Freely Serve/More Light welcoming congregation tour of an area where there wasn't much of a presence of some of the national organizations on the ground, locally.

After 2000, I still stayed in touch; 2006 General Assembly came to Birmingham. I wasn't really involved in the politics and the polity of the General Assembly work that was being done by the different groups, but I did connect – I did go and work their tables.

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During the plenaries of the General Assembly business, I stayed at the table for That All May Freely Serve and was just sort of hanging out there, because there were maybe five or ten people in the hall of the exhibit hall, but I just stayed.

And, an African observer, official statues, observer from one of the African Churches was wandering the room when nobody was in there and that was his opportune moment to come over to our tables. We started talking; he was genuinely inquiring. He was – “troubled” – is not the right word for it. He was *exploring* the issue with an open mind, but he needed a safe place to do it. So this moment was a good time! He came over and he was looking at the materials, and then he said, “I just don’t understand – how do you decide who’s the man and who’s the woman in your relationships?”

And I just sort of did my little smile and laughed and said, “Well, we’re not bound by the gender roles, so we can decide who does what best and who has the time. So we’re free as a relationship to work that out mutually.”

And, he kind of said, “Hmmm, that sounds like that’s a good idea!”

He left after looking again some more at the tables, but I knew in that moment that change was happening, one by one as we told our stories, as people who were willing to listen would have the moment to hear someone else’s truth. At the end of that General Assembly, That All May Freely Serve and the other groups had a silent demonstration, just holding posters as people were entering the closing worship. There was a long set of stairs coming up to one of the entrances, and we were on the sidewalk right above those stairs.

I happened to be standing closest to the stairwell. Middle-aged man, conservatively dressed came walking up the steps – and of course when you’re walking up the steps you’re looking down and then he looks up and sees us and he starts shaking his head. And I know, ok? Here’s somebody that’s not onboard with us. But he had look on his face that was different from some of the adversaries we have dealt with before, and he looked at me and just said – and it was from the heart – he just said, “Why can’t y’all just be like me?”

And in that moment, I knew what I needed to say back, I said, “You know I thought as Christians we were called to become more like Christ not more like each other.” And he kind of looked at me like, “That’s right!” And, I just left it there. Gave him room to sit with that and he walked on, he was no longer shaking his head; I could tell he was thinking. He was really thinking, “What is my reason for this?”

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And, again, it was just one of those small moments when I saw change happening, but there was a long way to go.

Then in 2010, Soulforce National (I'm involved with Soulforce Alabama, which is a local chapter), but Soulforce National was going to do another involvement with the Presbyterian Church. There was a small core group of us, but only two of us was Presbyterian. And, I'd been very deliberate in my Soulforce work in saying that people from each tradition should go back to their own tradition. So, I knew I had to go to General Assembly in Minneapolis, with that action. We got there – there were two things – two committees working: one was on marriage; one was on ordination. There were so many people signing up that we knew there were going to do a draw or a lottery for who got to speak. I got to speak at both committees. It was just one of those God things, I called it you know, where it worked out. And, for me that was important, but I got involved much more deeply with the politic part of the organizations working for change.

General Assembly then, in the plenary sessions, passed what became 10A and was the change in the Book of Order, but they failed by just a few votes on the marriage. Well, the Soulforce folks got upset. And they went back to meet about what to do, and one of the people representing the allied groups was meeting with us. As they decided to do a demonstration, similar to one they had done at a Lutheran assembly, our allies said, "That is just not ok with us as Presbyterians."

And, when I realized the allies were onboard with this, a Soulforce principal is "You don't violate your allies," but the others could not hear that, and the other Presbyterian was newly out and wanted to get his feet wet with a direct action. So, they went ahead and did it, and I couldn't participate. During each of the votes on our issues, we had stood in a visible place to the commissioners, not in front of them, but at the back – praying for their decision.

Well, I went back and took my place at that place and prayed for what was going on that would not do harm, but I also went and told our allies, "They're coming! Let your people know so that this doesn't blindsides them!" And, I had been working with a presbytery exec who was there, and of course the presbytery execs sit behind the commissioners and had told him, so he could tell the presbytery execs because they wouldn't be privy to all the commissioners were hearing or that the moderator would hear directly from our allies.

But, I felt very betrayed by that, almost as badly as when the person who had outed me, because I had been a friend.

So, I came back in 2012 to sort of redeem the Soulforce part of me and work again.

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So, I've spoken to the 2012 and 2014 committees, as well and have worked with that. I worked with the 10A passage when they were working on the canvassing of local presbyteries. But, for me that's been a magic part of my process, is using the healing from Soulforce from the outside and the part of that for me also is – how many of us have had to leave? It's the unfinished business of General Assembly, because there is no process for reconciliation for those of us who have left. I have explored it. I actually – I had an opportunity to apply – and had a friend who was on the Committee on Ministry in the presbytery to talk to about what the process might be. Because I'm not from UCC or some recognized Reformed tradition where I was ordained, they would require that I go back and start over again. After having been in relationship with the Presbyterian Committee on Preparation for Ministry for two and a half years, while I was in seminary – I don't know where I would be, because I had already taken three of the ordination exams and passed them with very good scores. I don't know where I would be with the whole question of – “If you're not from a Reformed tradition, you have to be re-ordained” - and to me that's like re-baptizing!”

So, there's real unfinished business with how to reconcile with the forty years of us who have not been able to stay in the Presbyterian Church and have gone elsewhere. And, the other issue is – we were talking about in our group – how we have been changed by this process in the church. But, I'm in Alabama and I'm very aware of the African-American part of our church that is just culturally and theologically in such a different place, and we have a lot of work still to do around that, in terms of the healing.

There's and HBC, Historic Black College University in Tuscaloosa that's Presbyterian affiliated – there are problems there on campus. How do we work with them to create change? Because that institution will become a witness to the entire African-American community that thinks that it's a white issue or that it's all kinds of stuff around that. There's a lot of work still to be done.

The unfinished business is reconciliation process. 10A went from here forward. It didn't deal with forty years of the past, and so that's where I'm coming from and I know it's a part of the change that still needs to happen. There is still some significant work to be done politically within the church around on polity of reconciliation, because there isn't any right now.

Warren:

On that specific issue, how would you structure that – I guess it would be an overture.

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Helene:

There are really two ways I could see that being done. One is to add a clause for discretion for the presbytery Committee on Ministry and Preparation for Ministry to work together on someone attempting to transfer credentials with recognition of their previous calling that had been denied, that the polity has now changed, and they would have the discretion to work that out. Negotiate like that with each individual person. That would be a very simple wording.

The other would be to address more specifically those specific areas of that section that talks about ordination and transfers and to make those changes in it. And that would be a much larger document of proposal and there would still need to be some discretion and negotiation allowed in that between the candidate and the presbytery committees that are involved.

The other thing that is a big part of that is churches willing to take that risk of entering that unknown of will this person be approved or not. It's one thing to take someone fresh out of seminary whose gone through the process. It's quite another thing to take someone whose been somewhere else, doing something else and you don't know if they're going to get through the process or not.

For example, the requirement right now would be that I resign my position, join the Presbyterian Church, and start over again. And, that's just not appropriate to reconciliation. So, the question – there's two ways it could be addressed: one is through a clause that would allow the presbyteries to negotiate what would be appropriate to meeting the standards given the previous experience. I went through twenty-five years ago. I aced the polity exam, but polity isn't the same anymore. I wouldn't call it remedial, but I would need an update.

And, what would that be and how would that be worked out with the ordination exam process, because that's a whole 'nother part of this that would have to be addressed – is how those who had taken the exams twenty-five / thirty years ago – or someone – I notice that one of the people had their ordination “re-ordained” or whatever. You don't re-baptize. And, for me the theology behind that is that re-baptism denies your previous journey of faith. Well, re-ordination denies my previous twenty-five years of ministry. I just can't go there. Not with integrity to who I am and the calling and the faith and the life I've lived.

So, that would be the two answers that I would have.

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Warren:

Separate question, about the internal dynamic of what we'll call "The Movement," which to be specific I'm talking about the liberation movement for gays and lesbians – so, the relationship or the dynamic that exists between those like yourself whose call led them away from the, we'll call it the institutional battle lines and those who actually have been at that grindstone. It's an interesting dynamic that I witness, as I check the group, and there is still a "we" that focuses on the liberation aspect. I'm wondering if you could "double-click" that and give us some insight to some of the other stuff, some of the nuances in that...

Helene:

For me, I can say, I began to realize that we have equally valid ministries that mine was just in a different form than theirs. I could work with them, and I could come and speak with a voice that they didn't speak with.

It's like when I went back to the presbytery in North Alabama and spoke as the person who had been in the Presbyterian process who had been denied. Those are voices that were not being heard in Alabama, during the conversation around the issues. And, that is an important voice.

And, it is important that people stayed and fought. Each of us has made our own sacrifices; it was a very difficult thing for me to leave the Presbyterian Church – I felt like a lifelong relationship and family had been broken. But, out of that, I have also come to an awareness is: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism and it's not about any denomination.

So there's a sense in which I have grown beyond the denominational identity, but I am still so Presbyterian. And I find it difficult to be in places where the decency and and in order of the integrity of polity and working a process as slow and as crazy as it can be – is far better from making rapid changes when you make mistakes. And, that's actually what happened with Amendment B back in the 70's; in 1973 the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) changed the classification of homosexuality from being a disease to being a mental health condition related to social oppression. And, the churches then had to deal with that, because all of a sudden their Committees on Preparation for Ministry could not call us "sick." So, they had had to go to the "sinner side." And that's where we wound up on a decision made with only three years reflection. It wasn't ever that. It hadn't been studied. The study came out and people didn't do it, but that slower process of doing the theological work, of really examining and and listening to stories is so important and the stories that are not heard – I'm really excited that the people that are coming back here to this event from the same stories I've had...

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I met Susan Leo in the 1990's at the same time I met Janie Spahr – there's a whole 'nother story around that! I was just coming out, as I had said earlier, and at the conference on Saturday morning they had a table with like eight seats or ten seats around it. And on it it had a card that said, "For Lesbian Seminarians!" and I said –

Susan Leo had picked me up at Larkspur Landing coming from the airport on the shuttle. And, I really kind of liked her and thought she was a cool person and I said, "If she sits there, I'll sit there."

Well, Susan Leo walks in and sits right down, and so I say, "OK!" So, I go sit down. Little known to me, was there was another person on the airplane from Atlanta from Chandler Seminary, who had seen me and said if I sat there, she'd sit there! So there was this sort of domino effect of people coming out because they saw somebody else do it. And, so I have not kept in touch with Susan, but I saw that she's supposed to be here.

So, this connecting of those of us that have had to leave to go and do our ministries – it's a very difficult decision, between staying and working for change and following that calling that said you were called to pastor my people. And, Janie did a wonderful job of that of pastoring God's people through That All May Freely Serve, but in Alabama that needed to have a form of a place where people could go and worship, because there weren't any places when I went there in the Nineties, until we did that little tour there weren't any More Light Churches that were identifiable.

The other exciting thing for me is the collaboration. I have watched as that has been built, and I know there's always that sense of competition. But what I have seen is each entity come up with what its strengths are to recognize in one another, and then to realize that they could each do their work together, without competing with each other by using their specialization strengths. And, so when they had people coming to tell their stories from That All May Freely Serve who had been telling their stories - but the people from Covenant Network would work the politics – I am not a politician. I am far too direct.

So, each does their work best, and that mutual respect for what each one does is what I have admired in this process that they had built that over the years. It was difficult, there were some combinations, but to realize that they were reaching different people and they had a different function in the process and that those functions were equally important. That one could not do it alone. And that to me was – I'm not sure how to describe it – it gives me a warm feeling that we could collaborate; that we could have different ministries and that we could collaborate together.

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Warren:

What is your sense of the status of that collaborative posture and relationship given now the advent of the new day, as it were? And, speak of it, if you could, in relationship to some of the political aspects – most in particular the reconciliation.

Helene:

Actually, my biggest concern has been where they're going to go from now. Now that this has been solved. And my point is that it has not been solved. And they still need to collaborate on finishing a reconciliation process, and to be on the alert for the "next" whoever it is that's outside.

Unfortunately, the polity of the Presbyterian denomination is premised on Roberts Rules of Order and debate, and it always creates winners and losers. And, I don't see the church being reconciled and united until they change that structure. And, that's a whole 'nother issue! It feels so un-Presbyterian, but until that conversation becomes one where we can dialogue and disagree without having to vote and have winners and losers there's going to be some tension and some disunity, because of the power structure of that dialogue and who winds the vote.

That's way beyond what anybody's thinking about in the Presbyterian Church, but I see that as an issue and these groups have come together – it is about *That All May Freely Serve*; it is about the inclusion of every member and how do we do that and being aware of other ways that this whole bias thing will resurface again. Was it women? Was it African-Americans? Was it – we're dealing with immigrants, so it's still the race issue, the culture issue. So, how are we going to relate to our brothers and sisters in other countries, because Presbyterians are organized nationally – I'm aware of the Anglican community really struggling, similar to the Presbyterian issue. I mentioned the African observer here. What are our relationships going to be? We've got to work through that and there's a lot more work to do there about what mutual relationships in the church means, and I think we're learning that.

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Warren:

Last thing that occurs to me to ask you – so the issue of diversity.

All liberation movements are cousins. So, in light of the fact that that's the fact, and also the fact that generally speaking those liberation movements are monophonically focused in their own specific personal issue, I'm wondering if this place in time affords an opportunity that you can see for lateral conversation between liberation movements that in fact can create a more powerful presence on that. I'm wondering just about your imagination concerning these observations...

Helene:

Oh yes! In fact, I did my own ministry, because I'm a pastor of a very small church, co-pastor actually, of a very small church. I have other time for doing things like this work, but I'm also involved in Interfaith work and the Soulforce work.

But the Interfaith work for me is about how that is coming into play with other liberation issues, and particularly the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and I am aware of the "truth and reconciliation process" – that's from my Satyagraha roots in Soulforce, the amazing unbelievable miracle of South Africa's process. And, I'm very aware that Mandela, early in that process, when he was still in jail but not at Roben Island and was in dialogue with the South African white leaders, he was very aware of the fear factor. And, I think that that is the factor in every discrimination, the fear that someone else doesn't have the same values, whatever; and we're not talking about our common values. We're talking about theological differences in all these conflicts.

And, that model is important to me, but I realize that the barrier is fear. I come from a biology background, so a little chemistry: the energy of activation to get over it, you know to have the reaction to have the event happen is so high in some situations for that liberation for that reconciliation to happen – because liberation to me is really about reconciliation. About being accepted as a full human being and included in equal and mutual relationship within the larger community and society of the world.

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That fear is so difficult to overcome and that's the really hard work for people of faith, because faith is the antithesis of fear – or vice versa, if you want to say it vice versa. Fear will kill faith. And, that's the struggle I see spiritually in all of these liberation movements is how do we overcome our fear to see each other as human beings – to be in community together with mutual respect. And, that is the larger work and that is the specific work for this issue – and that's going to be the specific work on race, and it's going to be the specific work on gender and on the culturalism and immigration and the conflicts in the Middle East, or wherever else they come up – is how our faith can overcome that fear.

And, we're not used to doing that. We're so used to having people around us like us that we haven't had to have a very high – but we've got to build that ability in our faith – to listen to someone else's faith and trust that their values that their goals are not going to be harmful to us. Mandela saw that. Gandhi saw that. And it's also what kind of leaders we raise up. Gandhi was very deliberate about trying to make sure people who were in his movement were prepared to then transition to leadership. Kind of like Bayard Rustin – when do you go from protest to negotiation? You have to change your relationship and what you're willing to do in that process. We have a lot of work to do on that. We have just scratched the surface.

Warren: It strikes me as the perfect time to strike that match.