

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

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Stony Point Center, Stony Point, NY  
April 8 – 11, 2015

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**Erin:** Hello, my name is Erin Swenson and I'm from Atlanta, Georgia. I'm actually a retired member of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, and I am as far as anyone knows, the first ordained minister in any mainstream denomination to change sex and stay ordained.

And, that's what brought me here. I'm an unintentional member of this community. My life story is a long one, as is everybody's my age! I'm getting ready to retire from ten years of working for an insurance company as a behavioral health specialist. I have been engaged for the last four decades as a psychotherapist, ordained as a pastoral counselor in a validated ministry by the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.

It was in my mid-forties, after about twenty-three years of that ministry that I came to myself in understanding that I really needed to do a gender transition. Something that I had never really intended or even dreamed about. It was something that I avoided, as long as I could, and it became clear that my life would be an unhappy one if I did not transition.

This was a rather cataclysmic experience, because I was married; I had been married for almost twenty-seven years. We had two lovely children, one of whom is a special needs child. And, I had been an ordained minister for twenty-three years and a successful psychotherapist in the City of Atlanta.

So, my goal was to transition and to do it as quietly and discreetly as I possibly could. The only things about my life that I really wanted to change had to do with gender expression and how how people saw me. I didn't want to change my vocation, my friends my family. All was good with the world, except for the fact that I was in the wrong gender.

And, so I made this transition, and the need to address the presbytery about my changes came fairly early in that process. I went to the Committee on Ministry and told them that I wanted to change my name on the roll of presbytery. At the time, we weren't really keeping gender designations for some political reason; I'm not sure that I remember exactly why. So, it was easy for me to just as for a name change, but when it was clear that my name was being changed from a distinctly male one,

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which is Eric – I wanted to change it from Eric Karl to Erina Katrina Swenson. That sort of tipped my hand, as far as what I was actually doing and started a two-year long process in the presbytery. The main struggle of which had to do with my insurance coverage, because my insurance for my family was through the presbytery and Board of Pensions and was inextricably tied to my ordination. Were I to give up my ordination or have it taken away from me, I would lose insurance and remember I have a special needs kid who had a fairly extensive medical expenses. It would have been a family disaster. So, I had to pursue this and did, hoping that it would be discreet and it turned out not to be discrete. After the first presbytery meeting it became a public matter and the newspaper article came out and what I had wanted to be quiet and easy became difficult and loud.

It was in the midst of this that I found myself having breakfast with a sixty-seven-year-old woman who had called me, up as a result of the newspaper article. She had introduced herself on the phone as Ida, and she had been one of Dr. John Money's first patients at the Johns Hopkins Gender Reassignment Clinic in Baltimore. She had seen the article and wanted to get together with me because I had mentioned part of my therapy had been in Baltimore, as well.

So, we got together and we had this wonderful breakfast, and she introduced herself and told me about her life. I was thrilled. I was just ecstatic. Here was a person who was probably twenty-five years older than I was, who had lived the life. She had transitioned in her early life and moved from South Georgia to Baltimore to do the transition and then back to Atlanta, where she got married and had a normal life as a woman. I was in awe of her, and I reached my hands across the booth at The Majestic in Atlanta, where we were having breakfast, and I grabbed her hands and I said, "Ida, it is so wonderful to meet another another transgender Presbyterian."

And she turned dark. Her faced dropped, and she said, "Oh, but I'm not a Presbyterian."

And, I said, "But you just told me that you belong – you went to this church next door to you and it was the center of your life. You told me that you're playing the piano and you're in the church practically every single day, and it's a Presbyterian Church, and I don't understand, why are you not a Presbyterian?"

And, she said, "I never joined the church."

I thought that maybe she had some childhood membership somewhere, and she said, "No, I didn't join the church because I didn't think that I was supposed to. I really didn't think that God wanted me to join the church because of who I am, you know? I just didn't think that I really belonged there." And she said, "That was why

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when I saw a newspaper article about a Presbyterian minister who was like me - it meant so much to me and I had to meet you."

And, of course, there were tears. She was just a little old transgender lady, and there was Jesus sitting in a greasy spoon, telling me where I needed to go, and discrete transitions became a thing of the past. The Committee on Ministry resolved the insurance problem and came to me and said, "We've got insurance for you, now all you've got to do is resign your ordination."

And, I said, "Nothin' doin'! I've got work to do!"

That's who we are to each other.

Thank you.

**Warren:** So, the phrase "discrete transition" catches me, and I'm wondering if you could talk some about that decision - in the context - of the movement, as relates to the work you relate to...

**Erin:** OK. At the time, I was not related to any movement, whatsoever. I was - my movement was my own. I had just met Janie Spahr. I think of Janie as the unifying principle of the movement. And, of course, she's way more than just a philosophical idea! Janie Spahr is a force of nature. And, I had just met her. And, so I had just become introduced to the movement, and it was through the process of the intervening few months that Janie became really supportive of me and the other people in the presbytery, who I thought would have wanted to be quiet about my status. They all came out of the closet! This is the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. You have to remember; this is in the middle of the heart of the bible belt. So, we didn't have inclusive, progressive churches on every street corner. For me, every person who came and said, "I want to come and support you in any way I can," meant so much to me.

**Warren:** In the context of your experience here at this conference, talk about your - the emotions of reconnection, the emotions of - I've heard a lot of "sweet and sour" aspects, so speak a little about your experience and how you were processing your past and in the context of this present experience.

**Erin:** Here at *Rock Stars and Prophets*, it's been a remarkable experience for me. I became a part of the movement in the mid-1990's, which as far as the group here is concerned was *very* late. Because, so many people started in the Seventies and Eighties and struggled at a time when the church was not only - not thinking about it - but was openly hostile to the whole idea of LGBT people in the church. And,

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although I did catch some of that, I became co-moderator of More Light Presbyterians, one of the organizations, so I was able to witness first hand some of the struggle, especially the floor of presbytery and in the churches about changing the standards for ordination, not so much the marriage thing.

But, I came into the movement in the Nineties and while I have known most of the people here before, I had not had an opportunity to hear their stories in this beautiful integrated kind of way that gave a texture, a unifying sort of texture to the movement, to see what has happened – how remarkable it is what God has done through these people, through this community over the decades that has ensued.

It makes me very excited, frankly, to see what's going to happen from here.

**Warren:** So, as relates to that point, if you would then – with those reflections, projections reflect forward, and from this new dispensation of the marriage equality and the ordination and 10A, talk about how you're seeing the future of the movement and in terms of some have spoken about concepts of reconciliation and that kind of thing. Give some of your thoughts...

**Erin:** Well, what makes me so excited with the changes that have occurred – and they're important changes to transgender people, too – in fact, DOMA, the Defense of Marriage Act that went through the U.S. Congress, has been used more forcefully against transgender couples than it has against gay and lesbian ones. So, anything that opens marriage up is helpful to those of us who are transgender.

What I think, in terms of where this movement is going, is – I think this is a point at which the movement gets freed from the concerns of politics and legislation and legalism and becomes capable, freed to do the work that it does so well, in terms of connecting with people in the church about this issue.

I think this issue isn't just about this issue. It's about every Christian, it's about every person – because each one of us has a journey. And part of that journey is one that we don't really align with being acceptable to other people. I think one of the witnesses that can emerge powerfully is a profound acceptance of ourselves and God's love for us, as we are that we don't have to dress up pretty to go to church on Sunday to be acceptable to God. So, when someone who is homeless comes into the church and doesn't smell quite right and looks dirty and ragged, they feel at home because that are with other people who are like them.

Not that we are smell and ragged, but that we're comfortable with ourselves in our "smelliness" and in our "raggedness" and don't feel uncomfortable in the presence of such a person. So, the community of the church, I think, is poised on a place where it

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can become the church in a new and exciting way because of this movement. Not just this is part of the church; I think this is integrated into the heart and soul of what I think the church is.

**Warren:** So, the last question, focuses on that “comfortable with self” aspect. A lot of the themes that have emerged are the themes that focus on validation and being, claiming of self-identity. So with that theme, as a part in common with these videos are information for lookers, but they’re also messages. So, if you were to give a message to those who were seeking, those who might be finding their way through the path that you have taken, if you could give a message that includes your conclusions – or least your approach to the struggles of claiming self.

**Erin:** It is. It’s a – you know one of the problems with this conference is that is called *Rock Stars and Prophets*, and so – and it is in many ways – every single person here is special in terms of where they have come from, but they reflect the specialness of everyone. They are simply reflections of a larger community and having been a youth who was aware of being transgender at a time when there was no such word – I’ve come to understand that every person has a gender journey, we all do. Gender expression is a concern for all of us as we grow up; as we become and adult; as we establish families; as we engage in careers; as we get older; as we grow into the senior years and aging – all of that has a concern with how we express our gender. And being transgender does not mean that you are really different than everybody else. At least not in nature, perhaps but in degree – and I think every transgender person, I’m a little biased, I think every transgender person is their own prophet. Our culture has become pretty rigid as far as gender is concerned. I mean we’re not as rigid as some of the countries in the Fertile Crescent – but we are still – middle school is a harrowing experience for many kids, primarily because of the expectations of gender and girls starving themselves and boys engaging in acts of violence just to establish a gender identity. I think one of the things that every transgender brings to the community is a message that we don’t have life with that oppression.

**Warren:** That’s awesome Thank you very much.

**Erin:** Thank you!