

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

“... I felt like I was a person of integrity until I had a clear understanding that I was Lesbian . . . after that, until I came out, I felt like that was set aside.”

Transcript

My name is Laurie McNeill, I'm a graduate of Princeton Seminary; I was ordained October 22, 1989. I served congregations in Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and now once again in New York. I'm someone who was grateful for the organizations that evolved in my early years of ministry: That All May Freely Serve, Covenant Network and the like, because that let me know that there were people there that were saying that one day, perhaps, I might get the nerve to come on out. Basically, they were just saying, "It's OK you can live and be an out gay person in this church."

I was a person that didn't have much faith, because I really didn't believe that for a long time, and I felt like I was a person of integrity until I had a clear understanding that I was Lesbian and then after that, until I came out, I felt like that was set aside.

I want to tell three "Jane Spahr stories" and then I will tell the one that is significant in terms of my experience in the church.

Jane Spahr I saw speak at Moravian Seminary in the early '90's. And Chip Colson was a pastor at the Emmaus Church in Lehigh Presbytery, and afterwards he said that he had been at seminary with Janie. And, he said, "I knew in seminary that Janie was going to have a significant role in the life of the church, because she would breast feed in class – and that was back when no one would breast feed. And, she made her mark right when we were in seminary."

But, it's fascinating to me that in the early '90's, there she was in Bethlehem, in my presbytery, and I was able to hear someone speak what no one else would speak. Janie came, and I am just amazed, at how many times I've seen Janie, Tricia Dykers Koenig

and others. It let's me know how much they itinerated around the country and in places large and small.

Janie came to Long Island Presbytery, one of the larger churches had her come and itinerate around Long Island for a few days, but no one wanted to have her preach. No one wanted to have her lead worship. And, so they asked my church of sixty members, you know, "Could Janie preach there?" And, of course, that would be fine.

Well, and so she did, but it came time for the "Children's Moment" and, I kind of noticed that none of the kids were there that day. I had about eight young little children, young school-aged children in this small church and one of the fathers had said, "It's ok for a Lesbian to speak at our church but not to preach!"

And, I thought, "Buddy, every Sunday you have a Lesbian preaching!" But that was painful, that was painful to know that one person would set the tone for other parents. That they felt that pressure, even though they were really much more accepting.

That was a painful experience. And, there was a third Janie Spahr story I wanted to tell, but I can't remember it...so anyway...

What happened for me in the church was that in 2009, I got married, and I was marrying...I'd taken a week off...a long week for vacation. And it was really, it was pretty crazy to be planning a wedding and to be closeted and to be serving a church. And, I was forty-nine years old; I was forty-nine years old. I was going to get married for the first time in my life – and to a woman. And, I knew that life would never be the same after that.

The church had always been a lifeline for me, from my earliest days of my childhood, and there was nothing I that ever wanted to do more in life than be a minister. And I had such joy in that. And, ideally, I would have married Lisa at my church in North Carolina, but that wasn't legally permissible.

Ideally, it would have been in a Presbyterian Church; ideally it would have been a Presbyterian pastor officiating; but I didn't want the wedding to be subverted by the politics of that.

So we were married in Massachusetts, in just a beautiful little church in Harwich Port, Massachusetts on Cape Cod. Episcopalian. The Episcopalians allowed marriages to take place, at that time, in their churches in Massachusetts, but the Episcopal priests were not allowed to officiate. The bishops, the bishop of that diocese did not allow that.

So, we had Lisa's pastor from her home church in Nashua, New Hampshire lead the service; we had the pastor at that church, (*Odie Odierna* was the pastor that conducted the service), Judith Davis was the pastor of that local church, an out Lesbian, who at one point had lived in my hometown in Aberdeen, North Carolina. It seemed to be fate.

And, then a woman who had been about ten years older than I in my home church in North Carolina who I'd always admired and looked up to. She was a UCC pastor in Rhode Island and she officiated. And that meant the world to me because that was like having the pastor of twenty years of my childhood and my youth be present and all that that extraordinary experience to be there, represented in Caroline Patterson, Caroline Johnson Patterson. So, she did the vows.

There were seventy-five people at the wedding; there were twenty-five people who were ordained officers either pastors, deacons, elders in the Presbyterian Church. To go back... so that was on Saturday.

But on Tuesday night I had a Session meeting; I said to my Session at Central Presbyterian Church in Montclair, New Jersey; I said, "You know, I'm going on vacation this week, but it's a little more than that. It's actually going to be a honeymoon. I'm getting married." And, it was like whiplash. You know, nobody's paying any attention, it was Pastor's Report, and they all sort of looked around and they sort of looked at each other it's like "You're getting married..." -- and there was just sort of there was like -- you could just sort of see in this moment freeze frame, "But, aren't you gay? You know? And you're getting married?"

And then I said, "And there'll be no groom at the wedding."

And then there was just sort of, "You are gay. We've known this about you!"

And Stewart Campbell, this beautiful man, retired man said, "I make a motion that we affirm our appreciation and love for Laurie as a pastor and that we go on record as celebrating her marriage." And someone seconded that. And it blew me away. Stewart was a wise man. He realized this was going to... he tried to offer a little shield there and then this woman said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Before we do that, we need to talk about this." She says, "I know people who don't come to church here because of this issue. And they've told me that they're disappointed with Laurie; they felt like she deceived us. And, we can't just go approving that motion."

And, that was a helpful piece, because there'd been resistance in the church to much of the ministry there, and I couldn't figure out why. And in a nutshell, there we had it. They did approve that motion, which was a wonderful gift, to go off, get married -- best day of my life -- wonderful day, the wedding day was.

Came back a week later. The congregation at the coffee hour – it was an unusually well attended service that Sunday! I had mailed a letter to the congregation that Tuesday night. At the coffee hour after church, people asked if I'd say something.

I said, "There's two dates that you need to know that are significant in my life: two things that you need to know." And I said, "One is that my parents presented me for Baptism when I was an infant, and forever I was signed and sealed into the Love of Christ, and grafted into this Body of Christ.

And, the second was that when I was a young person, I made my Confirmation, public affirmation of faith, and, as was the case back then, for the first time received the sacrament of The Lord's Supper." I said, "Now since then, I've been ordained and I've been married – those weren't sacraments in the church, the others are. I love being a minister and I love that I now have this love in my life. And, what's significant in the church is that I'm baptized and that I participate in this Body of Christ."

That was in October, in January at the annual congregational meeting – there were people at that meeting that we hadn't seen in years. And, the wagons had been circled; there was an awkward motion that was finally made to fire me. I left, handed the meeting over to the Clerk of Session, and for the next hour and a half they deliberated.

And, the next few years are just kind of a blur. What the people who had circled the wagons didn't realize was that there were people there who really wanted me to be their minister. So, at that meeting they realized that the people that wanted to have me fired, realized they didn't have the votes, so they withdrew the motion, they worked behind the scenes more.

There was another congregational meeting in May; I was fired. It was a close vote. There were people that didn't come to the meeting because I was their pastor. They were not willing to support a Lesbian, but they weren't going to vote against me. They didn't come to church that day.

There were people that abstained; and the vote really was evenly split except for abstentions. If the abstentions had voted, it would have passed. Which would have been, I would have left as soon as I could, just 'cause it was such a divided church, but I would have stayed long enough... anyway.

So, anyway, I had prepared to two hymns: "We Gather Here to Bid Farewell" or "The Church of Christ in Every Age Must Decide." We sang the second hymn, "We Gather Here to Bid Farewell." And, I, when we were singing that hymn, there were some people that were signing it like, "Ode to Joy"! This is the greatest thing that happened. And, I thought that represents part of the church. They're glad the Lesbian's gone. And, there

were people that were in just total anguish, and that was one of the most painful days in my life.

Fast forward, the Presbytery of Newark filed charges against me. Tricia Dykers Koenig and Doug Nave found me incredible attorneys: Mark Robertson and Todd Hambidge in New York City. Mark was at the First Presbyterian Church, Todd at Madison Avenue. Todd called his mother in Indiana and said, “Mom, I need to finally transfer my membership to New York.” She said, “Oh, you’re finally joining the church there!”

He said, “Yeah, I’m going to do some legal work for someone in the church.”

She said, “Oh, I’m so proud of you! What are you going to be doing?” And he told her, and she said, “Oh...”

But anyway, they represented me. We won against the Presbytery of Newark. They appealed the “Not Guilty” verdict. We won in the Synod of the Northeast. Newark appealed that “Not Guilty” verdict. We won before the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. They upheld that I could be married and was not in violation of my ordination and I was not guilty of being in a “happy marriage” – that was my charge, even though it was a “happy marriage”!

Anyway, Newark spent over \$100,000 of their funds to try to defrock me and my attorneys did pro bono work. I am so grateful for what people have given and then in 2012, these amazing little churches in Ulster County in Hudson River Presbytery – Highland and Marlboro - invited me to be their minister. And, I am very grateful to be serving.

And thank you for listening to my story.