

Oral History Interview: Karen Ziegler

Interviewee: Karen Ziegler

Interviewer: David Weekley

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David W. Okay, Karen, let's talk about your life a little bit. And I don't know a lot about it, so I'm really curious, too, and looking forward to hearing more about you and the things that are important in your life. So tell me a little bit about you.

Karen Z. Okay. I was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and God was always very important to me. Always a very kind of introverted kid who moved around a lot and didn't have friends, except God was my friend. So I remember in sixth grade walking around just talking to God in the outer perimeter of the playground, and I think I developed a rather pious spirituality around reading the Bible and this book called "Elsie Dinsmore," which was really this fundamentalist child who lived in the 1800s.

David W. Wow. Was this a true story?

Karen Z. No, it was a novel. But when I went to college I had a roommate, and she was an Evangelical Christian. And I was raised Presbyterian. She was a born again Christian and she wanted to know when I met the Lord, you know. And there was this group of people that was like, well, when did you meet the Lord? And I was like...that made no sense to me, and accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and savior made no sense to me.

And also I had a Jewish roommate that they were trying to convert, and that really didn't make any sense to me.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. So I remember going to my college chaplain just in tears, meeting him for the first time and saying, you know, I don't get this. I'm a Christian and these people are crazy, and this is not the Christianity I want to participate in, so maybe I can't be a Christian. And he invited me to be part of the sort of other Christian organization on campus that was not Christian Crusade.

David W. I was going to ask. That was during the time of the Christian Crusade for Christ?

Karen Z. Yeah, so it was 1971. And so at about that time also I realized that I really didn't want to continue my life as a white person with other white people. I didn't want a white suburban life. And I had been reading, for a long time, books about people who were very different from me in very different circumstances. And I just remember this sort of prayer that spring, my first year in college, it was 1972, you know, I want my life to be different. I want people of color in my life, I want adventure. And so I started volunteering downtown at this place call the Unity Center that was mostly the Black community, but also people that wanted to support the Black community there. Pennsylvania is a very racist place.

David W. Oh, I've been through it.

Karen Z. In general, yeah.

David W. So this was in Pennsylvania?

Karen Z. It was in western Pennsylvania not far from Erie. And meanwhile there was something called the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago and around the country, which was these very liberal and rather strange people who had figured out basically how to save the world, but in a different kind of way. We read Tillich, and “You Are Accepted.” There was this whole thing where you go around the room and you say, you know, I did this terrible thing, am I accepted? Yes. After we read the Tillich sermon. I’m Adolph Hitler. Am I accepted? And then we were all supposed to like understand. And you really did understand in that context, yeah, everybody’s accepted. So it was a different take on Christianity and I really liked it.

So at a conference downtown at a church that was around these Ecumenical Institute people I met a woman, a Black woman, who was a year ahead of me in the college and lived in the town, named Colevia Carter. And we just fell in love, like instantly. So the last thing I expected. I thought, you know, a white man on a white horse is going to come riding up and that’s what’s going to happen to me. But instead it was a Black woman. And I was clearly in love with her. We became inseparable.

And then we had to figure out, oh, well, I guess I’m not a lesbian. I guess I’m just in love with this woman. And then oh, that’s what a lesbian is. But then we didn’t think there were any other ones. So meanwhile I had

been singing in the choir in the soprano section and really had been very intrigued by this alto named Nancy Wilson, who had graduated by then, and as I was entering my sophomore year she was entering Boston University Seminary and starting MCC Boston with Larry Bernier. And Colevia called me one day in December of that year and said hey, I found another one, and it's Nancy Wilson. Well, I had a terrible crush on Nancy Wilson and I thought, well, if it's Nancy Wilson, you know, then it's okay, maybe, but I didn't know.

So Nancy invited us to Boston and we had our first experience of being with other gay people, and my first experience of seeing a woman clergy person, and being in a gay church, which instantly healed any misgivings I had left about does God love me and is it okay to be lesbian. I just in that sitting with other lesbians and gay men in worship, I was forever healed of that doubt. And I just remember that time as so exhilarating, like being in a bar. I'm not even sure I'd ever been in a bar before. But I was in a bar, you know, dancing. This was like years of wonderful dancing music and—

David W. So like a gay bar?

Karen Z. A gay bar, men and women, just—

David W. Right, yeah, yeah, everybody just... Mm-hmm.

Karen Z. —so beautiful. So beautiful. And I really did feel like Alice in Wonderland who had followed the white rabbit into a whole different

world, and I knew it was my tribe and my world. So I was a premed student at that time for a little while longer because...I don't know. I guess there were a lot of reasons for that. But I was struggling because it didn't come naturally to me, studying physics and—

David W. So it didn't feel like a vocation?

Karen Z. It felt like a vocation, but I was really having trouble getting As in physics and things like that. That was a problem. So my college chaplain, same one, Don Hobson, called me into his office one day and said, you know, have you ever thought about being a minister? And it had never occurred to me to be a minister. And he said, you know, you ought to really think about that. Because I had been sort of leading this group now a little bit. And he said you have these skills and this would be something you could be good at.

So the next day—it was early, early in the semester—I changed my courses, changed my major from biology or something, dropped organic chemistry, dropped physics, dropped something else and instead took ethics and Old Testament. And then that was just the difference between crawling and flying.

David W. I was going to ask.

Karen Z. I just loved studying all that stuff, and I just knew, well, this is what I want to study now. But I wasn't sure that I wanted to go to seminary. I was raised Presbyterian. I knew I couldn't be out and be ordained in the

Presbyterian Church. I still thought maybe I should go to nursing school. So I took a year off and worked at MCC Philadelphia with Don Borbe (??). And my job was at the medical school, Jefferson Medical School.

David W. So it kind of dovetailed both together.

Karen Z. Yeah. But my job was slicing rats' brains after guillotining them, which I actually made my supervisor do the guillotining, but it was rough. So yeah, I'm not attracted to that form of science, and I really did love the church. That year I was an exhorter, which was our student clergy at that time. And then the following year I went to Union Seminary.

David W. Can you tell me just a little what an exhorter does?

Karen Z. Oh, it's just a student clergy. You know, you follow the clergy people around and they tell you do this, do that. I think we had a clergy collar with a little line in it telling she's sort of an almost clergy.

David W. Okay, clergy in training.

Karen Z. Clergy wannabe, yeah. Yeah, yeah. They changed that probably a long time ago. So then I went to Union, and Union was really wonderful for me. I had a lot of anger, which I think was pretty misplaced, but some of it wasn't. Like there were very few women at that time.

David W. I bet, yeah.

Karen Z. And we all had the same experience of like raising our hand to say something in class and being ignored, and then a man would say exactly

the same thing and yes, that's a brilliant thing to say. So we all had that experience and we all were so angry in church history class. But there were wonderful people who were teaching there—Beverly Harrison, Robert McAfee Brown, Dorothee Soelle, James Cone, Phyllis Tribble, Elaine Pagels. All these people were my teachers.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And they were just amazing people. So I was so fortunate to go to Union, I think, which was where my college chaplain had gone. That's how I ended up there. But I was way out. I applied to Union as an out person, and actually I got a scholarship, I think, for that reason. And there weren't too many. I think there was maybe one or two other by the time I left Union. It's changed a lot now.

But in the meantime, pretty soon I got licensed as a minister because MCC had this two step process. You become licensed and then you become ordained. And after my second year the pastor of MCC New York retired and I became the worship coordinator in 1978, and that was almost like being the pastor, in a way, because there wasn't another pastor. But I still had to go through...at that time I could apply and I did apply to be pastor of the church as I was finishing at Union.

David W. And had you left the Presbyterian Church by then?

Karen Z. Oh, yeah. Yeah. They were not sorry to see me go, I think. [*Laughs.*] Yeah, I mean, I didn't even try to communicate with them. I knew. I was

very lucky because I came along at that time when Bill Johnson was in New York and he had just been ordained by UCC, Bill Silver by the Presbyterians, Michael Collins by the Methodists. I think Bill Silver, I'm not even sure if he's living. I know Michael Collins died. And Carter Heyward. And the five of us were like a little clergy support group. So each of us were from a different denomination, but we were all struggling in our own ways.

David W. It's wonderful you had that together.

Karen Z. It was really wonderful. And we would have really interesting discussions about—I couldn't understand why they weren't in MCC and they couldn't understand why I was. They felt they could have a bigger impact. But I felt the opposite. And I also felt like why waste our time being abused by these people who don't get it, and why not pour our energy into our own people who need us.

Because what I was experiencing was the tremendous healing that people found, just as I had, by just coming into an MCC church. So yeah, I really never looked back, I think, once I had experienced that in Boston and then Philadelphia. I knew that's what I wanted to do.

But meanwhile I was going to Union and I'm studying with these radical lesbian feminists. And I had become radicalized around feminism in 1972 when I went to Boston and Nancy Wilson was taking a course with Mary Daly at Boston College and said why don't you read this book "Beyond

God the Father?" So I did, and that really cracked open my life. That was like, I remember, I would read a chapter in that book and then throw it across the room because I knew everything she said was true, because it was like the scales falling from my eyes around patriarchy and the church. So when I was at Union I preferentially studied with feminist theologians and wrote my papers and my biblical studies papers with that lens. And ended up publishing a few things.

We had a theological journal at that time in MCC and another kind of journal. And I guess I published both of these articles in the theological journal. One was a paper I wrote for Phyllis Trible which was about the Creation story and another was one that I wrote about Jesus and how really untenable I found Christology as a lesbian. And then I wrote my master's thesis as a radical feminist theology of ministry.

And at that time, probably still, MCC required a thesis for ordination for the final step of credentialing. And in 1979 in Los Angeles, I was to be interviewed by the full committee, which were all men, except one woman, to get ordained. And I presented that paper to them. And meanwhile people had been reacting to these papers that I had published in the theological journal, and were saying that I was a heretic, which I was. But I was proud of being a heretic. I mean, I had no problem with that.

And I was really in their face, so that I remember being met at the airport by Donna Wade, who was an elder at that time, and some of her friends,

and they gave me a t-shirt, a black t-shirt, that said, in glitter letters,
“Heretic.”

David W. [Laughs.]

Karen Z. And I just thought it was great, you know. I mean, I was really...you
know how you are when you're young?

David W. Right, yeah.

Karen Z. Like you're just immortal and isn't it all fun.

David W. You can do it all.

Karen Z. You can do it all. So I walked into my ordination interview in that t-shirt.
And I don't think anybody was amused. And Jim [Dykes], who was a
pastor from Australia, was particularly not amused. But it turned out—
they did ordain me, but later I found out that they ordained me by one
vote.

And the stakes were really high because I had just been called to MCC
New York. I had just graduated from a seminary. And so the only way
they could have refused my ordination would have been to say that I was a
heretic, and almost half of that committee said that I was a heretic. And if
I had been not ordained, I would not have been able to accept that call
from MCC New York because you have to be an ordained, credentialed
minister to do it.

David W. Right, to take a call.

Karen Z. A lot of that I didn't know until later. Jeri Ann Harvey, who was the pastor of MCC Los Angeles, told me that later. She was the only woman on the committee. And she was my thesis advisor. And to this day I don't know how she voted. Because I think she thought I was a heretic. We became very good friends, but our theology was very different for a long time. I think we came to understand each other over the years.

But those years were characterized by huge theological battles in MCC, which I think was a bit of a class struggle because many of us had very good educations and many of us had no education in theology or biblical studies, even, really. We came from every kind of denomination and background, from the most...yeah, everything. We were everything. And that was the great part of it. That made our liturgy very rich and the music very rich, and everything about it was very wonderful. And there was still this struggle going on around, you know, there was racism, there was sexism.

David W. And theological tensions, too.

Karen Z. And mostly theological tensions, yeah.

David W. Some related to those other issues, I would think.

Karen Z. Right, right. So I remember district conferences in Boston, and Hartford, and Providence, and New York and Philadelphia. It was as though we were crusaders riding in on our white horses trying to win the people over on inclusive language and all of these things that we were... And the

Elders of MCC in those days named the churches, some of the churches, after soap operas, you know, so the Edge of Night. [*Laughs.*] And MCC New York was The Young and the Restless.

David W. Oh, that's perfect.

Karen Z. Because I was 24 when I became the worship coordinator—

David W. Wow, really?

Karen Z. —and 25 when I became pastor.

David W. That's really young.

Karen Z. It was so young. It was ridiculously young. And I had no idea what I was doing. But I did have a great deal of earnest faith, you know. And I was smart enough to know that I didn't know anything, and I didn't know what I was doing, so I really did...you know, I prayed a lot and I said I don't know how to do this. You're just going to have to show me how to do this.

And then the other thing was I think my passion and youth and also just being at the right place at the right time attracted a lot of other young people who were very much like me. So Jim Mitulski became my associate pastor, and Pat Bumgardner, who's still pastor of MCC New York, was on my staff. So there was like, at one point like, I don't remember how many, maybe eight young people who were clergy in that church.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And we were all—and Bob Crocker, who was the music director, was just such a wonderful music director—we were all so passionate about what we were doing. And I think I was able to not try to control it too much so that people’s brilliance could be brought forth. I think that was my one strength.

David W. So you tried to facilitate the others coming out and sharing.

Karen Z. Yeah, I think so. I think that was good because we were inventing something that seemed completely new to us. Because the more we did inclusive language, the more we really thought through what it means to have an open communion, where everybody is invited, and the more we delved into the scriptures and felt that these scriptures were for us, I mean, everything in the scriptures that we read was like this is our story, the more we did that the more we realized how different we were from the churches that we grew up in, and we were inventing almost a different religion. So it was exhilarating.

But, and so I became pastor in 1979 and it was 1981 where that *New York Times* article was about Kaposi’s sarcoma beginning to appear in gay men in Los Angeles and New York. I remember I was reading the newspaper in the laundromat on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn near my house, and oh, this is going to change everything. And of course it did.

David W. Yeah, it did.

Karen Z. The other thing that happened before AIDS happened was I was living—my partner at the time was Renee McCoy, who started MCC Harlem. She had moved from Detroit on Nancy’s staff to New York to be on my staff, and she started MCC Harlem. And she did a lot of anti-racist education. And in the Fellowship the white people were also—Mary Ann Van Fossen was leading this—a real effort to...white people healing racism. So I’m doing a lot of that kind of thing now, but I hadn’t for a long time, and I remember how important that was back then. And we did a lot of really stupid things in the service of trying to be activists around that. So anyway, AIDS happened. And it changed everything.

David W. And you were still in New York.

Karen Z. I was still in New York. I was the pastor of that church until 1988.

David W. Wow, that’s a long time.

Karen Z. It was a long time, yeah. Really ten years. And during that time one of the things that I am most proud of is that we started the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York because we had our offices in this old, beat up old school, abandoned school, really, on 13th Street and 7th Avenue that was owned by the city. And there were a few other agencies that had their offices in there, Caring Community and Senior Action for a Gay Environment. Maybe one other. I forget what they were called. But we were renting from the city.

And a few of us realized, wait a second, this is the last publicly owned building here in Greenwich Village that could possibly be a lesbian and gay community services center because gentrification was starting even then. So we proposed to the city that they sell it to us very cheap and that we have that be the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. And Koch was the mayor, and he, of course, said no. And then they evicted us from the building, and then we *occupied* the building.

And fortunately—because I’m really a street activist. I had no clue the kind of high end financing that needed to go on, and lawyers, and political people in high places that needed to happen. But what I was good at was I was a street organizer telling the community look, history has given us this building and we have to claim it. And we did. So the church staffed the building. We had...Marcy Kahn was a lawyer for a very prestigious law firm, who now is a judge in New York, and she knew people who people know who work for law firms, I guess. And Tom [Burroughs] was very instrumental in this, and a lot of other people who just glommed on.

And actually, it was good for this effort that we had the leverage of AIDS, I think, because unlike in San Francisco, in New York the city had not allocated any resources for AIDS, and so I think that was one of the things that the people that were negotiating with the city used as leverage. But anyway, the building is there and it’s gorgeous now. It’s a beautiful center, and I really love that the church had such a big role in that. They were really supportive of me spending a lot of time on that.

So then meanwhile AIDS. AIDS changed us completely, all of us. There were many strains of that. There was the whole lesbian feminist separatist stuff that was happening that really just got aborted, I think in a major way. There was all the caregiving. There was the activism that was just so tremendously inspiring. And the men who were so brave and so creative and so beautiful, really. And we then also adapted our worship around that. We had healing services, we had laying on of hands. No lack of scriptures to preach on about that.

David W. Right.

Karen Z. But, you know, I didn't know what I was doing. I was so young. I was just ridiculously incompetent. And I was a good preacher, I think, and I was a good counselor. But I really couldn't administrate myself out of a paper bag. I didn't have any skills in that area, or training, really, at all. And so it became harder and harder.

David W. Running the church?

Karen Z. Yeah, being the pastor felt very hard. It always felt very hard, but it got harder and harder. And part of that was staffing issues and money issues. We all lived below the poverty line. We had more of us than we could support. Jim Mitulski was doing brilliant work, and so was Pat Bumgardner. And she had started a food pantry, which was just a wonderful food pantry, wonderfully organized, in the church. And then Jim had started men's programs which were really also brilliant and well

received. Which was also increasing the number of men in the church, and there already were so many men in the church. There were very few women. So I think we felt endangered. Which was a little bit like white people feeling endangered by Black people, since men were also starting to die, but I didn't make that connection right away.

And so I remember feeling very crunched around these staffing issues and feeling like I really had to make a choice about either... Because I knew my time was coming to an end. I had been begging God for a long time to be released from this call. I didn't have any other plans, but I felt like, you know, I'm not very good at this, it's really hard, don't make me do this anymore. And I really felt like the answer I kept getting was yeah, you know, you're having a hard time here, and you're not the perfect person for this, but I don't have anybody better right now, like you just have to hang in there. I need you to just hang in there. And some days it was just like all I could do was hang in there.

And I got my D.Min. during that time at New York Theological Seminary, really out of desperation, because I thought maybe I'll learn to be a pastor, all the ways that I don't know how to be a pastor. There must be a way to learn that. And so I did my thesis on empowering people to do ministry. And it was about that. And I really learned a lot from doing that. But I think it was too much doing that program and also trying to pastor the church at the same time during AIDS.

David W. Yeah, that's a heavy load.

Karen Z. It was right in the middle of AIDS. I think I graduated in 1986. But those two last years I was kind of limping along, but I was thinking okay, so it's not quite time for me to leave, apparently, but when I leave I can see that one of these people is going to get called to be the pastor of this church. And I felt like Mitulski was brilliant and he would excel wherever he went, and I wasn't so sure about Pat. I felt like she's also brilliant, but a little harder to translate, you know, to another situation. And also I really loved the food pantry. I really thought...I really felt that if you're going to be a Christian you have to feed hungry people. It's just like that. And I felt like that was one of the most important witnesses of what the church was doing. And I knew that if she left it wouldn't continue.

So when Jim Mitulski's contract expired, I said I'm not renewing it. And it was up to me because I was...that's how the polity worked. And then all hell broke loose because the men in the church, that was their pastor, more than me, for many of them, maybe even most of them. And they were the majority of the church. So that was the worst thing I've ever had to live through. I felt I was doing the right thing. I felt that I was being led to do this and that I just had to withstand the fire of it. Recently I heard someone say that his three year silent retreat he did to become a Tibetan lama felt like he was being skinned alive. And that's kind of how that felt.

David W. That's how you felt?

Karen Z. Yeah. But I felt like I just had to get through it. But you know, I never had any antipathy toward Jim. I just felt like this is what had to happen because of history. And it was kind of like the same insight I had about the Center, like this building is, all appearances to the contrary, is the Community Services Center. I felt like Mitulski has to go somewhere else and Pat has to keep doing the food pantry.

Well, and San Francisco called, and they were looking for a pastor. Well, that was it. That was clearly it. And I remember giving that recommendation and saying he's excellent, he's perfect, he's exactly what you need, and he's not leaving because there's anything wrong with him. He's leaving because he needs...he's the baby bird that needs to be kicked out of the nest and fly. So that was really the spirit in which I was doing it. But it didn't look that way to other people, or probably to him for a while. We're really close now, but it took a little while. So thank God I was released in 1988. [*Laughs.*] And I just knew it's okay for me now to go.

David W. So you knew it was complete.

Karen Z. I knew it was complete. It was like I got a message, okay, good, you can go now.

David W. And did you know where you were going?

Karen Z. No, I didn't know. It was like falling off a cliff. No, I had no idea where I was going. I knew I didn't want to be a pastor anymore. I had no idea what I was going to do. And that was fine. It was fine. It was just so clear that it

was time for me to go. And so what I ended up doing—I was really lucky because I had gotten to know these AIDS activists like Michael Callen. Of course I'd gotten to know them in the community. And I volunteered to type the PWA Coalition news line, the People With AIDS Coalition news line. And so I started doing that because I didn't have anything else to do, and I think I got a \$10 an hour job. Yeah, I got maybe two \$10 an hour jobs doing basically secretarial work part-time, so I had like two part-time jobs and a volunteer job. And they were all typing. Because I was a word processor. Remember word processing?

David W. I do. It's been a while.

Karen Z. Yes, WordPerfect. It took me a long time not to miss WordPerfect. So anyway, I did have this one skill because I had taken word processing. And Michael Callen eventually hired me to type the PWA Coalition news line, and then eventually hired me full-time to work with the People With AIDS Coalition. And that was really wonderful. I was the only one who worked there who wasn't a person with AIDS.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And my friends were all people with AIDS, and my boss was Michael Callen, and I loved him madly. But then I was offered a job at the AIDS Resource Center, which operated Bailey House in Greenwich Village, an apartment house for people with AIDS—well, a house for people with AIDS and then a pastoral care service, a citywide pastoral care service. So

I got that job, which was the first job I'd ever had that paid more than, like, \$25,000 a year, I think. And then I got laid off after a couple of years and started AIDS Interfaith, which was doing the same work, but having to get my own funding. But meanwhile I decided to go to nursing school.

David W. So you went back to—

Karen Z. I went back to that.

David W. —an old dream.

Karen Z. Yeah, yeah. And, you know, I think one of the pivotal moments was when I was still pastor, and maybe it was like 1986, and my friend Craig [Sheba], who was just a beautiful young man, I was with him in his Chelsea apartment, and he had terrible diarrhea and just horrible symptoms. He was suffering so badly. And I just remember, you know, it's nice that I'm here doing pastoral care with my friend, but he really needs someone to control his diarrhea.

So it was kind of in the heat of the pre-antiviral AIDS that I decided to go to nursing school with the thought of working with people with AIDS. So I took the prereq courses I needed to take and then I went to Columbia Nursing School in a kind of accelerated program for 16 months. But I wanted to be a nurse practitioner because I knew that I was used to a lot of autonomy, and I wanted that, so I went to Duke to get my master's, and that's how I ended up in Durham, North Carolina.

David W. Okay.

Karen Z. Yeah. So, you know, that wasn't easy, either. [*Laughs.*]

David W. It doesn't sound like it, no.

Karen Z. No, it was really kind of hard. And now I'm circling back, you know. Now I'm doing things like going to this conference, and I preached at MCC Boston this year. And the street organizing that I'm doing around Indivisible since the Inauguration really feels familiar to me, and I feel like the people that are with me are all of those AIDS activists who taught me so much about how to be an activist with so much passion, you know, fighting for our lives, which I think we are now, in a different way. So part of my passion now is honoring that legacy and bringing it forward.

David W. As I'm listening, it sounds like you've done that or are doing that with several threads in your life—the MCC, the nursing school, working with HIV and people with AIDS, and ministry and how that's all come together, and now what you're doing with your activism around democracy and race, it sounds like.

Karen Z. Yeah.

David W. So you graduated and became a nurse?

Karen Z. Yeah, I became a nurse and worked at the VA. I thought, oh, god, I want to work at Duke, you know. I don't want to take care of men. Ew. You know, just straight men, are you kidding me? And then I just fell in love

with these veterans. Oh, beautiful people. You know, at that time, in the '90s, we still had a lot of World War II veterans. And I couldn't understand a word they said because of their southern accents, but I loved them. And the Vietnam veterans.

But that was incredibly hard being a staff nurse for three years while I was also going to school to be a nurse practitioner. Yeah, that kind of rivaled the last few years of being the pastor of a church because I would go to work from like 3:00 to midnight. Sometimes the next person doesn't show up for a shift, so I worked through the night. Then I went to school during the day. And a 41, 42, 43-year-old brain just isn't the same thing. And so I really didn't know if I was going to make it. But I did.

And I think that much like when I was a pastor, I was really focused on healing, spiritual healing and what that meant to those of us even before AIDS came, but then... Well, healing, to me, I felt like my whole ministry was about helping people come out and the healing that happens when you really can do that and love yourself.

And I really learned so much about healing through all that work, and then more with AIDS when I realized nobody's going to get cured here, but I'm seeing a lot of healing happen and people's light becoming more brilliant even as it's going out. So much like the pastor was healing, the nursing was really pastoring. I really felt like I'm a pastor masquerading as a nurse most of the time. So I had to sort of do a few things to show up as a nurse,

but it wasn't where my heart was. I never managed to drop that other whole part of myself.

David W. Well, it sounds like they both went together for you.

Karen Z. Yeah, they really did.

David W. When the nurse appeared, so did the pastor.

Karen Z. Yeah, yeah. So I've been lucky to be able to follow both those threads all this time, I think. And then the other, I think the other thread is just my spirituality, which has been another constant in my life. So I really felt, so often, in my own meditation and in that community of MCC New York the presence of God, and in MCC, too, just the undeniable Holy Spirit and leading us.

And even with all of my radical feminist theology, in talking to my Evangelical colleagues and friends in MCC, and parishioners, I had to come to terms with what it meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus. And so I was fortunate to have this therapist, Tilda Norberg, who had studied this thing called faith imagination, which was popularized by Ruth Carter Stapleton, President Carter's sister.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And what it is is, you know, say you had a terrible trauma as a child, sexual abuse or something, and what you would do is you would go back—and this is kind of a pastoral counseling thing—you would go back

to that time and then you would invite Jesus into the memory. And so this Gestalt therapist that I worked with a little bit, and then I studied with her to do this work, this is how she did pastoral counseling and taught us how to do pastoral counseling.

So for years, when I was the pastor, people would come in and say something like I have AIDS, I know I'm going to die, my mother sent me a tract telling me that I'm going to hell, you know, showing me the tract which really did say you deserve this, you're going to hell because you're gay and you deserve this. It wasn't always like that. Sometimes it was just I'm worried because I want to be a Christian but I'm gay.

So anyway, every time, though, I did the same thing, which was I would just have us sit together in like meditation, you know, just kind of going to a place of silence, which is really a little like hypnotherapy, I realized later, but that's not what I was doing. And then I would just say just imagine that Jesus is in the room with us. It might be a little hard, but just like you're a kid playing let's pretend, imagine Jesus is in the room with us. And then I would just wait.

And every single time I ever did this, I thought, oh, it's not going to work. But it always worked. So I would say, after a while I'd just say is he here? Or sometimes the women would want, like, you know, the goddess or something, someone other than Jesus, or God or something. But anyway, is he here? Yeah. Always he showed up, so that was good. So then I would

just say something like okay, just ask him your question. That's all I would say. I never manipulated it. And then I would just wait.

And inevitably people would weep, you know, they would just relax. And then I would just ask, you know, what's happening? Did you ask him? And it was always different, but it was always exquisite. It was always, you know, something like I asked him why doesn't he fix me and he said because you're fine, you're fine exactly the way you are, something like that. He said he loves me. And you could just see, from the physical release of the trauma of self-hatred and the wonder, which I shared, of really the presence of Jesus coming and saying you're fine. And that's healing.

David W. Absolutely.

Karen Z. That's what healing is. And after these years of being the spiritual leader in this community, and AIDS, and our church secretary killed himself after Jim left. I don't think it was connected, but it was—

David W. Right, but still.

Karen Z. Yeah. I really needed a spiritual leader myself because I felt although I had read books about meditation and had a spiritual life and practice, I knew that I needed to learn more and I needed to study with someone who knew more. So I went to a nun for a while. I thought they are good. They have this contemplative tradition that I didn't get in Protestantism. But that didn't really work.

But I was praying for years, before and after I left the church, for a spiritual teacher. Now I had conditions on it. I said I do not want a guru, no. But meanwhile I'm praying for a spiritual teacher. So during the time that I was praying, I kept getting the answer, but I kept rejecting it, and it was a guru.

David W. Okay.

Karen Z. So eventually I had to just kind of say okay, this is okay. This is apparently the answer. And I studied in that tradition. I went to India three times and lived in the ashram there a few times, and really studied meditation, and had the experience of having a teacher. And then I moved on in more recent years to Buddhism and studied Buddhism.

David W. So the teacher that you studied with in India was Hindu?

Karen Z. Sort of, yeah. It was the Bhakti yoga tradition, so yoga, yeah. So it was a devotional yoga practice. And all the trappings were very Hindu, which was fun. You know, you have Ganesh, you have Shiva, you have Krishna, and they're all there, and you're chanting, and I just loved the chanting. That was a really beautiful, healing time for me and I learned a lot.

David W. And how long did you do that?

Karen Z. Like 20 years.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. Yeah, like...I think I started in like 1989. Let's see, '89 to 2009, probably, so yeah, about 20 years. And so I've had a very rich life. And I'm so grateful to MCC because I think I gained a certain confidence and certainly a community from that.

David W. And at a young age.

Karen Z. Yeah.

David W. A really pretty young age.

Karen Z. I think I was just kind of the right person at the right time.

David W. So you mentioned that recently, or fairly recently, you've kind of moved from this teacher and practice of like the Bhakti yoga more to Buddhism?

Karen Z. Mm-hmm.

David W. Any particular form of Buddhism?

Karen Z. Well, insight meditation, which is...there are very few trappings. It's very simple. And it comes out of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, which I have a little argument with. I really like the Mahayana better.

David W. I like it better. [*Laughs.*]

Karen Z. [*Laughs.*] So I'm kind of a Mahayana Buddhist in a Theravada tradition. But I've been to [Beri] several times and I was at the Forest Refuge for a month in May. And I know you know these places.

David W. Yeah.

Karen Z. Yeah. And my main teacher has been Rodney Smith from Seattle. But most recently we brought Lama Rod Owens to Durham, actually the week before last.

David W. Oh, wow.

Karen Z. Do you know him?

David W. I don't, no.

Karen Z. He's in Boston.

David W. Really?

Karen Z. You have to go see him.

David W. Oh, okay. Where in Boston?

Karen Z. I don't know. You'd have to look at his website. But I became interested in this book called "Radical Dharma" a few years ago that was co-written by Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, a Black lesbian Zen teacher and an academician and him. And he's a fully credentialed Tibetan lama who just graduated from Harvard Divinity School with an M.Div. in Buddhist studies.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And he's gay.

David W. Okay.

Karen Z. So he's this really gay, really Black, really large Tibetan lama, and he's the coolest guy. So I got to host him for a week and hang out with him. And the thing that was so beautiful about that is he's 38 years old and my first lover, Colevia Carter, came to visit because I'd sent her the book or told her about the book and then she read it and she wanted to also sit with him. So there I was with my partner of 33 years, Randa, and Colevia, who had taught me everything about racism, and had broken open my life, James Baldwin and all that stuff, and she and Randa and then Lama Rod. And when he left he wrote this beautiful thing about how he appreciated his elders and how those of us who had been feminists and activists and Black, gay liberation people had given birth to him as an activist, and it was really...

David W. That's beautiful.

Karen Z. It was so beautiful. So I loved studying with him. He has a great website and the book is quite wonderful. Because I had not really managed, until I read that book called "Radical Dharma," to figure out how I could bring all of it into my practice. You know, I think my meditation community is very white, very straight—not entirely, but very. Very hierarchical. And that whole Theravada tradition of insight meditation is these sort of mostly white guys, except Sharon Salzberg, who came back and reported the teachings of these men, basically. So it's very patriarchal and very

hierarchical. And so I hadn't managed how to figure out how to really bring my activist soul and my passion and also all that wild Hindu stuff and tantric practice from Siddha yoga into who I am in this current incarnation.

And so he really encouraged me in that, and that book really encouraged me in that. And so I think what they're doing, in this book and these teachers, they're really breaking open Buddhism in exactly the same way that we broke open Christianity. And so once again I find myself in just the right place to be able to bring all that stuff. Because I know what it looks like. I know some people are going to be upset. [*Laughs.*] That's just how it is. And you just have to just be true to yourself. I know a lot more about compassion than I did and a lot more about my ego and how to watch out for that, and laugh at that instead of acting it out. So I feel in some ways I'm just getting started.

David W. Sure. Well, it sounds like this is your recent, like you say, incarnation.

Karen Z. Right, right. And I've gotten to have a lot of them.

David W. Well, and seemingly they appear to kind of tie together, and there's threads that go from one to the next. And it's kind of interesting to me that being in the Theravada tradition, in a way you're revisiting almost a hierarchical, patriarchal system, but now from the perspective of decades of other learnings and teachings that you can bring to bear on that.

Karen Z. Yeah.

David W. You're not the person that you described who didn't know what you were doing, but you were trying to do the right thing. But now you're coming at it from all this rich experience.

Karen Z. And yet I have no idea what I'm doing still. I mean, right?

David W. Right.

Karen Z. Because that is the whole point, I think, right? You're like, well, okay, just show me where I can do the most good, like tell me what I should do today. You know, it's just like following orders so...you know?

David W. Right, yeah.

Karen Z. Because I know I'm not in charge of this at all. But it's that, you know, the eight-year-old child who figured out, okay, seek ye first the kingdom of God. Okay, I guess that's what I'll do. I feel like I made that decision when I was eight and this is basically what happened. Because I feel like—

David W. Because you answered...

Karen Z. Yeah. I think at every point I was just going for it, just going for okay, I'm going to India now. Okay, I'm going to just do this next thing that feels like this is where I can take the next step to learn how to be connected with all there is.

David W. And so this is the place where you're at today with the Theravada Buddhism and your street activism.

Karen Z. Right.

David W. And the spiritual practices that sustain your work.

Karen Z. Right, yeah. And nursing was a lot like pastoring in that I was very happy to be released from it, even though I, you know, it was...

David W. I was going to ask if you're involved in any way with the medical or with nursing any longer.

Karen Z. Well, no. Not really. But I think it's a little bit like being a pastor or being a New Yorker. It never leaves you, you know?

David W. Yeah.

Karen Z. Right? [*Laughs.*] Those things. But I feel like...my prayer is just put me where I can do the most good. And trying to be open to redirection. Because I had not planned this. I didn't know what I was going to do. And then I just signed up to do this Move On rally, and then it turned into an every week thing. And it's lovely because after a certain point I asked the people, like well...they come from ten different counties in North Carolina.

David W. Wow.

Karen Z. And I asked, well, should we keep doing this? And they said yeah, we really need to keep doing this because this is the place where we feel like we're not crazy and, you know. Especially the people who come from those outlying counties.

David W. That's right.

Karen Z. But what it is is, every week it's a worship service, really.

David W. I was going to say it's a community.

Karen Z. Yeah. So I've been writing responsive readings lately. And William Barber is really my role model.

David W. Right, okay.

Karen Z. And I was able to go to a number of demonstrations with him, and so he's the one that I really learned the most from about how to do this. Yeah.

David W. Is there anything else you want to add or fill in?

Karen Z. I don't think so. I feel like I lived happily ever after. I feel that I struggled really painfully in my 20s and 30s and 40s, and into my 50s, and now in my 60s it feels like all those times when I thought if I just hang on, you know, I'll come out of this. And it feels like the difference between drowning and coming to the surface and breathing.

David W. Wow. That's a good place to be.

Karen Z. It really is. It's a much better place to be.

David W. Yeah.

Karen Z. Yeah. And so in this time in history that feels so precarious, I feel like the other thing that I really want to bring is the idea that no matter what is

happening on the outside, we don't have to be distressed by it. It's like the heart sutra, form and formless, and we're also formless at the same time as all these forms are looking so distressing. We don't even know. Like sometimes I think all of this is good because the patriarchy had to fall apart, and it wasn't going to be pretty. So who knows, who knows.

David W. I try to look at it that way, too. It was inevitable, and we've all known that, but gosh, I didn't know it was going to be this horrific when it started to happen.

Karen Z. That's right. That's right. That's right. Yeah, me neither. So...well, you're very good at this.

David W. Thank you. It's fun. I mean, you're great to talk to.

Karen Z. Thank you. I really appreciate you...

[End of recording.]