

Interviewee: Randy Spaulding
Interviewer: Rachel Waltner Goossen
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Interviewer: I'll say for the record this is Rachel Waltner Goossen, and I'm in Topeka, Kansas. I'm interviewing Randall Spaulding, and he is in Boulder, Colorado, and the date is December 8, 2017. And do you go by Randy or Randall? What's your preference?

Spaulding: Well, I think in the Mennonite world I'm going to stick with Randy.

Interviewer: Randy, okay.

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: Good to know. And I've read just a little bit about you, but not terribly much, so the little bit I know is that you were a pastor in Florida, you know, I guess that was a decade ago or some era like that, but I don't really know your history previous to that. And then I know that you went up to New Haven and were at Yale, and I think you've been a chaplain since then, and then I know you're coming to Boulder. So since I don't really know much more than that, I know a little bit about you not being able to stay on a hymnal committee, because that was in the press, but we can get to that later.

0:01:04 Since I don't know much about you, it might be helpful if we could just start and you could tell me some about your background, you know, where you grew up and how you got called to ministry, and then we'll sort of move up to some more recent things. But let's just start with some of the biographical and just tell me things and I'll—even though I'm recording I'll be sitting here taking notes, but be glad to hear what you have to share with me.

Spaulding: All right. So I grew up in a Mennonite community in rural Indiana. It was a small Amish and Mennonite community in Kokomo. And my mother's family is Mennonite and many of them continue to be Mennonite. She's a Mennonite and attends Howard-Miami Mennonite Church. She's a song leader. And so up until like the time I was about 21 I lived in that community. My father was not Mennonite, not really a practicing Christian at all.

0:02:03 But I was really immersed in the Mennonite world, and it was sort of the life blood for me. When my parents divorced when I was in eighth grade I really looked to the church as a support. The pastor there, a number of

church people just really offered a lot of compassion. And it's also where, in those early years, I really was encouraged in my love for music, which is really my first love before being a pastor or preaching. So in that world, you know, I really was influenced in sort of the congregational sort of system of community, and peace and nonviolence, and service, which are sort of the three areas for me that really I claim as my Anabaptist and Mennonite heritage.

0:03:04 And it's always been a part of me, even though I consider myself now a Unitarian Universalist Mennonite, so there's kind of a hyphen in there.

Interviewer: Okay. There's probably three hyphens, right? *[Laughs.]*

Spaulding: Yes, yes. So I went to Ball State University, where I got my undergraduate degree in music education, and I met my, the person who would then become my spouse, my former wife. And we married in 1988 and then moved to Lancaster County, where we both worked in small Mennonite schools. I was a music teacher and a Bible teacher at Hinkletown Mennonite School, and Laura was a music teacher at Kraybill Mennonite.

0:03:57 And a few years after that I received a call and interviewed with Bahia Vista Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Florida, where they were looking for a minister of music and Christian education. I took that call and we moved to Florida in 1991. And I was really in church ministry from 1991 up until 2011, when I left to move to New Haven, so it was about 18 years.

Interviewer: You say 1991 to 2011?

Spaulding: Two Thousand Eleven, yes.

Interviewer: So were you ordained clergy or were you as a church musician? What all were you doing?

Spaulding: I was considered a licensed and credentialed minister. I did not seek ordination, partly, for many years, because I was a music director, I was a music minister, and then later a worship minister.

0:05:00 And I was...so I...it was a large Mennonite church in Sarasota. During the summer months we usually had 600 people and it would double, sometimes triple in the winter when the winter residents would come.

Interviewer: It tripled?

Spaulding: Sometimes it would, yes. It was huge. Sometimes you didn't even recognize any of the church members because there were so many winter visitors.

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Interviewer: I've never been down there to that church. Can the church hold 1,800 people?

Spaulding: We usually had to have two services.

Interviewer: Two services?

Spaulding: Yes.

Interviewer: Oh, wow. Okay. I mean, it—

Spaulding: And then—

Interviewer: Wow, that's huge.

Spaulding: Yeah, yeah. It's gotten smaller. I mean, there was a lot that happened over the almost 20 years that I was there. A lot of it centered around, you know, homosexuality, theology, women in leadership, divorce and remarriage, all those sort of hot button things.

Interviewer: Yeah. The congregation is called Bahia Vista?

0:06:00

Spaulding: Bahia Vista Mennonite Church, although they may have changed the name. I have a feeling they may be withdrawing from the conference.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Spaulding: But I don't really keep up on what's going on with that congregation. I was there from 2001 until—no, I'm sorry—1991 until 2003, yes. So I was a full-time music minister, Christian ed minister, and worship minister. I was instrumental in bringing the blue hymnal and worship book to the congregation. We had a number of church choirs—adult choirs, children's choirs, youth choirs, worship bands, hand bells, contemporary Christian music. There was just a lot going on. It was a very active congregation.

0:07:01

Interviewer: They were part of which regional conference?

Spaulding: Southeast Mennonite Conference.

Interviewer: Okay. And so you were licensed at some point, like maybe 1991 or somewhere in there, by the Southeast Mennonite Conference of the Mennonite Church.

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Spaulding: Yeah, the Mennonite Church. And I retained that credential until 2009. I think it was 2009. When it was stripped from me. They took my credentials away.

Interviewer: Okay, till 2009. I'm interested in this whole credential business, of course, but I'm not...I'm myself not a minister, so I haven't had to go through this. Is it the kind of thing where it's good for like three years or five years and then you have to renew it?

Spaulding: Yeah, it's sort of a...at least in the Southeast Conference it wasn't a real official process.

0:08:02 You usually received a little card from the conference minister, and I don't know if it was every year or every couple of years just renewing that credential. As long as you were in good standing with the conference it was fine. And it's what allowed you to continue to receive housing. It helped for tax purposes and it allowed you to be part of the ministerial clergy group, the Mennonite ministers in the conference.

Interviewer: Okay. And what did you do after that 2003 when you weren't at Bahia Vista anymore?

Spaulding: So by that time it had really taken a turn to becoming much more conservative, and I kind of saw the writing on the wall, so I decided that it was time for me to resign.

0:08:57 And in doing so there was a small congregation called Covenant Mennonite Fellowship in Sarasota that had begun several years before, and they contacted me and asked me if I would consider being their pastor. And it was a surprise because I'd never actually preached, you know, anything or had any real seminary training.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. Yeah, you had—

Spaulding: But it was—

Interviewer: —you had basically a bachelor's in music or something from your Ohio university?

Spaulding: Yeah. I had a bachelor's in music from Ball State in Indiana, and then during the time I was at Bahia Vista I received a master's degree in choral conducting, so it was still sort of in the realm of music.

Interviewer: Okay, so Ball State in Indiana, that was a music bachelor's.

Spaulding: Yeah. And then the University of South Florida, Tampa, is where I received my master's degree in music, in choral conducting.

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0:09:58

Interviewer: Okay. So you got this invitation from the Covenant Mennonite group, which was a smaller and newer congregation.

Spaulding: Right.

Interviewer: Were they also in the MC Mennonite Church world or were they somehow dual conference or something like that?

Spaulding: No, they received member in Mennonite Church USA and they were part of the Southeast Mennonite Conference.

Interviewer: Okay.

Spaulding: There was a little bit of controversy because they were much more progressive, and there were some conservative members in the conference who raised some eyebrows when they sought membership with the conference. But they were eventually accepted into the conference. And so I continued, my ministerial credentials just continued to be honored when I became the minister in 2003.

0:10:58

Interviewer: Okay. And then were you the sole pastor of this group?

Spaulding: Yes. And I was there until 2011.

Interviewer: Okay. And you were sort of an all service kind of solo pastor?

Spaulding: Yes, yeah. You know, their main—they had a strong social justice emphasis and an emphasis on, you know, sort of vibrant quality good Anabaptist worship and a sense of sort of family and fellowship. So we met in a local storefront and it was just a wonderfully eclectic, experimental kind of congregation. They allowed me to try things as a new minister and sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't, and it was just a wonderfully gracious congregation.

0:11:59 We became the most active Mennonite church in the social justice scene. It was around—well, it was in 2003—yeah, it was in 2003 when the Iraq war started, and so our congregation was very active with the peace and justice coalitions in the area. And we remained active with other peace and justice actions and then with LGBTQ groups and the coalition in Sarasota.

Interviewer: What was happening with LGBTQ activism at that time? Like were you joining the support of Congregations Network or something like that?

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Spaulding: Yeah, we were in... I'm trying to think about what actually happened. I think at some point we joined the Supportive Congregations Network, but it was also a really careful and sensitive thing to do because the Southeast Mennonite Conference was much more conservative.

0:13:09 And a lot of the conservatism came because the conference is very ethnically diverse. And so, you know, we often said there were five languages that were spoken in our conference: English, Spanish, Haitian, Garifuna and tongues.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Spaulding: Because we had a couple of congregations. One of them was an African American church that, you know, they spoke in tongues, so...

Interviewer: Okay. And what was the fourth one you said?

Spaulding: The fourth one was Garifuna.

Interviewer: What's that?

Spaulding: It's an ethnic group that comes out of the—I'm trying to think—I think it's the west coast of South America. It was a group of people who, settlers, colonists or colonial settlers intermarried with the local people.

0:14:09 And so they speak a special language called Garifuna. And they have—there are quite a few churches in the Miami area, Mennonite churches, and there are some Garifuna churches in New York, in New York City. And so those groups started to become involved in our conference as well.

Interviewer: Okay. And your group, was your group a fairly—the Covenant group—fairly diverse as well ethnically and racially or not so much?

Spaulding: Not so much, no. We were more diverse theologically, I would say.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Spaulding: So we had people who were, you know, really—I mean, believed very strongly in the Bible as the inerrant word of God and we also had people who were atheists who went to our church.

0:15:05 We had people who considered themselves Jewish. We had people who considered themselves Buddhist. We had traditional ethnic Mennonites and we had Mennonites by faith, you know, come in.

Interviewer: Okay. Great. So then what happened?

Spaulding: So what happened was my former wife, Laura, and I divorced in 2006 after about 18 years of marriage. And in that process I was in contact with our conference minister, and it was about a year afterward that I decided that I really wanted to just live in the light and be upfront and very transparent.

0:16:00 And so the first thing I did was I went to each family in my congregation and I came out to them, and just received a wonderful—it was a hundred percent welcome and affirming kind of experience with my congregation. And then I decided, you know, I needed to talk to our conference minister, so I did. And he told me that we don't really need to do anything about this right now, we don't really need to say anything, but, he said, if you ever decide that it's going to be important for you to be in a relationship or to date someone, you need to tell me.

So it was about 2008, I think it was, that I had the conversation with—I don't know if I'm getting the dates exactly right. But I started the conversation with the conference minister saying that I'm considering dating and forming a relationship with someone.

0:17:06 And so I think it was then that they decided they needed to do something about it. The conference was in turmoil at that time. I don't even know if they had a conference board or leadership team. I think the bylaws were suspended because [they were] completely new bylaws. So they called a meeting of the conference ministers, my congregation and myself and they also brought down a denominational minister to a meeting. And we sat around a table and we all talked about this being the beginning of a process of discernment, of sharing our stories, and sort of figuring our way forward with this.

0:17:57 Part of it was a little uncomfortable. You know, I had just come out. It was all new to me. I felt very unsafe in some places, and heard directly from people who had been my ministerial colleagues and friends for many years that, you know, I was a sinner and going to hell. And that was very difficult to hear. But I was heartened by the fact that we were going to begin a discernment process and begin conversations.

So it was about maybe a month or two later that a meeting was called, and I thought it was going to be the first of the discernment meetings that we had. And so I met with the members of the conference committee, and it was at that committee, at that meeting that they just sort of slid a piece of paper over to me and the paper said that as of this moment we are revoking your credentials, we request or we demand that you resign from your congregation and if you don't, the congregation itself could be in jeopardy of losing its status in the conference.

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0:19:18 And they wanted me to sign it, which, I refused to do so. And I was glad that there were a couple of my congregation members who were there, my board members who decided to come to that meeting. It was really a painful experience. I sat across from people that I'd known for almost 20 years, and we had done ministry together. We did cleanup on hurricanes, and relief work, and we'd worshiped and prayed together. And for them to sort of be not only just sort of I felt it was a rejection of myself and of my ministry, and of my gifts, but also of my personhood and the relationship that we had.

0:20:03 It was difficult for me, too, because there were two women on that committee. One was Anglo and one was an ethnic female. And that was hard for me, and I questioned them at the time. I said, you know, 20 years ago you would not even have been allowed to sit at this table to be a part of this, and I'm just finding it really difficult that now you can sit across from that table and do the same thing that had been done to so many women in the past. They didn't really have an answer for me. And so we left that meeting very disheartened and shocked. That was to be the beginning of a process or a journey and it was not.

Interviewer: And this was—you think this might have been in about what, Two Thousand...?

Spaulding: Two Thousand and Nine, yeah. About 2009.

0:21:04

Interviewer: Okay. And you were still the pastor, obviously, at the Covenant Church.

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: And these church members who had been with you at the meeting were probably shocked like you were.

Spaulding: Oh, yeah, yeah, they were. One of the persons asked will you give us until Sunday to talk to our congregation about this, this such a surprise, we need to discern this. And they said no, we won't. We're not going to give you that time. You need to make a decision now.

Interviewer: You mentioned that there—was it at this meeting there was also a denominational minister?

Spaulding: No. That was the meeting before.

Interviewer: Earlier.

Spaulding: Yeah, earlier. And he was the one who said, you know, we're here as the beginning of a process, beginning of a journey to discern this together.

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Interviewer: So who was that, do you remember?

Spaulding: I think it was Lee Lever.

Interviewer: Lee Lever, okay. So you had had some assurances from kind of the next level up from MC USA.

Spaulding: Yes.

0:22:00

Interviewer: Yeah.

Spaulding: And, you know, I never knew for certain, but I really felt that there was pressure from a lot of the conference ministers, the conservative ministers, who were basically saying if you allow him to continue to be a minister in our conference we're going to leave, our church is going to leave. And so I think—and at the same time the bylaws had been suspended, so they didn't really have to go by any sort of order or set of rules, they could just make decisions and, you know, draft a paper and make these kind of demands, so it was a very strange time.

Interviewer: The bylaws had been suspended because the conference itself was in some turmoil, is that what you mean?

Spaulding: They were rewriting their entire set of bylaws, who they were as a conference.

Interviewer: I see.

0:23:00

Spaulding: At a previous meeting, conference meeting, the congregation members voted or the conference members voted to suspend the bylaws.

Interviewer: And when you say you didn't know for certain, but you felt there was pressure from conference ministers, do you mean conference ministers within that Southeast Conference or more broadly across MC USA?

Spaulding: Just within that conference.

Interviewer: Within that conference.

Spaulding: Yes.

Interviewer: I don't know how the structure worked. This isn't that huge of a conference. Was there one conference minister or were there...?

Spaulding: Yes. There was a conference minister. His name was Marco Guete.

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Interviewer: I have no idea how to spell that.

Spaulding: G-U-E-T-E.

Interviewer: Okay.

Spaulding: Yeah. And he had come from Colombia, South America, and was connected to the Mennonite church there and then also had been connected through, I'm not sure if it was Hesston or EMU, the work that he did.

0:24:08

Interviewer: Okay. So he was a—you sensed him to be a key player in how this was shaking out?

Spaulding: Well, I did. I felt Marco felt compassion for me. He felt in a bind and in a really tough situation trying to hold a conference together and wanting to support me, but at the same time needing to, I guess, you know, for him look at the larger needs of the conference and decisions based on that.

Interviewer: What happened? You refused to sign that paper at that meeting and then you and your friends from your congregation, I guess, left and were in shock. And then how did things unfold after that?

0:24:54

Spaulding: Well, after that I was really—I don't know if I was contacted again by the conference, but I knew at that point that I was no longer a minister with the conference, my credentials had been revoked. My congregation, that following Sunday, stood unanimously and affirmed my call and my ministry and who I was as a person, and it was a wonderful healing moment for me.

But at the same time I knew it was going to put the church in some hot water, which it did. And eventually, after I had moved to New Haven, that church, Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, voluntarily withdrew from the conference, and a while later, I don't know how long it was, a year or two later, they were accepted into Central District Conference.

0:25:56

Interviewer: Yeah, Central District has had a way of plucking progressive churches all over the place lately.

Spaulding: Yeah. And it was also interesting, at the time I had had personal conversation with Central District conference minister, and I didn't really get a good, strong, supportive vibe because there was just so much.

Everything was just...there was so much energy and static and negativity that I don't think they really wanted to sort of touch this really hot button issue of my church and my excommunication. And I really consider it an excommunication. I was taken off all the ministerial, all the local ministers' email lists, I was not invited to any more meetings, I was not told where the ministers were meeting. I was disinvited from leading a hymn sing at a local congregation, actually, and at my home church in Indiana.

0:27:02 I had been contracted to do a hymn sing there as well, and that was rescinded. And then not long afterward I was also removed from the binational worship council or binational worship committee, which was a Canadian-U.S. worship committee working on worship resources, and the hymnal supplements, and considering a new hymnal. I was asked to step off voluntarily, and I refused to do that as well, and so they removed me.

Interviewer: This is all pretty sad. It must have been really painful.

Spaulding: It was. It was very painful.

Interviewer: And you had so far told the conference minister or people around in Southeast before all this happened that you were about to start dating likely? I mean, that was what precipitated—

0:28:07

Spaulding: That's the whole—that was the whole precipitating thing. It wasn't that I was in a relationship. It was just the fact that I was considering it that, you know, the conference just, they wanted not to have anything to do with it and to get their hands completely away from it.

Interviewer: But it sounds like being removed from this binational committee, that wasn't the work of the Southeast Conference people.

Spaulding: No, that was a denominational decision.

Interviewer: That was MC USA.

Spaulding: Yeah. So that went all the way up to Ervin Stutzman.

Interviewer: Was Ervin Stutzman the executive by that time?

Spaulding: He was, yeah, and he was involved in that decision.

Interviewer: Were there meetings about even—I mean, that, I think, did get into the press, the Mennonite press. What do you remember about—or did you just get a letter that you couldn't continue meeting?

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0:29:04

Spaulding: No, I had a phone—I think it was a conference call with...I'm trying to think who it was. It might have been Terry Shue. I don't know if Ervin was involved in that conversation or not. I'd have to look back in my records. But we talked over the phone. It was like a conference call about—and they were asking me at that point to resign from the committee. And it was during that conversation I said I can't do that, you know, and do it with integrity. I don't feel like my being a gay person has anything to do with what I can contribute as far as my music, my worship skills, my education, and what I bring to the Mennonite church in those areas. Being gay has nothing to do with it.

0:30:00

Interviewer: But that wasn't a satisfying answer to them?

Spaulding: No, it wasn't.

Interviewer: Wow. Okay, was that also in about 2008 or so? Or did some of—were you still living in Florida when that was happening?

Spaulding: Was still living in Florida. And that might have been in early 2010, late 2009 or early 2010. I can't remember.

Interviewer: I can probably dig out some old press releases or something like that.

Spaulding: You could probably even find a press release—because it was interesting. The next day after the conference revoked my credentials and gave me that piece of paper I got a call from the Mennonite press, so somebody had been putting a bug in someone's ear.

0:30:58 And I was just completely taken off guard that it already, you know, the gossip had already begun. So there was—there were some articles written about my de-credentialing in the—

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh, from *Mennonite World Review* and places like that?

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: How were you supporting yourself when you... You essentially lost your congregation because you didn't have the ministerial license. Because they—

Spaulding: Well, no. The congregation still supported me. Yeah, they were willing to be excommunicated themselves. And so I remained the minister with the church until 2011.

Randy Spaulding

Interviewer: I see.

Spaulding: I met my partner, who later became my husband, Gary Stephens, in 2009, and we had a commitment ceremony in Florida. Gay marriage wasn't legal at that time.

0:32:00 And we had a commitment ceremony in 2010. And it was, you know, after that we started talking about, you know, it just felt like it was time to leave Florida and to move forward. I knew that I, you know, part of it was that I didn't want to see the congregation be excommunicated as well.

And part of it was that I still felt called to ministry, and I knew that my opportunities would be very, very small if I didn't have better training as a pastor, as a minister. And that's when I applied to Yale Divinity School and was accepted. Gary, my husband, is from the New Haven, Fairfield area, so that was one of the reasons why we chose that.

Interviewer: Were you going for an MDiv at Yale?

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you entered—that's usually about a three year program or something. Was that what it was there?

0:33:01

Spaulding: So I was there from 2011 to 2014.

Interviewer: Okay. And it sounds like you've gotten legally married at some point along the way, but at that point the commitment ceremony was what you had been able to do?

Spaulding: Yes, we had a commitment ceremony in Florida with—my church was involved and, you know, just a wonderful resource and support. One of my former colleagues, James Miller, who still lives in Sarasota, he was a youth minister at Bahia Vista Mennonite Church with me and later became a member of Covenant. He performed the ceremony. And then Gary and I were legally married in Connecticut in 2011.

Interviewer: In when?

Spaulding: In 2011.

Interviewer: Two Thousand Eleven. Okay, so Connecticut was one of the states that had legal marriages well before the Supreme Court made the big decision.

Spaulding: Right, yes.

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0:34:00

Interviewer: Okay, so 2011 married. And I guess Connecticut didn't then undo—some of these states, you know, they allowed it and then they didn't allow it. But you didn't have that issue?

Spaulding: No. No.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. So just curious about your husband. Was he Mennonite or was he part of any of this? Or was he in some ways kind of removed from all this stuff?

Spaulding: He was kind of removed from it, although we met in late 2008, so he was there with me when I was excommunicated in 2009 and went through that whole process with me as a member of the congregation and as my partner, you know, and my boyfriend at that time. But he grew up Congregational and was—he had lived on St. John Island in the Virgin Islands for many years.

0:35:00 I met him in Sarasota because he was living with his mother, who was in hospice, and she passed away then in 2010. And that was also another reason why it just felt like it was time to sort of move forward and move on.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you were in New Haven at the divinity school 2011 to 2014.

Spaulding: Yes.

Interviewer: Where were you in terms of your Mennonite identity and all of that at that point?

Spaulding: Well, at that point I was really feeling that I needed—I felt I needed to broaden my...what do I want to say? Well, my theology had been getting wider and wider for many years. Covenant Mennonite was—they were also very open to new ways of understanding God, our relationship with one another, with the world, with our sexuality, and so I had become very involved in the Jesus Seminar. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

0:36:07

Interviewer: Give me a little quick tutorial, because I think I've heard of it, but not too familiar.

Spaulding: It was a group of scholars who, they continue to meet, but they started meeting probably 25 years ago to really look at what does the Bible really say, what did Jesus really say, and sort of really pushing the boundaries of biblical, historical criticism. And that really sort of was a defining moment

for me, too, to sort of reimagine what God was like, who Jesus really was, what Jesus really said, what he meant, and how we can continue to live that out in a real way in the 21st century.

0:36:59 So all of that had been going on probably since Two Thousand and—probably 2003, actually. And so we, you know, we really questioned together as a congregation in Florida our theology, what's important to us, what is it time to let go of, what is good for us to continue to embrace, what is important for us to hold, but also maybe to reimagine in our theology. We did a lot of that.

And I also became in—I came into contact and formed relationships with a lot of people through my social justice and peace and justice work, so I met a lot of Unitarian Universalists, and Episcopalians, and Congregationalists, and Buddhists, and Jewish people, and Muslim people who really broadened my understanding of how God works in the world.

0:38:07 And I really started to think, you know, my theology really is very much kind of [in a parallel course] with Unitarian Universalist. And what I really appreciated about Unitarian Universalism is they don't ask you to give up your former journey or your former experience, so I could fully be Mennonite, fully be Anabaptist in a Unitarian Universalist sort of perspective.

So when we moved to Connecticut one of the things we found out was there are no Mennonite churches in Connecticut. So we started looking at Congregational churches and then at Unitarian Universalist churches, and we joined the Unitarian Society of New Haven, and became members there.

0:39:04 And that was the church that really walked with me through the next years of seminary, and working on my ordination, and being accepted as a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Interviewer: Let's see, is the Yale Divinity School, that's traditionally a Congregationalist, or what is that?

Spaulding: Not anymore. I mean, it started that way, but... They are still firmly...their seminary work is still firmly Christian.

Interviewer: I see, okay.

Spaulding: But they don't really hold to a particular denomination. There's a huge Episcopal presence there because of the Berkeley Divinity School, which is in partner with Yale Divinity. But we worshiped—I worshiped alongside so many different denominations and other faith traditions as well.

Randy Spaulding

0:40:01 There were Muslims attending the divinity school. There were Buddhists attending. There were Jewish persons attending. And we had atheists who also attended. So that also was just such a welcoming place for me to see that God's circle is very, very, very wide.

Interviewer: So it wasn't that you were specifically—obviously you were not in a UU seminary, you were in a pretty broad oriented seminary.

Spaulding: Yes. And in actually a small group. There were maybe seven, I think at the largest there were 11 Unitarian Universalists. I helped to form the first UU student group there, and I think it's still continuing.

Interviewer: And so at some point you were...you must have been thinking about vocationally what you want to do next once school is over, or were you working part-time throughout?

0:41:02

Spaulding: Well, I was working part-time as a chapel minister at the divinity school, but that was just very part-time. My work was really involved in getting my degree and then doing some summer work in between the years. And one of those summers I did a chaplain CPE unit at Bridgeport Hospital, and I just, I fell in love with it. It just felt like this was something that could be a completely fulfilling vocation for me.

And I think partly it was because of my...the way I understand faith is in a very relational way. It's not credal, it's not based on what the words in a book say, but it's in a relational way, how we treat one another, how we treat our world and nature, and how we're in connection with the universe.

0:42:04 And chaplaincy is relational every moment that you're at the hospital working with patients or staff, family members, in very critical moments. And so it was also sort of a continued affirmation of all the years of my experience as a Mennonite minister. It was kind of saying your work has not been in vain. Your call still remains to be in relationship with people.

And I had moments where I had those experiences where people asked me about my spouse, or about my wife, and I had to make that decision, you know, what do I say? Is this important enough? Or do I redirect or what do I do? And in moments that I came out I was just met with either oh, okay, and then going on with the story or just a wonderful sense of acceptance.

0:43:03 And those were life-changing experiences for me. And so after graduating from the divinity school I worked for a summer doing some per diem chaplain work and then was hired that fall, in 2015—was it 2015? Yeah, I think it was. I think it was 2015. As the oncology chaplain at Yale New Haven Hospital.

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Interviewer: Wow. As someone whose dad died of a pretty bad cancer, I think that must have been very meaningful work.

Spaulding: Every day. Intense work, but deeply fulfilling. Deeply fulfilling work. And I think it was a way of preparing me, in a sense, for this next phase of my journey now moving sort of back to parish work.

0:44:10

Interviewer: So you were at...in this oncology chaplaincy, it sounds like, for a couple years, though.

Spaulding: Yeah. About two years, 2015 to 2017.

Interviewer: And were you credentialed or ordained or something through the Unitarian Universalists there?

Spaulding: Yeah. I received my...I received fellowship, preliminary fellowship with the Unitarian Universalists in 2016 and then was ordained in my congregation in June of 2016.

Interviewer: And once you're ordained there can you be a minister of any sort or do you need to stay a chaplain, or how does that work?

0:45:00

Spaulding: No. If you're ordained and go through the full process of meeting with a denominational committee and they approve, then you're prepared to serve in any capacity, whether that's chaplaincy, which is considered community ministry, or parish work in a church position.

Interviewer: Were you aiming, in your vocational interests, aiming for parish work among the UUs, or were you thinking you might want to get back to the Mennonites, or what was...?

Spaulding: I wasn't thinking any of that. I just knew that I wanted to finish the work that I'd begun as a Unitarian Universalist in that ministerial process, actually not thinking that I was ever going to serve in a Mennonite church again. And the chaplaincy was going to be my vocation for the foreseeable future.

0:46:03 And then, just sort of out of the blue, I received an email one afternoon from an old Mennonite conference minister or bishop saying hey, Randy, how are you doing, and by the way, you know, if you're ever thinking about church work again, I have a congregation that might fit you or that might be perfect for you, and let me know what you're thinking. [*Laughs.*]

And it was one of those kind of like wow, really, okay, that's interesting, an email. And I just, you know, I just sort of—I didn't take it very seriously at first. I just oh, tell me a little bit more about it, and what are they looking for, and I'm really happy at Yale Hospital and doing the chaplaincy work that I'm doing, and, you know, it would be kind of strange, don't you think, for a Unitarian Universalist to serve in a Mennonite church?

0:47:02 Conversations continued on email, and it was basically, you know, this is a very progressive congregation, and I think that their theology would fit very closely with yours, and I know that you still consider yourself Anabaptist, and that's important, because this congregation wants to maintain that identity.

And so, you know, over the months it just sort of slowly became well, let's have a phone conversation with one of the search committee members. And then we started to Skype, and then I started to really think about it and talk with my husband about it. And then we traveled out there to meet the search committee and felt a really warm sense of connection with them, and that who I was as a person and what my gifts are that I bring as a Unitarian Universalist Mennonite might fit this congregation.

0:48:08 They are passionate about social justice, about music, about worship. They love their community kind of ingathering that they do and all of those things are part of who I am, I think, what I can bring as a Mennonite minister. And so, you know, one thing led to another, and we candidated, and we were—I was offered the position at the beginning of November and accepted. And here I am in Boulder, Colorado. [*Laughs.*] Very strange. Life is never what you expect it to be.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*]

Spaulding: And I have to tell you that I can imagine that there are probably still, you know, some people who will grumble about this. You know, there will be probably some issues around it.

0:49:05 I've been basically assured by Mountain States Conference that, you know, they are going to be fully supportive. It may not be without some sensitivity and some questions. But in this conference it's not going to be the same experience that I had in Southeast.

Interviewer: Right. So I'm curious about this email that you got. It sounded like this was a Mennonite person who you knew. I mean, maybe you don't want to divulge this person's identity or anything, but—

Spaulding: No, it was Linford King. And Linford was serving as the interim—Linford and his wife Mary Etta were serving as the interim ministers, conference ministers with Mountain States.

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Interviewer: Oh, okay, as—

0:50:00

Spaulding: And I had met Linford many years ago in Sarasota. He and Mary Etta actually candidated, or I don't know if they candidated, but they interviewed with Bahia Vista Mennonite Church at one time to be the ministers there. And I think they decided not to do that at the time. And then I met Linford later at some of our national assemblies, and in some connection with the Inclusive Ministers.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. I don't know Linford and Mary Etta, but it sounds like they had come out of earlier MC—you mentioned him as a bishop. He had been a bishop earlier. I mean, nowadays we don't...we're probably not using that—

Spaulding: No. I think they were involved in the Lancaster Conference.

Interviewer: Okay.

0:51:01

Spaulding: Don't quote me on that, but I'm pretty sure that they were involved. He was a bishop at one time with Lancaster Conference. And I think they called them bishops. Lancaster Conference has now left—

Interviewer: I think they did. I've never lived there in Lancaster, but I'm certain you're right about that. But at some point he made some kind of leap from that to being part of the Inclusive Pastors?

Spaulding: Yeah, yeah, I think he did.

Interviewer: It sounds like a nice leap for somebody to make.

Spaulding: It was. I actually haven't sat down and listened to his story, but I'd like—

Interviewer: Okay. Well, you do it and then sometime maybe I can get to interview him as well. He sounds like a great guy. And his wife, too.

Spaulding: Interestingly, Rachel, he has now—he and Mary Etta are now in Sarasota and he is now the minister at Covenant Mennonite Fellowship.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Spaulding: In their retirement. I think they're doing part-time work at the church. They're retired now to Sarasota, and it's just weird sort of turning world, you know.

0:52:04

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Interviewer: Yeah, okay. So my next question has to do with this—I'm sure you're acquainted with the Mennonite Leadership, what is it, Information form or whatever, the MLI.

Spaulding: The MLI, yes.

Interviewer: The MLI. Did you fill that out?

Spaulding: I did, yes. And there were portions of it that I just admitted that I was at variance with, some of—especially the Mennonite Confession of Faith, yeah.

Interviewer: Had you...maybe you never really used that whole process back in your days of getting into ministry in Florida because maybe this is a more of a MC USA process, and...

Spaulding: Well, I didn't use it—I don't think I filled one out when I became the music minister, but when I became the pastor at Covenant I think I did fill out an MLI at that time.

0:53:04

Interviewer: I see, okay. But now you probably filled out—

Spaulding: [*unintelligible*] 0:53:08 at the time. I was still married, you know, so I—

Interviewer: But now you filled out a new one when you wanted to go to Boulder Mennonite?

Spaulding: Yes.

Interviewer: And so did you submit that then through Nancy Kauffmann or whoever in the denomination?

Spaulding: Yeah, I did.

Interviewer: And, I mean, you have openly been in the press for years as someone who is a gay or a queer man, so there was no, you know, you've been out of the closet a long, long time, so there was... How did—what was the response of Nancy or whoever received that? They just were willing to process it?

Spaulding: Yeah, they just processed it. They didn't ask any questions. And it was not an issue in creating that.

0:54:00 I know—now that you are sort of leading into this, I think there was something that had been happening that they weren't going to make MLIs available to people who—to the full congregation, or full denomination for people who are queer. And so—but this was a very specific reason

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why. I wasn't putting it out to every congregation, it was just I was filling it out because Boulder wanted me to do it.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. I think—the way this has come to—that I've come to understand it is that this past April, which probably predates when you gave your MLI to Nancy, but this past April the executive board of MC USA made a new policy that said that they would process queer candidates' MLIs, but that would be kind of in a separate pile from everybody else's, and they would only process these MLIs and give them to conference ministers who asked for them.

0:55:09

Spaulding: Yeah, I think—

Interviewer: So that they weren't going to sort of send them to, you know, conservatives who didn't want them.

Spaulding: Right.

Interviewer: And that was a new process because there was about a, I don't know what, about a four year period prior to that where they really weren't processing queer candidates' MLIs if the candidates made clear that they were queer. [*Laughs.*] So that's a really crazy story that I'm actually trying to tell. That's a pretty different story than yours because you, by being Unitarian Universalist during those years you circumvented that weird stuff.

Spaulding: Yes, yes.

0:55:54

Interviewer: You've come back into the Mennonite MC USA right at a time where it hasn't been a big deal or a stumbling block for you.

Spaulding: No, but I will also tell you that I wanted to consider some of the Anabaptist seminaries, but I didn't. I didn't consider them because I knew that I would not be able to receive an MDiv while I was in a committed relationship with someone of the same sex.

Interviewer: So you had thought about like, I guess, you're talking about EMS and AMBS or...?

Spaulding: Yes, yes. Specifically AMBS, yeah.

Interviewer: And this was in like 2011 or something you were making the—

Spaulding: Yeah.

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Interviewer: You were making the decision even though you would maybe like to go there, you thought because you were in a covenanted relationship they would not grant you an MDiv.

Spaulding: That's right, yes.

Interviewer: Okay. I think now—you probably know this at least as well as I do—I think now that's not the case anymore in 2017. I do not believe they would now deny an MDiv to anybody in any kind of marriage or whatever. I think that is actually changing now.

Spaulding: That's good to hear.

Interviewer: I think so. I mean, Sara Wenger Shenk would be the person to put that question to, and I'll have to ask her that myself.

Spaulding: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: But they have definitely been moving in a progressive direction since 2011. So at the point at which you made that decision I think you were absolutely right, but I don't think time has really stood still with them on that.

Spaulding: Good, I'm glad.

Interviewer: Right, yeah, so... [*Laughs.*] Yeah, I'll ask. I'll talk to Sara and ask her that for sure and try to get an understanding of that. But I think there's actually been a shift. So AMBS really didn't get you as a candidate for that reason.

Spaulding: Yeah.

0:57:58

Interviewer: When you went to Yale, though, I imagine you had classes where, if you wanted to study things like queer theology and stuff like that, that was easy to do. Did it also occur to you that if you went to AMBS that might be...those kinds of things would not be in the curriculum as much?

Spaulding: Yeah. I did consider that. And I also knew that it was still pretty raw for me to be among, you know, so immersed in the Anabaptist world. So I think going to Yale was actually, you know, it was like I don't know what you call it, the universe's or God's timing to just sort of give me a breath to breathe from all of this and do a little bit of healing. And I don't know if going to AMBS I would have been able to do that.

0:58:56 But you're right, you know, in some of the other classes that I was able to take, which fit very well with Unitarian Universalist theology and thought, including some Buddhist reflections, a class on Islam, on queer theology.

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That really was also a breath of fresh air and something I was really glad to have been able to take advantage of at Yale.

Interviewer: How did—I know you're a musician and I don't know a lot about your songwriting and all of that, but how has your music and the production of your music and your songs been received by Mennonites since that point at which you lost your credentials back in Florida?

0:59:57

Spaulding: I think you'd have to ask them. I don't know. I haven't done a lot of composing or writing since leaving Florida. One of my small choruses is in one of the supplements. And I served as the project editor for both of the Mennonite supplements.

Interviewer: Are you talking about *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story*?

Spaulding: *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story*, yeah.

Interviewer: You were the editor of both?

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Spaulding: I know that those songbooks are considered progressive songbooks, and some congregations chose not to purchase them or use them.

Interviewer: And those came out, though, before your credentials were revoked, right?

Spaulding: Yes.

Interviewer: In Two Thousand—

Spaulding: Yeah. So it's always interesting to me to see how some of those congregations make use of those, knowing what they now know. I don't know. I don't know. I know Bahia Vista Mennonite Church purchased at least one of them, although that church is really, like I said, it's completely turned upside down. I don't even think they use hymnals at all. I think they probably got rid of them.

1:01:05

Interviewer: But your music composing and music writing dropped in your own life once you went from Florida up to New Haven?

Spaulding: Yeah. I mean, life got so busy with seminary work, and then in my chaplaincy, which was so intense that I haven't really had time to really focus on it. Which now, being a parish minister and being part of a

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congregation that's very interested in music, I'm hoping that I can sort of work on developing that again.

Interviewer: So I guess what I was sort of thinking was that you might have been kind of blacklisted with your songs and so forth after that, but it's not—that isn't a way that you've thought of it, or it didn't happen that way, really, because a lot of your work with the music and getting things out happened prior to losing the credentials, and then you made this turn.

1:02:04

Spaulding: Yeah, that's [true].

Interviewer: Okay, good to know. I just wasn't sure how—because I didn't know if you'd been super active composing music and—

Spaulding: No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Spaulding: And there have been churches over the past few years that have contacted me asking if they can use one of my songs that I'd written previously in their worship services. And I've been contacted maybe once or twice, maybe three times about the new process of the new songbook that they're working on just to get some of my experience and some of my historical background. I felt—the conversations went well because most of the time they were prefaced by we know—we understand what's happened, and if you feel that you don't want to contribute we completely understand that and we want to respect that.

1:02:57

Interviewer: Was it members of the current committee that were checking in with you?

Spaulding: It was someone from, what's it called now, MennoMedia, Mennonite Media?

Interviewer: MennoMedia?

Spaulding: Yeah. Because I think they're the ones working on some of the copyright things and some of the publishing things. I think it was the people from them. They are the contact.

Interviewer: I just wondered if you've been watching that hymnal committee from afar.

Spaulding: I really haven't.

Interviewer: You haven't, okay. Interesting.

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Spaulding: I'm letting them do what they do and it'll be interesting to see what happens.

Interviewer: Yeah. I know some of the people on that committee. I know some of the people that are probably a little bit on the older side, like people in their 50s and 60s. But they have told me that the vast majority are quite young people, so people in their 20s on this committee. And so, you know, it may be really quite refreshing to see what all comes out of this group.

Spaulding: Yeah, I hope so.

Interviewer: I hope so. Yeah, I hope so, too.

1:04:00

Spaulding: And to see how the songs and the music will be made available. A lot of people say that print material is passé, and that we've got to find a new way of making songs available, so I'm curious about that.

Interviewer: Well, you might find yourself drawn into some of these things now that you're going to be a Mennonite minister again. It's like you took a big sabbatical being with the UUs, and now that sabbatical is over.

Spaulding: Yes. Although even with this congregation I've made it known that it's still a part of my identity, being Unitarian Universalist, and I really don't look—some people say oh, I'm glad you're back. And I sort of stop them and just say I don't feel like I've come back or I've turned around, but that I'm just, I'm moving forward in this moment as a Unitarian Universalist Mennonite with a Mennonite congregation, and we're journeying forward from here.

1:05:00 And so I, you know, I'm not turning around or going back to something. For me going back would be going back to like Southeast Conference or something like that, and that's not what this is or what it's [becoming].

Interviewer: I just have to—you know, most people talk about playing the Mennonite game, but I'm just going to play the UU game with you for—for me that will be a very short little game.

Spaulding: Okay.

Interviewer: But I did interview just a really great woman for this very same project several months ago who's a UU minister, and her name is Krista Taves. And I don't know if you've ever met her, but she was just a complete delight. She's a lovely formerly Mennonite woman who grew up in Ontario, Canada, but her ministry has been mostly around St. Louis, Missouri and in some UU congregations in southern Illinois and up in Wisconsin.

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1:05:57 And she was—wow, I just, I so enjoyed her. And she, like you, she told me she holds these two identities of being Mennonite and being Unitarian Universalist and just embracing them both. So you've really been reminding me of her, so I just wondered if you knew her.

Spaulding: No, I don't, but now I'm curious just to look her up.

Interviewer: Yeah, you might want to look her up. Her name is spelled T-A-V-E-S, and her first name is Krista. And I've now, like some of the other people that I've interviewed I've become Facebook friends with, so sometimes I look at her blogs and stuff. She has very nice, interesting sermons where she sticks a lot of Anabaptist stuff in her UU... [*Laughs.*]

Spaulding: Oh, good. [*Laughs.*] That's awesome.

Interviewer: So anyway, she's really great. But just this business of holding these two identities together, I just wanted to tell you you're not the first.

Spaulding: Good. And I have met many Mennonites who are now Unitarian Universalist—

Interviewer: Oh, okay

1:07:00

Spaulding: —[in] congregations who are former Mennonites who are ministers, UU ministers. And there's a, in some ways there's a wistfulness and a sadness about some of them, you know, feeling like they've had to leave. They didn't want to. They really still feel those principles are so strong with them—peace, nonviolence, service, and a sense of community.

Interviewer: Did you have a sense with some of these people they left over sexual identity things?

Spaulding: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: And are you talking about people who are members in the UU tradition or they're ministers?

Spaulding: They're both members and—well, I don't know ministers, if I've met any queer UU ministers [who were] Mennonite. But certainly Congregational [ministers].

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. That's interesting, and I guess probably not surprising because it's a progressive place to go for people.

Spaulding: Yeah, yeah.

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1:07:59

Interviewer: So yeah, okay. I did want to just look a little bit at my questions to see what we've covered and what we haven't covered. Okay, one question here, did you ever get yourself connected with Brethren Mennonite Council or Pink Menno or those groups?

Spaulding: Yeah. I was part and still am, I feel, connected to Pink Menno. Carol Wise and I have been friends for many years, and they were very supportive in this whole experience in Sarasota. And so I've really journeyed a lot with both of those groups.

Interviewer: Do you see yourself continuing going forward? Those groups are still around, so...

Spaulding: Oh, yeah. The Mennonite church, its larger umbrella systemic organization still is not welcoming, and until that changes I think we're going to continue to need groups like Pink Menno and Brethren Mennonite Council.

1:09:08

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. And there is a question number one that we didn't really ever get to because you were sort of telling your story, and it started out with you being married to a woman, and then it sounds like it wasn't until you'd been married 18 years or so that the marriage ended. But I was wondering if you do have any comments about that. Your call to ministry must have been, you know, when you were a younger person, either in college or something like that.

Spaulding: Oh, way earlier than that.

Interviewer: Way earlier, okay. In the Kokomo, Indiana area you're talking?

Spaulding: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So your sexual identity, did you think you were a heterosexual guy that whole time or you didn't really know?

1:10:00

Spaulding: Well, I think if you would have asked me at the time I would have said I'm heterosexual. But if you ask me what my heart knew, I think it knew all along that I was not heterosexual, that I was queer. But in that context, in that time, in that community you didn't even consider it. It just wasn't a possibility to remain who you are and to remain accepted. And I got married because I thought this was the way God was going to heal me.

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Interviewer: I see, okay. So you, so in other words—

Spaulding: And I was really disappointed [he] did not.

Interviewer: —you had... It sounds like you had struggles around your sexual identity as a young person.

Spaulding: Early on, yes, yes. And it was just a couple, maybe a year into our marriage that I finally had to just...I sort of had this little moment, this little breakdown and just, you know, I had to tell my wife about some of the experiences that had happened to me and some of the feelings that I was having.

1:11:03 You know, I didn't know it at the time, but I, you know, we met a, I don't know, we found a counselor who was really doing reparative therapy, which was, you know, a total disaster. [*Laughs.*] And it wasn't until I found a good Christian counselor in Sarasota after we moved there who really helped me just to accept myself and love myself and realize that God loved me just as I was.

Interviewer: But it sounds like that was a long process because you were married to her for really a pretty long marriage.

Spaulding: It was a very long process. And, you know, it took Laura a long time, too, to, you know, just as much as it took for me to come to accept it. She's now such a strong advocate for queer rights and for queer people. She remains that, even though we're no longer married. But it was a painful process for her.

1:11:57 And I understand that experience for so many straight people who marry queer people, not knowing it. You know, I know that that's such a painful thing to go through.

Interviewer: Do you think she felt like she was in the closet? You kind of were—

Spaulding: No, she's a straight—she considers herself straight, yeah.

Interviewer: But she knew for some big bunch of that 18 years that you were a closeted gay person, right? She knew that, or...?

Spaulding: Yeah, I think—yes, she knew that.

Interviewer: She knew that, yeah.

Spaulding: But at the same time, you know, I was still very much ensconced in this sort of conservative Mennonite world where you made a very serious vow to God and to a community and you needed to keep that vow. And, you

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know, I tried to do that as long as I possibly could, you know, until
[unintelligible] 1:12:55 not possible.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. It sounds like some really good, really hard things happened along the way, but it sounds like it was healthy for everybody.

Spaulding: Yes, yeah.

1:13:03

Interviewer: Okay. Well, we've talked in lots of ways about my question number seven was how has your theology changed over time, because you went from this conservative Mennonite ethos to the Unitarian Universalists, and you retain the Unitarian Universalist open sensibility and openness to faith traditions outside of Christianity or apart from Christianity and those kinds of connections.

Spaulding: Yeah, so I really—there's a theologian and writer, professor, he's passed away, his name is Marcus Borg. And one of his phrases that he uses, which really just was like a thunder strike, you know, like a lightning bolt was that he said, you know, I take the Bible seriously, but not literally.

Interviewer: I see.

1:13:57

Spaulding: And that was a revealing thing to reflect on, that yes, you know, that's exactly the way I've been looking at it and how my theology has changed over time, that this book and these stories of a people who have journeyed and who have screwed up, and have, you know, gotten right with God, and continued to do it over and over again, but are just...just find themselves in relationship with ultimate love and ultimate reality, you know, it's a metaphor for our own lives and how we can be these same kind of people, forgiven and in sort of this grace filled state, while not having to believe everything literally that's in the Bible.

And that freed me up so, so much. It gave me a lot of anxiety at the same time. I had panic attacks when I started changing my theology. I literally had panic attacks. [Laughs.]

1:15:00 It was like my whole paradigm, my whole gestalt was changing and had turned on its axis. And it was very scary. Very scary. And I can understand why many people, including a lot of my relatives, just can't go there. It's just too disruptive to their lives.

Interviewer: Was that, having that sort of sensibility changing, was that already when you were in the Bahia Vista church in Florida?

Spaulding: It started, yeah. It started when I was a child in my childhood congregation when the minister was preaching on divorce, and the sin of it, and these horrible, sinful people, and my mother was sitting right next to me. And I'm looking at the red letter edition of the King James Bible and thinking no, that's not my mom. She's not this horrible sinner. There's something not right here. My little brain couldn't quite parse it out, but even then I was, you know, ten or 11, 12 years old and already questioned the authority of the pulpit and also what the Bible was saying. It started back with divorce.

1:16:13

Interviewer: Since you brought up your mother again, has she been able to be supportive of you these years?

Spaulding: Yes, she has.

Interviewer: Okay.

Spaulding: I waited until I was probably 40 to come out to my family. And most of them have been very welcoming and accepting. Not everyone. I have a conservative brother who thinks I'm going to hell in a hand basket and refuses to stand in for family photos if Gary, my spouse, is in the picture. That's just one example of the kind of tense relationship it can be sometimes. But many people have. It's been a really gracious experience, one that I think, you know, I should have come out a lot sooner. You know, life just didn't make it possible.

1:17:08

Interviewer: Well, I'm glad you've gotten the level of support you've had. It sounds like from a lot of, you know, certainly the congregation, the Covenant church sounds like they were pretty amazing in terms of being very solid, like for—

Spaulding: Very much. And because I was so involved in the local interfaith groups in Sarasota, those churches, those synagogues and temples were—they knew the journey and the experience I was having, too. Which is interesting because many of them, many of their congregational members and even the churches themselves wrote letters to the Southeast Conference expressing their dismay and, you know. It didn't make relationships very good. It didn't help me. But it was wonderful to know there was so much support coming from all of Sarasota, and the United States, and other congregations.

1:18:03 I think they still have like a, you know, 600 page file on me down there somewhere. [*Laughs.*]

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Interviewer: *[Laughs.]* Okay, well, I have a question number eight here that has to do with Mennonite Church USA and sort of changes that are going on right now. Certainly your coming to Boulder is emblematic of those changes. Erica Lea coming to Albuquerque is emblematic. Other things that have happened recently are emblematic. Did you have any sort of sensibility about that question when you saw it about your overall optimism or pessimism about where Mennonite Church USA and is going?

1:18:53

Spaulding: You know, I would be lying to you if I say I didn't. You know, my main thrust was with this congregation, and then larger with the conference. But I also knew at the same time that there were changes. It wasn't the same denomination that had excommunicated me almost—well, eight years ago, in 2009. But I also knew that systemically it was still—it still hadn't changed its policies. There's still work to be done. And that can still take a long time.

I do know that the tenor of the denomination is different. So many of these conservative congregations that, I'm sorry, bitched and moaned and complained went ahead and left. And so that's, I think, freed up some things and given the denomination a little bit of a breather. But there's still work.

1:19:57

And there's still a space to agree to disagree, which has always been—which really was always my philosophy, was that we can remain sisters and brothers and kin to each other while not having to see this as something that determines whether you're in or out. There are so many more important things that we need to fundamentally be in unity about, and this was never one of them for me. But for other people it was. It was.

So I think back to my home church, Howard-Miami Mennonite, in the 1800s, they almost dissolved and split up because half the congregation wanted to wear buttons and the other half wanted to stay wearing hooks and eyes. And it almost destroyed the congregation. And today I think oh, that's ridiculous, you know, how stupid.

1:20:57

But to them it was very, very serious. It carried so much weight. And it reminds me, those kinds of stories remind me to keep this in that kind of perspective, that to many people this is very serious, and it really determines for them their salvation, or their acceptance by God. I just hope that we can find common ground somewhere that rests on something a little stronger than whether or not I choose to love somebody who has the same anatomical physiology as me.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. And one question I have that's not on here, but I've tried to ask everybody that I've interviewed is there are all these different

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terminologies for LGBTQ, and so how do you prefer to identify, or how do you self-identify? Is queer where you are with that, or gay, or would you say something else?

1:22:07

Spaulding: Well, I continue to use the word gay for myself, and my husband does, too. I did, you know, one of the things that was refreshing to learn in my seminary work, in my divinity school, was the word queer itself has a strong meaning of sort of overturning something. We talked about what are the things that we queer today, that we sort of take and we look at from a different lens, or turn it upside down and look at it, and that our job, in some ways, for me is to continue to queer the world. I think, who was it, was it Walter Kraybill wrote the book the *Upside Down Kingdom*.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

1:22:51

Spaulding: And in a real strong sense you could work, you can use queering the kingdom. And that's what Jesus was doing in the stories that are told in the Bible. He was queering religion and God for people, and making them look at things in a different way. I am comfortable referring to myself as queer in that sense as well, that I do come across as not mainstream, not the norm, as sort of overturning heteronormativity, which is a really important word I learned in seminary. [Laughs.]

Interviewer: [Laughs.] I can imagine. Okay. So you're not opposed to queer, but for you it has some of these larger, almost theological connotations where it makes sense for you?

Spaulding: Yeah, yes.

Interviewer: But in terms of your sexual identity to say you're a gay man is actually your, it sounds like, a preference.

Spaulding: That's fine, yes.

1:23:55

Interviewer: Okay, good to know. And my other questions here are just, you know, if you have any, I say here, published or unpublished documents. You just made this joke about a 600 page archive down in Florida. I will not be going down there to ask them. [Laughs.]

Spaulding: Okay. Ask for that file.

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Interviewer: But if you ever—it sounds like since you’ve been a chaplain you haven’t been writing sermons lately and all that kind of thing. But just know that I’ll be working on this project for a while, and if something you find in your files or you create something that you’d want to send to me I’d be completely open to receiving it. And some people are doing that and some people aren’t, and that’s fine, but that’s an open invitation that doesn’t have to get decided right now.

Spaulding: Yep.

Interviewer: And then also I’ve always been asking of names of others that they think might—my project really is about people in church leadership. So that’s why I asked you about these other UU folks that are ex-Mennonites or formerly Mennonites, whether some of those were theologically trained or things like that.

1:25:08 I’m looking at people that are queer in leadership, whether they’re Mennonite or whether they’re in some other denomination, or whether they’re traversing those boundaries in some way. That’s kind of my universe of people that I’m trying to get in touch with.

Spaulding: Okay.

Interviewer: And I’m looking at people both in the United States and Canada. I mean, I’d be happy to look beyond, but right now that’s the easiest for me to manage, is Canadians and Americans. So if anybody comes to mind to you or you want to give me some names, that’s fine. Your name came up from a number of people that I’ve already interviewed.

Interviewer: Have you interviewed Theda Good?

Spaulding: This week. I did.

Interviewer: Oh, you did? Okay, good.

Spaulding: Yeah, we Skyped on Wednesday. That was great. She and I had never met before, but it was really fun to connect, so yeah.

1:25:59

Spaulding: Okay, great.

Interviewer: Yeah, that was delightful.

Spaulding: I was actually kind of, you know, when I first thought about this job I was kind of excited because I knew Theda was out here. She was one of the first people I called and said I want to talk to you about what’s going on. And that’s when she told me she was leaving.

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Interviewer: Yeah, right. Yeah, yeah. So I heard a little bit about that.

Spaulding: I also know there's some interesting and maybe potentially good things happening for Theda, too, so...

Interviewer: I think so, yeah. Yeah, it was really fun. We had a great session on Wednesday. And then my last question on this sheet is just utterly open-ended because in many cases, like with you and me, I'm talking with somebody that I don't really know, and so I'm not sure if my questions have really been the ones that you were hoping I'd throw out there. If there's something that really hadn't come up in our conversation but you want to put out there now, this is kind of the time.

Spaulding: It felt like just a really broad overall sort of circle that we talked about. If something else does come to mind I can email you or get in touch with you, but it was pretty thorough.

1:27:05

Interviewer: Okay. That's good to know. I'm on sabbatical right now this semester, so I've been working on this a lot, but I go back to teaching in January. I teach at a university here in Topeka. It's a full-time position. This will get probably put a little bit to the side again until summer, but then I'll be working on it again. I consider this kind of a long-term project, and I actually have not started writing yet. The research has been really fascinating, but at some point I'll start doing some writing. But I did notice that it's fine for you for me to use your name, so that's good to know.

Spaulding: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: That's good to know because there are, you know, you've been out for a long time, but I'm definitely also talking to people that are in the job market and aren't totally out, and so I have to kind of really check with people about that. But in your case it's really clear to me why I can use your name.

1:28:02

Spaulding: You definitely can. That's fine for me.

Interviewer: It's interesting, people are at all kinds of different places on that.

Spaulding: And it was interesting, too, throughout these last ten or so years, how many people in the closet who were Mennonites, who were in leadership, who I can't tell you, have called and gotten in touch with me just to have somebody to talk to.

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Interviewer: Really? Okay.

Spaulding: And people that I have just sort of listened to their stories, or counseled them, or just kind of talked with them through some really difficult [things], and they still remain. I wish I could tell you their names.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Yeah, no, that's okay.

Spaulding: Some fascinating stories that could really contribute, but you know, who knows.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, I think our hope is that as we go forward people don't have to be so tortured about that. And I have so enjoyed the big age range of people I've been talking with.

1:29:03 So you're kind of middle, but I've definitely talked to people in their 20s for this study and the most elderly person I talked to I think is just a little bit shy of his 80th birthday.

Spaulding: Oh, wonderful.

Interviewer: And he was awesome. But just fascinating to see where people are at different places in the life span, so yeah.

Spaulding: This has been great. Thank you, Rachel.

Interviewer: Right. And my email and all that is not going to change. I'll keep working on this and be based here, I think, for some time to come. So just any time you want to send me anything I'd love to hear from you. But thank you so much for your openness, and I wish you well in Boulder. And the Mountain States Conference is awesome, and plus you're so close to Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp there, which is—

Spaulding: Yes, I know.

Interviewer: —a phenomenal place, and yeah, you'll enjoy it, it's great. And I hope things work out for your husband, too, and all those, because two people making a shift is more complicated than one.

1:30:02

Spaulding: He actually got a job here before I did, so... [*Laughs.*]

Interviewer: Oh, wow. That's awesome.

Spaulding: It's okay if I mention that I talked—to talk to Terry and say I mentioned—

Interviewer: Please do. Yeah, please do. That would be really great. Tell her hi for me.

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Spaulding: All right.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you so much, Randy. Take care.

Spaulding: All right. Thanks, Rachel.

Interviewer: Take care. Bye.

Spaulding: Bye-bye.

1:30:28 [End of conversation; Recording ends 1:39:09.]