

Lee Ann Bryce

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SPEAKERS

Lee Ann Bryce, Mary Wilson

- M** Mary Wilson 00:02
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson and this is November 18, 2020. I'm interviewing Lee Ann Bryce, Pastor at UCC church in Fort Worth. Good afternoon, Lee Ann and thank you for agreeing to do this. I'm very excited to talk to you today.
- L** Lee Ann Bryce 00:17
Hi Mary, I'm excited about this project too. Thank you for asking me.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:21
Yeah. So the way I want to start is to simply ask you a little bit about your life story and background and some of the things in your life that have been formative that have led you to become a minister. What are those, I guess, transitional moments in your life?
- L** Lee Ann Bryce 00:43
I was raised in Arlington, Texas, [in] a pretty conservative community. I was raised in a Bible Church, in a very religious family, evangelical tradition. There's a lot about that that I value. Even as a kid, I've always been a person who takes faith really seriously. I've always had a kind of an earnest approach, I guess, to God, to religion. We were very, very involved in church. And I worked at a summer camp, Evangelical Pioneer Girls, I was a

Pioneer Girl, sort of like Christian Girl Scouts. As I said, I have many fond memories of that.

L

Lee Ann Bryce 01:34

As I grew older, I began to have some kind of niggling fit points about that, that were not quite right for me, but I couldn't really articulate what that was. And for me, the giant life transition point was coming out. I didn't come out until I was 35. So, I was married to a man, we had a son together, and I never thought of myself as being gay, I never even knew that being gay was an orientation. I thought it was just about behavior. I may want to do a lot of things that are wrong, but I shouldn't do them, so I just don't do those things. People of our age, maybe it was the same for you, Mary, but there were just so few gay or lesbian examples in media and on TV and in the news.

M

Mary Wilson 02:46

Yeah, I came out in my early 30s. I was married, and had children, and there was no context. I grew up in a similar way [in an] evangelical kind of bubble, and there's no context in which to [come out].

L

Lee Ann Bryce 03:00

Right, there was no context. Gay and lesbian figures, and I didn't know any trans, so I will say just gay and lesbian - the figures that I was aware of, they were certainly not put forth as any kind of positive examples. They were never anybody you wanted to be like. So, when I was in my mid 30s, I fell in love with a woman.

L

Lee Ann Bryce 03:26

I'd had experiences with a couple of women earlier in my life, that I just sort of put in that category of, "Oh, I'm just not going to see this person, then I won't be tempted to do these things I shouldn't [be] feeling." I guess, it was when I just fell madly in love with a person that I worked with, and it was such a transformative and liberating experience for me, that I had this reassurance of, I need to be myself and embrace this part of myself or there will be nothing of me left. And so, that gave me the courage to come out, come out to some extent, come out to myself.

L

Lee Ann Bryce 04:17

I did fully anticipated that that would be a break with me and God, with me in church. I worked at a church at the time and I knew that they wouldn't take that, so I was

completely closeted, except to myself. Also, that led to divorce and the potential of custody issues here in Texas that I just couldn't risk. So that's when I came out to myself and my life changed. Most of them in good ways, but there was a great deal of loss about that. Primarily, most of my family. Estranged is too strong a word, but it was just years of not having communication because the communication was so painful for all of us.

L Lee Ann Bryce 05:25

Thankfully, things are not that way anymore. Their first response was not their last, but that's when it came out. And then the other moment of real transformation that I'll note is when I met a woman who was ordained in the UCC, she's my previous partner. I met her and I was so stunned, first of all, that women could be ministers. I never dreamed [that possible]. I mean, I knew that there were, but certainly not in any church I'd ever been to. So that was the first point of -

M Mary Wilson 06:08

They were unicorns from another world.

L Lee Ann Bryce 06:10

That's right [laughs]. And then [the fact that] she was a lesbian minister just blew my mind. I thought, "What the hell kind of church would do that?"

L Lee Ann Bryce 06:20

So then, he and I became partners, I moved to Colorado, and that is when my life really started this trajectory of healing, because that led to me sort of awakening to those voices of call inside my own head that I had always had, but I'd never thought they were even possible, so I'd never really developed those kind of ideas. Though she and I are no longer together and that's a good thing. That's one of those things that you'll cut out, right? It's through her that I went to seminary, that I felt called, that I'd found this vocation that I feel like I was born to do.

M Mary Wilson 07:19

Yeah. That's great. That's a great story. And I'm also aware there's a lot of painful pieces in that story, that it's not this straightforward journey that I'm at a place that I want to be now, and I got here in a very easy way.



Lee Ann Bryce 07:40

Yeah, there is a particularly painful aspect of it that I didn't know at all. I lived in Colorado, I went to seminary at Iliff School of Theology, I worked when I first moved to Colorado, I got a job as a youth director in an Episcopal Church in Boulder. Well, the search committee knew that I was a lesbian. Episcopalians are, for the most part, known to be pretty progressive people. It never dawned on me that it would be a barrier to my working at this church, being lesbian.



Lee Ann Bryce 08:24

After my partner at the time had a wedding, that was a very high profile event in the community, the rector at that church, at the bishop's direction, fired me from my job for being a lesbian. And this is despite the fact that the associate rector had been in our wedding, had been on the search committee, fully knew, and she was completely stunned by the rector's response too, she had no idea that it would be a barrier. So it became this giant state and federal lawsuit that lasted three years plus that was soul draining and devastating at the time. I thought, "I've come so far, I'd come out. I was at the seminary." Doretta was one of my professors, I met her when I was at Iliff.



Lee Ann Bryce 09:28

It just seemed incredible to me that what I thought was a progressive church, would fire me. That was a very painful, draining experience. And it ended not with a court resolution, but when I graduated, I was called to Rochester, New York - and when I moved there for my first full-time pastor [position], I just could not sustain the long term read depositions and the hearings, and it was absolutely crazy. At that point, I dropped the case, but it went on for about three years.



Mary Wilson 10:20

Yeah, I am so sorry. That really is incredibly painful. Progressive spaces are not always safe spaces.



Lee Ann Bryce 10:32

Right? Don't I know it, sister.



Mary Wilson 10:35

And we would like to believe they are, but they aren't always [safe].



Lee Ann Bryce 10:39

And when they're not, it's particularly painful when you have an expectation that this is safe.



Mary Wilson 10:48

I had a conversation with somebody yesterday, who just wanted to talk about where he might go to seminary, and we knew there were places not even on the map, right? So when things aren't even an option, or not even where you'd want to be, that's one thing, but when you're in what should be safe spaces and you get hurt, it's more painful.



Lee Ann Bryce 11:17

In such a very public way, front page of all the newspapers, [and] on NPR. Because of the particular aspects of the case had potential to be a very important case, legally, it was picked up by a lot of media.



Mary Wilson 11:43

So how did you heal from that?



Lee Ann Bryce 11:47

I'm still healing from it. I mean that I think that it's something that will always be with me and I think that's a good thing, really. Initially, I've done a lot [of] therapy and meditation is my primary spiritual practice, journaling, [and] anything about reconciliation, I've read or experienced probably.



Lee Ann Bryce 12:19

I have, I think, by nature a forgiving heart. I'm somebody who doesn't hold grudges. I'm an enneagram nine, so I really, really value calm spaces, which means - and sometimes that takes the form of people avoiding conflict and I'm not at all that kind of person. I'm very direct about addressing things that disrupt my sense of calm, because I just don't like it when they're unresolved, you know?



Lee Ann Bryce 13:03

Probably the most painful aspect of it is that the associate rector, who was on the search committee, who knew my partner in campus ministry, was fully aware and was at the last court hearing when she lied on the stand. She was asked, "Did you know that Lee Ann was gay when you hired her?" And she, I will never forget it, she just shook her head and said, "I didn't know," and I was crushed by that. This is a person that was a dear friend and I respected her. Honestly, I still respect her. So this is getting to your question about working through [things] because I know that she was right at the point of getting her final ordination. She had gotten her first church and had she told the truth about that, it would have jeopardized everything for her future of being a priest, of being a rector, and she felt that she couldn't do that. Now we're casual, we're Facebook friends, we comment on each other's posts, and I feel no anger or anything toward her. It's just like, "Let that shit go." Making, what was for her, a really wrenching decision and I'm sure that she's had her own agony about that.



Mary Wilson 14:45

So how do you think all of that has impacted your life as a minister? What does it bring to your role as a pastor now?



Lee Ann Bryce 15:01

Let me think about that for just a second. I'm particularly attuned to the way the church, as an institution, can be painful to the people, I recognize those things. And it's something that in any church I've been in, I go to great lengths to not have that happen to people who come to the church, not just gay and lesbian people, across the board. It's also really important to me to be very out. My wife -



Mary Wilson 15:47

Do not put yourself back in the closet. It's important to be out.



Lee Ann Bryce 15:54

It completely did. For example, I know a lot of teachers, who are gay or lesbian, and they're not inclined to talk about it very much. They're more of the opinion, and it's a different setting, I understand, [but they are] more of the opinion [that] this is my private life and it's nobody's business. I think the experience of the lawsuit and the pain of rejection from family, for me, it's just had the effect of, "I've come so far. I'm putting it out

there without hesitation." And even I make a point to put it out there because I just don't want to open myself to rejection of somebody not knowing. It's like, "I've come this far, this is who I am. Let's find out right off the bat."

M

Mary Wilson 16:48

Right, right. Well, I'm wondering if you have similar experiences that I had, because I was obviously very open and vocal in my community. And so, I would get phone calls from people, 50 to 100 mile radius of the church, saying, "I have these questions and am I going to hell? Because everybody else that I know thinks I'm going to hell." And then we would have some people visit the church, maybe just once or twice, but it was almost as if they just needed to see there was a church out there that they could go to. Do you have some similar experiences?

L

Lee Ann Bryce 17:28

Absolutely, I have a ton of those. I've always had those kinds of emails and people to trust if it's true. And sometimes it's like, there's people in that situation, [who] have this internalized homophobia that they just can't quite let it in, as much as they want to believe it. As I think about that idea of, "Is this going to keep me out of heaven because I'm gay?" All of those experiences have led me to have a super, super progressive theology. And so, I put that out there too because I think the basic idea about that is that the church has used this ridiculous idea of hell to manipulate for so long, and I just want to do everything to expose it.

L

Lee Ann Bryce 18:25

My sermons are just so frank about [it]. I did six weeks [of sermons] on hell. I think through my ministry, I've developed this style of saying things, I've been told by parishioners, [of] articulating progressive theology very frankly and plainly, and not worrying about if it's going to be too much for people.

M

Mary Wilson 19:02

Yeah. Well, I'm glad you do. I think it's important for ministers to be able to do that.

L

Lee Ann Bryce 19:09

It is and not many are able to, frankly. Because any atonement theology or any of these things that people hold sacred in the Christian tradition, that I find just the most abusive,

horrible ideas, yet a lot of ministers have to tiptoe around choosing their words carefully - you may believe blank, you may believe that, I'm just like, "That is bullshit."

M Mary Wilson 19:36
Like, "I don't believe this."

L Lee Ann Bryce 19:39
Yeah, not that you have to agree with me, but yeah.

M Mary Wilson 19:48
Yeah. Preaching is a curious profession, isn't it?

L Lee Ann Bryce 19:52
Yeah, it is [laughs].

M Mary Wilson 19:53
Are we part of the profession?

L Lee Ann Bryce 19:57
And it's even more different during COVID, where there's just a lot -

M Mary Wilson 20:05
Tell me a little bit about your congregation and then, how is COVID affecting not just your church, but then your personal life and how you work as a minister? What's the overall impact on what you're seeing?

L Lee Ann Bryce 20:26
Everything is different. Everything is different. First Congregational is a very progressive place. I'd say it is just right on the edge of what most people would call Christian. And I can say more about that, theologically, if that's of interest, but I'm gonna try to get to your the main point of your question. We were fortunate enough in our church to have a

few tech media people or tech people who could help with doing a live stream and could help with how to put music videos together and do virtual choir pieces and stuff like that.



Lee Ann Bryce 21:09

So what we do now is we live stream on YouTube and Facebook and our website. We really focus on - have tried to get people - we have it as a live event, so we preserve that feeling of at 10 o'clock on Sundays, this is what we do, we go to church together. For now, we do that on our computers. I know a lot of colleagues who are not able to really do that live stream event thing because they don't either have strong enough WiFi where they are to pull that off [or] technical reasons, or they don't have people who are able to be the tech people other than the pastor, who's there talking, and it's too much to do so. To me, the live stream [allows] you to have that real time way to share a prayer concerns on the comments thread. And that way for the community to interact at the same time feels important to me.



Lee Ann Bryce 22:19

Our small groups have continued to meet [on] Zoom, virtually. I think I really do sense from people how hard it is to be apart. It's a very close knit congregation. One thing that was just crushing to me - because my undergrad degree in music education - and that's what I did professionally before I went into ministry.



Mary Wilson 22:52

Okay, I didn't realize that. I knew you were very talented.



Lee Ann Bryce 22:58

Well, I don't know about that [laughs]. I was our artistic director and conductor for the equivalent of the Turtle Creek Chorale in Dallas - that's all through seminary. Anyway, I love choral conducting and I just started doing that at our church about a year before the shutdown. And so, it was just the most exciting, thrilling thing. We had a choir of 30 voices, which for us is big, and incredible music and people [were] so engaged. Of course, with COVID, all of that is gone, just singing together, because we're really a singing congregation, who enjoyed that so much. When we come back limited someday, that'll be gone for a while, at least, so there have been some what feels like crushing losses. Part of it is being together and the hugs and seeing how people are and then in addition to that, not being able to sing is just really, really hard for me and for others.

M Mary Wilson 24:17
I do appreciate the ukulele gift that you and Lisa are offering.

L Lee Ann Bryce 24:24
That's our little offering [laughs].

M Mary Wilson 24:27
I see the comments. I've enjoyed them and share them.

L Lee Ann Bryce 24:33
That's funny.

M Mary Wilson 24:34
But I think it speaks to that desire to be expressive musically and the way people have enjoyed that on Facebook speaks to the desire to be together and enjoy that kind of expression.

L Lee Ann Bryce 24:51
It is a way of connection through music that just feeds my soul. I mean, that is God among other things, but that feels like the holiest moments for me, for music to bring people together. And so, you're right, I hadn't really thought about our little ukuleles, but that a part of why that's fun to do and why it's satisfying.

M Mary Wilson 25:17
So how long have you been at First Congregational?

L Lee Ann Bryce 25:22
Eight years?

M Mary Wilson 25:24
Eight years? And did you come there from Rochester?

L Lee Ann Bryce 25:26
Uh huh.

M Mary Wilson 25:27
Yeah. Okay. And so, did you have this desire to be in Texas?

L Lee Ann Bryce 25:34
No. Well, yes and no. It's kind of funny. So we were in Rochester and at the time, my partner's daughter and most of her family lived in Colorado. All of my family, including my son and his wife, lived in Dallas. We were in Rochester for 10 years, it was a really great church. And it just began to feel like this is about right and we wanted to get further west, so we were looking at ways to do that. I remember so well, Lisa and I were driving in the car one day, and she's looking on her phone at the UCC employment stuff. She said, "Look Lee Ann, there's a church in Fort Worth that's open," and I just laughed. I was like, "Oh, God, like a church in Fort Worth would ever call me." Then she began to read about it and it's like, "Wow."

L Lee Ann Bryce 26:34
I submitted my profile and looked at theirs and thought, "I think this is for real." It really surprised me because in socially conservative areas of which Fort Worth is one, the most conservative urban area in Texas, in those areas, progressive communities tend to be very vibrant and close knit, because you kind of form an opposition to the culture. And it was probably just a couple of months after that that I was interviewing with the committee.

L Lee Ann Bryce 27:22
So it wasn't that, "Yes, I really want to get back to Fort Worth." And since Lisa had moved to Rochester for me, we actually were more looking in Colorado, because it was sort of like, "Oh, this should be your turn to kind of lead here." And that's where all of that side of our family is, but it was just fantastic for me to get back closer to my son and the greatest gift of being here is really to come back home, to meet all of the pain of estrangement that I felt for most people in this area, [and] to heal those relationships. My son, David, and I are super, super close, so just to be able to have lunch and drive over to see each other even now, it's just fantastic.

M Mary Wilson 28:22
And in other years, go to baseball games.

L Lee Ann Bryce 28:23
[Laughs] I know, that's true. We always had the mother-son baseball game. This year, he got me a dopple Ranger, one of those cutouts, and my cutout was actually directly behind me.

M Mary Wilson 28:41
I saw that.

L Lee Ann Bryce 28:42
I was probably 20 rows up or something, but I'm right there.

M Mary Wilson 28:49
That's awesome. That's really awesome.

L Lee Ann Bryce 28:53
Did you watch much baseball this year?

M Mary Wilson 28:56
I watched the Cardinals play every day.

L Lee Ann Bryce 28:59
Did you?

M Mary Wilson 29:00
I have a baseball TV package. And since my favorite team is not in the region, there's no blackouts, and so I can watch them every day.



Lee Ann Bryce 29:16

I tried to do that. I don't know what it is, I'm a big sports fan, but I felt very disconnected from watching sports. I'm a big Cowboys fan, but I just can't. Of course, they're having a terrible season anyway. It's very difficult for me to watch professional sports or even college sports right now.



Mary Wilson 29:35

Well, that brings up that interesting, disconnect feeling. It's not just that we can't get together in person for church, or we're not meeting our families, there's a feeling, an overriding feeling, that our lives are disconnected in ways. Would you agree?



Lee Ann Bryce 29:53

I would agree with that.



Mary Wilson 29:55

I mean, you can watch TV, you could watch the Cowboys on TV, if you wanted, you know? And how would that watching be different than last year when people were in the stands more than they are this year?



Lee Ann Bryce 30:11

I think for me, it's like COVID is, in some ways, is proving to be a sort of a corrector, a corrective - personally, what are good ways in some that I can name and I think about sports. I was excited for the Cowboys to start the season and the first couple of games I watched, I just noticed the things like, they have the crowd noise [that] is artificial. It just feels like, "What are we even doing?" I don't know.



Lee Ann Bryce 30:57

And so, I'm not convinced that major league sports have ever added a whole lot to my life, but yet, I've spent hours and hours and hours and hours watching them. I'm not ready to say that I don't want to have major league sports, but to see college football and the pressure of putting players and staff at risk just to preserve these billions of dollars in universities.



Mary Wilson 31:25

Right, and the SEC had to cancel what four out of six games last weekend.



Lee Ann Bryce 31:30

Oh, I haven't even been paying attention, I've just broken completely with that and it's very unusual for me. And things like restaurants, I love to go out to eat, I love to have nice cocktails, and drink good wine and probably, before COVID, that was my most favorite social thing to do, I would just arrive with friends. Now, once a week, we get carry out from a restaurant. Other than that, we cook all the time and I really like it. I have not missed restaurants. I make the fancy simple syrup to make my own cocktails, and it's a lot cheaper, and it's creative and fun. I've lost 30 pounds. I would have thought I would really have missed that, but not so much.



Mary Wilson 32:27

That's interesting. What do you think you'll keep when say, a vaccine is distributed or we have other options maybe later in the spring or summer of next year? What do you think, in the midst of all these changes, what do you think is going to stick?



Lee Ann Bryce 32:50

Socially or in terms of church? Or both?



Mary Wilson 32:54

Any.



Lee Ann Bryce 32:55

Well, for church, I think Zoom meetings are here to stay, hallelujah, they are so much better. I really think that it's a great improvement on resources [and] of people's time not to have to drive to the church for a meeting and all do it at the same time. I think there's very little loss by having committee meetings on Zoom. You can screen share to say, "Here's the part of the budget I'm talking about." I think Zoom communications are here to stay and in many cases, they're better than face to face, I think.



Lee Ann Bryce 33:36

They don't take the place of face to face, but everybody has been pushed to learn how to do that very simple technology in a way that before for COVID, we never could have had a single meeting on Zoom, because people would be like, "I don't know. I can't figure that out." So we're forced to do that and that's a good thing. We did not live stream before, [but] we've been forced to do that [and] will continue that even when we go back face to face. Our congregation is bigger and broader geographically than it's possible to do [in-person meetings]. Personally, the separation, I hope that won't stay, that's the thing I miss the most. Like I don't need to go out to eat at a restaurant with friends, but I want to have my home full of people I love, eating food together.



Mary Wilson 34:43

Here, come try the cocktails I've learned how to make.



Lee Ann Bryce 34:45

That's right, oh my gosh, come drink with me. I love to drink and I love it when people drink with me [laughs].



Mary Wilson 34:55

I might have to join you.



Lee Ann Bryce 34:58

Please do. Another thing that I love during COVID is, I went to Planet Fitness before [because] I had this idea that I had to go somewhere to exercise and it was a time constraint. Now, I ride my bike and I walk, our whole neighborhood does. And we happen to live in a pretty culturally diverse neighborhood and I just love that. Can you hang on just one second please?



Mary Wilson 35:31

Sure. Sure. [SESSION BREAK].



Lee Ann Bryce 36:00

Is it possible to be through in a couple of minutes or less?



Mary Wilson 36:03

Yes, I was gonna ask you, is there anything else that you feel like would be good for people to know and share that I haven't asked or that we skipped by too quickly that that you would like to include? We can close with that question.



Lee Ann Bryce 36:26

I feel very scattered and I'm not sure exactly the kind of content that is most spot on for [this]. Can you be more specific about particular areas?



Mary Wilson 36:38

Is there anything about your congregation that you would like to mention that you haven't mentioned or your life story that you think would be useful for people to know that we haven't talked about.



Lee Ann Bryce 36:53

I think that the congregation I serve now is just living proof of how starved people are for progressive Christian theology. And I think ministers are often afraid to put it out there, but people are hungry for that. They really, really are. It's not that you won't get resistance from more traditionally inclined Christians, you will, but it's possible to just put forth a really integrated, progressive Christian theology and thought.



Lee Ann Bryce 37:40

I believe that people need it, the world needs it. I think we live in a post Christian world, and most churches haven't caught on to that yet and they're still circling the wagons. We need people to articulate what it's like to follow Jesus in a post Christian world, instead of circling the wagons and preserving this traditional faith for a variety of reasons.



Mary Wilson 38:13

Well, I could talk to you all day.



Lee Ann Bryce 38:16

Well, let's talk again, just for fun.



Mary Wilson 38:21

Thank you very much for your time today. I really appreciate it so much.



Lee Ann Bryce 38:26

Oh, you're welcome. It's great to see you, Mary.