

TRANSitions
OVERVIEW PAPER

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Overview Description

In the summer of 2021, I began showing up as the senior pastor of the United Methodist Church for All people more authentically—as a transgender woman. Initially, my Sunday attire of men’s muted, collared shirts made way for more colorful androgynous attire. I did not initially feel safe to preach as my fully authentic feminine self, and I wasn’t yet publically out, but the observant eye noticed. On one occasion, I came out to a church member who responded that she had already figured it out. When I asked how she knew, she said, “I don’t know, it could’ve been the eyeshadow, the blouse you are wearing, or the mermaid necklace.”

As I began to internally explore how to publicly live out my gender expression, one of my largest concerns was how I would be received as a pastor. I did not personally know any other transgender clergy. The United Methodist Church for All People is located in the South Side of Columbus, Ohio. The community is primarily comprised of low-income, working class people. According to the study, “Social Capital and Equitable Neighborhood Revitalization” by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, nearly half of households on the South Side earn less than \$25,000 per year, 50 percent of the population is Black and 43 percent white, with high percentages of returning citizens from prison, and an unemployment rate of 16 percent.¹

¹ Jason, Reece, *et al.*, *Social Capital and Equitable Neighborhood Revitalization on Columbus’ Southside*. The Kirwan Institute, 2014.

In this context, the worshipping community of the United Methodist Church for All People is two-thirds low-income and one-third middle class, roughly half Black and half white. This context shaped my research topic. As an out, transgender person serving in a predominantly low-income, largely African American neighborhood, there is sometimes tension between my gender and conservative religious and cultural heritages. And yet, in the diversity of our community, there are 10 LGBT+ bars within a few miles of our church. Holding ministry in this diverse neighborhood together I began to wonder how does a transgender pastor lead when not in a place like a “gayborhood”? How does a transgender pastor live in community and proclaim, listen, and incarnate amongst diverse people and social systems? How is our distinctiveness as transgender faith leaders not only lived out through our personal transitions, but how can we help transition the churches we lead to draw the circle of God’s love wider?

Initially, I tried to find support for living in to my pastoral identity through local transgender support groups facilitated by local health systems and the Veterans Administration. These groups did not connect well with my age, personality, or profession. As I continued to look for resources, I found some support from online groups with Transmission Ministry Collective and I took a course with QueerTheology.com. Over the last couple of years I have facilitated a “TransGenerations” group with Transmission Ministry Collective for gender diverse people over the age of 40.

As I began to reconcile my internal identity with my public persona as a pastor, I read the books I could find at the intersection of gender diversity and faith such as Austen Hartke’s, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Melissa Wilcox’s *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion*, Justin Tanis’ *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* and Shannon TL Kearns’ *Queers*

the Word. These books, and other resources, served an important role in reconciling my gender and faith. However, they did not satisfy my longing to find specific resources in how to practice the arts of ministry as a transgender pastor. I saw my gender as a renewed call to ministry. I believed this could be an opportunity of growth for me and for the church I serve. As Melissa Wilcox writes, “Considering gender identity to be a divine calling makes being transgender intrinsically good and holy.”² However, I struggled to find guides to help me walk this journey.

This yearning led me to enroll in the doctorate of ministry program with Pacific School of Religion. I specifically choose this school because of its focus and leadership with the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion. From these studies and experiences I centered my work on the hypothesis: *Out³, transgender clergy are a relatively recent manifestation in church leadership. As a result, distinctive transgender theologies, hermeneutics, and pastoral practices, have not been fully developed. In order to equip transgender faith leaders to operate out of their unique and distinctive gifts, I will create a series of online and print resources for gender-diverse ministerial leadership.*

In exploration of this hypothesis, I used a combination of critical inquiry and practical disciplines study to create resources for transgender faith leaders and to create a capstone portfolio. This combination of methodologies provided for an examination of existing literature while applying research to the work of transgender pastoral leadership. While conducting research I asked how the literature connected, or failed to connect, with lived ministry experience. In order to develop a broader range of ministry experience to draw upon, I had

² Melissa M. Wilcox. *Queer Religiosities : An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021, 163.

³ By “out” I am referring to publically out faith leaders, openly operating from their gender identity and expression.

personal conversations with some of the leading transgender people in their fields such as theologian Shannon T.L. Kearns, pastor Paula Stone Williams, chaplain Liam Robins, and playwright Jo Clifford. These conversations gave me a broader perspective from which to apply research of published literature with the experiences of transgender faith leaders. From this research, I created resources to empower transgender people in the ministries of leadership, preaching, pastoral care, justice work, and social media. I published a volume of each of the following resources as an academic paper which I then converted in to a webpage and trifold brochure that are available online at <https://transpreacher.com/transitions>:

- TRANSition Your Spiritual Leadership: Standing Tall in 4” Heels
- TRANSition Your Preaching: Proclaiming the Good News through Painted Lips
- TRANSition Your Pastoral Care: Listening with Adorned Ears
- TRANSition Your Justice Work: Looking with Shadowed Eyes
- TRANSition Your Presence: Living as a Prophetic Witness in a Digital World

Often, I was able to align course work with development of this project. For example, after completing “HRPS 3300: Queering Your Spiritual Leadership” I modified the work I produced “TRANSition Your Spiritual Leadership: Standing Tall in 4” Heels.” I was able to do the same with resources I developed for preaching and pastoral care. Resources I developed for justice work and digital presence took place through independent study.

Throughout this process, I began to take elements of the resources created and shared them through social media. In July 2023 I began posting short-form videos @TransPreacher on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X. Over the last year I created about 150 video logs on a wide range of topics at the intersection of gender, faith, scripture, and politics. This platform allowed me to bring a transgender faith voice to the public sphere. Initially I envisioned this messaging would connect with LGBT+ people, but the following has grown to a much broader audience.

From the beginning of this journey I knew that the field of transgender religious leadership was a relatively recent discipline—not as developed as Womanist, feminist, Black, Latinx, environmental, or disability religious studies. For example, the American Academy of Religion did not host its first panel of religious transgender studies until 2015 with the Society of Biblical Literature following in 2018. The later recognition of this work was not due to neglect or avoidance, but because up until this time the field of transgender religious studies had not developed enough for this level of academic review.⁴

The field of transgender studies as a whole did not come together until the 1990s. However, the connection of this work with religious and theological studies would take another decade. Melissa Wilcox credits Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's *Omni-Gender: A Trans-Religious Approach* in 2001 and Justin Tanis's *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* in 2003 as the first books focuses on the study on the study of transgender and religion.⁵

The development of the field was slowed by a combination of factors including the division of religion and gender studies, the prevalence of patriarchal systems, and push back from feminist leaders such as the theologian Mary Daly who viewed transgender women as men; and, openly and loudly practiced transmisogyny.⁶ Joy Ladin writes, "Just as feminist theologies grew out of the recognition that humanity includes women as well as men, the recognition that

⁴ Max Strassfeld, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza; Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion. *TSQ* 1 August 2019; 6 (3): 283–296.

⁵ Melissa M. Wilcox. *Queer Religiosities : An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021, 31.

⁶ Siobhan M Kelly,. "Multiplicity and Contradiction: A Literature Review of Trans Studies in Religion," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 7-23.

human beings are not only created male and female but other ways as well demands that we develop trans theologies.’⁷

As transgender religious studies developed, it initially focused on capturing and reflecting on individual experiences. For example, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood published a collection of transgender experiences and theological reflections in the 2009 book, *Trans/formations*.⁸ Likewise, in 2012, Jakob Hero contributed the essay "Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency," in the book, *Queer Religion*. In this text, Shaw tells the story of his own gender transition to develop a theological movement for all gender identities to move from salvation to flourishing.⁹ In the same way, the most formative book from this era for me personally is Christina Beardsley’s, *This is My Body: Hearing the theology of transgender Christians*. I first read this book after getting kicked out of my home for being trans. Just as the book’s intention was to give religious validity to gender diverse people, and not allow evangelical Christians to define transgender bodies as profane, this book helped me reconcile my identity and faith in a fragile moment.¹⁰ These, and other texts, illustrate the use of individual experiences to build an understanding of religious transgender experiences.

⁷ Joy Ladin, "In the Image of God, God Created them: Toward Trans Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 53-58.

⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/formations*. London: SCM Press, 2009.

⁹ Jakob Hero, "Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency," *Queer Religion ; 2: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion* 2012: 143-166.

¹⁰ Christina Beardsley and Michelle O’Brien, *This Is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians*, London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2017.

One of the most significant demonstrations of individual experiences occurred in 2007 when Joy Ladin, a tenured professor at the Jewish Orthodox Yeshiva University, notified the dean that she is a transgender woman. Ladin was placed on leave, told not to return to the campus, and was described by a rabbi and fellow professor at Yeshiva as “not a woman. He’s a male with enlarged breasts... in massive violation of Torah law, Torah ethics, and Torah morality.”¹¹ Ladin successfully fought to keep her job and shared her experiences of bridging gender and faith in 2012s book, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*.¹² More than a singular experience, Ladin’s public witness moved conversations on gender and faith in to the academic and public sphere.

Ladin’s work demonstrates the early stage of transgender religious studies, with leading voices working for acceptance. With this beginning point, the field has not had the opportunity to grow from theory to practice. One cannot go from orthodoxy to orthopraxis if your body is not accepted as normative.

Today, many religious traditions continue to negate the sacredness of transgender bodies. In Ohio, anti-transgender legislation is led and sponsored by Rep Gary Click, the pastor of Fremont Baptist Temple. Click sponsored Ohio House Bill 68 which in 2024 took away all forms of healthcare access from transgender youth. Although the American Civil Liberties Union challenged this law in court, it was upheld by Judge Michael Holbrook who stated it was within the state’s rights to regulate transgender bodies. Judge Holbrook said the recourse for change in

¹¹ Jennifer Altmann, “Becoming Joy,” Princeton Alumni Weekly, Apr 6, 2016, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/becoming-joy>.

¹² Joy Ladin, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.

this policy was through elections. In effect, elected evangelical religious leaders, such as Rep Gary Click, were justified in imposing their religious-based bigotry on to public policy.¹³

In order to counter the prevalence of evangelical Christian voices on LGBT+ faith issues, throughout my work I focused on the importance of intersectionality. For example, as I did research for the section, “TRANSition Your Pastoral Care: Listening with Adorned Ears,” I heard the voice of the feminist activist Angela Davis speak on the importance of “radical self care.” Davis described how self-care was not effectively practiced in the civil rights movement and how it is essential to sustained liberation work today. At the same time, in my ministry, I worked with organizations such as the Black Queer Intersectional Collective in Columbus, Ohio, hosting training events for them and speaking at their rallies. These academic and lived experiences shaped me and the work presented in this project. I have seen throughout my studies that the field of transgender ministry studies is not growing from its own inertia, but from the work of multiple fields that share marginalized experiences.

Concurrent to these studies was my continued work as the pastor of the United Methodist Church for All People. My fears of not being accepted by the community of the South Side of Columbus proved unjustified. A small number of transphobic people left the church and there are people today who make jokes about my body and attire. However, for the most part, my gender expression has opened more doors for ministry than it has closed. Each winter, our church host’s an overnight warming center where homeless people can safely sleep. Through that, I have built strong relationships with a group of young, Black, transgender women. After a recent worship service, a young, gender diverse visitor to our church said to me, “I didn’t know a transgender

¹³ Ken Schneck, “Judge: Ohio’s ban on trans female athletes and gender-affirming care for minors is legal,” The Buckeye Flame, August 6, 2024, <https://thebuckeyeflame.com/2024/08/06/ohios-ban-on-gender-affirming-care-deemed-legal/>

person could be a pastor, I didn't know a transgender person could be in any position of leadership." Several times every week, an LGBT+ person, or a parent of a queer kid, will find themselves to my office because they have heard about me and want to talk about gender/sexuality and faith. I have become an on-demand speaker at pride events and clinical pastoral education workshops. Even in my professional relationships with general church members, people have shared that I now operate out of a greater confidence and have more authentic connections.

However, as I conclude my doctorate of ministry studies, I am in a period of wondering what is next; where this work is taking me. After 18 years of church leadership, I am yearning for what opportunities are available to further contribute to lifting up the gifts of gender diversity and faith. I am left wondering how I might grow more in to the justice work of advocating for trans rights; how can all of who I am be incorporated in to what I do professionally?

In a short period of time, I have been honored to have the opportunity to share the work I have done in this program in many forums. With a small number of transgender people serving in the role of a senior pastor, I am often called on to speak. Many of these opportunities are provided below in artifacts that include videos, podcasts, speeches, sermons, articles, and other opportunities I have had to use my position to articulate the intersection of gender and faith.

Artifacts

1. Vlogs, TransPreacher, June 2023-Current, a series of video reflections on gender and faith published across social media platforms, <https://www.instagram.com/transpreacher/>
2. Academic Paper, "Transition Your Presence: Living as a Prophetic Witness in a Digital World," August 3, 2024 <https://transpreacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/social-media-final.pdf>
3. Video, "Intentional About Faith," Mozaic Ohio, July 26, 2024. <https://transpreacher.com/2024/07/27/intentional-about-faith/> Mozaic Ohio, an LGBT+ community center in Columbus, Ohio, interviewed me to talk about the connections between gender diversity and faith.
4. Academic Paper, "Transition Your Justice Work: Looking Through Shadowed Eyes," July 7, 2024 <https://transpreacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/justice-final.pdf> This paper explores how to queer justice work, bringing an intersectional praxis. This paper is the foundation for the "[TRANSition Your Justice Work](#)" section of this project.
5. Speech, "Interfaith Prayer Service," Stonewall Columbus, June 11, 2024. <https://transpreacher.com/2024/06/12/interfaith-prayer-service/> Speech I gave at Stonewall Columbus, Central Ohio's largest LGBT+ center, for their first Interfaith Prayer service. This speech focuses on the importance of showing up as our authentic selves, especially in uncomfortable spaces, and ends with a rewritten queer version of the Sermon on the Mount.
6. Academic Paper, "Transition Your Preaching: Proclaiming The Good News Through Painted Lips," June 3, 2024, <https://transpreacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/preaching-with-painted-lips-final-paper.pdf> This paper explores the unique voice that transgender people bring to preaching, issues faced by transgender preachers, and the development of a transgender hermeneutic. This paper served as the foundation for the "[Transition Your Preaching](#)" section of this project.
7. Commentary, "On toward Christian perfection after General Conference," UMNews, May 24, 2024, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/on-toward-christian-perfection-after-general-conference>. United Methodist News invited me to offer a commentary on the significance of General Conference removing restrictions on LGBTQ+ people from a transgender clergy perspective.
8. Article, "United Methodists repeal longstanding ban on LGBTQ clergy," NBC News, May 1, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/united-methodists-repeal-longstanding-ban-lgbtq-clergy-rcna150220> This article describes the removal of restrictions on LGBT+ clergy in the United Methodist Church. Moreover, the headline photograph of me crying got picked up and published around in the world by news sources including CNN and the Wall Street Journal. This resulted in unprecedented levels of support and backlash.
9. Testimony, "Testimony to ODH against proposed healthcare rules," TransPreacher, March 21, 2024. <https://transpreacher.com/2024/03/21/testimony-to-odh-against-proposed-healthcare-rules/> Testimony I presented to the Ohio Department of Health in regards to rules proposed by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine that would restrict transgender healthcare.
10. Speech, "Nex Benedict Vigil," TransPreacher, February 24, 2024. <https://transpreacher.com/2024/02/24/nex-benedict-vigil/> This speech was given as the

- closing comments at a vigil outside the Ohio Statehouse honoring the life of Nex Benedict, a 16 year old non-binary student who committed suicide after being bullied for their gender.
11. Video, “Stand with Trans People,” NV Gay, January 21, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oc2ZOL8fXE> After the Ohio Senate overrode the veto of Governor Mike DeWine, removing access to healthcare for transgender youth in Ohio, NV Gay made this video with me and a dozen other transgender leaders and allies standing together.
 12. Sermon, “The Waiting,” Pacific School of Religion. December 13, 2023. <https://youtu.be/HmvXctrxBrE> This sermon was preached for Pacific School of Religion on December 13, 2023. It is a modern, dramatic retelling of the Christmas story from the perspective of Joseph, cast as “Jo”—a transgender woman. This illustrates the potential of using a transgender hermeneutic.
 13. Video, “BQIC Black Trans Lives Matters Rally,” December 3, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bO-oaLhgjuE&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Ftranspreacher.com%2F&source_v_e_path=Mjg2NjY Columbus, Ohio’s Black Queer Intersectional Collective invited me to speak at their 2023 Black Trans Lives Matters Rally. I spoke about the imago Dei in all people, especially in BIPOC. I said in this speech, “God looks like a Black transgender woman.” After this rally we marched and closed down High Street to bring light to the murder of Black, transgender people.
 14. Academic Paper, “Pastoral Care in the Transgender Community,” December 1, 2023, <https://transpreacher.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/pastoral-care-final.pdf> This paper explores how transgender people bring unique gifts and experiences to pastoral care that particularly equip them for this work. This paper is the foundation for the “[TRANSition Your Pastoral Care](#)” section of this project.
 15. Video, “Stonewall Columbus 2023 Donald R. Hallman LGBTQ Veterans Recognition: Joelle Henneman,” Nov 28, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRxpgRb3vY> In November 2023, I was recognized by Stonewall Columbus with an LGBTQ veterans recognition award. This video, which describes my experiences as a queer person in the military was shown during the recognition ceremony.
 16. Podcast, “The Christian Bear: Where Are They Now,” August 22, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYt2PUtCYsw&t=4s> On this podcast I was interviewed by Dr. Ben Huelskamp, the Executive Director of LoveBoldly, about how gender identity and expression impacts faith development.
 17. Webpage Post, Faith in Public Life, June 28, 2023, <https://www.faithinpubliclife.org/profiles/pride2023/> Faith in Public Life asked me to write a context for their video celebrating LGBTQ+ faith leaders from across the United States. In this piece I focus on “God as a Troublemaker”—God has caused trouble in our lives as queer folk so that we can go and trouble the world.
 18. Sermon, “We’ve Never Done It This Way Before,” June 17, 2023, <https://transpreacher.com/2023/06/17/weve-never-done-it-this-way-before/> Sermon preached at Pride Worship, June 16, 2023, at Broad Street United Methodist Church. This was the first in-person Reconciling Ministry pride worship service since COVID and the first time I publicly preached outside my own church since fully coming out.

19. Video, “Joseph’s Dress,” Transmission Ministry Collective, May 31, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5kqcO9pcoU&t=1s> Austen Hartke, Executive Director of Transmission Ministry Collective invited me to help lead this Bible Study of Genesis 37, bringing a transgender hermeneutic to the story of Joseph’s coat.
20. Speech, “Faith and Spirituality,” May 16, 2023, <https://transpreacher.com/2023/05/16/faith-and-spirituality/> I gave this speech at the Ohio Statehouse as part of a “Faith and Spirituality Day” designed to raise awareness of the giftedness of LGBTQ+ people in the face of proposed anti-transgender legislation.
21. Podcast, “Creating Space,” March 31, 2023, https://www.spreaker.com/episode/creating-space-joelle-henneman--53160415?utm_medium=app&utm_source=widget&utm_campaign=episode-title I was interviewed for this podcast published on Transgender Day of Visibility. In this interview I share my journey in ministry, growing the circle of God’s love to include people on the margins and me.
22. Sermon, “New Beginnings,” January 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g1SogFTpUM>. My coming out sermon at the United Methodist Church for All People. In this sermon I reflect on the Acts 8 baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch as an example of God’s inclusion of a Black, gender diverse person and of me.
23. Blog post, “Psalm 13 TRANSlation in honor of Club Q,” November 21, 2022, <https://transpreacher.com/2022/11/21/psalm-13-translation-in-honor-of-club-q/> Following the mass shooting at Club Q I reinterpreted Psalm 13 asking the question, “How long, O Lord,” in the continual face of violence against LGBTQ+ people. I read this psalm at several protests and rallies. This illustrates the use of a transgender hermeneutic to interpret scripture.

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