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Contact:

LGBT History Project
Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: **Pastor Lori Hatch-Rivera**

Interviewer: Mallory Slusser

Date of Interview: April 20, 2015

Location of Interview: Metropolitan Community Church in Harrisburg

Transcriber: Karin Carthins

Proofreader: Sara Tyberg (Sept. 2015)

Finalizer: Mary Libertin (May 2020)

Abstract:

Lori Hatch-Rivera was born in Rockville Central, New York on Long Island in 1958. After Lori's family moved to South Florida, Lori enrolled into what is now Palm Beach Atlantic University and graduated in 1989 with a degree in history. After about ten years of teaching, Lori believed God was calling her to do ministry work and obtained her Master's in Divinity at Florida Center for Theological Studies, and she is currently attending Lancaster Theological Seminary to fulfill her Doctorate in Ministry. She is the founder of an interfaith group located in Venice, Florida, and works closely with the LGBT Interfaith Coalition group and Equality PA. In this interview, Lori discusses familial issues surrounding her sexuality, her relationship with religion and the Metropolitan Community Church [MCC], as well as her social justice work within religious community in order to bring them greater awareness of LGBT identities. She also mentions future challenges for the LGBT community and her appreciation of Harrisburg's tight-knit community. Today, she is married to her partner Darlene and is a Pastor at the MCC of Harrisburg.

MS: My name is Mallory Slusser, and today is April 20, 2015, and I am interviewing Pastor Lori Hatch-Rivera, at the MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] in Harrisburg, PA for the oral history project of the LGBT Center of Central PA. Lori, is it okay for me to ask you a few questions regarding your involvement in the LGBT movement?

LHR: Yes.

MS: Okay. Could you please state your name and that you are willing to be interviewed?

LHR: I am Reverend Lori Hatch-Rivera, and I'm willing to be interviewed.

MS: Okay. And then, could you please sign the consent form?

LHR: Sure. Okay. [Puts on glasses, picks up pen, and signs consent form] Do you really need my address and everything?

MS: We can fill that in for you later.

LHR: Okay.

MS: All right. So we're just gonna ask you a couple questions here.

LHR: Just a couple?

MS: [laughs]

LHR: A few.

MS: Well yeah, we'll go with a few. Okay, so let's start with you telling us a little bit about where and when you were born.

LHR: I was born in Rockville Central, New York in Long Island, many years ago. 1958. What else do you want to know about being born? [laughs]

MS: I guess, go into talking about your schooling.

LHR: Okay, started school in New York as a child and ended up, when we moved to Florida. I did, I went to Palm Beach, and at the time it was called Palm Beach at Monte College. It's now Palm Beach Atlantic University because it's gotten so many programs that it's enlarged. Did my undergraduate work there in history and graduated from there in '89. Waited about, oh, ten years or so and realized that I wanted to do more in my life than teaching, so I went into Florida Center for Theological Studies to get my Master's in Divinity. And now attending Lancaster Theological Seminary to get my Doctorate in Ministry.

MS: Alright. And why did your family move to Florida?

LHR: My father was a—had diabetes, really badly, and it would affect—it would affect his fingers and his hands, and he would lose feeling in his ... and just said winters are out, we need some place warm to live. So myself, my two younger brothers, and my parents, we all moved to South Florida.

MS: Wow. Okay. And what was your family life like?

LHR: I was the only girl. All brothers. All my cousins were boys on my mother's side of the family. I had an older female cousin on my father's side of the family, but we hardly ever got to see her, so there wasn't a big impact or closeness between us, so it was mostly playing with the boys and very much a tomboy. I was very much into sports. Even in high school I was on the basketball team, the softball team, the—ya know, any team I could think of. My brothers and I used to be much closer than we are now. My brothers and I are no longer close because of being a lesbian, and... they've kind of shut me off.

MS: And I know on the page it said at one point that your brother attacked you with these anti-gay scriptures. What was your reaction to that?

LHR: This was right after—actually I came out to him by accident. Not knowing that MCC had their largest church in Dallas, Texas. And he was in Dallas going to Seminary at one of the Southern Baptist Schools and when I said to him, "Hey! I found a new church! It's called MCC of the..." and there was like silence on the phone. And I didn't know what that meant. Only to come find out he knew exactly what the church was and exactly that the church was meant for

LGBT community folks. And that was my coming out to him without knowing it. And then on his school break for the summer he proceeded to come home, came to my house, knocked on the door, had his bible under his arm, and proceeded to beat me up with what we refer to as the “Text of Terror.” Those six or seven scriptures that you find throughout the Bible that, if taken word for word just out of context, says that homosexuality is wrong. He would not listen to anything I had to say. Any kind of reply that I tried to make, I was told, “You’re being brainwashed by that church.” It didn’t apply to him and what he had learned during his time in a Southern Baptist Church. So, that was part of the difficulty.

MS: And what about your other brothers?

LHR: My older brother... we just don’t have much of a relationship, and that was due to some issues from teenage years that we don’t need to go into. My middle brother for the longest time told me he was supportive of who I am. That’s as far as he can[he] was concerned his sons had two aunts. That changed dramatically back in November when I sent out my wedding invitations. When I sent out my wedding invitations, the only person in my entire family to respond was my mother and one niece. And the only reason she responded was because I made a notation on Facebook that said, “Oh my gosh, Darlene and I now only have ten more days until the wedding!” And then it hit her that she had never responded to the wedding invitation. So, she called me up and apologizing, but I heard from not from any of my brothers, not from any of my adult nieces and nephews. So—and I still have not heard from my brother, my middle brother, since then. So I have to make the assumption that... that he was fine as long as I wasn’t getting married. Or putting it out there that I’m really a lesbian. So now we have nothing to do with each other.

MS: And then, it seems like your mom is at least moderately supportive if she wanted to go to your wedding. How did your parents...?

LHR: My parents were extremely supportive. It was very funny, ‘cause I, ya know, I’m there telling them, finally coming out to them, and I’m almost 30 at this point, and I still hadn’t come out to them. And so I’m sitting there telling them. I’m crying, and they’re sitting there ‘cause I’m so afraid of upsetting them and hurting their feelings and disappointing them. And my father pipes up with, “Tell us something we didn’t know.”

MS: Oh.

LHR: And then he proceeds to tell me all the other people in my family who are gay. I was like, “It would’ve been a lot easier if I’d known,” ya know. I have a cousin that’s a year older than I am. He’s gay. I have—my father’s uncle was gay. My mother’s aunt was gay. And it’s like, this would’ve been a heck of a lot easier if you all had told me that we had all these gay people in the family. But... some things you didn’t talk about.

MS: Well—

LHR: Especially then.

MS: Do you think your brothers are aware of how many other...?

LHR: Yes.

MS: Okay and—

LHR: ‘Cause we’ve talked about it.

MS: How do they feel about them being gay?

LHR: They don’t really have any—there’s very little contact anymore between my mother’s side of the family and my father’s side of the family. Moving to Florida caused a great deal of geographic distance, and then when my grandparents died, that was the connection that was keeping everybody together, and so that connection—and then slowly but surely my father being the youngest, most of his older siblings were all dead. So there isn’t—there isn’t the folks there to keep the connection going. And my father’s now dead. So there’s no one there to keep the connections going.

MS: Okay. Let’s see here. So, you said you spent time as a middle school teacher and then, I also saw you were a clerk in a hospital and an eye doctor’s office. So what finally just drew you towards wanting to be a pastor?

LHR: Okay. It’s—it’s a—a long story. I really believe back in my 20s that God was calling me to go into ministry. I tried to ignore it. ‘Cause at that point I was in a Southern Baptist Church, and when you think about Southern Baptist and women preachers, it really doesn’t work together. And at the same time that I’m thinking out, “Do I want to go into ministry? Is this really what God’s wanting?” I’m also dealing with the coming out process. And starting my relationship with my now wife. So all this is going on, and I’m thinking, this can’t possibly be what God wants. So, when I went and ... I had originally started at college to get a degree in Religion, and I changed that to history and got my teaching certifications. While I was teaching, there was a point in the mid 90s where I kept thinking again about going into ministry again, but things weren’t very safe in South Florida at that time for the LGBT community. So my partner was really afraid about me going into ministry and what that would’ve meant for our safety in the community. So again, I put it off and finally it got to the point where I would wake up in the morning and realize, “This is not what God wants me to be doing.” And every morning I wake up with that same thought: This is not what I’m to be doing with my life. And it got to the point that I knew that when I could not think about anything else but serving God as a pastor, that it was time for me to go to seminary. So that’s when I found this, very small... very, very, small, non-denominational, very diverse—ethnically and religiously—seminary in Miami. I mean, the—the president of the school was a Catholic Priest. The—my history professor was a Cuban exile and a preacher in the Baptist Church in Little Havana in Miami [Florida]. So it’s a very, very diverse school. And from then—from that experience, I was an associate pastor for seven years in Florida and then came here to become the Senior Pastor of this church four years ago.

MS: Okay. And what drew you to this MCC?

LHR: To the MCC or this particular one?

MS: Both.

LHR: Well, M—mostly the MCC, for MCC there ... when Troy Perry began the church in 1968, he had three points that he thought it was very important that we have in our churches. That one, it was a place where people would encounter God. It was a place where people could come and find family and find safety, and they could come and be the people they—they are. Without feeling that, “Oh my goodness that person’s looking at me. I can’t look too gay or act too gay. Or how do I not be gay?” And then the third one was for us to be engaged in social action. Darlene, who is my wife, when—back in the late 80s, a friend of hers at work—and she’s a nurse—said, “Hey, I found this church called MCC of the Palm Beaches,” because we were living in Palm Beach County, Florida, at that time. “It’s a church for gay people. It’s a place where we can go and be accepted,” and they told me about it, and I said, “I’m not going. It’s just a bunch of queers playing church.” Yeah, I actually said that. And so they went for a few weeks, and every week they would come back and tell me all the things that went on. And it—and the more I kept hearing about it, it was more like, “This really sounds like church.” And so finally, one week I said, “Okay, I’m gonna go with you guys.” And I went. And I walked across the threshold of that building, and I felt like I had come home. I knew that this was the place where I could be who I was and serve God at the same time. And no one was gonna run screaming and kicking because there was a lesbian in the room. The roof wasn’t gonna cave in. And... it was really through that church that I was able to extend the love of myself as a lesbian, but also the love of myself as a lesbian and a Christian. And it was through that church that I eventually was ordained. Well—not that particular one, but through MCC. Coming here to Pennsylvania in our system, MCC’s system, you’re not placed anywhere...you, when a church becomes available, they—they post it on the hiring page on the website. And you send in an application, and if they—usually a church will have what’s called a “search team.” And if that search team kinda likes your application packet, they’ll—well, like what we did is—they did a skyping interview first. So, I’m on my computer at home sitting at my desk, and on their end is this big row—circle of people who are asking me questions. A few days later, after that, they invited me to come up here and to meet the folks and to have another interview. From that interview, they invited me to come up and actually preach a service and have the vote—the congregation—‘cause it’s the congregation that says yes or no to the pastor. They actually ... what you do is, you preach a service, you... maybe you do a bible study, you have some kind of meal together, you spend time getting to know the people, letting them get to know you, and then they actually call for a vote. And they ask you to leave the room, so Darlene and I came and sat in here, chit-chatting and talking. They’re all in the sanctuary, and we knew it. Well, we knew it went well when we heard this cheer go up after the vote. So then they come in, and I said, “I guess that means you’re hiring me, huh?” So, the vote was at the beginning of—or was it the very end of January, and I came—I was here in place by the end of February.

MS: Wow. That’s a pretty quick process.

LHR: Yeah. Well, I had—I had been looking for a while, and you have to wait until a church is open, ya know—unless you’re really into doing church starts somewhere, and that was not one of my gifts.

MS: Sounds like a lot of work. Can you describe some of the work that you have done, so far, as being a pastor for MCC, either in Florida or here?

LHR: You mean like social justice work?

MS: Sure, yeah.

LHR: Okay. Well we always had fun every Valentine's Day. A group of us would go down to the courthouse. And we would apply for marriages licenses. Now, this was in Venice, Florida, and when you looked online for the vet ... for the marriage licenses, it would just say, "The bride and the groom need to come in person and apply for the license together." But by the time—the last time we did this, by the time we left, someone had already gone back to the computer and changed it to "The groom (male) and the bride (female)—

MS: Oh my gosh.

LHR: —must come and be in person." So, that was now their way to say, "Nope, we can't give you a marriage license, 'cause you're not male and female." So, there was that kinda—I'd done a whole lot of justice work through interfaith. I'm a founder of an interfaith group that's in Venice, Florida. I'm a group—a part of three or four different interfaith groups here. So, a lot of my social justice work is... within the religious community and bringing a lot of awareness of the LGBT people to religions that know nothing about us. I also work with Equality PA. I'm one of their—their faith folks that they have kind of on file so like when things are going on here, or—ya know, when there's time to get out and do a—a demonstration or go out there and do a press conference, they'll call me and say, "Can you be there and be supportive of that?" I also work with the LGBT Interfaith Coalition, which is a coalition of religious faith voices that speak out for social justice for the LGBT community. We are working very diligently on identifying all the churches, temples, mosques, religious houses of worship that consider themselves open and affirming. So, like when I get a phone call from someone saying, "Hey, I live such and such, and I'm really from this religion. I'm trying to find a church that would be accepting of me as a gay person. Can you name one?" I can pull out that list and say, "Well, here's a couple choices that you can use." And we also give out the list during Pride Fest. And things like that.

MS: So, how long do you say that list is? Like, do you think it's grown over the years?

LHR: Yes, we started out at one point, I think we had five churches on it where—I think our... last time I looked at it, we had 25 churches on it now.

MS: Oh wow.

LHR: And it's Presbyterian churches, there's all different churches. There's the Jewish temples in the area that are on the list.

MS: Oh, that's impressive.

LHR: So—and we keep working at it.

MS: And how would you say that MCC has been a leading voice in Central PA for LGBT rights and for social justice?

LHR: MCC, as a whole, internationally, has been a voice for social justice, for the LGBT community. Even so far as... just being aware. First, being aware of what has to be in place. A good example is we used to hold our general conferences, and these are international conferences, and we held them all in the United States, and we held them every other year. Well, there was a point, especially back in the 90s, where if you were an HIV positive person or had full blown AIDS, you could not enter into the United States from another country. Not allowed. So we realized what was going on and so, it was like, “Duh, we can’t keep having our conferences only here in the United States, because there’s a whole lot of people that can’t come.” So, now what we do is one year, we have it in the United States, the next one is somewhere outside. Canada, we’ve done Australia, Mexico, all different places. And, so that’s one way of being aware of the lack of justice, and of course, a lot of those laws have now been changed with time. We have stood outside of the buildings for immigrant rights, ya know, and picketed. Just about anything that goes on MCC is—MCC is probably one of the biggest and fastest moving educators of HIV AIDS, including starting programs that others have taken on. Trying to think of a specific example. Mostly here in Central PA—and I can only speak of while I’ve been here, our social justice actions—I—I’ve done a lot of work with Equality PA in working with them that—and bringing my church with me and coming as a representative of this church and—and a faith voice. Which is very important, because we have so many faith voices that are saying no to the LGBT community. It is so important for people to realize that there are other faith voices that speak positively of the LGBT community. And so why—so we then sometimes need to be as vocal as they are so that people know that there are counter voices in any kind of social justice issue.

MS: Let’s see here. What types of struggles have you seen the church face due to its willingness to be inclusive? And so involved, really?

LHR: There have been struggles both within the community themselves and outside of the community. 19... I think it was ’73 was a devastating year for M—MCC Churches. We had seven churches that had been attacked by arson. The mother—what we refer to as our “mother church,” which is in Los Angeles [California] was burnt out. The church in New Orleans... they were meeting in a room above a bar and someone set a fire to the building, and the pastor and many others lost their life in that fire, and that was one of the worst ones. So, there has—ya know, and—as I was saying earlier when we were—when Darlene and I were talking about me going into the ministry, there was still, you know, we used to have some of our bigger guys, lesbians and gay guys kind of walk the parking lot during the worship service to make sure the cars weren’t vandalized. So, that was from outside the community. And the—the usual racial slurs and [stutters] homophobic slurs and, ya know, things written on the walls, part of the churches being damaged. All those kind of things. But there is also—there was also a need for knowledge within the church of what it meant to truly be inclusive. And then inclusive just didn’t mean saying some of the right words, ya know, and not saying, “He forgot.” But inclusion meant that we remember all people of all races, of all economic backgrounds. That the LGBT

community weren't, aren't, just a bunch of middle to upper class white folks. There are people—LGBT crosses all social economic lines and... and this is still a growing place. Ya know, when MCC first started for the first five years, it was all male pastors. And it wasn't until '73 that the first woman was ordained. And then it was a while later before you got the "Trans" added to it. So it has been a growth process for—both internally at ... to be more inclusive of all people, and then also help to be part of the education externally for inclusion and acceptance of LGBT people.

MS: Just kinda going back for a second. Do you think as you were going through the process of being ordained that you experienced any discrimination from your fellow classmates for your sexual orientation?

LHR: Not at all. Florida Center for Theological Studies, they had no problem whatsoever. They actually had two campuses, one in Miami and one in Orlando. The campus in Miami because of its locale to the Caribbean, the majority of the students there were of—of many of the Hispanic countries. I was probably the only lesbian/gay person on—on that particular campus, but if you went up to the Orlando campus, the majority of those students were from the LGBT community. Because the—there are so few seminaries in Florida. But—and they met at a Disciples of Christ Church, and that's where they housed the seminary there, and I never had any discrimination shown to me at all in whole time I was at that seminary, and I haven't seen any at Lancaster Theological either, so...

MS: That's fantastic.

LHR: Actually, the Lancaster Theological actually—they have a Pride week and they invited me to do the consecration of communion for the Pride week. So, it's completely the opposite. They celebrate those in the community—in the school community who are part of the LGBT community.

MS: That's great. Okay. Let's see. Do you know what your plans are once you leave the church?

LHR: I really don't plan on leaving to the church until it's time for me to retire.

MS: Okay.

LHR: So... normal retirement stuff, ya know, probably traveling a little bit more, visiting family... for probably more, Darlene and I, spending a little bit more time traveling.

MS: Do you think you'll still be a strong advocate for social justice?

LHR: Oh, yeah. That—that's—that's part of who I am now. It's funny someone—someone said to me the other day that, ya know, I could just not be a pastor. And I said, "Ya know, being a pastor is not like taking off a hat. When I walk into your house, I don't take off my hat, put it on a coat rack, and say, 'Okay, now I'm not a pastor anymore.'" Well, I feel the same way about advocacy work and social justice work. It's just part of who I am. And that, when I see injustice, I speak up. And that when I see things that are—like I already have a number of items on my

calendar that's happening in the next two weeks that I know I'm gonna be at because of things that are happening in the community. So, that's still gonna be part of who I am. And doing that kind of work.

MS: Okay. And just kind of like down the road... [mumbling] What challenges do you think still remain for the LGBT community in general?

LHR: Probably the most basic challenge is still is full acceptance by—by the world at large... and that's still gonna be slow in coming. There are some religious sects that got nothing to do with LGBT people, and they see—ya know, they might say love the—hate the sin, but love the sinner. Well, number one, you classified me as a sinner, which means you already have one knock against me. And there—there are still places in the world that, if you're an LGBT person, they will kill you, ya know, so there are still places where it is very unsafe to be... to be an out LGBT person. So that's still the biggest challenge is—is gonna be worldwide acceptance as us as a people, and... and not as a deviant people, and not as, ya know—people that have—that need to be fixed, but just as people just like anybody else. So, that's probably the biggest challenge.

MS: Alright. Do you think we missed anything?

LHR: And you mean in your questions?

MS: Just anything you wanted to share with us?

LHR: [shaking head] No, I...

MS: ...in regards to anything?

LHR: No, not really. Probably, I really enjoy being in Harrisburg. I find—although it seems sometimes that we're... that our different groups are kind of isolated, when it comes down to the nitty gritty, we know we can call on each other, like when stuff's going on, I know I can call the LGBT Center, or I can call—ya know, I can call upon the guys—the leather guys in town. Or I know I can call upon this—these folks here, and we come together, and you see that with Pride and how many groups there are. And I'm very pleased to see the growing number of churches that are at Pride letting people know that you're welcome in our churches. So, that's probably the best thing I see. Harrisburg is—I consider it one of the best kept little secrets. You know, it's a small little town, even though it's the capitol of the state, it's still got a very much small town quality to it, and yeah, the roads might be a mess, but—

MS: Yeah. [laughing]

LHR: —when you get down to it there's always something to do here. There's always places to connect with people. And so it's a great place to... to live and be of service to a community.

MS: Okay, well, all right. Thank you.

LHR: Certainly, my pleasure.