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Sara Hart, Ph.D

RS 301: Religions in America

30 April 2021

Oral History Project: Erikka Ingebretsen

Erikka Ingebretsen was raised by parents that followed two different religions. She spent her childhood juggling being a Lutheran on her mother's side and Baptist, Southern Baptist to be specific, on her father's all while handling her own internal struggles of being a transgender woman that could not be female presenting until her later years. Erikka's mom was from Norway where the Lutheran religion is the only religion, so that had a heavy influence on her upbringing. Erikka always had a hard time with the Baptist religion because she felt as though they were very judgmental and that she "was not very well liked by a lot of [her] peers". She couldn't even have her ears pierced and still present as male without church goers assuming something about her gender or sexuality. The one thing she admired about the Baptist religion though was the freedom around baptism. Lutherans baptize their children as infants whereas Baptists wait until the person can fully comprehend what they are committing to. After years and years of going back and forth between the two religions, Erikka settled on Lutheranism, specifically the ELCA sector. She took a break from religion when serving in the military but resumed her faith after getting married and having her first child.

Most of Erikka's religious experiences have been in Humboldt County. Besides attending a few churches in other places such as the Bay area, Erikka has stayed mainly local. Her mother raised her at a church, once known as the Danish Norwegian Lutheran Church but now the

Calvary Lutheran Church, over in Eureka, CA near Winco. Erikka even continued going there after dropping the Baptist church when she turned 18 and graduated high school. She especially admired the way they did communion. There was something about taking communion on your knees that she felt was so humbling. Ever since then, Erikka has felt as though “taking communion on your knees is the only way to do communion”. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, communion has changed drastically for Erikka. Services are no longer in person, so she must find her own way to take communion. You have to buy your own wine or grape juice and bread but if you don’t have any, “you can always do communion with a cup of coffee”.

For the last 20 years, Erikka has been involved with Catalyst, a progressive non-denominational church. One of the many things she liked about the church was that she was not the only LGBTQ+ member attending. There were gays, lesbians, bisexuals, but most importantly, other transgender people. Their acceptance allowed her to feel comfortable enough to come out as a transgender woman. At Catalyst, Erikka plays bass in the praise band. Being front and center like that made it hard to keep her transition discreet. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Erikka would dress pretty androgynous but kept her toenails and fingernails painted and would even wear makeup sometimes, something hard to see from the crowd. Now, she does not have to worry about any of that. She can attend service wearing shorts, a dress, no bra, whatever she’s feeling for the day and all anyone is going to see is her face and that is only if she has her camera on.

Aside from how she has to dress, a lot about how Erikka practices her faith has changed since the implementation of social distancing due to the pandemic. For one, Erikka has the chance to attend a lot more churches than she would have if service were still in person. At 7:30 in the morning, Erikka starts her Sunday off by attending a Zoom service for her friend Brian’s

church, a UCC, located in Ohio. The UCC has a lesbian associate pastor which though it is not a requirement for her, having a member of the LGBTQ+ community in such an important position makes Erikka feel all that more welcome. When that service ends at 8:30am, Erikka switches over to Wilshire Baptist Church in Texas. Though she has had bad experiences with the Baptist church in the past, Erikka feels as though Wilshire is quite progressive. She especially likes how Mark Wingfield, the Editor in Chief of a very progressive news site called Baptist Global News, attends the church. At 9:30am, Erikka comes back to California and attends a service for a Presbyterian church in Eureka. She finds that the Presbyterians are far more progressive than Methodists, a religion she followed in the beginning years of her first marriage. The Presbyterian clergy “is open to LGBTQ people,” something important to making Erikka feel accepted, while the Methodists “will begrudgingly have someone who is a lesbian or a gay, but transgender people, no”. At 10:45am, Erikka wraps up her Sunday morning with a Catalyst service. If it wasn’t for COVID-19, Erikka would not be able to hop around from state to state attending whatever service she’d like.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed talking with Erikka. Our discussion went on for well over an hour and we got to talk about aspects of her faith other than what it has been like to practice since the pandemic started. I learned about how she takes the Bible as a metaphor and her interpretations of Adam and Eve, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the seven days of creation. I had the chance to listen to all of the wonderful moments that have reassured her that God loves her exactly the way she is. As a previous member of the Christian church and a current member of the LGBTQ+ community, it was incredible to hear from someone other than a cis straight man. Religion has always been hard on those perceived as “different”, so it was quite refreshing to hear from someone deemed as such who despite being an easy target for discrimination and

hate from those that claim to love God, has managed to persevere and grow stronger in their faith each and every day.