

TRANSCRIPT— REV. BELVA BOONE

Interviewees: Rev. Belva Boone
Interviewer: Anne Blankenship
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DISC ONE**1:30**

Anne Blankenship: Were you raised in a church?

Belva Boone: Raised in the church all my life. The church was actually instrumental in helping to raise me because my mother had to work. And so the women of the church, many of whom became my other mothers who helped to care for me and raise me when my aunt was unable to. When I was in Norfolk there was an aunt who helped to raise me as well.

AB: What denomination?

BB: Baptist

AB: Baptist. Southern Baptist or...there are all sorts.

BB: Actually we had a dual affiliation. It was an African American church, so we had a dual affiliation with American Baptist and National Baptist.

AB: Okay. Do you think that influenced your career decisions?

BB: I'm not the one who would say that being in church... [pause] I would argue that the people of the church supported and encouraged me to find the right path for me even when they didn't think it was the right choice. And as it relates to vocation, in terms of call, that that was clearly something that was divinely inspired and implanted as opposed to something that the church helped to birth.

AB: But they were supportive?

BB: Actually, actually I would say to people all of the time, my experience with the church was the exception rather than the rule. You know, the church that I was raised in has been and continues to be extremely supportive to me and has been. I've been out all of my life and so was raised by a pastor who affirmed everybody's sacred worth, including my own. And probably even more encouraging to me because he knew my mother's circumstances. And so that was a non-issue for me growing up in the church.

AB: So it wasn't something you realized later on and then had to confront with with the church.

BB: No, no, as long as I can remember, I've always, you know—my heart and soul have always been attracted to the same gender.

AB: Were you younger or older? About how old were you when you decided, or received your calling?

BB: I was in high school.

AB: Very early.

BB: I was about fourteen, fifteen. And very, very clear about, you know, the call. Because nobody in the room except for me. I probably was fifteen. And knew that that

was something that wasn't my own making, nor was it something that I could forever turn my back on.

8:52

AB: What led you to teaching for, you said ten years, before attending seminary?

BB: What led me to do that?

AB: Yes, if you had your calling before?

BB: I was very involved in a church. The church that I attended was very content being involved with the church doing what I was doing. It was a great place to hide from the call to pastoral ministry.

AB: Were you involved in lay ministry?

BB: On the weekends, worship coordinator, worship leader. You know, you name it, I did it. I was very content with that and continued to do work in the church that I was raised in as well. I was kind of between both churches at the time and was content with that. The rigors of pastoral ministry can be incredibly overwhelming, particularly in an MCC context. And so, I did very well hiding from it for some time. Caught up with me though.

AB: Did some aspect of ministry interest you more than others or did you just let opportunities come to you?

BB: I will probably always have an evangelistic thread that runs in me. I have a passion to lead people to a place where they can discover their sacred worth and their place, you know, at the divine table. And to take that journey with them, hopefully through my own story and committed to doing that, regardless who you are. And so that

will always be a passion; I will probably always have a greater passion for those who are the underserved, if you will, of our society, particularly the folk who have their own various struggles, whether it's HIV/AIDS related or substance abuse or incarceration, but working with folk in the midst of their circumstances for them to reactualize in many respects their sacred worth and to celebrate that. To not lose focus on them.

12:15

AB: Did something specific attract you to this church?

BB: No, no. I tell people all the time, there's no rhyme or reason why I should be living in North Carolina. Absolutely not.

AB: I was wondering because you have affection for Virginia.

BB: I just shared this with somebody earlier. If someone had asked me eight years ago that I would be living in North Carolina, I would have told them they were a fool. And I am who I am. I'm not apologetic for who I am and will never be apologetic. So being called to a place that is known for its conservative roots and fanatical systems of belief. And you know, it's an interesting place to be and at the same time it's a fun place to see people go, oh, never thought about it that way. I think a part of the call is to be able to, not necessarily challenge peoples' belief, but invite them to reevaluate if it's something they really believe or if it's something they have bought into as a result of what they have been taught. And so I spend a lot of time inviting people to rethink what they think.

AB: Excellent. So you see major differences between here and Virginia or D.C.-

BB: Well, I mean, culturally.

AB: Culturally, yeah...

BB: Culturally, in terms of the community and certainly coming from the D.C./Maryland area where certainly it is more urban, it's more *out*, in terms of people and more access to resources, organizations, ways to connect, network. Certainly there were vast differences between being here and up there. I would also go as far as to say, when it comes to issues related to faith and theology and belief in however you identify your higher power to be, that journey in many respects is easier for folk in more urban, metropolitan areas than it is in the Bible Belt. It's a challenge just to be out and live in the Bible Belt, particularly if this is your native home. And so the struggles are different and some of those struggles are further intensified when individuals realize that when they are invited to rethink what they think, they also have to deal with the reality that it calls into question everything they've been taught. And so that creates an interesting cycle of cleansing, if you will, that is sometimes not necessarily without pain, but is certainly worth rejoining.

AB: Of course. Do you think that is due more to the history of different locations or merely just that larger, urban populations are going to allow for more diversity and more connection with people within a similar group or-

BB: I don't know if that is always the case. You'll find some urban areas that just -they're tolerant, but they wouldn't be if they didn't have to be. And so it's not always the case. You're not always going to find a New York City or a Washington, D.C. or Baltimore, Maryland wherever you go. And even in those areas, you have pockets of people and groups of people who have their own systems and thoughts and beliefs that are contrary, as I like to say, to what I think is essence of the sacred worth of every human being, so I think that you can find it everywhere, but it just seems to be more

pronounced in some pockets of the domestic U.S., particularly in the South and this is one prime example. Right here.

AB: Certainly. And then there are also additional challenges of racial issues in the South.

BB: Sure, sure.

AB: Do you find that you have to confront those issues here in Raleigh as much? It's somewhat more urban than-

BB: I... whether or not they are blatant or not, I don't know, I wouldn't go as far as to say they were blatant. There have been times when folks in this area have confused me with Wanda [pastor of Imani MCC in Durham] and times when people have confused Wanda with me, so that's a subtle form of racism in itself. And so is it real? Absolutely, and she and I will joke about that from time to time trying to figure out who we're going to be today.

AB: That's funny.

BB: So it does rear its head. There was—when I candidated here at St. John's, there were folks who had issues with the fact that I was African American; there were folks who had issue with the fact that I was female. There were folks that had issue with all of that, had an issue that I was African American and female and that I wore men's shoes. So, I mean, you deal with it and it's the reality of the culture, not necessarily the DNA of the person, so you work to change the thought process and behavior. And for some folk, they get there and other folk, you turn them over to the grace of God.

34:10

AB: Do you have any comments on the inclusive language? Have you had any problems or challenges with it here?

BB: This is my deal with inclusive language. I believe to be inclusive in and of itself, by its nature, is to be exclusive. So what you're trying to do is you're trying to accomplish a balance. You're trying to, as I like to use the word intentionally, including language, where again there's room for you and myself, my church administrator, any of my deacons to come and bring their experience of the holy to the table without fear of having it questioned, judged or criticized and knowing that that experience is just as valuable as someone else's experience of God who for them him or her may be identified as Sophia, just as valuable, just as important. And that adds to the richness of who we are as a community and also speaks to, I believe, the diversity of who God is. So when we say we want to be inclusive, I think we set ourselves up to do the very thing that we try not to do.

AB: That's a problem, I think, that comes up in, well at least, any community that I've been involved in.

BB: And I have been in that place, you know. For several years I've taught that inclusive language component and I always start there. I always put my disclaimer right out there-that you need to understand that, you know, Jesus is historically male. We know that. And when we get to God, God can be anything and know that that's okay. And the okayness becomes even richer when we encourage people to discover who God is for him or her. So when we invite them to participate in worship, I'm not going to invite you to participate in worship and then ask you to participate using the God of my understanding because I've just shut you out. And so it's been an educational experience.

Even here, we've got folks who have some history with MCC, who have been members of this community for, one for the whole thirty years, some for ten plus years, and for them, they've kind of taken this journey around the importance of inclusive language. And then the new pastor comes and says, well, let's rethink this. And so it's been a stretching moment for them that has been good in some instances has given some of the saints permission to go back and reclaim some things they thought they had to leave at door. And, again, that's a part of what we offer here as part of ministry. One of my standup phrases here is that it really doesn't matter to me what you believe as long as what you believe is what you believe and not what you have been taught or force-fed. Otherwise, how can you justify what you believe? Somebody taught me. Well, how do you know they were right? I don't. Let's rethink. Let's rethink. And sometimes in the process of deconstruction, we can construct something even more beautiful. That's just as rich if not richer.

AB: That's great. Is there or has there been a history of activism, social activism, politically in the congregation? Have you or others led organization? Or has it been more on an individual basis?

BB: It is not anywhere near where I want it to be. We've always been on the forefront, MCC in general. We've always been on the forefront of social justice work. And that's part of, you know, our three pronged gospel, if you will, as a denomination. And, again, I think location, the culture in which the church is located, will have a direct impact on the degree to which local MCCers will quote unquote put themselves out on the frontlines and while we do have individuals who are active in social justice organizations, that number is few. And when it comes to major, what I like to call,

major, in your face, out there social justice work, those numbers are almost nonexistent, which is a burden for me. And, again, that's one of those moments where growing up congregations can understand that they have nothing to fear except fear itself. And we will get there. Hopefully, I will live to see it, but we will get there.

AB: What do you think is hindering it?

BB: We have lots of people in our community who are not out. That's the biggest challenge. They're not out for lots of different reasons. Two of the primary reasons are work and family. A great majority of our people here still have their mamas and daddies and grandmas and aunts and uncles and cousins who are still alive and still live in Raleigh or someplace close by. And so, they're not out to their parents and they're not going to run the risk of being outed, you know, by somebody else. And that's a stretching point. And having a pastor who's just kind of out there sometimes makes them stretch a little more, but that's a struggle. Folks, who on major holidays, you know will, out of obligation, you know, go to family and go through the rigors, and dare I say, the misery of having to do that obligatory thing. They're not able to find that place where they can fully accept, not reconcile, but fully accept who they are and celebrate that as a gift. And so that does eat at our degree of effectiveness to do that type of work, and so pastors end up being on the frontlines to do that work, which is not a problem, but it does take its toll.

AB: I'm sure. As far as work is concerned, there aren't anti-discrimination laws in a lot of the areas, in the state—

BB: Here? You haven't been here long, have you? There are all kinds of things that are not allowed.

AB: Well, that's what I mean.

BB: Yeah, it's...wow...man.

AB: It's such a bigger issue here than it would be in—I'm from the West Coast. I've lived here for about six months and it's a big shock.

BB: Well, yeah, if you've only been here six months.

AB: My friends didn't believe me. I don't think I realized until I was talking to the Edens and I came home and told my friends. They're like, "No, that can't be true." I'm like, "I think they would know." We looked it up online.

BB: Mmmhmm. It's unbelievable the lack of protection for queer people. Unbelievable.

AB: I mean, it's understandable, but...if you're going to be unemployed.

BB: Yeah, which feeds into why people stay in the closet. And there are folk here, members of this congregation, who in conversation with me (), I really feel convicted. It's about my own sense of integrity. I realize that I'm taking a risk, but I really feel that I have to do it. And so, you know, with journeying with people until they get that sense of peace with doing that and realizing that a part of that at peaceness is about divine timing and more often than not, when that at peaceness comes, the time is right and things work themselves out. That's been a good thing. Thus far, when journeying with individuals who feel compelled and convicted to do that that sense of human peace and holy timing came together at the right time and things go worked out. But, no, I tell people all the time, you know, if you're queer and looking to relocate, I would always check anti-discrimination laws where you're going. Got a couple of folk, you know, who are here from up North and really felt convicted that this was where they

were supposed to be, but had no clue. And having to work through that, but at the same time, I think one of the beauties that is happening, at least for these folks is that they're seeing, you know, the need for intentional social justice activity around that and so it does work itself out.

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