

# Rene Slataper

October 16, 2020 41:19

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Christian, LGBTQ+, community organizing, student ministry, mentor, COVID-19, Chicago Theological Seminary, San Antonio, Austin, military, anti-racism work, marginalized communities

## SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Rene Slataper

**M** Mary Wilson 00:01  
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson and I'm interviewing Rene. Rene, how do you pronounce your last name by the way?

**R** Rene Slataper 00:06  
Slataper

**M** Mary Wilson 00:06  
Slataper. I was afraid I was gonna say it incorrectly, and I realized as I was about to say it, but I've never actually heard it said, so thank you.

**M** Mary Wilson 00:18  
This is October 16, 2020, and Renee and I are going to be talking about his story and in the ministry that he is a part of and leading during the pandemic. First of all, Rene, would you share with those who are listening, some of your background and formative experiences that have helped shaped you to be the minister you are today?

**R** Rene Slataper 00:45

How long do we have?

M

Mary Wilson 00:49

As long as we need, I know it's a big question.

R

Rene Slataper 00:54

My name is Rene, my pronouns are he/him/his. I grew up in San Antonio, not really going to church at all. I moved to Austin very quickly right after college. I went to school in San Marcos and I've been here for about 20 years.

R

Rene Slataper 01:16

I got into ministry through a pride service that I had gone to. I was going to UMC church [United Methodist Church] for quite a while and really felt called to ministry. When I changed and ended up going the route of the UCC [United Church of Christ] - and so I'm a member in discernment right now. I'm seeking a ministry license, and seeking ordination as well in the UCC. I am at Chicago Theological Seminary going to school. I'm a minister right now in a college ministry called Lamberth Progressive Student Ministry. It's on the beautiful University of Texas campus and it's a wonderful place to be. It's actually a wonderful place to be during the pandemic as well. I really like being with the students. They teach me a lot every day as well about how to connect and how to use the technology that we have. It's a wonderful place to be. I really enjoy it.

M

Mary Wilson 02:23

That's great. Well, now I have a ton of questions. Okay, so first of all, when was the pride service that you went to, tell us a little bit about that.

R

Rene Slataper 02:32

That would have been probably 2011-2012 - maybe that was at University United Methodist Church. It was a beautiful service and they had the pride stoles there I remember.

M

Mary Wilson 02:55

What was it about the service that felt so compelling?



Rene Slataper 03:01

It was just lovely to be in the community. In a spiritual space with other queer people. They may not have the exact same story as me. I always say, we may or may not be singing the same lyrics, but we can have the same tune. That to me was my first experience and having that was just beautiful. I believe I met the pastor of that church that evening and had a great conversation with him and ended up checking it out. Man, I really dipped my toe in slowly for sure.



Mary Wilson 03:49

I'm pretty sure I was there.



Rene Slataper 03:51

Oh, really? That's awesome. So, I was baptized at UMC in 2013.



Mary Wilson 04:02

Okay, nice. Had you been attending that particular Methodist church prior to the services at the one you've been going to?



Rene Slataper 04:11

I had been going there for a while, just dipping my toe in.



Mary Wilson 04:16

So, popping in and out a little bit, sort of on the sly, if you will. What drew you to start attending it, just in checking it out to begin with?



Rene Slataper 04:31

Just knowing it was a safe space for me. I was already incredibly spiritual and seeking that experience. I just needed to know I was safe there.



Mary Wilson 04:46

That raises a question for me - what does safety look like to you?

**R** Rene Slataper 04:51  
Safe to be myself, to question myself and have that be okay, and safe to question God - I think was also really important to me. It's a Methodist church, so there's a lot of going on. To me that felt safe to have that framework at the time, to really question those things.

**M** Mary Wilson 05:18  
Had you had experiences where you had felt unsafe?

**R** Rene Slataper 05:22  
In churches? Yes. Oh, certainly. I had worked for a nonprofit for a few years and that had me in a lot of faith spaces. I worked for the marrow donor program [National Marrow Donor Program] and so we were asking for marrow donations, but we did it in a lot of places of faith. There were a lot of places I did not feel safe. You get to hear the message sitting in the back waiting to give your testimony and talking about what you do - that could be a little jarring in some places.

**M** Mary Wilson 06:11  
Yeah. You may have said already, and it went right by me - where did you grow up?

**R** Rene Slataper 06:17  
I grew up in San Antonio.

**M** Mary Wilson 06:19  
San Antonio, that's what I thought you had just said. San Antonio is a big place. What part? What environment was your life like in San Antonio?

**R** Rene Slataper 06:32  
I grew up on the northeast side of San Antonio, which is predominantly middle class. I would say it's a good mixture of races. The school that I went to was predominantly white, and then very close Hispanic, and then we had a few Black people at our school, but not very many. It's a military town [and] because of that, I feel like it allowed for more diversity in races, which was always really nice to go to school and just everyone was very different.

M Mary Wilson 07:32  
Did you ever get drawn to the military being in San Antonio? It's the military city of [the] USA.

R Rene Slataper 07:40  
Yeah, of course, but I grew up through "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and I came out at 14 as a lesbian. I didn't actually come out. It was actually just, "you look like this, you talk like this, this is what you are." I questioned that. I was like, "Oh, does that mean, I get to still dress the same? Like, are you just labeling me this?" And it wasn't a bad thing to a lot of my peers - it was just, "This is what you are," and so I accepted it.

M Mary Wilson 08:26  
When were you able to find your own way, as opposed to one that was, like —

R Rene Slataper 08:33  
Prescribed for me?

M Mary Wilson 08:34  
Prescribed for you, yes. That's a good way of putting it.

R Rene Slataper 08:39  
I don't think that happened until I was really allowed to question myself and question my body and feel like I had autonomy over myself, and that did not happen. It doesn't happen when you turn 18 and it didn't. It didn't really happen until my late 20s when things started to make more sense to me. I also didn't have the language for it, we didn't have that word growing up and if we did, it was not a good word. For me, I think that was about the time when I started to question [things]. Now, I think I had always in my mind known something, but I didn't know what that was and then when I learned the word for me, it was like, "Ah, that's it, that's the word."

M Mary Wilson 09:43  
Yeah. That must have felt good to have something that felt right.



Rene Slataper 09:51

It felt good and terrifying all at the same time - coming to terms with something about yourself, but the world does not view well is never easy, no matter what it is. For me, it was, "Crap, here we go again." There was a lot of that and it's a lot of the same things all over again. It gets easier, I will say that.



Mary Wilson 10:28

Good. Well, I'm glad for that for you. It strikes me that as a minister for a progressive student ministry, that you have a lot to offer, in terms of helping students come into their own identify with their own identities and so forth. Could you talk a little bit more about what you feel you bring to the ministry at UT?



Rene Slataper 10:59

I don't know that I bring any, like special brand of spirituality that's going to be unique that anybody else would not bring, but what I think I do bring is the ability for students to recognize themselves and someone else, and I mean, in a lot of different ways. For some, it might be, "Oh, I want to be in seminary, that's my next step. Tell me about that process." For some, it might be, "I was in the UMC and it didn't feel affirming and you're in the UCC — tell me what that's like." There's some of that - there's a lot of things that students might identify with - and I think what we're kind of talking about - is the identity of queer and Christian and, "How do I be both? What does that look like?"



Rene Slataper 11:58

We can talk about saying that is accepted, sure, that is welcomed, sure, that is affirmed, but what does that look like - to go through an entire process being affirmed? I think we're learning that. "What do those students need?" I'm learning that now. I have students that have, from the moment they came out, been loved, affirmed, encouraged, loved into ministry, and they're in student ministry, they're right next to another student who has an evangelical background and they're right next to a student who is an atheist.



Mary Wilson 13:00

That sounds like a very fascinating mix.



Rene Slataper 13:06

Exactly. It's not like the start of a joke, this is real, this is what happens all the time. So, their eyes are being open to these different ideas of what life could have been, "What could have been my lived experience?" What I do is I talk with them about that lived experience, and how it's helped them think about God, and help them think about their own theology and their own story in that theology. We want to see ourselves represented in Scripture, we want to be validate. I hope they find those things and I help them find those questions. I don't really know that I give them a whole lot of answers, but I help them. I help them find some questions that I think help them understand themselves and understand how to be both queer and Christian.

M

Mary Wilson 14:27

I think, you can correct me, I think it's true that Labyrinth is not necessarily a queer student ministry, it is for all students and yet it attracts a number of queer folks in order to have, as you talked about earlier, a safe space.

R

Rene Slataper 14:50

Mary, what's fascinating is that we've been working with other student ministries that are also mainline —these are mainline, these are not heretical, these are like the Protestant student ministries, the Lutheran student ministries, those are also predominantly queer kids.

M

Mary Wilson 15:12

Interesting. Why do you think that is?

R

Rene Slataper 15:20

Because they're in a place in college where they can question themselves and question the narrative that a lot of them have been given. They look at the neighboring churches and they say, "Wait, that's not their story, this is the tradition I grew up in. The tradition I grew up in might say one thing, or my parents might say one thing, but the tradition is being loving and accepting, and these people are cool and they're just like me, I want to hang out with them."

M

Mary Wilson 16:01

What is life like on the UT campus these days?

**R** Rene Slataper 16:05  
During the pandemic? It's bizarre, it is weird. Right now, it's almost midterms and the university would be just packed full of students and it's not. It feels like summertime when you're just walking through the campus and you may see a couple people here and there, but there's no one around.

**M** Mary Wilson 16:31  
How does that impact your ability to do ministry on the campus?

**R** Rene Slataper 16:37  
We aren't really doing anything on campus. I say that, that's not true - I would say we do about 25% on campus. What that looks like is we meet with masks on outside, socially distanced, six feet apart and we do meditation and we've had services outside or small groups - we can do that.

**R** Rene Slataper 17:14  
We can have the space and we've recorded, we've done both. We're recording, but we're also outside. It changes the way that we do some rituals - communion, we've had to change how we do that. Communion can only be done virtually. We're okay with that. When we do meet in person, we limit who can speak. We don't sing. We do have music that is played, we have someone that plays, but no one sings. The only people who are allowed to speak are me and Anna while we're preaching, or speaking, but we do prayers. What we do is we give each person some marbles, or we've used blocks of wood and we light a candle and everybody can place their prayer on the altar, as they'd like to. It's changed how we do things, but the sentiment is still the same.

**M** Mary Wilson 18:27  
Do you do some things online as well then? Do you have students who are not here in Austin, for instance?

**R** Rene Slataper 18:37  
Anything that we do in person, we do online as well, that includes meditation that includes worship - all of those things. We used to have a student lounge and that used to be a great place for students to meet up. It's not open, but it's not closed, either. We use it as a



food pantry space. Students are coming in and basically treating it like a grocery store, they'll come in and grab what they need. We even give them bags to take with them - they'll use it as a space to study - we really only have one student that does that because she doesn't have a space, she's in the dorms. Other than her room and there's no other place for her to go on campus. For us, that's pretty negligible. She's always wearing a mask, it's fine.

M

Mary Wilson 19:56

I was going to shift a little bit, I don't want to cut you off, but I was wondering — how has the pandemic not only affected the ministry portion, but then your personal life, too, in the midst of trying to be a minister? What is different for you?

R

Rene Slataper 20:28

My partner and I share a very small one bedroom apartment and we have two cats and a dog. He is a music director for the Paramount, which is a theatre company here in town. He does educational theater, so he works with kids and teaches them about music, storytelling and story writing.

R

Rene Slataper 20:59

He does this from our living room. I don't know if you can tell, but I'm in a closet in our bedroom. He basically has a little studio in the living room and this is what we've done to get by. We're moving soon, hopefully. It's been hard, personally, and trying to do your work while your partner is also doing work - it changes a lot. It makes — wouldn't say your personal life more difficult - it makes it more challenging for sure.

M

Mary Wilson 21:44

Yeah, that little phrase, "And it's fine," the tone is exactly the opposite of fine when you say that. It's more of a, "We're making it work, but it's actually not fine."

R

Rene Slataper 22:01

We're faking it 'til we make it, Mary. We're just like, "Yeah, we're fine. This is fine. The kitchens on fire around us. We're fine."

M Mary Wilson 22:16  
What do you do for yourself to navigate this fine world you're living in?

R Rene Slataper 22:26  
What do I do for myself? That's good question. I do a lot of meditation. I facilitate meditation. I run a meditation group, but I also do my own as well as my own practice, which is helpful.

M Mary Wilson 22:46  
Do you have a style of meditation that you do?

R Rene Slataper 22:49  
I don't, I do lots of different types. I always tell people, there's more than one flavor of ice cream, learn them all, go have fun. But I was I was trained to do centering prayer.

M Mary Wilson 23:10  
How is that helpful to you?

R Rene Slataper 23:14  
I think it's helpful to have a spiritual practice, whatever that practice is. I would say, it's a habit, and forming a spiritual practice, or forming compassion or forming whatever you want for yourself is a practice, just like working out, you're just like a muscle. You have to work out that muscle in order for it to actually work for you. I think for me, my spiritual practice of meditation is very similar to that. It's like a workout for me.

M Mary Wilson 23:55  
Do you do it every day, multiple times a day? Or what is your routine?

R Rene Slataper 24:01  
Every day usually. There's times that I miss for sure. I don't make it a thing that is punishable, that's not good for anybody - but in times of stress, I intentionally set twice a day [to meditate]. During the pandemic, that has certainly been a helpful practice for me

for sure.

**M** Mary Wilson 24:26  
What has been the hardest part of the pandemic for you?

**R** Rene Slataper 24:29  
Not going anywhere, we don't go anywhere. For the longest time, I wasn't the one going to the grocery store, so I really didn't go anywhere. As people, we're not meant to live alone - side note, I did a camping trip, a 40 day camping trip alone, like 40 days in the wilderness. I'm so glad I did because I think I would have had a lot more anxiety during this time - but I was able to kind of recognize and see like, "Oh, this is part of that process when people are alone too long [this is] what happens."

**M** Mary Wilson 25:28  
Can you give some examples about what happens when people are alone for a long time?

**R** Rene Slataper 25:38  
More talking to yourself, you know, those kinds of things, more rapid thoughts and you [just] have the time.

**M** Mary Wilson 25:49  
The picture in my mind is Tom Hanks in Cast Away, talking to the volleyball.

**R** Rene Slataper 25:58  
That is a very real thing that happens and we will do anything to keep our sanity. Our sanity is really based on a reality that we need people. When we don't have people around us, the effects of that are really powerful. Some of the things that they really do lead you to believe like, "oh, we really do need each other even though we know people are ugly and we're our own worst enemies," but we need each other. So, you really start to recognize that. Towards the end of it, things start to quiet down inside your mind. Things become very different. When you are coming back into the world again, everything is brighter and louder and it's hard. It's a bit much, it's an adjustment.

M Mary Wilson 27:04  
The senses are heightened because they've been, in some ways, suppressed. Is that a fair assessment?

R Rene Slataper 27:11  
Well, yeah, exactly. You start to realize, "Man, NPR is really loud" and you're bombarded by news all day long.

M Mary Wilson 27:25  
So, this need to be together - I'm very sympathetic to the desire that we all have to spend time with one another. How does that seem to be playing out with the students, in the ones you see on campus?

R Rene Slataper 27:42  
I'm glad you asked that because I'm a very optimistic person and I want to see the good in things. I've been able to see a lot of really good come out of this. One of the really good that came out of this is [that] the co-minister of Labyrinth and I - early in the year, we thought [about] how we were communicating, and what we were communicating and started switching more towards social media to communicate and that became very successful. [We realized that] emailing, or texting is not the way to do things anymore. We have a Discord server, which is similar to Slack or a communication channel. What we found is students preferred to interact that way, and it was really helpful for us. We started setting those up really early in the pandemic, and the students ran with it, and it was great.

M Mary Wilson 28:51  
They can all be on there at once and it's a little more organized - there's just a group text message [and] you can manage it individually a little bit differently than something like text.

R Rene Slataper 29:05  
It's also something that is passive communication - it is not a text message, which for some folks is impulsive to look at and respond to. When it's a Discord chat, you can easily just be like, "I can get to that later. It's really not that important." And the reality is, it's

probably not, it's probably a picture of someone's cat. But we wanted to give students a place to put those things, to have a place to put the picture of their cat that they were really excited about and to share that with others. It worked and they're really happy with it. They've gotten to know each other and make friends without ever actually meeting each other.

M

Mary Wilson 29:55

Do you think they're looking forward to actually seeing each other in person?

R

Rene Slataper 29:59

I do. I think there is some anxiety with that. We have some kids that have a lot of social anxiety, I think. To be fair, some of that has to do with not knowing if they can trust these people that are a part of the church, and again, "Am I safe here?"

R

Rene Slataper 30:42

They get to decide for themselves what safety looks like. For them, being out and being part of this community might look unsafe online. That feels okay for me right now. For some of them, online is great and then for some of them, meeting in person is imperative. So, we have those in person meditations — I can be with you and see you, and you can be a part of this, and for them that's very meaningful.

M

Mary Wilson 31:34

I'm going to change topics completely here, because you mentioned earlier, Chicago Theological Seminary, and I know that it is predominantly an online school and has been prior to the pandemic, or at least has opportunities there. How is school going for you during this [time]? Has it really changed any than what it was before?

R

Rene Slataper 31:58

Not for me. Well, yes and no. I'm at Chicago, but prior to that I was at Lexington, which was also online. For me, it's getting used to a different style of online. At Lexington, my classes were shorter, and everything was like this. Whereas at Chicago, I have one thing to do a week and I'm used to a much faster pace, but that's good to know. Maybe that means I can take more classes than I thought, which would be great. I could finish faster. It's a little different. I will say that there are students that I'm in class with, that were supposed to be in person that are online, that are

struggling and I feel for them so much.

R

Rene Slataper 33:13

I also I feel like there was, at the very beginning of the year, an expectation for some of the classes that I'm in - for them to be really rigorous and then they realized, "Oh, this is too much work, students are starting to complain about too much work." A lot of things became optional.

M

Mary Wilson 33:55

What I'm hearing, and what I have heard in other venues and seen, is that professors are also trying to adapt to - one, not just being online, and being appropriately rigorous, but the reality that people are at home, with their jobs, at home with their families, at home and they're not just working. One part of the day and taking class and part of the day and caring for their families, children, potentially another part of the day - it's all happening at once, which makes it much more difficult to figure out what an appropriate assignment [is]. It's not even just that it's online. It's the fact that it's happening in the pandemic and trying to figure out how to manage lives.

R

Rene Slataper 34:45

It's hard. I don't envy [it] at all. I had that conversation with another student, it's hard. The last seminary I was at, they were doing for quite a few months, a lot of pass/fail really, because of this situation, and they were doing some very interesting grading things. If you put in enough effort, everyone gets a B, but if you put in the extra effort, you'll get the A, if you put in zero effort, you're gonna fail - but you put in some effort, you'll get the B - which is weird, but, okay.

M

Mary Wilson 35:44

I've talked to someone in our local school district, talking about, "We're not going to fail an 11 year old in the middle of a pandemic. We're gonna figure out other options to get the information to get the education delivered in ways that are beneficial, but we're not going to fail an 11 year old in a pandemic when life is crazy." It sounds like that extends in some ways, not just to 11 year olds, but maybe 41 year olds, or whatever age it is in between. How are your students at UT feeling that? Are they having similar experiences as well?



Rene Slataper 36:33

For some of their classes, yeah, but for some of them, the only thing that changed was lecturing that's done online. The reading, the workload, most of that stood the same. They were already doing discussions, I believe online anyway, as part of their participation or what have you, right around class discussions - none of that was new for them. But for a lot of them, they've had some issues with professors not having lectures done or recorded - or recorded, but like sounded weird, all of those things.



Mary Wilson 37:29

I don't want to put words in your mouth, but maybe the summation here is - people are working very hard and it's not always going smoothly.



Rene Slataper 37:41

Yeah, that's exactly right. I mean, people are, doing [their] best, but that's not always gonna cut it, and the thing is, that needs to be okay, right?



Mary Wilson 37:54

Yes, yes. Well, I want to be aware of the time and your time in particular. I don't want to take too much more time. But I do want to ask if there's anything that we have maybe glossed over that you wanted to come back to or that I just didn't touch that you think is important to share, either about your personal story or about your ministry right now?



Rene Slataper 38:13

I think in the midst of the pandemic, and the midst of doing ministry and the pandemic, we need to revision church, everyone knows that, but I think it's revisioning also how we communicate.



Rene Slataper 38:39

What are we saying about ourselves or the things that we're doing, "Are those on brand for mission?" And starting to talk about those things and making everything really clear and understanding there's pathways, and understanding your direction of where you're going because, gosh, it [makes] a big difference - and keeping our community together and growing our community is really knowing how to communicate.

M

Mary Wilson 39:15

Yeah, and I would expect that growing your community in a college environment has some unique challenges because it's already transitory, just given the fact that students aren't there forever to begin with. We have unique challenges compared to say, a church that's your brick and mortar, here's our place and here's where we've been for, you know, 30, 50, 100 years. Ministries are entirely different in that regard, which is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you because I thought you would have a different kind of take on ministry than some of the other pastors that I've been able to talk to, and that's certainly true. What do you think is the most unique piece about being a student minister in this time in particular?

R

Rene Slataper 40:09

I think a lot of folks, if you're not worried about money, then you're doing your pastoral care calls and it's both things at the same time. I don't think student ministries any different, it's the same. We're out looking for the money and figuring out how we're going to keep our doors open once this is over - and then, "How are we going to see all the students that need to be seen also?" It's a juggle and I don't think it's any different, maybe the approach is different.

M

Mary Wilson 41:00

That's fair. Well, Rene, I want to thank you for joining me today and for sharing your story, sharing your ministry. I appreciate all that you've added to the conversation. Thank you very much.

R

Rene Slataper 41:13

Yeah, thanks.