

# Joanna Crawford

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Unitarian Universalist, Cedar Park, congregation, religious leader, cancer, sabbatical, Black Lives Matter, Montgomery County, liberal, marketing, seminary, Houston Graduate School of Theology, zoom, process theology, Musician, women ministers

## SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Joanna Crawford

- M** Mary Wilson 00:01  
Hi, I'm Mary Wilson. It's October 20th, 2020 and I'm sitting down having a chat with Reverend Joanna Crawford from Live Oak Unitarian Church in Cedar Park. Joanna, thanks for doing this. I'm so excited to talk to you today.
- J** Joanna Crawford 00:17  
Thanks for asking.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:20  
Yeah, I just want to start with getting a little information about your congregation. Could you give us a little insight as to what your congregation is like and what sort of things that you focus on as a group?
- J** Joanna Crawford 00:33  
The Unitarian Universalist Church was born in the Cedar Park, Northwest Austin area. They were founded about 27 years ago, so a somewhat new-ish church. With our denomination we are theologically extremely liberal. Our members are often very liberal in other ways as well, politically. We're geographically right at that edge of Travis County, which is liberal and Williamson County, which has historically been very

conservative. As people are moving out into it, it's becoming more liberal. Right now, we're at this point in time where there is a lot of tension going on. We're really aware of that. Our members really try to be active in the local community.

M

Mary Wilson 01:41

Yeah, I am aware of some of the tensions in the community because of course, my congregation is very near Live Oak. We have similar interest amongst the people that I was serving and the ones you serve. Could you identify some of the tensions that are going on in the community right now?

J

Joanna Crawford 02:06

So, part of it is kind of the cultural, social justice issues. We have members of the Cedar Park City Council, who have come out and said things like they're "praying against the witches in the community" that you didn't expect to be dealing with. I don't even want to say, it's not even like liberal conservative, it's farther out than that. We have some of those things kind of coming.

M

Mary Wilson 02:46

I would have to say, having served my congregation for 18 years, but we're stepping down in April - I had never seen that kind of language being used in the public square -that is present now.

J

Joanna Crawford 03:01

Yeah, the editor of the little local paper here, Hill Country News, last year, put out an editorial that said, "city council members are supposed to be boring." City council meetings are supposed to be boring, right? Because both your city council and Cedar Park, all of a sudden there was all of this drama, just not what you're expecting from there. That's one of the things that affects our community and affects us. Then I would say also the diversity. The racial diversity that is happening - that many of us consider to be a great thing that Cedar Park and this area is becoming more racially diverse. Other people don't see it the same way we do, and so, that's another kind of element going on.

M

Mary Wilson 03:59

Yeah, yeah. I have noticed that there have been some incidences of racial tension in the

area and especially in this time of Black Lives Matter. How has your church responded to that?

J Joanna Crawford 04:16

Probably the two biggest issues for us right now, and that have been our biggest issues for a few years, have been Black lives matter and then anything LGBTQ. Our members are often out at the marches, doing things like that. There was an issue about a year ago in Leander where they were going to have - it's kind of a common thing that's been happening around the country, drag queen story time hour. It became another big drama and our members were out there at the library trying to stand up for human dignity. We had, you probably remember this, for several years, we had kind of an old wooden sign and we had a rainbow flag right on it. And it really had been ignored for quite a while and then right about a month or so before the Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality, it started getting stolen just over and over. I mean, we just started buying them in bulk. Every time they would steal it, we'd put up another one. Then a couple of years ago, we got an order. About a year ago, we got an electronic sign. Now, the rainbow flag is on there, they can't take it down. We've got Black lives matter on there and really haven't heard much. I haven't gotten any mean letters or anything like that.

M Mary Wilson 06:04

M Yeah. Well, that's good.

J Joanna Crawford 06:07

J Yeah. Yeah.

M Mary Wilson 06:08

M Because I know that that can happen. Okay, so that's great. We got a little bit of sense of your congregation. I want to kind of go back and start talking more about you. Tell us a little bit about your life story and the things that have shaped you along the way.

J Joanna Crawford 06:29

J Okay. I'm somewhat of a unicorn in that I'm both a native Texan and a native Unitarian Universalist, which in this part of the country is pretty unusual. I grew up in the faith, a

liberal in a very conservative world. I grew up in the outside of Houston in Montgomery County, very conservative. And ministry is my second career. I was in marketing for a long time and creating websites right at the start of all of that.

M

Mary Wilson 07:08

I don't think I knew that about you.

J

Joanna Crawford 07:10

Yeah, yeah. And I will say, the marketing does still - it was right for me to leave the career. Because I was trying to get people to spend. It's not like I worked for anything nefarious, I worked for a jewelry company company, but there was still kind of an emotional manipulation that you do, it didn't feel right to me. I was pretty much still doing freelance, kind of graphic design and stuff like that, and raising kids, I'm a mom of four. It was in 2004, and I had gone to - I had actually become a webmaster for our denomination's district and had gone to our annual general assembly. Two months later, I was in seminary. I was living in Houston at the time and pregnant with my fourth child. And so I went [interrupted]

M

Mary Wilson 08:39

Perfect time to make a change of career.

J

Joanna Crawford 08:41

Right. Exactly. The seminary choices were somewhat limited there, but there was and is a seminary, an accredited seminary, called Houston Graduate School of Theology. The majority of is evangelical, but not a particular interdenominational. The majority of my classmates were black, and I thought that was an advantage. Also, I was raised Unitarian Universalist, but in my denomination the majority of the people who come to a huge church still were not raised in the faith. I felt that I needed some grounding in Christianity. Yeah, so started that, had the baby, took what was supposed to be a short break. Then right as I was about to go back to seminary, she was six months old, she was diagnosed with cancer. It's not just that that put seminary on hold. I lost my - there needs to be a word beyond atheism. I lost my faith. How could there be a call? How could there be, you know, if a baby could - I didn't even know babies could get cancer.

M Mary Wilson 10:15  
Right, right. I can't even imagine that.

J Joanna Crawford 10:19  
Yeah, I just didn't believe in any meaning or anything. She recovered. It took me longer to recover. At a certain point though, I got the really clear message of okay, "it's time to get back on the path." Went back to seminary and then right before she turned three, the cancer came back. It was towards the end of that semester so, I was able to finish that semester. Did what we needed to do. When cancer comes a second time, it's a lot harder, but I did not have to go through the dark night of the soul that I'd gone through before. I had found theological answers that worked even in the presence of a child with cancer. Eventually, she got better and I went back to seminary. Now, I'm a minister and she's a 15 year old band geek, completely normal.

M Mary Wilson 11:46  
That's great. Great. Well, there's no way that hasn't shaped your perspective as a minister then. Can you identify or articulate ways that that happens?

J Joanna Crawford 12:04  
I would say, first of all, on kind of the pastoral side of things - knowing that what you think is the worst thing that can happen, that you can survive that. To be fair, it wasn't the worst, right? She survived. I have friends who were not so lucky with it.

M Mary Wilson 12:25  
Yes.

J Joanna Crawford 12:26  
I think that there's something about knowing that you can go through something so terrible and survive it. Because sometimes I'm with a member who has just found out something terrible, and if it is their first time to really struggle with something like that, to be able to tell them, "you will make it through this," is huge. Because I remember that was probably the most powerful thing that was said to me was, I had a friend who coincidentally, she had a child that had cancer and could not survive. And at a particularly low point, if you believe in coincidences, she just happened to wind up on my

front porch. She sat with me while I cried and she said, "you will make it through this." It wasn't meant to be comforting. She knew that I probably wouldn't, if the worst happened, I wouldn't want to make it through that. But there was still something so solid in knowing that because I think when you're on this side, on the other side of the equation where you haven't made it through, you just can't believe that you'll actually survive. That's one thing. And then all the theological stuff, all the theodicy of figuring out, how can there be a god if a baby can get cancer? I had to kind of work my way.

M

Mary Wilson 14:13

Mm hmm. Well, can I ask what does work for you in that?

J

Joanna Crawford 14:19

Yeah. To me, it was, how we sometimes if we're lucky, we get those messages however they come to us. It was after she had cancer the first time, quite a while after she had recovered. I would take these long walks, just thinking. On one of those walks, I just got this really clear sort of feeling of, like God was talking to me. It's not that clear, right. But this really clear message of this is how the world works, that things can happen, and I'm so sorry. You need to know that when you grieved, I grieved. There was something in that felt, it didn't feel like my imagination. It felt real, and it felt solid. That was something that even now, global pandemic, whatever, it still fits with that.

M

Mary Wilson 15:42

Right. Right. Yeah. Can you say more about that, especially in regards to the pandemic?

J

Joanna Crawford 15:49

I know that that idea is often distilled down into this sort of, what do they call it? The clock maker idea, right? That God created the world and then was kind of hands off? I don't know what the answer is, that doesn't feel entirely like it. That's probably something that I still struggle with, and I will probably be struggling with my entire life because sometimes there are definitely things that feel like there is a hand in all of this. Then there are other things that, how could there possibly be a hand? I guess for me, in terms of justice, it was - MLK kind of made it sound a little nicer. It was a Unitarian, Theodore Parker, who talked about the arc of the universe bending toward justice. He was really clear about that this is a long way off. He said, "I can't see it by my eye, but I feel like the arc bends towards justice."

I tend toward process theology. That all works for me, this idea of that somehow there is a force working in us and through us, a seduction towards the good. In terms of things like cancer, that God works with and through science, not in opposition to science.

Mary Wilson 17:42

M

Right. I think we share some similar views in that regard. Well, speaking of process theology, let's kind of go down that path a little bit. How did you get introduced to it? How did that become something that was relevant for you?

Joanna Crawford 18:02

J

Yeah. I once heard a description of a process theology, or not really a description it was, someone said, "You really can't explain it without a thesaurus." That for a long time, I guess, I'm just not smart enough or it didn't do anything for me. Then when I was in seminary, I read, it was a short essay, by a Unitarian minister named Gary Kowalski about God as a verb. It hit me and I understood it. Then once I was exposed to sort of that overarching idea, I was able to go deeper into it. To me, it just kind of seemed sort of logical. It seems like a logical extension even in terms of the Christian idea of being the hands and feet of God.

Mary Wilson 19:10

M

Mm hmm. Yeah. I'm just thinking about a lot of different things because we could go down this route, talking about process theology, and I'm not sure that's what I'm gonna do for this interview. I want to get a sense of what it was like to grow up Unitarian in Texas because it's not a dominant tradition in Texas. As you mentioned earlier, so many people come to your congregation from other traditions and finding someone who's grown up in that tradition is unusual in this area. Tell me a little bit about that.

Joanna Crawford 20:00

J

First of all, I have to kind of define that. I was born in 1969. Especially in the 70s, really the 50s through the 70s, Unitarian Universalism was heavily agnostic, if not atheist. I mean, the people who created the Humanist Manifesto, the majority of them were Unitarian. I had that kind of going in my religious life. I lived in a very conservative area and I had the experience. If you talk to any UU who grew up in the south, we all have the same story - which is in kindergarten, having a child, a classmate, ask us if Jesus was our savior, and then being told that we were going to hell when we answered. The sad thing is, you would like to think that that has changed. I can tell you from raising my kids, nope. They are still

doing that in kindergarten. The good thing is, in my faith, we have learned better than we did when I was a kid. We've learned how to give our children help in being able to form answers. I can remember my son - the first principal in U-ism is about the inherent worth and dignity of all people. I can remember him coming home from kindergarten and talking about a particular classmate saying, "and I told him that I respected his inherent worth and dignity, but I just didn't believe like he did!"

M

Mary Wilson 21:40

That's wonderful [laugh].

J

Joanna Crawford 21:43

Right. Religiously, in terms of my peers, I really, I always felt like I didn't fit in. Then at the same time, and I've talked to so many people who grew up UU at the same time I did, that had the same experience. We were being raised by parents, by Unitarian parents, who said our religion is one where you can believe whatever you want to believe. Thank goodness we don't say that anymore, but that was what they said then. Then when we started saying things like, "well, I think I believe in God." Many times our parents in our church were not supportive of that. We grew up feeling like we didn't fit in at church entirely, and we didn't fit in with our peers entirely. That's a little bit - thankfully, things have gotten better on both sides of them.

M

Mary Wilson 22:49

Well, it strikes me and hearing this part of your story, and of course, the story with your daughter and her illness that you bring a lot to being a pastor. That you understand that sometimes people feel like they might be on and that has to be such a gift to your congregants, to have a minister who has that kind of empathy to their situation.

J

Joanna Crawford 23:16

I think it can be. I will say the one thing that I was missing that I had to learn from other people's experience was - I did not grow up - I did grow up in a faith where it was - where you were asked, "what do you believe?" And there were no wrong answers. Parents might look at you a little strange when you started talking about your experiences of the divine, but no one was going to say that that was a bad answer. In my home congregation, one time I had a friend, it was actually a seminary professor, who would come to guest preach



this one Sunday, and he'd grown up in a very conservative church. Then I had a member who had grown up, she said it was Church of Christ, but they looked at the other churches of Christ and thought that they were too liberal. And I'm talking church of Christ, not United.

**M** Mary Wilson 24:17  
Yeah, yeah.

**J** Joanna Crawford 24:19  
I happened to overhear her ask him, "how long did it take before he stopped waking up in the middle of the night and going, oh my god, what if I'm all wrong and I'm gonna burn in hell and whatever?" This was a seminary professor, right. He said, "when that day happens, I'll let you know." I had no experience with that dynamic. That was definitely one that I had to learn from others. And so, when someone comes to me and says that they have made the switch [to] Unitarian, often what I'll hear is, "oh it's the religion I always knew that I was, but didn't know it existed." They'll have a parent who is putting a lot of pressure on them because they - I can't say that I have the understanding of having lived through that, but I have been able to see how hard it is.

**M** Mary Wilson 25:32  
It is a difficult transition. It is a difficult journey to let go of some of those condemning beliefs because they get so embedded. Well, I'm glad you were there to do that. Okay, I'm going to change directions significantly because I see three guitars and a piano behind you.

**J** Joanna Crawford 26:13  
And the banjo!

**M** Mary Wilson 26:17  
Oh, I didn't see the banjo and the other guitar. Tell me about the musician Joanna.

**J** Joanna Crawford 26:21  
The banjo has not been, it has not been fully learned yet. That is my hopeful one up there.

I love music, but what I say if someone says do you play guitar, I'm like, "well I pretend to play guitar." When I was a college student in Texas, I'm pretty sure it's the law that you have to pick and play guitar. I've played since I was in college and written music. When I was going through all this stuff with my daughter that was a huge outlet, being able to put those things into music. My husband also has a musical background and we got musical kids. I have a daughter who, she's the one who has really learned how to play the piano, and she's 21. Then I have another one who is now the band geek, who is playing mellophone and french horn and really wants a bass guitar for Christmas. So it's just a part of my life.



Mary Wilson 27:39

And do you incorporate that into your ministry?



Joanna Crawford 27:43

Very rarely. I am almost phobic about playing in, I mean, it's crazy. I can preach in front of thousands and it doesn't bother me at all, but playing guitar in front of people, I feel like my fingers freeze. I did a couple of years ago because I had a sermon about kind of pushing - if you have received messages before, which I had, you're not musical, that kind of thing - to try and push through. I actually played and sang Fleetwood Mac's 'Landslide' because of that line about I built my life around you. The sermon was about the lies you've built your life around and I had a lot of people come up to me and say, "oh that was so great, we hope you'll do it again." I was like, "never." That's terrible, right? I wasn't listening, but if I do that, it'll be something completely away from ministry because I just need to keep those two worlds separate.



Mary Wilson 29:03

Yeah, I play the piano a little bit. Over the years at Church of the Savior, I was the backup pianist on several occasions, and my hands were never so clammy on the Sundays where I was filling in on the piano. I can get up and talk in front of thousands of people, but playing piano for people to sing along was a whole different story. So yeah, I get you. I'm right there with you.



Joanna Crawford 29:39

It's something that is more for me. It's actually kind of nice to have something that's just for you.

M

Mary Wilson 29:46

I'll sit down here at home and play and just whatever I want and can make whatever mistakes I want and who's it going to impact? No one, you know? Yes, that's a me thing. Well, I want to just think through all that we've talked about and simply ask you if there's anything else that you feel like would be good for people to know that we've either skimmed over or we skipped because we moved on to something else. What else needs to be shared here that I haven't specifically asked?

J

Joanna Crawford 30:24

Yeah. One of the interesting things that you and I both experienced is, what does it mean to be a woman minister in Texas?

M

Mary Wilson 30:36

Oh, yes. Have you gotten the letters with with pastor in quotes?

J

Joanna Crawford 30:42

Oh, I have not. I know you have, I have not. I mean, maybe? I don't know. Maybe I have and I just blew it off. No, what I have had is going to meetings where there's other clergy and the male ministers are "Reverend" and I'm "Joanna."

M

Mary Wilson 31:04

Ah, yes, of course.

J

Joanna Crawford 31:07

Definitely having people walk into the church and asking, even though they knock on my door where it says, "senior minister Joanna Crawford," and I opened the door and they look at me, and they go, "can I speak to the minister?" I also have had people who, especially women with daughters, who come to the church and the first thing that attracts them is that it was a woman's name. They want to show their kids that. Before the pandemic, I had a tradition of every Friday, I would put on the clerical collar with a little rainbow pin. It wasn't that I would do something so much - a lot of times I would just be working on a sermon. I would go somewhere in public just so people could see that. I can't even tell you how many times I've had someone, especially Catholic, people who grew up, women who grew up Catholic, who really loved seeing a woman in the collar.



Mary Wilson 32:23

Yeah, representation matters. Well, speaking of the pandemic, how are things going during the pandemic for you personally and for your congregation?



Joanna Crawford 32:37

They're going really well. I would say because of a whole lot of work, right? Boy, talk about how our paths take us through some interesting things. My first ministry internship was with a church that was exclusively online. And we started, it had been a church by mail kind of thing for decades and they hired me as the intern. We just kind of said, "okay, we're going to do online worship." We had no idea what we were doing and so, it was just a matter of learning it as we went. That was great.



Mary Wilson 33:24

You've already done this before? [laugh] The ministers were just like, we're just making this up as we go?



Joanna Crawford 33:26

Honestly, yeah. March 12th was when I sent an email to our board and said, "we got to shut down, here's why." That Sunday, we did our last in person one. The following Sunday, we had an online service. In fact, I have to confess, I think I actually had a video from eight years ago that I used for the first one just to buy me some time to get everything set up. I mean, I'm just so incredibly grateful. I can't imagine trying to do this and learn it on the fly. And people have been great, like we just had our annual stewardship. We have families that have lost jobs, and other people stepped forward, and we actually wound up higher in budgets than a year ago. But it's really hard. Our church gets about a third of its income from rentals. We have a couple of long-term renters that are still with us, but for the most part, that ended. Our numbers, it's hard, but our members are great. They set up an online trading post, a spreadsheet, in those early days, so that if you couldn't find toilet paper somewhere, and someone else had more toilet paper, they would bring it over.



Mary Wilson 33:38

Oh, that's great.

J Joanna Crawford 35:07  
A lot of the stuff like that has been strengthening. And the fact that our members keep saying, "we're so grateful you're doing this." I have these older members who had never zoomed before, right, and considered the internet to be the stuff of the devil, not that Unitarian Universalist is the devil. They got on and they learned how to do it, so I think we're doing okay.

M Mary Wilson 35:38  
Yeah. Are you finding any fatigue as the months drag on, seven months in now?

J Joanna Crawford 35:45  
The members or me?

M Mary Wilson 35:47  
Both. Doing things online and just, I just would rather see people in person and I'll wait till that can happen or?

J Joanna Crawford 35:56  
We lost surprisingly few. I think we lost, we only had one family that said - and they were fairly new - they said, "we don't already have the relationships." I can tell that it is affecting us. I can tell it in our meetings. And the biggest thing has been with the kids. It is so hard to do religious education right now because they are online five days a week for hours. When we say "hey come on Sunday and get on zoom." They're like, "please no." So we're trying to figure out how to best do that.

M Mary Wilson 36:39  
Yeah. Well, and that's kind of what I was getting at. Are you finding a zoom fatigue of sorts between kids at school and parents working and how many meetings can you go to?

J Joanna Crawford 36:53  
Interestingly, for the social stuff, it seems to still be working. We have a weekly staff lunch with the minister that I do online, we have a senior coffee. And people are showing

up to that and expressing appreciation for it. I don't know why that works better and the meetings are harder. Maybe part of it is simply that people are having to do meetings with their actual jobs and so, it's harder to be really clear: this is my church life, not my business.

M

Mary Wilson 37:35

Right. Right. Wow. Before we started recording, you had mentioned that you were supposed to go on a sabbatical on April 1st, how's that working out for you?

J

Joanna Crawford 37:50

You know how there's moments in time where you can look back and it's like a movie you can remember? I was doing all the stuff that you do to prepare for sabbatical, writing the things of why we do this. And our intern minister was going to transition and be our sabbatical minister. I was getting all that set up and I can remember at the start of March, sitting at one of our meeting tables with other church leaders, and saying, "yeah we're hearing about this thing and I'm setting up a file with some videos in case we need to not do church for a couple of weeks." I remember saying, "okay, but if this is the zombie apocalypse, like Wu Han, I just won't go on sabbatical," and all of us laughing. Well, I didn't. Our sabbatical minister became assistant minister, which was wonderful to help us kind of get started before she left and started doing CPE. We just had a budget meeting because we needed to be putting our budget together for 2021. The president said, "okay, so what about sabbatical?" Because now it's just me, I'm the only minister.

M

Mary Wilson 39:26

Yeah.

J

Joanna Crawford 39:27

I said, "okay, I can't go on sabbatical while this is going on." Once we're able to be back together again, I'm going to need to be there for the first few months. I said, "let's try and put some money back and maybe go in 2022 because I'm really going to need a sabbatical."

M

Mary Wilson 39:48

You're gonna need a sabbatical in 2022, definitely [laugh]. I'm sorry you didn't get to

take it. I'm hopeful that 2022, you will be able to do that. Oh my goodness. Well, Joanna, thank you for your time today. I really appreciate it, really appreciate hearing the stories from your life and your congregation. So thank you very, very much.



Joanna Crawford 40:15

Thank you for asking.



Mary Wilson 40:16

All right.