

# Karen Thompson

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Pandemic, pastor, lesbian, hope, religious leader, LGBTQ, Metropolitan Community Churches, social distancing, Zoom fatigue, mental health, addiction, American Sign Language, unsheltered population, clergy, congregation, Uprising Austin, Central Presbyterian Church

## SPEAKERS

Karen Thompson, Mary Wilson



Mary Wilson 00:02

Hi, my name is Mary Wilson. I'm interviewing Karen Thompson, Pastor of Uprising Austin. It is October 6th, 2020. Welcome, Karen, good to see you. [It's] very good to see you. My first question is one that will help us get a little background information. I'm wondering if you could share some stories about yourself that helped describe formative times in your life that have eventually led you to be the pastor that you are today?



Karen Thompson 00:36

I was raised in the church, in a Lutheran Church, ELCA, and that was very important to me. I lived in a very small town. I grew up in Pflugerville and it was very small. My friends were, we went to school together, we went to church together. All of our lives, our whole lives were intermingled. Church was a huge part of my life - being part of the youth group. And then, that continued when I went off to college and I was involved in athletics in action, and various types of youth group work, even when I was in college. I taught public school for 16 years before I decided to go to seminary. When I went to seminary, I entered in the Master of Arts program, prepared to just get a degree in theology for some other work that I was doing. I thought it would be good for my credibility and some other work that I was doing. I was a member of Central Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. At that time, I was not out. I am a lesbian, and I was not out. I was part of this church and I was going to seminary to get a Master of Arts degree. I had experiences in seminary that convinced me that yes, absolutely, I wanted to be a pastor, felt called to be a pastor. With the support of

Central Pres, I switched from the Master of Arts program to the MDF program, and for several years, moved towards ordination. At that time, the Presbyterian Church was not ordaining out gay people. We all knew that it was a possibility that my move towards ordination could come to an end, but we just kept working. Eventually, I was approved for ministry in Mission Presbytery, but that was immediately appealed and there were various hearings and cases on that. By the time that it got to the highest court, the permanent Judicial Committee of the Presbyterian Church, I had decided that I had done as much as I could for unity, for opening the way for LGBT people to be your ordained. I made the move to Metropolitan Community churches. I was ordained in Metropolitan Community churches that what was formerly, what was at that time, MCC Austin. I was ordained in 2007, and became a senior pastor there in 2008 and that's where I still am.

M

Mary Wilson 03:44

Okay. Would you say any part of that journey was painful?

K

Karen Thompson 03:50

I would say, a lot of it was, but not overwhelmingly so. Definitely, the different painful times were worth it, all of it. All of it lead to who I am as a pastor. Here's how I phrased it - when I was standing before Mission Presbytery, being examined for ordination, I used the line from the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. They were talking about Aslan, the lion, and the question was, "Is he safe?" The answer was, "No, of course he's not safe, but he's good." What I tied that to my experience of ordination that following your call, following God, is it safe? No, but God is good and so, ultimately, that's what came out of it for me. I believe it made me a more compassionate person. I believe it prepared me for some of the things that we go through as pastors that seminary can't possibly prepare you for. Yes, there was pain, there was anguish, there were some dark nights, but ultimately, it has been a blessing.

M

Mary Wilson 05:31

Has it helped you with people coming into your congregation who have experienced past pain with church life and even rejection, if that's not too strong of a word?

K

Karen Thompson 05:42

Yes, definitely, I think so. Metropolitan Community churches have - their churches turn

52 years old today, October 6th. 52 years ago, they were begun by a [inaudible audio] Pentecostal pastor named Troy Perry. MCC churches have literally saved lives, not just spiritually, physically saved lives. People hearing for the first time in their entire lives that God loves them, even if they are LGBTQ people. Many of those churches, as you can imagine, were and continue to be almost triage centers. That terribly wounded people, people who have been cast out of churches, cast out of their families, lost jobs, lost their children, they come to these places, and sometimes the wounding is so deep, and the pain is so deep that there's never an invitation to heal and to grow. We will be your sanctuary, we will be safety for you, we will be your reminder that you are loved, and that you are valuable. One of the things that we are very intent upon at Uprising is inviting people into a wholeness, inviting them to come out in all of the ways that they can, to bring themselves to light, to take spiritual growth very seriously, to begin to heal in all kinds of ways. I think my experience made me both empathic with that, with that experience. I know how it feels to be cast out of the church. I know how it feels to lose family members and be afraid for a job. I also know about the freedom that's on the other side. I think that's helpful with me. Our congregation is about 90% LGBT.

M

Mary Wilson 08:22

Right, right. I'm going to interject maybe a little bit into our friendship here because I know you have a tattoo that has the word hope on it. Can you share a little bit about that, and what that means to you?

K

Karen Thompson 08:40

Well, it's not just hope, but it is rainbow colored, so red, orange, yellow.

M

Mary Wilson 08:47

It seemed like it fit this part of the conversation and I was wondering if you could share.

K

Karen Thompson 08:53

I had started seminary and I was going through the process and I was at a bookstore and they had these bumper stickers and they were hope in these rainbow colors and I said, "Oh my god that's it." That's the first sticker I've ever been willing to put on my vehicle because I just think it's such a commitment to put a bumper sticker on. I bought not only that one, but I bought all the ones that they have because I wanted to have one all the rest of my life, and I wanted to be able to give them away because hope is my thing. This rainbow hope just said what I needed to say. Just before I was ordained, I was part of the clergy

intensive process that was the last step before being ordained at MCC. I took that bumper sticker into a tattoo parlor and said, "I want this." It appalled my children. It was 14 years ago now. It appalled my children, who at that time had no tattoos themselves. I'm not sure if they do or don't at this time, but yeah, that's my thing.

M

Mary Wilson 10:18

Yeah. Well tell me more about what hope means to you. What does it look like? Do you have a definition that you think of when you think of the word hope?

K

Karen Thompson 10:30

I think of a lot of things - abide by faith, hope and love, I think of all that. I think of Christian faith being founded in the hope of the resurrection, it's not the end, we can be transformed to the image of Christ, all of those things. One of my favorite quotes about hope comes from Jim Wallace, who I think I've got it right, I could have conflated several quotes or whatever. Basically, Tthat hope is looking at the evidence and then waiting for the evidence to change." I don't want it to be a naive hope. I want it to be an informed hope, but I just believe that ultimately, love prevails.

M

Mary Wilson 11:30

Are you drawing upon that? Recently?

K

Karen Thompson 11:39

I am. I decided long ago, I was thinking, "how should a pastor sign a letter?" I was thinking, "alright, sincerely faithfully in Christ," all these all these possibilities. I settled long ago on, "always in hope," and that's how I sign things. That's how I sign off on things, write to our congregation. For me, that it's never the end of the story.

M

Mary Wilson 12:18

Yeah, like that, sort of meaningful way for me to think about our faith as well. The end of the story is yet to be written and the worst day is not the last day. Well, let me move a little bit into the pandemic time and how it is impacting you personally and professionally? We'll talk more about how it's impacting your congregation, but how is it impacting you just on a personal level first?

K

Karen Thompson 12:56

I think I don't even really know yet what the whole impact of it. The immediate thing was just, how do you be a pastor without people? How do you be a pastor without people? That's so important to me is that life together that I know happens - it happens Sunday to Sunday, it happens Wednesday to Wednesday, we are living life together. Oh, so, so distressing for me. I try to be honest with my congregation in all things and at the beginning there were many times when I would say during service, "I miss you." I'm not sure what to do or how to do this, but I miss you. I immediately set up some things like, at first I was doing zoom calls with me for anybody that was lonely or had questions or just wanted that relationship with the pastors at eight o'clock every night except Sunday night. I took Sunday nights off. We started to build some community that way and I have a wonderful group of deacons at our church and we started talking about different ways that we could reach out to the congregation. One of the things that's really hard is you don't know who needs what. You don't know who has great needs that you're not hearing from. You don't know how many times you need to reach out until someone really trust that it's okay to share my pain or my loneliness or my vulnerabilities. It's just that knowing I'm a hugger and I miss that. I have taken hope from my friends reminding me that really social distancing is a misnomer, it's physical distancing. That we can continue to be socially and spiritually connected. I have a wonderful staff who keeps me encouraged and keeps me supported and is learning new things to make sure that we can make our - we decided not to do recorded worship. We do live worship on Facebook Live. It limits us in some ways, but I think that real time connection is so important. There hasn't been a day, I don't think there's been a Sunday during this pandemic, when I would have felt completely comfortable with my sermon, and with the prayers and with other portions of the liturgy, if I had recorded it even on Friday. Things change.

M

Mary Wilson 13:26

They do. They change from Friday to Sunday morning. There are certainly times I adapted my sermons on Sunday mornings because of what happened overnight. I know some churches are doing some things that are more pre-recorded and trying to connect them at different times. I want to go back to one of the words you said about the staff and the deacons about being encouragers. Do you feel like as a minister, and as a senior pastor, you are drawing upon that more now than you have at other times? What I'm trying to get at is the distinctiveness of this time. Is it distinct to this time and the ways that you are using that?

K

Karen Thompson 17:05

Yes, I've never been afraid to show that I'm human. If I'm physically ill, if I'm emotionally mentally tired, whatever, I've never been afraid to be open about that. But in this time, I just want to be strong in the ways that I can be strong. I want to be some normalcy for people. I want to be the person they've known me to be that they can count on, that they're going to see me next week, and they can expect the same thing from me. In ways, I'm leaning on that more. I'm letting and encouraging people to do the things that they need to do for their mental and emotional health, reminding them constantly, and then they in turn, remind me that we're in a pandemic. You might feel less productive or you might be putting things off or changing your priorities, and we sort of remind each other of that it's okay. I've really strengthened my relationship with a few other clergy persons that we just have come to depend on each other so much. We talk at least once a week. We're sharing both personal and ministry concerns.

M

Mary Wilson 18:41

Yeah, yeah. Well, I had a thought, now it's gone. Maybe it'll come back. We are getting older [laugh]. In terms of establishing community, and this actually does kind of go back a ways to talking about how to be a pastor without people. In thinking about the way you set up zoom calls, have you found any zoom fatigue creeping in at this point? Are you still doing eight o'clock every night?

K

Karen Thompson 19:19

No, I pretty quickly dropped Saturday night. That was really hard in the mornings. Then I dropped Thursday night - and one of the people that was part of that group picked it up and they started doing a game night on Thursday sometimes. Our deacons meet every month, and our deacons do a lot at the church. We meet on the first Sunday of the month. This Sunday, this past Sunday, October 4th, we decided not to meet because of literally zoom fatigue. Nobody needs one more zoom. There's nothing I felt like we could offer, devotional, encouragement, sharing time, maybe something fun. There was nothing I felt like we could offer that was more important than a break.

M

Mary Wilson 20:17

Well, I think that's important to recognize, isn't it? When we need a break, when we need rest, when we need downtime. Is that more difficult for you during this time to recognize when you need breaks, and when yours is out?

K

Karen Thompson 20:34

What I've noticed is, I'm a person who generally has very good work life balance, and a person who generally has very good boundaries in place. When I'm at work I'm working, when I'm at home I'm homing, right? What I've found is that everything seems to bleed into each other. This could just be my feeling, but I don't feel like - I feel like it's a sign of times. I'll get, say, a text from a congregant or board member about an item of business after 10 at night or early in the morning or just, you know. I'll tell a little story if I have time, if you'd like, about sort of how that happened. When our last Sunday in person service was March 15th, and I know that because my third grandchild was born on March 15th and so, I left the service to go to the hospital. Luckily, I got into the hospital. I was the last visitor period, and they shut it down. We started hearing right away that there were going to be these shelter in place orders, that people were going to have to stay at home. My first thought was, "If I have to stay at home, what happens at the church?" I thought that stay at home was going to be strictly enforced. I thought that things might have, they might check your driver's license to see if you were at the grocery store closest to your house, or that there might be checkpoints on roads to make sure you weren't doing unnecessary travel, all of that. I said, "I cannot be away from the church. We have hungry people to feed, we collect food for the homeless and clothes, and all of those things." I talked with my board, and I literally moved into the church for three months. A big part of it was so that there was someone there to take food deliveries, to get food out to people that needed it, and all of those things. The other biggest part was, I could not accept the church shut down. I could not accept no lights on, parking lot empty, signs on the doors. I couldn't. For me, the church is a lighthouse, is a beacon. I felt like the lighthouse keeper needed to be there. It was an amazing time to have both that relationship with our buildings. The church is not the building, the church is the people and God's work through the people. It was a blessed time, almost a sabbatical time, and I found that people would stop by because they heard that the pastor was there. They saw my truck there and people not even part of our congregation would say, "what do we do? Are you giving out blessings?" It was really a blessed time.

M

Mary Wilson 24:19

Yeah. Well, the other thing about your location, it is hidden from the road by a lot of trees and growth and so on and there's some security issues, right?

K

Karen Thompson 24:33

Oh, absolutely. It could invite whoever or whatever. I was on call.

M

Mary Wilson 24:42

Yeah. After I left my position at Church of the Savior at some point this summer, there was a break in. It's very open and public and so on, but it goes to the point, people could take advantage knowing that a physical presence is not the same as it has been. I don't really know any more than that. I don't know if anything was taken or what damage was done. I just kind of heard it through the grapevine, sort of speak. It's an unusual time. I want to get back to the space idea too because I'm thinking about Kathleen Norris, and the way she writes about physical location and the spirituality of that. I certainly experienced that in my churches space. I mean, I loved going out to the sanctuary and just sitting sometimes and enjoying the way the light came in, or the banners, and the space was meaningful to me. I'm hearing that you were experiencing that as well. There's something about the space that was helpful to you. Can you elaborate on that any? What is it that you like about that space or what touched you?

K

Karen Thompson 26:00

It's all of it. We have 10 acres, and it's wooded and beautiful. Our buildings are not traditional brick and mortar, they're sprung structures. I say they're like being in the womb. They're domed and real. Each building has a great big skylight in the top, so you have this constant, just this golden light, this warm light. It's just a feeling of being on holy ground.

M

Mary Wilson 26:53

That does match up well with your idea of the church being a beacon as well, being the light out there, the light house, and the way the light comes in there. That's a nice imagery to think about.

K

Karen Thompson 27:04

Our building is very alive. I know that all buildings have their own noises and everything, but this is kind of special. I mean, when the wind comes up, the whole thing sways, the lights will sway. Rain doesn't sound like raindrops, it sounds like a deluge just this close to nature. You're inside, you're warm and safe, but you're this close. It was a wonderful time, quiet time. The quiet was good for me. I didn't have a television that whole time and I didn't miss it. Prayer, studying, reading, it was like part of the rhythm of the day as opposed to this is the time for this. It was just the rhythm of the whole day.



M

Mary Wilson 28:04

That's really refreshing to have that kind of sense of time. Reminds me of Herschel's Palace of time idea that time can be holy and sacred. Well, I actually remembered what I was, what I forgot earlier, which was related to the text messaging and stranger hours than in the past. My sleep has been disrupted in odd ways because the change in rhythm, if you will. I'm wondering, is that a sign from members of your congregation that there's has been as well? Then I'm wondering about yours, how are you sleeping?

K

Karen Thompson 28:53

That's a great question. My whole sleep rhythm changed when I was at the church because I've always been a morning person. I'm early to bed and early to rise, but when I started staying at the church, I went to sleep later. Part of that was just sort of being on guard, "what have I not locked up? What have I not turned off? What do I need to shut down?" Then hearing all those noises, it was not always comfortable. I'd worry about this or worry about that. Sleeping on your mattress and literally one night, I heard, something woke me up. I was very lightly sleeping and I heard some noise and it sounded metallic. I was afraid that somebody was hitting the door, like maybe to destroy the lock or get in. I went looking around. For security, I used a can of wasp spray and a 7 iron. [Laugh] I couldn't see anything and this was a Thursday night. Then on Friday, later in the day, when I was around in the back where I had heard the noise, the lock - we had a realtor's lock box with a key for the building, it had been cut off.

M

Mary Wilson 30:52

Oh, wow.

K

Karen Thompson 30:53

Cut off. I had heard the metallic and I don't know. We had all the locks changed, we saw the security cameras, but no, it was not a good three months for sleep and some other things. Lately, I've been sleeping better. About a month ago now, I made a real clear, I had a real clear 180 of this is all we have. I'm going to stop thinking about it as though we are preparing worship and creating worship. Then like we always would - and then offering it to the people through video or whatever. This is all we have. I'm going to put the same time and effort and energy into creating the virtual experience as I would put into the in person experience. It means that our order of service has changed. It means that we're trying to - one of the things I started doing is inviting

people to send pictures of everything. When we're doing something, like last Sunday was our 45th anniversary, I discovered that the 45th anniversary is the sapphire anniversary. We invited everybody to send us pictures of them in their blue, and this was just something symbolic. We've been doing a worship series and this specific topic for last Sunday was communion and it also was world communion Sunday. I made a big batch of bread and then cut that bread into little cubes, put two in a package, made a few hundred packages. And then we had our people out on Friday morning and Saturday morning for a few hours, handing that bread out to people, so that when we took communion on Sunday morning, we're carrying that one loaf experience. We're trying to do things like that, that just feel like we're together. We're encouraging the comments on Facebook Live by either asking specific questions or encouraging the people to interact with one another.

M

Mary Wilson 33:37

Yeah. I think you're kind of getting at a question I haven't overtly asked, but how is your congregation doing during the pandemic and not meeting yet? Trying to figure out ways to be community and that sort of thing? You've described a lot of that between the way you do communion and some of the zoom calls on the game night. Is there anything else around that you'd like to add that you haven't already mentioned? Seems like you hit on a lot of things already.

K

Karen Thompson 34:03

One thing is we do small groups, we do them three times a year. For eight or so years now, we've done a whole church study in the fall, where we're all sharing a book or a learning. Then in the spring, we have everything from country dancing to auto mechanics to Bible study to whatever. These small groups in the summer we do summer activities, but we had decided that we were having, our people were having a little bit of fatigue with that. We were going to take this year off, but because of the pandemic, we decided to go ahead and bring about the small groups. We just started yesterday, we have about eight groups with anywhere from 10 to 20 people in them. A couple of them are in person, but they're things like taking care of our campus and so, people will be outside, they'll be socially distanced, they'll be wearing masks. One of the things is for people with addictions, mental illness, it's been so hard. Everything exacerbates loneliness, which I think has already been an epidemic for a while now, is exacerbated. People who live alone, people who live with maybe roommates that are non-compatible. We've had people relapsing into addiction. It's been hard and not being able to make hospital visits is hard. Not just for us, but when you think about the way that families aren't able to be there for each other, that's tough.

M

Mary Wilson 36:15

It can be heartbreaking.

K

Karen Thompson 36:18

Yes, yeah, absolutely. I worry about all the children and what their experience is now. I do not believe that we should prioritize their socialization over their physical safety. I don't believe that we should just be putting, sending kids back to school in person because it's better for them to be there. I think we've got to prioritize physical safety. For our people, in South Austin, where we are, so many of the school kids are from low socioeconomic homes, and they're living with multiple generations. I want all those kids to be safe, but I worry about them too. Are they learning to be afraid? Are they learning not to trust? What's going on?

M

Mary Wilson 37:25

Are they learning not to hug?

K

Karen Thompson 37:27

Are they learning not to hug? Are they learning not to need hugs or want hugs? I just don't know. I just don't know.

M

Mary Wilson 37:41

Yeah. No doubt they will have some shaping that is different than say what you and I had at the same age or what their parents had at the same age. I want to ask just one more question. Is there anything that has come to your mind, as we've been talking, that you have wanted to say that somehow we moved past? Anything else that you think is important to share about your personal journey or the life of the church, and especially in connection with the pandemic?

K

Karen Thompson 38:17

I would say that there have been some incredible challenges. I would like to say that I know so many clergy are struggling right now and I'm praying for them. I hope encouraging all the clergy to really reach out to each other really - we have this bad habit

of talking about numbers and membership and all these things. It's a time to be real and to reach out to each other when we need to. Many, many, many churches and nonprofits are going to fail financially and we need to figure that out and how we support each other through that. For us, there have been some real opportunities that I'm not sure we would have been open to had it not been for the pandemic. This would be a great story to close with because it's just amazing. We built a new sanctuary that we finished about three years ago. And so, that means we have our original sanctuary building and for several years now we've tried to figure out, what do we do with it? How do we use it? We've come up with some big plans and some big ideas. One of the things that we wanted to do was to create a school, a daycare, a preschool for deaf infants, deaf infants and children. We feel that's a very under served population. We have certified teachers prepared to teach the kids and we thought, "what an amazing way to use our space." That was a piece of it. Okay, so put that aside. Just a few weeks after we'd started online virtual worship, I received an email from a woman. She said, "I watched your service online. I've never been to your church, but a friend of mine suggested that I watch this service. I saw the things that you're doing in the community and one of the things that really caught my attention was your outreach to the unsheltered population, to the homeless people. I know that you provide food to them and other things." She said, "I would love to help somehow." I said, "well, sure, let's talk." She came in, we talk, and this woman owns a daycare and many of her children are from low socioeconomic homes, and there are government subsidies, including food, that her daycare receives. Now, all of a sudden, she didn't have her kids in daycare. What if I take the food that's coming in anyway, and I prepare it for the homeless, and your people deliver it? We set that partnership up and we went from giving food out one Sunday a month to six days a week.

M

Mary Wilson 41:46  
Wow.

K

Karen Thompson 41:47  
The pandemic actually allowed us to increase that, but it gets better. Her daycare had been in a church for 20 years and the church has closed, the church failed. The buildings have been sold to a developer, so they had to find another home. We said, "I wonder if our building would work?" So we are in the process right now of bringing them in. It is a daycare that serves our neighborhood children. That's the kind of relationship we would love to have. We will be able to bring in our deaf infants, so that it will be a trilingual situation with English and Spanish and American Sign Language. We'll probably be able to start that earlier than we would have been able to if we were going through the

whole licensure process, et cetera. There have been some tremendous blessings.



Mary Wilson 42:53

Fabulous story. Thank you. All right, well, I'm gonna go ahead and turn off the recording.