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## Aging Out in the Queer Community: Silence to Sanctuary to Activism in Faith Communities:

A conversation with Barbara Satin

Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen

### Abstract

In this article, *Generations* Guest Editor Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen interviews Barbara Satin, a transgender woman with a national leadership role in the United Church of Christ. Satin addresses the history, challenges, and hopes for LGBT older adults seeking sanctuary in modern faith communities as they age

### Keywords

LGBT older adults; faith communities; Church of Christ; LGBT spirituality; LGBT religion

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**Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen (KF-G):** How crucial is faith to the health and well-being of LGBT older adults and their families?

**Barbara Satin (BS):** For a significant portion of the LGBTQ aging population, religion has been a blessing and a curse. They were most often set apart from the faith communities in which they were raised because of who they are. For many of them, that was enough to turn them off. But for a significant portion of the community, faith is a part of their DNA. They expected faith communities to react differently to them than the faith communities did, and they were deeply hurt.

It gave rise to what became the sanctuary movement within progressive churches. United Church of Christ was a sanctuary church, where it welcomed all LGBTQ people. That was critically important for the older adult community. It's valuable but less important for some young LGBTQ people—they come with a whole different set of expectations of their faith communities.

**KF-G:** How has your personal experience as an LGBT person brought you to the faith work you do?

**BS:** I knew I was trans, basically, all my life. I grew up in a traditional church. And I was pretty [sure] that wasn't going to work very well. So I spent most of my life feeling guilty, and hiding it. When I decided I had to figure out who I really was, I realized there was little place in ministry for a woman in my church, and definitely no place for a trans woman. So I needed to find another safe and welcoming place.

That's when I found the United Church of Christ. It was a place of really was, and grow comfortable, from a spiritual and morality standpoint, about who I am as a trans woman. But

I also wanted to do something more, and I found having a progressive church setting to do that was very enabling, so I moved from sanctuary to activism. And that has been life-giving and life-affirming to me.

**KF-G:** How might a church or a faith group direct their energies to be more inclusive?

**BS:** One challenge is that so much senior care programming, regardless of whether you are straight or queer—is faith-based. Many faith communities don't understand the differences that LGBTQ people come with as they age. They [think] you're all old, you're all going to be the same, your bodies age the same way. For the trans community especially it's not quite true.

Our mindsets are different as we age out in the queer community because so many of us have been so oppressed by the church and society that we come with a great deal of guilt and fear about how we're going to be treated, and have fear about senior care providers.

Many progressive—particularly Christian and Jewish—denominations have done great work around acceptance of LGBTQ people, but they haven't done much work around understanding the mindset of older LGBT people. These individuals were assaulted, they were criminalized, they were called sinners, they were called perverts. Even today, as we experience so [much] progress within the culture around gay acceptance, a lot of the older community don't see that, they haven't lived that. In many cases, they live in fear and isolation, so they haven't had the experience of being out and accepted for who they are.

'For a significant portion of the LGBT community, faith is a part of their DNA.'

The faith communities have to do a better job of understanding who we are as old people and the experiences that we've gone through.

They're going to be brought into that understanding very quickly by the baby boomers, who are coming through with a whole different mindset. They're expecting to be treated well . . . saying, 'I'm a gay man—I'm a lesbian—I'm a trans woman—I'm a trans man—treat me with respect or there are going to be consequences.'

**KF-G:** Are there models where faith communities are effectively providing services and care to older adults in a way that's good for LGBT or Queer older adults?

**BS:** There are individual places where that's happening, but I don't see it broadly. The United Church of Christ is seen as very progressive, and yet it's only now that its senior care organization has become effective around LGBT aging issues. Not too many years ago, I was invited to make a presentation to their national convention, and when they realized that somebody had invited a trans person to speak, they disinvited me. They just weren't ready. Things are beginning to change, but we have a really long way to go.

**KF-G:** Are there faith communities that have evolved in their thinking and the way they approach these issues?

**BS:** The United Church of Christ is evolving. The Lutheran church has done some really good work. The Jewish community has done some really extraordinary work around opening up its understanding and willingness to serve LGBT people, particularly LGBT old people.

But I have a sister in a long-term-care facility that's run by a religious group, she's being treated very well as a straight woman, [but] if I were to go there as a client, I would probably not be accepted as a trans woman.

**KF-G:** What is most likely in your faith community to prompt needed organizational change?

**BS:** One thing that gets people to take action is when they begin hearing the horrible stories about what it is like to age as a queer person—how badly they're treated and the repercussions that people suffer as a result of lack of access to care—or fear of access to care.

As churches begin to realize there are LGBT people in their pews, and as more and more LGBT people come out and [churches] hear the stories, and understand the histories that these people bring, I think they [will] begin to understand there's a need to do more than just listen to those stories. They need to respond to them—to seek change in their denominational programs for seniors.

**KF-G:** How has your church moved toward fuller inclusion? Has it created opportunities for you in terms of ministry and in terms of service to the community?

**BS:** It has, and the personal example is the fact that Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ, the church that I came out to, was so moved by what we were doing around aging issues that when we had this church property we needed to do more with, rather than sell it to developers, the church took our suggestion of turning it into senior housing for LGBT people. That forty-six-unit affordable rental building opened in Minneapolis in September 2013 and became a model that other churches within and outside our denomination have used for what to do with big buildings that are hard to maintain.

**KF-G:** Over time, how have you modified how you work with LGBT older adults?

**BS:** I came out at 60, without having gone through some of the horrendous issues that lifelong LGBT people have gone through. As I gained understanding [of] and empathy for what they've gone through, I've become far more engaged and active around those who provide services to make sure that their services are open to and accepting of LGBTQ people.

'It was a place of sanctuary, where I could fully express who I really was.'

Our church put together an event for seniors who wanted to be involved with LGBT Pride. But many seniors never attended because the Pride grounds were too crowded and it was just overwhelming. So we did a pre-Pride gathering the night before. We played music of the '40s and the '50s, and we had food and the opportunity for people to dance and socialize. The first year we had maybe fifteen people, the next year ... we had seventy-five people

show up and we were just overwhelmed, we were thrilled, and it gave us a couple of insights. We had done all of our advertising and promotion through the gay publications, which you would have to go to a gay coffee shop or a gay bar to pick up. And seniors don't do that. But they read the daily paper, so we realized we needed to make sure we do a better job of reaching out to a broader publicity outlet.

At the end of the event, a man came up to me and said, 'My partner died fourteen years ago of AIDS and I have not been out socially since, because I didn't think there was any place where I could go where I would be accepted.' And that was the [wake-up] call to me that made me realize what isolation really is.

**KF-G:** What are the most critical challenges in terms of the intersection of faith and LGBT communities?

**BS:** We're making such progress, and yet I'm looking at the pushback we're receiving. So much of the progress we have made has not been legislative progress, it has been progress that has been done by executive order and by administrative action; we have a president and an administration that is very supportive of LGBTQ issues and very strong around aging issues. Health and Human Services has done some wonderful things around equality for LGBTQ people, but all of that can change.

A lot of faith communities are going to continue to be progressive but I think some of them are also going to end up becoming a little bit more conservative if a more conservative government gets in place, simply because so much of funding for services that are provided by faith communities comes out of government programs.

**KF-G:** What would be most important to respond to in terms of providing supports and services for the LGBT community as people age?

**BS:** We need to really focus on [providing] education around aging issues to faith communities, so that they understand their role in all of this—that they understand who they are serving—and in some cases, not serving—as they open or close their doors to LGBTQ people.

**KF-G:** Concerning the intersection of faith and LGBT communities, what are the priorities in terms of end-of-life care?

**BS:** I've been trying to generate a curriculum, a training for congregation faith communities to talk about end-of-life issues, particularly for LGBTQ people, many of whom are really struggling to try and bring themselves back into their communities of faith as they close the circle of their lives and don't know how to do that. The faith communities in many cases don't do a good job of reaching out around end-of-life issues anyway, and they do little around reaching out to LGBTQ people. When they do, it unfortunately tends to be 'let us try and save you before you die,' rather than to affirm who you have been as a person.

*As they close the circle of their lives, many LGBT elders are struggling to bring themselves back into their communities of faith.*

**KF-G:** Any other thoughts you have that are really critical to address as a community?

**BS:** I'm thrilled you reached out to ask these questions around faith and aging: it's a significant and unmet need among the LGBTQ community. As long as I have the energy and the passion, I want to keep being the thorn in the saddle around the faith communities' response to the aging issues of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

## Biography



Transgender activist Barbara Satin is assistant faith work director for the National LGBTQ Task Force, where she assists faith settings in welcoming and affirming transgender persons; provides leadership training for trans religious leaders; educates people and faith settings around the needs of LGBTQ individuals as they age; and helps to bring a faith and LGBTQ perspective to issues such as immigration, asylum, and employment.

She also is a founder of GLBT Generations, which educates people about the needs of aging LGBT persons, and is a member of Living Table United Church of Christ in Minneapolis. She was instrumental in developing Spirit on the Lake, which opened in Minneapolis in 2013 to provide safe and respectful housing for LGBT elders.

As the first transgender woman to have a national leadership role in the United Church of Christ, Satin has advised the Civil Marriage Collaborative, and worked on LGBT aging issues with a variety of national senior organizations. In May 2016, she was appointed by President Obama as a member of his Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, becoming the first trans person to serve on this important White House group.

Generations Guest Editor Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen interviewed Satin for her thoughts on faith and the LGBTQ populace.