

Becoming myself: A transgender pastor's story

by [Erin Swenson](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

Somehow my shaking fingers kept pushing the buttons on the phone. All I could think as a voice answered was, “God help me.”

“Hello,” I said. “This is Eric Swenson. Is Reverend Greene there?” Maybe there was still a chance that I could leave a message.

“This is Lloyd Greene,” came the deep and resonant reply. My heart sank. I had no choice but to go forward.

“I am calling you in your capacity as chair of the Committee on Ministry,” I ventured. “I am wondering how to go about a name change.” I hoped the quaver in my voice wasn’t noticeable.

“All you need to do is write a letter to the committee and tell us what you want to change your name to.”

It sounded easy enough. I hoped this would be the end of the conversation, but instead he continued, “What do you want to change your name to?”

Hesitantly, I answered, “Erin Katrina Swenson.”

A long silence.

At last Greene said, “Why do you want to change your name to that?”

I took a deep breath. “I am in the process of changing my gender expression from masculine to feminine. I thought that would be a more appropriate name.”

The cat was out of the bag. I hung up the phone that day in 1995 feeling both relief and apprehension. I knew that Greene would be calling the leaders at the presbytery office. Since the beginning of my gender transition I had become accustomed to being talked about behind my back. The sensation had inspired a germinating

paranoia that I have since learned is common for people struggling with gender issues.

Greene called back 30 minutes later. In my letter to the committee, he said, I should address two issues: first, my gender transition, and specifically whether I anticipated medical treatment or surgery. Second, what my intentions were for my ordination. Did I intend to keep it?

Perhaps I had been naive to think that I could get the presbytery to simply change my name. While I had been ordained for 22 years, most of the time had been spent as a pastoral counselor in private practice. I wasn't a high profile pastor and I had imagined that I could hide in the large Atlanta presbytery. The request that I address the question of my ordination exposed the naïveté of my plan. The shame of being exposed to the church community I had grown up in seemed impossible to endure.

I wrote the letter, worrying the words to death in an attempt to say not too much or too little. First, I asked for the name change from Eric Karl Swenson to Erin Katrina Swenson. Much time and energy had gone into the selection of my new name. I liked the androgyny of Erin, phonetically similar to the Hebrew Aaron. In a previous era, transsexuals had been urged to choose distinctly feminine names in order to reinforce an emerging feminine persona. This approach encouraged transsexuals to change their surnames and put distance between their past and present, breaking with all aspects of their former life, including family, friends, career and community. I was glad that this was not demanded of me.

I desired no complete break with the past; I had never desired to be extremely feminine. I just wanted to be a woman, like the powerful women I admired. Changing just that small *c* in *Eric* to *n* allowed me both the continuity and the feminization I so desired.

After I requested the name change, I did my best to describe the process I was undergoing. I outlined the list of accepted medical protocols, including psychotherapy, hormone therapy, a year living experimentally as a woman, and finally the possibility of surgical procedures. In my letter I was tentative about the surgery, although I had a deep and inexplicable desire for it. I didn't want to put myself in a position of asking the church for permission to have sex reassignment surgery.

Finally, I wrote that I wanted to continue in ordained ministry. Though the briefest answer of the three, I knew it was the most difficult.

Why was I going to all this trouble? Why not set aside my ordination as a Presbyterian minister? It certainly would have been easier for the church, and it would have removed all kinds of complications in my life. The idea of confronting church people with my plans for a gender transition made me physically ill. Images of faces twisted with disgust filled my mind, along with fingers pointing in derision and voices raised in anger. As a marriage and family therapist fully licensed by the state of Georgia, I could easily carry on my work without ordination.

I knew that my ministry would continue with or without the church's acceptance. I knew there was no magic in ordination. In my more than two decades of ordination, nothing magical had happened. The Presbyterian Church recognizes this reality by teaching that ordination does not confer any special status on the holder. Ordination simply denotes a person set aside for a particular purpose that serves the church.

What kept me from walking away was a very practical concern: my daughter. Lara was born when I was in my first ordained church position. She was premature by ten weeks and very sick. When Lara finally came home from the hospital, she had permanent and severe disabilities. Her mother and I were devoted to her care, while also trying to be good parents to her older sister. The insurance policy that I held as an ordained minister was our financial oasis in a desert of multiple hospitalizations, antiseizure medications, wheelchairs, expensive adaptive equipment and many doctors.

When I began to think about a gender transition, insurance was a major consideration. I checked with the insurance agency of the Presbyterian Church to see if I could maintain coverage if I left the ministry. The answer was no. What if my ordination were taken away from me? Again, no. I explored the possibility of getting a private insurance policy. After only a few calls, it was clear that no one would insure both me and our disabled daughter. And because the likelihood of a medical emergency requiring astronomically expensive treatment was always high with Lara, anything that threatened insurance coverage was not an option. If I was to do this gender transition, it would have to include keeping my ordination.

Eventually, Greene called to say that the Committee on Ministry wanted me to come to its next monthly meeting. The relief of not having been dismissed without a

hearing was quickly replaced by the terror of facing this powerful committee.

For the very first time, I wondered if anyone had done this before. It had been 40 years since Christine Jorgenson brought transsexualism into the American vocabulary. But had any pastors walked this road ahead of me? I looked hard in seminary libraries for evidence of gender transition and found nothing but a copy of Janice Raymond's biased and hate-filled *Trans sexual Empire* in one library. Awareness slowly grew that I was very alone in this.

My prayer life had always been a quiet sense of God's presence that fell over me at various times of the day. I often said a simple prayer of thanks when I walked outside. Just as often, I might issue a complaint (I call them prayers of complication). As I waited for the meeting with the Committee on Ministry, my prayers of complication increased. *God, how could you? What do you mean saddling me with this?* I had no idea what I was doing, and I found no guidance anywhere.

As the day of the meeting approached, I faced a concern unfamiliar to me, but certainly well known to women: what to wear. My hair had been growing for almost nine months and thankfully was long enough that I wouldn't have to wear a wig. Makeup was a skill I had acquired over many years of closeted cross-dressing. I had had my first clearing of facial hair by an electrologist. It was the clothing that worried me the most.

Meeting with the committee members was perhaps the most important thing I would do during my transition, and they would examine what I wore as intensely as anything else—as they would any woman who met with them, it occurred to me. This was a new awareness, and a kind of resentment came with it. I wondered, "Do all women feel this?"

Several months earlier I had decided to go through with the transition to become the woman I had always wanted to be. I had no idea what would happen in my life, but for the first time, as I made that decision, I felt whole. At that very moment, I had a strange feeling of thankfulness for being who I am. God, I prayed, how strangely you have made me! And how thankful I am to you for it.

The memory of that moment helped as I pulled into the presbytery office parking lot in an office park not far from where I lived. An administrative assistant ushered me to a waiting area cordoned off with ropes, like one would find at a movie theater. *Am I the feature presentation?* I laughed to myself.

When at last I was called into the meeting room, it was washed in the unfriendly glare of fluorescent lights. A dozen folding tables were arranged in a large three-sided formation. On the other side of the room, facing the tables, was the single chair where I was to sit. It was a long walk, a kind of gauntlet, to my seat. I tried to quiet myself with a prayer, "Please help me to keep my heart open to them."

Lloyd Greene opened the meeting by recounting the events since we had first spoken by phone. He described how the committee had been taken by surprise at my request. "There are obviously many questions and concerns," he said, "and we will want to get to these. But first why don't you tell us a little about how you came to be here?"

I took a moment to look around. There were two people on the committee I knew, a few others I recognized. But most were people I had never seen before. Now, for the first time in my life, I told my terrible secret to strangers. I told them of my normal childhood and of my first awareness—at age ten—that I wanted to be female. I told of joining the church at 12. I spoke of my call to ministry, my marriage and children, my work as a pastoral counselor. I told them of all the lying and diversion that went into hiding my secret. Everyone listened intently. When I was finished, Greene asked for more clarification about the transition.

I had anticipated the question, and I had decided to lean heavily on the medical standards for individuals who desire to physically change their gender. These standards, arrived at by medical and counseling professionals, are designed to ensure that decisions regarding irreversible medical procedures, such as hormone therapy and surgery, are made as carefully as possible to protect both the physician and the patient. They have been continually revised over the past 30 years and are currently in their sixth edition. I described the therapy I had undergone over the past two decades. Hormones and androgen blockers had been part of my daily regimen for the past six months. I was required to live for a year as a woman before I would qualify for surgery. I was in the process of obtaining a legal name change in order to live more comfortably in my new role. I told them that the gender transition had so far been a wonderful experience for me.

When the floor opened for questions, a middle-aged man who sat with his arms and legs tightly crossed asked, "Isn't it true that you are seeking a surgical solution to a psychological problem?"

I strained to thank him for his question as I remembered my prayer about keeping my heart open.

“It’s difficult when your gender is normal to understand what it is like to look in the mirror and see a stranger looking back at you,” I said. “I have seen therapists regularly for over 20 years trying to repair what seemed to be psychologically wrong with me. I even became a therapist myself, hoping that I could somehow find the secret that would release the hammerlock on my life.

“There are a few counseling professionals who claim they are able to cure transsexualism. These are aversion therapies that have great potential for harm and have never proven reliable when subjected to peer reviewed testing. Gender transition is the treatment of choice and has a high success rate when compared with other treatments. In fact gender transition as a treatment is more effective for gender identity disorder (the medical term for what I am dealing with) than angioplasty is for arterial blockages.”

I waited to see if he had a follow-up question, but I could tell that I had completely overwhelmed him. “Does that help?” I queried. He nodded his head. He clearly wanted to hear no more.

“Tell us about your marriage and your daughters,” one of the several women on the committee asked. “Will you divorce your wife? How will you fulfill your obligation to your children?”

The committee seemed surprised when I told them that Sigrid, my wife, was supportive of my gender transition. She had just recently divorced me, mostly because she had had enough of my inner turmoil. She still loved me, as did our daughters. Our older daughter was struggling mightily with my transition. Lara had accepted my new identity as a woman but was angry with me for the breakup of our family. I explained that much of my practical need to continue in ordained ministry was related to the importance of keeping Lara’s insurance coverage through the church.

Two hours later, I left the committee meeting and returned to my car, baking in the April heat. Tears formed in my eyes, and then I was sobbing. The committee members had been respectful and attentive in every way. Their questions were pointed and sometimes awkward, but they had opened themselves to a new and unfamiliar dialogue. *Thanks be to God*, I prayed. But I still felt very alone.

A few weeks later Bill Adams, the head staff person of the presbytery, called to tell me that the committee had approved my request, but there was another step. My request would be placed on the “consent agenda” at the next presbytery meeting. It could be approved with a number of other routine items at the beginning of the meeting. Bill warned me, “Anyone can ask for an issue to be taken off the consent agenda.” He urged me not to attend the meeting, because people were sure to barrage me with questions.

A few months later, I was sitting in the Atlanta Gender Explor ations booth at my first ever Gay Pride Parade when one of the members of the Committee on Ministry called to report about the meeting.

“Erin,” he said somberly. “It was a difficult meeting. Someone asked that your name change be taken off the consent agenda. He then requested that we send the report back to committee for further study. His motion passed by a large margin.”

My heart dropped. “For further study” was often the way the presbytery buried things it didn’t want to deal with.

The next afternoon, my situation got more complicated. I came home to find a message from Gayle White, religion editor at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. She was writing a story on the presbytery meeting and urged me to call her. She wanted to do a pro-and-con story, she said, with my story on one side and the committee member’s objections on the other.

I was devastated. I wanted to take the whole ten months back, to climb back into my womb of shame and secrecy and live there as best I could. But as I spoke with her, I realized that cooperation would be the best option. It was better to tell my story than to have it told for me.

Eight weeks later, the newspaper article appeared. The pro-and-con approach had been scrapped, and the title was “Seeking Acceptance.” It was a good story, accurately and compassionately told. Best of all, my story was told as one of several of transgender clergy. Even so, the fallout was considerable, and it changed me as much as anything in my gender transition had.

Amid the calls and letters of both support and hatred that I received, one voice in particular stood out. A woman left a message on my machine. She said simply that she had read the article and asked me to call her back.

I anticipated the worst, imagining that the tension I had heard in her voice was hostility. I expected another lecture on accepting my God-given gender. Instead, she introduced herself as Ida. She had been among the first group of patients to go through the sex reassignment program at Johns Hopkins University.

Ida and I met for breakfast at the Majestic, a dingy, if historic, Atlanta institution. As I approached the worn concrete of the diner's front porch, I saw an old woman with a cane, wearing a rather stylish beret.

"Reverend Swenson?" she called out.

Over greasy eggs and bacon, Ida told me that she had been raised an only child in a small town in south Georgia. As a very young man, she began treatments in Baltimore that would allow her to become a woman. She returned to Atlanta and met and married a man with whom she spent most of her life. I imagined myself becoming an old woman like her, and I liked the prospect.

Ida had been raised in a Southern Baptist church, but she discontinued her churchgoing as she transitioned. When she entered a retirement community after her husband's death, she found herself walking through the large wooden doors of a nearby Presbyterian church. She discovered a community there and became a regular piano accompanist for church dinners and Sunday school classes. I expressed delight to find a Presbyterian in the same boat as me, but her face turned glum and she pulled away. "I have never actually joined the church," she said.

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "I could never join the church because I am a transsexual. No one there knows about me. I didn't think God wanted me in the church. That's why your story was so amazing to me."

At that moment, questions about insurance policies and discreet transitions faded. Jesus was sitting with me at a greasy spoon in midtown Atlanta in the form of an old transsexual woman. He was calling me to a place I had never considered and, to be honest, a place I didn't really want to go. My heart was bursting with grief for her, for a lifetime of believing that she was not acceptable in the community of God's people because she was transsexual. Not acceptable even to God. I remembered the text, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I heard the message. The church I loved had to be set free. Ida, and everyone like

her, needed to experience the church's embrace.

A couple of weeks later, when I received a phone call from the Committee on Ministry and was asked, "If we could find a way to cover insurance for Lara, would you consider resigning your ordination?" my answer was clear. No. I had a call to the ministry, and I had no choice but to follow. And I was no longer alone.

In 1996, the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirmed Erin Swenson's ordination.