

## Oral History Interview: Ann Thompson Cook

Interviewee: Ann Thompson Cook

Interviewer: David Weekley

Date: October 30, 2017

David W. I'm just going to set this here. And it picks up really well, so I don't think you have to really force your voice. And this is basically your time to tell the story of your life, the things that are important and significant to you. And I'm basically going to listen and ask for clarifications, or if there's things that I'm really interested in that I hear, I might just ask you to elaborate a little more about that. Otherwise I'm just going to enjoy listening to your story.

Ann T. Well, I...it actually, when I train, I prefer interactive, and it would be way easier for me to...for you to keep saying, you know.

David W. Suggesting some prompts?

Ann T. Yeah. I just...that would be great.

David W. Okay.

Ann T. So feel free.

David W. All right, good.

Ann T. I wanted to start by acknowledging that I'm a white, cisgender, hetero, straight identified woman, because my having started work on gay and

transgender issues in the early '80s was not expected out there. So I just want to acknowledge who it is that's speaking. I got started with this work in the early '80s because we had just moved to Washington, D.C. and we started a—Dumbarton United Methodist Church, started attending there in December of 1980. And I think the very next year, '81, a gay couple—I'm saying I think it was 1981—that a gay couple came to Dumbarton and asked to use the building for a holy union. And at the time, and before we even came, there was an Affirmation group that was using the building on Sunday evenings. But the minister of the congregation brought the request—it was just a building use request.

David W. Right.

Ann T. But he brought the request to the congregation and said, “This is not my issue, and if I allow the building to be used for this, I could be brought on charges, and if the congregation feels strongly that we should do it, we’ll approve the request, but I need to hear it from you.” So here we are, very new attenders at the church, and the thing I remember most was somebody saying that having that commitment service in our sanctuary would be “desecration of the space.”

And I was—you know, like up to that moment I had been pretty oblivious. And I remember saying something in the course of the meeting. I was so shocked. And I said that I had just spent several years in Chicago as a social worker, and working with families that abused and neglected their

children, and it seemed to me that a church would want to affirm any loving relationship that came its way. And it was like I had never...I don't know what I said exactly, but something to that effect, and it was like I had never spoken, it just went on. And it looked to me like about half the people in the room would have approved the request and about half of the people in the room were on the desecration side of the conversation.

David W.     Wow.

Ann T.        So the minister didn't get a strong signal from the congregation that he should do that and the request was denied.

David W.     Wow.

Ann T.        And I sat with that for a few years feeling like there was something I was supposed to do. And you know like as a straight—by this time I'm married and have small children and I really have been so oblivious that I didn't even know gay people, transgender people, I didn't know that I knew them. And so I just had this feeling like I was supposed to be doing something and saying no, that's not me. And then in about the mid 1980s, all of a sudden people that I knew and loved started coming out to me. You know, like in the mid '80s everyone was closeted, right?

David W.     That's right.

Ann T.        So I remember this one guy, Scott, who was a clarinetist, and just a...I mean, his music just touched me so deeply. And I was in the choir and he

would sometimes show up and do these clarinets. One day he grabbed me on the way up to choir practice and said “I have to talk to you.” And he told me this story of his really abusive father, especially, and having been kicked out of his house, and how his father didn’t think...I mean, every aspect of this story was abusive. And then he told me about having struggled with drugs and attempted suicide. And I had no idea. He was crying. And then more people were doing that, and telling those kinds of stories to me, which I had been oblivious to.

So at that point my kids were in elementary school and I had two boys, and they were running through the house with their friends. And I’m starting to look at them and their friends and saying, you know, somebody is going to figure out that they’re gay, and nothing has changed from what happened to these adults who are coming out to me in such pain and suffering. And at the time I was working in the field of sexuality education, so I was starting to put some stuff together about that. And 1984 was when the Reconciling Congregation thing started as a program of Affirmation.

David W. Right.

Ann T. And Dumbarton was approached after—there were certain congregations in the country, a few congregations in the country who immediately joined the program because they already had gay people, they were already welcoming, it was all handled. So they joined immediately. And then it

was time to find some congregations to say will you consider this. So an Affirmation person, John Hannay, came to Dumbarton and said...and came to, actually, an annual fall conclave that we had and made a formal request that Dumbarton take this under consideration to be part of the Reconciling. And the congregation said sure, we'll take it under consideration.

And I'm waiting and watching and nothing happens for six months. So then I went to the Council chair and said you know, we agreed to do this, but what's the plan? So we put together a very small steering committee that had gay and straight people in it, so very small.

David W. So when you asked about it, they brought you in to help you plan?

Ann T. Well, we put something together. I was part of organizing the steering committee. And we planned a...I think the only... John Hannay came to all the meetings. The only gay person there was Rev. Penny Penrose, who was...she was a force to be reckoned with. And that was the beginning of my really learning.

So it was really important that she was part of that because the process that we created for the church to go through to consider was very thoughtful, and we brought in one of my colleagues of sex education, and had some programs, and we had every committee in the congregation set aside a committee meeting during the year that they would go through this process that we designed, and there were adult ed programs and sermons.

We had a DS [District Superintendent] at the time who came and did one of the sermons and talked out of both sides of his mouth, so like whatever you thought you believed, you heard yourself affirmed by him. *[Laughs.]*

David W. Okay. Good politician.

Ann T. Yeah. So at the end of that, which only took about ten months, the biggest concern in the... As it turned out the concern that couldn't be gotten over, which we hadn't planned for, was the question, well, what about our kids? I mean, it's one thing to say we welcome these adults, but what message are we sending to our kids? And wouldn't that send the message it's okay to be gay? So we brought our sex educator back for a special session, and by the end of that, the parents were satisfied that it was a bigger problem that whoever figured out they were gay was going to have a hard time. So the congregation unanimously agreed.

David W. Wow.

Ann T. Approved this. And then had to live into it, because they really had no idea. So that's how it got started. I was the most visible person, like leading the process. And then after that I went to Chicago, immediately after that decision I went to Chicago for the very first national conference of the Reconciling. It was a very small group, like I don't know, maybe 100, 80, 60. I don't know how many people he had, but it was the first time people had gathered. And I was hungry for like...that had been a very

big deal and a lot of heated conversations, and I was still learning. So after that I was on a video. They did some videotaping.

David W. At that meeting?

Ann T. Yeah, my husband David and I were both videotaped. And I remember saying we had to talk about sexuality and all that. So then I was invited—they decided to set up a small four person board and they invited two straight identified people and a gay and lesbian member, when it was still part of Affirmation, and then I was on the committee that...when it was time for Reconciling to separate from Affirmation, I was part of that separation agreement-making. And then I was on the first national board.

David W. For the Reconciling...?

Ann T. Yeah, for Reconciling. So meanwhile Mark Bowman, who is one of the cofounders, lived in D.C. also, and so we would often meet and strategize and think about stuff. And at one point he said we don't have any—we need a resource that we can distribute that kind of lays out what this is about and presents a different story than what's out there.

And I, by then, was writing and publishing materials on sexuality education, and abortion, and reproductive health issues, and I had had hundreds of conversations with people who didn't get it, that gradually I felt like I had gotten better and better at helping them turn around all that in shorter and shorter time. So I said I thought I could write that resource.

So that was the first...the resource was called “And God Loves Each One.” Did you ever see these?

David W. I did, yes.

Ann T. So it’s called “And God Loves Each One: A Resource for Dialogue about the Church and Homosexuality.” The second edition said sexual orientation.

David W. Okay. I think that’s the one I saw, was the second one.

Ann T. Uh-huh. So—

David W. And those were published through Dumbarton?

Ann T. Well, yeah, I was working with a designer, a really gifted—everything I had written and published before I had had designed because it was always on—everything I’d ever written was on sensitive and controversial topics, and you need a good designer to communicate some of that stuff for people who are uptight about this subject. So this designer and I really were totally on the same page that it had to be very beautiful.

Do you know it was at a time when the only thing available to people was PFLAG, and if you called PFLAG you would get something in the mail that had been typed and reproduced, and it would be in brown paper wrapping with no indication of where it was from because the parents were closeted too, right?

David W. Right.

Ann T. They didn't care what it looked like because they were so desperate for help. Whereas the people that I was writing for were almost completely unmotivated to learn anything. [*Laughs.*] So it had to be beautiful, it had to be inviting, it had to have pictures of people who could live next door to you, very warm, gentle language, but also gentle photographs and design, and lots of white space.

David W. So you were really conscious of your audience, is that right?

Ann T. Oh, my gosh, yeah. I mean, I had just spent a lot of time with that audience, right? So anyway, I suddenly realized that Reconciling, when I had been asked and agreed to create that, they didn't have the funds to publish what I felt needed to be published. So I wrote fundraising proposals and I got funded to do the print, to go to print the way I wanted it. And I got the grants through Dumbarton. So we had a really great treasurer at the time who was so supportive of what I was doing, and he just kept it on separate books, and managed the grant for me, all the financial accounting and stuff.

So what I did was, all of the welcoming organizations didn't have resources. So I let them know before we go to—here's what I'm going to print for Reconciling. If you want...you would have to do an order in advance, and depending on how many copies it'll cost between this and this per book, and you can order in like packs of 500. But the deal I worked out with them is that I would put their logo and their information

so they wouldn't be distributing Reconciling materials, they would be distributing their own in several denominational groups, More Light Presbyterians, and the Episcopal Dignity. I don't remember who all the organizations were, but I had quite a few denominational.

So we did a print run that changed the branding for each one. And they let me know how many multiples of 500 they wanted, and I sent them those, and they paid, and it worked. I really only needed funding for the basics. I mean, there were expenses. I think I got \$2,500 funding for that first book.

So then, at Dumbarton what was going on was in 1990... I think the church made that decision in '88 and by '90 and '91 we came to agreement about a declaration on holy unions, that we would treat same-sex commitments the same way we treat other-sex commitments. And Chip Aldridge and I—Chip Aldridge mostly wrote that declaration, and I worked with him on it.

In the meantime the bishop was trying to undermine our ministry and appointed a Chinese pastor to Dumbarton who was adamantly theologically opposed to what we were doing. He had done a lot of work on sanctuary, which, we had also done sanctuary work. But he just walked in the door and said, "Theologically I can't agree with this, I don't support it."

So when we came to him with this declaration, by that time he had been through a membership class that included this really wonderful lesbian

couple. And they shared extensively about their faith journey, and how they'd both been raised in the church. And he just completely got over himself about this issue.

David W.     Wow.

Ann T.        So at that point he's looking at this declaration and he's saying it's not strong enough on the theological part, and we had to work and strengthen the language.

David W.     Wow. So he became an ally?

Ann T.        Totally. Rev. Dr. Man-King Tso. So then he said, well, we should tell the *Washington Post*. So we sent the declaration to them and we ended up being on the front page of the Metro section of the *Washington Post* about this congregation that was willing to have holy unions be the same as weddings for other sex couples.

So I think what happened—he [Man-King Tso] was a DS, so I'm a little surprised that this ever happened, but the bishop woke up on Sunday morning with a phone call from somewhere in southern Pennsylvania saying, your church is on the front page of the *Washington Post*. [Laughs.] And he hadn't heard. I mean, Man-King Tso had been...I'm sure he was a DS before he came to us. But he didn't tell the bishop. We were just motoring along.

So the bishop calls us in to his office to really call us on the carpet. And I will never forget Man-King Tso sitting there entreating the bishop to join us in the “kin-dom of God.” I mean, it was hysterical because he so clearly had been sent to undermine the ministry.

So at some point in those years, and I don’t know what years they were, but I also, in addition to the ecumenical work of helping all of the movement organizations have these resources, I was also co-editing, with Brad Rymph, the *Open Hands*.

David W. Oh, right, the journal.

Ann T. Yeah. And I think we kind of took that to a new level, professionalized it in a way to really have strong articles. We solicited articles around themes. So that went on.

David W. I can remember getting that. It was like a lifeline sometimes.

Ann T. Yeah, yeah. Also around that time I started realizing that I really thought that the thing about, quote, homosexuality was about sexuality. And the thing that really got me was figuring out that when little boys are being bullied and called gay on the kindergarten playground, it’s not for how they’re being sexual, it’s for how they’re being boys. So then I said I’ve got to really learn more about—I’ve got to figure this out. And I literally said, well who’s the expert in this? And I realized the transgender community were the experts in this gender thing.

So I started...this is one of those things where I cannot—I should have said this before—but I cannot stop acknowledging lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer people for how much they were willing to share with me, and let me in, and tell me about their lives, and let me listen in on their conversations. I mean, it's how I got up to speed on the gay part.

With the transgender, I think my first thing was to go to... Somebody vouched for me to go to a support group, a highly closeted support group of trans women who were meeting at a Unitarian church in our area. And this person was a UCC minister who was out as a trans woman and worked in the national office. And I had had some...we had been colleagues. She wasn't living as a woman, but she was naming herself as a woman during that period.

David W.      Okay.

Ann T.        So she got me into this support group that she was part of, and I just could sit there and listen to what people were talking about and start to get their concerns. And I have done that over the years. Like I went to conferences. Like I went to a health conference for lesbian-gay health during a time when everyone was closeted, and everybody assumed that if you were there you were lesbian or gay. And I didn't tell people I wasn't. So I just got to learn so much by listening to what the discussion was, and the challenges that they were facing.

But usually it wasn't stealth like that. Usually I was going places and clear who I was. And people just were willing to share. So one of the conferences I went to with trans was a trans health conference in Philadelphia.

David W. In Philadelphia, right.

Ann T. And, I mean, this was years ago, in the '90s. And I went to this conference, and...like after the morning session—I'll never forget this because I look back and all I can do is shake my head at how gracious people were to me, because some people invited me to lunch. And I said that I was sitting in the morning session wondering where are the trans people? I thought this was a trans conference. [*Laughs.*] And then somebody would stand up and use first person, like we or I, and I would realize oh, that person's trans. You know, it's just that's how... I had only been with people who were using the support group to dress, which was a very rare event, so I didn't know all these trans people who were out in the world being themselves.

David W. Full-time just being themselves, right.

Ann T. Right. So anyway, I said a lot of stupid stuff like that on the way to lunch and during lunch, and people were just...you know, there were people who—there was one person who was a professor at a university and people who were professionals out in their lives, and they just... I think

the fact that I was there at all just intrigued them, and they were willing to educate me at whatever level I was at at the time.

So I've done that with everything that I've taken on. I've put myself to be in a minority in the context where marginalized people were meeting with each other and learned that way, because the stuff that they were saying to each other was not stuff they were going to say to me as a, you know, whatever the difference was. So I do have to acknowledge the amount of gracious sharing that people have done with me over the years.

So the way I did all of my books, including the first one that I've already talked about, was to create a panel of advisors who I felt were experts in the topic. So for the one on gender difference, which was called "Made in God's Image"—you're probably familiar with that book.

David W. I think I still have a copy or two.

Ann T. So what I did was get people who had expertise in gender. And one of them, name is Luca Maurer, who is now trans identified, trans masculine identified. And he was one of these extremely generous people that I talked to about it. He's the founding director of the LGBT Center at Ithaca College. And I would send writing to him, to Luca, and get back these long emails. Sometimes we'd have phone conversations, but mostly he would email these long explanations to make sure I understood the bigger context, and was willing to...

I mean, I had several people on my advisory list, which I could probably... I always acknowledge them, so it's probably in the back of the book. But he's the main one that I... Mary Boenke, who founded PFLAG's transgender network, Betsy Driver, the outreach director for Bodies Like Ours, John Hannay, that was a public health consultant, Moonhawk River Stone, who was the—do you know?

David W. I've met him a few times.

Ann T. Yeah, and Erin Swenson. So I published "Made in God's Image..." That was...when was that? That was 2003. And that...you know, my books were pretty 101 education, and so they started with a conversation about why we would want to talk about it. They provided educational distinctions about—the first one on sexual orientation and the other one about gender, things that people really don't know and are so basic to understanding. And then there would be a little bit on religion. But it wasn't primarily about religion, it was more like laying out...giving people a context for understanding that they didn't have.

So then there was a Frequently Asked Questions that, you know, I never did any of this writing without having hundreds of conversations with people, and I knew what the biggest concerns were that kept coming up. And so there would be little answers to those kind of questions.

And then there was a section about real, like vignettes of real experiences of real people that were so, like... "Made in God's Image," here's one.

“Having grown up as an African American female, I’ll never forget the first time I walked down the street as a male and a white woman walking toward me clutched her purse. She must have been afraid that I would rob her.” So there were like really poignant vignettes like that.

So on this one—there are two stories about this I wanted to share. One is on this one I shared the draft with a few friends and colleagues who totally understood what I was up to. And it already had the photographs. It was all laid out with photographs. And they were reading it, and they loved it and stuff. And then I went through from the beginning and I said, “what do you think this person was assigned at birth?” And every time they answered based on like the...this person on Page 5 looks female and they would say female. They knew that I was writing basically a transgender education 101 and they flunked the test. So I thought if they understood what I was doing and they couldn’t figure out that these were trans people, you know I had to...

So I went back to the designer and we had to completely recreate the concept of the book. And what we did was we kept the pictures, but then we added three or four pages. And then I had to go back and rework a lot of the book in order to accommodate that there were these extra four pages that I hadn’t planned. So in those four pages we went through each picture of the book and a little vignette about the person in the picture.

So there's a picture of a guy sitting next to his mom, who's clearly in a hospital or some kind of care setting, and...let's see. I don't know where that one is. Oh. "Tony is pictured with his mother, who had Alzheimer's. Tony transitioned after many years of activism in the lesbian, gay and women's rights movements. At the time he was a deputy sheriff." You know, so I sort of tried to capture, in a few lines, and gave the picture again and what page it was on and I said "assigned female, photo on..."

David W. Okay.

Ann T. So that was one of the most impactful aspects of this book for people to realize that they could look at somebody and not recognize. Like I had made the distinction of assignment is what happens at birth and that's not the same as gender identity and gender expression. I had gone through all that stuff. It was highly impactful for people to be able to see that they misunderstood what they were seeing, which, that's a 101 conversation, right?

David W. Right.

Ann T. The other story about this book was again I had to go out and fundraise so that I could afford to publish it the way it needed to be published. Did the same thing with the ecumenical movement of figuring out how to brand it for them, each different organization. But I got a lot of pushback from trans activists.

David W. Oh, really?

Ann T. For presuming, like how could a foundation give me a grant as a cisgender person? They were outraged.

Ann T. So it was very, very hard to navigate that because I wanted to be in partnership with the trans activists and they were pissed at me. But after it came out, some of the people who were angriest and most vocal came and said—next time I saw them—they came and said, “I read your book, thank you, I get it.”

And the other thing with that book, one trans person said to me that she had been sending material to her dad for three years and he refused to see her. And then she sent him my book and he picked up the phone and called her and said, “I want to come visit.”

David W. Wow, that’s a real affirmation.

Ann T. Yeah, so that’s the kind of difference it was making. It was the difference it was making for people who weren’t trans and who weren’t even inclined to be accepting.

David W. And so people could see, maybe some of the trans activists could see that you could bridge that in a way that they couldn’t at that point.

Ann T. Yeah, at that moment, yeah.

David W. At that moment, right.

Ann T. I mean, now the trans work is very sophisticated.

David W. It is, but it's still an issue, what you're describing, because there's still a lot of cisgender people writing on behalf of or writing about transgender, and I still hear a lot of anger in the community about that.

Ann T. Yeah. I mean, I think how come it worked is that I would put these panels together and I would listen very carefully to what they said and then see if I could...if there were things that needed to be changed or reframed or whatever. I just really listened to my advisors. And then I would send it back and say did I address it? How is this landing? And then sometimes they would go deeper and, you know, I just stayed with it until my advisors were satisfied.

Which is, I think, a lot of people don't do that. So it was very strongly informed by people I was working with. I'm a writer and I'm also a publisher, because like I do it from beginning to end. I work with the designers and have that...you know, I take it from word to published materials.

So yeah, there were a lot of issues about my being a cisgender, straight identified person along the way. It just kept...it showed up a lot, but that one was the strongest. I could get it. It was really hard for them that I was getting funding to do something that they thought was theirs.

David W. Well, and that they may not have been able to get funding for.

Ann T. Mm-hmm, right.

David W. Because of the power differential.

Ann T. Right. So let's see... So after I published "Made In God's Image," I did a new edition. So here's what happened with the "And God Loves Each One." In the first edition on sexual orientation, I had language in there like everyone is born male or female. *[Laughs.]* And so by the time I finished with "Made in God's Image," do you know it's like I couldn't let that sexual orientation guide just sit there without fixing all the binary gender.

David W. Right, yeah.

Ann T. So I went back and did a new edition of that with a new panel and advisors and everything. I mean, it wasn't that hard. It just needed to get cleaned up to get the binary out and the more fluid gender piece, gender identity, gender, like the... I didn't try to bring all the gender distinctions into it, but I needed to point to this book that did, and also change the language where I said things like "everyone's born male or female." *[Laughs.]*

David W. Right, right.

Ann T. So the "Made in God's Image" was 2003 and I created the new edition of "And God Loves Each One" in 2004. Meanwhile I'm getting a lot of requests from people all over the world to translate "And God Loves Each One" into Spanish. And I had, in my abortion-reproductive health-general health work, I had done bilingual materials and I knew how tricky it was. I didn't want somebody translating my writing. And people were just

hungry for it. They just kept insisting, well, we could do it, and will you let us? Just give us permission. And I said no.

So finally I put my panel together of...I got this great panel. The top person was the Latino lead at Centers for Disease Control, Latino lead on HIV at Centers for Disease Control. So my panel...you know, first we talked and talked and talked. Like I didn't want to just translate it. I wanted it to be culturally appropriate and relevant, and in doing that, to recognize that Spanish language is spoken in many different nationalities and cultures, and some words in Spanish in one place have a different bounce somewhere else, right?

David W. Right, which complicated your work.

Ann T. Absolutely. But I had been there before on sensitive topics, so I knew you had to pay close attention. So the thing about the Latino lead was that he had, prior to coming to Centers for Disease Control, he had done trainings with all the nationalities in Spanish.

David W. Oh, nice.

Ann T. He had been training on sexuality issues and HIV across nationalities, so he was really...

David W. What a resource.

Ann T. Yeah, he was great. And he was very committed to this project because he needed it in his work. So we started—should I tell you about how that process happened?

David W. Sure. I'd like to hear.

Ann T. So we got somebody who was a translator. Like we made some... There were some changes. Like some of the stories. I was going to use different photographs because a lot of the photographs in "And God Loves Each One" were like just of a person, and the family aspect for most Latino cultures is paramount. So I had to get the kind of photographs that showed family together.

So anyway, the translator...do you know the advisors just saw... I had them do like four pages or something and the advisors said, this does not capture your book. It's stilted. It's not warm and gentle and loving, and it doesn't capture the essence of spirit of your writing. So I finally gave up on that translator. And then we found one, another translator who was Argentinian and an extremely formal Spanish, which, I don't speak Spanish, so I had to completely rely on my peeps, you know?

David W. Right.

Ann T. So they just were tearing their hair and saying no, this isn't it, this is wrong. So one day my guy from CDC was in Washington and we had lunch, and he was worried that I wasn't ever going to publish this thing by this time.

David W. Because he wanted it for his work, too.

Ann T. He wanted it. And he basically made the...you know that perfection is the enemy of the good? He basically made that argument. So I said no, we're going to get this right.

And I had worked with Rev.—you probably know this—Rev. Ignacio Castuara from L.A. area, and I had worked with him when I was executive director of Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. He was a really strong spokesman on abortion rights, and we had worked well together in the early '90s when I was there. And when he came to D.C. he always stayed with me, even after I left that organization. He did some work with Planned Parenthood and he would come and stay with me.

So I said Ignacio, why don't you come out for a week and we'll figure this out? I told him the whole story. Because he's a native speaker from Mexico, but... He came and I would...I had a desk in the guest room, and he would sit, and I said your job is to write this in Spanish. Don't think of it as a job to translate it into Spanish, think of it as—he's a good writer. So I said write it in Spanish and then come tell me what it says.

So he would spend a couple hours on some sections, and we would sit down at the dining room table together. He would read it to me in Spanish, which I don't understand. Then he would back-translate it into English. And then I would go to my desk while he started the next section and I

looked up some words that he had used and tried to figure out what he was saying in there. And then we would go have lunch.

And by that time I had some questions for him. Because nothing I did was single layer. There were always many layers in the way I was talking about something. And I said, so I just want to know if you get this layer that I was accomplishing in these paragraphs. And he didn't, and so I would educate him about what I was working on in there. And then he would explain to me why that was really hard to do in Spanish. And then he would go back and he would do what he—

David W.     Tried it.

Ann T.        He would take in what I said and he would rewrite it. So we spent a whole week doing that with a 20 page manuscript. And when I sent it to the panel, I mean, they were just elated. They were thrilled. It was exactly what they were waiting for. So that's how we got the "Dios Nos Ama Por Igual," which, I'm sure I butchered the Spanish, but...

David W.     It sounded good.

Ann T.        That was in 2006.

David W.     Okay.

Ann T.        And meanwhile, do you know I occasionally was going to leadership meetings and retreats with ecumenical leaders. This is where no one could figure out why I was there. I wasn't a parent of a gay person. I was

married to a man. I wasn't an "out" anything. And I was clearly passionately and intensely contributing to the forwarding of the movement. So they just could never figure me out. But some of the retreats that I went to with them were diversity trainings with Beth Zemsky.

David W. Oh, right. I know, yeah.

Ann T. Yeah, so...but I had a lot of experience working with white organizations that I helped reorganize...like with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, we weren't going to fulfill the mission of that organization as a white organization. And I had a lot of experience figuring that out about what has to happen.

One of the things that has to happen is that you have to have top leaders of color for communities of color to see the organization as something for them. And in the welcoming movement it just was persistently white. And I just became very frustrated with that. Like it wasn't going to change. There were things that I knew needed to be done that weren't being done, and there was no commitment to do them.

So I finally...I had, actually, a health crisis where I learned that I had a condition that I... I had a TIA. And I learned then, when they investigated why did I have that, that I have a hole in my heart that allowed a blood clot to go through. Rather than go through the lungs and be cleansed, it

went through as a blood clot, got into my retinal artery and I lost my vision for a few minutes.

David W.      Wow.

Ann T.        In that eye. And so when they found out that I had this hole in my heart—which a lot of people do. You're born with it. It's supposed to close up. Some people it doesn't close up. But mine was too small. If it was bigger they would have suggested fixing it, closing it. But it would have been riskier to do that than to just leave me alone.

So what happened for me then was I realized okay, I have this condition. I could have a blood clot go through and the next time it could go right up in my brain and really zap me. And if I was lucky I would die, and if I was unlucky I could be a mess, right?

David W.      Right.

Ann T.        So it was one of those moments that people have in their life where they have to face their mortality. And I did a lot of soul searching about what I was up to in my life. And at the time—I mean all these years that I've been describing to you I was doing it around other jobs. So like I was doing this work at 6:00 in the morning and 10:00 at night.

David W.      Well, that's what I was thinking because you had other jobs. You had your family. You had a whole other life going on with all of this.

Ann T. Right. So when I had that health situation and was looking at my life, the work that I was doing, I was being an executive coach as a consultant. And some of it was even...like I coached Mara Keisling at NCTE when she was first founding NCTE, and I did some work with their board. So it wasn't all irrelevant to what I was passionate about. But some of it, a lot of it was irrelevant to what I cared about.

And I finally just looked and said, you know what I'm doing is working really hard to coach leaders of big organizations be really successful at what they're passionate about at the expense of what I'm passionate about. So by this time, you know, my kids were grown and stuff, and I started saying, what if I were working full-time on what I was passionate about?

Like as it was the interval at which I could create new materials was around two years. I could produce one thing every two years, you know, by the time I raised the money, and did the research, and figured out what needed to be said, and wrote it, and designed it, and published it. So that's what I could do when I'm working at 6:00 in the morning and 10:00 at night. So what could I do if I had full-time? And I talked to my husband about it and he just...like we were in a position that I could go there.

So I just stopped that consulting and really dwelt in the question of what would I do if I had full-time. And what I decided—and I really looked at, again, looking at the movement and saying there are a lot of people who aren't being reached by the welcoming people. That included people in

very conservative churches for whom Good News, for example, had demonized the Reconciling program. But in all the denominations there were people who—

David W. There's counterparts, yeah.

David W. Who were in conservative Christian contexts who had seen the welcoming version in their denomination and seen what they viewed them as being aggressive and confrontational, you know? Like that's how it occurred in the conservative context when you're hearing from Good News that was demonizing them or the other various... So there were conservative Christians within the mainlines, there were all these people of color churches that weren't in the conversation and didn't see themselves in what was looking like a very white movement, and, you know, in denial that that's a white gay thing or whatever.

So what I initially did in starting Many Voices was create...my idea was that I would create an online clearinghouse for people who could go safely online. You know, there were people in all those categories who had questions, but they couldn't—and the answers were over there in the welcoming movement, but they didn't see that as a resource to them. So I wanted to create a resource for people who could just safely go online and start asking their questions and get some solid information.

So I started that and got a little ways into it, and then Rev. Cedric Harmon and I hooked up. And we actually got some funding and did a really

deliberate strategic planning process, at the end of which we decided we really needed to narrow the focus to the area that he had the most expertise in, which was the black church. By this time I'm...I was 65 by then and I knew I was going to have to retire at some point, and so my commitment was to build his ministry within the black church. And that's how it became Many Voices, A Black Church Movement for Gay & Transgender Justice.

David W. About what year was that?

Ann T. 2010.

David W. Because I remember Many Voices coming out and seeing it online, and looking at it.

Ann T. Before it was A Black Church?

David W. I think so. It was right when you were starting to work towards that.

Ann T. So I feel like that whole conversation is a different session.

David W. Okay.

Ann T. Do you have any questions about the things that I've been talking about?

David W. I think you've been really clear. It's really helping me because I've read the books and I had met you once, and it really helps me put it together. I would say, as I was listening to you, that what you put together was

experiential learning with all your intellectual learning, and that that made it so much fuller for people, giving it that heart tone.

Ann T. Right. Right. And do you know what I didn't mention is that I, like when I published the very first "And God Loves Each One," Mark Bowman sent me on a speaking tour, like a book tour, and I spent a lot of time in church basements around the country talking about the book. It was a way that they had to not only introduce the book, but begin to foster dialogue. And every national conference they held I was always doing workshops there, and I did a lot of workshops in the Washington area with churches that were trying to figure it out after Dumbarton did. So I was also doing a lot of training around the country in the midst of all that.

But that is what I felt was making a difference to people, was what was showing up in my books. I always thought my audiences were straight identified, cisgender people.

David W. Yeah, that comes across in the conversation as you were talking, that you knew your audience and knew what they could tolerate.

Ann T. Right. But what I...a lot of the feedback that I've gotten over the years—I haven't gotten a lot of feedback, but when I have gotten feedback it often was from gay or trans people who had found healing. I was at a sex education retreat years ago with this guy who's a sex educator, and he does TED talks. He's out there. But he was so excited to meet me because he said when he was 19 and trying to figure himself out, my book was

what he found, “And God Loves Each One,” and it just completely reframed everything for him. So I often have heard not just the story of “I gave it to my parents,” but that it was healing for the LGBTQ person.

David W. Oh, sure. That makes sense.

Ann T. But it wasn't who I was writing it for, you know?

David W. Right, yeah.

Ann T. But it was applicable. Like we all absorb the negativity through our pores, whether we're cisgender or trans, whether we're gay, or lesbian, or bi, or straight. We absorb all that, and none of us has accurate information or really perspective.

David W. That's what I was thinking, that it would make sense to me that gay or trans people reading the books would experience healing in part because of the tone with which they're written. It's an embracing tone. So even if they knew all the information, the affirmation of the tone of the writing makes a big difference.

Ann T. Yeah, exactly.

David W. And to the cis and straight audience as well because they can be embraced in what they don't know and learn it in a gentle way.

Ann T. Yeah. And with no accusation or condemnation of them or anything for being so clueless.

David W. Right. And some of that, it seems, came from your own experience of being brought into groups that you weren't part of initially, and their graciousness to you.

Ann T. Right.

David W. So you could extend that in your book.

Ann T. Exactly. I've always been very able to remember myself being clueless.  
[Laughs.]

David W. [Laughs.]

Ann T. So that helps. Because I'm not judging anybody.

David W. And that comes across in the books also, which I think is a helpful tone.

Ann T. Right. It's the only tone that makes a difference.

David W. Well, I think...yeah, I think so.

Ann T. Otherwise people become defensive immediately.

David W. Mm-hmm, and all is lost. You don't read the book. So this is a good stopping point for the first point?

Ann T. It is for me.

David W. Okay.

Ann T. I didn't think I could talk that long about my work.

David W. Well, we did well. We did one hour and six minutes.

*[End of recording.]*

*[Interview continued later.]*

David W. So Ann, we were up to the point of your talking about the project you're currently involved with and helped get started. Would you like to share a little bit more about that and your life at this point?

Ann T. And so when Rev. Cedric Harmon and I started talking about it [Many Voices], he had just been organizing black clergy in Washington, D.C. because the city council was considering marriage equality, and there was this black bishop who was being very assertive that the black church would never stand for this. So Rev. Cedric Harmon went around D.C. to all eight wards and talked with ministers who were already working on justice issues and asked them to sign in support of marriage equality. And he did it to people who were already working on things like fair housing and school to prison pipeline, incarceration issues, and all the many inequality issues, justice issues that there are to work on.

And they would say, well, that would be a tangent. Like if I worked on that, it would draw me away from these important ministries. And Cedric would point out, in each case, that whatever that minister was working on, that African American queer people were disproportionately affected in that very area, so it's not a tangent, it's like that's the least of these who are most affected. And many got that and then said well, I'm completely

unprepared, can you prepare me, because if I sign onto that, people are going to say how can you do that when the Bible says this, and what about the Bible, how can you say that as a Christian. And they needed help. They didn't know how to answer those questions. So he worked with them.

But he was very clear, after all of that, he ended up getting 200 ministers, and there were people who weren't willing to sign on, but he asked them to stand down out of respect, like to not oppose out of respect that there are differences. So D.C. ended up getting marriage equality. It was very successful.

But he, in the meantime, was in between jobs and knew how desperately this online clearinghouse was, how needed it was, because all these ministers had been asking him to give them resources, and where do we go to learn and figure this out. So we went through... We got started in my original vision and then we went through a very serious strategic planning process that involved Randall Miller and Chris Paige and a number of other people. Randall actually chaired it. He was at the Haas Foundation at that time, Haas Jr. Fund.

So by the end of the strategic planning, you just kept hearing the need in the black church. And that's where Cedric's expertise was. And by this time I'm seeing that I'm not that far from retirement. And I really saw that we needed to narrow our focus and really get clear what community we

were targeting and to build an organization like that. So we declared it as Many Voices, A Black Church Movement for Gay & Transgender Justice.

And at that point, because I wasn't...like we committed ourselves to having a movement from within the black church, which obviously, as a white woman, I'm not. So what I did was use my executive experience, nonprofit executive experience. We worked together to build the organization, and I was in the background while he had conversations. Sometimes I went to the conversations, but I was very clear that it was not my job, in most of those situations, to fully participate. But behind the scenes we worked very closely together on strategy and how we were going to talk about this.

And what we ended up doing, we found that my writing skills, like we loved to write together. I did a lot of the communications work. We would talk through what needed to be said and I would write stuff, and he would then make sure that it was capturing the language of the black church. And out it would go, and emails, and proposals, and more and more resources, which is the thing I love the most. So we created black church versions of "And God Loves Each One" on sexual orientation, "Made in God's Image" on gender.

We created—I don't know if you've seen these. I'm going to pull them out. We have these 6x9 handouts that are so beautiful. Everything is beautiful. I mean, I feel so strongly that when you're talking to people

who are uncomfortable with an issue you have to be...everything has to be beautiful, and inviting, and loving and all that stuff. So we found an absolutely wonderful designer, and one of the things that was wonderful about her is that she brings photographs of really engaging people.

David W. It looks very nice.

Ann T. They're just great. So we did these 6x9...we call them handouts, but "Questions you may have about God and LGBT," "How to respond to negative claims about the Bible and LGBT," "Rethinking the thorny issue of sin and LGBTQ," "It's time to talk about marriage and LGBTQ." And when we published these things, you would show someone, like an African American LGBT person, and just almost to a person, you would see tears streaming down their face because it was the first time they had ever seen themselves.

David W. Themselves, right.

Ann T. In the resources on these topics, and so affirmed. So one of the cool things about these handouts is that they're very brief and like—

David W. I noticed that, yeah.

Ann T. —capturing a very big topic with very few words. But in the process of that we were not only...we had two audiences. One was black LGBTQ people and one was black pastors and religious leaders who were trying to figure stuff out. So on the thing about questions you may have about God

and LGBT, “Does God dislike me because I’m lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer? Does God disapprove of what I do sexually? Am I in danger of hell? Is my life unholy? Must I change to please God? Can a LGBT queer person be a faithful Christian? And even though the answers were very succinct, they were also very powerful.

But it signals to a religious leader who’s trying to figure stuff out what the questions are. Whether they ever get asked in that way, those are the heart of the matter for people who are suffering as black Christians. And so we were doing healing work with black LGBT people with the answers to these questions. Like, “Can an LGBT queer person be a faithful Christian?” “Yes, of course. A faithful Christian is simply someone who loves God and follows the teachings of Jesus.” You know, the answers are very simple. So what it does is it tells the pastor, the religious leaders, what the questions are and it gives them answers, language that they need to begin using to actually make a difference with that population. So it was very gratifying to work with him on all these materials.

David W. I can see that, yeah.

Ann T. And to see how moved people were that finally they could see themselves in the materials. They’re not having to climb over that it’s white and it’s oriented toward white people and all that stuff. So that’s what I...you know, my piece.

I told them for a year and a half that when I turned 70 I would retire. And I did. And I said that I was going to take six months to figure out, like I wasn't going to say yes, like most retired people get overly busy and don't know how it happened, and I didn't want that. I wanted to really think about how I wanted to... Like the person quoted Gloria Steinem last night about "I'm not putting down my torch." [*Laughs.*]

David W. Exactly.

Ann T. But I have to be...I want to be thoughtful about what I do because there were parts of being an executive director or whatever else I did, things you have to do, but I did not—and I was good at them, but I didn't enjoy them. And I wanted to see if, when I get out of the accountability of a job, how I could stay in the lane where it's fulfilling and satisfying to me and I love doing the work.

So the way I'm continuing now—I think Cedric waited six months to bring this up to me. [*Laughs.*] He said that people were really struggling with suffering that was happening. Like a pastor who was absolutely leading an extremely welcoming and affirming church and she couldn't understand how come people were still suffering and feeling that God didn't love them, and they weren't worthy, and all those issues that people have that was beat into them from early childhood.

So we're creating a blog series, which is clearly going to turn into a book, on healing from religious trauma. So it's a very needed conversation. And

we've got some wonderful people who have contributed what they were taught and the journey they had to go on to come to be whole. And Bishop Yvette Flunder has given us some material.

David W. That's what I was going to ask. Is that specifically for people of color or is it more general?

Ann T. Well, you know, Many Voices is all about the black church movement, but I think it's going to be important to a lot of people.

David W. It's a huge issue.

Ann T. Right now I'm coaching an African American professional black 40 something-year-old woman from a different organization, and I was telling her what I was working on. And she started telling me the story of having worked...she worked for an Atlanta-based black organization. She's in D.C. They needed her network. She's an organizer. They needed her network so she had this contract.

And somehow it came out that she was a single mom and had a teenage son. And these black ministers insisted to her that if that ever came up, she needed to say to people that her husband had died because they didn't want to be represented by someone—I mean, it was...you know, she just like went right there when I brought up religious trauma, which is not, quote, “the focus” of our series. But everybody I tell it to has their own experience of it, it seems like.

David W. Absolutely.

Ann T. So I don't know how...I think we're going to just stay within that context. There's a lot written in a white context, and if it turns out to be valuable, people can...you know, it will transcend who the intended audience and who the contributors are. It's really a universal problem.

David W. It is. But I was thinking about what you were saying, and I would think even in terms of trauma and suffering there are contextual differences.

Ann T. Yeah, yeah.

David W. Yeah.

Ann T. Yeah, because in the black church the minister is often...you just don't question. Ministers and doctors, you don't question them. So I'm getting over my head here to say that because I leave that kind of assertion for black people to make. But I've heard them say that so many times.

David W. Okay, all right.

Ann T. So I think that's probably what I want to say about it.

David W. It's an important piece. I'm glad we came back to do this.

Ann T. Yeah. Yeah, it's meant a lot to me to work in this arena.

David W. And the materials look wonderful. And I really like the brevity, keeping it simple. Because people can always expound more. But you've given them the pieces to begin.

Ann T.        Yeah.

David W.      Yeah, that's great.

Ann T.        Yeah, that "Thorny issue of sin" was—[*laughs*]—I think that was the hardest. Anyway.

David W.      And like you say, you know, you said that beauty, having something aesthetically pleasing was important, and these really fulfill that.

Ann T.        Mm-hmm, yeah.

David W.      They look really nice. Anything else you want to add?

Ann T.        I don't think so.

David W.      Okay.

Ann T.        What is that, 20 minutes?

David W.      Well, probably. But that's, you know, that's good. It was 25 minutes.

[*End of recording.*]