

## Carolyn Mobley Interview Transcript

Lorraine Fontana interviewed Carolyn Mobley by phone on December 2, 2015.

### Biographical Note

Reverend Carolyn Mobley-Bowie, born in Sanford, Florida, in 1948, earned her religious education degree in 1971. Next, she did missionary work in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, then took a position as youth director and minister of education in Orlando, Florida. Rev. Mobley-Bowie earned her master's degree at an Atlanta seminary in 1976. After graduation, she became involved as a lay person with the MCC, the Metropolitan Community Church, which ministers to a mainly gay congregation. At the same time, she got a paying job as a career missionary working for the conservative, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). After five years, she left that job when her lesbian identity became an issue. In Atlanta, she was an activist in the LGBT community, participating in AIDS Education and Advocacy; gay pride festivals and marches; LGBT protests and rallies; and singing with the Atlanta Feminist Women's Chorus and the Lambda Chorale. She also helped to lead worship services and special events at the local MCC in Atlanta (MCC of the Blessed Redeemer, later renamed First MCC of Atlanta).

Rev. Mobley-Bowie moved to Houston, Texas, in June 1990, to join the staff at Resurrection MCC, where she served for 15 years as an associate pastor. Just two years later, she was named the Grand Marshal of the Houston Gay Pride Parade. During her time in Houston, she continued her activism in the LGBTQI community. She served on the Board of Directors for various HIV/AIDS organizations, and on the board of the Houston Black Tie Dinner. She was ordained as a Christian minister in 1995, at the General Conference of Metropolitan Community Churches.

Rev. Carolyn Mobley-Bowie met the love of her life, Adrain [sic] Bowie, in Houston. They were joined in holy union on August 8, 1998. The couple was legally married on December 17, 2015, while living in Richmond, Virginia, and serving in a church there. They changed their last name to Mobley-Bowie then. The reverends Carolyn Mobley-Bowie and Adrain Mobley-Bowie now live in Saginaw, Michigan, in the childhood home of Rev. Chaplain Adrain.

Rev. Carolyn Mobley-Bowie continues to sing and to preach, extolling the Lord in her attempts to move heaven and Earth.

### See also:

Woody Blue, "Mobley-izing for Change: A Black Lesbian Seeking Community in the South," *Sinister Wisdom* 124 (Spring 2022): 140-46.



Filename: Carolyn Mobley and Adrain.png

Caption: Carolyn (left) and her partner Adrain. They both use the surname Mobley-Bowie.

**Lorraine Fontana:** This is Lorraine Fontana. I am in Atlanta Ga. It is December 2, 2015 and I will be interviewing Reverend Carolyn Mobley, who was in Atlanta, Georgia early on, some earlier parts of her life, and that's why we are interviewing her about being a Southern lesbian in relation to her life and experience. We will also talk more about where she is now and being a traveling woman. So, Carolyn, why don't you start with your family background.....where you were born, and your parents and siblings and growing up.

**Carolyn Mobley-Bowie:** Ok, that's great. I usually use Mobley, but my older brother goes by Mobeley, so we answer to each, both of them, either one. But Carolyn Janette Mobley is how I was labeled when I was born in a little town called Sanford: S-A-N-F-O-R-D in Florida. Now that's pretty south, and I stayed in the South, some portion of the South, pretty much all of my life. This is as far North as I have ever lived, which is Richmond, Virginia, but it's south of the

Mason-Dixon line, they tell me. They still consider this South. In fact, I have learned the whole of the confederate was here. But I was born in Florida. *[After marrying Adrain Bowie in December 2015, she changed her surname to Mobley-Bowie: "Mob" rhymes with "bob" and "Bow" is pronounced "boo."]*

LF: Virginia is pretty south.

CM: Yeah, Virginia. I never thought of it that way but it is. So I've been in the South my whole life. I'm from Sanford, Florida, I grew up in a household with two parents until the age of 10. When I was 10 years old when my father died. But he died at home and he died of a war injury. He had been, I think, in the Korean war, I always thought it was WWII, my sister told me he fought in the Korean war, lost a leg, and so it never completely healed. But as a child I was baptized at the age of 10, in a Baptist church. First Silo Missionary Baptist Church in Sanford Florida, and I remember being in a church all my life too, just grew up there even before going to church at age 10. You know, I had been going to Sunday school, and my granddaddy was a Baptist preacher. The family had a story about me as an infant sittin in my granddaddy's lap, in the little old country church called Stonehill Baptist in the same county as Sanford. Again, Sanford is the county seat. But in this little town, he's gettin' so excited in church, he stood up, forgot I was in his lap, I fell to the floor, broke my collarbone. My dad was a medic in the army, so he wrapped me up real good, but it was a Sunday, of course and no doctors out living there at the time. And the doctor says: "Well, there's nothing I can do. This is a great bandage, you know, just wait for it to heal." So..... thankfully I got 2 collarbones working. But I finished high school right there in Sanford as well. I was aware of being a lesbian, really, by the time I got to high school. When I was real tall before first grade, I used to tell my mother all the time or anybody else who would ask: "what you want to be when you grow up?" I'm gonna' marry ..... when I grow up. I want a ..... She's gonna be my wife. That was my babysitter. And this is like 3,4,5 years old talking. And by the time I got to 23, my mother told me to stop saying that, you're not gonna marry no ..... You're gonna marry a man, and nobody else. And so I stopped saying it, but I didn't stop feeling it. I still have a warm place in my heart for that woman, even as an adult. I think I came out to her later too, but anyway she's beautiful.

I finished high school and by the time I was a junior or senior in high school, you know, the pressure was to date a boy or do something, so I "courted" and this guy used to come by my house and visit. His mom and my mom were good friends, worry about those nights that we were dating, but you know, we never went out on a date per se, just sat around the TV, kissing and petting and stuff. But, I was through with that by the time I graduated high school and went to college. Because I was always, even in high school, falling in love with girls, writing little notes, love letters, and journals, keeping that big secret. So I went to a predominantly white, coed college in Abilene, Texas. I was tempted to go to Spelman, because that would have been in line, my brother had already gone to Morehouse and we didn't have any women in our family who had gone to Spelman, so I thought: "well, I'll be the first." But then I thought: "oh my God, all those women all the time....." I would never do anything, I'd just be messing around with girls

all the time and flunk out of school. So I thought: "I'd better give myself a chance." So I'm going to a white school, in a far off place - Abilene Texas - and I won't be bothered by being a lesbian anymore. Surprise !!!!!. It goes with you. I was falling in love with girls in my freshman class, and seniors, women who were upper classmen. One in particular was my "big sister", and I am still fond of her. I've come out to her too.

But anyway, I went to college to do a degree in religious education. I knew that I wanted to be working in the church all my life. Never felt called to be a preacher, partly, I'm sure, because that's just my culture. Women weren't supposed to be preachers. I wasn't trying to "buck the system", I just wanted to serve God. I loved God with all my heart, and I wanted to serve in the church, I figured as a missionary or teacher or something.

So I got out of college in 1971 By this time I had fallen in love with enough girls that I knew I was a lesbian. About that time I was REALLY interested in this woman who was 10 years my senior. She was of European descent, but she was a missionary in the Bahamas. So she was around black people all the time, she loved my people, she loved me. And I met her at a conference my senior year in college, and I went to visit her upon my graduation, down in the Bahamas, which was awesome. And when I got on the plane to come back, I thought I would die from longing to be with her. I considered moving down there, forgetting everything else, but I already had a job set up in Orlando, so I had to come back.

I worked at Shiloh Baptist church in Orlando, Florida as the youth director, and the minister of education. So I was doing my dream: working in a black church, not preaching but as education director, and working as church secretary.....that came with the job...it was kind of a dual deal. But I could not escape my lesbianism, it was right there with me in church and in the office, and somehow..... there was a woman hired after I was there who was taking on the secretarial position so I could do it more with the educational piece. She was a lesbian who introduced me to a young woman that I had an extended affair with. I thought: "wow, first time." But, I had really...let me back up...the woman I went to see in the Bahamas really is the person who brought me out. She came to visit me when she was leaving the mission, on the way to North Carolina, and stayed with me in Tulsa. We made love right there, that was the first time. I thought, oh, ok, this is what I've been waiting for, and even though, I can't go with her, follow her...her life is more religious than mine, she's 10 years older, she's white, I'm black, not gonna work. I'm gonna stay here and see what's happening where I am.

So I did fall in love with an outside woman, in church and out of church. This woman that the woman at Shiloh introduced me to happened to be a hooker, of all things, but as we dated and she came home with me, we found out that her momma and my aunt Jean, who lived in Jacksonville, know each other and were best friends, and that this woman knew my aunt and called her "Miss Collins". "Hey, Miss Collins".....then (my aunt) turned around and called her by her real name..... Eljareen, and I didn't even know that was her real name, cause she was going by Tangie. So I was calling her Tangie and I said Eljareen!... and I got the whole story that

her mom and my aunt Jean were bosom buddies, drinking buddies, hanging out in the projects, living, you know, as neighbors, all that. And this woman that I was with used to be in and out of my auntie's house all the time in Jacksonville as a kid. And it blew my mind. So my auntie Jean said (to Eljareen): "Your mom know where you're at? You'd better call...." So I took this woman to visit her mother. She hadn't seen her in 10 years or more, and she was a drug addict, unfortunately. At the time I didn't really know that, and a prostitute..... which I did know..... but she ended up getting taken away by her pimp, and I didn't see her anymore. They moved out of the city. She told me not to try to reach her, you know, that was a piece of my life that was done.

So brokenhearted and looking for another way to be comforted, I picked up another relationship with a distant cousin, who had been writing to me and stuff. So we finally connected and that kind of began my coming out experience of 'serial monogamy'. I was always faithful to one woman, but one at a time. And sometime later on I actually was in a long-term relationship during which I had 2 or 3 affairs, so it was a real different thing there. But I was kind of growing up and coming of age in Central Florida ----Sanford----and then coming back to central Florida-- -- Orlando-----for work and really coming out, and that's when I came out to my mom. I told her the real deal. "Don't ask me about getting married, I'm not marrying no man. I'm not marrying no man, ever, so please don't ask me about that anymore. If you want to know the real truth about my life, I'll tell you." So I did tell her about all my girlfriends.

In 1973, I was ready to leave Orlando and move to Atlanta, for the first time, to go to seminary. I had been seeing a woman who unfortunately was married to a man, but she told me that they were getting divorced, and he didn't live there, and turns out he was a football player for the Chicago Bears. He was still married to her and he kind of took that seriously, in terms of his not wanting anybody to be with her. That kind of backfired on me, and I got out of that as I moved to Atlanta. But in Atlanta, I kept coming out. I was very excited to meet all the gay people in my incoming class. One young man who, we became like sister and brother, tight friends, people thought we were dating and we let them think that. But he was gay, took me to my first gay bar and told me about gay life and he later dated a gay male cousin of mine, or at least had an affair with him. I wouldn't say "dated". But we were good buddies, his name was Gerald and I credit him with a lot of my growing up as a lesbian in Atlanta those early years: '73,'74,'75.

We graduated seminary in 1976. By that time I was involved in MCC [Metropolitan Community Church], as a layperson, while also working for the Southern Baptist Convention. That was my first job after graduating seminary. May of 1976 I started working for the Southern Baptist Convention as a career missionary. I did that for five years before they decided that they wanted to ask me if I was gay or not, and I refused to answer. They told me: "if you can't tell us you're not a lesbian, you have to resign." I said: "I'm not going to tell you anything. But if you want me to resign, I'll be glad to do that soon as I figure out who's gonna replace me, train my own replacement." And I did that. And they paid me full salary for 6 months after I left the job, but I know they knew they were wrong, and they had no reason to fire me, other than their suspicion I

was gay. But I told them: “I’d rather be single than subjected to.....be part of..... this church that’s tarnished because you either have to be (thought of as) a homosexual or a whore...nothing in between.” And I said: “I’m just not gonna live under that kind of scrutiny and I am not gonna lie about who I am.” So I didn’t lie, but I didn’t tell them the whole truth.

I left there and immediately joined MCC. I had been attending anyway. So in 1981 I became a formal member of MCC in Atlanta, and continued to expose myself to the gay community. I went to my first gay pride in 1981. That summer I figured: if I’m gonna be out, I’m gonna be out out. And they had put me out, basically, of the Baptist church, and I said: “that’s fine, I don’t need to work in the church, I can work in the world. I’m a human being with 2 degrees. I’m sure I’m smart enough to do some kind of a job.”

So I became a courier, that’s a no-brainer job. But a friend of mine who was also Baptist had gotten kicked out of his professorship at South Carolina, a big university, a Baptist University. He was driving for Central Delivery, and he got me a job. I said: ‘thank you Jesus, thank you God.’ So I worked for Central a couple of years, and then one of the owners..... one of the managers there broke off and became an owner of Eagle company. So I got to be a driver, then a foot carrier, and then worked inside the office doing customer service work, which was great experience for me and I loved it, and I got paid more than the church was paying me. I thought: “well, what am I thinking anyway, I should just stay here and do this.”

But after about 10 years.....8 or 9 years to be sure.....I decided I wanted to work in the church, and so I made that switch. But during those 8 years when I was working as a courier, that’s when I became involved in the gay and lesbian community on a large scale. I sang with the Atlanta Feminist Women’s Chorus for 10 years, was one of their soloists, and was very active in that group and even the coed gay and lesbian chorus I sang with, Lambda Chorale. I don’t know if you remember that, Lambda Chorale. I was active in Pride every year, of course. It was about 1981, and AIDS became a big issue and I had to volunteer at that Gay Community Center and was trained as their AIDS educator. So I did Aids 101 with a lot of people, and I became a volunteer for the first time for people living with AIDS, and was assigned to a woman who was dying, a black woman at Grady hospital. Only got to see her once, and chat with her about her faith and God and how much I loved her, and I hope it made a difference, but she died shortly after that in Forsyth, the town I was in.

In Atlanta, at MCC saw lots of people die of AIDS. I did several funerals as well as my clergy work. I was a deacon and that would have been enough to do a funeral or preach, do everything but baptize. I did serve the Lord’s supper. I guess I could have baptized somebody’s dead ass..... but I was very active as a lay church leader in MCC from 1981 to 1990, when I left to move to Houston, Texas. Cause I had been invited to a position at that time: Second Baptist MCC in our regional Fellowship in Houston, Texas. I worked there from 1990 to 2005. And in ’92, after being there just 2 years, they made me the Grand Marshal of the pride parade in Houston, incredibly. So I do lots of things at the bars, did a couple of memorial services at the

bars for people when AIDS was still taking folks right and left in the early 90's: 90, 91, 92 to 96, until they started doing the drugs that let people live much, much longer. So I was as active in Houston as I had been in Atlanta. Toward the end of my time in Atlanta, maybe '86 or '87, I helped to start a group called the African American Lesbian Gay Alliance [AALGA].

LF: AALGA. I was gonna add that to the list I had. I was just thinking about lesbian groups...like Sisters. But then I remembered there was AALGA.

CM: Do you know what?? I did not know Sister's in Atlanta, but, believe it or not, after I was in Houston just a short time, the woman that I was partners with at the time (we were together 4-1/2 years), she started a group and we called it Sisters, but it was SISTERS, all capital letters. It was a .....what you call it ??- algorithym ?? Anyway, the letters stood for something..... What do you call that?

LF: Acronym ??

CM: acronym..... thank you. It was an acronym - can't think of what each letter meant but it was something like sisters being there for each other-that's why it was called SISTERS, but it was all capital letters. So I'm not familiar with Sisters in Atlanta, but we helped form a group which was African American lesbian/gay support group...same idea...in Richmond, in Houston, Texas, and we started that about '93, '94.....'93 I think..... But it was an amazing group.

But back in Atlanta. AALGA, after African American Lesbian and Gay Alliance, was started largely..... all I can remember it was during the time that we started we started..... a guy whose name was Duncan Teague and I were very active. The first president was a gay man who died of AIDS, and we had a big memorial at MCC with lots of folks from all over the city. He had worked at Morehouse College in one of the offices... tremendous human being.

LF: What was his name??

CM: I'm trying to think of his name, it's been too too long. I did have an award with his..... Marcus Walker, there you go. Marcus Walker. And we did the Marcus Walker award, I got the first one, from AALGA, in his memory. But we did extra spiritual services, I didn't want to call it ecumenical, coming up with that word, cause that's what [another group] called its gathering, but extra spiritual largely because we worked in different religions, and people who weren't identified in a Christian religion, you know, so we did that through AALGA.

LF: What year did AALGA start...do you remember?

CM: It would have been around '86 or '87. That's when I had my surgery. No, let me think.....'85 or '86, earliest '84. I'd have to call Duncan to ask him about that.

LF: ok.

CM: I don't remember first year but it was in the early to mid '80s that we started, and it was still going after I left.

LF: Let me ask you. Is there something in here that you can kind of meld into what you're talking about in terms of your identity as a lesbian?? ...and any identity you had, if ever, as a feminist or womanist ??

CM: yes

LF: How did you relate to the mixed groups versus the.....were you in any all lesbian groups and how did that work for you in relation to working with men and other women?

CM: OK, right, right..... coming out I was fully aware of who I was by the time I moved to Atlanta and while I was in seminary I continued to come out. And that's when I began to, after graduation in '76, I began to really check out organizations. Carole Etzler was a friend of mine that I met, who was a feminist, a feminist song writer; she worked at the Presbyterian Center at the time and I'm on one of her albums that she made: *Womanriver Flowing On* [1977] is one and then...I forgot the second one, but we remained friends. She was the first feminist that I really met and I got involved in a feminist house church called "Becoming," and that was while I was still in seminary. [*Carole Etzler is now Carole Eagleheart.*]

My last year and the first 2 years after graduating seminary I continued to meet with those women. They were a largely Catholic group, some Presbyterian obviously, Carole was Presbyterian. The woman who has been now for years the chaplain out at the woman's prison outside of Atlanta was also part of this house church, and she is on one of carol's albums with me. So I had been running in feminist circles in the late '70s: '78 and early '80s: '80, '81, '82. And of course I was aware of ALFA, went to the ALFA house from time to time to look at their books, early on.....uh, to get reading materials while I was still in seminary, check that out, and of course I met 2 or 3 young African American lesbians who were at either Spellman or Clark College and they used the ALFA house a lot as "coming out" ground : learning stuff, reading materials, meeting other women, that sort of thing. ALFA was feminist and the feminist house church was too, but I became aware of Womanism, womanist movement really, sometime later while I was still in Atlanta.

But I didn't fully identify as a womanist, cause feminism seemed broader to me. Plus I kind of liked the idea of all woman space and not including the men. But the womanist perspective is that we can't move forward without the men.....because we're Black, that trumps being gay. I never have figured out if that's true for me or not. I think it is, but being gay is such a core part of who I am - it's a part that's not negotiable. You know, I didn't choose it, and so I can't give it away. But so is being Black, I didn't choose that either, and I certainly can't give that away. So womanism and feminism began to merge, or kinda blend with me, I guess while I was still in Atlanta, and separate out more as I moved to Houston, I think.

I was more a womanist there [in Houston] because I ran into Black women. A group called Afro Fem Centric was already started before we started SISTERS, and they were kind of fading out, weren't getting very much attendance. So we started SISTERS, and that drew a bigger crowd at first. But, you know, every organization waxes and wanes, so we had our ups and downs. Feminism for me, as a part of my identity, emerged because I am woman identified. As a lesbian, I am [redacted] - as a lesbian in high school even when you all weren't using it. I know what it was, I had looked it up in the dictionary, and I thought: hmm, ok, that's me! And so, moving on through life, I continued to relate to feminists, even though the more I got into African American history...I have a video that talks about the feminist movement and it documents a period when women were fighting...when the suffragists were a big thing, trying to get the vote for women. That vote happened at the expense of black people, in general, because the women, feminist movement, would not include Black women to the point of..."If you're gonna give all women the vote, not just white women..."- you know, that whole slavery thing. They couldn't separate it out. Except they did, to say ; 'well, get the women's vote, THEN we'll help slaves get free, and help, you know, black men and black women get to vote.' It was a long time coming, but it did happen. But I wish that, if I could rewrite history, I would have women standing together so strong that they would embrace overcoming racism, simultaneous to overcoming (patriarchy). Anyway, that's how I kind of developed on that.

The more I got in touch with the inconsistencies in the Black community, the more I leaned toward womanism and away from feminism, but I could never exclude feminism as a part of my core identity. I remember in Atlanta one time there was a period of time where the gay bars were double carding black gay men, as in requiring more ID and giving them a hassle, trying to keep them out. Eventually they had to let all gay people in, regardless of color or gender identity, or any of that. Now we know. But I remember with Duncan and others kind of what got in some of the clubs; they were doing that in Atlanta until they got better. The gay community center, they didn't speak up against the racism within the gay and lesbian community. I never let that be a stopping factor for me, but it certainly was a hindrance in a way.....uh.....I think I was one of those African Americans that became the exception and you can recognize that..... it's like, 'well, we know Carol, we like her. We don't like the rest of you Black People so much, you know, but she can come....' And I didn't like that, being the only one. That was true in MCC. I was the only one for a long, long time. Me and a guy name Darrell. He lived in Washington, DC, and every time I go there now I stay with him. But we were both in an MCC.

I didn't know it at the time but there's this unspoken rule that people of European descent in America, they can have the mixed groups as long as they're the predominant group. Like they can handle 5 or 10 or 12% of the room or the organization or church to be black, but don't let it become 15, 20, 25, or 50%, or they are out of there. You know, it's just overwhelming to most people of European descent. They can handle a little but not much integration. So the whole idea of integration as it was happening in the schools...people just kept segregated schools by starting private schools - so that's kind of where our culture is and I'm sorry to say that I think that a lot

of that still exists, people that don't want to have black people involved in their lives can escape that starting something new and closed somewhere else. But the good news, in my mind, is that as more people relate to each other intimately, whether in marriage or as sex partners, some of that is becoming overcome. So that if I was with a European-descent woman and she really loves me, she's gonna have to stand with me, with Black people and get comfortable with being the only White person in the room sometime. And I think this is happening some. I think that's happening all the more with Barrack Obama as a mixed race Black man, he identifies Black, but, you know, some people think he's half white, and he is. He's still himself. And that's a whole surprising thing to me. In this country, if you got any what they call Black blood in you, that makes you Black. If you're 2/5 African American, I don't care how white your skin is, you're still African American. So that says something about how deeply rooted racism is in this country, and how it cannot really be overcome overnight. I think that the only thing that will really undermine racism is when people understand there's one race: human. We come in all shapes, all textures of hair, there's one race, the human race. And it will be a better world when that day comes. But in the meantime.....

LF: Yeah, in the meantime.....

CM: yeah, in the meantime.....in the meantime, feminism and womanism are, are meeting more, I think I have been to a number of conferences and such where womanists and feminists are both on the stage and speaking about their passions, and their call for justice. I think feminists and gay people in general have learned that the best way to move our agenda forward is in coalition with others who have a similar agenda: justice. Women want justice, gay people want justice, Black folk want justice. All of our lives do add up, but when one part of life is getting attacked, we have to raise that up. Black lives right are getting attacked. Literally, physically, and killed. And so we have to say: black lives matter like the rest of us, all lives matter. But we need to pay attention to that of \_\_\_\_\_ being hurt the most. So that's kind of where I am with that.

I enjoy women's company, period. All colors, all races and colors..... I learned that I could fall in love with White women, with Asian women. There was a little Hawaiian woman in our freshman class I was crazy about. I remember her name: Debbie Tam. Pretty as she could be. (She) was not a lesbian, and I didn't ever come on to her...but I was good enough friends that I could admire her from afar. And of course when I moved back to Atlanta, and I first started coming out after college, my first long term relationships were with women of European descent. A woman named Julia - we started going to MCC together, and then later Diane Velasquez who still lives there in Atlanta, but not involved in MCC very much anymore, kind of a non-church person, but a beautiful person indeed. A strong heart of faith, but just not into religion in terms of practice thereof, but she has her spirituality, it's very, very deep, very personal.

So for me, when I got to Houston, I was Grand Marshal at the [Pride] parade. I got interviewed and at the tail end of that interview, I talked about my people. "Who....who are your people?"

“Well”, I said, “lately all people”. But I have 3 groups that I identify with as my people. First of all, Black people are my people. You know, that’s how I grew up. That was the first way I understood myself in the world, was as a Black person so Black folk are my people. And I said, gay folk are my people. All gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people are my people because I also identify as lesbian. And I said, church people are my people. I love the folk outside the church too, but I’ve chosen to train and live and work through the church. And so, those are my people. Black folk, gay folk, and Christian folk. Even the bad ones among them. I know Christianity has some serious problems...with the right wing side...but there’s enough pull on the left side to bring us closer to the center, and that’s where I am in MCC.

So..... what else do you want to focus on?

LF: Well, there’s so much stuff that you’ve put out. I know that you’ve said you went to Texas in ’92, so that’s why you.....

CM: 1990, not ’92. I was made the Grand Marshal in 1990.

LF: Ok, so even earlier. You weren’t (in Atlanta) when Zami started.....

CM: I was not.

LF: When you were back here for a little bit during the past years... you know, 20 years, did you at all relate to Zami?

CM: yeah, I began to seek out Zami because it was most like the group called SISTERS that we had started in Houston and that I had left there. And so Zami was an African American focused lesbian group, and so I sought them out, got to know a couple of the folks leading it, attended maybe three or four of their functions during that time I was there, cause they did mostly annual/biannual things, maybe they did it twice a year or only once a year. So I went to those and all of them were wonderful. Their parties as well as the roundtables discussion they had about the butch femme deal and looking at racism, sexism, all the ‘isms”. I left the courier business, before I got invited to join the staff in Houston, I was working at Chari [Books, a feminist bookstore]. And I was hoping at that time they were gonna make me and the other young woman a partner, with Linda [Bryant] and her partner [Sherry Emory]. They decided against that, and both of us ended up leaving. We were hoping to work at something like that, and I was looking at getting money to put into it.

LF: I didn’t know about that story. So many of us worked at Charis at one point or another, but I didn’t realize you wanted to maybe become a part owner and that’s interesting.

CM: That’s what Linda had expressed when she had me and this other woman..... I can see her face now..... but I can’t remember her name..... that we were in training, we were management trainees, that’s what they called it. And that after we worked a while then we would see if we wanted to buy in.....They were working out what that would look like, but then they decided

against it. Mainly I think Linda felt I could not fully commit to that because she knew about my religious background, and I hadn't shared with her that I was considering, you know, a church job at that time, cause I would have stayed there and probably let Houston go. I knew Atlanta so well, but I didn't want to just stay there and work for a small amount of money when I could make a full time salary somewhere. So, anyway, that didn't work out and that's when I decided to accept the job in Texas. And that was in June of 1990, I think I pulled out of there May or June 1, 1990. Yeah.

LF: I want you to talk some about your musical gifts and talents and how that started. You know, you're a singer and you play the guitar, and maybe other instruments that I don't know about, and write. Tell me how that started and how that fit in with the various parts of your life, and how you used that.

CM: I've been singing since I was 5 years old, probably sooner than that, just singing along with the radio and harmonizing. I have a natural ear for harmony. Growing up in Sanford, I sang in the church choir. As a kid, I got to sing with the gospel group because I was good. Even though I was too young to be in it, they let me sing in it anyway. Church music and church choir and high school choir and college choirs, I was always a part of that. So everywhere I went I sang in whatever group was available, and, in fact, when I went to Hardin Simmons as a freshman, 2 other freshmen girls and myself started a little group called the Sojourners, and we sang so well together. Two of them playing the guitar, one on the tambourine.....and we sang folk songs and religious songs mostly. But we traveled in Texas, central Texas, and west Texas and impressed enough people that when Baptist World Alliance came around in 1970 -- it was the 1970 world's fair in Japan -- the Southern Baptist Convention was having the Baptist World Alliance in Japan the same time as the World's Fair was in Osaka. So we flew to Tokyo and we were signing at these little itty bitty Southern Baptist Japanese churches all week long. And we spent the weekend singing, or Saturday afternoon at the American Pavilion at the World's Fair, and got to meet lots of people. Not a lot of English spoken, but when you heard somebody speaking English, you gravitated toward them. We met people who were speaking all kinds of languages, and it was wonderful. We learned a little Japanese and sang a couple of songs in Japanese, but all religious songs. So really you can identify with everything I've done. When I was on staff in Houston for 15 years, I sang with the regular choir from time to time, but also I started a group called the Gospel Ensemble, which is now racially mixed - it was then too - but mostly black and black gospel music is what they feature. So they don't sing anthems and they don't sing anything but Black gospel music, and the people who are in it love that. Because the church in Houston has a sanctuary choir that does a variety of kinds of music, and they have a little Southern quartet that gets met, and they have a handbell choir, all kinds of musical stuff.....But the gospel ensemble is something I started that survives even when I'm gone.

CM: And so with the women's chorus in Atlanta, I was delighted when it got started and the founding director and I were good friends and still remain friends. I call her once in a while. I need to call her for the holidays now. Linda Vaughn. Of course she retired after about 10 or 12 years, but I came back for that 10<sup>th</sup> year reunion, cause I had just moved to Atlanta (that was 1990 or '91), and I came back and sang for their concert and did a special number dedicated to Linda. That's when I got into women's music. That's something that happened to me in Atlanta, during the time I was an active feminist. I loved Olivia, anything and everything. All that's left for me to do now is go on an Olivia cruise. I have not done that but I still want to. But I went to the concerts and I sang at women's music festivals, the one in North Georgia, later at the one in Texas.....never got to go to the one that one that's held in August every year..... up in, what state is that ?? Indiana or Michigan ??

LF: Oh yeah, Michigan Women's Music Festival.

MC: I've never gotten to do that, but that may still be in my future too because my partner was only.....

LF: The last one was this year !!!

MC: Oh really ?? This was the last one ?

LF: Yeah, They decided to end it, yeah.

MC: Wow.....well, I missed that era. But I was aware of it the whole time, and mindful of it, and hearing music of it, and thinking music from it. And, of course, singing with Carole Etzler, who's a feminist songwriter and musician and artist got me into a lot of feminist music and women's music. [*Etzler later changed her surname to Eagleheart and became a Unitarian Universalist minister.*] When I met my current partner she had never heard of women's music but she was always a Motown girl. She grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, and going to Detroit all the time. She actually worked at radio stations that were Black stations...Motown, Rhythm and Blues, all that stuff, and never heard of women's music. On our first date I ended up.....brought her home..... we sat on a beach towel or something like that, and we listened to women's music.

LF: all right!! What's she think??

CM: She liked it and she mentioned people like Linda Tillery, you know, she was impressed. I was crazy about Chris Williamson, of course, and others, but she liked that music too. It was good, and she liked the words. The style was different for her, didn't have enough rhythm and beat for the most part - she liked a little more upbeat.

LF: Yeah, more like folk music kinda stuff, But, you know, the one picture I have of you that I remember is you playing your guitar and singing, before we'd start off the Pride Parade, like at a rally....

CM: Oh god, yes!!! I will never forget, you're right. I did that, and I even had a chance to go to Boise, Idaho for their first ever Gay Pride. And our friend who had moved from Atlanta to Boise, up to Oregon after that, made me promise I would come bring my guitar and lead them in singing too, just like when she had seen me in Atlanta. I loved that. But the thing that stands out in my mind is the time in '81 or '82, First Baptist Church [REDACTED], and all that rhetoric about God and AIDS was God's condemnation, and we had to stand against that. We did this silent protest, it was huge. We met at the MARTA station downtown nearest First Baptist and walked from there to that church, and then circled the church. The whole city block..... just people lined around facing the church. We didn't say nothin', we didn't do nothin', and as soon as they got out of church, they saw us and they knew our purpose. We had some signs: "God love Gays" and "AIDS is not a punishment" and "Gay people are not the only people with AIDS", you know, all of that. But that was a [REDACTED] singing at the Marta station that day: "We are Gay and Lesbian people"..... that's the little theme song that I do sometimes at gay gatherings, that Holly Near song...

LF: Yeah

CM: (singing: "We are Gay and Lesbian peoeople , and we are singing, singing for our liliives....") I did it in Boise, Idaho for their first ever Pride.....I sang a little bit at the pride function in Houston, and the Pride Parade float. When I was in Houston, MCC always had a float and sometimes we had our choir. I remember singing in the last few. I was on the float with them... course I rode in the car the year I was Grand Marshal, but other times I walked with MCC in those parades, or was on their float signing with a small group. Music has always been a part of everything I've done, from preaching (I always sing), to leading rallies with my guitar, and community songs. And that was much like the civil rights movement; we always sang as well as all of our gatherings. And, of course, we still in the Gay community sing " We Shall Overcome" from time to time, because that is still...we are still overcoming...still in the process.

LF: Yes, obviously still. Both processes. Many processes. But let me ask you about that. This is Atlanta again...the Gay and Lesbian movement here always remained, and still is, very segregated. There's been few positive attempts, successful attempts, to have really multicultural, multiracial kind of groups and organizations. When you were....when you knew about ALFA and when you started ALGA, were there a lot of Black gay people who were coming out? Was there an internal Black community gay and lesbian presence that you knew about?....(I know) that people would have house parties or people would have not-so-public organizations that supported each other. Did you know about that culture?

MC: A little bit. I was not as privy to the house parties as some others. But I was aware of them, mostly because of gay male friends, Black gay male friends that I know about. And there were a couple of attempts in Atlanta, as I recall, for Black gay clubs and women would come, but those clubs wouldn't last very long. Because women, Black gay women, were the poorest among gay and lesbian people in terms of having extra money to spend to go out. So those businesses didn't last very long, and didn't...couldn't...attract big enough crowds to stay in business. But in terms of race and integration as it related to women's organizations and gay and lesbian organizations, I think it's very difficult. (That) it may remain segregated.....is proof positive...and it's very difficult to integrate them. My take on that is if we as African American people can bond

together and build strong Black gay and lesbian organizations, then we have a voice in the larger gay and lesbian movement, because all of a sudden there is a pool of Black folk who are out and gay or open to some extent, that predominantly white gay and lesbian organizations have access to. When there is more than just one person at the [redacted], like AALGA, you can invite the whole AALGA team to participate in Pride, for instance, not just one person here or there. You can invite the whole ALGA group to a play or function that ALFA or Sisters even or Zami (are putting on). Well, Zami is another group that is right now I guess the focus where you can find a group of Black women at one time rather than just the leader or (an) individual person. It's hard to integrate because birds of a feather flock together....that's real...water doves seek it's own...that's real. People are more comfortable in segregated groups. Everybody, black folk too. There are some black people who think integration was the worst thing that happened to our community, it tore us apart, it separated us, it splintered us. We no longer have strong Black schools as we used to. Even when I was in Elementary school we were learning Black history - it was not being taught at the white schools. I don't even know if they celebrated Black history day or week or month or anything. But as we move into those larger circles, we had to bring Black history celebrations with us, so that's where other people began to get some information and learn that there was a whole vast array of writings and materials and movement that they were just blind to before. Whites can live in a sanitary society if they want, I mean, they can really avoid being around Black people, easily. Black people cannot, on the other hand, avoid white people as much. I mean, we can cling to each other in smaller groups, but we still gotta go into that bigger world to ride the bus, to get a job, you know, to movies. I don't know any black-owned movie theaters. I just haven't seen any. But, of course, maybe there were. There should have been, back in the day when we were relegated to only the balcony of movie houses, didn't go downstairs. I remember that in my hometown. And even places you couldn't get into, period...not even in the balcony. So you couldn't get in if you were Black; it's just the way segregation works. We're much better now on those public accommodation things, public venue places, but the places where we still have a choice, like church and private clubs, there segregation will abound.

LF: How have you seen MCC over the years.... starting as many LGBT things did back then as predominantly white, almost all white, and, has that changed over the years in terms of the ability to be more multicultural and interracial?

CM: I think at the top MCC has remained committed to that, has modeled it, and it has filtered down to some of our churches. But I can name the ones that have any kind of decent African American presence: the one here in Richmond is about one third Black, Resurrection in Houston, I think, is about one fourth if not one third Black, MCC in Washington, DC is almost 50/50....half.....there's more blacks there than whites in terms of who attends Sunday mornings. It's very, very mixed and it has a strong Afro-centric presence with its music, gospel music being the main music, not a separate choir that does something other than gospel, like at Resurrection. There's others..... just a few. Los Angeles church, MCC L.A., has a sizeable Black presence, but after Troy left and after Matthew Wilson left, the new pastor that came, didn't draw as many Black people in there and there's some who didn't like him and didn't feel like he was leading the church in the right direction. He was from Europe- a British guy newly in America, pastoring at American church. But because he was white and younger he attracted younger gay while men much more than he would women of any color and certainly people of

color in general. But they maintain a strong Hispanic movement within the MCC L.A. They meet at different hours, all Spanish language service, but they are part of the bigger church when it comes to congregational meetings and large church-wide fellowship things, but they worship separately and have their own pastor. Even the church in Las Vegas has a decent maybe one fifth African American congregation. But Wanda Floyd, that's the Black woman from North Carolina: Wanda.....W-A-N-D-A Floyd, who as their interim pastor has brought more black people into it. They had a strong Hispanic congregation meeting with them that has since broken away to start its own unique ministry. But it started as a part of MCC Las Vegas.

LF: Getting back to.....getting back to the South and Atlanta, what's your story and experience with MCC Atlanta. There's more than one MCC now in the Atlanta area. I know there was, again, a very small minority of African American folks in that church, at least when I knew it, in the '70s.

MC: Right. Well, I was, like I said, the only one for a long time when they were on North Highland. As they grew and moved to the place on Colby Circle, right off of 85 and whatever that neighborhood is.....

LF: North Druid Hills.

CM: North Druid Hills, right. In that location they grew their black constituency a lot. There was at least one fourth, if not more, of that congregation that was African American, when I left there (that was 22 years ago). But they did not reflect that in the leadership because the pastor was not...it wasn't on his radar or it wasn't his primary concern. Every place that MCC has broadened its African American constituency, it has had to be a real deliberate effort on the part of the leader. Like the guy at Resurrection at MCC in Houston, he hired me knowing that a bunch of folk wasn't liking having no Black person on staff, paid full time, but it grew, and kept on growing African American participation and involvement to the fact now they have, have had, a racially mixed staff..... ever since then Black people (are) being paid by the church to do whatever they do. And they just hired a young woman as associate pastor now, who came through there when I was there. She started in MCC when I was there. But now she is a clergy person and has been hired by that church. My heart's desire, from '81 when I left Southern Baptists, my heart's desire was that MCC Atlanta would grow to the place where they could afford two pastors and would have me as one of them, as an associate. I wouldn't really want to be senior pastor anyway, that's not my gifts or calling. But I could help **lower** church as an associate pastor or staff pastor focus on outreach and community connection. That's where I'm strongest.

LF: Yeah.

MC: I'm not that good of a preacher. I'm Ok, I mean, I can do it and I've managed, but it's not a passion of mine, and I don't really love to preach. I love to sing. But MCC has grown in terms of its inclusive nature, because they have been intentional from the top.

LF: Oh Yeah. It probably reflects on any place you're talking about, any institution.

CM: Right, right.

LF: Um, let me ask you this..... why, and I don't mean to be..... I'm afraid to ask cause I don't want to.....

CM: You can be honest with me.

LF: Yeah..... why is it that you would stay with MCC rather than get into, like, Unity Fellowship...some all Black or majority Black congregation?

CM: Good question, good question.... Everything is a tradeoff. My feminism is too strong to be part of Unity Fellowship; they are so sexist, it's pathetic.

LF: Ahha, I didn't know that..... OK.

CM: Black men, Black men running everything, and they accept.....

LF: That's not here in Atlanta now. Their minister is Marissa Penderman now.

CM: Yeah, all right, they're growing in that area. When I was coming through and when I had the opportunity to switch, it was not worth switching, for me. I didn't want to deal with the sexism of black men, and they were not speaking of God besides anything but Eden and some still love the St James version. I was not interested. I'm still not. I would do a Unity Church that was racially mixed, or Black men from Bishop Saunders' church [United Church of Jesus Christ (Apostolic)]. Her Pentecostal movement is predominantly Black, but she's open to others as well. And there are some white Pentecostal groups that are affiliated with her, but, for the most part, she is nonsexist and a feminist and womanist in her preaching and she's mindful of inclusive language. All of that, I'm attracted to that. But a lot of people in the pew still are in the St. James Bible. They can't see God as anything other than that. Theologically I could not make the leap. MCC is where I am theologically about inclusion too. I stay with MCC because I believe in the dream. The dream is multicultural, multiracial, everybody on the same level playing field. It's not there, but we're moving in that direction. We have from day one, that's been the intention, that's been the goal. And it's never waived as to what we want to see all of our churches be. If all of us get discouraged because the mobile church is not as blended as we want racially, and if we leave.....it'll never happen. And so I stayed to help it out, and I did see it happen to some extent in Houston and in Atlanta, and of course it was already happening in Washington, DC. and L.A. before I came along. So.... There are many, many more MCCs where they have a handful of one, two, three, you know, Black people you can count on the fingers of one hand. For the longest time MCC Lubbock Texas had one Black person, many years, her name was Mary Anne. She came to the PAD conference: People of African Descent conference, sponsored by MCC. That's the other thing... the fellowship. You have MCC Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. Churches have always been clear about this on the denominational level, doing things that meet the needs of the folks who are attending. MCC did not have very many black pastors, and black folk who are attending put together a list of things we need to see: Black elders, blacks on the staff of the fellowship, on the administrative level, we also need to have more black preachers ordained. There's a stumbling block in ordaining cause you're required... everybody seminary to get a degree and lots of Black folk

from the traditions we come from..... if God calls you whether you go to school or not, it's your choice. But God's still gonna use and you can pastor and preach without a degree. But now, even more Black churches are moving toward degreed pastors, so that's a blessing. That was a stumbling block that kept black people from being ordained. It is still a long, arduous journey: 5 years to be ordained, but that's true in other denominations too. Now it's about 5 years in the UCC, it's about 5 years with Unity...it just takes a while to get the experience and the training under your belt. So I'd say, because it was the best place to plant myself, to grow and to help create what I wanted to see exist in the world.

LF: Yeah, thank you for that. Wonderful. Do you have other things which you thought might be interesting and relevant to your story and how it relates to our Southern Lesbian Herstory Project?

CM: Well, being a Southerner is a part of why I stayed in church too. You know the church is deeply rooted in the Southern culture. All kinds of churches were, but growing up in the Black church in the South, church would be where I would plant myself. So MCC is the church of choice, I mean because I can be most of who I am there. I can be out gay, I can be out Black, I can be out as a feminist, as a womanist, and be embraced in MCC as those things. Black churches still have a problem with women, believe it or not - thank God that's changing. But in a week's time I was in a Black church, both Baptist, one of which the pastor will not let women, any woman, come to the pulpit. If a woman's gonna preach or speak at that church, or do anything, there's a podium on the floor with a microphone, and he will plug into that. Only men come to the pulpit, and that was right at El Jean's mother's funeral that was still true. I spoke to the family. He did not invite me up. He pointed to that lectern; I went right over there because I was not gonna make a scene at my Aunt Loretta's funeral. But just a week later I attended a funeral in Spotsylvania, just last Saturday. Black preacher there died, and there were Black women clergy in the room and on the roster, and when one in the audience asked to speak, the pastor extended his hand to help her up the step and put her on the podium, in the middle of the pulpit, like it outta be. But I thought.... "wow, what a difference." Even at a funeral this man in Michigan would not allow a woman to come up to bring greetings or read, let loose, or nothing..... And at this other church a woman wanted to express her condolences to the family and was invited to the pulpit. Unfortunately, a lot more are like that first preacher.

LF: Do you sense that the changes, the positive changes, are different in different parts of the country, or is it just hit and miss? In other words, would the South be leading on that issue, or not?

CM: I think that people grow at various levels and paces all over the country. I think that there are pockets of really inclusive black preachers in every community, but they are far and few between - they are not the standard, they would be in the minority. And I think that's everywhere. And so every area of the country has some reference, even Tulsa Oklahoma had a progressive presence. People like Bishop Carlton Pearson, who used to be far right and is now far left. He was kicked to the curb by the evangelical groups in this country. But there was, when I was in Tulsa, a wonderful group of, an organized group of clergy, interdenominational, multi-faith that would gather to do all kinds of little things, and even in the gay community center, that welcomed religious and nonreligious folk, and supported the whole community. It was amazing to see at Pride representation from the Jewish Community, from Wiccans, and Christians of all

denominations. So there are pockets of progress everywhere, thank God. But the resistance is strong everywhere, unfortunately.

LF: Well, did you want to end on any particular note?

CM: Basically, I think only one thing I want to add would be that I feel blessed that I came through at the right time to help make the world more integrated. In our community, then, as a teenager coming out of high school, I went to a college that was predominantly white. I didn't have to experience what integration was like because I graduated from a Black high school at a time when everything was segregated, and went to college just as things were opening up. So I was the first Black female in my dorm, in college, but I continued and graduated from that school. I've been back for reunions; it's a growing school. There's a largely Hispanic student body now. But they are making attempts to be more inclusive. That's something that I support? But I think that being in MCC for me has meant forging ahead a vision, a shared world and shared leadership in the world..... that Black, white, gay, straight can work on together - that's important to me, rather than isolating where it's comfortable.

LF: Well, you were one of the few people who put yourself in those positions to try to see that vision come true, and it probably was uncomfortable for you quite a lot.

CM: That's true.

LF: And so I appreciate all your work and it's a wonderful thing, that you did, and you are doing, what you are doing and you are very much appreciated by a lot of people, Carolyn, really.

CM: well, thank you. I appreciate you and the friendship over the years and all of my experiences in Atlanta. I am grateful [redacted] make me who I am and to shape my future.

LF: Well, thanks you so much for taking the time to do this interview and I am sure that I will see more of you once you get to move back to Atlanta and I hope that happens.

CM: (laughing) It could happen. I'll certainly try to come that way for Christmas, or during the holidays.

LF: I'd love to see you then. Thank you so much.