

Oral History Interview: Darlene Garner

Interviewee: Darlene Garner

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: Part 1 October 27, 2010 and Part 2 November 23, 2010

Monique M. So I'm going to set us up again.

Darlene G. And?

Monique M. And I'm going to repeat everything, just start the recording over.

Darlene G. Sure.

Monique M. So today is October 27, 2010. My name is Monique Moultrie, and I'm here with Rev. Darlene Garner from the Metropolitan Community Church. We're going to do this interview in two segments, and this first segment is going to focus on your early life. So my first question for you was about where you were born, if you could tell me something about your neighborhood that you grew up in – upper middle class, or working class, or mostly black neighborhood – what were your surroundings like in Columbus?

Darlene G. Okay. I was born in Columbus, Ohio, grew up in the late '40s, early '50s. I was raised in a working class black neighborhood in the heart of almost downtown Columbus, with...kind of surrounded by neighbors who did everything that they could to keep an eye out on everybody's children, so

even if I had wanted to get away with something, I wouldn't have been able to because they...it was truly a village that helped to raise me.

Monique M. Wonderful! So that partly leads me into my next question, which is about how you were raised. Could you tell me something about your family? Were you raised in a large family, a small family?

Darlene G. I am the oldest of four siblings, the oldest of five children, and I was raised as an only child in that I was raised by our great aunt and uncle who adopted me when I was around ten years old. Then my mother and my siblings lived about 20 blocks away, so I had the life experience of being an only child with three sisters and a brother.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] That's unique.

Darlene G. It is, it is. It certainly had its challenges, being a child who wanted very much to be with my siblings, but the circumstances of our life were such that that was not possible, and so I had an interesting relationship with them and even an interesting relationship with my mother, wherein, in a lot of ways, my mother was almost more of a big sister to me than what I make up would have been a typical mother-daughter relationship.

Monique M. Now, your great aunt, is that on the maternal or paternal side?

Darlene G. My great aunt on the maternal side, yes. And I was the...our family is from southern Ohio, so in a way we are kind of...my friends tease me by calling me a hillbilly. And I think that that might not be too far off the

mark. I was raised with very kind of rural family values, where one is, you know, children are seen and not heard, with a very, very strong work ethic, and a very strong ethic that says that nothing is more important than family and preserving the family reputation in the world.

Monique M. Gotcha. So as far as your other extended family, did many of them also move to Columbus, or were your grandparents, etc. still in southern Ohio?

Darlene G. My grandparents were still in southern Ohio, so it was my mother, great aunt and a couple of other great aunts who lived in the big city of Columbus. Much of the family stayed, literally, down on the farm.

Monique M. Gotcha. And your father's family, were they in the same area?

Darlene G. My father's family I did not really know. My parents were divorced when I was...I think I was probably around two. And so I didn't really get to know my father until I was around 21, and he and I met for what was for me the first time, although it obviously wasn't actually the first time, but I had no memory of him, no childhood memory of him.

Monique M. Right. So seeing that you had family that was in a different part of the state – I realize you do a lot of traveling now – did you do a lot of traveling to visit them or other relatives as a child?

Darlene G. As a child I spent many summers with my extended family, especially great aunts. They lived in Vinya, Ohio, and so I would spend summers with them, with my cousins, in small town Ohio, at least until I was in

high school, by which time I had such an active life that there wasn't enough time for me to have summer vacations on the farm or down in the country with my family.

Monique M. And so what else did you do for fun other than visiting family during your summer months, or even during the school year?

Darlene G. I was very involved with Girl Scouts from the time that I was six years old, seven years old until...oh, until I was well into my 40s, so much of my fun time was doing various kinds of Girl Scout activities. I was in the marching band and in the orchestra at school. I was always rather introverted, and so spent some of my most enjoyable hours at the library reading and kind of escaping into worlds of someone else's imagination.

Monique M. Nice. So how did you get involved with Girl Scouts? Was that something your great aunt and uncle encouraged you into?

Darlene G. It was definitely something that my great aunt encouraged me into. I like to say that my great aunt did everything that she could do to kind of cause me to...she wanted to form me in a way that would, from her perspective, minimize problems, challenges being a woman of African descent, and so she raised me with the expectation that, as I put it today, that I would grow up to be the best little white girl that I could be.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. And so even though in the '50s there were not a lot of African American girls in Girl Scouts, it was something that was very important for her that I be involved in, so was involved in Girl Scouts all the way through elementary school and even into high school. And even as an adult I even worked for a while as a professional Girl Scout.

Monique M. Wow. So were you part of an all black Girl Scout troop, or were you in an integrated troop?

Darlene G. At that point, if you wanted to be in Girl Scouts, you had to be in a segregated troop. It was unofficial, but integrated troops were not very prevalent. Our Girl Scout troop was based out of our church, Union Grove Baptist Church, and that was basically a continuation of the black experience kind of learning how to be a...learning the values that are taught by Girl Scouts and applying those values within the black community.

Monique M. Okay. You mentioned this troop was a part of your church, so the Union Baptist Church, was that where you were baptized?

Darlene G. Yes, yes. Union Grove Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio. I was actually the...at least at that point, I was baptized when I was, I believe I was seven years old, and at that point I was the youngest person ever to be baptized in our church.

Monique M. And—

Darlene G. I was really clear that I knew what I was doing and there was nothing that was going to keep me from being baptized.

Monique M. All right. Now, is that the church that your great aunt and entire family was still a part of, or was that a church you attended on your own?

Darlene G. No, my great aunt was very much a part of that church, and my great uncle was a deacon, and I spent almost – *[laughs]* – almost every day there was something going on at church, and it felt like we were there every time the door opened.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]* I know that feeling. I do.

Darlene G. *[Laughs.]* Yeah.

Monique M. According to the profile that we have up, it says that you moved at some point from this church to an Episcopal church. Was that later on in life, or was there a family move of some sort?

Darlene G. No, it was very much an individual move. When I was in high school, and exploring the world of dating, I dated an Episcopalian boy, and kind of fell in love with the liturgy of the Episcopal church, all the smells and bells that were just so very different from my Baptist experience. And so as part of my...actually, as part of my coming out process I joined the Episcopal church and had my children baptized in the Episcopal church.

And the particular attraction was what at the time was celebrated as the first ordination of women. And I was beginning to get a sense of call to ministry and felt that the Episcopal church might be a place where I could serve. And it was only after joining an Episcopal congregation that I realized that the ordination of women was not common in the Episcopal church. Indeed, the first ordinations were considered irregular, and it caused quite a schism in the Episcopal church. And the congregation that I joined turned out to be a relatively conservative congregation that was threatening to leave the denomination. So the place that I thought would become my spiritual home pretty quickly revealed itself to be not what I had hoped it could be for me.

Monique M. And when you made the decision to move from your family's congregation to the Episcopal congregation, was that supported or seen as part of teenage rebellion?

Darlene G. Well, by the time that...I got special permission from my family to worship once a month with my boyfriend at his Episcopal church. By the time I made the decision to join the Episcopal church, it was made at the same time as I was coming out as a lesbian, and at that point in my life there was absolutely nothing that I could do that would meet the approval of my family. And so there was no need and no expectation for any kind of approval from them for my spiritual choice.

Monique M. So if this was happening simultaneously, you were aware of your sexuality as a child or a teenager, how did that play out for you?

Darlene G. Well, I graduated from high school in June, was married by December, had three children as quickly as my body could produce them in order to prove to...I think to prove to myself that the feelings that I had for women were something other than being, as my family would say, being “that way.” And it felt to me at the time that getting married was really the only option that was available to me.

Unfortunately, the marriage was not a healthy one, for a number of reasons, and about four years into the marriage I became very clear that my physical as well as emotional survival depended upon me leaving that marriage. And my husband at the time, without intending to, suggested that if I wanted a divorce, it must be because I was a lesbian, and he intended that to be an insult, because how could I dare think of not being with him.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. But his words to me freed me, in a strange way, to reclaim the notions that I had always felt and remembered having first experienced when I was a young child, like six, seven years old, maybe even younger than that, being absolutely fascinated by women and having crushes on TV actresses and on almost all of my female teachers. And it just all suddenly made

perfect sense to me. So I will be forever grateful to him for helping me to come into myself.

The process of coming out, though, was not nearly as simple as coming into self-awareness, and my great aunt was not at all supportive.

Threatened to have my children taken away from me, threatened all kinds of unpleasant things, and even made up a story for my Baptist church community that... As part of my coming out, I chose to leave Columbus and move to Washington, D.C. And my great aunt, in order to explain my absence from Columbus, created a story that she told people at church.

That story was that I had become a prostitute.

Monique M. Oh my!

Darlene G. And that I had left Columbus because I had stolen money from my pimp. And being a prostitute was, to her, far preferable than telling anyone that I was a lesbian.

Monique M. My goodness!

Darlene G. Yes. Yeah. So that was... Unfortunately, by the time she died, we were never able to reconcile from that.

Monique M. Now, was this also the response of your siblings and your mother?

Darlene G. My mother was not judgmental. She was...what she said to me was I love you and that's all there is to it. And so from the very beginning of my

coming out, there was never an issue of rejection or anything from my mother. It was more my adoptive mother, my great aunt who was of a different generation and had a very different set of expectations of me than my mother did.

Monique M. And your siblings?

Darlene G. And my siblings have always been very supportive. Even though we were not raised together, we were still close, and they tell me now that they always looked up to me, and continued to look up to me even when I came out to them. So even though they didn't necessarily understand why, the fact that it was me, their sister who they loved, that was what was most important, to maintain...to live into that love and to maintain that relationship as siblings. And today we have a wonderful, wonderful and supportive relationship with one another. I could not ask for more from them.

Monique M. Now, you mentioned they looked up to you. At that time period and at the time period when you were growing up, who did you look up to?

Darlene G. I looked up to the adults around me and to national figures, because I did not have a lot of friends, growing up, kind of peers, but I did have close relationship with a lot of older adults in my life, and many of those women were role models for me. And as I grew older and became more aware of the world around me, and...

I had the opportunity, when I was around 13 years, old to have dinner with Martin Luther King, Jr. He and my pastor had attended seminary together. It was in the very early phase of the civil rights movement, and Dr. King was in Columbus trying to enlist support from various organizations in Columbus for the work that he was doing around civil rights. And I happened to be at my pastor's house for dinner that night. My pastor's daughter was my best friend at the time.

Monique M. Ah!

Darlene G. And so one of my early heroes was Martin Luther King, at that point not as much for his work in the civil rights movement, his leadership there, but more as a kind man who noticed me and actually engaged me in conversation. This little kid from Columbus, Ohio and this strong preacher, who actually paid attention and asked me questions, and at least through that conversation, remembered my name. Those were unusual things for a child in the '50s and '60s to have that kind of attention from an adult.

Monique M. Wow! That's a very cool childhood memory.

Darlene G. It is, it is. It's one of my favorites.

Monique M. I'm going to take a step back and ask another question that's kind of sort of related in regards to how you were forming yourself and being formed. What role did education play in that? You mentioned that many of your

friends were older friends, so how were you interacting with peers your own age in your school? If you could just give me a sense of your educational journey.

Darlene G. I was educated in Columbus public schools. Have always had a very high value around education, even though I was not able to achieve the educational standards, the educational levels that I had always hoped to be able to achieve, primarily for economic reasons. My family just did not have the money. And my family also had kind of a different value around education. They thought going to college, the only reason that they could understand that a woman would want to go to college would be in order to meet a man, and so they considered that it would have been a waste of their money to send me off to school just to get married.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. So I was able to achieve a small level of scholarship and went to Ohio State University. Wasn't able to finish because of having children and the complications in life that having children can create, even things as simple as daycare. But even though I wasn't able to finish at Ohio State, I consider myself to be a lifelong learner and to have certainly graduated a few times from the school of hard knocks. Yeah, but have always had a high value around education.

Monique M. And so you mentioned your library being a means of escape. Did your early middle school, high school classes act in that same role?

Darlene G. I'm sorry. Say that again. I didn't understand the question. I'm sorry.

Monique M. Oh, no problem. You mentioned that you went to the library a lot as a means of escaping into books. Did your education, i.e., middle school, high school, offer you that same opportunity for escape into different worlds, different cultures?

Darlene G. Oh, absolutely yes. When I was in middle...I started learning foreign languages when I was in middle school, and was always fascinated by cultural diversity, even though there was no vocabulary for that at the time. But I have always been fascinated by difference and understanding and experiencing people who are different from me. When I was in junior high and high I was involved a great deal in various music programs, some of which took me outside of my local school, so I was able to be in the All State Orchestra, and so meeting people from beyond Columbus was exciting for me.

So I have always wanted...I've always had a wanderlust in my spirit and that still, I think that still burns within me even now, all these many years later. And that sense of wanderlust has really been a blessing to my life in that it has allowed me to not be afraid as I enter into strange lands and strange situations with different kinds of people. As well I would say that I really like my life at all of its stages, even when I didn't necessarily understand the reasons for whatever I might have been going through at the time.

Monique M. That's a wonderful reflection to have.

Darlene G. Yeah. Yes.

Monique M. Well, moving from there, moving just, I guess, a little bit forward then, so when you graduated from high school, did you immediately – because you mentioned sort of June to December you were married – was the decision made then that you'd be going to college and you got married along the way, or was that something that happened later?

Darlene G. I graduated from high school in June and started college the next Monday.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. Yeah, I immediately went to university, and then made the decision to get married far too early. I should *never* have made that decision at 17 to get married.

Monique M. Was he someone from your high school or someone that you met at Ohio State?

Darlene G. It was someone from my high school, yeah. He was four years older than I was, and I discovered too late that the reason that he wanted to get married was in order to avoid the draft into the Vietnam War. So at that stage, love had absolutely nothing to do with my decision to marry. I married him because I saw it as my only chance to get away from home. He saw it as his only chance of avoiding the draft.

Monique M. And so when you got away from home, did you still stay in Columbus, or were you, like, *away away*?

Darlene G. Oh, when we got married, I discovered the night after we were married that he and my great aunt had arranged that we would live with her.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. So my grand scheme – [*laughs*] – to move away was foiled from the beginning.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] Drat!

Darlene G. Drat indeed. So he got what he wanted. I was pregnant right away, so he was able to avoid the draft. And I got to continue living at home almost throughout our marriage.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. Yeah. Double crossed.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] So the sense of needing to get away, did that occur as your family grew? Did he also get on board with this idea of creating a separate household?

Darlene G. I don't believe he ever fully got on board with it. We did eventually buy our own home, but soon after the marriage just fell apart for lots of reasons, including a little bit of domestic violence. So my decision to end

that marriage was not as much about me coming out as it was a need to literally save my life and possibly my children's.

Monique M. All right. Now, while you were married, were you married within your church? And which church was that at that point?

Darlene G. Baptist. The Baptist church.

Monique M. And was the church supportive? Was that the norm, sort of marrying at that young age, for your church tradition?

Darlene G. Yes, that was, indeed, the norm, and my church was very, very supportive of me getting married. I had just turned 18 when we were married. They were all on board with it.

Monique M. All right. And so when you decided to leave him, and thus start your own path, did you immediately move then to D.C., or was there some period of time where you were on your own in Columbus?

Darlene G. I was on my own in Columbus for about a year, year and a half, and during that time, did not go to church. Getting married was one thing, getting divorced was something else. And coming out, at that point, was not something that...I wasn't out to many people, and certainly not to my family initially. When I actually left Columbus and moved to Washington, D.C. I came out to my family, but initially it was all about survival.

Monique M. Now, when you made the move to D.C., did you bring your children with you at that point?

Darlene G. Yes, I did. Yes, I did. So I was 23, I believe – no, sorry, 25 when I first moved to Washington and had three children who were two, four and six.

Monique M. And what did you do when you first moved to D.C.?

Darlene G. When I first moved to D.C., I came to D.C. because I found a job. I worked for the World Bank, initially as an administrative assistant, and then was selected to be the director of the staff association which, if the World Bank had a labor union, the staff association would be it.

Monique M. Okay. And making that move to D.C., you got a job. Did you also continue schooling at that point, or were you working full-time?

Darlene G. I was working full-time and then some.

Monique M. With three small kids, I can imagine that to be the case.

Darlene G. Yes, yes. Yes.

Monique M. And when you made the move to D.C., did you join a faith community there?

Darlene G. Yes, it was in Washington that I joined the Episcopal church for the first time.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. Yeah, the Neighborhood Episcopal Church.

Monique M. So that memory had remained from your high school years?

Darlene G. Yes. Yes, it did. Yes, it did, very much so.

Monique M. And the church you joined, was that an integrated or a black congregation?

Darlene G. No it was, I recall it integrated, although it was predominantly white, overwhelmingly white.

Monique M. And were they welcoming to you?

Darlene G. Um...I have to say I wasn't there long enough to have noticed one way or the other. They were...it soon became clear, quickly, that they would not be welcoming to me as a woman who felt a sense of call to ministry, and they would not be particularly welcoming to me as a single parent, or as a black woman. They were tolerant, but not welcoming. So there were a number of reasons why my time in that Episcopal congregation was relatively short-lived.

Monique M. And was that the congregation your children were baptized in, or was it another?

Darlene G. Yes, that is the congregation where they were baptized. Yeah.

Monique M. And so when you realized that that wasn't actually the place for you, where did you move?

Darlene G. Then, by that time, I had found MCC. It was 1976 when I first went into MCC Washington, and from the very beginning, knew that I had come home.

Monique M. Now, that's going to be a good point for us to start up on the next interview. I will ask one final question in the few minutes we have left. To backtrack, so you mentioned your coming out to your family, the move to D.C., and your children being very young. At what point did you begin having those conversations with them?

Darlene G. I was kind of forced into having a conversation with my mother because of the reaction from my great aunt. My great aunt had long suspected that I was a lesbian, and when... It's been a long time now. But there was a moment when we were probably on the phone and she told me that she didn't like the fact that my oldest child, who at that point was probably six or seven, that when she came home from school, she went to...our neighbor next door kept an eye out on her until I got home from work. And my great aunt was very, very fond of this particular daughter, and thought that that was just totally unacceptable that strangers would be watching my child, and so she threatened to call Prince George's County and report me for child neglect.

And so I turned to my mother for consolation and direction and support, and in doing all that, somehow or another it just felt like I needed to come out to my mother in that conversation. Looking back on it now, I think it

was bad timing, but at the time it made sense. And from the very beginning, my mother was, you know, just one hundred percent supportive, and kind of coached me through that really, really rocky time with my great aunt.

Monique M. And did she give you assistance in coming out to your children?

Darlene G. There was never an issue around my coming out to my children. They have always had some level of awareness, almost from the time that I did, and have always been very supportive and have always told me that they are... When my children were growing up, their friends always hung out at our house, and my children always outed me to their friends, and so I was a novelty to their friends.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. And my kids just took great delight in outing me, and said to me that if... I kind of warned them against outing me because I was concerned about the impact that it might have on them if their friends knew that I was a lesbian. And they said, well, what's important is that my friends know that you're my mom, and if they don't like the fact that you're a lesbian, then they can't be my friend.

Monique M. *Awww.*

Darlene G. And that was consistently...it has consistently been their response. If their friends couldn't get with the program, then they'd get another friend.

Monique M. Nice!

Darlene G. Yeah. So my children have been consistent in their love and in expressions of love for me. Consistent.

Monique M. Well, that's such a pleasant note to end on. I think I'll stop us here and have us schedule the next time we'll talk. And that next conversation will sort of start with your move to MCC and sort of take us to the present time, so I'm anticipating it being about another hour worth of conversation. Maybe not an entire hour, but at least 30 to 45 minutes more of conversation.

Darlene G. All right. Sixty-two years is a long time to squeeze into two hours.

Monique M. It's true, it is. But we also want to make sure we don't overburden you with trying to remember all the good details of life, and sometimes bad details of life.

Darlene G. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. So I'm going to stop the recording.

[Part 2.]

Monique M. Okay, now can you hear me?

Darlene G. I can.

Monique M. Excellent. All right. So this will be our second part of the interview that we began earlier, actually last month. For the record, I am Monique Moultrie, and this is my second interview with Rev. Darlene Garner. I am recording on November 23, 2010. We ended our last conversation with your move to D.C. and eventually your move to the MCC church, so I'd like to sort of pick up there and have this interview focus more on post D.C. life.

Darlene G. Post D.C. life, all right.

Monique M. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.

Darlene G. On post D.C. life. So we got up to around 1976, I guess.

Monique M. Yes.

Darlene G. Yes, okay. I was a member of MCC of Washington, D.C., MCC D.C., and with my three children had a really busy time as a member of the church. Became a delegate to our general conference, I was on the board as the treasurer of the church, and just kind of immersed myself in new theological discoveries and learned how to fully embrace myself as a beloved child of God, with no need for shame for being a lesbian. It was a wonderful time of self-discovery and discovering new things about God. But one of the realities that I faced at the time was that as a black woman, it felt as though I had to choose between being black and being lesbian. And so when I look back on that particular time in my life, I say that

my...I became unwoven, my strands all came apart. So after...there came a point when my social community shifted from being my lesbian social community, shifted from being primarily through MCC, and I worked with six others to found an organization called the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays in 1978. And that became...that required more and more of my time and attention and energy than I was able to put into the church. And one of the things that we did during that time was to organize an international conference for lesbian and gay people of color that preceded the first LGBT March on Washington.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. And by the time...yeah. And that was, as far as we have been able to tell, was the first national black LGBT organization in the country. And actually, right now the founders of that organization are working together to kind of write our history before it gets lost.

Monique M. Yes.

Darlene G. Yeah, so that's a fun thing that I'm doing now. But it became really difficult for me personally, and there came a moment where I think all of my pieces just completely unraveled, and I actually got married to a man again, and left Washington, returned to Ohio. I had come out to this man. His name is Otis. And I told him that I was a lesbian and that I was tired, that I was just in pieces and I needed to rest. And he offered that if I were to marry him, that I could rest for whatever time that I needed to rest, and

when I was ready to resume my life, that he would support me in doing that.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. I was so broken and so naïve, I did not understand at the time that you didn't make those kinds of deals.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. So I got married and moved my children from Washington and we lived in Cincinnati for four years while I healed. And during that time I had another child. But then after about four years it was clear to me that I was ready to reengage my life. I told Otis that I was ready, and he was true to his word. He encouraged me and supported me to reenter my life.

And so I moved from Cincinnati to Philadelphia, now with four children instead of three, and the very first place that I went when I drove from Cincinnati to Philadelphia for a job interview, the very first place that I went, was to MCC. And when I walked into the church that particular Sunday, I mean, literally the first place, I arrived in Philadelphia on Sunday and sat in my car until the time for worship to begin.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. And when I walked into service that evening, there was a national committee meeting that was taking place in Philadelphia, and so when I

walked in, standing around the room – the service was standing room only – and standing around the room were people who I had known from MCC in the ‘70s, people who were in leadership, and so there were like ten of them standing around the room, people who had been my icons, my heroes and heroines, heroes and sheroes, and I felt as though I was being welcomed back by a great crowd of witnesses.

Monique M. Wow.

Darlene G. And I decided that I would never again allow anything to cause me to leave any part or piece of myself, that I would engage all of...I would enter life from a place of wholeness, not a place of brokenness, and no one would ever come between me and myself, my whole self. And that’s kind of the way that I’ve lived since then.

Monique M. Now, at that time period were you identifying as bisexual, or was your primary identity still lesbian?

Darlene G. My primary identity was still lesbian, including while I was married, during the second marriage. I was still lesbian. Yep.

Monique M. Now, it seems that MCC had a great impression on you, so much so that, as you said, when you returned to the East Coast, that’s the first place you went. So what was so welcoming or warming about the MCC community for you?

Darlene G. That’s hard to name what that...

Monique M. Well, I ask because, of course, there were numerous other religious spaces that you could have gone to, say a Unity or any other congregation and just made your home there, made peace with yourself in that home. So I'm just wondering, for the record, especially given the fact that you are a part of the hierarchy now, and integral to the role of the MCC church in religious leadership, what was the initial pull?

Darlene G. I believe that the initial pull had to do with MCC's commitment to what we now call human rights, but what I experienced then as a real commitment to being in good human relationship across all boundaries, whether they were boundaries of race, boundaries of gender, boundaries of nationality, of language, of physical ability. It was a community that was really committed to being diverse, of allowing people to incorporate and to celebrate in a holistic way our own selves and to celebrate one another in ways that I just didn't experience anywhere else.

There was something about me that had always gravitated...there was something about this call to diversity that had always resonated within me, and in MCC I was able to really experience religious community as being truly a manifestation of heaven on earth, because it included everyone. And it's hard to put words on what made MCC...it was a sense of integrity, I think, that I experienced with MCC, an integrity that... I experienced in MCC a commitment to walking the talk.

Monique M. Okay. And so what would you say would be one of the crystallizing moments for your move into leadership with MCC?

Darlene G. I have been...whenever I have been asked to do something, to be of service, I have always said yes, even when I had no idea that I had the gifts or skills to be able to do whatever was being asked of me. And so throughout my time in MCC, I was frequently called upon to serve on the board of the local church, to serve on various committees at the level of the district or the denomination, and I think that others saw in me certain qualities that I believe they found trustworthy.

And because of that, I frequently found myself being asked to do things that I had no way of knowing I would ever be called upon to do. And so I think that in a real sincere way I think the leadership was thrust upon me. Over time people saw me and saw something in me that said that because I was faithful in the small things, they trusted that I would be faithful in the larger things.

And when I was first elected to the Board of Elders, at that point, in 1993, our system was such that elders were elected by the entire church, and that takes form at our general conference, with delegates from all of the clergy in the denomination and delegates from all of the churches in the denomination. And so having been elected to serve as an elder indicated that a core majority of those delegates, of those representatives, of those voices of the churches saw in me a certain quality that led them to want to

want me to serve them as one of their spiritual leaders. And I have, certainly over the years, have tried to live and work in a way that people would continue to experience me, as a result of my work, to still be worthy of the trust that they first placed in me.

Monique M. Wonderful. I want to backtrack there and sort of provide for others a genealogy of your journey through MCC and leadership roles. So you mentioned when you first arrived you sort of started out as a layperson working within the church as treasurer. When did you move towards seeking the ministry full-time, seeking ordination, etc.?

Darlene G. I entered...it was at sunrise service, Easter morning in 1985 that I received the call to ministry, undeniable call. And I entered seminary the following September and was ordained in 1988. Yeah, 1988. At that time my full-time ministry was not based in the local church. Rather, my full-time ministry that was recognized by MCC was the work that I was doing politically. I worked at that time as the executive director of the Mayor's Commission on Sexual Minorities in Philadelphia, and so my first formal ministry was a political ministry in that enterprise. It was a political appointment by the mayor.

And from that I became...I was elected to be the pastor of MCC of Baltimore, and I served there for a year. And then was elected to be pastor at MCC of Northern Virginia in Fairfax, and I served there for seven years. It was in the midst of that time that I was also elected to the Board

of Elders for the first time, and so for the first five years that I was an elder, I was also a full-time pastor.

And then in January of '99, I was invited by the founder, Troy Perry, to move to Los Angeles in order to be able to work as a full-time elder at our headquarters in L.A. And that's kind of my chronology of my ministry.

And in accepting that call, it just opened up a whole, an even wider range of opportunity to be of service, not only in the U.S., but even internationally, which was just a wonderful, tremendous opportunity that I otherwise would not have ever had in my life.

Monique M. So from about 1976 to '85 you were involved in lay leadership, and you mentioned then going into seminary. Was that also in Philadelphia?

Darlene G. It was Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Monique M. Okay. And at that point, were you pursuing pastoring or were you planning on continuing your role with the mayor's office and still remaining in political activism?

Darlene G. At that point I just knew that I needed to be in seminary, and I knew that I was preparing for professional ministry, but I did not know what form that ministry would take.

Monique M. Okay. And so at this time period, how old are your children? Are they embracing your move to ministry?

Darlene G. Yes, they were. They had been some resilient people.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. [*Laughs.*] At this point my children were three, 13, 15, and 17.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. Yeah. Excuse me, I'm going to make a pot of coffee. The water going into the coffee pot. Sorry.

Monique M. No problem.

Darlene G. So we lived for a while on campus at Lancaster, and my children have just been unconditionally supportive. They've each had their own journey in life that I will not share in this interview. There were particulars that were challenging for them as for me. But even with all of the challenges, we were always a solid unit, even as they started acting very much like independent children.

Monique M. Yes.

Darlene G. Yes. [*Unintelligible*] about that.

Monique M. Well, I'll change subjects slightly, then, and return to your role as pastor. It looks like about eight years you were involved in pastoring. How was that move for you? Were you still involved in other social organizations, actively working for LGBT rights, or were you doing that through the church at that point?

Darlene G. At that point I was primarily...my engagement was primarily through the church rather than with other organizations, so I was always in a spiritual leadership role. In the '80s, with the...you know, kind of height of the AIDS epidemic was the time that I was active in pastoring, and my primary social activism was around advocating for people living with AIDS.

And I also serviced as a hospice...as a chaplain at an AIDS hospice. I was elected to be the president of Northern Virginia AIDS Ministry, which was an ecumenical support service organization in northern Virginia. So I would say that my primary activism focused around AIDS in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. And then around '97 I again shifted focus a little bit and organized, founded a national conference, an international conference, for people of African descent within MCC that is still ongoing. We now do that conference every three years. So though I wasn't organizationally involved with...involved in organizations in my justice work, I have continued to be very committed to the cause of improving the spiritual life of people of faith who are of African descent.

Monique M. Gotcha.

Darlene G. And that has been an evolutionary experience for me, and something that's just really, really important. Especially as I have had increased opportunities to exercise leadership, I see part of my responsibility and my commitment is to lift others as I climb. Being the first spiritual leader of African descent in MCC, I feel that it's a responsibility to make sure that I am not the last.

Monique M. Okay. Now, I'm interested in this switch. You mentioned when you first began that you created the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays more as a secular organization, and then it seems later in your career you moved through organizing through religious organizations. Conceptually, how did that move function for you? Were both serving the same needs, or was it, as you just said, you were becoming increasingly more concerned with improving the spiritual life of persons of African descent, and thus wanted to organize and to go in that way?

Darlene G. I don't know that I followed the question.

Monique M. Okay. I'm asking about the move from secular organizing to religious organizing.

Darlene G. Yes.

Monique M. So at the this same point, were you still involved with the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, or were you finding your work

through MCC serving that same purpose, and thus your priority moved from the social organizing to the spiritual organizing sense?

Darlene G. I found the same... Doing that work through MCC was... That's where I needed to do it.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. Rather than through a secular organization. Yeah. So that's an apprentice thought. It was there is a need here, and I am in a position to be able to respond to that need, therefore I will. It wasn't a conscious shall I go with organization A or organization B. It was there is this need at home.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. I've got to take care of home. And with MCC being that home.

Monique M. I think that may answer, but I'll give you space if you want to further fill in my next question, which was a question about your career trajectory, where it seems that many of your jobs have involved working with and for LGBT persons, and I wondered was this a coincidence, you know, you sort of went where your friends were, or was this a targeted effort under some purpose-driven life, in a sense?

Darlene G. The former. When I accepted call for ministry and began at seminary, it was during a time in my life when I was a professional Girl Scout.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. And I was on a very clear trajectory to become executive director of a Girl Scout council somewhere. That was my career dream. And then God got in the way.

Monique M. So this is before or after working for the Philly mayor's office?

Darlene G. Just before. When I went to Philadelphia, I went there to accept a position with the Girl Scout Council.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. And when I first went there became involved with secular organizations as well as MCC, secular gay organizations, and so my photo appeared on the front page of the *Philadelphia Gay News*, and I was fired from my job shortly thereafter.

Monique M. *Ohh.*

Darlene G. I was a little more out than the other lesbians on staff.

Monique M. Gotcha. Yeah, being on the newspaper would do that.

Darlene G. Yeah, yeah. And *Philadelphia Gay News* was distributed on street corners in downtown Philadelphia, so couldn't even...you didn't have to go to a bar to get it, all you had to do was cross the street.

Monique M. Gotcha.

Darlene G. Be outside in downtown Philadelphia. And there I was, above the fold.

Monique M. Okay. So then from there you went to the mayor's office and then to the call to ministry?

Darlene G. Yes.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. Yeah. After spending – and between...it took me about three months before I got the job with the mayor's office. And during significant parts of that time – well, actually, all of that time – my children and I were homeless.

Monique M. *Ohh.* Wow.

Darlene G. Yeah. I could take you in lots of different...lots of different directions on this interview.

Monique M. Yes, yes. All of which will be completely interesting to me, and will be completely fascinating to those who come to the web site for information and for future work. I'm going to be observant of time. We've got probably another 20 minutes or so.

Darlene G. Okay, mm-hmm.

Monique M. So I'm going to move to another section of the journey. So you've talked to me about your move to being on the Board of Elders and your move to L.A. – well, being asked to move to L.A. Did you physically move?

Darlene G. Yes, I physically moved. Drove across the country.

Monique M. And how long were you in L.A.?

Darlene G. I was in L.A. for two years, and from there moved to Cape Town, South Africa for two years to support MCC churches in Africa.

Monique M. Wow. And so you currently are over part of South America?

Darlene G. Yes. I currently support churches in D.C., Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Southern California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Southern Texas, Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Portugal and Spain.

Monique M. That's a lot!

Darlene G. Yeah. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. I don't know that I made it through writing down the entire list. I'm glad it's going to be transcribed. That's a lot.

Darlene G. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. And so you do that as the full-time job. Is the people of African descent something that you also do as a part of MCC, or is that like a division, branch off?

Darlene G. Well, that is also part of my ministry as an elder within MCC, yes. And the next conference will be in May of 2011, the 19th through the 21st, in Washington, D.C.

Monique M. Excellent.

Darlene G. Mm-hmm.

Monique M. Excellent. And so when you have these types of organizing, what purpose do they serve for the organization and for the persons who are involved? Is it more of a leadership training or is it a sense of camaraderie and support?

Darlene G. It is all of the above. It is all of the above. The reason that we do this conference is to...we do it recognizing that in many parts of the country, it is very easy for there to be only one person of African descent in a church, and so it can be a very isolating experience. So we do this conference as a way to empower and encourage people of African descent to make MCC their home, to make it look like them, feel like them, and just know that there is space, there is space for all of us in this thing that we call MCC. So we do a lot of focus on leadership development, on helping people to network with one another. We encourage people who are considering the possibility of answering a call to professional ministry. We always make sure that there are at least five seminaries present, seminaries that kind of have a track record of being relevant to LGBT people and LGBT people of African descent, in particular – being relevant and being open to our students succeeding in their academic setting.

So this conference is very, very important. Very, very important. And it's next to our general conference. Our general conference is also offered every three years, and attracts around 1,000 people. And the conference for people of African descent is the second-largest conference that MCC offers.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. And we attract...we're anticipating 400, 450 for the conference this coming year.

Monique M. Excellent. Well, I want to move, I guess, from your career to finally ending with some more personal aspects of you. So I wanted to say congratulations on making history recently on your marriage. And I wanted to get—

Darlene G. Oh, thank you.

Monique M. --wanted to get some of the back story there on what led to this first public step. I had read the article in *The Root*, but I wanted to be able to expand that for persons who are going to come to the web site for future information.

Darlene G. Ah. Well, the genesis, Candy and I are madly in love with each other and had wanted to be married to have those legal protections, and we had been talking about where might we do that. And then it became possible for us to – you know, where might we have to go in order to do that – and then it

became possible for us to stay home and get married, and so we decided as soon as the laws were changed in the District of Columbia, we decided that we would get married in D.C.

And then, as we were kind of thinking about, oh, when are we going to do this, HRC invited us to consider the possibility of basically allowing them to provide...to be a way for there to be global witness to our wedding as well as... And so we agreed, and it was kind of a whirlwind of wonderful activity that ended up allowing us to be able...our wedding to be simulcast on the Internet and for people around the world to be able to witness our exchange of vows and our entry into lifetime commitment with each other. And we...hm, mm, married... I'm sorry, I've gotten all romantic [issues in my desk?]. I'm sorry, I'm having a moment.

Monique M. Completely allowed. Completely allowed. The pictures looked fabulous, by the way. I loved your pantsuit.

Darlene G. Oh, thank you! Oh, thank you. I've had more compliments on that suit! Now I know why I bought it.

Monique M. *[Laughs.]*

Darlene G. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. It photographs well. You were gorgeous. Both of you were.

Darlene G. Oh, thank you. Thank you. Yeah. That was, that was quite...quite a moment for both of us. We had...Candy and I had fallen in love and were...when I was pastor in northern Virginia, Candy and I met and we began relationship. So that was around 1980....I'm sorry, '96, '97, something like that. And we were together...we were actually in a relationship with one another when Troy Perry invited me to work full-time at the offices in Los Angeles, and we ended our relationship at that time because I said yes to Troy before I asked Candy.

Monique M. Mm.

Darlene G. Dumb, dumb, dumb. But I didn't...it just never occurred to me. I just said to Troy, sure, I'll do that. And told Candy and, well, we ended our relationship. And yet over the years since then had continued being...we were, for about two or three years she and I were best frenemies.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Darlene G. And there was something about us that would not...we couldn't stand not to be in good relationship with one another, and so we worked really hard, because the frenemies thing was just not working for either one of us. It just was not working. So after about two or three years of doing frenemies, we had a conversation and said, okay, we've got to figure out what this is. We've been acting like we hate each other and we know that's not true, so let's see if we can at least have a friendship out of this.

And so we worked really hard, really intentionally for several years to reconcile – sometimes just reconciling our memories of what had happened, and how things had developed, and why things fell apart. So we really came to be best friends instead of best frenemies. And then there came a time when both of us were single and we said if you're willing, let's try it one more time. And we were both willing. And the rest is history. We finally got back to where we should have been all along.

Monique M. Mmm.

Darlene G. Yeah, yeah. And though neither one of us was happy about the journey that we had to go on in order to get back to each other, we're really glad for the journey, and that the journey brought us back.

Monique M. Now, did you all do a separate religious ceremony with MCC after the human rights ceremony, Human Rights Campaign ceremony?

Darlene G. Oh, yes. We wanted...it was real important to us...two things were really important to us. One, that we be able to share a moment with our friends and family in MCC, and we knew that that was not possible, that everybody couldn't get to D.C. That was just out of the question. And it was also important to us that we have a religious ceremony. Candy is also clergy in MCC. And so the church is very important, and the people in the church are very important for us.

And so we considered our ceremony in Washington to have been our civil ceremony. Then we had a religious ceremony in Acapulco this past June, on June 30th, so we were June brides, for our MCC family and friends, so they were able to witness that. And so we have many...our wedding album is full. Full to overflowing. And every one of our ceremonies has a special significance for us because each one kind of represents a different aspect of who we are individually and who we are together.

Monique M. Okay. Well, my final questions have to do with just general questions about what you're proud of, and where you find joy and fulfillment. I always like to end with persons reflecting back and thinking through, but also ending on a positive note to summarize their lives. So I'll start with what are you most proud of?

Darlene G. Hm... Hm. I'm still, I'm alive. I'm trying to feel that question.

Monique M. No right answer, no wrong answer. It doesn't have to be a single answer.

Darlene G. Yeah. I'm most proud of...being able to be all of who I am wherever I am, and know that that gives hope to someone else.

Monique M. Excellent. So an additional question from that is where do you find fulfillment and joy?

Darlene G. *Ahh.* I find fulfillment in those places where I can be of support to someone else, whether that someone is an individual or a corporate body

of the church. That fulfills me. And what gives me joy is being in the presence of people I love and who love me.

Monique M. Wonderful. So my final two questions just deal with sort of filling out the rest of who you are for the persons who will be reading and listening to your interview. So what do you do for fun?

Darlene G. Watch silly movies. And Cirque du Soleil. I like Cirque du Soleil.

Monique M. Okay. And what else fulfills your time? When you're outside of the ministry world, outside of the church leadership, what are your hobbies or side organizations you participate in?

Darlene G. Right now what is filling my time is literally getting our house in order. We bought a new house at the end of July and we travel so much that we're still living in cardboard boxes. So I spend a lot of energy trying to get boxes unpacked and disposed of. So doing things around the house is fun for me. I like that. Using power tools when I get a chance.

Monique M. Okay.

Darlene G. And Candy and I do like traveling, and we get to do a lot of it, even for her ministry or mine.

Monique M. Excellent. Well, is there anything else you would like us to know? Those were all of my questions.

Darlene G. I think the only thing I want to make sure that people know is that no matter what they're going through or being put through, it gets better.

Monique M. Excellent. Well, I'm going to stop the recording and then I'll have a few parting words with you.

[End of recording.]