

Interviewee: Reverend Elder Freda Smith
Interviewer: Melissa Wilcox
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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Melissa W: We're set to go. Okay. And we're recording. So this is February 24, 2007.

This is an oral history interview between Melissa Wilcox and Reverend Elder Freda Smith of the Metropolitan Community Church. That's the formal stuff.

Freda S: That's the formal stuff.

Melissa W: You were starting to tell me about *The Gay Christian*, and so—

Freda S: All right. You asked, you said that you had seen . . . you had gone through all the copies of *In Unity* when you visited the Fellowship offices with Frank Zerilli and I said, "Did you see *The Gay Christian*?" and then you said "No," you didn't think you did. Then I said *The Gay Christian* was a companion magazine with *In Unity* in the early years, which was (*In Unity*) was headquartered in Los Angeles and *The Gay Christian* [was] mostly from the Northeast, Boston, New York, with differing theological views. So it was a discussion. Ultimately, for a few issues, the *In Unity* and *The Gay Christian* were combined.

Melissa W: So *The Gay Christian* was also MCC?

Freda S: It was MCC . Right . And like I said, in the early years, they were very turbulent years. Actually, in the denomination right now, there's sort of a sense that there are **three Phases** of the Metropolitan Community Church. There was the **early Phase**, and it was very raw -- it was clashes, clashes. You know, the feminism [the struggle for women's place in the ministry was] very, very strong. It was, of course, during the Vietnamese War, at the end of the Vietnamese War. It was the [struggle between] evangelicals, the liberals, the "no religion," the-- [laughs] the "Get Jesus in, keep Jesus out" time. And [MCC] people [were] from every conceivable religious background, and some with no background. That's why I've always said MCC is the most exciting church since the Book of Acts. Because you have to go all the way back to the Book of Acts to find so many differing people; so many differing ideas; from so many differing places who were all starting a church together. As I was saying the **First Phase** is [a time of] great turbulence: lots of clashing, lots of issues (and a lot of that's in print, and a lot of it isn't). This went for about fifteen years. Actually, right up to between, say, between '81 and '85? Maybe. people talk about '85.

Then, for the next fifteen years **Phase Two** was AIDS. I mean, it [AIDS] took everything we had. It [AIDS] took a third of our members. It [AIDS] decimated our clergy. I did hundreds of funerals, and working with people who were dying and there was no time for anything except AIDS.

And then this time, now, with Reverend Elder Nancy Wilson as the new moderator, is the **Third Phase**, which is building into the future. It's going to be very,

very strong. I think -- now I can't say this for sure, but I know Nancy (she's very ecumenical [and] she's very, very involved in getting the word out in social justice) and I think that MCC is going to be a lot more unified than it was in its early stage. Not as evangelical; maybe more mainstream.

Melissa W: What do you mean by mainstream?

Freda S: I mean, here's what I mean-- [laughs] I can see, and this, it might be prophetic and it may not be prophetic, but I can see a possibility, maybe a strong possibility, of MCC merging with UCC in the future.

Melissa W: Really? Huh.

Freda S: I can see that [although] I personally would like to see MCC keep its own unique identity, because I think MCC has been the catalyst for all of the change that has happened in the Christian church, and outside the Christian church, too. I see just [the] incredible strength of what MCC did. And I was thinking, as I was coming across, I was thinking when we first started meeting it was *against the law* to be gay or lesbian even in California, and we were *mentally ill* as far as the psychological, psychiatric community were concerned; and we were *definitely sinful* as far as the churches were concerned. So as I was saying, at first it was **impossible**. We met, and one of the early publications, I don't know, have you seen the record *One God*?

Melissa W: No.

Freda S: Which was put out by Troy. I can possibly make a CD of that. But it's very, very early put out, with Troy preaching a very, very early sermon.

Melissa W: That's one of the things we need to have in an archive. [laughs] For sure.

Freda S: And Willy Smith is singing *The Impossible Dream*. And so of course it was impossible. We were doing something so radical, so impossible. So, of course, *it* [gay, Christian ministry] was **impossible**. Then we moved forward, and *it* [MCC ministry] became **improbable**. And then we moved forward, and it became **inevitable**. So that was the progression. But when we first started, when I first started to MCC, which was, actually it was in 1971, because *it* [MCC] hadn't come to Sacramento yet. Troy founded *it* [MCC] in October of '68. So in very, very early '71, Joseph Gilbert, who was a deacon in the San Diego church, came up to Sacramento and started meeting in his living room with an MCC. It was about that time that Troy made his march from Oakland to the Capitol and I was all involved with the feminist movement at Sac State. I was [a member of] the women's studies board, and a very strong feminist. And we met at the Capitol and I was the feminist speaker, Troy was the religious speaker, and Willie Brown first introduced his Consenting Adults Bill. But at that time, with Joseph as the pastor, the idea was that MCC was a church that was in business to work its way out of business.

Melissa W: You said with Joseph as the pastor?

Freda S: Joseph Gilbert.

Melissa W: So there was already an MCC in Sacramento and you just found it?

Freda S: Well, there was a group of people who weren't MCC yet. Joseph came up as a deacon from San Diego.

Melissa W: Okay.

Freda S: We got together, twelve or thirteen people, which seems to be the magic number for MCC. [laughter]

Melissa W: It's a good number in Christianity.

Freda S: He was on the radio in Sacramento, because he came up and I heard that -- so I knew where it was meeting. And it was so impossible to me -- if we get into it -- just so absolutely impossible. But when Troy marched from Oakland to Sacramento, then there was already a small group. In September of 1971, we had what was the second General Conference of Metropolitan Community Church, which was for me the first Conference and I was, by that time, involved with those dozen people. So we went to the Conference. Joseph was the pastor. I mean -- he [Joseph Gilbert] was a deacon, but he was licensed at that Conference. That was my first Conference. [At] the second

Conference, I was licensed. But anyway, at that time [1971], Joseph, and actually the Fellowship, were saying: “We’re in business to work our way out of business. We’re going to get in, we’re going to point out all the inconsistencies in what the Christian church is teaching about gay and lesbian people, and then they’re going to say, ‘Oh, my goodness, you’re right.’ And then we’re all going to go back to the churches we came from, so we don’t really have to get along with each other.” [laughs]

Melissa W: There was a lot of hope in the early seventies, wasn’t there? Dignity had similar ideas about changing the Catholic Church when it was–

Freda S: Right.

Melissa W: At least in ’70 and ’71, and then I think they still–

Freda S: Right. Right through there, absolutely, they did. They did. Because if you’ve been raised in a certain way that you see scripture in a certain way, and you value it very, very much, but you never really deeply investigate it, because it’s just the way that it is, and you don’t even really want to go there. And then you go there and you find out there isn’t that much there. So all we have to do is show everybody else there isn’t that much there.

Melissa W: On *homosexuality*?

Freda S: On homosexuality, on the whole thing, you know. And so there was a lot of (actually): "MCC was in business to work its way out of business." It wasn't until 1972 that we found out we had to get along with each other that much.

Melissa W: So what happened in '72 that made you realize that?

Freda S: Okay, 1972, and I think you said that you read Troy's book: *[Don't Be] Afraid Anymore*.

Melissa W: Yeah.

Freda S: In 1972, when I was licensed, Jim Sandmire, who was (became an elder in '73, just the time I became an elder) pastor, in San Francisco, preached a sermon. And he preached that we say that "We're in business to work our way out of business. Is that true?" And he said, "No." He said, "I think God is doing a new thing." And Jim, of course, was LDS [Mormon]. I don't know how much you've studied about Jim Sandmire, but [he was] powerful, powerful, maybe [the] second pioneer of MCC because he stood up and he said: "We're in business to work our way out of business. Is that true? Or is God doing a new thing?" And he [Jim Sandmire] challenged us. He said, "Are you willing to give to this church what you would have given to the church that you came from?" I'd come out of the Salvation Army, where I was going to give everything. And it was a very big deal. I had an enormous religious experience *at the time* when I yielded and said, "Okay, God, I want it all. That [you have] to give."

Melissa W: *At the time* meaning at this Conference.

Freda S: Yeah, after that Conference. After Jim had preached, they had an ordination service for I think four or five men being ordained. At that time, you had to be licensed before you were ordained. And anyway, during the ordination service, I was licensed. I was in with the licensed ministers. We were told to reach our hands forward as *they* [the elders] laid on hands. And then, as we were praying -- then all of a sudden -- I heard a message in tongues, which, (as I've said) I'd never heard one before because that was not in my background; but then I also knew the interpretation at the same time. I had this profound religious experience.

Melissa W: You heard a message in tongues, meaning someone else that was there spoke in tongues.

Freda S: Yeah, somebody spoke in tongues. And then, I think you probably read this [in Troy Perry's book: "*Don't Be Afraid Anymore*"], but I'll tell you--

Melissa W: In case there are people who are reading this who haven't read it.

Freda S: Who haven't read it. Okay. The message, there was a message in tongues after Jim had spoken. Jim had said he believed in all of the gifts, because the LDS Church does support believing in all the gifts. There was a message in tongues and then, following the message in tongues, there was the interpretation. But before the

interpretation was given, I already knew [what had been said in tongues]. I mean, I heard it and I already knew what it was. I also was told that the person that was signing for the deaf signed the interpretation before it was given. So I mean, it was profound, it was just a profound (to me) movement of the Holy Spirit and at that moment I became charismatic. [laughs] At that moment, I'm ready to die for MCC. And I still am, to this day. And at that moment, I would say that Metropolitan Community Church, as a *movement*, was born.

Melissa W: Hmm. Because it was no longer seeing itself as temporary.

Freda S: We weren't in business to work our way out of business. We were in business to change the whole world and be something new, and to carry with us our truth. And part of our truth was that we came from every conceivable background, and that *we* were going to do it.

Melissa W: So it sounds like Jim Sandmire, is that right?

Freda S: Sandmire.

Melissa W: It sounds like his background in the LDS Church was really influential in this whole experience, in terms of—

Freda S: Oh, yes, I would say—

Melissa W: Being open to the idea that God creates new churches and does, makes new revelations.

Freda S: He died of AIDS. [It was a] very tragic, tragic, tragic loss. But he was the first person who really pushed for social action. He's the one that really wanted women in the church, you know, because like I said, I was a feminist, and when I came in, I came in, actually when I came in in '71, he had me speak at this [meeting] where they were talking about social action and I got up and I said, "You say you want more women in the church." I said, "That reminds me of the old recipe for rabbit stew. It says, 'First you catch a rabbit...' We've got to get women to church, and you've got to put them in the front, and you've got to let them do things, you've got to acknowledge them. And you don't set them back in the back, set them in the kitchen."

Melissa W: Or tell them to make photocopies.

Freda S: Tell them to make photocopies. I was, like I said, I was in the women's movement then. And right from the very first, I would gather all the women together and say, "This is what we have to do."

Melissa W: Okay. I've been very curious about what it was like to blend feminism and MCC at the time you came in. The feminist movement, aside from its feminist spirituality branch, was not particularly fond of religion at that time.

Freda S: Yeah, I know -- like I said: I was at Cal State University, Sacramento and we were working at getting Women's Studies [as a program]. Actually, we were the second Women's Studies program in the state of California, after [Cal State University] San Diego and we were working on Title IX. I had pushed religion out of my life well before that time, because religion didn't want me, and it was a very hidden thing for me, but I was a very, very strong feminist. Actually, my minor for my B.A, was Women's Studies -- in fact, we got the Women's Studies department going. So I was a very, very strong feminist and *they* [the Women's Studies Board] couldn't understand why I got involved in *this church*. And then actually, one of the things that I brought, [to the interview] because I didn't know which way things were going to go. I brought you a couple of things. One, I brought some raw footage of "Purple Grass."

Melissa W: Oh, fabulous!

Freda S: In case you ever heard of that sermon.

Melissa W: Well, I did my background research, too.

Freda S: Did you see it already?

Melissa W: No, because all your web site says is to contact you for a copy.

Freda S: Okay. There you did. But now this is—

Melissa W: Is this a copy I can keep?

Freda S: Oh, it's yours. It's for you.

Melissa W: Thank you.

Freda S: This, the Fellowship, published, all I have is a galley proof on this, because of the fire. And I think somewhere I can, you're going to get this, too. That's the cover of it. "Dangerous Derek Diesel Dyke." And then it reprinted it. But this right here from Annie Montague, I saw from your *Of Market and Missions* you read *The Gay Church*, by [Ronald] Enroth. Now Annie, she was part of the feminist movement there in Seattle. She wrote part of this foreword for *Dear Dora*. This is the poem itself. And this was read after, it was first read, it was done as a lobbying effort for passing the consenting adults bill.

Melissa W: I'll put this somewhere where there's no food anywhere around.

Freda S: [laughs] You don't have to read it now.

Melissa W: No, no.

Freda S: But I might refer to part of it if we go in that direction. It's a feminist poem; it's not religious at all.

Melissa W: So it's copyright '71. Is that when you wrote it?

Freda S: I wrote it in '71. This is yours.

Melissa W: Oh, it is?

Freda S: That's why I copied this. This, but see, the original, I mean, the book that the Fellowship produced, these are some more of the galley prints. But the meat of it, the center of it, is there. But I don't have, I think I know someone who has a copy of what the Fellowship produced.

Melissa W: So we need to get that in an archives also.

Freda S: If we can get it. Because it's done by the Fellowship. Anyway, I was very much a feminist. And I'm very much, from the very first, the first time I addressed the Conference was about the 'catch a rabbit.' The second time I addressed the General, the Fellowship, was actually at a clergy conference. Because even though I wasn't yet licensed, I was invited to clergy conference because the board of elders had named me, foreign missions market, it's like evangelism. So I was invited there. And I was able to speak, too. And partially thanks, again, to Jim Sandmire, who was really pushing, we had

to have women in. He said, in his sermon—and I’m recalling it—he said, “I do not want to be a part of a middle-aged, middle-class male ghetto,” is what he said about MCC.

Melissa W: This was in the same sermon at the General Conference? Or was this another?

Freda S: Yeah, the '71, the '71 General Conference. He says, “I do not want to be a part of a middle-aged, middle-class male ghetto.”

Melissa W: So that really set a tone for the development of MCC in the '70s, didn't it?

Freda S: It did. It did. It actually did. Actually, and this is an aside, too, and I don't know how much you got from this, but when he set that tone, and then in '72 we had politicians address the Conference. That's part of why Denver MCC withdrew from the Fellowship early in 1973, was because of being inclusive, being social action, not being just narrowly 'toe the mark.' Not political, not involved in the issues, what I call the “isms.” We were in business to turn the “isms” into “wasms.” [laughter]

Melissa W: I like that.

Freda S: And Denver [MCC] didn't really want to do that. Anyway, 1972 then, early, at the clergy conference that I was able to go to, it was called Ministers'

Conference. It was all men. It was in Atlanta. The clergy, of course, were all men, and then the deacons were all men. And the exhorters were all men. And then I was there and so I got to speak -- which is always a good thing -- and it may have been tokenism that I got to speak but I stood up and I said, "Look around you. It's all men." I said, "This is the way it **is**, but this is not the way it's supposed to be and it's not the way it's going to be," and I said, "We're going to have women." Just very impassioned sort of a thing, really confronting. And it wasn't an unwelcome message. The thing is that the gay community, in a large extent, [at that time] was segregated. The men were segregated from the women. Oh, another thing, at the first one, when I spoke about catching the rabbit, I believe it was in that message that I gave, I told them, because there were so many testimonies because people had been thrown [out], they'd graduated from seminary and weren't ordained, or they'd had a church and they were thrown out, or whatever. And I said to them, "Our hearts go out. We hear your story. You were thrown out of seminary. You were thrown out of your churches. But women were never in the seminaries in the first place to get kicked out." [laughs]

Melissa W: Women were kicked out a few millennia earlier.

Freda S: Yeah. Right. Like women, which one thing we had to fight with, is because I'd been trained at Salvation Army, but I wasn't ordained or anything else. When I came up for licensing, I didn't have the credentials the men did because there weren't women [who had been admitted to the ministry] . Now there are. I'm very, very happy. And you know, like with you. I'd love to see you involved in MCC with all that you do,

because you would be such an incredible powerhouse. But that wasn't true [then]. That wasn't true. "If you're going to have . . . (and I was at this time -- in 1972 when I came up for licensing -- I was already almost pastoring the church in Sacramento) I said, "If you're going to have women in the ministry, you're going to have to accept them where they are and we're going to have to move from here. You're not going to have the same [clergy]credentials in women in the early years." Which they didn't, because the women didn't have those credentials.

Melissa W: But MCC was willing to do that, then. Was willing to recognize that women, unless MCC was ready to have a seminary, which I know it did for a while.

Freda S: But it hadn't yet. It didn't have a seminary at that time. I taught in the seminary. And I taught the women's studies. But--

Melissa W: So MCC was willing to accept that women couldn't get those credentials.

Freda S: They were and they weren't. Well, let's say that, I came in from Sacramento... And at that Conference, when Joseph Gilbert was very positive, (he just died this year, it was very sad.) But Joseph was supportive of me. And--

Freda S: But Joseph approved me to go up for licensing, accept me as an Exhorter, which is what they called the people, and I could certainly exhort at that time. And I came in [as a minister] in 1972, before Jim Sandmire preached that sermon, to be

approved for licensing. At that time, there were three people on the licensing committee. And the licensing went all . . . (I was at the very end) it went all day and into the night and I was the last one on the list. If anyone reads the book [Troy Perry's "*Don't Be Afraid Anymore*"], I fell down the steps and injured my ankle, which was very convincing to me of God's being even more powerful than I knew that God was.

Melissa W: You mean because of the healing.

Freda S: Yeah, because I saw it. Because it happened to me. Other peoples' healing: " That's very interesting, and I'm glad you believe." [laughs] But when it happened to me. . . ! But anyway, so at like two in the morning, or whenever it was, I finally got in to see the three of them. And it was Papa John Hose, and it was Howard Wells from San Francisco, and it was Ron Carnes, who was the pastor [of Denver MCC] who left, took the church, and split MCC the following spring.

Melissa W: With Denver.

Freda S: Yeah. With Denver. Denver, Oklahoma City, part of Salt Lake, and tried to take Dallas.

Melissa W: So more than one, I didn't realize it was more than one congregation.

Freda S: Hey, it was a major schism; and when they held the meeting to withdraw from the Fellowship (this is warts I don't know if you're going to see this other places) but they held the meeting, and Troy flew in from Los Angeles they (MCC Denver) had a court order to keep him out of the building so he was not allowed into the building when they voted and that was the middle section of the denomination at that time -- at that point and they voted to leave the Fellowship That's why Denver MCC is "MCC Of The Rockies" -- because [the name] "MCC Denver" belonged to the other group and MCC couldn't use their own name.

Melissa W: Now is there still a group that has descended from them?

Freda S: No, it died, and it [MCC Denver] was a big one and Ron Carnes had great credentials. He looked down his nose at Troy. He [Ron Carnes] thought Troy was [not as capable of leading] . . . you know, people always underestimate Troy -- It's one of his great strengths. Because he was totally . . . , you know, if I were God and I were going to choose somebody to do what Troy did, I would choose Troy. All the others thought they should have been the ones, because they were so much more qualified, because they were so much more this, that and the other. But anyway, Ron Carnes was there, and Howard Wells, and Papa John. And Howard Wells (who was in San Francisco at that time) then, he asked me . . . (I guess he was in San Francisco before Jim Sandmire. So Jim Sandmire must have still been in Oakland at that time when he preached that sermon, because Howard Wells was still in San Francisco) . . . Howard Wells asked me, "Are

you sure,” he says, “that you’re not trying to get licensed just so you can get ahead in the feminist movement?” And I thought, "this is the kiss of death." [laughs]

Melissa W: Yeah. That’s pretty ironic. How could you get ahead in the feminist movement by being licensed?

Freda S: Being in MCC, this little upstart. But anyway, they did approve me. They did license me, approve me for licensing. And then, well shortly after, they also approved Bob Wolf, who was also another exhorter in the MCC.

Melissa W: Now what’s, if I can just interrupt you for a minute.

Freda S: Sure. You may.

Melissa W: Can you tell me the distinction between being an exhorter, being licensed to preach, and then being ordained, as they were in MCC at that time?

Freda S: An exhorter was like a deacon [in] that you were set apart and you were recognized as someone who was getting, being considered for licensing and (different churches gave different people different roles but you were recognized as like kind of pre-clergy) so that if you’re going to fall on your nose, they hoped that you did it then -- and if you’re going to mess up, they hoped, but in case you didn’t mess up then, then they had licensing.

Melissa W: Okay.

Freda S: Now licensing, you had to be licensed every year. It was a time of testing and usually you were licensed for about three years and *they* [the credentialing committee] decided that you had . . . you were not going to really mess up (they hoped) and you were ordained for life at that time. MCC no longer ordains for life, but at that time, they ordained for life.

Melissa W: So you have to renew your ordination in MCC.

Freda S: Now you do. I went for the first twenty-five years just being ordained. Now I have to reapply every year.

Melissa W: Oh.

Freda S: Or resend in and tell them what I'm doing. Anyway, that was the difference then: exhorter, licensing, up to three years. I was actually ordained the year after I was licensed. But and then, lifetime ordination, which is now no longer lifetime ordination.

Melissa W: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to, well, to be the first woman ordained as well as licensed, right? The first woman elder, also?

Freda S: The first woman elder. Yes.

Melissa W: So, I mean, you were really leading the way and opening those doors for all the women behind you. What was it like to be that door opener?

Freda S: Actually, because you read *The Gay Church*. And Howard Wells had an assistant pastor named Dr. Alice Naumoff, who was a–

Melissa W: N-o-m?

Freda S: N-a-u-m-o-v, or f-f, or something. Anyway, it's in *The Gay Church*. I'll tell you something terrible, that you can edit out.

Melissa W: Okay. [laughter] All right.

Freda S: These are the warts and all part.

Melissa W: That's important, because the only history we have of MCC is really Troy's. [both talking at once]

Freda S: You need to. Howard [Wells], after, he really came out of the Navy . . . (he was a naval officer) . . . he pastored MCC San Francisco, and MCC San Francisco was "*San Francisco*" -- and we're just entering into what was known at that time as the

"Sexual Revolution." I mean, people[who] had been very closeted, they came out. The baths were going, this was going, that was going. Alice Naumoff was, I don't know what her background was, but she was very uptight, very puritanical (actually, I can tell you two warts and all things) she was, I was told (not there,) but one thing, this -- (I know you've done some study of Wicca and everything, and it was active; the gay fairies and just everybody was really just trying to get an identity and all this) -- but these two young women came up to . . . (and they were Wiccan) for Communion and Alice Naumoff said, "No, we're not going to give you Communion." And they said, "Well, could you at least give us a scripture?" And she says, "Yes, I can. *'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'*(Deuteronomy 18:10)." Whoops. So this you can edit all out.

Melissa W: Well, but it's part of the tensions.

Freda S: But Howard, but Alice was the thorn in Alice's [Howard's] flesh. So Howard left San Francisco and he went, he became the pastor in New York and he went to the Union Theological Seminary and he got his M.Div., and he went on very, very ... but he left San Francisco. So he went to New York. And I was told by a very good source -- and I totally believe it -- that when he used to go to the baths in New York, he used to sign his name "Alice Naumoff." [laughter]

Melissa W: So Union was -- Union was open to having an out gay man there? This would have been in the mid-'70s?

Freda S: Uh huh. Very early '70s. Actually, I would say, well, it was probably toward the mid-'70s when he went to Union.

Melissa W: Still, I wasn't aware that they would have been ready for that then.

Freda S: Yes, I'd have to see what I could check, but I know that while he was there in New York, that he could get his M Div at Union. So, Union was early. Iliff was early.

Melissa W: GTU, probably.

Freda S: Yeah, GTU and Chicago. But I think that Union was very early on. But anyway, the point I was trying to make -- as you edit all this out -- there was a woman named Alice Naumoff who was in the Fellowship, and actually preached at -- probably it was the '71 Conference. It might have been the '72. She likened MCC to an animal shelter that she worked at that when they brought the little animals in, it didn't matter who they were, they just brought them in.

Melissa W: So that means that she was--

Freda S: She would have been the first woman minister in MCC, but she didn't stay. She wasn't -- I don't even know if she was licensed by the Fellowship or if she was just accepted, her credentials were accepted. Because she was gone very quickly,

because I think she was possibly, there was something there. Oh, I think you should identify with this. I believe, and I probably could find out a little bit, but I believe she was on a faculty somewhere, and MCC, the newsletter printed something about her and her lover. And she decided that was just too risky at that time.

Melissa W: Oh. So that leaves you, that's kind of back to my question about you being the door opener. So you stayed.

Freda S: I did. Well, I was the feminist. I came in in 1971. Got the people together. And then I [we] also . . . (in the Northwest District, there was the feminist group in Seattle. And again, going back to *The Gay Church*, because it's the only thing that I know that's definitive at that time, we did, at the District Conference in San Jose -- either in -- it's probably in early '72 that we had the beginning of a Women's Conference) . . . then we started a Northwest District Women's Conference the next year in Sacramento.

Melissa W: So Northwest included Northern California?

Freda S: Yeah. Northern California, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, Idaho; but anyway, I came in like that and then I addressed the [MCC General] Conference. I had a chance to address the Conference again at the Clergy Conference; and then 1973 I had the opportunity to preach [at the MCC General Conference]. And I'm still gathering the women together, and we're pushing, we're pushing for the language and 1973 is where I stood up on all [motions] to change the by-laws -- and

really pushing and pushing that women be recognized -- and that women be included and that you had to understand, again, that you couldn't -- that women would not have the same [clergy] credentials [as men] at that time -- although we wanted them to do. *They* [women] were not going to come in having pastored a church for fifteen years in the mainline churches; it wasn't going to happen. So then, probably after I'd preached and after I'd done that [moved to change the by-laws to include women] , and then we had . . . and I'd *changed* (stood up and made the motion to change all of the wording in the by-laws that had to do with gender) . . . following that, they [the Conference] had the election for elder; and they were enlarging the board of elders from four to seven. I was nominated from the floor for position of elder. And that was real (you know) -- I wasn't sure.

Melissa W: Who nominated you? Do you know?

Freda S: Yeah. It was, here's another wart. [laughs] Robert Sirico. You know who Robert Sirico is?

Melissa W: I don't know that name.

Freda S: Well again -- he's in [the book] *The Gay Church*, being from Seattle. But he is now: Father Robert Sirico, the founder and head of the Acton Institute for the Catholic Church.

Melissa W: So he left MCC and went into the priesthood?

Freda S: Well, he was a charismatic boy preacher. He came into MCC when he was eighteen; he was in MCC, pastored MCC Seattle. He came to Los Angeles. He had this great big -- he wanted to be pastor in Los Angeles but that wouldn't work. He came to Los Angeles and he had this great, big, fierce, theological battle with Jim Sandmire, because he -- being former Pentecostal -- he called the LDS Church a cult. [laughs]

Melissa W: Oops.

Freda S: And Sandmire did not like it. They had a great big clash. But by this time Sandmire's an elder so Bob Sirico gets upset. (He's [Sirico] a good, good friend of Frank Zerilli's, too).

Melissa W: Oh, is he?

Freda S: They're still in touch. So he went out of MCC, and he became the director of the Los Angeles Gay Community Center.

Melissa W: Oh, that's why the name sounds familiar. Okay.

Freda S: And then -- from the Gay Community Center -- he started back to school. And then he went back to his early Catholic roots -- because he was -- I think it's a New

York Catholic thing -- I don't know. But he was Pentecostal by the time he entered MCC, but then he went back, and then he went into the Catholic Church. And then, after a while in the Catholic Church -- he's really . . . the Acton (A-c-t-o-n) Institute . . . is very involved in finances. He's a very bright, bright, bright man. And he's just founded that -- and I mean -- he's very, very well thought of and well known.

Melissa W: Interesting. Go ahead.

Freda S: No. [laughs]

Melissa W: I can always come up with more questions, but sometimes you're the better one to be saying what direction we should be going in.

Freda S: No. No. I want you to help, what you can use--

Melissa W: All useful. All useful. Sit around the table, have you tell me stories, and it will all be incredibly valuable for the next generation of historians.

Freda S: Well, I mean -- it is what to do is to just lay the framework? We were doing an impossible thing. We were making the most exciting church since the Book of Acts, and it did work -- and you've got to go back to the Book of Acts -- you've got to go back to Peter and Paul facing each other -- you know: [their] head on clash. Because

" if you're really set free: why are you imposing these restrictions on people? Or if you're really of God: why are you being so loose and uncritical? [laughs]"

Melissa W: Now was that kind of a framework of, I know that there was some debate over inclusive language in the church. Was that sort of the framework for it?

Freda S: Oh: terrible debate. Okay. You asked how we got Bob Sirico in there -- who nominated me -- it was Bob Sirico who nominated me (and I'm going to go back to that in a minute, because it's interesting because I was overwhelmed) and Troy's up there, and he says, "Do you accept?" And you know, here I am. I'm on the spot. I'm saying, "women should do this," on the other side I'm thinking here -- you know -- "The Elders!!" Maybe out of the Salvation Army (or whatever) I have this real respect for the hierarchy see. And "Do I?" So . . .

Melissa W: And you were probably used to that hierarchy being male.

Freda S: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because [in the Salvation Army] the women got shipped off to Africa and the Philippines, unless they got married. They were officers in their own right -- but they were wives of officers -- because in the Salvation Army, you couldn't marry anyone that wasn't an officer. [laughs] Anyhow, here's the Board of Elders -- they're way up here to me -- so "Would you accept this nomination?" and so I'm on the spot. Am I qualified? I'm very unsure. Well, I accept. How can I not accept if I'm saying that women need to. So I said "yes." And now this

has to do with the men in the denomination, though, because when the voting came in, I was elected. So the men were not -- the majority -- (I'm sure a lot of them were) -- but the majority were NOT opposed to having a woman in that kind of a leadership position. So here I am: I'm still living -- the weight of the world is on my shoulders: "Oh my goodness, what am I going to do?" Good thing -- we went into a back room, and the board of elders was being expanded from four to seven so they were doing staggered terms. And so they were going to do (I guess) three (3) three-year terms; two (2) two-year terms, and one(1) one-year term, and they drew lots -- and you pulled it out of the hat which you were going to get -- and I reached in and I pulled out the one-year. And I thought, "that's good," because if I'm supposed to be here (I really believe in laying out a fleece) if I'm supposed to be here -- then I'll be reelected next year. And if I'm not supposed to be -- if I'm somewhere where I shouldn't be -- then I won't be. So that took the weight off of me, that I was elected for one year. But then -- of course-- I was elected again in '74 in San Francisco, and then I was reelected 'til I was on the board of elders for twenty years.

Melissa W: Until '93?

Freda S: '93. But I was very much really pushing the feminist thing, really pushing.... The next year, in '74, when I was reelected -- that's when we first brought in the thing on inclusive language -- for inclusive language -- out of the Women's Commission. I founded a Women's Commission and we had women in every district. And in '74 -- we brought --we were on the floor and we brought our proposal for

inclusive language and for women's rights. And so we were very, very active, because we needed to be. I mean there's not such an active feminist movement in MCC today because -- both because -- of the feminist movement and also because of AIDS -- the majority of our clergy are women. But in those days, it was, it was a big struggle. So actually -- I got a letter back then following '74 conference -- I got a letter mailed to me from England: "To the Feminist Fury."

Melissa W: What a compliment.

Freda S: Well, it was. And it was -- actually it went all the way to (let's see) '77, in Denver on the floor of the Conference -- when (I don't remember at what point, but we had someone from Los Angeles stand up and said about me) they said that I shouldn't be an elder because I had said from the pulpit in Los Angeles (now I'm trying to remember exactly because this was never written down) he said that I was supposed to have said that if a man's penis was the only thing that kept a woman away from the altar - - we should cut them off. [laughter] And I said, "I never said that!" and everything just went all up in arms, you know, boom! And my mother...Kathleen and my mother were down in the restaurant of the hotel where we were meeting and someone came running in to say, "They've attacked Freda on the floor!" and they thought it was a physical attack, they came running up. Just pandemonium! And everything just goes crazy. The pastor from Los Angeles, Don Peterson, flew back to Los Angeles and spent that night reviewing every tape of every sermon I'd ever preached in Los Angeles -- came back the

next day with an apology -- two dozen red roses. But it was like any woman who said anything that was outrageous. . .

Melissa W: Or that was considered outrageous.

Freda S: . . . Or that was considered outrageous: it was attributed to me, because it was like -- you know -- we all look alike. It's such a long time since then but that was reality then. Yeah, that was reality. But--

Melissa W: And yet-- I'm sorry, go ahead.

Freda S: No, go ahead.

Melissa W: And yet you had, you clearly had enough allies, since the church was still very male dominated, you clearly had enough allies to get inclusive language through in '74.

Freda S: No. No, no, no, no! We introduced that -- that was a goal. No, it didn't go until '81-- and oh, what fights! And then 1981, we fought so bad over inclusive language. This was before AIDS; this was probably the culmination. We had our paper on inclusive language -- the Directive -- and it had been debated, and it was brought to the floor of the conference.

Melissa W: This is in '81 now?

Freda S: '81, in Houston, Texas. Actually, the *Houston Chronicle* was covering the Conference (by that time, we were big enough to be covering the Conference) wrote that we wanted to call God a hen . . .

Melissa W: A hen?

Freda S: . . .well, there's the mother hen: ("as a mother hen . . . the chicks" [Book of Luke, Luke 13:34]) . . .that we were just so outrageous, that we were just so off the wall." And we just, I mean, if the Fellowship was ever going to crash, it was going to crash. (you know, it might be absorbed in another denomination but it would have *crashed* right there) because it was just violent confrontation all over the place. You know, "We don't want inclusive language, da, da, da, da, da, da, da." and the women and a lot of the men -- I mean, there were a lot of male feminists -- really pushing -- and then, extremists on both sides. . . I know I preached a sermon-- now this is while Bob Sirico was still in -- I preached a sermon on Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar [Book of Daniel 5:5] and -- you know -- " the handwriting on the wall," and I said that he had his feast, and he'd taken his goblets from the temple and I said the exquisite "workmanship" -- oh, he (Sirico) caught me on that *workmanship*. [laughs] I was just blown out of the water because I taught inclusification, but I didn't know that "workmanship . . ." Anyway, so you had the real extreme --you had women and male feminists -- that if someone used a word, a word, that was male-identified, they'd get up and walk out of the worship

service. And then you had the other side that, “Guard God, you’re not going to invent scripture.” “My scriptures says this and you’re not going to change this—” and da, da, da, da, da. So those were the extremes (just like you have extremes everywhere) but they were really clashing and the people in the middle were just being battered by both sides but we were growing like crazy.

Melissa W: So something was working.

Freda S: Oh, it was definitely working. I mean, with all of that, again, it was the Book of Acts.

Melissa W: Except the Book of Acts doesn’t have as many women as that part of MCC’s history does. [laughs]

Freda S: No, but they didn’t write the history, either, did they?

Melissa W: No. Very true. Very true. And the books that they are in got pushed out of the New Testament. So.

Freda S: Yeah. And that’s true. And that’s really true. And the thing is now (like I say) with our early history --you know -- at some point in time it could be that MCC came in and it was just -- I don’t know -- there wasn’t anything to it. Of course, you just went out and you started the church and there it went.

Melissa W: So I have written down here, and this is from one of the interviews, it's from one of the sources you sent me. I've lost track now, because I went through them all at around the same time. But I think you yourself mentioned that you're quoted in *The Gay Church*, in Enroth's book, as saying that you saw MCC as the vanguard of the Christian feminist movement. And I thought that was really interesting.

Freda S: Yeah, I did.

Melissa W: And I thought that was really interesting. I was wondering if you would say more about that.

Freda S: I did.

Melissa W: Do you still see it that way?

Freda S: Oh, I see it, totally. But I see it that at that point in time, even the Methodist Church didn't have that many women as ministers. And the ones that they did, they weren't pastoring churches and that women's roles were very, very defined. And like you said -- even the Salvation Army -- the women were officers and all this: but their roles were very, very defined. You had a woman's role and you had a man's role and those roles spoke for themselves. What you would do, what you could do. MCC, we didn't see each other like that. The women were not beholden to the men and so for that

reason, we were able to step out of roles and we were able, then, to be people together and that's how I saw it as being the vanguard. But what happened was that we were, early on, no one was into inclusive language before we were. It just wasn't there. No one was pushing to the same degree, to have full leadership of women. It just wasn't there. And say like, you've got Larry Bernier's song: "Our God is Like an Eagle;" now that was 1976 in Washington, DC, when he did that and we were really pushing then. That was two years, (no, it was three years after I was elected elder in '73 and we did the whole thing in changing the by-laws) but three years later, "Our God is Like an Eagle" was on the floor of General Conference and people were just going crazy you know: "Our God is not a woman, our God is not a man, our God is both and neither, our God is I Who Am." No other church -- NO other church was there in that way. But the other churches started picking it up because there were feminists and women in other churches and I mean it just spread like that-- but the beginning, the focus, the catalyst, were a bunch of gay and lesbian and people who identified with them -- people who were doing this crazy, mixed up church that shouldn't even have existed.

Melissa W: So what do you think made MCC the feminist vanguard? What made it the church that was able to take that role?

Freda S: Because we were so many different people that were working together. And the ideas! We could get in there with the ideas. Like I said -- from the very first, when I came in -- I was able to stand up and again give that "catch a rabbit" speech. Six months later I was able to get up and say, "This is the way it is -- but it's not the way it's

supposed to be -- it's not the way it's *going* to be." Can you imagine doing that in a Catholic church? [laughs] Or any church that has form?

Melissa W: So the ecumenism, that means that there isn't a long tradition that people are falling back on, so there's more space there. Is that right?

Freda S: It was like, well, say like 1973: Roy Birchard, who's no longer in the denomination -- (he was an elder for a very short while. He's there in the Bay Area. You may want . . . He's very good. He was one of the voices writing in *The Gay Christian*.) He preached a sermon on "new wine in new wineskins." and he identified us --this was the same time the feminist movement is just bringing forward their first papers on really wanting: "this is the way we need to go as a denomination, we need to go this way;" he preached that: "We are new wine in new wineskins. If the old wineskin tries to hold this, it's just going to break and pour all over" . So we were very, very volatile, and our very volatility gave everyone a voice. So that's (I think out of that) who else could be a vanguard? Who else could do anything -- except someone that was totally unformed and weren't dependent on roles? No man -- gay man -- in his right mind, was going to try to treat some booted lesbian . . . [laughs]

Melissa W: So they had to watch out for the tough dykes, is that what you're saying?

Freda S: They weren't going to try and do that, although they did feel that (a lot of them, a lot of them) did feel that the male role was superior. Not all of them. And I think when I-- [laughs] [voices in background]

Freda S: When I wrote to you I said that -- a lot of the prejudice which I saw (that I totally believe) against gay men was that the world saw them taking on the woman's role, which was an inferior role. So therefore, a lot of the prejudice against homosexuality is totally sexism and so we were confronting that, too because there were men that had been raised with a lot of male privilege and really thought that men were superior -- that's why they were born men.

Melissa W: Because God made Adam first, after all.

Freda S: God made Adam first. [laughs] And, you know, it's "our *father* who art in heaven."

Melissa W: I've been really interested in the material that you've sent me, but then also, to a certain extent, this shows up in *Our Tribe*, Nancy Wilson's, book, too. You're talking about there being three phases of MCC's history kind of clarified this for me. Because I've noticed that a lot of the discussion of the history of MCC, and women in MCC, especially, that discussion focuses on the '70s, and then stops.

Freda S: Yeah.

Melissa W: The interview you sent me on the DVD also pretty much stops with the 1970s. So that clearly AIDS put everybody into a complete tailspin. What was the impact on women in MCC of AIDS?

Freda S: It was devastating . Totally. Totally, totally, totally devastating. Actually AIDS to impact us so heavily (because we went through first) you know, it was a disease that gay men: you know: "What is this?" And then -- but say 1985 -- we had the General Conference in Sacramento in 1985 and a member of my choir: Gary Johnson, was our first person who died of AIDS. He died right after, (for Sacramento) , he died right after General Conference. But he was . . . he came in, he told me . . . and he said: "I want you to feel this. Feel my arm." And it was kind of a little lumpy, and I said " yeah" He says, "I have KS, Kaposi's Sarcoma," (And I think he'd had that relationship with that guy in the baths in San Francisco. The pilot, whatever he was. You read *And the Band Played On?*) But we had two gay doctors in town at that time, Harvey Thompson and another one, but they didn't have any real test [for AIDS]. They were watching for lesions. Anyway, Gary had that and he said, "Well, there's this" and then he had AIDS. And Harvey Thompson, the doctor, you know, he was treating him and we were studying everything we could about AIDS -- which wasn't very much -- and Gary died very early on. He went back to his folks in Rancho Cordova. He died. And they called me, because he wanted to have his funeral (I think he probably committed suicide because he wasn't, I mean he . . .) but he died. So they called me and they said, "We don't want you to say

anything about your church. And we're not telling anybody. We're saying he died of cancer." But [at first] no mortuary in Sacramento would take his body.

Melissa W: [whistles] Wow.

Freda S: Everybody's scared to death of AIDS. But anyway, because of Gary, I went ahead and preached, didn't say anything about that. But that was just the beginning.

Melissa W: And the funeral was at MCC, but you didn't-

Freda S: No, it wasn't, it was at the mortuary.

Melissa W: Oh, I see.

Freda S: No, it was at the mortuary and the friends and the family. But they wanted me, because he wanted me. But they didn't want anybody to know what he died of..

[sentence deleted at interviewee's request.] Most of the men in Sacramento. I mean, not most of them, but hundreds. And we were the church.

Melissa W: You were the only church serving the LGBT community at the time?

Freda S: Yeah. And my brother's in San Jose, and my brother,(nobody knows what's causing AIDS) he wants me to get out of the church, because he's afraid I'm

going to catch it through the air or something. But we're just in it like, bang! And then I know . . . I have this colonel, Air Force colonel, that came into my office and (he'd just been diagnosed and came in) and he fell on the floor, and he just sobbed. I mean, it would just kill you to hear him crying like that -- because he just got the news --and then he pulled himself together and went out: just was his soldier self. Another young man came in and he'd just been diagnosed (I mean, they came in to me when they were -- and this is where I was -- when they were first diagnosed) they'd come in: "Can you help me tell my parents?" And then they were dying. Larry, my assistant pastor, when he was dying, his mother came down and he was so weak -- he was so sweet. He'd lay on the bed, and I'd go in and I'd lie down beside him to talk to him. But it was all the way through 1989. I had raised a boy, David Brown -- and he died on his twenty-ninth birthday, of AIDS. (1989, the Conference we had . . . the thing [proposal] on the floor was to make me a full-time elder: to pay me as an elder, because I was traveling all over, too.) And it was like I remember one time up in Montana -- we were at a conference -- and I'd gone to sleep and I woke up in just this cold sweat (because coming up, we were talking on the plane -- different MCC ministers -- we were talking about the funerals that we'd done and comparing: Jim Sandmire's funeral -- all of the incense -- that was, I mean, because we were just doing funerals, funerals, funerals, funerals, funerals) I woke up in this cold sweat and I said, "We're all dying, we're all dying, we're all dying" but we're going on. This is before -- as soon as someone was diagnosed with AIDS they were walking corpses -- there was no cure. There was no hope. And they'd all -- or at least almost all of them -- had been exposed to AIDS before they ever knew there was such a thing. I mean, it was just walking through death and preaching and believing that

God was greater than AIDS. So '89, the budget hearing was the budget for me to be a full-time elder but Steve Pieters was starting the AIDS ministry there, and there wasn't any funding for the AIDS ministry -- for Stephen Pieters. So they voted to give me the salary, because I'm elder [vice-moderator] and I stood up and I said I wanted the salary to go to Steve Pieters, because we had to have an answer to AIDS.

Melissa W: So this was the AIDS ministry within MCC didn't start until '89?

Freda S: Paid. Paid, paid, paid, paid.

Melissa W: I see.

Freda S: Someone who was a [paid] director of the AIDS ministry at a Fellowship level.

Melissa W: No, I had thought it had started earlier at the Fellowship level.

Freda S: Not paid. See, there's never enough money to do -- we were always fighting over -- not fighting but we were always **struggling** -- over money. There was never enough money.

Melissa W: Sure.

Freda S: And every penny was -- you didn't spend on one thing without taking something from another. So actually up until . . . (I remember, Jim Mitulski is the elder now. He was from San Francisco.) You've done Jim Mitulski?

Melissa W: Yeah, no, I know who he is.

Freda S: He'd been given a negative on his AIDS test, HIV test and I remember when he went to the doctor and it turned out that it was positive -- and he talked to me: he said, "Freda, I missed my honeymoon." Because there was usually from the time they were diagnosed until they developed full blown AIDS, there was a period of time when they knew they were probably dying, but they had that time while they were still in comparatively good health. But no, that period of time you will see, and it's almost like a knife that came down. That was, you know, you couldn't be that surrounded by people in the process of dying -- not just the dying, but the family, the accepting it, the dealing with trying the different medications. My partner, Kathleen, she was one of the first people who was involved in the AIDS Foundation in Sacramento. And she was partnered with people, I remember this one young man, he went back to Ohio to see his family. We have a picture of him waving goodbye at the airport, like this. He goes back there. He gets pneumocystis pneumonia, and he's dead . Our choir director, Chuck Vickers -- he was traveling with an evangelistic group after he left Sacramento -- but that whole group died of AIDS -- but he came up because he wanted to spend some time with us before he died. He had been . . . he'd always fought with his weight, but he was real, real, really skinny. And he had to wear these diapers. We had him in the house, and he was running around

in these diapers. There was always a sense of humor there, too, because it was, how do you deal with it? But it was like if you lived during the bubonic plague or something. It was like— have you seen *The Seventh Seal*?

Melissa W: No.

Freda S: You need to see *The Seventh Seal*. [laughs]

Melissa W: Okay.

Freda S: It's the story of a knight that's gone on the Crusades, and he's coming back at the time of the Black Plague. [other voices] Let's wait.

Freda S: But *The Seventh Seal*, you may want to look it up. It's a movie. And it's Swedish, and it's very noted director, whom I'm not think of the name right now. But this knight is coming home from the crusades, and he comes home at the time of the bubonic plague. And as he's traveling home, and this is all in Swedish, or whatever. He starts a chess game [with] death. And death is playing with these pieces. And it goes through this, it has the Danse Macabre with death. And it has this gypsy, every time I see it, I see it differently. But it just has to do with going through death like that. And it has this jester and his wife, and a baby that the knight tries to protect from death. But to me, that's sort of a Jesus part of a thing in there -- that the new hope being born with the baby during the time when. . . But it's, it just has this sense of our [MCC] going through, at fifteen years

-- which overlapped -- I mean, the really volatile **First Phase** overlapped with the **Second Phase** And the **Second Phase** just became that whole consuming focus of ministry. It had to be. There was -- there was no other way. I mean, we have the AIDS candle; we have, you know . . . we sit and sewing things to be, doing panels for the AIDS quilt.

Melissa W: Yeah. Do you think, in some way, that AIDS pulled MCC together?

Freda S: Yeah.

Melissa W: You talked about the Conference in '81, where inclusive language was adopted, but at the same time, that, it sounds like, was kind of the height of the debate. And then AIDS hits right then, in '81, right?

Freda S: Actually, '81: was the very first cases, [we were] not as aware. '83. . . See, I'm going from Conference to Conference: '83 -- we [MCC Conference] were in Toronto. There was more about AIDS, but I think right in there -- there was a lot of disfigurement with Kaposi's Sarcoma, and people having, you know, just, but that was just starting to show up. And nobody knew how it was spread. So that's '83. By '85, pretty clear that it was sexually transmitted and blood-borne. But also there was that overlap there. But after '81-- I would say AIDS drew everyone together. And also, I think that other churches also starting to be more open and affirming. Which -- as far as a lot of people (you know) that -- say like if they were Presbyterian,-- and then they could

go back to the Presbyterian Church. They could still be gay -- but they could tell people they went to the Presbyterian Church -- but not MCC, so they could keep their. . . you know. So there was kind of . . . gay people have always been kind of self-protective as far as being able to hide. The mainline churches started to give them a place to hide. And then -- also (the ones who weren't mainline) a lot of them [were] more evangelical -- then mostly you had break-offs of groups from MCC that are evangelical.

Melissa W: Like the Christ Chapel.

Freda S: Like the Christ Chapel. A number of them wanted more of an evangelical focus and they didn't want to be **as** involved in . . . a lot of them aren't involved in civil rights, human rights, humanism. You know, now I'm very evangelical, but I think that's the greatest thing about MCC is that we're. . . (I don't know, I think it's out of my Salvation Army background with "Heart to God and Hand to Humanity" , you know, that you've got a world to win) . . . and, you know, that we've been given this opportunity. You may want to wait a minute. [voices still talking]

Melissa W: I think they're going to be around for a while. I'm just going to hope that this mic picks up fairly well. When would you say that things start shifting again, at least in the Sacramento church, if not in the Fellowship as a whole? That AIDS is no longer the all-consuming focus?

Freda S: I think that as the . . . -- when AIDS stopped being a death penalty -- but we still (when the medications happened) we had Hope House here, and we were working with the Catholic Church in Sacramento.

Melissa W: I'm sorry, what is Hope House?

Freda S: It was in Sacramento. It was a house that was just for people with AIDS. And then we had hospice, and we had . . . and the other churches were joining with us.

Melissa W: So Hope House was founded by MCC, or you were just involved?

Freda S: We were involved, actually, there was quite a crossover there with the Catholic Church and MCC at that time in Sacramento, in dealing with AIDS, especially. But when it stopped being a death penalty, but we still had people who were dying of AIDS, but we had people who were under, with treatment for AIDS. And then it was kind of a gradually working out and back again -- I'd say that it wasn't actually (even for the denomination) I'd say that AIDS dominated up until '93. And then '95 (of course, is then with Nancy being elected as elder, that she has...) Because Troy, he [first] announced that he was going to retire in '95.

Melissa W: Oh, did he really? So there was a really long period of time for the church to prepare for his retirement.

Freda S: Oh, yeah.

Melissa W: So that would—

Freda S: I would say, yeah. I'd say that the last couple of years had to do with dealing with Troy retiring, and actually, kind of a real shift in government structures and systems, and that it's moving more -- it used to be that almost all the business was on the floor of the Conference with the delegates -- but now it's more into committees and that the Conference isn't the big -- you know -- ruling force that it had been. And I'd say that that happened, actually it was probably around, around the turn of the century, around the millennium time. A lot of the things, I think AIDS took a lot of the issues off the floor, and let other people handle them and went into committees.

Melissa W: Does that mean that some of the issues just got silenced or neglected? Or does that mean that by coming off the floor and going into committees, they actually were better able to be solved without controversy?

Freda S: It might be who's looking at it.

Melissa W: Okay. Fair enough.

Freda S: They don't have floor fights, but the Conference used to have days and days and days of business. Now they do it in half a day. [laughs]

Melissa W: That's nice. So you said that MCC, has it always been, it's River City, right?

Freda S: No, no, no. Now I'll tell you the story of River City.

Melissa W: Okay. Tell me the story of River City.

Freda S: Joseph Gilbert founded it. As I said, he was a deacon from San Diego, and he named it Harmony MCC. I've got a lot of the early Harmony things. And then, after Harmony, then we decided that we wanted to be River City. Sacramento was really into a River City sort of a thing. River City Bank, River City this. So we wanted to be River City. So we had a motion and we named it River City.

Melissa W: And that was—

Freda S: That was early. I don't know, that would have been probably in the early '80s, I'm not sure. And then, when the church burned in '93, '94, and we went ahead and bought the Chapel on Mather, which was an impossible thing to do, but we did it. Then we changed it because of the fire and everything, the devastation. We changed the name to Cathedral of Promise.

Melissa W: Oh, okay.

Freda S: So we had the name Cathedral of Promise. And then again, people thought, well people couldn't find it in the phone book. And the yellow pages wouldn't list it right, and the people that were MCC, they couldn't find it or anything. So then, because of the fact of not being able to be found that easily, they changed it to Sacramento MCC, or MCC Sacramento, depending on which way you, so the people from out of town or who were looking, could find it.

Melissa W: So the yellow pages in Sacramento doesn't divide by denomination, then? I've seen some yellow pages in some cities where Metropolitan Community Church is actually listed separately.

Freda S: Yeah, well they tried to do that, but the yellow pages wouldn't that much, and they'd put them in under the Mennonites or— [laughter]

Melissa W: That's not helpful. Was the fire accidental?

Freda S: The fire, apparently, because it was a church fire, it looked so suspicious. We'd had Molotov cocktails thrown at the church.

Melissa W: Recently?

Freda S: Before the fire. Yeah, within months before the fire. And we had some graffiti put on the church. And also, there was a mattress pulled up against the back door

and set on fire. But anyway, when the church burned, it just seemed like, it just went so fast. It was a big building, it was a former Odd Fellows building. The fire went so fast, it looked like it had been something. Any church, any church fire, they have the, what is it, Tobacco and Firearms, ATF?

Melissa W: The ATF.

Freda S: They came in.

Melissa W: Really.

Freda S: And they brought their dogs, and they went through all of that, and they couldn't find any accelerant or anything like that. And so they said it was probably wiring. But it was, you know, it was, I don't know.

Melissa W: It sounds like it's still suspicious.

Freda S: It's suspicious for me. It always has been suspicious to me. But it was devastating, because it was, we had what had been the Odd Fellows building, and we had three floors, three big halls. And one hall, we had, we started all the seven step programs, gay programs in Sacramento, were started there. AA—

Melissa W: Seven step?

Freda S: Oh, twelve step, excuse me. Not seven step.

Melissa W: I thought that was a whole new setup that I didn't know about.

Freda S: No, twelve step. [laughs] The twelve step programs. And then we had country western dance in there, non-alcohol. And we had a feeding program for people. So it was all, and we had the Northwest district offices in there. So the fire was devastating.

Melissa W: If I can kind of move us forward to the present, and I hope you'll let me know if there are things I'm skipping over that are important. But I'm wondering, looking back at MCC, having been an elder for twenty years, and then looking back at it, I know you said that you have asked Nancy Wilson if you can make a presentation at this year's General Conference about that history. How do you see, what are the most important changes that you see? And what are most important things that you see that have stayed the same, in the history of the denomination?

Freda S: Well, I think that the most important thing, that I truly believe, which I preach that, well, like you wrote, that the only time MCC could have happened was when it happened. The only one who could have done it was Troy Perry. But I believe that there's been an anointment, an anointing on it that, you know, I always said that this was the new reformation of the Christian church. I believe that the most important thing that

happened in the last century, as far as religion is concerned, was the founding of Metropolitan Community Church. It's the way that it's impacted other churches, they don't even know. They don't even know. And my fear is that it's [MCC History] going to get left behind.

Melissa W: MCC is going to get left behind?

Freda S: The history of MCC is going to get covered up. It's just not going to [be credited], it's like spontaneously, all of a sudden, the other churches, "Oh, yeah, feminism. Oh, yeah, this. Oh, yeah."

Melissa W: Like it's their idea.

Freda S: Yeah. Like it just happened. Like somehow, there wasn't a catalyst. But there was. And as far as a religious movement, it has had the total power of a religious movement that . . . (you know) . . . the faith, no matter how it's expressed -- that the thing that held us together [was] that we're going to be a church. That we're going to worship together. We're going to be together. We're going to have communion together, even if we don't agree on how you do it. That we're going to baptize--

Melissa W: Even if you don't agree on how you do it.

Freda S: Even if you don't agree about, because out of Salvation Army, you know, they don't baptize but I was an [MCC] elder and I, of course, then went ahead and got baptized, and was baptized. But I, with people from other countries, like England, Canada, Australia, where the Salvation Army's a lot stronger and people came in to MCC and the communion and the baptism, because Salvation Army preaches the real presence, and that those are just symbols of the real presence. But I sat down and said, "No." I said, "Jesus said, 'Go to all nations and baptize them.' But you know, we didn't agree. And I went into, (because I visited churches all over the world). And I'd go into churches and where which candle was lit on the altar was just so important -- whether you were pre-Vatican II, or post-Vatican II -- and whether you had your back to the congregation when you celebrated the communion, or your face to the congregation. But we were a church. We were a religious movement. God had called us into being. We could do it. We were going to. And we did. And we still can. And we still will. But my fear, and this is, we all have biases. But my bias is we've got to somehow hold onto the fact that the MCC has been a catalyst for a new religious reformation. And I think it will be worldwide. And I think that it wouldn't have happened without MCC.

Melissa W: Where do you hope that the denomination is going?

Freda S: I'm biased.

Melissa W: Aren't we all? [laughter]

Freda S: I would like to think that, what Jim Sandmire says, "We're a new thing. God's brought forth a new thing." We're a new wine in new wineskins. We're not UCC. We're not the Methodists. We're not the Catholic Church. But we are all of those things, and more.

Melissa W: So where it's going is future growth? Is continuing to spread the message of MCC?

Freda S: You know, I think we are, I think that we're on a crossroad. Like I said, in one sense I see us going toward, like I said, possibly, maybe UCC. I think UCC would love to have us being absorbed into UCC, because there are movements, there are things: that's one side. The other side is that I would like to see that this denomination be built into what I think it can be. But it's got to be the focus: "This is the Denomination." And so that's where we are. But whether or not it's recorded, whether or not it's remembered, whether or not it's of any monumental meaning in the future, it still was ushered in, to me, the dramatic shift in Christianity today.

Melissa W: So if that's kind of the legacy of MCC, and this is my final question, I know we've been running for a long time. Looking back from the position of sort of semi-retirement, can I say that?

Freda S: Yeah. I'm retired as a pastor. I'm an evangelist. But yeah. Like I said, this year I'll be seventy-two years old. And I came all the way from coming out in the very early 1950s, all the way through what that meant.

Melissa W: You've seen a lot of change.

Freda S: I have, you know. And you know, whether or not, like I said, anybody recognizes, I recognize.

Melissa W: What do you see as being the legacy of your ministry in MCC?

Freda S: Okay. I think, let me go into "Purple Grass." Actually, the legacy of my ministry—

Melissa W: Watch this, because that's going to get fuzzy when you talk.

Freda S: Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh!

Melissa W: You can touch anything else. Just not the mic. [laughter]

Freda S: No, but I believe in the oneness with God. I believe that. I believe that we're spiritual beings. I believe that our spiritual component is so incredibly, incredibly important -- and I think that releasing that [spirituality] in the gay and lesbian

community. . . you know, I don't even know how to put it into words. I know that when I thought that I couldn't acknowledge God in my life, when I tried to fill that [void] up with anything and everything, and then when I had the sense of *really* coming home and feeling the power of God in me. And feeling that we can't fail. And feeling that there are things that are greater than just us, is -- to me -- the most important thing that MCC [contributed to the LGBT community]. It set a whole...it was like leading the children of Israel out of bondage. It's just immense. That's what I see. I'm so happy that people can worship freely. And also, it's a denomination, even beyond my feeling about MCC actually existing and everything. But the fact that there is some place that [LGBT] people can go. There are some answers out there. I can look back at me at sixteen, and really feeling that I was down, I was lost, I had no way out of where I was. And that God didn't want me, and the world didn't want me if they knew who I was. And you know, the only thing ahead of me [in the 1950's] was: "Who ever saw a healthy grownup gay person?"

Melissa W: Yeah. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that should be on this?

Freda S: I can't think of anything. It sounds like you got a lot. [laughter]

Melissa W: I asked you a ton of questions. I'm going to go ahead and stop it, then. If you think of anything else.

Freda S: No. In the future, if you wanted any--

[96 minutes]

[End Interview.]