

Oral History Interview: Justin Sabia-Tanis

Interviewee: Justin Sabia-Tanis

Interviewer: Anthony Boss

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Anthony B: My name is Anthony Boss. I am an archival intern at the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, and I'm also pursuing my Master's of Library and Information Science degree at Simmons University. Today is Monday, June 13, 2026. I am here with Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis. This oral history is intended for the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network. Justin, could you introduce yourself, with pronouns if you'd like, and where you're calling from?

Justin S: Hi. I'm Justin Sabia-Tanis. My pronouns are he/him/his, and I am answering this from northern Minnesota.

Anthony B: Cool. I didn't know that's where you ended up moving. That's fun.

Justin S: Yeah. We are out of the woods, in lake country.

Anthony B: Nice. So would you mind giving a brief description of your background, like what you do and where you're from?

Justin S: Sure. So what I do right now is I'm the Associate Professor and the Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts at United Theology Seminary of the Twin Cities, so I am on the faculty here. I'm also an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ. How much of my background do you want me to go into?

Anthony B: As much as you'd like, honestly.

Justin S: Oh, okay. Let's see. I have a degree in international relations from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, a Master's of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School, a Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary, and a PhD from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. I was a minister with Metropolitan Community Churches for about 16 years. I had brief stint as a Unitarian Universalist, and then transferred my credentials to the United Church of Christ.

Anthony B: Thank you. Yeah, I guess that's a really big question, and it's hard to know where to stop or—

Justin S: Yeah, where to start, yeah.

Anthony B: —start, yeah. I guess cover everything.

Justin S: Yes.

Anthony B: Yeah, we can get more into, like, details of that later on.

Justin S: Great.

Anthony B: So just to start, I was wondering where you were born and where you grew up.

Justin S: So I was born in New Haven, Connecticut. I was adopted. My father was, at the time, a director of the Beinecke Library at Yale University and then was on the faculty at Yale Divinity School, and then he moved to outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he was the director of libraries at Bryn Mawr

College for the rest of his career, so then we moved down to Villanova, Pennsylvania.

But in between there, when I was an infant, from about nine months old to...for almost a year, we lived in the Netherlands while he was getting his doctorate at the University of Utrecht, and then again when I was 10 and 11 we lived in the Netherlands. So I grew up in New England, Pennsylvania, and the Netherlands, which was a very formative experience for me, learning what it—living outside the United States and having more perspectives than many folks are able to have at a young age.

Anthony B: Yeah, I'd imagine when you're 10 going to the Netherlands is like a pretty, like, jarring but interesting experience.

Justin S: Yes. Yes, it was. Yeah. And I found the Dutch—you know, as a nerdy, very, very, very shy kid I found the Dutch schools much easier to fit in with and just a, I don't know, it just was an atmosphere where I sort of blossomed in different ways, I guess, because it felt supportive in different ways, so enjoyed that very much.

Anthony B: That's super cool. I didn't even know.

Justin S: And my dad is of Dutch heritage, so we...a lot of my childhood involved Dutch cultural aspects of—thank you. Do you mind if I switch chairs?

Anthony B: No, that's fine.

Justin S: This arrived downstairs and I've been sitting on a very uncomfortable one [in the middle] of the process.

Anthony B: That's totally fine.

Justin S: Thank you. I'd gotten it to like the top of the stairs and I was like okay, I know I have to run down and sign on. Henry just brought it down and wheeled it in, so...so that is much better. Apologize for the interruption.

Anthony B: No worries.

Justin S: Yes, so...yeah, so we were raised in a culturally Dutch household in the United States and the Netherlands as well, which was, again, very influential on me.

Anthony B: What are some elements of being culturally Dutch?

Justin S: Celebrating St. Nicholas Day in addition to Christmas, and my dad would just intersperse Dutch language with, you know, various—you know how families have their sort of own language. We had sort of a Dutch-English mashup sometimes. And many family friends who are Dutch. We would travel to the Netherlands and visit. Yeah.

Anthony B: Cool.

Justin S: Dutch things around our house, Dutch tiles. My dad was also a historian, so there was also a lot of like old strange things around our house as well, so...

Anthony B: Like a little museum, almost?

Justin S: Yes, yes. Quite a bit of which I inherited, and quite a bit of which he got rid of before he passed away, so... Yes, it was like growing up in an odd museum.

Anthony B: Your dad sounds like he was a really interesting person.

Justin S: He was. When we'd have like colonial days at school, like my dad would send us with, like, actual colonial items. Like that's how dorky my childhood was.

Anthony B: I mean, that sounds kind of fun, too, right?

Justin S: Yeah, it was, but also dorky.

Anthony B: Yeah. And when you're a kid I imagine that could be a little embarrassing. It's like everyone is with their little American flags and you're like I have an actual artifact, right?

Justin S: Right, exactly. As if I didn't stand out as a weird kid enough, there was that. But in hindsight it was really cool, so...

Anthony B: Yeah. Yeah, that's super cool. And so you feel like—do you feel like your dad and I guess also your mom had like a really big influence on you in that respect? Not just the Dutch heritage, but like in other ways as well.

Justin S: Yeah. So my parents met at East Harlem Protestant Parish, which was a sort of radical Christian experiment in...or community in New York City in the East Harlem neighborhood, which at the time was very racially segregated, primarily immigrants and African Americans, Puerto Ricans. And so there was this idea of creating this cooperative ministry where people would go and live there, not just advocate for people from afar or minister to them sort of as a missionary, but rather live and share their experiences.

So my mom did that for a number of years, and my dad went to seminary at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and so he did his field internship at the church where my mom was the parish administrator, and so that's how they first met.

But they didn't hit it off at first. My dad asked her out on a date, and apparently he showed up with a potted geranium plant, and she thought that was like the stupidest thing, and he thought, but it doesn't die like a bouquet of flowers do, and she thought, doesn't this man know what to bring on a date? So I guess she just thought he was weird. But then they reconnected some years later, and he tried again, and it worked, and they got married, so... They left that ministry when my dad went to Yale. But this idea of sort of like radical justice, racial justice as an intrinsic part of faith had a big impact on me then and now.

Anthony B: Yeah. I'd imagine like growing up in that kind of environment would definitely have a huge impact on your beliefs and your mindset and everything.

Justin S: Yeah. I didn't live there as a kid because they had left that, but it still, it influenced a lot of how they saw the world, for sure.

Anthony B: Yeah, that sounds like a very unique sort of like experience.

Justin S: Yes, yes.

Anthony B: So I'd imagine like that also had an impact on your perceptions and your parents' perceptions of queer identity and everything like that, like when you came out and were realizing yourself.

Justin S: Well, it's interesting. I think—well, first of all, I mean, I grew up going to a left-wing progressive Presbyterian church, a liberal Presbyterian church back when liberal was not a bad word or not a weird word. I don't know, it's changed, but... Liberal Presbyterian church that had gone through a conflict because the minister was against the Vietnam War and initially the congregation did not support that, so it attracted other people who were interested in peacemaking, and you know, which drew my parents in.

And so that pastor—his name was Joe [Jensen]—was very influential in my childhood as well. And so, you know, was always surrounded by, you know, progressive religious ideas, the idea of equality, the idea of justice being part of what it means to be a person of faith. And I forgot your original question before I went off on that tangent.

Anthony B: Oh, that's fine. I was asking like the influence of the church and your, like, parents' beliefs on your sense of like your identity and everything, and their perception of it.

Justin S: Yeah, so...so that was always very central to me, and later to my ministry. I think I grew up both influenced by my parents, but really by that church or that ministry. The youth pastor there, Jim [McDonald] and others were really emphasizing that, you know, not as sort of Christian triumphalism or even individual sal—you know, like the evangelical born again salvation, but really like doing good in the world is part of what it means to be a Christian, and that has always stuck with me.

When I came out as queer, it was interesting because my...I guess I had two different—I came out when I was 19, when I was in college. I had just broken up with my first partner in like a super dramatic lesbian way, and was heartbroken. And I came home for just a couple weeks for the summer. I was going to intern in a church in downtown Philadelphia working on a program they called the Tot Lot, which provided a day camp for kids in an impoverished neighborhood in Philadelphia, and I was going to move down there.

But I was there for two weeks, and I was very sad. My mom kept pestering me about, like, what was wrong, what was wrong, what was wrong. So I told her that I was a lesbian, that I had broken up with my girlfriend, that I was heartbroken. And she broke down crying, saying I thought you were going to tell me you were pregnant, like that was going to be the better idea, you know, is that I was pregnant. So she did not take it well, even though I knew she knew people who were gay when she was in East Harlem and in other points of her life.

But she became very intolerant and very inflexible, and like gay people were fine if they were somewhere else, like other people's families, that was fine, but not in hers. Yeah, it was very...she pretty much held onto that till the end of her life.

And it was...yeah, in very sort of diehard, very problematic ways. There were years we didn't speak because it was like if you can't call and talk to my partner nicely on the phone, don't call my house, you know? And it's funny because she was not, like I said, she was not that way about other people's family members.

But I have a very—both my parents came from large families—I have a lot of cousins, and I knew that—my mom told me that some of my cousins were also

LGBTQ, but they wouldn't tell—the mothers made a pact not to tell any of us who the other ones were so we couldn't support each other. So that was really problematic.

On the other hand, my dad, you know, he worked at a women's college, he worked in libraries. There's a lot of queer people in libraries, as I'm going to guess you know. And so I grew up with knowing a gay couple, a lesbian couple, other gay and lesbian people who worked for my dad.

And actually, when I graduated from college, they sent me, collectively sent me a gift, a graduation gift, and a note saying that they had discerned that I was a little queer kid fairly early on, and they'd been watching me, following and supporting me through the years. And it was just one of the most, the very most touching things I have ever experienced. And when my dad died and we had his funeral, a couple of them traveled—they were now in other parts of the country, but had traveled there and were there with me for that. I mean, it just was an amazing experience of sort of having queer elders keeping an eye on me while I was a teenager. That was really important to me.

And my dad was always very supportive. In fact, led Bible studies, and later in his life led his...he also transferred to the United Church of Christ and helped one of his congregations, the last congregation he was part of, become open and affirming, and was a very strong advocate in the presbytery before he left the Presbyterian church, and in that UCC church, and led that program when he was in his late 70s, early 80s. And he said the old ladies would always say to me, well, if you can do it at your age, I guess I can, too. [*Laughs.*] And, you know, so... So

he and I were always very close throughout my life, and then especially—my mom passed away about 10, 12 years before he did, so—and at the end of his life, but...

Anthony B: Wow. Yeah, that's...the contrast is so interesting between your mom and your dad. I mean, it is so nice that you had those, like, queer elders watching over you, I guess.

Justin S: Yes.

Anthony B: Even though you didn't always know that they had their eye on you.

Justin S: Yes, exactly. Well, and there was a big controversy when I came out as trans, too. My mom spent about five years pretending I didn't transition, which was incredibly awkward in public. And at that point they were moving from the house I grew up in into a retirement community, and my dad told me that he said to her, well, you've got two choices: you can tell everyone you have two sons or you can look like you're ready for the memory impairment wing. Like...it's like it's entirely your choice; I'll support whatever you feel you need to do. And she did not want to look like she was ready for the memory impairment wing, so she started calling me the right name and pronouns. But really only, I think, because of that peer pre—you know, the pressure of not wanting to look foolish or whatever.

Anthony B: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I guess it's good that it happened in one way or another, but yeah, so...

Justin S: Yeah.

Anthony B: Coercion, in a sense.

Justin S: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, we did reconcile near the end of her life where she once asked me, like, why had—she had not been supportive of me—like why was—I was helping her, you know, as you do with your older parents, and with all the things they need, and she was in the middle of a medical emergency, and I was there, and I was just, well, you're my mother, I love you, like, you know, it's the... So, you know, we did have some reconciliation at the...and acknowledgement from her about the impact of her choices at the end of her life, but...never an easy relationship.

Anthony B: Yeah. That sounds like it was a lot easier with your dad. Was he like immediately accepting or did he, like, take some time to figure it out?

Justin S: For me being a lesbian, that was fine. When I transitioned he was more unsure. So he flew out to Los Angeles, where I was living at the time, and like did one of those like buy a plane ticket, come out to see what's going on kind of things. And he met with my therapist, and my dad said, according to their report to me, that this didn't seem to him in character with his child. And the therapist said, well, I've been meeting, you know, with your kid for months, and I think this is—is it perhaps that you don't know your child as well as you would like to? You know, so they spent the time sort of thinking of questions he could ask, and then he came out of there asking a ton of questions, and that sort of... I answered them, and that was fine, and there was never an issue for the rest of my, you know, rest of my life about that.

Anthony B: Hm.

Justin S: So...

Anthony B: It sounds like a pretty good way of resolving everything, I guess.

Justin S: Yeah. I came out in my late 20s. I came out at 19 as a lesbian, and 27 or 28 as trans.

Anthony B: Mm. So was that because you didn't want to come out or was it more that you hadn't realized or come to terms with being trans?

Justin S: I didn't really—I knew about trans women. I remember being on a high school camping trip, and we were camping on Chincoteague Island, and there was a news story out about Christine Jorgensen, and I was fascinated by it, but I couldn't quite figure out why I was so interested in it, you know. But I never met any trans men, and the only person who we would now call nonbinary was a tutor that I had at Harvard Divinity School in Greek, but very nonbinary. And I didn't want to be sort of...I didn't sort of feel ambiguity was right for me, especially keeping in mind this is the late '80s, not a time when there were a lot of nonbinary identities around either. And so I just didn't really have any role models.

And then when I moved to San Francisco in '93 I suddenly started meeting trans men, and I was like, oh, light bulb, you know, this suddenly makes sense to me, so a lot of things sort of clicked into place. And so I sought out a therapist and explored it.

Anthony B: Yeah. Yeah, just like—sorry, go ahead.

Justin S: Oh, I just wasn't aware, you know, that this was possible.

Anthony B: Didn't know it was something you could do.

Justin S: Right.

Anthony B: So when you were like going through your undergrad and everything you were... Like when was it that you moved to San Francisco?

Justin S: Well, so I went to college and then I went right to seminary. And from there I briefly passed—I was ordained in Metropolitan Community Churches because I knew I wanted to serve—well, let me just back up a little bit. In college I majored in international relations because I wanted to...I thought I wanted to serve in the diplomatic corps or do some kind of international work, which always interested me. But at the time, to get accepted by the State Department you had to be closeted, and that wasn't...did not feel quite right to me, it was awkward. I was sort of trying to figure out what to do about that. Explored the idea of law school. I did an internship, but nothing was quite sitting right, even though I love the study of international relations.

And then we had just an amazing college chaplain named Janet Cooper Nelson, who really encouraged people to consider like what your vocation was. And she had gone to Harvard Divinity School, so she encouraged me to apply, and I did. And I went—at that point, you know, by the time I did that I'd been out for a couple years and the AIDS epidemic was rising at that point, and I really wanted to serve my people, queer people, in ministry, so I went to HDS to study that.

So from there I pastored very briefly in Boston as an interim pastor, when the pastor I'd studied under there left. And then I moved to Hawaii for three years and pastored a church called Kai Nui Nui O Ke Aloha, which means Rainbow of Love, which was an amazing multicultural, really vibrant congregation there. But Hawaii is incredibly expensive to live when you're in your—you know, we moved there when I was 25.

Many members of the congregation and in the community died of AIDS. I did a lot of AIDS ministry there, but also, you know, a lot of other work there. But we realized we were just going deeper and deeper into debt, you know. What a queer congregation, including a lot of people who were dying, can pay and what it cost to live there did not match up, so my partner and I at the time had five jobs between the two of us, and we just couldn't...we couldn't make ends meet.

So I accepted a call to be the associate pastor at MCC San Francisco in '93—'94, sorry. I was in Hawaii '91 to '94, and then we moved to San Francisco, where I was, for a couple of years, again during really the height of the AIDS epidemic, right before protease inhibitors were made available. And then I went down to Los Angeles to work as the director of leadership development for the denomination, working with queer people in 22 different countries, so I sort of got to bring the international perspective. And one reason I got the job, I think, is that I'd already lived in other countries, I knew how to work with people from other countries. I had that international experience, so...

Anthony B: Yeah, you've just been like all over the place, it sounds like.

Justin S: Well, you know, a friend of mine jokes, you know, join the church, see the world. Like if you, you know, if you follow your calling to different places sometimes it takes you places you never expected to go, so...

Anthony B: Is that pretty typical, then, like going to a bunch of different congregations and like a really big variety of places?

Justin S: Well, you know, for Metropolitan Community Churches, because it's a relatively small denomination—I mean, it is a small denomination—it was bigger then than it is now, but, you know, if a church opens up, you go where the job is, you know. I mean, you know, if you're part of a larger denomination, then the options of saying okay, I'd like to be in this geographic area or whatever. But, you know, in MCC at the time, you know, if you're picky like that, you know, someone else already has that job, you know. You can't sort of wait for them to vacate it, so... I think a lot of people had that experience of like traveling around the country going to different places in order to fulfill their vocations.

And then academia is the same way, right? So, I mean, I switched into—I did some public policy work and then switched into academia where you go, you know, we're in Minnesota because this is where I was offered a job. And then we had places we were not going to go, but, you know, I didn't necessarily think about coming to Minnesota. Although we absolutely love it, so...

Anthony B: I'm glad that worked out well for you then.

Justin S: Yeah.

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: It was mostly...I mean, I think I'm sort of a nomad by personality, in some ways, like I'm interested in a lot of things and different experiences. But yeah, it's also just been the nature of the kind of jobs I've had.

Anthony B: Yeah. It sounds like it was, like it's a really good fit for your personality then, like all the different jobs that you've been doing.

Justin S: Yeah.

Anthony B: I was curious why you decided to become a minister for MCC specifically.

Justin S: Yeah. So I was raised, as I said, in the Presbyterian church, and even though it was progressive at the time, it barred open, avowed and practicing homosexuals, which meant, I guess, if you were closeted, didn't like yourself, and were celibate it would be okay, maybe. So I went to the pastor of the—not the pastor of the church I—well, the pastor of the church I grew up in, who's not the same pastor that I originally grew up with, but when I was in college. And I said to him, you know, this is my dilemma, what do I do? I feel called to ministry, I'd like to minister to queer people, but—or at the time gay and lesbian people—but what do I do about pastoring a church?

And he said I can perceive two different vocations, so tell me which one fits for you: do you want to fight the Presbyterian church for the right of ordination, which is a very valid calling, and it'll take at least 10 years to get ordained, or do you feel called to minister in a local church setting, in which case we have to find another denomination for you that will fit you now? And that was really helpful

because I thought no, I don't want to just like fight the institution that doesn't want me. You know, I want to serve.

As I said, I did an internship for a couple summers in a UCC congregation. I loved it. But at the time you could get ordained, but not really get a local church. You know, gay pastors were sort of like a specialty, a novelty item. And the people I knew, as I was in seminary the people I knew were always the second candidate, you know? They'd call—I'm sorry, we picked somebody else. You were great, but we didn't think it was the right match for our congregation right now. So that seemed like the same kind of closed door.

And I'd gone to MCC in Philadelphia when I was doing this internship at this UCC congregation. Just randomly turned out that all of the people they hired that year were all these 19-year-old just out queer people, so we ran around the city and went into gay bars, and we were underage. And went to MCC and did all kinds of, like, things you do when you're coming out and you're 19 years old, and you're on your own for the first time. And I liked it, but it was so far from what I grew up with. It was very evangelical, it was very... But it was multiracial. It was an interesting congregation. But it wasn't quite for me.

But then when I started seminary, a friend of mine who was a friend in college and seminary, I guess my second year, said, you know, I started going to this MCC church in Boston and I love it, and I think you'd really like it. I said oh, you know, tried MCC, I don't think it's for me. And she's like no-no, really, try it, just come with me one Sunday. So I did, and I never left. The pastor there was a man named Steve Carson. Very much in line with, you know, social justice being a

very integral part of ministry, and so that's where I ended up doing my field placements.

And yeah, so that sort of started me on my way. MCC at the time had a fairly negative view towards ordination—or towards seminary. A lot of people came out of evangelical or the Pentecostal traditions, where that wasn't, the mark of ordination was seminary, so even at my initial interview for licensure I'd been told that this one pastor was going to vote against me. I mean, it had to be unanimous. And so Steve told me, you know, you're going to get rejected, but you're going to win on appeal, so just go in there and don't worry about it. Well, got to the interview. He slept in, and he was a couple hours away, and so they substituted someone else in who was a graduate of Yale Divinity School, and I passed, and it all worked out, so... But yeah.

Anthony B: That was lucky that he slept in.

Justin S: You know, it really, I mean, I did really and do really feel like my vocation is serving LGBTQ people, and I'm really grateful for the impact MCC had on my theology that, you know, there's never a need to apologize. You know, if I'd stayed in the Presbyterian church, or even the UCC, apologetics would have been a lot more a part of the theology, I think, than I did. But as it was, saying this is good and there's nothing to apologize for, sex is good, bodies are good, you know, is a really important place to come out and to be a part of that, so...

Anthony B: And yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I guess so the Boston one was less like evangelical then, and it felt more familiar?

Justin S: Yeah. I think Steve's background was Methodist. I'm not positive, though.

Anthony B: Mm.

Justin S: Well, he also was very involved in the Episcopal church later in his life, so yeah, I'm not sure. But yeah, it was much more liturgically recognizable to me, theologically recognizable to me. Definitely a liberal church.

Anthony B: And at this time would it also have been, there would have been like AIDS ministry going on or...?

Justin S: Mm-hmm, yeah. That's where I first got involved in doing AIDS ministry. And my first year in seminary did an internship at a domestic violence program where I worked building a program for children whose mothers were escaping domestic violence. And then the next two years I worked at MCC Boston doing social justice ministry and AIDS ministry. And I wrote my master's thesis on the religious responses to AIDS, which at the time, you know, most churches were...you know, the more progressive denominations were passing sort of sympathetic statements, but very few people were doing anything. So that's the first time I, you know, held babies with AIDS where, you know, there was ministry to go into the hospitals and hold babies that had been orphaned and needing touch and then that were going to die, but, you know, needed comfort.

And began—I got involved in ACT UP while I was in seminary with some other seminary students there, participated in some of the protests, like when the conference of Catholic bishops came to town we did a big demonstration. We

were told to bring a banana and a condom and demonstrate to the bishops how condoms worked, and so forth. Yeah, did civil disobedience with ACT UP.

Anthony B: It sounds like it would have been very emotionally difficult as well, that kind of work, right?

Justin S: Oh, for sure. I mean, when I was in Hawaii I...you know, our church grew from about 20, 25 people when I came to about 75 or 80 people, but we buried like 75 people, you know. Like, I mean, it just—I mean, the sheer numbers of people just dying, and the number of funerals that we did. And then that was nothing compared to going to San Francisco, where, at one point in time they had a rule. I think ministers weren't allowed to do like more than four funerals on a weekend each. You know, I mean, it just was constantly ministering to people who were dying, people who were reeling from test results, you know, people who had died, grieving people who committed suicide because they couldn't handle the multiple losses in their lives. Yeah.

Anthony B: Yeah. What do you—oh, sorry, go ahead.

Justin S: Oh, I was just going to say, you know, in some sense I think—like I was 25 when I went to Hawaii. Like who in the world sends like a 25-year-old to...in the midst of this kind of situation? But on the other hand, like who else was there to go, you know? I mean, everybody had to do something, and so...

Anthony B: Yeah. But you'd barely started living your life at that point, so...

Justin S: Right, right. And, you know, I had friends my age who died of AIDS, and so I think it gave me a sense of the sort of like preciousness of life,

too. You know, if you...it could go. And, I mean, to be completely honest, as a religious professional, too, you know, I ended up in therapy for a number of years with a therapist who specialized in—one of his areas of specialty was working with people who had been care providers for people with AIDS or been helping professionals with people with AIDS, just because there was just such a tremendous amount of grief and loss. And when you're in the middle of doing it you just keep going, but afterwards you think that's not reasonable, like, you know. I mean, I had some profoundly beautiful and incredibly spiritually moving experiences, but it was also continual, so...

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: Part of why I left active ministry for a little while was like I need to heal from that experience so that ministry isn't just, for me, about death and dying, but also about caring for the living. Once I felt like I was sort of, had balanced that better so I could serve people without harming them, or without dragging them into my stuff, I went back to ordained ministry.

Anthony B: Yeah. Wow. It sounds like it, like it was all just like had a huge impact on you, like as a person, and in your... Do you feel like it also had an impact on your, like your spiritual or religious like actions or beliefs or anything like that?

Justin S: Absolutely. I think one thing is—you know, I was... Being raised in a liberal Protestant tradition, it's very rational, you know. It's not spiritual in the sense of, like, otherworldly spirits kind of thing. Although my mom did believe in ghosts and UFOs and things like that, but...the Loch Ness monster.

When I got to Hawaii, one of the first... There were these two wonderful men who were part of my congregation, both of whom had AIDS, and one of whom was dying faster than the other, and so we'd set up a respite program at the church for people to come and help his partner care for him, because he was dying.

And so I get this phone call—this was long before cell phones—I get this phone call at home, and the partner's—or no, one of the church members, who was a native Hawaiian, called me and said we need the pastor here right away; we've seen a spirit and we need the pastor to discern, we need you to discern whether it's a good spirit or bad spirit. Now, I went to Harvard Divinity School, which is highly rational. Nobody did anything about spirit discernment. But I did take a lot of pastoral care and counseling courses that did a lot about like listening and cross-cultural listening, so I did have some tools.

So I went there and I asked everybody to describe what they'd seen, and they said they thought they'd seen a spirit that was coming to check to see whether this person was ready to move from the living world to the spirit world. And so what do you think the spirit thought? And they said I think he's not ready to—I think the spirit came, checked and left because he's not ready to leave, to move on yet. So I just sort of affirmed that, you know, repeated back to them what they said because that's the only way I know to discern the presence of the spirit, you know.

And so about a week or two later he was actively dying. So I'm back at the house. I'm with him and a few of their close friends, and we suddenly hear this squawking of birds, and we all look up. And they lived right out on Kaneohe Bay.

And coming across the bay was all these birds, and they were squawking. They were flying and circling around this tree and they were making a huge uproar of noise.

And so of course as we're all looking out and seeing these squawking birds, you know, and we were in that part where you're like waiting to see, every breath, you know, is this going to be the last one, and there would be a longer pause, and then there would be another breath. Well, we realized, we all went to the window to look at these birds and realized that then, of course, he had stopped breathing. And people often die when you take your attention off of them, for some reason. Maybe it gives them space, I don't know.

But anyway, the birds went silent, and then they lifted up and flew and circled over the house, and flew back out over the bay. And the same person who had sort of alerted me to the presence of the earlier spirit said ah, they came back and took his spirit with them.

Anthony B: Hm.

Justin S: And, you know, I mean, honestly, that was the most rational, the most correct interpretation I can imagine for that moment, you know. So I became much—and people in Hawaii also, you know, the sort of idea culturally, religiously, the idea between...the space between the living and the dead, ancestors, it's much more permeable.

So people would tell me, you know, about having a conversation with someone that I knew I had done that person's funeral, but they were having a conversation,

you know. And the dead, you know, would always say things like, you know, you worry too much about money, you know, or you should go find someone to, you know, go find another love interest, you know, like at that point you can't, come on, you know. Like they would always be kind of encouraging people to focus on living, you know, on what matters, on those kind of values, and they were very consistent, even when the person who died, you know, had different personalities. And I thought there's something to this. And I don't think I would have been open to that without that experience in Hawaii of sort of really seeing that.

And then in San Francisco, you know, there were lots of experiences where people reported seeing ghosts. And I can in some ways explain it through what we know about the grieving process and how our minds work, but, you know, I think I became really much more open to the fact that there's so much we don't know and don't understand, and a mystery is fine, the mystery is beautiful, and somehow life is always being reincarnated all the time, and so, you know, I do have the sense that I'll become part of whatever this living energy is that's part of this world and that exists there. So I think it definitely gave me a... And I became—you know, I mean, I think...

I was trying to tell the story, a story about being with someone who had passed away to my mom once, and she was just, she's like you were in the room with a dead body? Like, well, it's sort of part of the job of a minister, you know? Like, I mean, it's...it's what we do. And I know she'd experienced that, too, in ministry so, you know. But it was...yeah, it's what...

You know, I think I became much more familiar with the sacred aspect, like coming—you know, we celebrate people coming into this world, and going out of this world is a very sacred and beautiful, and very rich moment, too, so... And the insights people have as they're dying are very important.

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: Appreciation for all that.

Anthony B: Yeah, wow. I mean, just like despite everything going on it's...I don't want to say it's beautiful, because it sounds almost like rude to say that in the midst of so much death and suffering, but it is nice to hear that there was so much like, I don't know, reverence for it, and respect for it, and like...for the death process and all that.

Justin S: And the living process. I mean, that people should not have to go through this alone. And I think that commitment, that we are more than...we are more than ourselves, we are, you know, that our commitments—you know, for me Matthew 25 where Jesus says whenever you, you know, whenever I was—whenever you gave the least of these something to eat, you know, who was hungry something to eat, you know, who's thirsty some water, you did it for me. Like this idea of like that we are here to be for each other in the AIDS epidemic was certainly true. You know, everything was a fundraiser and people did the best they could to help each other out when the government and society were not helping.

But I think you can also see [remnants] of that then with like the response to Operation Metro Search in the Twin Cities, like, and in here in Minnesota. Like, you know, what does it mean to radically stand for your neighbor, and not just for yourself. You know, and in the '80s that was a countercultural thing to do in a way that's even different than today, but yeah, I think that's...it's always been an important part of my spiritual life, in part because of those experiences. And others.

My parents were very open with their house and, you know, holidays were always times when people who didn't have any place else to be were welcomed and given gifts and, you know, all of that, so... But there was certainly a tremendous outpouring of generosity during the AIDS epidemic, generosity in all kinds of ways.

Anthony B: Is that the kind of thing that like helped you just get through all of it?

Justin S: Yeah. I think... Yeah. I think you weren't doing it alone, and you got in trouble, I would say, like emotional trouble, like the waters were very risky if you tried to do things alone. And so I think being a part of a sense of a community—we had three services a Sunday at MCC San Francisco. When we first moved there we rented this apartment that had a hot tub in the backyard, and so we'd do 9:00 and 11:00 services on Sunday, and then all the ministers and the music director, everyone would go and we'd get in the hot tub and maybe have a drink. Usually had like a Zima wine cooler. This totally dates the...it's the '90s,

right? In the hot tub, and then take a nap, and then do a 7:00 service, and, you know.

But there was a sense of, you know, there was sort of this little pact, doing it all together in the midst of that epidemic. And, you know, some of those people are still my dearest friends, so I think that made a big difference. And then I think, you know, you just put one foot in front of the other, like climbing a mountain, you know. It's only when you're done that you realize like oh, my gosh, that was too much.

Anthony B: Mm-hmm. Is that kind of what ended up happening when you left ministry?

Justin S: Well, yeah, because I transitioned—I did leave parish ministry in part—for a variety of reasons. This new position was opening up, and it was really ideal for what I wanted. And there were some tensions in the San Francisco—it just didn't...it wasn't quite the right...I don't know, there's just things that didn't work out. Not earth-shattering, just not... And at the same time this other job was opening up, and so the pastor, Jim Mitulski, who's one of my dearest friends, encouraged me to apply for that job.

You know, and that meant I got to travel really around the world with MCC and meet queer people in almost every continent and, you know, see how communities were really providing these lifesaving ministries to people in South America, in Africa, in Europe and, you know, it just was...it was a great—it really fit—it suited me well, so... And it meant I was not—I was still doing some, you know, I still had friends with AIDS, I was still working with that, but I was

doing it on a more programmatic level. We had a program officer whose job was working with AIDS, so I coordinated with him about our conferences and learning experiences about working with people with AIDS.

So yeah, that was... So I did it in a different way. And that's when I also went to see a therapist about really what I'd been through in solo ministry in Hawaii and in joint ministry in San Francisco with the AIDS epidemic.

Anthony B: Yeah. Yeah, in Hawaii doing that solo is crazy, especially when you're like almost fresh out of school.

Justin S: Exactly, yeah.

Anthony B: So—sorry.

Justin S: There were a great many people in the church, but yes. You know, it was my first pastorate, and I was very young.

Anthony B: Yeah. So when you took that new job, was that also around the time that you, like, came out as trans?

Justin S: Yeah. As I was leaving San Francisco—when we got to San Francisco I started to meet other trans men, and then we moved to L.A. And actually, I started seeing that therapist about the AIDS loss, and then I said, by the way, there's something else I'd like to talk about. And so began exploring transitioning. And really as soon as I...

And I had several friends who were transitioning, a group that included Mason Davis, who went on to be the executive director of Transgender Law Center, Nick Adams, who does trans programming for GLAD, a couple other people who went

on to lead healthcare networks in California. So it was like a group of people very active in... A person who's openly trans professor in Southern California. Like it was a group of people who went on to do a lot of leadership in trans organizing, it just so happened, with this group of friends I transitioned at the same time with, and our little group of littermates. So, you know, I had a lot of good role models, people who transitioned earlier than I had, like that professor, and a therapist and some other people. And yeah, so I transitioned while I was working at MCC in Los Angeles.

Anthony B: And I'm curious, do you feel like—well, I'm curious about the differences in ministry from when you were identifying as a lesbian until you were identifying as trans. Like...yeah.

Justin S: I would say that one benefit for me in my time working as the director of leadership development, because I was working with clergy all around the—and people studying to be ministers—all around the world was that, you know, I had some idea of the sexism and, you know, what women pastors face, but I also understood what it was to be treated like a man in ministry, so I felt like it gave me two lenses on the world that was useful.

I think... I... As an openly trans and openly gay man, I would actually say that I don't know that my experiences in ministry feel that different to me than as a woman. I think if I were a straight man, you know, or whether or not I disclose my trans identity might be different. But I have sort of felt like my identity sort of places me in a not man, not woman category in terms of ministry, and like I said, sometimes that's useful. Sometimes it just is.

So I'll tell you a funny story, though, from my first transition. I was doing a retreat for a friend of mine at his church in England, and so we were on this retreat. And I talked about being trans. And one of the older gentleman, who'd been a drag queen, came up to me and said, you know, if we shave that—because I had a scruffy little beard at the time—he's like if we shave that off, with a little makeup we can make you look very pretty. And I was like, oh, I did not explain what kind of trans person I was. And he thought he was being so...that he was just going to help me look more feminine and transitioned to be a woman. And I was like, oh, thank you so much, but no, that's not the direction we're going. And he was very embarrassed and apologized. But I just, you know, I mean, I realize people get upset about being misgendered and, you know, I do, too, under certain circumstances, but in this case I just thought it just came from the goodness of heart. He was just trying to offer what he could, you know? So it just...and then, so then it taught me to be much more specific about what I'm talking about.

Anthony B: Yeah, the sentiment is nice.

Justin S: It was sweet. I mean, it really was. But.

Anthony B: And I guess also, like you had said that you didn't know about trans men, and I feel like that's still, especially back then, was still kind of the case, like—

Justin S: Yeah.

Anthony B: —you know, if you say you're trans, they're like oh, you're a trans woman, regardless of how, like, masculine or feminine you look.

Justin S: Right, yeah. Exactly.

Anthony B: Well, I guess it makes sense also that if you're at MCC, like being trans versus being lesbian wouldn't make that much of a difference in how people react to you.

Justin S: No, I don't think that's true.

Anthony B: Oh, okay. Sorry.

Justin S: There was a—no, it's...I understand why that seems that way. But I would say there's a lot—there was a lot of transphobia in MCC. And in fact I left that job at MCC because of a very intolerant person who came into leadership who told me that I couldn't do my job effectively because people didn't trust me because I was trans. And at that point I'd been working in that job for seven years, including traveling around the world multiple times a year, and, you know, I was kind of burned out, so I thought I'm not going to fight this for a job that I'm not sure I'm still called to.

But I had wanted to go to D.C., and so I just...yeah, I just left because I just couldn't handle the pressure of that anymore. So there were certainly some negatives. I went to one church where they emphatically told me that I needed...me looking...well, much browner than I do now, but, you know, several years in the transition looking definitely male, and they told me to use the women's restroom in their church and, you know, things like that. So I definitely encountered transphobia there.

And there was a woman who preceded me who was the first trans elder, and she experienced tremendous transphobia at MCC, so...you know, it was not easy. You know, because people had the stereotypes of like just, you know, like it's just internalized homophobia. You know, you just don't want to be with someone of the same sex unless you transition. It's like, well, yes, except I transitioned and am still with people of my same gender, so...

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: You know, or it just was...you know, people have theories about it that do not stack up, so...

Anthony B: Uh-huh. Yeah. I mean, that's really unfortunate at a place that's supposed to be like a sort of queer haven, that it's just also like extremely transphobic.

Justin S: Yeah. You know, I mean, MCC had trans clergy and trans people from the beginning. That church I went to in Philadelphia, you know, it was the first time I'd seen the women singing bass in the choir, you know. And well. You know, so it's not that it wasn't there, but it also wasn't...you know, people still had a lot of discomfort. Yeah, and that experience is why I left MCC. With that supervisor who was very not supportive, and yeah, told people I just couldn't be effective because I was trans.

Anthony B: It's a pretty horrible thing to say to somebody.

Justin S: Yeah, it is. Yeah.

Anthony B: So is that part of why you went to UCC as well?

Justin S: Yeah. And I had spent a few years as a layperson in... Well, I went from there, I went to Washington, D.C. and ended up working in the National Center for Transgender Equality.

Anthony B: Right.

Justin S: And because I applied for a job at the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, which I didn't get, but while I was...but the executive director, Mara Keisling, for the National Center for Transgender Equality, NCTE, saw me and realized I was interviewing for a job. And we had met before, and so she was like, when I was done with my interview she was like, you know, why don't you come—let's chat. So she talked to me about like whether I'd be interested in a job with her. She's like see if you get the job, if you don't, call me back.

And so I ended up going there and doing community outreach communications work, a little bit of policy work, working on the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, so I ended up doing that. When George...I started when George W. Bush was President, and Mara said, you know, nobody has to live in D.C. because there's not a lot we can...we're not going to get anywhere with the people in power right now.

We started to spend a lot of time building up our base, so I did, you know, things to sort of, yeah, build up our mailing list, doing a bunch of stuff. So I lived in Albuquerque for a little while with a friend of mine, and I just started attending a Unitarian church there, which I loved. It was a really great congregation. And then when President Obama was elected we moved back—everybody moved back to D.C. because that's where now we could get something done. And yeah, so I

let myself be a layperson at some Unitarian churches for a couple years because it fed my soul. But ultimately I find the teachings of Jesus really meaningful for me and for my life, for my values, so ended up going back to the UCC.

I do want to tell you one story from when I was at MCTE. When President Obama was elected, the first year he was there in the White House, they had the Easter egg roll, and they invited all kinds of children. In fact, it was like—it looked like one of those sort of crazy collages of like children of the world. I mean, it was amazing, like every different kind—there were children on crutches, and in wheelchairs, there were children with turbans, there were children of every skin color, there were children—like it was amazing. And one of the groups they reached out to was like parents who were advocates for trans children, trans families, and they wanted... So I got nominated somehow from the small staff to escort this group of children.

And there was a little girl who was four or five, and her mom—and when we got to the egg roll—and we also took some other children as sort of decoy children so that if news media got a hold of there being trans children there, they wouldn't be able to figure out which ones they were and exploit them, but that didn't happen.

But anyway, this little girl was like floating, I swear, like off the ground she was so happy being there. She had this adorable little dress with little, like, chickens around the bottom of it, and her sister had this adorable dress with little bunnies around it. And her mom told me the story about taking this child shopping, and the child had always sort of expressed this female gender identity, even though was assigned male at birth, and said like honestly, it's like I didn't know a two-

year-old, a toddler could be depressed, but I think my kid was, and then started dressing in their older sister's clothes, her older sister's clothes, and sort of came alive. And so they were working with a pediatrician and therapist to let this child socially transition.

And then when it came time to go to the—they got an invitation from the White House, and the mom said, you know, we're never going to get another invitation from the White House, so we're going to do this up. We're going to go to Macy's dress department, and we're going to get—you can get whatever you want. And this little child sat down on the floor in the middle of the dress department of Macy's and started sobbing. And her mom was like you can pick any clothes here you want—you can have boy clothes, you can have girl clothes, what do you want? Like what's wrong? And the kid said I'm not crying because I'm sad, I'm crying because I'm so happy. And so picked out these adorable dresses and came. You know, it was really, it was this beautiful moment, so...so that was—

Anthony B: So sweet.

Justin S: Yeah. So...

Anthony B: Oh, that's so sweet. And it sounds like—yeah, sorry.

Justin S: No, go ahead.

Anthony B: I was going to say like it sounds like you had a lot of, like in that job you were really able to like make an impact on people.

Justin S: I hope so, I mean. And I did, you know, I did work on passing the, you know, with a great team of people, we all worked on passing the Matthew

Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was the first federal legislation to possibly address LGBTQ issues, particularly trans issues. And I was also part of an implementation team with the Justice Department, Civil Rights Division, on that, and chaired a task force on gender identity. So you had to figure out how, you know, how do you help the FBI agent in the field figure out, you know, whether a crime is an anti-trans hate crime or, you know, what happens.

And the money for that was not a penalty enhancement bill. You know, there's a lot of controversy about that. It was really about trying to begin to take statistics about crimes against trans people, and also about women, juveniles, you know, other categories of people. We can't prevent things if we don't know what's happening. So gathering data on violence prevention in the hopes of decreasing it.

But yeah, I'm very proud of the work that I did on that and, you know. I know some of it's being unraveled by the Trump administration. I know people have felt despairing, like oh, you know, this is my life's work and now it's gone. But I don't think that way. I think we learned how to pass these bills once, and we can pass them again. We learned how to advocate for ourselves at one point in time. We can...we still know that we have self-worth and dignity and the right to advocate for these, that we don't deserve to be killed, so we can just keep doing it. I don't think this is a permanent situation.

Anthony B: Mm, yeah. The fight doesn't stop, but also the progress doesn't just go away.

Justin S: Right.

Anthony B: Yeah, yeah.

Justin S: And yeah, I mean, bringing our community together, you know, we build one iteration upon the next iteration, and I'm proud to have been part of that from that...a piece of that.

Anthony B: Yeah. So yeah, what was it like going from, like, these constant like religious positions to being a layperson for a few years? Did that feel very, like, jarring?

Justin S: It was nice. It felt like a respite.

Anthony B: Yeah. And you'd mentioned that you went back in part because you felt like you wanted to continue that work again.

Justin S: Yeah, so I had a partner—I moved to D.C. to be with someone who passed away during surgery in 2009, and I stayed there for a couple of years. He had a young adult son. You know, there were things to do to wrap up his life and so forth. And I was, you know, very invested in this job at NCTE. But after a couple years I felt like I needed—D.C. is relentless in terms of policy stuff, and I felt like I needed to get away from that, and I just needed another chapter in my life to sort of move on after grieving, after Jack's death.

So I applied for a job at Out & Equal in San Francisco and I applied for a PhD program. I figured I'd do whichever one I got. And I got them both, and I tried to juggle that for a little bit, and that didn't work so well. But I went back to study at GTU, and while I was there a wonderful friend of mine, Leslie Taylor, encouraged me to really think about coming back to the UCC.

And what was beautiful about that experience is I went for my—I filed all my transfer paperwork, I took the polity class, and did all the stuff you have to do, and then I went for my interview, and Leslie was my advocate, or my sponsor. Anyway, we go for the interview, and I step out of the room—you know, they asked me questions, step out of the room. When I came back in they had made these signs that apologized that there was not a place for me before, but the signs they made said, “Welcome home,” and they said we’re sorry we just weren’t able to accommodate your ministry when you were first ordained, but we’re so glad you’re here now. It was just this beautiful, touching moment, and so that was really positive, so I’ve...and, I would say—I mean, the other side of that piece.

And I also had a new partner, Henry, who’d grown up on an Episcopal convent boarding school with Episcopal nuns, and so I tried to get—we wanted to go to church together. I tried to get him to go to the Unitarian church with me, but it’s just too far from the Episcopal church of his childhood, which was pretty traditional. So in some ways the UCC was also a compromise so that we could go to church together, but...it does earn the title Unitarians Considering Christ, but...or the nickname. But I’ve been very happy being in the UCC and feel very supported and glad for my ministry in this setting, too, so...

Anthony B: Mm. Yeah, so I actually don’t really know too much about UCC. So how is it mainly different from MCC? Like I know MCC is designed specifically for, like, queer ministry, but then UCC is very, like, very sort of open and liberal as well, right?

Justin S: Yeah. It comes out of the history of the congregational church in America, the Pilgrims, as well as the German Evangelical and Reformed church, and there was a merger of a bunch of churches, four or five different bodies, in the '50s to become—'50s or '60s to become the United Church of Christ. And United Theological Seminary is a UCC seminary. It was founded in '62, I think, when the denomination was still young. So yeah, it's a very progressive denomination. Not all of its churches are open and affirming, but you can find a pretty warm welcome in any UCC church. And sometimes, you know, you go to some of these rural, drive around rural Minnesota, you know, we drove over a corn field and there was a UCC church flying a rainbow flag, and it helps you feel welcome in those places, so...

Anthony B: Yeah. And so you became a minister for a UCC church then?

Justin S: No, the way it works, my primary calling appointment is at the seminary, but you enter what's called a four-way calling where you make an agreement between a local church, and the seminary, and you, and the conference and all that, so I've been part of a local church ministry.

And we had a brief period between my job in San Francisco—I had a job in San Francisco as the director, managing director of the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion, which, LGBTQ-RAN was a program of that, so I worked with Mark when I was doing that in San Francisco for four years. But that was just a contract job.

When that ended we briefly went to Arizona, where Henry's from, for about 18 months, and I worked as volunteer clergy at a UCC church there and ran a respite

shelter for—co-led a respite shelter with a nurse for people who were seeking asylum in the United States, people who come across the border and who are moving from detention to their sponsors' houses. So I did that kind of ministry and then also some ministry in our local congregation here. But I'm open to pastoring a church again. I do a lot of preaching and a lot of teaching in different churches, mostly UCC.

Anthony B: Mm, okay.

Justin S: My ministry is serving as a seminary professor, which is one of the options.

Anthony B: Okay. Right, that makes sense. How has it been like being in academia now? Because you've been in so many different sort of like fields, professions. How does it compare?

Justin S: You know, academia is its own—I mean, I feel glad that I grew up in an academic household and that I sort of know how some of it works, so I sort of knew what I was getting into. But I love teaching, I love my students, I love being able to share what I've learned in ministry with seminary students. And yeah, you know, I think that I'm the first openly trans person appointed to the regular faculty of a seminary, not just a visiting person or an adjunct person, one of the core faculty, you know, which is obviously a different thing.

But there's a lot of great queer and trans scholars in the religion academic world who are, I think, I find incredibly supportive of each other and interesting people. Yeah. I mean, I think I sort of—seminaries kind of straddle both worlds, right?

We're active with people who, we can talk about faith. Like I've taught in a state university and a community college before. You know, it's different. You have to be guarded about how you talk about religion. I like being able to explicitly talk about faith with it, so...

Anthony B: Yeah. And I saw that you also have a lot of writing about, like, trans ministry as well, right?

Justin S: Yeah. So I...when I was in Los Angeles, when I was working for MCC as the director of leadership development, I did a Doctor of Ministry degree at San Francisco Theological Seminary, which was a general focus on ministry. But I chose to write my dissertation on trans theology. And I had a wonderful advisor, James Noel, who has since passed away, but he was a scholar of the Black Atlantic, and new how liberation struggles fit with religion and theology, and what that meant. And even though he was not queer himself, was just a tremendous advocate. And I think their—as it was told to me, their faculty was not quite ready for a topic like mine, but he went to bat on it and got it passed through. So I worked with him and with Bob Shore-Gass, who wrote “Jesus ACTED UP,” and a number of other, you know, really important works of queer liberation theology as my other advisor on the project. And then that got published by Pilgrim Press as a book and, you know, just...

There were other people who had written trans theology before, particularly Victoria Kolakowski, and just beginning at about the same time, Virginia Mollenkott. But I really tried to sort of think about putting it together into a book to talk about, you know, what's helpful, what's not helpful in terms of ministry,

how do we think theologically, how do we think about the Bible. You know, and a lot of that was really inspired and modeled by MCC's way of approaching being gay, especially in the earlier years, the more radical years, thinking about—yeah, as I said, there's no need to apologize, this is a gift of God, so how do we see it through that lens, and not through...

You know, and I really, I wanted to publish something, the kind of thing I wanted to read, not just something that was... There were, you know, at the time most of what was available was just narratives of people's lives, which are interesting and important, and often the forerunners of, you know, theological thought, you know, autobiographies, memoirs. But I wanted something that delved a little deeper into the theology, into the biblical scholarship, so...yeah.

And then I followed up on that a number of years later. I did a brief fellowship in the Netherlands where I was able to work on a chapter for a book for Baylor—or Baker Academic, which is a conservative press, that was four views on transgender that ran the gamut from extremely conservative, non-accepting, you know, the trans people don't exist view, through a couple other authors, to me.

And that, I was really proud of the work in that book because I think I was able to push trans theology a little more deeply and talk about the tremendous diversity of gender, of in between categories, of nonbinary categories on the earth, and why that's clearly part of creation.

And I was also, while I was there, I was at the Free University in Amsterdam at the [Protestant] theological university doing this fellowship, and was exposed to the philosophy of the hospitals there, which in the 1950s and '60s were presented

the question of trans people wanting medical transition, and they went to their ethical board. The Free University is free not just as in tuition, but free-thinking, right, free Protestantism, so it was a Christian university. And the ethicists said if trans people are saying that gender dysphoria causes suffering, and we can see that it does, and physicians are tasked with alleviating suffering if we have the ability to do so, then we have an obligation to alleviate the suffering of trans people through these means that we know, so therefore it's ethical—not just ethical, but must happen. The historian [Jaya Bachchan] has written about this since then.

But that also really shaped some of how I was looking at that, like right, this is not about a reading of Genesis 1 as presenting only two options for humanity, but about sort of this richness and our ability to act in compassion and care for each other. Yeah, so I wrote about that in that project. And I'd done some other writings on some biblical texts from a trans hermeneutical perspective in a volume called "Take Back the Word," where I wrote a chapter, and then more recently like in "Trans Biblical," which is about trans hermeneutics.

Anthony B: That all sounds very, like, super interesting, like really cool work that you're doing.

Justin S: Yeah. And the book that I'm just finishing up now is actually based on my dissertation for my PhD, which was about using contemporary art to understand the spirituality of queer people, particularly those outside of religious institutions, so it's a global interfaith look at, yeah, queer spirituality through the lens of art.

Anthony B: Mm. Yeah, I was curious about the role of art as well because I'd seen that you have like an art certification of some kind, and that art's been kind of involved in your work before, so yeah, I wanted to ask more about the role that it plays in what you do.

Justin S: Yeah, I've always been interested in art. I've taken, through the years, a number of art history classes, including studying with, when I was a pastor in San Francisco, taking a class at Pacific School of Religion with Doug Adams, who's one of the sort of real pioneers in bringing together art and theology. And actually, Wilson Yates, who the chair that I'm now sitting in at United is named for, served, after Doug, was—Wilson went for a year as a visiting scholar to the GTU after Doug passed away, so there's continuity between our experiences there.

So I've always been interested in what artists have to say and always been interested in queer art just as personal interest. And then when I was doing the communications job at NCTE in D.C. we didn't have money to pay a graphic designer, so I pointed out that the bill that we were spending—like I could go take a graphic design course and see if it would help us, and I could use some layout of stuff that we did. So I ended up going to the Maryland College of Art and doing a certificate in graphic design. But it also really opened me up to a lot of tools and a lot of creativity for my own artistic practice.

But then—well, it was funny—when I was doing my PhD program I took a number of art courses there, just because I was interested in it, and I had taken up photography as a hobby just for fun, and had taken a couple classes in that, and so

forth. But ended up doing—I went to an open studio tour at Berkely and I came across this wonderful artist named Susan McAlister, who asked what artistic practice I did, and I mentioned I did photography.

And she said oh, I need a photographer to photograph my artwork, would you be interested in bartering drawing lessons for photography? I said sure, because I didn't have money to pay an art teacher, but I thought that sounded fun. And so we formed this bond, and we ended up—she ended up teaching me colored pencil drawing—well, graphite and colored pencil drawing, which is now very much a part of my artistic practice, and so had that experience with Susan and subsequent to that.

But when I was—I think through my studies at the GTU, taking the—I took all the classes in their theology and the arts program as well as interdisciplinary studies. You know, I really wanted to do a queer topic for my dissertation, and I realized that the things artists were saying about spirituality were so much more interesting than... You know, queer theology, in its early days, in both Judaism and Christianity, was much more radical, you know. It started from this premise of God blessed this and it's good. You know, the apologetics, as people began to become accepted in the church, and in the synagogue, strayed into some more apologetic territory. Well, I just see the controversy around Matthew Vines', you know, why can't we just all stick to traditional marriage op-ed in the *New York Times* recently, right?

But I realized that artists were not actually trying to accommodate anyone. And I think, you know, I came to see artists as a lens for what a broader community

might be saying about something, but they're not trained in theology, so they're not sticking to the categories, they're not sticking to the discourses, they're not sticking to the pressures that theologians are facing. So I really wanted to bring sort of this dialogue between what we're saying in queer theology and trans theology in dialogue with how artists are representing spirituality.

You know, because if you want to, let's say you're going to make a queer angel, or a nonbinary angel, like how does your viewer know that that's true about that person, right? You can make them in loving contact with someone of the same gender, you can make them visibly nonbinary, like what are the cues that people use, and like what does that say about their—you know, and then what religious symbols are they using in their art and what does that say about what they think about theology?

So I interviewed a number of artists, and studied a number of artists, and brought that together in a new book, so... Which I just have to finish up the last couple things so it can go into production this year, so...

Anthony B: Wow. Yeah, I want to check that out. That sounds really, really interesting.

Justin S: Yeah, so, you know, I think there's some really radical and really interesting theology that comes out of that, so...

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: Yeah, I loved being able to sort of lift up what some of these artists' visions are.

Anthony B: Yeah, because, like, art is like a great space to envision a future or a more positive future, and then also a way to reflect on our present, and how we perceive it, and reflect.

Justin S: Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

Anthony B: Super cool. Yeah. I mean, I know we've talked about a lot of different things, and it's been like about an hour and a half now, so I don't want to take too much of your time, but I guess I was wondering if you have any sort of reflections or comments for just queer people or just any thoughts on what we've talked about today, or anything like that to, like, near the end of our talk here.

Justin S: Yeah. I think it is really important that we remember who we are, and the goodness of what we are right now. You know, to me being trans is about the right to live my life, live it in my body in ways that are right for me, you know, the freedom to express myself and to pursue happiness, whatever that means, and be here.

And I think there are so many forces that are trying to, you know, that have decided that trans people are the people to scapegoat. You know, populism is not just like, does not definitionally mean just a popular uprising of things, but a popular uprising that is based on scapegoats, right now immigrants and trans people.

And I think it is so...I think we need to cultivate remembering who we are and standing firm in that so that, you know, if someone else says something nasty, that's a reflection on them, you know, it is not actually true about us. And to be

able to hold the ways in which we're protecting each other, and caring for each other, you know, really valuably. And I think in [our world] to keep cultivating, you know, what came out of Minnesota and Operation Metro Search, this idea of neighboring, you know, that neighboring is an active verb—like Mr. Rogers talked about it. You know, that everyone is my neighbor. Everyone is my kin, as our indigenous elders, you know, communities are teaching us, or reminding us. You know, and so I think living in this network of positive care for each other, we can see as many people helping as we can see harming, or even more.

And so, you know, I just, I've been really trying to think of like how do we get a message to our communities to stay strong, to say who we are, to not apologize for who we are, but make room for younger people coming after us, for the generations that will come. You know, trans people, nonbinary people have always existed across the planet, and we will continue to exist, and there's such fundamental goodness.

And, you know, in our ability to, as I mentioned before, see more than one way of being in the world, you know, to not just rely on what people tell you about yourself, but who you know yourself to be. Like these are incredible strengths to, you know, be able to envision possibilities beyond what you knew was possible. And so I want to see cultivating that fundamental goodness so that we can continue to thrive. That's what I hope is the message of like the books I've written and the theology I've done, that we have a place here, and it's an equal place, in God's eyes, for sure, until it is in humanity's, so...

And also—and I didn't mention this, but I'll just mention it really briefly—a big part of my work and interest has been in saving this really fragile planet that we're on that is in incredible pain right now. It's one reason we're moving to a place where we can hopefully live much lighter on the land, and as caretakers of this land, caregivers for this, the animals that live on our almost 40 acres, and the trees, and all of those things, and produce our own food, because we've got to live differently than we've been living.

And so I think queerness and ecology go hand-in-hand because there's a reason some of the early queer communities took to the land, and tried to care for the land in radical ways. So that's also a very important part of my theology and my life, so... Even though I was sweating at 7:00 in the morning yesterday hauling dirt around, and trying to get my little tomato plants in the ground. Since we moved here late in the season, we're trying to get a few crops out, you know, a few plants in the garden this year, so...

Anthony B: Yeah, I appreciate that addition. That's definitely a really important element. I mean, just all of what you just said just now is really like beautiful. And I feel like—you said that you hope it's been reflected in your work, and I definitely feel that. Even just hearing about your life story and your experiences, I definitely feel like what you've been talking about, community and like not apologizing has just been clearly reflected in what you do. And also the ecological element is, I feel like, often ignored, and I feel like really important as well.

Justin S: Yeah.

Anthony B: Yeah.

Justin S: Yeah. Well, if you have other questions or, you know, like I'm happy to do a follow-up if you think like darn it, I wish I'd asked this. That's fine with me, too, so... It's been great talking with you, Anthony.

Anthony B: Yeah, it's been really great. Thank you so much for meeting with me and everything. Like it's just been really great talking with you.

Justin S: Well, thank you. Great. Well, good luck on the rest of your summer, and like I said, let me know if I can be of further help.

Anthony B: Thank you. All right, I'll stop the recording now.

01:28:49 *[End of recording.]*