

## Oral History Interview: Larry Rodriguez

Interviewee: Larry Rodriguez

Interviewer: Obie Holmen

Date: October 31, 2017

Obie H. My name is Obie Holmen. Today's date is October 31, 2017. It's Halloween. I am with Larry Rodriguez. Larry is going to tell us his story today and I will ask a question or two here or there, but Larry, mostly this is for you to tell your story how you want to tell it. So why don't you start by telling us where you were born and raised and your early life?

Larry R. Okay. I was born in Los Angeles, California, and I've lived my whole life in the Los Angeles area. I live in Culver City now, which is just one of many cities in the Los Angeles area. And when I was nine we moved to Monterey Park, which is in the San Gabriel Valley, also one of the closer suburbs of Los Angeles. Went to the local high school, Montebello High School. Graduated from there and went to UCLA, where I got my Bachelors degree in meteorology and my Masters of Science in meteorology, and my teaching credential there.

Taught for Los Angeles School District for 32 years. Originally hired to teach health and then science, taught physics and computer science. I taught for 32 years. Roosevelt High School is the largest high school—was, at that time, the largest high school west of the Mississippi. It had 5,300 students. Our English department faculty was larger than most

faculties of most schools, just one department alone. It was a multi-track, year-round school. It was like a city. But it was its own community. It was part of East Los Angeles, and the East Los Angeles community, Hispanic community in Los Angeles. And loved doing that. I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church tradition.

Obie H. Tell us a little bit about your childhood in Roman Catholic East L.A.

Larry R. Okay. Like I said, when I was nine we moved from Boyle Heights to Monterey Park, so most of... My first church remembrances of... Actually, I was born, I was baptized in the founding church of Los Angeles, which we called the Placita, but Our Lady Queen of Angels, the original church that founded the city.

Obie H. So how old is that church?

Larry R. The church was originally established in 1781, I think it was, 1781. I had always thought I was baptized in my parish church, which was Dolores Mission, but it turns out that I was baptized in the founding church because one of my cousins was also going to be baptized, and in order to be baptized in Dolores Mission, you had to be a member of the parish, and this other family, they didn't really go to church. But at the Placita downtown, they didn't care. So they wanted us to be baptized together, so I was baptized in there.

And Dolores Mission, just to give you an idea of what it's like, if you've ever heard of Father Boyle and with the Homeboy Ministries, that was the

church that he started with, with the outreach to all the gangs in the Boyle Heights area. So from the beginning—it's a sanctuary church—so from the beginning it was like church meant something in the community. It was this instrument of change.

As I grew up I went to public school, so I didn't really—I mean, I went to church on Sundays. Later on, when I got older, I sang in the choir. I wasn't very good at it. And I used to play the organ on Saturday night service. And so I was active in my church, but I didn't go to Catholic school. And maybe that's why I still like the Catholic church.

Obie H. [Laughs.] You don't have those bad experiences.

Larry R. I don't have those bad experiences, no. And so that was interesting. But in 1969—

Obie H. Let's get to that in a second.

Larry R. Okay. Go ahead.

Obie H. I want to know a little more about your family growing up.

Larry R. Oh, okay. Well, my father's side of the family—I don't know my father's... Okay, my father was raised by his uncle in Los Angeles. My father's father and mother lived in Arizona. And he worked for the Santa Fe Railroad. So the children in that family were born all along the railroad. So my grandmother came from Chicago. My father was actually originally from Texas. [CORRECTION: should say that Larry's father's family was

*originally from Texas; Larry's father was born in Los Angeles.]* And I never really knew them because we only saw them once—I only remember seeing them once when I was young. I was at the most maybe eight years old.

But my mother's side of the family came to the U.S. from Valle de Santiago in Mexico, during the Mexican Revolution in 1911. And there was already, some of the family was already living in Los Angeles. And they fled because it was an agrarian—I don't know if you know much about the history of Mexico—it was an agrarian revolution. They were landowners and they were killing the landowners, so they fled with whatever they could take with them and they came to Los Angeles.

My mother was actually—that was 1911. My mother was born in 1916, and a couple months before my mother was born, my grandmother went back to live with the family for a while, which was very traditional. She went back to live with the family for a while. And that was my grandmother went back. And my mother was born in Mexico. And then came back three months later. So my mother had lived all of her life except for three months in the United States, but she was legally born in Mexico, so she became a naturalized citizen years later.

And that's what makes the whole border situation so complicated because my father's family migrated from Spain long centuries ago and lived in what was then the northwest of Mexico, which is now the southwest of the

U.S., and they didn't change, but the border shifted. And so, you know, that's why all the complications with immigration and everything else I understand because that's what my family went through.

And I always find it very amusing because—I'll also mention it later—Los Angeles is called, nickname is the city of the angels, but that's not its nickname, because it isn't the city of the angels. It's El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles, which translates as the town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels. So it's not the city of angels, it's the city of our queen, the queen of the angels.

But during the war between the United States and Mexico and the land shifted, and the border shifted, and it became a U.S. city, you have this Protestant-Catholic divide, because it was a Catholic city and now it's a Protestant city. They couldn't deal with the queen of angels, so they changed its meaning to be the city of angels rather than the city of our lady, the queen of the angels. But the cathedral and the church that I grew up in are still called Queen of Angels. My sister was born at Queen of Angels Hospital.

So anyway, and so it was...you know, I grew up in a neighborhood that was racially mixed. My best friend was Ichiro Okuma, from a Japanese family, first generation. He was first generation Japanese. And my other best friend was H.C. Higgins, African American, as we call them now. And Boyle Heights was the melting pot. Still is. It's the entry point for a

lot of people coming to Los Angeles from outside the U.S. I don't know how much more you want to know.

Obie H. You had brothers and sisters?

Larry R. Oh, I had one sister. My sister, five years older than I was. Her name was Guadalupe. My mother was Mercedes. And my father was Lawrence. I'm Junior.

Obie H. Oh, are you?

Larry R. Yes. The interesting thing about that—and again, it was something I didn't learn until I was older—my father, when he was a young adult, everybody called him Larry, and when I was born, and I was Lawrence, I was Lawrence, Jr., it would really be common in our family for me to have been nicknamed Junior. But he didn't want me to be called Junior. He didn't like that. So he changed what people called him, and he changed to Lawrence, and so I could become Larry. And when I grew up everybody called him Lawrence except for the people that knew him when he was young. They would call him Larry.

And so my mother and my father, my sister, I miss them dearly, but they were my best friends. When you're young you think that everybody has a life like your own at home. And I had one of those...our house was the house that all the neighborhood kids hung out at because there was always something to eat, it was always open. And that's the way my house was. And there was just my sister and I, but whenever we had family things,

everybody was at our house. And that's the way I thought everybody else grew up. And then I found out, when I was older, that not everybody did. But they were not only my family, they were my best friends. And...whew. I lost them in the space of less than three years, so—

Obie H. Your sister also?

Larry R. Yeah, my sister. My father had a massive stroke in '94, which left him paralyzed in all four limbs. He could barely talk, but he couldn't take care of himself. They gave him like...actually, they said, when he first had the stroke, they said he wouldn't survive. He was in a coma for months. And they said he wouldn't survive, and if he did he would just be a vegetable. Well, he came out of it and he wasn't a vegetable, but he couldn't take care of himself. He could only whisper at the most. So the one that was always the caretaker of the family couldn't do anything for himself. He had to be...he was like a very large baby. But he was so good humored about it. That's one thing about my dad.

And we thought he would be the first one that would go, but it was actually my mom. And she was healthy. She was 86 years old. She was old, but she was healthy. But she was slow and a little unbalanced, and a little physically unbalanced. I mean, what do I say? Unsure of her walking. She had arthritis in her back. But other than that she had...not a diabetic, she had low blood pressure, she was all those other things. But

she fell and broke her hip and she died a month later from complications. That was so unexpected.

And then my sister died just about a little less than two years after that. She had developed cancer of the esophagus and it just spread from there. And my father was the last one, and he died at the age of 90. It was hard losing my best friend. I learned what it's like to be the adult orphan. And it took me a long time to understand what that meant. But my mother and my father were the oldest of their generation, and my sister and I were the oldest of our generation, so I'm the only one left of that generation in my family. All of my cousins, they're all younger than me. And I only have one aunt left from my mother's generation. That's the last one. So it's like whoa, being the elder of the family, that's...holding the gosh last in my family, you know.

They...you know, my mother and my father, when I came out in the late—it was 1970, actually, the year—I knew if it had been anybody else's son they would have accepted it with no problem, but I was so worried about me, I was their son, how I could do that. But when I did—the reason why—now we've got to shift. I've got to shift.

Obie H.        Yeah.

Larry R.        Because by the late '60s I'd started going to MCC Los Angeles, but there was only one church at the time, and in 1969. And that was one year after it started. And we were meeting at the Encore Theatre. And I had also, I



was at UCLA and I got involved in the Gay Liberation Front. And Morris Kight and Jim Kepner—I don't know if you know who they were. Morris Kight was one of the founders of the Gay and Lesbian Center. And if you knew Morris, Morris was one of the original fairies, and to do something very Morris-like... The Rampart police station was notorious for going and raiding gay bars. That's what they did. I was even in a bar once when they walked in and, you know, lights went up and they said you, you and you out, and they arrested people on the spot for what they called lewd and lascivious conduct. And that's the way it was in those days, you know, that happened.

So Morris Kight and Jim Kepner, they were going to do something. They were going to levitate the Rampart police station. So they invited a whole—that's why I said if you knew Morris, you'd understand. So we were going to levitate this police station. In those days the MCC was like, that was the center of the community. It was one of the few organizations that you could go to that there would be...you knew you could get people, you could talk to a lot of people at one time.

So I went and we surrounded the police station, and we started meditating, and we were going to lift this thing off the ground. We didn't lift it off the ground, but there were news people there. And when I came home that night and I turned on the TV, I saw myself walk across the screen on the news. And at that point I said I'd better tell my parents before somebody

else does. And that's how I did it, and why I did it. I outed myself to my parents.

And so it was...when I told them, we spent a long time. We must have talked for at least an hour, maybe more. And there were a lot of tears and a lot of questions and all the rest of that stuff. But my mother's and my sister's biggest concern was that I would get hurt, which I have, you know.

Obie H. How old were you at that time?

Larry R. Oh, gosh. I would have been about 22. And my father didn't say a lot during that whole thing. That was not unusual for him. He was more of a quiet person. He listened a lot. But I'll never forget this. At the end he got up and he hugged me and he said... [*Choking up.*] I want you to remember that no matter what happens, you will always be my son. And, you know, when I said earlier that when you're young you assume that everybody has the same family life that you do, and it wasn't until I was older that I realized how many people didn't have that kind of a family.

So as I got older, you know, the images that we have of God, as God as father, I can understand why some people can't relate to God as father. But to me, I don't see God as father or mother. I see God as father and mother and everything else, you know. We're trying, in human terms, to explain who God is. But, you know, God is both and neither at the same time. But if my dad could love me, and as he said, there would be nothing that would ever separate me from him, then I can understand when it says

that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It makes sense to me. And I can also, at the same time, for people who didn't have a family like that, how come some people have so much difficulty believing that, that there is nothing that they could do that would ever separate them from the love of God.

Obie H. I think one of the most profound lines for me in the New Testament is the words "thou art my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." And it sounds like that's exactly the message that your father gave you. And I don't think there's a more loving, profound statement that a father can make than that. When did you first realize you were gay?

Larry R. You have to remember in those days we didn't have words like that. The word gay didn't exist. It's hard for people in this generation, in this time, to realize what it was like in our generation, right? We grew up with Lucy and Ricky. They slept in separate beds. They never went to the toilet. They didn't have sex. I mean, I remember, what was it? "From Here to Eternity" was such a scandal, the movie, because, you know, it was sexualized. You look at it now it's so tame. But it was like, you know.

So this is one of those other stories. But it was...let's see, Jim Sandmire was pastor of the church at the time so it must have been in the mid '70s. And Christmas was coming, and we wanted to put, the church wanted to put an ad in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Obie H. MCC wanted to?

Larry R. Yeah, MCC. MCC wanted to put the church in the *Los Angeles Times*. And I was asked to design the ad and do that. Well, the *Los Angeles Times* would not let us use the words gay and lesbian. We couldn't even put it in the *Times*. We couldn't use the word homosexual. And people didn't...you know, those words didn't come up.

So when you asked me when did I realize that I was gay, we didn't have the words for it. But I knew that I was different, and I knew that when I was in...I would say when I really realized it was when I was in junior high, which we now call middle school, junior high. And I remember that because there was one guy, and I just was so attracted to him, and it would make me nervous whenever I was around him. And it was just that. That's when I realized I was different. But it wasn't until I was in college that I began to give it a name.

And what sparked it all—oh, gosh, you're going to make me go somewhere—what sparked it all was I—I told you I used to sing in the choir at my home church. And the director of the folk mass, he was a year younger than I was. He had gone to seminary and then dropped out. And he was the director of the folk mass. And I used to sing with the folk mass, too. And I really liked him a lot. And one night we were just talking. You know, I had gone over to his place after church and we were just talking. And he said you're gay, aren't you? And I said, how did you know? And he said because I am, too. So, you know, we struck up a relationship and

we started, we, you know, that was my first sexual experience. And, you know, but it was all on the hush-hush. We double dated.

And then all of a sudden one day I went over to his place and he told me he never wanted—the relationship was over, and it was like he didn't want to see me again and all the rest of it. So I said why, what happened? And then, you know, I didn't know any other gay people. I mean, he was the only gay person I knew. As far as I knew, there was no other gay person except me. I mean, I didn't know anybody else. And there's nothing in the news about gay people. They didn't even use the word. So that's really kind of like what forced me to come out because I had to talk to somebody about it.

An old time friend of mine, he was on leave from the Vietnam War. He came to visit me. And he was one of my high school friends. And I just poured out my guts to him. He said, hey, you know, you were my friend then, you're still my friend now. And that's when I began to accept myself, was when he accepted me. And then I got involved in the Gay Liberation movement, I started going to MCC.

But anyway, a couple months later this person that had brought me out, this director, his name was Bill, he announced that he was getting married to the person we used to double date with, and I'm thinking, oh, that's wrong. Because he was using it as a cover. And so I confronted him with it. And oh, he told me, you know, that it was none of my business and the

pastor of the parish knew about this and had said if I knew what was good for me I would just stay away from the church altogether. And I said well—because I was quite active in the church—said well, if they want me to go, they're going to have to tell me.

And a day or two later I got a phone call from the music director of the parish and he said, well, you know, thank you for all the stuff you've done, but basically your services are no longer appreciated. So I said, well, you know—I started talking. I said, well, you know... I started saying some things and he started saying some things, and I realized wait a minute, something wasn't matching here. I said what did Bill tell you?

And what Bill told him was, what happened was the music director had gone home with...had gone over to Bill's house one evening and I had left a note on the door. And the music director was questioning Bill about this. So Bill made up the story that I was this gay person and he was trying to help me through my emotional distress. He was being my friend. He was straight, but I was the gay one. And I said that's not what happened. And I told him the truth. And he was shocked and he didn't quite know what to say. He said, well, I think for your own sake you should not come to the choir, but just go ahead and do the other stuff that you were doing; I will talk to the pastor and I'll make up something.

So I continued to play the organ at mass on Saturday, but I was no longer a part of the choir, and that was okay. And by that time was already

joining—I was already going to MCC on Sundays. And one day, it was the rector of the parish, who I never liked, he was such a stick-in-the, you know, old fashioned, very old fashioned. He got in his sermon and he was blaming the...I don't know. He was blaming World War II on abortion and all the rest of this stuff, and women, and everything else.

At that point I just kind of walked out. I couldn't...it was really... I left not because I was gay, but because of the church's stance on women. I said, you know. And so I left. But I said I just...I never looked back. And it was also, I got a lot of phone calls because when the organist leaves, people notice. [*Laughs.*] Because there was no music the rest of the service. And I never looked back.

And so that's how I came out. I remember the struggle I had. One night—this was after this had happened with Bill—I said to myself... I was locking up after Saturday evening service, and I walked up to the altar—everyone was gone—I walked up to the altar and I said...I knelt down. And, you know, churches are really nice when there's nobody in it. I mean, it's just...you know, there's this...it's...I mean, it's also nice when there's people in it, but there's something special when you're there all by yourself. And I knelt down at the altar and I said God, if this is wrong, then change me. But if it's not, then find me a people that will love me for who I am and who I can love, too.

And it was shortly after that that I read about this church. I don't even remember where I read it, but I read about it. And with this pastor, Troy Perry, and I went. And it changed my life, you know. I was home.

Obie H. You come from a liturgical, Roman Catholic background.

Larry R. Yes.

Obie H. Troy Perry came from a Pentecostal background.

Larry R. Yes.

Obie H. How did you relate from that standpoint?

Larry R. Okay. This is very interesting. I was raised in a Roman Catholic church, but the priests were Franciscans, and the nuns were the Order of St. Vincent De Paul. Oh, the ones with the big cornets. And I loved to watch them play baseball. They would just pick up those things and they'd go running down, and it was like—what was the—“The Flying Nun.”

Obie H. “The Flying Nun,” yeah.

Larry R. Yes, those cornets would go flapping in the wind. And they were sweet. They were some of the nicest people. And the Franciscans were very intellectual, you know, and very much serving the poor, you know, doing good works. And so the church—we had a rock mass, you know? We had a folk mass. We were quite...we, the church, the old church was replaced with the new church. That must have been in the '60s. But it was designed in...the altar was placed in the middle, not against the wall, but in the



middle, and so the priest would face the congregation when they consecrated communion. And the rail went almost in a semicircle, almost all the way around the altar.

And so even today, you know, because my mother and my father and sister were still part of that church when we had the funeral mass. The memorial service, the rosary and a lot of the work was done by the deacons. Not by the priest, but by the deacons. And so, you know, we had altar girls as well as—I mean, the church has altar girls as well as altar boys. So it was quite a liberal church.

I also used to go to the charismatic services at Loyola University, and so, you know, I was... my understanding of charisma and the charismatic movement was there, it was just different. And hearing the nuns sing in the spirit was just incredibly beautiful, so beautiful.

My first service at MCC, you know, I remember they were meeting at the Encore Theatre at the time, and I sat in the back, and I was kind of like I was a little nervous. It actually had taken me three weeks to go. The first three weeks I drove around and I was too afraid to go in. Finally the third week I said okay, it's now or never, park the car, and I went in and sat down in the back. And, you know, the beginning of the service was okay. They had a processional. They were in robes. And the opening hymn, I don't remember what it was, but I remember it was a tune I knew, so that was okay.

And then this guy in robes gets up to the pulpit and says if you love the Lord say amen, very loud, and then the congregation responded, and they shouted out amen, and I jumped. It wasn't—he wasn't the one that surprised me, it was the response of the congregation that surprised me because in the Catholic church that didn't happen. We don't do that.

But there was something there that captured me, and it was the...the sense of feeling home, a place where I was, like I said, you know, a place where people loved me for who I was. I didn't have to pretend to be somebody else. I could be Larry in all aspects of who Larry is. And they would love me like my dad said, no matter what. I want you to always remember that you're my son.

And over the period of time what I realized is that it was just my understanding of the spirit and the way the spirit works, between me and Pentecostals, was that it was just that amongst Pentecostals it was a little louder, that's all. The decibel level was different. But, you know, I believe, you know, hey, I was Roman Catholic, but I believe in miracles, you know, Lourdes, the Virgen de Guadalupe, you know. It's like those are things that, you know, you can't explain them in human terms, so how different is that from the Pentecostal movement? It's just that it's a little noisier.

And so that was...that was...it wasn't a big adjustment. It really wasn't. I could sense the spirit was there. It was not expressed in the way I was used

to, and that took a while to get, you know. Because the passion with which the people expressed their emotion was something that amazed me. Still does. And it's part of what I love about my church. It's passionate.

Obie H. So you went back the next week and the next week?

Larry R. Oh, yeah, and didn't stop going after that. That was it. And I remember, you know, my...like I said, I came out to my parents, and it's one thing—you know, it's a learning experience because what does that mean? It's like yeah, okay, they know that you're gay, but what does that all mean? And especially back, this is 1970, not today. But there were no models around. There was no PFLAG. You couldn't read about—there were no books written about this stuff. This didn't exist. And so in the beginning it was as if nothing had changed.

And I was a member of UCLA's Rally Committee. We did the card stunts for the football halftime shows. And I was very much involved in that. And so my parents had met some of my friends from school and they also had met some of my friends from church, but they didn't know which were which. And so it wasn't until I had my first love, and my mother knew I was going to another church, I wasn't going to Catholic church. My mother said is he one of those from that church? That was her...those were her words. And I said yes. And I said and if he's not welcome, I'm not either. And I remember we talked on the phone, and I hung up on her. And I didn't talk to my mom for about three months. And that was

unusual because we usually talked like once a day or if two days went by, that was unusual.

And then the Fourth of July was coming, and my mother—Fourth of July was...we lived in Monterey Park next to East L.A. Stadium, and they had a fireworks show, and so the whole neighborhood would go out and everyone would sit on the...put benches out on the sidewalk and we would watch the fireworks from there, and people would have their own fireworks, and, you know, people would do barbecues outside and everything else. It was a big event. And we'd always done it. We'd done that for years and years.

And so the Fourth of July was coming. So the phone rang. It was my mother. And she said what are you doing for the Fourth of July? And I said, well, I haven't decided anything. Nothing special. She said, well, you know we're having a barbecue, da-da-da-da, and you're welcome to come, and so is your friend. And that's what broke the ice.

In the end, my mother and Virgil—that was his name—were like two peas in a pod. I mean, they were—you know, even after Virgil and I broke up and we had a very...it was not a good breakup. And one time my mother asked me, how's Virgil doing? And I had just gotten into—I was so mad at him. And I said something, and my mom looked at me and she said, no matter what, he's a human being. And she was right. She was right. And it's something else when your mother tells you about your ex. You've got

to treat them like a human being. And so, you know, and with my husband today, it was so, you know, she loved him.

Parents have to come out, too, to the family. And I remember one time, I had one cousin who was gay that I know. I mean, I have more than one, but, I mean, this one. And his parents, he was the youngest of like six children, and when his parents got old, he was the one that was taking care of the parents, but his father really did—his father was really very homophobic. But he was still the only one of the children that was really always there for the parents.

And I came home one time and my mother was on the phone to his father, and my mother just lit into him and said, what kind of a Catholic do you call yourself? What kind of a father are you? He's your son. And I'm thinking go for it, Mom, go for it. You know, she was just...that's the way she was.

Obie H. Was that her brother?

Larry R. Pardon me?

Obie H. Was that her brother that she was speaking to?

Larry R. No-no-no. Let's see. Mexican families are so complicated. He's my cousin, but he's really not my cousin. I think he would be my great-cousin, would that be it? Yeah. So, you know, we don't make those kind of distinctions in Mexican families. It's like...it's like coming...my parents

coming out with one of my cousins, real cousins got married. He got married to a woman of Greek ancestry and they were married in St. Sofia's Church, which was, you know, it was wonderful, this melding of Mexican culture and Greek culture. It was fun.

And my husband Kees loves to go. He's ready for any kind of a party. So he went with me. And we're sitting at this table, and, you know, people come to my—so my mother was the oldest of her generation, so they would come to her, you know. Rather than her having to go to greet people, they always came to her. So every time somebody came around, she would introduce, you know, this is you know, and this is... And then she got to Kees—that's my husband—and she said and this is my other son.

And I, you know, she was...she hesitated because it's like he's more than a friend, you know, and so she just adopted him as her other son. She had to come out, too, to the family, you know? And so, you know, it's just like I was really blessed, fortunate to have the family that I did, which is why I miss them so much, you know? So that was my early life.

Obie H.           What activities did you participate in with MCC in those early days?

Larry R.           Well, let's see. It wasn't too long after that Troy said we need some help with ushers, and I figured I can do that. So I joined the usher staff. And that's still what I love to do. It's like you meet all the...you get to figure out who are the first time people and you try to make them feel at home. I

love it. We have a good usher staff. They're one of the...ushers and hospitality are two key areas in a church. And if you have good ushers and you have a good hospitality team, you've got it. They can make or break a church. So I was an usher. And later became a head usher.

And then I was...the person that was actually one of Troy's roommates when he started the church, he was the head of all the ushers, he left the church. And by that time Troy was no longer pastor. Lee Carlton had become pastor. And so Lee appointed me to—was it? No. Yeah. No, it was Troy. Troy was still pastor. Troy appointed me to take that place in charge of church services.

And it was funny because I didn't know that you had to be a member of the church to be in charge of one of the departments. I wasn't a member. I mean, membership classes were on Sunday, and we were always there early because we were on the road. We were still traveling in those days. And so we had to be there early to set everything up. I could never attend a membership class. And coming from a Catholic background, this concept of becoming a member, of joining, yeah, you don't do that. You're baptized, you are. I'm sure I'm still on the rolls of my parish church. So I just didn't do it.

And finally one day—this was after...this would have been after the church fire, and Lee Carlton was pastor, so this would have been in like '73, something like that, '72. They decided to have one, instead of the two

or three membership classes you had to go to, they were going to have one. They were going to do a special one, one long class on a Sunday morning. I said, well, I can take out one Sunday morning to go to class, so I did. And the person who was giving the membership class was surprised that I was not a member.

And then of course the next week they called the new members forward to be accepted in the congregation and I remember the look on Troy and Lee Carlton's face was just like, you're not a member? Everybody assumed I was. And so I became a member. I became a member years after I was very much involved in the church.

And then I was elected to the board—actually, I was appointed to the Board of Directors of the L.A. church in about '73. That's when we moved to 11<sup>th</sup> and Hill Street. That would have been about '73, '74, something like that. And I served on the Board of Directors for ten years through...that would have been Lee Carlton as pastor, Jim Sandmire as pastor, Jeri Ann Harvey as pastor.

And then when Jeri Ann Harvey resigned, I was appointed the worship coordinator, which was like kind of an interim pastor kind of thing, but as a layperson, so there was not an interim pastor, but as a layperson I was the worship coordinator during the time that we were searching for a new pastor, and when Nancy Wilson became the new pastor, so I served the



longest six months of my life. It was an experience to go through and I never want to have to go through it again. But I learned a lot.

And then a year later I was elected to the Board of Elders by the General Conference, so I served on the Board of Elders of the denomination for ten years, from '87 to '97. And then left there and came back to my home church because it's really, you know, my home church is where I am. And I went back to ushering, which is what I love.

And then I took a leave of absence there when I played for the choir for a while. You know how this works in church. Somebody comes up. There was a music director who found out that I could play the piano, and they had had problems with their accompanist, and it was about three months before Christmas, and they were getting ready for Christmas. You know how that kind of stuff is. And he asked me, could you play for us until Christmas? And I realized later he didn't say which Christmas, because I wound up doing it for the like next two years. And so after that happened, you know, I went back to ushering again.

And then I retired from teaching, and Kees, my husband, told me I want you to make a promise. I want you to take at least a year before you get involved in church. And that lasted three months. Because he knew what I would do. And so three months later one of the staff people, clergy staff people, was...she was pregnant and she was going to have a baby, and she was asking for help with doing the bulletin. Well, I did desktop

publishing. I mean, this is what I did for a living for years. And so I said I can do that. So yeah, I was going to help her out. Well, that went from three months, and I was doing it several years later. And so I got involved as one of the volunteer staff.

And right now I'm two things, the archives committee—two major things—the archives committee of the church and the creative worship team. So those are two things. And I play the organ on 9:00 service in the morning. I'm still on leave from the usher staff, and they remind me of that constantly, because I love ushering. And one thing about playing the organ, I don't get to talk to anybody. I'm busy before and they're all gone by the time I'm finished. But yeah. So here I am.

Obie H. Larry, you said that when you came out to your family, they said they were just afraid you'd get hurt, and you said you were.

Larry R. Yes.

Obie H. How were you hurt?

Larry R. Physically. Physically I was hurt. Kees I had gone to visit his family. Kees is Dutch. Born in Holland. Moved to the United States in '68 when he was in his late 20s. And we had gone to visit his family, and we were in Amsterdam, and we had gone to... This was 1994, the same year my dad had his stroke. Oh, excuse me, 1991. My dad had his first stroke in '91. The big one was in '94.

And we had gone to Amsterdam, and we had gone to one of the bars, and we were walking back to the hotel, and we were walking down one of the streets near a canal. It was dark and it was late. And as we were walking, there was nobody else on the street, and we came around a corner and then were going down another street, and it was dark. And these two guys passed us, and they said something to us, and I couldn't—it was in Dutch. But I didn't understand Dutch. But we walked past.

And we walked past, we kept on walking, and within a few seconds I heard glass breaking, and I heard something like a metal pipe. And so we both stopped and turned around. And the two guys, one of them had gotten a beer bottle that was on the street, broke it, and the other had a pipe that was laying—there was construction going on in one place and it was a pipe about so long.

Obie H. You've indicated about a foot and a half.

Larry R. Yeah, about a foot and a half. And Kees...you could only do this in Holland. Kees was—as we were looking back at them, Kees was on my right, and he reached over and picked up a bicycle that—*[laughs]*—and actually, you could only do this in Holland. And of course this bicycle, he picked up the bicycle to defend himself. And that's all I remember. I looked at him and I turned to my right to look at him, and the next thing I remember was Kees was pushing me up against the door of a bar that was closed and I was so sick. I just, I was...I thought I was going to throw up.

And Kees was pounding on the door, and the bar keeper had been cleaning up. And he let us in and Kees sat me at the bar, and I saw that I had blood all over my jacket and my shirt, and I felt so sick, I put my head on the bar, and I thought I was going to pass out. Well, the guy had thrown the pipe and it hit me in the back—well, across here, so... This crease in my ear, this part of my ear was just hanging by one piece. They had to stitch it back together. And they put four stitches in the back of my head. And because of that, I lost a lot of hearing in my ear. And the reason I was so—I thought I was going to die. I mean, I really did. The whole world was spinning, because it had damaged the inner ear. And... [*Pause.*]

And...I, you know, the paramedics came and they took me to the emergency room. And, you know, I didn't speak Dutch, and the doctor was...you know, Kees was my interpreter. And I remember...I remember Kees had to go to the bathroom so bad, and I said, don't leave me, don't leave me. I was afraid that if I were to fall asleep, I wouldn't wake up. I had no idea what was wrong with me. They didn't, I mean, they had... And I was alone in another country, and I didn't understand the language, and I felt so helpless.

And, you know, Kees, when I first met him, said that he was an atheist. And I knew that wasn't true. It was just he had gone to Catholic school in the Netherlands, and he was just very badly damaged from the Catholic church. Because he was different. He never fit in. And so he said, Larry, you have to pray. And I said, Kees, I can't. I was just trying to concentrate

on being there. And he said I don't know how. I said, yes you do. So he started to pray the most beautiful prayer.

And I remembered something. I was just afraid, when we went on the trip—I love to travel. I hate to fly. I don't like to get into a plane. And so I said God, you know, use this time for us to get together and get to know each other better and to get closer to each other. And God, let this be a time where we both will get closer to you.

And in that moment when Kees was praying, I realized Kees had suddenly jumped so much closer to God, and I knew whatever happened that God was with me right there at that moment, and everything was okay. I didn't know if I was going to live or if I was going to die, but it didn't matter because it was okay.

And it turns out I wasn't really in a life threatening situation. I mean, I was, because they didn't know whether I'd had a concussion or not, and the doctor said keep him here, but all we're going to do is observe him. And he stitched me up and patched me up. He said but all we're going to do is observe him. Or you can go back to your hotel. And he said you just have to, every hour you have to ask him his name and what date it is and all this other stuff. So I said I want to go back to the hotel. I didn't want to stay in the hospital.

So the paramedics took us back. And, you know, it's typical in Dutch hotels, if you stay in a Dutch hotel, not an American style, but a Dutch

hotel, the stairs are narrow, the hallways are narrow, and these two paramedics, they were two women, carried me up the stairs and into my room. And I didn't know—I couldn't open my eyes, though, because if I opened my eyes everything was spinning and I thought I was going to throw up. If I kept my eyes closed I was okay.

But I could hear them talking in Dutch, and to me, in my mind, they were two lesbians. And Kees said I think they were, too. They carried me up. They knew what happened. And they were so gentle with me. God sent me angels to take care of me and put me back in the room.

And so I've lost, you know, about 40% of hearing in my left ear, which is why sometimes I go like this because I can't really...I can tell where I can hear some things, but I can't understand it, so I really have to concentrate. So when I get asked to play the piano or the organ, I say, boy, you're really in bad shape—*[laughs]*—I can't...if you've got to get somebody who's half deaf to play the organ or piano.

So yeah, I was hurt. That was the physical thing. And emotionally lots. Well, you know, we've all been in the struggle, you know. It wasn't just about... Because of my being in MCC, being gay or lesbian was not the issue within my church. That wasn't a problem. But I'm also Latino and I'm a person of color, and that's a whole other issue. *[Phone rings.]* I've got to see who this... Oh, okay, there. Quiet. And when I was elected to the Board of Elders, I was the second layperson. The first person was not

my role model because he actually resigned the position before his term was complete and left the denomination.

But to kind of explain those things, when I was... The occasion of my election to the Board of Elders, it was a time when they would accept nominations from the floor to the Board of Elders, and there were 29 people nominated for four positions. Twenty-eight of them were clergy. I was the only layperson nominated. And to understand the polity at that time, because it's changed since, the Board of Elders were like the College of Cardinals, because we elected the Moderator, we elected the Pope. And so this was a big thing.

And I was elected. It took four ballots. And suddenly it was like okay, all the issues of being a Latino, being a person of color, being a layperson in a position that's traditionally a clergy position all came to the front. And that was hard. That was really, really, really hard. And my first—I may talk about it some other time during this conference—but my first district conference as an elder was actually here in St. Louis. And I'm thinking, gosh, is this coincidence or not that here we're in St. Louis. And I came and I arrived, you know, and it was like I'm the newbie elder, right?

It first presented itself to me when, at the end of the General Conference when I was elected, they had to hand me some cards because I was not even a voting member of the General Conference. I was the chair of the bylaws committee. I had a voice but I didn't have a vote. So I didn't need

the voting cards. And they gave me the cards and I'm thinking which one is which. I hadn't paid attention because I couldn't vote until the very end.

And then Troy, at the end of the session, said I'd like all the elders to come up to the podium because I want to talk to you about tomorrow's service. I went up there, you know, and I said I'm now one of those, so I went up there. And he starts giving instructions because the next day they were going to install the, as we call it, install the new elders, and they wanted all the elders to be there. And he said I want all the elders to vest. And my first question is so what do I wear? I don't have vestments.

And that next morning I looked in my closet and I said, well, thank goodness I had brought a sports coat with me. And so I put on the coat and I put on a tie and I went downstairs. And I'm walking into the grand ballroom where everyone is getting vested, and they had all of these, you know, these people, they had all these ruffles and flourishes. I mean, I thought the people with little ruffled collars, it's like where did they get all this stuff? Because it was the big show. I mean, this was, for some people this is the only time they could really ever wear this stuff.

And so there were all these people, all the clergy were in this grand ballroom. There must have been about 150 of them or so, I don't know. And there were people helping them get dressed, right? And I'm walking in and I'm thinking... And I walked by two old friends, LaPaula Turner and Sandy Robinson, two African American women. And they looked at



me and said you don't have a stole. And I said, no, I've never needed one. And they gave me this rainbow ribbon. It was about five feet long. And I put that on.

And all I could think was that, you know, God oftentimes... I'm a real control person. I like to know where the left foot is going to go before the left foot even leaves the ground. I say to God, okay, God, I can do Plan A or Plan B or Plan C; which one of these do you want? And God says no, I want this one way over here. And what I've learned is sometimes you don't have all the answers. God just says go and you go. And that's what I did. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I went.

And in St. Louis... So I come to this conference in St. Louis, and I arrived Friday. It started Friday night. And Friday night they had, which is standard for most district conferences—I don't know what denomination you came from.

Obie H. I'm Lutheran, ELCA Lutheran.

Larry R. So you have your regional meetings. This was our district conference, and it was the Mid Central District, and it was in St. Louis. And so I arrive at the hotel, and I check in, and I get going, and look at the program, and there's a meeting for the clergy and there's a meeting for the laypeople. And the clergy, in the program it said this meeting is open to clergy only. I said okay, well I don't go there. And it said there's a meeting for lay house that's open to everybody, so I went to the lay house meeting. I was a

layperson. So I went to the lay house. And oh, they were so excited. No elder had ever joined their meeting. And we talked lay stuff, you know.

And the next morning I get up and go down to the lobby for breakfast, and I get read by several people, why didn't I go to the clergy meeting? And I said, well, I'm not a clergyperson. Yes, but you're an elder. I said, yeah, but I'm not a clergyperson. And it said very specifically this meeting is only open to clergy. Well, you should have been there. I said, but it says that it's only open to clergy, and I'm not a clergyperson, so I went to the lay house.

Then they had the business meeting. And, you know, I'm an observer. I'm an elder, and in our denomination if you're a clergyperson you have a vote in the clergy house. It doesn't matter where you are, you have a vote in the clergy house. But I wasn't a clergyperson. And I'm a layperson, so I can have...I was not a lay delegate, so I couldn't sit in the lay house. So I sat in the back on the lay side as an observer. That was fine with me. I was perfectly content to be just an observer because that was my role anyway as an elder. I mean, I don't have, jurisdiction over a district. That was the district coordinator's job, who would be like a bishop of that area.

And so they get down the middle, and they're getting towards the end of the meeting and they're doing the proposals for bylaw changes to the denomination bylaws. And somebody from the clergy house gets up and they make a motion to amend the bylaws so that they would read that

elders could only be clergy, ordained clergy, not just licensed. Not just licensed or ordained, but you had to be an ordained clergy, and that was the proposal.

And I'm sitting there, and from where I was, I remember Sam Rape, love him dearly. He was a layperson on the committee. He was sitting in the front. All of a sudden I thought he was going to leap over the table and attack the person that made the motion. He just turned beet red. And, I mean, it was, you could tell, one house against the other. I mean, it was just arguing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. So they took the vote. It passed in the clergy house, it failed in the lay house, and so therefore it failed.

And then that evening they were having some kind of a celebration at one of the local bars. And I knew the person that had made the motion in the clergy house to do this. And he said, do you have a ride to this gathering? I said, I have a car. Because I had rented a car. I'm from California, Los Angeles, we're born with cars, right? Yeah, I never used to go anywhere without a car. So he said, can I get a ride with you? And I said sure, sure.

So we went, and on the way he was...we actually spent most of the evening talking. And he was trying to be so apologetic to me. You know, it was like this wasn't about me personally, don't take it personally. This was about his own theological beliefs. And he said I'm an ordained clergy in MCC, but I really count my first ordination in the church that he

originally came from, denomination he came from, as that was my real ordination. Because I knew who laid hands on me and I knew who laid hands on that person who ordained me, and it goes back.

And I'm thinking he's talking about apostolic succession. And it's like, you know, I come from a Roman Catholic background. I know what that stuff is. And so I said to him, you know, it's amazing when you come into MCC that we bring all these traditions and customs from our former background into MCC, but sometimes it's good and sometimes it really trips us up.

We have to be very careful about how we handle that stuff because from my tradition, from my background, your church is a bastard church. That's what I said. Your church is a bastard church and you have no claim to ordination by who laid hands on you because we go back to Peter. So if I'm going to accept you as a clergyperson, I have to let go of that background I came in with, so maybe you need to let go of that, too.

It was also about that time that one of my mentors, Jim Sandmire, I loved him dearly. I don't know if you ever... He was the pastor of the church for too short of a time of our church. But originally from San Francisco, and he was on the Board of Elders. And when he passed, they had the memorial service at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. And all the elders were there. I went. I didn't go because I was an elder. I went because Jim was one of the people that said to me, "Larry, you can do more than

usher.” He saw something in me that I—I was very content just being an usher, but he said you can do more than that and I’m going to teach you. He was one of those mentors to me. And he was so proud of me when I was elected to the Board of Elders.

So we had been told to gather in this room behind, and I’m going to call him the—see, I don’t know what Grace is, what, Episcopal, Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. I think it’s Episcopal. But it’s a big, Gothic style church and all the rest of it, a big building with a high altar, those huge candlesticks and all. I mean, this is done right.

And so we were in this room in the corner, and I’m going to call him the traffic director. He was the one that was going to tell everybody where, because there were different people from different denominations there. And of course, you know, because Jim had worked a lot in the ecumenical movement. And telling everybody where they’re going to go, and said the laypeople here, they’re going to be here, and the clergy people. And I looked over at Troy and I said okay, Troy, where do I stand? And Troy says, you’re a bishop. You can stand with us.

Oh, I didn’t finish the story about the—and I’m going to end this whole thing with this last thing. Because what happened at St. Louis, after that meeting with this person that had made that motion, that was Saturday night. Sunday morning they’re going to have the closing service. And I

had been asked to bring greetings from the denomination to all the people, and I can do that.

And so I got up and I got dressed, and I got there early at the church. And at that time they were meeting in a former Catholic church, so it was very Catholic inside looking. Old style Catholic. And so I got there and there weren't a lot of people inside the church yet, so I went and I sat in the second row. I figured when it's time for me to do my thing, I'll just get up and do my thing and I'll come back, right? I mean, it makes sense to me.

So I'm sitting there and I'm just kind of looking at things, and I'm all by myself. And somebody comes up from behind me, taps me on the shoulder, and says they want you downstairs. So I said okay. So I went downstairs. All the clergy are downstairs. They're getting dressed, again with all of these ruffles. And I believe it was in May and it was hot, and the place was not air conditioned, and people were dripping in sweat. But they were putting on all these robes.

Which to me, that makes no sense. I mean, it's a European tradition. That's where it comes from. And it's not from Jesus. I mean, Jesus wouldn't have worn all that stuff. We like to say it is, but it isn't. And it makes sense in the cathedrals in Europe when it's cold. I mean, chasubles and cloaks, I mean, those things, it keeps you warm, because cathedrals were not heated, the churches were not heated. But it doesn't make sense in St. Louis in May. It was like 90 degrees and humidity.

So they're all getting dressed up, and I went down there, and they said, well, you have to be part of the procession. I said I can just sit in the second row and I'll come up and do my thing and I'll go back and sit down. This is your conference. And then they got into an argument as to where I was going to process. Some said I had to be in the front because I was a layperson. I would process with the deacons and all the other laypeople that were part of the service. And others said no, no, he's got to be in the back because he's a visiting elder. And I was thinking oh gosh, people, you know, what's wrong with you? I don't care. I'll sit in the second row.

So they had this long... And finally they decided that I would walk in side by side with the district coordinator, we would walk in together. So okay, we line up outside the church, and the sun is beginning to come and really beat down on them, and they're all dripping wet. And I'm hot, too, because I had a sport coat on. And so then the opening hymn starts. One of my favorite tunes, "All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall, bring forth the royal diadem and crown Christ ruler of all." And somebody said remember this moment. Because here they were arguing about who was going to go first, and who was going to go last, and all these positions about rank. And the hymn that they were singing was let the angels fall down. It's like the traditions that we bring...

And what I realized is that me being a layperson, a Latino, a person of color in a denomination that was predominantly white, and all the things

that had brought, the traditions of what church meant and what clergy meant, and what lay meant, and all the rest of that stuff, I was like the stick-in-the-mud saying, but this is the way we're supposed to be. And so in that sense yeah, that's how I got hurt.

And I served for ten years. And at the end of ten years I could have probably been elected for another four years, but the truth was I needed to take a break. If I hadn't left, I probably would have done what my predecessor had done and left the denomination because it was so hard to always be carrying that...what's the word I want to use? That mantle. And so I am thankful for the ten years that I did serve on the Board of Elders. I saw some amazing things. The people were...

If you can get past all the politics and all the other stuff in the church, it's the people of God, the laos. Amazing. We have gathered here, like at this conference, we have gathered here. We have just a few of the leaders. But this movement wouldn't even be where it is today if it wasn't for all the countless thousands of people who are unnamed that made it happen.

We're just a piece of it.

And it's amazing to see... I remember going to a small little group in Visalia, California. Visalia is probably one of the most homophobic areas of California that you can imagine. It's in the Central Valley. And this group had no place to meet, so they met out in the park. And for a group to meet out in the open, where people could see who they were, in that place



and that time, those were amazing people, to take that risk just to be able to worship God. It's incredible. Incredible people. That I'm thankful for. The other church stuff, eh. But that I'm thankful for.

Obie H. Larry, let's close with telling us about your husband and your marriage.

Larry R. Oh. I'm going to tell the whole truth, because, I mean, this is...now you've got me started I might as well. You took me places I was not intending on going. After I broke up with my first lover—we were together eight years—and it was really dead after the second year, third year. And a big part of it was that I'm Latino, I'm a person of color. He was white. He was from Texas. He thought of himself as being liberal. I grew up in California, raised in Los Angeles, and my first trip with him to visit his family in Prairie Lea, Texas, and hearing people talk, the language that they use, it's like I had to bite my tongue to respond.

And we went to the...he took me to the Alamo. Wrong thing to do. He took me to the Alamo. We went to San Antonio and he took me to the Alamo. And I'll never forget this scene. There was this little old lady—and I'll describe it that way—little old lady, she was one of the Daughters of the Texas Revolution, sitting in a red, white and blue outfit, sitting under this huge portrait of Samuel Houston, and it said on the plaque, and I read it out loud, this building, museum, is dedicated to the men who fought for freedom. I read it out loud and I said bullshit. Because I learned the history of what we call, the U.S. calls the Southwest from the Mexican

perspective, that it was, you know. We won't go there. That's a whole other story. And Virgil rushed me out of the place before I got attacked.

And so when we broke up I said I will never date another white man again. I mean, that was...it's too hard. It was too hard. It's just like there were too many... So who did I wind up with? You can't get much more white than a Dutch man. But he was different. And it was because he was an immigrant. He understood what it meant to be an immigrant. He was not an American.

And there's only 14 million Dutch. There aren't a lot of them. And there's some sayings about them. You can tell a Dutch person anything, but not much. I mean, they're very highly opinionated people and all the rest of the stuff, but they also recognize that the world doesn't revolve around them. They travel everywhere because they're bored with their own country. Fourteen million people, that's smaller than Southern California.

And so he... I fell in love with him, and we fell in love with each other. We've been together for...it'll be 37 years in February. And he was a part of my family. He was out to his family, so I was...I love his sister. She comes and visits us at least once a year and we go visit her at least once a year. All of his family in Holland, it's like this isn't an issue. It's not an issue. And for him in my family it was never an issue. This is the thing about Mexican families, and the good thing is that whether you like it or not, you marry into the family, you're part of the family.

And we got married in 2008, in that break right after the California Supreme Court said that it was legal and before Prop 8 was passed. And so we got married in that window. And then of course we didn't know whether it was legal or not because of all the other stuff. And then finally it was.

Kees, when I met him, was working for Continental Airlines, and he loved to travel. And so anywhere I went, he went. And we went lots of places because the Dutch, that's what they do. They go all over the place. So we visited his cousin in New Zealand, and went to Sydney. I remember our first trip to Mexico City. Kees loved Mexico City, but can't handle the altitude.

And he...it was...when I was looking for my first Virgil, my first, I'll put it love, partner, whatever, I had said okay, I'm looking for this, this, and this and this, somebody that's going to be as involved in the church as I am. Well, that was a mistake. That didn't work out. And so when I broke up with Virgil I said okay, God, this time I'm going to let you chose. And God chose the right person. He had broken up, Kees had broken up from a bad relationship. I had broken up from a not good relationship. When we met we were not looking for a relationship, we just wanted to have fun. And 36, almost 37 years later we're still having fun.

We both retired about a few months from each other, about the same time, and it's like... This is the first time we haven't traveled together in

decades because we always go together. And I miss him. I do. I mean, I do. So he's...every day I thank God that God brought us together and keeps us together. Wish you could meet him. Hopefully you'll meet him sometime. He is a trip. *[Laughs.]* I love him.

You know, he never surprises me. I mean, it's like what he does, he's the kind of person... I'm very much...you see me today I will be the same tomorrow. Kees is the opposite. He's very spontaneous. So I come home and the furniture is rearranged, or there's a new refrigerator, or the walls have been painted. It's like, okay, I shouldn't have left you for so long by yourself. That's Kees. And I love him. He keeps me from getting stale. And so I don't know what else to say.

Obie H.        You've said a lot.

Larry R.        I know. My gosh. You are very good at this, you know?

Obie H.        Thank you.

Larry R.        Shall we end it?

Obie H.        Sure.

*[End of recording.]*