Oral History Interview: Leo Treadway 1

Interviewee: Leo Treadway

Interviewer: Obie Holmen

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Obie H. This is Obie Holmen. Today is November 10, 2017. I am at St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Leo Treadway is here with me and we are going to do an oral history and listen to Leo's story. Leo, where were you born and raised?

Leo T. Well, I was born in Enid, Oklahoma and lived there for about three and a half years until my father came home from the Second World War. Then my parents and now also myself returned to New Jersey, where my dad had been employed for DuPont. DuPont had held his job for him, kept all the raises he would normally have gotten, and he came back and job-wise it was as though he had never left. But I grew up in South Jersey, about 20 miles southeast of Philadelphia, so Philadelphia was the big city for us.

Obie H. Do you have siblings?

Leo T. I do. One sister who works at Disneyland and is probably the oldest and longest serving performer at Disneyland.

Obie H. Did you go to high school then in South Jersey?

Leo T. Yes, Woodbury Senior High School. From there went to the University of Delaware, completed my freshman year. My dad and I had a difference of

opinion about what I should be pursuing. At the time I had thought I wanted to be a chemical engineer because most boys followed in their father's footsteps, and so I was going to be a chemical engineer since he was, until I found out what that really was, and then thought heck no, I'm not interested in this.

So we settled our dispute by my going into the Army for three years, enlisting. I spent the first two years here in the U.S. and then my last year I was in Vietnam. That was 1974 to '75. It was very early in the war.

Obie H. You must mean '64, '65.

Leo T. Yes, '64, '65, sorry.

Obie H. Where were you in Vietnam?

Leo T. I was stationed in Saigon, at General Westmoreland's headquarters. I worked for another general, General DePuy. He was in charge of operations for the theater.

Obie H. So you were in the Army.

Leo T. I was in the Army.

Obie H. What was your MOS? What did you do over there?

Leo T. I was a combat medic and had originally been assigned to Vietnam to be like a visiting nurse, if you remember back years ago when they used to have those who would come around to people's homes. I would have a

position similar to that and I would be going from village to village and doing first aid and teaching public health kinds of stuff. Well, they canceled the program actually during my flight, and so I got over there and of course couldn't go to that assignment.

And so they were looking at what my skill set was and discovered that when I had… In my last duty assignment, which was an evacuation hospital, I had been the hospital commander's secretary, and so I had learned shorthand in order to get that position, but never had to use it. So General DePuy's office was looking for a stenographer, and I ended up there, and then had to explain that I didn't know shorthand anymore.

Obie H. Did you watch the recent Ken Burns "Vietnam?"

Leo T. Oh, yes.

Obie H. I did as well. I was an Army Ranger in '69 and '70 doing reconnaissance work in the Central Highlands, so yeah, I watched those with tremendous interest.

Leo T. I found them very interesting. There were things that I didn't know, things that I suspected, but didn't quite know. One of the episodes was about almost exactly the time period I was there and so it was interesting to see that. I arrived right after the assassination of their president and left just as they were beginning the big troop buildup. When I was there we were all assigned one by one.

Obie H. At that point you're not out?

Leo T. Oh, heavens no.

Obie H. Not out to yourself?

Leo T. Well, I was out to myself, but going into the military represented kind of a crisis of conscience for me. Not because I had compunction about serving in the military, because everybody did at that point, but because when I went through the initial induction and the medical exam and all that kind of stuff and they asked me the question about homosexuality, I had to say no, and that was the first time that I ever had to lie to the government. And, I mean, I grew up a good little Presbyterian boy. And church and government were things you were taught to respect, and so lying was… But I knew what the consequences were if I told the truth, so I kind of went through my military service carefully guarding that secret of who I was.

Obie H. When did you come out to yourself? When did you become aware of your sexuality?

Leo T. In the early '70s. Unfortunately—

Obie H. '60s again? Early '60s?

Leo T. No, '70s.

Obie H. Okay, that would have been after Vietnam.

Leo T. Right.

Obie H. Oh, okay.

Leo T. So I came back from Vietnam using the GI Bill, went to college. Met a woman that I fell in love with, and we were moving gradually towards marriage. And I came out to her and told her I thought I was a homosexual, and tearful scene with both of us. We decided…we believed that old notion that you find the right woman and you're cured. So we went ahead. That was a foolish mistake on both our parts, but I think we were in love and believed that silly notion.

Early into the marriage I knew that this was not going to work and so I decided that I really needed to come out to her fully. I needed to tell her that because I loved her I didn't think we could stay married. It wasn't fair to her, it wasn't fair to me. We'd end up hating each other, and neither of us needed that.

So I started looking around. I knew that I wanted to move to an urban area because that's where gay communities were, at least the ones I'd heard about. So I checked out several cities. Liked what I saw, generally, but nothing really grabbed me. And a friend suggested have you thought about the Twin Cities? And I said, well, no, where are they? That's how informed I was geographically. So he made arrangements for me to come up here and stay with some friends and sort of look around.

Well, the experience of being here was wonderful in and of itself, but it was the experience of getting off the plane that decided me on staying here. This was back when the planes would land and they'd wheel stairs up to the plane and you'd come down the stairs and walk across the tarmac.

I was getting off the plane. I stepped out of the door and was engulfed in this feeling like I had been gone for a very long time, but I had come back home, which made no sense to me. I didn't think I'd ever been here before. I had been here, as it turned out, for a fraternity convention, but that didn't put itself in my mind. I had no family up here, nothing that would explain why I would have this feeling. At the end of this long weekend I decided that whatever that was, perhaps I should trust that, and decided to come here.

Obie H. Let's put a time frame on this, on some of these events. When were you married?

Leo T. Married in '71.

Obie H. And divorced?

Leo T. We separated in '73. In '74 was when I came up here to look around. '75 was when I moved here.

Obie H. Okay. You said you were raised as a good Presbyterian boy. Tell us about your church experience.

Leo T. Well, first of all, there's no bad Presbyterians.

Obie H. [*Laughs.*]

Leo T. When my parents had moved to Woodbury Heights, which was this little community in New Jersey, my father and mother agreed that they would attend the local church as long as it was not Catholic. Otherwise, as long as it was Protestant, they would choose. Well, there were only two choices. One was a very small Episcopalian congregation and the other was a Presbyterian church, and that and a Catholic church in town were sort of the churches. So we became Presbyterians. We might easily have become Methodists if things had been different.

So my dad…the whole family became very active in the life of the church. In fact the church practically became our life. My mother taught Sunday School for years. My dad taught the adult Bible class for years, including some people who started out as young adults and finally gave up as much older adults.

But he taught all those years. He was the Clerk of Session. I can't ever remember there being anyone else who was Clerk of Session. So we were deeply involved. He led the campaign to build the new educational building which was built on this little early 20th century structure and then they built a new sanctuary building, and he was a leader in that.

All that time the secret was in the background of my mind, but I didn't really admit what it was. It was just, you know, I liked playing around

with other boys in my school and things. Thought I would grow out of it. Thought I would grow out of it at several different points, but didn't. So I don't know that my being active in the church had any connection with my growing awareness of what I would see as sexual identity. It was so completely closed off. It was over here and then the rest of my life was over here, involved with school, and church, and Boy Scouts.

Obie H. All right, so now you landed in Minneapolis in '74 at what today is referred to as MSP, Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport.

Leo T. Right.

Obie H. Probably back then was still Walt Chamberlain Field. May have been.

Leo T. I think it might have been. There were a couple of events prior to that that I'd like to talk about just briefly. The first one was an African American family moved into our little town. Next to our little town was a very small…it wasn't exactly a slum, but it was pretty close to it. That was where African American people generally lived. And even if they happened to live in Woodbury Heights, the focus of their lives was New Sharon, which was this little community.

Well, this family, the Flippins, moved into Woodbury Heights, and their decision was to send their son and daughter to our school. We only had one school in Woodbury Heights, elementary school. And my dad, who had served in World War II and had been the commanding officer for an African American company, engineers who went around building bridges,

so he had had a fair amount of experience living with and working with African American men. He stood up for them and fought that they had a right to go to our school and participate in the life of our community.

And I remember he sat me down and told me about all this. I was maybe ten at the time. And I didn't know anything about racism. I don't think I even knew much about African American people. But he told me they had a son, Artie, and Artie would be in my class, and I was to treat him like I would treat everybody else, which I did. I couldn't quite understand why my dad was making such a big deal out of this because the treatment of African Americans at that time was just sort of outside of my realm of knowledge or understanding.

Then Artie wanted to join Boy Scouts and my dad took up the challenge again. So Artie became the first African American Boy Scout in our troop. As I've looked back on my life, that was one of the key events which I think set me on a course for social activism or social justice is maybe a better description of it, because what my dad was doing just seemed to be the right thing. Never questioned that there was anything wrong with this. I just couldn't understand why it was such a big deal.

The next event happened after I had returned from Vietnam. I was back in college now at the University of Delaware, and I was old enough that I could become a senior floor advisor in one of the dorms, so I was doing that and got room and board as a result. And there were two young men

who lived on that floor, both involved with the Lutheran campus ministry. And so they kind of drug me begrudgingly into a project that they were doing, which was they were building their own student center. There was a retired gentleman who had been a contractor and he took care of all the stuff, and we did the things we could do. And so Saturday mornings we were up early on the roof pounding nails and shingles and having people yell stuff at us from the dorm because it was right across the street from the dorm.

And I was connected with them, and I was kind of involved in their activity, but I was going to church at the big First Presbyterian Church in Newark, Delaware. Became friends with a couple who, in many ways, were sort of an older version of my parents. He was the Clerk of Session and had been for years, both taught Sunday School and were active in church. And then this event came along.

I had never connected with the Westminster Foundation, which was for Presbyterian students at the University of Delaware, because the first time I went we sat and waited and waited and waited for the pastor to show up, and he didn't, and finally a call came through he wouldn't be there, so there was no program for the night, and the reason he wouldn't be there is because he was in jail. It turned out he was in jail because he'd participated in a civil rights demonstration. We didn't exactly know that at the time. Anyway, that sort of soured my interest in participating there, and so my life was—

Obie H. Not because of the protest from the pastor, but simply because it seemed to you to be poorly organized?

Leo T. Yeah. It just didn't seem like whatever my needs were that they would be met there. But they were being met by this very friendly group of Lutheran students and they actually became my circle of friends. And my church needs then were met by the Presbyterian church.

So a couple years later there had been growing discontent with this campus minister and the local church tried to have him removed. And so my friends, the couple, the older gentleman, Clerk of Session and his wife talked with me and asked me if I would be willing to appear and give some testimony about what I had or had not received in terms of ministry from this individual. Because at the time it was pretty clear to me and pretty clear to them that I didn't even go there because I was not likely to receive anything. So that was sort of to be my message.

And I started agonizing over this because there was something about this that just seemed wrong, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. One Saturday morning I went over with these two guys to do some work on the house and there was a meeting of Lutheran campus pastors from the area. And one of them, I don't know how I picked him out, he just seemed to be the person I could talk to about this. And so I explained my dilemma because I knew that my testimony would sort of put the final nail in this minister's coffin and he'd be removed. And the advice he gave me was

you will know exactly what you should do, which wasn't quite the answer I was looking for.

But finally I decided that yes, I did know exactly what to do. And the cost of it was what was making me so anxious, because I would, in a sense, be betraying this older couple. So the day came and I went in to testify, and the short version, my testimony was yes, I agree with what you probably heard. I have never received anything from this campus minister. I've never participated or known there were any programs to be involved in. So in terms of my need as a Presbyterian student, I've received nothing from him. But he was ministering to a group of students that everybody else was somewhere between ignoring and wished they would go away, and these were largely students connected with SDS. And so while other—

Obie H. Students for a Democratic Society, a leftist antiwar movement of the day.

Leo T. Right. Other campus ministries were not focused on justice issues maybe at all. His was. And so if I had been able to put the pieces together earlier I would have seen that this was what he was involved in, these civil rights demonstrations and antiwar protests and things like that. Well, without wanting to give myself too much credit, that testimony which was to seal his fate did in fact seal his fate, and the presbytery committee decided that he should be retained, that in fact he was providing a ministry. It wasn't what they necessarily had expected, but it was key and at this time and place he was the man that should be there.

That created a lot of tension then between this older couple and myself, and even though we continued to be cordial and I continued to be involved with the Presbyterian church, the relationship was never the same. But it was then, the first time that I think I had really taken a stand for a justice issue and paid the cost, and had convinced myself that's what I should be doing. So both that and the earlier experience around my dad's support for this African American family I think had a major shaping influence on the rest of my life.

Obie H. All right, so married in '71, separated in '74, came to Minneapolis-St. Paul in '74 to get a feel for the community, and you liked it, and you came back in '75.

Leo T. Well, I had this experience. I liked the community, but I had this kind of strange experience in the doorway of the plane.

Obie H. Right. Now, in 1974 here in St. Paul Lutherans Concerned for Gay People was formed, and I believe you became active in that group fairly soon after that formation.

Leo T. I became active in Lutherans Concerned for Gay People while I was still living in Indiana, Pennsylvania. I had seen the ad that they had run in "The Lutheran." I couldn't believe that "The Lutheran" would publish something like that, but they did. So I made contact, and this is all before I moved here. They asked me if I would be willing to attend the ALC Assembly of Congregations in Detroit, and another person and I did. That

was my first experience with trying to interact with the larger church around homosexuality. And that was more than disappointing.

Obie H. Elaborate, please.

Leo T. Well, the ALC office, which was in downtown Minneapolis, had agreed to ship our one box of educational materials. That box was "lost" for about three days into the assembly before somebody "found" it. [*Laughs.*] Finally they found it and so we put our stuff out. And a few people came by, and we talked with them, but it was not a very large success. It didn't have at least a lot of demonstrable impact. It was the first time that homosexual Lutherans had shown up and attempted to raise an issue.

At the same time, Rick Huskey, who I think you know, was living here in the Twin Cities and was on track to be ordained as an elder in the annual conference of the United Methodist Church in Minnesota. And what happened to him I thought was absolutely despicable. The division that was in charge of certifying candidates to move forward or not to certify them decided not to certify him because he was openly identified as homosexual, and that was part of their report. And then the report was given to the entire assembly.

And you've been to church conventions, so you know how many of these things. You get a binder like that, and trying to read it all, even in preparation for upcoming action, was a formidable task. And so most people had not read it because it was just buried in the report. And so the

annual assembly here in Minnesota was about to remove him from the process in a hidden fashion, and we thought that was reprehensible. So Rick and I put calls out to…

Leo T. So Rick and I decided we would call some friends, GLBT friends in the faith community here in the Twin Cities. They came down, several carloads of them, and we attended the ordination event, which was at the chapel, Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter. And our plan was not to be disruptive and not to create a bad scene. But what we did when they went through the worship service and then got to the point where they were going to do the ordination piece, Rick stood up, walked up facing the altar, so it was an elevated altar, and the rest of us moved out to the aisles that people would take to get up to that area. And so we created this kind of blockage where people had to climb over us or around us, or over pews to get up, the ones who were to be ordained.

And we had previously passed out something to people—most people took our little flyers, some didn't—that explained that we were going to do something. It didn't explain exactly what we were going to do. That was really the first action, kind of political action that I had done around homosexuality. And it seemed a more appropriate way for interacting with the church than the experience we'd had in Detroit with ALC.

Obie H. Was Gene Leggett there at that time, do you recall?

Leo T. I don't recall that he was there, no. I remember his name and that Rick had talked with him frequently, but I don't think he was at the event.

Obie H. What year would that have been? Was that '74 or '75?

Leo T. Well, I came up to visit in '74, I moved here in '75, so it would have been fall of '75.

Obie H. Okay, all right. When did you first come in contact with St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran?

Leo T. I didn't. They came in contact with me.

Obie H. Tell us about that.

Leo T. By this point Anita Bryant had come to town. St. Paul, because it had an ordinance protecting sexual orientation, this was one of her target cities to create a movement to get that repudiated. So we had demonstrated against her. But in the meantime she had found a Baptist pastor here who took up the challenge, and he created Citizens Alert for Morality, CAM. And those of us who created a project to try and maintain the ordinance, St. Paul Citizens for Human Rights was the name of that.

And a friend of mine, actually my boyfriend at the time, he and I, because everybody knew we were church guys, asked us if we would contact pastors and try and get support, letters of support or an endorsement or something. In the process of trying to figure out how that would even be workable and whether we could reach critical mass, Roger Mackey, from

St. Paul-Reformation—it had just become St. Paul-Reformation—made contact with us and said his congregation wanted to support the maintenance of the ordinance and was there anything he and his congregation could do. And so that put St. Paul-Reformation on my radar.

Obie H. Up until then you were a church guy, and where was your church activity? How did people know you were a church guy?

Leo T. Well, I was actively involved with Lutherans Concerned, and had some leadership with the local chapter, and we were bouncing around from church to church trying to find a place to settle in. Eventually that became St. Paul-Reformation, but that was a couple years later.

I think people knew that Craig and I were church related because we would talk about it. I mean, as it seemed appropriate we would mention, well, we talked with Integrity, and Integrity's willing to support this, or because he was Episcopalian and I was Lutheran, Lutherans Concerned talked about this. So it was no particular secret that we were involved in the faith communities. So we were given this task. Everybody else basically believed that churches were the enemy.

Obie H. Tell us about your own experience bouncing around from one Lutheran church to another for a couple of years before you settled at St. Paul-Ref.

Leo T. Initially we had found a home of sorts in the Minneapolis campus, the Lutheran campus ministry. And then there was some shuffling around and that program closed down or was combined with others. Anyway, the

geographic location we had disappeared. I think we met at the other Lutheran site for a while, but they finally figured out who we were. And then we ended up over at the St. Paul campus ministry center for the St. Paul campus and we met there for a number of years.

Mostly, as we sort of moved around, we found individuals, pastors who either were gay themselves or allies who would try to help us, because finding a home where we could provide support for other gay and lesbian people was an important thing for us to do. We were at Grace University Lutheran for a while, largely because of Verlyn Smith. But then around ’75, ’76 we approached the church here and they said they would allow Lutherans Concerned to meet here. By then I was in the process of attending regularly. Did not become a member until 1980.

So the struggle was always trying to find a place to meet. And we’d find one, and we’d be there for a little while, and then we’d have to move. And then trying to figure out how to get the word out to people. You know, this was back when you could use the telephone or you could put a notice in the gay community paper, but it wasn’t as easy connecting with people back then as it would be today. So it was just continual disruption until we got here and then settled in here for a number of years.

Obie H. And that was the late ‘70s?

Leo T. Yeah.

Obie H. I believe the first national convention of Lutherans Concerned was maybe in ’78. Does that sound right? Were you involved with that?

Leo T. There was one in, I think, Wisconsin. That might have been ’78. Because then there was one here in this church in 1980 or ’82. I’m a little fuzzy on the dates.

Obie H. Around that time, ’80, ’82, you became involved in national leadership within Lutherans Concerned as well, did you not?

Leo T. Yeah.

Obie H. Tell us about that.

Leo T. The assembly that was held, I think, in Wisconsin was unfortunately, I think, aptly described as a showdown. The people who had been the initial core that had participated in the Discovering Ministry event that Pastor Jim Siefkes held, were effectively running the organization, and everything was going through a small number of people. There was no real board. It was a little bit ad hoc-ish. And so lots of things were falling between the cracks.

And as numbers grew, particularly here, we decided that these things needed to change. We needed to get set up as an organization and we needed to have a functioning board that represented the whole country that was elected, not people who happened to be at the right spot at the right time. They did an excellent job in the beginning, but…

Obie H. The organization grew to the point where it needed some organization.

Leo T. Yeah, yeah. I think that's a fair way to say it. And so at that point Anita Hill and I became co-chairs for Lutherans Concerned. It became Lutherans Concerned North America shortly thereafter. And we set in place the structure which largely is still intact today. We had chapters, we had regions, we had regional directors, and we had some task forces or working groups.

One was on worship that I participated in. We created a book called "Creating New Worship" or something like that. It's been years since I looked at that thing. Which included things like a service for what would be a commitment service or later on, marriage. What we did was blend Lutheran liturgy with the experience of being gay and lesbian. We were still just talking about gay and lesbian at this time.

And it started at the assembly here at St. Paul-Reformation. Our closing assembly was one which got people very angry to begin with, and then they broke down to tears. We started out across the street. We had banquet tables covered with big tablecloths and all the stuff tucked away underneath. And the beginning of the service we just had people wandering around saying the most outrageous things that were said about homosexual people. That was the experience that almost all of us had had.

And then there was a turning point in what people were saying and reading, and then we used Finlandia and we formed up with—so we had

all these people in albs who had processional crosses representing each of the chapters in the North American organization process in up the front steps. Finlandia is blaring out over the PA system. And we went into probably the first setting for communion. And so the people at the assembly had never experienced anything like that before, that we took them from this is your experience, which is largely negative, in many cases, to the church actually having a word of saving grace for you, and then the celebration of that. And in this book we kind of replicated that in a smaller function around some other events.

Obie H. How many participants that day in that very interesting service?

Leo T. Oh, gosh. Maybe around 100. It wasn't…it might have been more than that, but it wouldn't have been much more than that.

Obie H. From various parts of the country?

Leo T. All over the country. All of whom—well, I shouldn't say that—most of whom were connected with chapters. There were some individuals who had gotten on the mailing list that were not near a chapter and they came as individuals, but largely as people connected with chapters.

Obie H. Probably around that time, or soon after that, you must have hard about the Welcoming Church movement, the idea of finding congregations that were going to be accepting even though the denominations may not be. Tell us about that.

Leo T. We had a board meeting of the LCNA board here. A lot of the things happened here because this was at least central for most people. And as a piece of new business, one of the board members—I think it might have been Pastor Broberg but I'm not sure—told us about a program that had newly started, which was one of the Welcoming congregational programs. I don't remember which one.

Obie H. Probably More Light Presbyterians. I think they're the ones who kind of got the first notoriety.

Leo T. Yeah, it could have been. I think we were aware of that because I was getting their newsletter at the time. Anyway, he suggested that this was a good new program and that we should consider it. And so we authorized the creation of that program. It was headed up by a woman who was living in California near Los Angeles. I think the town she lived in was called Cerritos. I may be fuzzy on that.

Obie H. Do you recall her name?

Leo T. Rose…Rose. Well, her first name was Rose. And she did have a last name, but that has evaporated into the mist. She ran the program for a number of years. And basically what we enjoined people in the organization to do was to think about the church that they were connected with, presuming that they therefore were out and the church had not gone belly up because of that, to talk with their pastor and the church council and see if they would act officially to become a Welcoming congregation.

Which they did, and very slowly that list grew. The largest number of them were here in Minnesota at the time, for obvious reasons.

Obie H. At what point was the terminology used "Reconciling in Christ," RIC?

Leo T. Well, originally the program had been called Reconciled in Christ, and while I think there is some legitimate criticism of this, I think people who were looking for something to derail the process in their congregation became horrified at the implication that if they became a Reconciled in Christ congregation, it meant that previously they had been unreconciled, and that was sort of not something that they appreciated. So we changed the name then to Reconciling congregations.

Obie H. And St. Paul-Reformation was the first registration.

Leo T. Was the first one.

Obie H. Followed very soon after, I believe, by Ross Merkel's church out in Oakland, California.

Leo T. Yes.

Obie H. And then there's a slow trickle after that and it has continued to grow, especially in Minnesota.

Leo T. And you might remember from our panel discussion, our conversation, that at least here in Minnesota work was happening both in the secular world around justice issues for what was to become GLBT people and within the church structure because we were regularly taking resolutions

to the Minnesota Synod of the LCA and then the Reconciling congregations. So all those were sort of happening simultaneously here in Minnesota, and each was playing off the other. When there was a series of murders of gay men that created a recognition that yes, gay people are victims, and it strengthened the rationale for why there needed to be Reconciling congregations.

Every year at Synod Convention for the entire Minnesota Synod, which was the entire state, LCA, we had resolutions related to GLBT stuff about one thing or another. It started out with human rights, and then it followed with I think trying to establish a task force to study church and the homosexual, and anti-violence. So the church was regularly, at least in convention, having to spend some time talking about these issues. And from there I think it filtered back to congregations. Particularly if the elected representatives were opposed to this, they would go back to their home congregation and oh, you'll never know what we had to deal with this year.

We regularly had a banquet table display there which Lutherans Concerned could not officially have because we were not an organization of the Lutheran church, but Campus Ministry, who came to our…saved us multiple times on multiple issues, said we could share their table. And so it started out 50% Campus Ministry and about 50% Lutherans Concerned, and over the years the 50% Lutherans Concerned kind of grew until Campus Ministry, which most people knew about, so it wasn't as though

they really needed a table, had a much smaller portion. And we distributed tons of printed material.

This was all back in a period—this was before the Internet, and this is a period where not only were people not talking about homosexuality, or sexuality in general, but finding resources to inform yourself was almost impossible to find or to get copies of. And so we were providing all that.

When Wingspan came along, one of the projects we did here was an educational reprint series which was about two dozen items. We got permission from all the authors to reprint their article. And so we created a format for them. And this is back in the day when you had to do everything with typewriters, of course, and copiers, fortunately, were on the scene then. And so we'd create this packet, and we were getting Wingspan.

But Lutherans Concerned also was getting increasingly larger numbers of requests for some information. Some of it, you could tell, was sort of negatively informed, but a lot of it was--I've never known any resource like this existed, I'm so grateful, could you please send me something? And we got a grant and we'd send these packets of 24 things that were broken down into a variety of areas.

Obie H. You mentioned the term Wingspan. Tell us what that was and your involvement with that.

Leo T. I had joined the congregation here in 1980 after having had this experience of their stepping forward during the St. Paul human rights campaign. And shortly after I joined, we were in the process of calling a new pastor. We had had the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church and Reformation Lutheran Church, sort of co-pastoring at the time.

Obie H. There was a congregational merger at about that time?

Leo T. Right, yeah.

Obie H. The two congregations were named?

Leo T. St. Paul's, which is just a few blocks from here, and Reformation. We were close geographically, not necessarily so close in terms of how you might identify the congregations, but enough that the process proved to be compatible. So the move was then to call a pastor who would be the pastor for the entire congregation. And I ended up in the interview process. I wasn't on the call committee, but they asked me to be part of the interview process.

And so during that process Paul Tidemann was emerging as kind of the front runner and I asked him, I said, this congregation has taken steps to stand with gay and lesbian people; what's your opinion about that? And he thought for a moment and said, well, I hadn't really thought much about this previously, but it seems to me that you are doing the right thing. And that sort of satisfied me. So Paul was called and had been here about a year, so—

Obie H. What year would this be, likely?

Leo T. This would be about ’81, I think. So I gave him about a year to get his feet on the ground and then I made an appointment to see him, and I said I’d like to propose a possibility, and that is that this congregation create a ministry to gay and lesbian people that would have the following complements: it would be pastoral care for gay and lesbian folk and their families, there would be an educational component both for them and for others, there be an advocacy part, and that we create a paid position to administer this so it doesn’t get lost with too many Indians and no chiefs. And so in our conversations he said, well, this sounds like a worthwhile idea, let’s test it before we go to church council with it.

And so I was asked to demonstrate two things. One is that a need existed, which was a fairly easy thing, and secondly that such a ministry could be funded. And that was a much harder task. But I was able to demonstrate both. It went to the church council and in 1982 Wingspan was authorized as a ministry here at St. Paul-Reformation.

I was hired part-time, and the following year they were wanting to make this a full-time position, and I said well, I appreciate that, I would jump at that, however, I think that the way things are in our community, we’d be better off keeping me at half time and bringing in a lesbian woman half time, and that ended up being Anita Hill. And so then she and I became a team from there on.

Obie H. Had she been part of St. Paul-Reformation?

Leo T. No, she was in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Obie H. How did the connection work? How did that happen?

Leo T. She and I had been co-chairs for Lutherans Concerned North America.

Obie H. That's right, yeah.

Leo T. And so this, of course, was back in a time where everybody knew everybody else, so I had known Anita and thought about her, and thought she would be a good candidate.

Obie H. Everybody knew everybody else not just in Lutheran circles, but pan denominationally, is that correct?

Leo T. Yes. Because we had a number of denominational gay and lesbian faith organizations here as well as nationally, and so because I had played a role on the national level I knew people in other denominational faith groups as well as locally. And we created something called the Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Council of Minnesota, which was largely an ecumenical group. Later a Jewish group did join. And so we did a number of things together. And that's partially why people knew that I was connected with the church. There was also another reason, which I'll tell you in just a moment.

Each of our groups was small enough that we really needed to band together, both for kind of socializing as well as some advocacy kinds of

things. As each group continued to grow in size and reach critical mass, then the denominational divides tended to come back in place, and the groups separated. The council kind of fell apart. And we had tried a similar effort at the national level which was sabotaged by two of the larger GLBT faith groups because it would have meant a sharing of power, and they were more influential alone than they would have been in a collective group. So shall I tell you now how other people knew that I was—

Obie H. Yes, please.

Leo T. Once I started working here, and was becoming more of a church insider, I realized that not just pastors wore collars, seminarians wore them, con ed students wore them, and so I thought, well, ministry associates, which is what Anita and I were, could wear them, too, so I went out and bought myself a shirt and a collar and started wearing it. And so when I would interact in the community—and I was involved in a number of different organizations and different arenas of activity—I would show up wearing a collar.

And this was probably one of the most powerful ways for the gay and lesbian—because we're still talking about gay and lesbian at this point—gay and lesbian community to see that somebody clearly connected with the church was working on their behalf. And then the reputation of Wingspan and St. Paul-Reformation just grew by leaps and bounds.

Our bishop at the time, after a few years, sent one of his assistants to talk to me about this, and I explained yes, I was doing it, and this is why I'm doing it, and no, I'm not going to stop doing it, and no, suggesting that I wear a little ichthus pin doesn't carry the same message, so if you can come up with something better, I'm open to that, but for the time being I'll wear a collar until the church starts ordaining people, and then I'll stop wearing it.

Obie H. And many years later you did.

Leo T. And many years later I did.

Obie H. At this time in the '80s you and St. Paul-Reformation are part of the Lutheran Church in America.

Leo T. Correct.

Obie H. Which was one of the two major Lutheran denominations in the country, and those two, along with a smaller group, a spinoff from the Missouri Synod, a moderate, even liberal spinoff of the Missouri Synod—

Leo T. AELC.

Obie H. AELC. Were in conversations about merging. And it became fairly apparent, as those conversations went on, that a merger was in fact going to take place, and that was scheduled to be effective on January 1, 1988. Tell us what the thinking of you and your community and your organizations were about this pending merger.

Leo T. Well, we saw it as a challenge and an opportunity. There were two organizations now positioned to work on keeping a focus on ministry with gay and lesbian people in place, and that was Lutherans Concerned North America and Wingspan. And so collectively we started submitting…I can't think of what the official name is. Documents at synod conventions to…

Obie H. Memorials?

Leo T. To become memorials. They're called something else at the synod level. But memorials to the larger church to…in the process of discussion to consider ministry which was happening to gay and lesbian people and for that to continue as part of this big new Lutheran church. So by now people in Lutherans Concerned have had some experience with their own synods, Wingspan had experience with synods. We both had some experience with the national church. Anita was involved with several task forces—Task Force on Human Sexuality and so forth and so on.

And by this time it was not just gay and lesbian people who were raising the cry, it was allies like yourself who were making sure that these were part of discussions and when there were informational events, would stand up and ask questions or suggest that ministry with gay and lesbian people needed to be some which continued, so it was happening in lots of different arenas. Probably for us, that is GLBT people, the largest leap forward was when Herb Chilstrom became the first presiding bishop.

Obie H. You knew Herb Chilstrom before that, I'm assuming. Herb Chilstrom had been the bishop of the Minnesota Synod of the LCA prior to that, so he was your local bishop on a smaller level, and now he became the national presiding bishop.

Leo T. And we had… Working together isn't quite the right phrase, but he was open to conversation with me. And in fact going back to the St. Paul human rights campaign, Craig and I decided that it was useless to try and go pastor by pastor, that if this really was a human rights issue, we should go to the bishops and ask them to identify it as such and encourage their congregations in St. Paul to support it. And so I went to meet with Herb Chilstrom and he agreed to pursue this.

And so he then talked with… I think, Elmo Agrimson was still the bishop in…where were they, Southeastern Minnesota? What is now the St. Paul Synod of the ELCA. And they talked with a couple other people, I think maybe the Episcopal bishop. And together there was a sense that this was a good thing to do and that no one was going to do it alone, and that they would at least coordinate their pastoral letters with other bishops. And so Herb and Elmo and the Episcopal bishop—

Obie H. Elmo being the ALC?

Leo T. ALC, yeah.

Obie H. And I think their terminology may have been president.

Leo T. Yes. That's right. He was district president, I guess. All wrote really remarkable letters and sent them officially to our campaign, and we had those published in the paper.

As time went on we gathered the judicatory heads of all the denominations except for the Baptist—well, we even had a Baptist congregation who supported the maintenance of the ordinance. But there was this major move forward by judicatory heads to support the maintenance of the ordinance.

Shortly thereafter, the Minnesota Council of Churches—I had drafted a statement for them on ministry to and with gay and lesbian people which was adopted and then created this firestorm of response to the media discussion of it. Herb Chilstrom weathered all that. He took a very clear pastoral yet justice stance on this.

So as he was moving forward as possible presiding bishop for the new ELCA, we knew that we had a friend. He was not necessarily supportive of everything that we might want, but he was open to being educated and forming and reforming his opinion. So he became a strong ally. And we had a good friendship. It was more professional than anything else. I was this great annoyance to him most of the time, but we had respect for each other.

Obie H. And then, indeed, he was the first presiding bishop of the ELCA, which came into existence on January 1, 1988, and within a month or two the

church, this new church, was immediately confronted with a crisis out in California regarding LGBT persons. Do you recall that?

Leo T. Yep.

Obie H. Tell us what you remember.

Leo T. Well, that had been brewing for some time. There were several—I think three was the number, because they talked about the three seminarians; Jeff Johnson was one, who is now ordained and serving the church out there—who were openly gay identified and heading towards ordination, and would the bishop allow it or not. And so there was a whole bunch of turmoil around that. And then the next stage, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart and Jeff all moved towards an extraordinary ordination.

Obie H. You knew Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart at that time. How was that?

Leo T. Well, I knew them and I knew Jeff through Lutherans Concerned, but they're in California and I'm here, so we didn't see each other very much, but I could tell that they were remarkable candidates for ordination. Even the majority of people in their candidacy committee had to say they were impressed with them. And so the decision was made at St. Francis that they would do the ordination and this would be a big deal. And so they moved it to a larger Lutheran congregation. I can't remember what it was now.

Obie H. This is in San Francisco.

Leo T. It was in San Francisco. And it was—

Obie H. In the early part of 1991, I believe.

Leo T. Yeah. For the church to do something like this was a big deal, and so lots of people from the gay and lesbian community, as well as gay and lesbian faith community, people wanted to be part of it. People traveled there. And I talked with Jeff and I said you know, we can't all travel there. We don't all have the resources to do that, as much as we would like to, so we've got to find something to take that into consideration.

And what we came up with is something which I think largely is ignored and its significance overlooked, and that is we set up satellite events, worship events, in I think maybe about eight locations. The one here in the Twin Cities was over in Minneapolis at a congregation on the north side. Anyway, this is back before the Internet and Skype and all that kind of stuff.

Obie H. And streaming.

Leo T. Yeah. So what we did was set up an elaborate conference call, and the reason we did this was so people could, in their time zone, move along the process until we got to the ordination, and then we would all go into the PA system. We could hear the event live with the telephone in San Francisco. And when they asked the questions and asked do you the people of God, there was this roll call. The people of San Francisco

answered first and then there was the roll call answering, and you could hear all these people say yes in these remote areas.

And the reason I think this is important is not just because of the ordination, which in and of itself was a monumental accomplishment, but it did what had never been done before, which was allow gay and lesbian people to actually participate in the ordination of gay and lesbian people. And I thought that was kind of a major piece of what happened. And today that sort of thing is so easy to do that I think the significance of it gets lost.

Obie H. Just a significance from the technological standpoint of overcoming the technological shortcomings.

Leo T. Yeah. We had little techies sitting in remote parts of the church—with us it was in one of the pipe rooms—who's listening to the service and keeping us on track with them. We were all doing the same service, but it's easy to get out of sync. And so we got the…I forget how…they made some announcement about and now we want to move into the ordination part, so those of us on the other end of the line knew when that was happening, and we stopped what we were doing, if we were still doing something, and then they threw the switch and of course we heard the thing. But the poor guy who had to sit in these remote rooms and listen to this whole thing waiting for the one moment to turn the switch, it must have been incredibly frustrating.

Obie H. But important.

Leo T. Yeah.

Obie H. All right, so that's 1991. What's next on your personal story in terms of your LGBT life and activism?

Leo T. Well, the early '90s the church, St. Paul-Reformation, was running into some financial difficulties and it became necessary to close Wingspan down. I had established, on our behalf, and Lutherans Concerned, this relationship with gay and lesbian people, Lutherans, in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, which is where the seminary—well, both seminaries, the Missouri Synod-related seminary and the ELCA-related seminary—were, and so I'd been down there speaking and helping them build up their organization. And I came back and the next day I get a call from Paul Tidemann saying the bad news that there was no money, and the budget had to be cut, and Wingspan was to be phased out, he would take over some of what I was doing.

Which began, I think, the downward slide of Wingspan's work, because the GLBT community was not his community, and he wasn't interacting in it the same way I was. I was mostly the outside guy here and Anita was focused inside. We used the image of the two of us standing back to back at the door of the church. I faced outward, she faced inward. She did pastoral care and things related to the congregation and the Lutheran church and I did stuff related to the community. So that part started to slide.

Wingspan kind of reconstituted itself and created a board of directors or an advisory board. I don't know what they call themselves now. And their decision was to move towards Anita's ordination. A lot of these events are kind of overlapping. And that was their singular outstanding accomplishment, was when Anita was ordained. And then she became senior pastor here when Paul retired. And a lot of the momentum that had been built up through Wingspan, having paid staff and what that meant in terms of being able to accomplish things, and then that stopping and becoming totally refocused on her ordination, the congregation began to lose some ground, some additional ground in terms of its role locally with the GLBT community. And that's continued.

And we have been having conversations around the side about how to change that situation, or if it needs to be changed, or if we accomplished what we set out to accomplish, which, to some extent, is true. A lot of the things which we brought into being now are the purview of specific organizations. Wingspan, for example, created the first sustained program for GLBT youth.

And there had been some other efforts, short-lived, prior to that, but our effort both with the support group that we ran weekly for GLBT youth and the educational effort which we did really moved that whole discussion and action forward. Now there are programs in both the Minneapolis and the St. Paul school districts for GLBT kids. There are other Lutheran Social Service, some of their street ministry operations have a component

of that. So that area which we waded into, where nothing existed before, we got the ball rolling and others have moved in.

And that's happened with other things, too. The human rights amendment for the state, we were actively involved through me with governor's task forces and things like that. So the question now that a number of us ponder is if we were to generate some funds and kind of reconstitute Wingspan, what would its focus be now. And that's a question which remains largely unanswered at this point. Today is not the same world that it was back in 1981, '82.

Obie H. I know that you have been involved with the Minnesota Historical Society, preserving records pertaining to this journey. Tell us about that.

Leo T. I have an arrangement with the Minnesota Historical Society that when I die they're going to have me stuffed and mounted and put in one of the display areas.

Obie H. [*Laughs.*]

Leo T. And they'll periodically spray me with whatever. It began to occur to me…well, let me back up. A lot of what I did in ministry with Wingspan and even before that seemed to be based on an ability to identify the right fruit that needed to be plucked. And so I would work in this area because there was something about it that was timely and we'd make something happen there, and then something else would appear on the horizon and I'd work on that, and that would become taken care of.

I became aware, after all this, and the fact that I was running out of filing cabinets, that there was not a record of Minnesota's GLBT communities. There were some fragmentary things and there was Jean Tretter's Collection, which is a more international collection, but now has a hefty Minnesota component to it. But at the time there was his collection, which basically was a private collection, Quatrefoil Library, which was GLBT related books, and nothing else.

And so I began some conversations with people over at the Minnesota Historical Society and we created a committee on gay and lesbian archiving. That's not the name of it, but Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Issues or something. What we did was we began to talk about the importance of archiving our history both in terms of print material as well as artifacts. And this led to a series of discussions within this task force.

And we had two staff members who really on their own, with the blessing of the Historical Society, but not paid, on their own met with us monthly. One was involved with documents and the other was involved with three dimensional things. That's sort of the way we broke it down. And so we began to publicize this in the community. I began to collect my stuff and box it up and have it taken. I've got about 20 boxes sitting waiting to go now. But because I'd been involved in many things, certainly not the entire community, but many things, I had their newsletters, I had minutes, I had all sorts of documentation about a lot of what happened in the community.

And I know people have already been using those resources for articles and things like that. In fact if you were to…or maybe you did this for your book, I don't know. But anyway, in a subsequent volume you work on, those would be good resources to tap into because it's not just my papers, but things that I had.

And the community got kind of pumped up about that for a while. It was sort of the new thing. I had a lot of conversations with people who started the conversation with, "but I don't think I have anything really important to contribute there," and very quickly found out that what they had in mind was the equivalent of a GLBT Constitution of the United States of America, or the Magna Carta or something like that.

And I would try to tell people that in the early days nobody had anything like that. We had buttons, we had t-shirts. We got into a bit of a discussion about t-shirts because the Minnesota Historical Society does not collect t-shirts. But I argued in our case that buttons and t-shirts, many of which had similar logos, so they're collecting the buttons, but not the t-shirts, were the artifacts of our community. And by this time the AIDS crisis has hit and gay men are dying left and right, and parents are coming in and taking their stuff and just trashing it because they don't know what else to do with it, or they're horrified by it or whatever.

But we did manage to convince a number of people who had played important leadership roles in certain parts of the community to consider

donating their materials and that they had three opportunities: Minnesota Historical Society, by now the Tretter Collection was receiving things over at the university, and Quatrefoil Library, so depending on what you had, those were three resources.

I decided that we should also try and stimulate some of this in other parts of Minnesota, and so I had a lot of duplicates for things in my papers and I asked that the Minnesota Historical Society return to me that which they did not want, which basically was often duplicate copies. So I'd take those duplicate copies and through a friend who worked at the University of Minnesota Morris, arranged with their library to receive a lot of the stuff and to be a repository for GLBT records in that part of the state so everybody didn't have to come to the Twin Cities.

Now I'm trying to figure out what to do with my library because it duplicates much of what Quatrefoil has, but also I have some additional things. And I'd like that to go somewhere out in greater Minnesota, but I have yet to identify a community that has an organization that has the space that can receive this. So I continue to dabble in this, even though largely the work of the task force has kind of died off.

Obie H. And here we are in November of 2017. What's Leo Treadway up to these days?

Leo T. Well, less GLBT stuff. I've kind of stepped back from there. I was on the front lines for a long time and overly involved, and that kind of mitigated

against opportunities to develop committed relationship. And so I decided to just kind of step away from all that. Most of what I am engaged in now relates to this congregation. I'm part of the sanctuary project team that works with the family we host. I'm part of another project here that's called Shear Grace, which has been providing free haircuts for homeless adults and children.

And I'm wanting to travel. I never had the opportunity to travel to places that wasn't somehow related to a GLBT agenda I was working on. In a few weeks, the day after Christmas, I take off for Southeast Asia, spend some time in Siem Reap around Angkor Wat and then get on a boat with some colleagues from San Francisco and we float down the Mekong to My Tho and then go to Saigon and spend a few more days and then come home. And then towards the end of 2018 I'm planning on returning to Brazil because it's been at least ten years since I've been down to see folks there.

Obie H. Leo, is there anything that we've missed that we should go back and cover?

Leo T. People have sometimes asked me, of the various things I've been involved with and various accomplishments, what is the one thing that really moves me the most. And I think it is the work we did to create an open, a safe space for GLBT kids. There were a lot of things which I said I would never see in my lifetime that came to pass, but I never, ever expected this

to come to pass. I thought this is something that was years away after I died. And so I like the work that we did. I like the fact that we had an every Sunday group that met, and sometimes had as many as 50 kids there, and that we created kind of an auxiliary group which worked with schools and youth serving professionals and kind of brought them up to steam with GLBT youth. That's what I'm most proud of.

What I'm most disappointed in is the international project. More recently we had a project to support GLBT people in Uganda, and that was happening at about the same time the marriage movement was going on. And it was very difficult to get more than a few people in different locations to recognize that we all have something in common and that we are very fortunate to be Americans and living in this country, despite all the things that are happening, and that we should be willing to show concern and act on behalf of GLBT people in clearly repressive countries.

That had been the latest phase in an international program I helped start with Lutherans Concerned North America which was to do similar sorts of work to get our chapters. If you think of the chapters as congregation-like, to get the chapters involved in foreign mission work with GLBT people. Somehow that seemed an almost insurmountable task, and getting GLBT people in general and even GLBT people in faith communities connected with this proved to be almost impossible. And I have to say I don't really understand why. The connections that are easily made in a church congregation like this where we have projects in El Salvador and Nigeria

don’t translate into people’s minds as why it’s important to support GLBT people in another culture. So that’s probably the big disappointment.

Obie H. Thank you.

Leo T. Yeah, thank you.

Obie H. Let’s end it.

[*End of recording.*]