

## Oral History Interview: Nancy Wilson

Interviewee: Nancy Wilson

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus

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Doris M. I'm Doris Malkmus. This is July 4, 2025, and I'm interviewing Nancy Wilson, who is with me at the Scottsdale MCC General Conference. And I'm going to start by asking Nancy if she understands the purpose of this is to make a recording that will be part of the LGBTQ-RAN website.

Nancy W. Yes. All right. Yeah, I do understand that. I'm excited about it.

Doris M. I am, too. Nancy, we always say tell us a little bit about where you were born and went to school, and so it's just a good place to start. But then maybe you would help us focus on how you felt like MCC—what prepared you to feel like MCC was where you belonged.

Nancy W. So I was born in 1950 in Long Island, New York, and we lived in a very suburban, working class community, mostly a Catholic community. We were Protestant, and I went to school with Catholics and Jews. And we're kind of a segregated community there, but I had an interfaith beginning in my life where we went to church in another town, a Methodist church, because we didn't have a Methodist church in our little town on Long Island. And from early on I liked church, the Methodist church. I sang in choir since I was six and all those things.

But I often say around the time I was 11 or 12, in that area, as puberty began I began to struggle with feeling different, and I say the primary thing was I probably had depression and didn't...it wouldn't have been diagnosed then. Nobody ever thought about children having issues, and even adults it was a lot of stigma.

Doris M. So if you were born in 1950, this would be the early '60s in Long Island.

Nancy W. Yes, yeah. And a few things were kind of happening at once, which was I had this really tremendous sense of feeling lonely. And I understand that now in terms of a lot of not understanding my life and sexuality—where is my community. And there were very...you couldn't identify gay people except one woman in my church whose name was Evelyn, and she wore a tie and a suit and would come bring her mother to church, and my mother would always say "don't stare at Evelyn." Of course I was staring at Evelyn because I was wondering how she got away with wearing a tie and a suit and looking so good. And of course I could not say that, so my mother would say "don't stare at Evelyn," and I'd think, oh, I'm staring at Evelyn. And so even from a young age there were those clues.

So about 11, 12 I was feeling extremely isolated and unable to speak about what I felt. In the upper room bedroom where I slept there was an open window and a street light, and I always say the street light sort of glowed. And sitting there, and I heard a voice, not audibly, but it was clearly, it felt not from me, and it said, "I'm your friend. Someday you'll have other friends, but today I am enough." That absolute, you know, at 12 years old, maybe.

And I always say nothing changed, but everything changed. I still struggled, you know, until high school, maybe, to find my niche or way with friends. But I had this place of safety in the universe that felt like it was solid and real. And I think if I had not had that I don't know what my adolescence or life would have been. So in some sense it prepared me, this relationship with this friend. And I knew it was God, but I didn't know enough about all that. I paid attention in church, sort of, but then I began to really pay attention in church, and I started feeling like did I have a call to ministry. There's lots of little things that happened along that way. I went to Methodist church camp, and—

Doris M. At that time did Methodist women have a place in the pulpit?

Nancy W. No, not hardly, no. I mean, there were a few. And so I'm feeling all of this at the same time that the civil rights movement is heating up. March on Washington, our pastors went to the March on Washington. I wanted to go so bad. I was 13 and couldn't go, of course. So this is awakening these things in my mind about justice and that passion, but also ministry.

And so the pastor of our church then, he didn't like kids that much, I don't think, and so... And the assistant pastor, though, was very supportive and nurturing. I told him about my calling. He supported me, very quietly. But I had to go see the pastor and tell him. And I made my father go with me, who was just...he just hated having to go in the pastor's office. He felt like a kid in the principal's office, so he was very quiet. So I asked the pastor, you know, I have a calling to ministry. He said well, you know, seminary is wasted on women. Because he had daughters who went to seminary and then just married pastors.

So I'm thinking that's not going to be me, and I didn't know why. But I said, well, do you know any women pastors? He said yeah, I know one in Kansas. So he pulled out his directory. I said, well, can I have this information? He said yes, so I wrote to her. She wrote me back and said that her husband had been a Methodist minister and when he died she took over the church, probably got a license to preach and something, and maybe even when to seminary, so she was quite a bit older. And so I'm thinking oh, that doesn't sound like a path I want to take. But there was one somewhere.

And then my father was sort of okay. My mother was panicked about this because she understood this was a gender kind of violation, and I'm sure she knew, you know, I'm sure she knew, from many other clues in my

childhood that, you know. When I was ten the teacher picked me to play Abraham Lincoln in our class play about the civil war, which I was so thrilled and astonished that she picked me. I was tall and skinny, and I knew the Gettysburg Address by heart, so she says yeah.

And so my best friend, who I was role rehearsing being a lesbian with—I don't know what she was doing, but that's what I was doing, like we were a couple. And she was heartbroken because she had no part in the play. So I wrote a part for her as Mrs. Lincoln, as Mary Todd Lincoln, of course, and the teacher approved it, which was just—now I think about that. And so her mother made her this gorgeous green satin gown, and she came in—I wrote the part where she came in with a tray and said, Mr. Lincoln, would you like some tea? And I said no thank you, dear. And that was the whole thing. But it was like the best day of my life because I had the lead in the play, I was my hero Abraham Lincoln, my girlfriend was Mrs. Lincoln, so in my 10, 11-year-old mind this was great.

But my mother was sitting in the play. Of course I had been putting on my cousin Billy's suit, and I made a wig, I mean, a beard and a top hat for myself. I practiced all the time because I got to cross dress and do that.

And then the day of the play, though, for my mother this is like this very...you can see how this led to my depression, which was after the play my mother says to me, you know, the woman next to me asked me who is the little boy playing Abraham Lincoln, and my mother said I don't know. And she told me that she said I don't know.

And of course this is 1960, '61. My mother was in just some panic about what she was seeing, I'm sure. But told me as a way, I'm sure, of letting me know this wasn't okay that I liked this and my sense of my freedom in myself. So that moment was kind of the, you know, snatch in the middle of the best day of your life is the worst moment of, you know.

And my mother and I talked about that in later years, and she said she didn't remember that, and I can understand why she wouldn't, you know, or want to. But she came around beautifully and was my best supporter in later life. But yeah, so... But that was the thing.

And my best girlfriend really started being interested in boys, so that was the end of that for me. So all of that were clues for my parents, so when I wanted to be a minister on top of everything, oh, dear. So I knew I had to sort of keep that quiet, too. And I had another friend, finally, later in high school who was very supportive of me thinking about it.

But I went to Allegheny College. They had a religion department. In 1968, which was, of course, the year MCC started. I was 18. I remember going my first month of college—I loved college because there was this huge library I could get lost in, and—

Doris M. I have to ask why Allegheny? It seems like kind of a stretch. Did you have roots in Pennsylvania?

Nancy W. No. But we had...I went to a Methodist church, and there were at least two people from my church who went to Allegheny before. It's a Methodist

school. It was the furthest away from home of all the schools I applied to, which I'm sure... It was a little, tiny, kind of conservative at that time Methodist school, but it was a great place overall for me to be. Totally out of, you know, I'm a New Yorker, and here we are in western Pennsylvania, so it was a culture shock. But a great religion department there, and I kept...okay. And people would say, well, what are you going to do with a degree in religion? Well, you know, there you go.

And of course the Vietnam War was the biggest thing going on. It affected our college. And I gave a talk at Allegheny years later about how those years during the war, as the school—we shut down the school like all other schools, big schools, we shut down ours during the moratorium. And that was a radicalization for me about progressive issues. I'd already been kind of...felt passionate about race and about civil rights, but then also this, you know, the war.

So that was, my education at Allegheny was also in activism and that young people could change the world. That's where I came to believe that...or we could try. And so I went to lots of marches on Washington, never told my parents I was doing any of that. I was very protective. I was the eldest child. And all during college I would say I sort of dated men, but hardly. But I still was very—it took me a very long time. It took me until my last year of college to come out and to have my first sexual relationship with a woman I loved very much. And man, everything just kind of exploded.

Then I'm thinking where am I going to go to graduate school. And I made it hard for God. I applied to Yale School of Political Science, I applied to a school of social work, and I applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship to make it hard for God to help me go to seminary. Okay, if you want me to go to seminary, I'm going to have to get the fellowship, which I did. And I was so thrilled. And I thought well, you could have just decided to go.

So we all... The first gay man I ever met, Greg, and my partner at the time, Gerry, and I all went to seek our fortune in Boston. I went to BU School of Theology and came out there almost right away, because I didn't think you could lie and be in seminary. I was very naïve.

Doris M. That's naïve, but I'll call it idealistic. That was part of the zeitgeist.

Nancy W. Totally. Both. Oh, totally. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So third week in seminary there's a radio show called "Gay Way Radio." Elaine Noble, who was a professor at Emerson and became the first openly elected gay official in the United States, I became friends with her eventually. And she had a program, and she had a guy named Larry Bernier, who was starting an MCC in Boston, on the radio. So my friend's going listen to this, listen to this, he's starting a church. I didn't know anything really about MCC, although I had a hint that I didn't take earlier. So he says, on the radio, if there's a woman out there, preferably one in seminary, will you please call me? He gave the phone number on the radio.

So I take down the phone number and call him. He said I got home, I had 40 messages. Only one woman called me. Of course this is Boston. Feminism is just, you know, raging now in Boston and even in the seminaries. There are some women in seminary, but they're also leaving the church, Mary Daly, all this stuff is happening. But I hear this. And he comes to my door the next day, and we went to have coffee. I said you couldn't buy me lunch? Because he was too poor. That should have been a clue. But he told me the story of MCC and said will you pastor this church with me? I'm in my third week of seminary.

Doris M. And can I ask? You said my friends in seminary. Were they gay and lesbian friends or were they friends who accepted, ally kind of?

Nancy W. Okay, friends in seminary?

Doris M. At the Boston University School of Theology was there a group of LGBTQ students?

Nancy W. There were, there were. Mostly very closeted, mostly Methodist, so they couldn't be out. And this was even before the '76 ban.

Doris M. Yeah, okay.

Nancy W. And, you know. So there were other gay students we knew, and some of whom really had their hearts broken and lives messed up because they came out too soon. But here I am third week of seminary, and Larry says, Pastor this church with me. And of course I say yes because I'm 22 and, you know. And so I go to the church. Somebody came and picked us up and took us, the three of us, Greg and Jeri and me to church, at Arlington Street Unitarian Church in the Honeywell Chapel, a little chapel there was the first MCC in Boston. We were the 23<sup>rd</sup> MCC church, maybe. The fourth MCC church east of the Mississippi.

And we go in, and there's about 30 people. Elaine was there, Elaine Noble, and she was the only other woman, and Jeri and me. And Larry, he starts the service very simply in his way. We said the Lord's Prayer together. It was very... And I remember being very impacted by where I am, sitting with these people. And he calls me up and he said, well, I want to introduce our new co-pastor. There were no rules in MCC then about... He said Nancy, can I use your last name? I said yeah, Wilson. So that was... The next week he went and bought me a shirt and collar at Jordan Marsh department store, and I consecrated communion the next week with him and, you know. I mean, we just...because... So I learned as I went from him, and I preached the next week.

Doris M. What were his credentials?

Nancy W.

Oh, he was a wild man. He had been Jehovah Witness, and he'd been Catholic. He was French Canadian-American, and I think he went to some Catholic seminary, maybe he graduated from high school from it, but he didn't have much formal education at all. But he was very radical and very out there. And I was his tempering partner because... But he was driven, and that made...

We were on the front page of the *Boston Globe* in two months, partly because Kay Longcope, who was the *Boston Globe* religion editor, was a lesbian. In fact she was Elaine Noble's partner. I don't even know if that's anywhere out there. But she was something else, Kay. She was lovely, and wrote this beautiful article. But front page of the Metro section of the *Boston Globe*, pictures, everything.

And I'd been out six months by that time. Fortunately, I was out to my parents. And that's another little story, which is when I came home from college, you know, I just came home with my parents. I'm in a relationship with a woman, but I can't tell them, so I felt very like, oh, this is not very adult. So I went home with my parents, and then I went with my best friend of—in childhood, one of my best friends in childhood who is by now a lesbian, Jean Gralley, and she took me to my first Pride parade in New York in 1972. Right graduated from college, living with my parents for the summer before I go to seminary to earn some money.

So I had been... Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny had spoken at my college the year before. They were the first openly gay people I heard speak publicly, and I was riveted to my seat and in total—this was before I was totally out to myself and in a relationship. It was months before. And I'm like oh, you know. I mean, I certainly knew sitting there in the chapel listening to them speak.

And I started corresponding with her because I ran the help center which was our, you know, we did drug counseling and all kinds of things. And I realized as I was writing to her in the spring of '72 that oh, she thinks I'm a lesbian. You know, I mean, this is so funny. And of course she said, oh, when you're in New York you should come meet me at this place, which was obviously a lesbian bar someplace. And I'm thinking wow, I wonder if other people think I'm a lesbian. [*Laughs.*] Which is just so funny. And my mind and my, you know, it was like I had a lot of buffers in there keeping me from knowing. And so finally, of course, that spring I came out and realized, of course. So I started writing to her for real.

And so when I got home and to my parents' house, Barbara had written me a letter, and it was sitting on the—as things always, mail always sat there. And nobody opened anybody else's mail in my house, you know, it wouldn't have happened. But the day I went to the Pride parade in 1972 my mother happened to watch the "David Susskind Show," and guess who's on the "David Susskind Show?" Barbara Gittings, whose letter was sitting... So my mother, I'm sure, opened my letter. She again denied that, but she...

So I come home at night from the Pride experience, and I walked in the

door, and there's my mother, and I know she knows. And I thought, was I on TV? That would have been unlikely, but... So we had our confrontation. She was...my mother was very upset. And I'm trying to explain to her. And I didn't deny it. She gave me a chance to deny it and I decided this was my moment, I couldn't.

So I was already out by the time I was in Boston and finding MCC, which was a great thing, because I didn't have to, you know. And it was tough with my parents for years, my mother more than my father. My father was more gentle and okay, you know, I love you and all that. My mother was oh, you know, like this is ruining her life at this moment, and my life, she thought.

And we learned to have a lot more compassion with each other, but... And my mother really took the initiative, finally, to say okay, I can either get with this or I will lose my daughter, so, okay, let's get with this, and she did, and wonderfully and she was a great... She used to come to these general conferences with me, and she was great.

And so there I am, first MCC service. And this is kind of in this shocking thing of everything is changing. My whole life is just changing, upside down, but it's so exciting, because I'm having a lot more fun than anybody else in seminary, believe me. I'm just... I remember the third week I was there this young man said I'm having surgery tomorrow—he was Seventh Day Adventist—will you pray with me? Took my hands like I'm supposed to pray a spontaneous prayer with him, which I had never...we didn't do that so much. We said grace, a formula grace, we had prayers written in church. And I think he thinks I'm supposed to know how to do this—I'm 22, I'm a pastor of a church, right? Four weeks in seminary. So I remember grabbing his hands and I thought, okay, you know, so go for it.

And that happened to me every day, you know. There was a brand new...there was the Homophile Union of Boston, and there was the Daughters of Bilitis. There were all these organizations. And the first Pride parade I think happened in '73 in Boston. It was *Gay Community News*. And there's probably things in the archives of *Gay Community News* about me—'73, '74, '75. And that was, you know, it was an exciting time in Boston. It was just the flowering of things in Boston of queer life, just amazing. And MCC was part of that. We were right there.

And I was going to BU School of Theology, and so the fourth week I'm there you're supposed to choose your fieldwork choice. So I go to the fieldwork director. His name was Dr. Robert Treese, T-R-E-E-S-E. So I say, Well, I've started working with—a week and a half, two weeks—Metropolitan Community Church of Boston. He looked at me, he said oh. And he said Troy Perry's church. And I said oh, yeah, you know, because I sort of knew that, barely, you know, oh yeah. Larry gave me a book, but okay. So I said yes.

He said, Well, how do you feel about working with these people? That's how he said it. And I said, Well, I *am* one of these people. He said, Okay,

stop right here, you're the first person to attend the school ever to say that. Are you sure you want to say that? I said, Yes. This is my church now. I'm leaving the Methodist church. You know, like in two weeks I made this decision, right there on the spot. And he said okay. He said, well, I'll personally supervise you for your fieldwork education, because he didn't have anybody else who could do that. Turns out he was one of the founders of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in San Francisco. Yes.

Doris M. Was he closeted at BU?

Nancy W. No. No. He wasn't gay. He wasn't gay.

Doris M. Oh.

Nancy W. He was a Methodist pastor and a seminary... No. And so he said, you know... So he educates me really more about who Troy Perry is, and about what my church is a little bit, which was four years old by then almost, three and a half. And it turns out he wrote the first article that I know of in a—I don't know what journal or book—it was called "Contemporary Views of Homosexuality in the Bible." In the late '60s he wrote a scholarly article on that. I always feel like people don't have—he should be somewhere. He was an enormous champion. And he was so kind to me. He supervised all my fieldwork, he supported me in my work at MCC. And what a gift. I mean, I had no idea. I didn't know what the Council on Religion and the Homosexual was. I barely knew what a homosexual was, you know, I was like okay.

And he was so amazing, and it was like...it was another piece of a puzzle of okay, I can be at the seminary. He was my cover at that seminary where they were very unhappy about me and about other people coming out. I mean... And they were saying we don't want this behavior from queers. I mean they said things like that at BU, and it was quite... I'm trying to remember the name of the dean during that time. It'll come to me. But he was very negative. We did a chapel service one time, you know. It's about the [word?] and all that at the seminary, but yeah. So here I am, I'm going to seminary, now I have cover to go to seminary while I'm pastoring the church.

And I needed to work for a living, so I worked at a hospital, a rehab hospital, St. John of God. It was a Brothers of...it was [called] the Brothers of St. John of God, and I had a church member who worked there, and he got me a job as a nurse's aide. And I worked there for probably two years.

Doris M. As a chaplain, or taking care of people?

Nancy W. No, I was a nurse's aide. Oh no, I had no credentials to be a chaplain yet. Which was a fabulous experience in terms of...it was my CPE for two years, really. And so I was working, and going to seminary, and doing this church with Larry. Larry wanted to pay me, and so he paid me. I got \$10 a week in 1972. That's why I needed another job. But, you know, I think eventually it may have doubled, even. So Larry made hardly anything. He worked. He was a respiratory therapist and he, you know. We all worked. I mean, no church was paying anybody.

In fact Troy—this is [another] story. So he quit being pastor of the L.A. church in 1973 and became full-time moderator of MCC, at no pay, and his mother lived with him. So he lived off of—he would preach itinerant, preaching all around the world, mostly in the U.S., and people gave love offerings, and he lived off of that. Eventually it ruined his credit and he had to declare bankruptcy. But in the scheme of things that's never something he thought... And one time he came home and his mother had been to the church food pantry, and he was horrified. And she said look, the cupboard's bare, you know, I went to the food pantry. They're our church. But he was...that was very tough.

So finally, in '75 or so they started paying him a salary from MCC, from the MCC churches, as we grew and had the idea that you would pay 10% of your church offering to the denomination. So I never heard of anything like tithing. I knew my parents gave generously to the Methodist church, you know, what they could, but... So I started learning. Right away I wanted to sign up, okay, what's the deal? We tithe here? Okay. So I've done that the rest of my life. I've been very poor sometimes and, you know. So I didn't finish at BU because—well, a couple things. I think I was restless. I'd been going to school a long time. And we were in this very revolutionary time. So there was a church starting in Worcester, Massachusetts, and—

Doris M. An MCC church in Worcester?

Nancy W. Yeah, yeah. And my first partner [Gerry] and I separated after the first year or so we were together, and I met someone else whose name now is Sky Anderson. He's in the archives. He's trans. At the time he was Heather—she was Heather Anderson. And so about 12 years older than me. And Sky had been a Marine, a woman Marine, and the terrible things that happened, Paris Island, South Carolina. There was a purge of lesbians, and he was...and then she was drummed out of the Marines, dishonorable discharge and all that. And then became a Catholic sister. Okay, so this is a person with quite a story. For, you know, maybe five or six years, left that. Had problems, mental health issues and stuff, serious. And after being hospitalized and lots of stuff came out of that and found MCC.

So in my still probably codependence, undiagnosed at that time, you know, we became very close, and then we were partners. And we went to

Worcester together to start the church there. We moved there. With no money, I mean, really. So, you know. I had a car that I think I couldn't afford to register, so I only used it like very locally in Worcester. I worked at a self-service gas station where people stopped by for counseling. You know, I'm doing one of the first self-service gas stations in Worcester. And we founded the church. And Central United Church of Christ let us use their chapel, so that was a time. I mean, we lived in a really rough neighborhood with very challenging circumstances.

Doris M. So were people in Worcester or people in an existing church in Worcester eager to bring MCC, or did MCC want to go there?

Nancy W. No. We started and we met at the Gay Union in Worcester. They had like a meeting place and we met there. And then we asked Central United Methodist Church would they let us meet there, and they did.

Doris M. I see.

Nancy W. They were, you know, really wonderful to us.

Doris M. And why did you choose Worcester?

Nancy W. Well, because people from Worcester came to Boston and said—it was Joe...what was Joe's last name? Joe. He was in love with this guy who was an alcoholic. He was only 18 or 19. He died of alcoholism at a very young age. So many people, young people then killed themselves, drug and alcohol, horrible issues. AIDS kind of...I think sometimes we have this little idyllic view of before AIDS, but oh my gosh, it was a lot.

So in Worcester there was one little gay bar, the Ports of Call, that was it. And there was a lot, you know, it was a very working class town. But Joe came and said please, please come to Worcester and help us, help us start a church, we need a church. And so we would commute and go and do services. And then finally they needed people to be there, and so we were there for only a couple years. And then eventually we moved to Detroit, where there was a church that was about five years old and needed a pastor.

Doris M. Did the church in Worcester fall apart?

Nancy W. It was about 30 years or probably less. It eventually did fall apart.

Doris M. But you left and someone else took over?

Nancy W. Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yes, uh-huh. And so—and we had a group in Worcester and Hartford. We had a group in Providence, Rhode Island, which we don't have now. And yeah, there's kind of an arc of these small

churches trying to, you know, with...everything rises and falls in leadership, and sometimes we have better leadership than others.

We were, you know, it was you all come for the first five to ten years because, you know, so, you know, we learned that there were people who were kicked out of the [their previous] church for being gay sometimes were actually kicked out for other reasons, no matter what they told you. It took us time to learn. We didn't have any vetting processes. This is just not... We were just, you know, okay, you want to go to somewhere? You go with our blessings and no money, and so, you know, that was it.

Doris M. You're the voice for that generation, you know.

Nancy W. Oh, yes. Oh my gosh, we... Thank goodness we were young and we could—you know, we do what young people do, again, so... You know, so we were in Detroit for about, almost five years.

Doris M. When was that, about?

Nancy W. '75. And '79 I moved to Los Angeles. And in—

Doris M. But you were ordained in '75.

Nancy W. Yeah. We had a process where you were licensed before you were ordained. That was our vetting process. So you were licensed and your license was renewed for a year. You went to conferences for it every year. And then you renewed at least once, and then you were ordained, so you had a three year process before ordination. So I came into MCC in '72 and began practicing as clergy. I was licensed in '73 and then ordained in Dallas in '75.

And it was in Dallas in '75 that we heard about Detroit, and they needed a pastor, and so we were ready to leave Worcester, and somebody could take that. And the idea was if the... We didn't have... You couldn't like go to Detroit and candidate because you had no money, so the district coordinator of Michigan, she came with a U-Haul and picked us up and took us to Detroit. And now if they liked us we could stay. If not, she said, I want you to go to Madison, Wisconsin and start a church. So that's—

Doris M. Who was she, the district?

Nancy W. She was B.J. McDaniels from Phoenix, Arizona. Kind of the old time like butch, leather, and very tall, really handsome woman, just about—I bet she was five-eleven or six foot, almost, and very strikingly... And very, you know, no formal theological education at all. But she pastored the church in Phoenix, and was an interesting, a little complicated character in her own way, but very forceful, early days, very, you know. And so she came and moved us to Detroit, and it turned out—

Doris M. Her district was like the whole Midwest?

Nancy W. Well, it was like probably Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin. I'm not sure. But it was like that. These districts were just forming. The district coordinators were volunteer, so they had to have jobs. Nobody was paid to do any of this. And districts were just...churches would tithe an extra two or three percent to the district to help with travel expenses and that. Eventually they became full-time people. That happened, but in those days, no. Everybody was, you know, hand to mouth. You didn't...  
[Laughs.]

Doris M. You said "we" went to Detroit. That was Sky?

Nancy W. That was Sky. And that was where he came out as trans, in 1975-76 and began to deal with that, which was, in those days, I mean, that was very tough. And, you know, he also had mental health issues in addition, and so his resilience to do this was tough.

So eventually one of our best friends, Jeffrey Pulling, Rev. Jeff, MCC—we met in Boston. He's also one of those early pioneers. Jeff came and took Sky out to Stanford to the clinic there, and Sky transitioned, and he pastored MCC San Jose for many years. And he'd be 86 years old now. I haven't talked to him in a while. He's disabled. But he eventually married a woman and they adopted five disabled children. He's in the [LGBTQ Religious Archives Network profile] archives. And, you know, we reconciled as just friends and family, and so, you know. So he was in MCC for those first 20 years, really. And one of the first trans pastors in MCC, and in a time when there was just so little information or support or help. So then I was single for a while in Detroit, and then I met Paula Schoenwether. We've been together—this will be 48 years in November.

Doris M. Did you meet her through MCC or—

Nancy W. Yeah, sort of. So my...the vice moderator of the Detroit church was also my friend, Jackie Walker, who's still around. She's 80 years old now, but she's a little older than me. And she, you know, we were having some particular time and she said I think Paula—Paula knew her through this kind of very closeted teachers lesbian group called Suburban Women Together in Detroit. It's in Detroit archives, I'm sure.

So she was just coming out, really, and she'd had a relationship that was a little tragic with an actress in England. It was like this whole thing, oh my gosh. So Paula is a few years older than me, and she and Jackie became friends. So Jackie kind of worked this out and introduced us by saying, after a terrible board meeting, let's go to the bar. And there's two bars. And she'd already arranged for Paula to be there.

So we met, and probably shortly after that started dating, which was awkward, because Paula, she said she wanted to come and talk to me. She actually asked me out and I said I had to do my laundry or something, some really horrible, lame excuse, terrible thing. She says Jackie, does she date or what? And Jackie said yeah, yeah, I'm sure she'll date. So poor Paula. So we finally said we'd go on a date. And I said well, you know, then I won't be able to be your pastor, you know, if that's, you know. And she said, Well, I don't think I need a pastor. I'm not a big church person, really. [*Laughs.*] So I said well, I guess that's okay, I don't know. There were no rules then. There was no consciousness about that. But I had some consciousness about it.

So we started dating when I was pastor of MCC Detroit. She was a closeted teacher, and she was outed because we had a ceremony. We had a holy union. And it was covered in the paper, but with not her name and not, you know, her photo, and it was very... And a kid in her high school developed our private photographs in a lab. He worked at the place where our, you know, you had your photographs developed in those days in a little packet.

So the word spread in her high school. And it was the year we were already thinking of moving to Los Angeles, and so she went through a really rough time there, and we kind of got out of Dodge before, you know. Later she learned that people were getting ready to bring it up to the school board. And she loved teaching, so that was hard for her. But she was ready not to be in the closet anymore. She was like that's it. And so we moved to Los Angeles, and I worked for MCC full-time then in the office there. That's about 1979.

Doris M. I'm quite sure that the Detroit records are at the Bentley. But I wonder if there's anything you want to say about the whole environment of Detroit at that time, early '70s.

Nancy W. Right. Okay.

Doris M. Just to get...yeah.

Nancy W. So you'd think I was probably the only out lesbian in Michigan at that point, in '75 or so, or one of the few. I would be interviewed on television, I would be... Paula would be hiding in the back room when I'd be interviewed. And when Chris Glaser was turned down for ordination I was interviewed in my home in Detroit. I knew him already because he'd been, you know, I'd spoken at his class in Yale. And so that was this whole big huge thing.

And there was a thing in Hines Park in Detroit, '76, where they were doing, you know, vice cops were arresting men in the restrooms. And, I mean, huge raids. And these cops were having sex and then entrapping men. And one person committed suicide, people lost their jobs, their

families, everyone. And one of those persons was David Krumroy. And David, it was his radicalizing moment when he was arrested there. He founded Michigan Organization for Human Rights. He became one of my dearest friends. And so he was the most out person, and he came to church. He was a church member. I did he and his partner Bill's wedding. So we were a very small out community. There were people like John Kavanaugh, who was a very out Episcopalian, and Jim Toy. Jim Toy was a dear, wonderful mentor and just amazing person in Ann Arbor, of course, the University of Michigan. But he came, they came to MCC often. He was, you know, just amazing people. And so it was, you know, there were bars. It was all bars. And these, you know, really not great bars in Michigan, but they would throw benefits for MCC with drag shows, so I went to more drag shows in the mid '70s, and you'd make \$100, maybe, and that was like wow, that was great.

But it was also a violent time. When I was—I think '77 a young man who attended my church was leaving a gay bar downtown Detroit and he was murdered. He was run over by a car and dragged. So here's the interesting thing. We didn't have the word "hate crime." We didn't know that. So he's murdered, I hear about this. And his best friends and the cops conspire to de-gay his apartment for his parents who are coming, as a kindness. So this is the cops with the friends so the parents wouldn't know that he was murdered because he was gay. So I go with the parents, I meet the parents. I'm his pastor. They didn't ask like this interesting woman is his pastor? Okay. But they were in such shock, you know, and terrible. So we go downtown to the police station to identify—the father had to identify the body. And so the mother is saying to me why was he in downtown Detroit? And I'm really, you know, I'm 26 years old, I'm faking it still, learning to be a pastor, I guess, you know, like okay. And I didn't feel like I could say to her he was gay and he was in a gay bar, and people who hate gay people ran him over and killed him. I couldn't say that. And we didn't think of it as a hate crime. In fact many people thought of it as this is the price you might pay for being gay. You pay a price. If you come out you pay a price, but if you don't come out you pay a price, but you pay a price.

And so, you know, the police never...nobody was ever caught for doing this. It was never... No, it was just kind of this is what happens to gay people because you're not really protected, and it's not okay. And so I never said anything. Now I think maybe the father knew. You know, I just had a feeling. He didn't ask questions, but she was just, you know, why, why, why—why was he down there? They didn't know like what kind of bar was he at. They never asked that. It was called the Iron Hinge. You know, the Iron Hinge. So they... And, you know, I have a feeling maybe the father knew, or knew what it... But it was like the best thing we could do was to protect them from knowing he was gay. That was worse than he was murdered, you know. That would be like heaping, you know. And that was Detroit. There were little bits of organization starting in

support. And all of us who were activists all knew each other. We were all very close in certain ways. And yeah, David eventually died of AIDS in Chicago. I did his funeral. And yeah, and his partner Bill died probably a year later. And yeah, so they were heroes. They were brave people and did great things there.

Oh, and Malcolm Boyd lived there. He moved shortly after we got there, but we were on a TV show together, and you know. And Heather, who became Sky, was on a TV show with Malcolm Boyd, and then Malcolm moved to Los Angeles. So I got briefly to know him. And he was just coming out, and he was, you know. And Brian McNaught lived there. And Brian and I, you know, we did work in Detroit, and he was just starting his thing. So had this great, wonderful community of people. Yeah, so. Yeah, Brian's just published his book recently, and yeah. So...yeah. So in some sense it was this, you know, pioneering place, and yeah.

Doris M. I think you've mentioned so many things that I think would help the later generations understand how MCC was born and how it moved from one place to another, and what it meant to—

Nancy W. And Detroit, I was there when Harvey Milk was assassinated, and so... And that was a big public celebration we held in the—okay, this is another story. The Methodist church—it was called Central Methodist Church downtown Detroit—was where MCC was meeting the last few years I was there, so that's an interesting little connection. Because, so 1977, probably, we moved to Central Methodist Church.

And the story there—this is an interesting story—the pastor of that church was [Dr.] Dick Devor was his name. He died recently. But he was the chaplain at Allegheny College just before I got there, okay, so I didn't know him, but his reputation, you know, Dick Devor. Never, he was this great guy. So here he is pastor of this church. So I go to him and say can we meet? And so we met with their board, and they approved us, and they met there for many, many years, at Central Methodist. Eventually they bought their own building, Detroit did. So we had that Harvey Milk service at that Central Methodist Church. Became a place that was friendly, or friendly enough in the midst of the Methodist church going backwards in '76 and all that.

And also I think the other thing, just stories about those times that, of course the New Orleans fire happened in '73, June, which I was still in Boston then. And so there's no internet, there's not anything, so we heard this by phone call. We had a phone tree. That's how we learned things. We had a guy named Art Ramirez who was in Texas. Arthur, who was like the church—he was a pastor, and he was like the gossip, so he did the church phone tree. So Arthur made sure we all knew what was happening. And that was a really awful one, of course.

That story is told in many places about MCC's role because it was our church that was having an after church sing-along and 32 people died,

including the pastor, assistant pastor of our church. They all died in that fire. So this was a time when churches were being vandalized or burned. And we did a testimony before Congress of hate crimes. Troy, I think, testified probably in the '90s about—maybe during Bill Clinton's time—about...no, it was... I'm not sure when exactly. But that we experienced a lot of hate crimes. We had pastors who were murdered. We had all kinds of things happen in those years. Cross burning on the front lawn of the Houston church. So for MCC pastors, you knew that violence or things could come at any time. That was just part of it.

Doris M. And did MCC have any—I'm going to just use the word violent rhetoric in opposition to that? Or what was the position of the church in terms of response to that? I think this would be an important part of the whole LGBTQ movement.

Nancy W. No, no, it was always, you know, kind of understanding this is homophobia, this is violent homophobia. And we really, you know, we took so many cues from the Civil Rights Movement, really, primarily. I mean, that was our guiding light of how to speak, Troy Perry. He never even wanted to like do an AIDS protest in front of a church. He didn't believe in doing that. He didn't believe in disrupting a church service anywhere. He was very, you know. Things had to be done, you know, and not returning violence at all. That was our absolute, you know.

And we really, like I said, our shining light was the civil rights movement, and we saw ourselves as a church in the way churches in the Civil Rights Movement acted, and that we were a safe place, and that we were a place also that stood up and spoke up even when maybe no one else would or could. And so I think the thing that, like internalized oppression is always that you deserve the violence, or you don't deserve to be protected from it because this is what you get for being who you are, and so we had to learn a lot about how do you have self-esteem.

And thinking about Troy, his greatest gift as a leader was he was a self-esteem machine—that's what I call him—which is when he'd see you, if he forgot your name he'd say "hi, good-lookin'," and we would say—it was so nice to be called good-looking that we sort of forgot that maybe he didn't remember our name or wasn't sure. But he had this incredibly optimistic, positive in every terrible situation. He was just built that way. He walked into a room and there he was, and he was a happy warrior. You know, only a few times did we... And he also grieved openly. He was totally transparent in his feelings, in his, you know. He really was extraordinary.

If you work with someone a long time you either respect them more or less, you know, and with us it was always more because he didn't think he knew everything. He attracted people like me who went to graduate school, or other people who had business degrees who came into our leadership, or who had skills that were beyond his skills, or interests, you

know. He was, you know, he had great impulses, great marketing, I think, impulses. He could have been a marketing genius, in many ways. He loved the press and media, and he was so good at that. I learned so much from him about, you know, because we all had to face the media. Many times we were the only person who would talk to the press or be on TV or radio—radio a lot in those days, even.

That's MCC. You could not be in the closet, and you could—even you're straight or gay, whatever—and you could not be afraid to...or if you were afraid you had to, you know, do it anyway. You could not refuse to say oh, it's too dangerous for us to do something. And that's even true in other countries in places. I see that today. You know, you have to have the courage. If you're going to do this, you have to have the courage to be out and model being out and confident. Yeah. I mean, that was so clear. You... You know, if we were going to speak to government or we were going to speak to other churches, you know. And, you know, that... And, you know, that was the other thing. I think my second general conference in San Francisco, two things that stand out from that.

Doris M. When was that, about?

Nancy W. 1974.

Doris M. Got it.

Nancy W. San Francisco. So okay, picture it, the church we had been meeting in, Jim Sandmire, he is, I tell you, he's—I'm sure he's in the [LGBTQ-RAN profiles] archives. He should be. He was on the elders board then, early days. He pastored the San Francisco church through its early, really...he was a public figure. He was friends with Diane Feinstein. He was a very political person. And he was Mormon in background, and he had a business degree from Harvard. And he was...we called him the silver fox. He was a very handsome man with kind of silvery hair. He kind of looked like a Mormon, you know, patriarch or prophet. And he was also into leather and, you know, he died of AIDS eventually. But he was very...he had kind of a slightly upper class feel to him, his education and... As contrast, Troy is very rural Florida Pentecostal, so they're an interesting match to each other. And Jim was pastor of the L.A. church for a while, several years as well.

But San Francisco, the church they'd been meeting in was arsoned a month before our conference. So okay, we were supposed to have the conference in the church, you know, maybe 400, 500 people. And we stayed in people's homes. We never used a hotel. Not till '76, and that's a story, too, did we use it. Oh, Dallas I guess we did use a hotel, but most of us didn't stay in it. We had to stay in people's homes. We had no money. People drove, you know. If they could afford it, a flight. They didn't have money for hotels, you know, that's just... So '74 we're in San Francisco.

We're in San Francisco the week Richard Nixon resigns the presidency, so it could be a little...you know. We were all rejoicing, you know.

And so but...so the church is burned down. So a Presbyterian church allowed us to have our conference. Can you imagine that they allowed it? Jim could talk anybody into anything. So this Presbyterian church, after the church has been burned down that we'd just been meeting in, so we're meeting. And so we didn't have—there wasn't enough space in the new church to have all the meetings we needed, and so we interviewed, every clergy person got interviewed at general conference to be re-licensed or to be approved for ordination. So they made us...we met in the burned out church building. So there's a hole in the roof that's been burned. I mean, there's floors and they brought in folding chairs, and so you met with your credentials committee in a burned out building—burned because MCC met there. I said so that was a very clear message. Okay, if you're with us, you're with us, this is what could happen, you know. But we're just supposed to let... But we never talked about it. It was just like we were there because this was space.

Having space—I think that's the other dynamic, is that one of the things we were doing, when they talked in the Bible about expanding your territory or space, Troy, from the beginning, was we need to own and occupy space. The first building ever owned by the gay community was owned by MCC. And it burned to the ground, you know. It was arsoned. But it was this relentless—you buy buildings. We bought the worst buildings. We bought, you know. I mean, whatever, but occupy space if you can, or create space, or create space in partnership, because that is...that territory gives you...that's an organizing, leveraging asset, you know. Have assets and you can leverage for the movement. Which is what, you know, the Civil Rights Movement leveraged the Black church for space. Someone also said that—I forget who it was—that in the African American culture music is space. Music is a cultural space. And so for us it was, you know, we were moving from a bar culture to an above ground. Jim Sandmire said, you know, when he first came to MCC in 1970, he said well, Troy, this is the first time I've seen these people in the daylight. And the first time people met like in the daylight was in MCC churches. And so...because it was still...

In 1974, in Indianapolis, Indiana,—this probably isn't in the archives—our church had its first church service in someone's home, and it was raided by the police because in the state of Indiana it was illegal for homosexuals to assemble. Now the cops came, and they kind of...they're having church service, they have, you know, communion and chairs set up, you know. B.J. McDaniels, she was the pastor. She's the same one. And she said, taller than the cops, probably, We're having church, you're welcome to stay or leave, but, you know, we're not leaving, so I don't know what you want to do but, you know. And they left.

But, you know, that kind of story was constant of, you know, how do you claim space and... And then the space was often vandalized, ruined, you

know, or you're driven from space to space. That happened, you know. And, you know, there was—because we were young there was the thrill of victory when you'd have these victories and, so that energized. And the stories. We had to tell the stories in newsletters and, you know, we...phone calls and...

And we met frequently. We had three district conferences a year, like we couldn't wait to see each other, you know, it was like, and then one general conference every year. And I think that built and built and built this sense of movement and community. And then, of course, helped found a lot of the national organizations MCC helped found, or like the LGBT Gay & Lesbian Center started as a crisis line at the L.A. church. So we would...the space in which people could find each other, organize, you know. Besides a bar, you know.

And, you know, in the very—Willie Smith, who I'm sure is in the archives, too, he was the second...he was the person who found the church with Troy, and he was a Seventh Day Adventist. And he was kind of a wild person, interesting. You know, he eventually got ordained in MCC. He did not have theological education, but he was very religious and knew a lot of religious history. He was a character. So Willie would lead the music in this very flamboyant way—and this is like 1969, '70—and he'd say all right, queens and, you know, lesbians—all right, queens, on your feet for Jesus, you know. So they'd... That was how—all right, queens, you know, and he'd say this is not the bar, you know, come on, stand up, you know. And teasing, you know. I mean, in the very earliest days it was like uh, you know. Bring your trick to church the next, you know.

Doris M. Bring your...?

Nancy W. Trick. That's what they call when you hooked up with somebody.

Doris M. That's what I thought, yeah.

Nancy W. It's old language. And so he said...they'd say yeah, you know. If you're going to sleep with them, bring them to church, you know. Everybody needs church, you know. It was like...I mean, they were...there was a shamelessness that was so powerful. And that was Troy, too. He, you know, was...he really healed of his shame about sexuality, and that he could speak about it, and he could...he was unapologetic, you know. And really creating a new sense of what is a sexual ethic.

And then in a time in the gay community, male community especially, when there was this huge, you know, all the bars and sexuality and, you know, which eventually got so, you know, decimated around HIV and AIDS, but... And I think part of our job during AIDS then was trying to help people not let the wall of shame kind of...to keep pushing that back.

Doris M. Can we move into...I think now we've kind of...you've moved to the main office. Can you say a little more about that, but especially in the context of what's coming with AIDS, like what was going on for MCC?

Nancy W. Right, so our office was a little place in Hollywood, like the second floor of this offices there. And so 1979 we had our general conference there, and then I moved there with Paula.

Doris M. Were you asked to move there?

Nancy W. Yes, yeah.

Doris M. Is there a reason behind that, that you...?

Nancy W. Yes. Jim Sandmire had moved back to San Francisco. He had been in the offices. And Carol Curetan, who was an elder, was the clerk. And the office manager had had a big falling out with Troy, and it was a mess. We had a crisis in our leadership in '79.

Doris M. '79.

Nancy W. And so she wouldn't come to the—she quit. Well, he fired her, Troy fired her. And she had kind of installed her friends in the staff there. So she left and she took people from the office, and she took most of the equipment because apparently she owned it, and nobody knew that. So eventually she and Troy, they reconciled, but she was never part of MCC again.

She was the founder of the church in St. Louis, and she was a powerful person. She'd been a chemist at, I want to say, Dupont or something like that in St. Louis, a business person who then started the MCC, and self-educated in terms of seminary or anything, and a powerful person. And then this blowup. She liked to control things and, you know, she thought she could control Troy around lots of things. And, you know, it was a bit of a boys club with leadership still, and so, you know. So I step in and took her place, essentially. Now we had been planning for me to move there and her to be there, and me to be—and a different person because Jim was moving, but it didn't end up that way. It ended up with just me and Troy in that office. Who truthfully, we knew each other. I mean, we were together doing all kinds of things all the time, and meetings, but at a personal level we were not, you know. We were so different in many ways. So moving to L.A. was that time to really come to know him.

And so the good thing was at general conference '79 we made money. It was a very large conference. And so we could buy the equipment we needed, because we didn't have any, so it was like starting over again to have a headquarters. And so my job was to kind of reestablish—that was where we had finances and records. And so it was an administrative job, which I'd never really had, but I had aptitude for that, I think, and for

management as well as leadership. And I understood my job was to support Troy, and to make the office run smoothly, and to, you know, be respectful of him and what he needed, and to...well, the infrastructure in the organization, which was...he had no interest in, you know.

Doris M. And it's kind of a 90 degree turn for you, for the person who wanted to go to seminary, to support Troy. And there was kind of a cross current. I know the Catholic women were feeling like those men want all the leadership roles, and women were rebelling. But you felt comfortable in that position?

Nancy W. Interestingly, yeah. I've always...you know, besides lesbian women, gay men are my second group where I feel comfortable with, and then it's probably straight women, straight men, you know. And of course now with gender everything is open and different, which is wonderful. But I love gay men's humor and kind of raw, sometimes, honesty, and things like that that was always very energizing to me. And I think...so we could be attracted and work together without complications of heterosexual attraction so much. Although I always think there's slight levels of bisexuality that exist in all of that, and I've often challenged people with that who, you know, those dynamics exist in the complexity of our community.

But yeah, I felt...I loved gay men, and sometimes they irritated me and angered me, and I... Women at MCC didn't have trouble speaking up about it and confronting. We had Freda Smith, who was our early champion. She was the goddess, the kind of sex symbol of the women. Troy was that, and maybe Jim, for men. But Freda was this iconic, you know, figure of...I mean, she could preach, you know, paint off the walls. She was Salvation Army background. She was passionate and very, you know, just, you know.

So in '72 conference she was ordained, and then she was a write-in candidate to be on the board of elders, and she won. You know, she was like very charismatic. She was a poet and, you know, she'd been an English professor at Sacramento State, and just got, you know, radicalized and all this. So she was our, you know. So I met her in '73, I think at general conference. And yeah, she was our shero. And she just pushed into this, you know, institution and said women will be, you know, empowered, not just tolerated or okay, but... And the men, a lot of them were like, what, who are these women? You know, it was like... And so feminism is happening, and so there's Mary Daly. And I took classes from Mary Daly at Boston College in seminary because we could take courses in other [colleges]... And, you know, they were all leaving the church. And she was not—she was in the closet then. And she gave me a hard time because I was finding MCC and freedom, and I could, you know. Larry was great. He gave...he supported me totally, and he was like... And men who, you know, didn't understand sexism became

willing, you know, became willing to duke it out, you know, figure it out. And so that was, I think...

And there were not without heartbreaks and issues and things that, you know, were not just and good, and so you had to keep pushing. But I think we had a sense we all needed to be doing this together, you know, and you weren't going to be able to change church without women, you know, changing church in this way.

And so Mary Daly was, she was, you know, she was pissed off at me, you know, I mean, really. I knew it was personal, and I figured out that she was a lesbian finally, you know, and of course she was Catholic. And of course this, you know. I don't know how that could not just, you know, to be in that kind of a patriarchal organization. And there have been times at MCC, you know, we all had the meetings, women where, you know, you present an idea and then [when] a man does, and everybody goes oh, great idea, you know. But we were able to call it, I think. Because when you risk so much in other ways it's like well, I don't want to be part of a church I've helped create and now, you know, I can't exercise my, you know, leadership or be empowered in it.

And, you know, there were some men who did a lot better than others, you know. Troy came to just...it was like...he's a lifelong learner. He's a learner, learner, learner. So this was fascinating to him, you know. And lesbians, who were different. You know, he was heterosexually married, but it was more like he was just fascinated with, you know, the dynamics of power and of, you know, gender, and these things just, you know, were so—you could tell. And he was always learning. And that's, you know. And humble in a certain way that he was not above being corrected or being challenged theologically.

That was always—we had a big struggle in the late '70s, early '80s, where more progressive—especially women, but men, too—were challenging. Troy came from very fundamentalist theology and Pentecostal theology. And we had to just keep... And we'd get a lot of people, especially in certain places, in Texas and others where the MCC, in the early days, was kind of unreconstructed, you know, and would just add that it's okay to be gay, you know. And so we really began pushing against that and say look, the whole theology, the whole thing.

You know, that took time, and trust and, you know, we had a nervous breakdown at our 1981 general conference, probably the most famous, in Houston, where we struggled around inclusive language for God. And I tell you, that was... And we came up and we came to an agreement, and... But it was not with—it was like fierce, to the death, you know. There were people who were still in that, you know, what Brandan Robertson was talking about yesterday about choosing everybody.

Doris M. Wait.

Nancy W. Brandan Robertson.

Doris M. Thank you.

NANCY W. Yeah. Who wrote the book “Queer & Christian,” who comes from that very fundamental, very Moody Bible Institute, which was where Troy went, you know, so we still had MCC. And my whole career at MCC is helping Catholics kind of accept that, you know, they have that internal authority and conscience, and that’s with them at MCC, and then fundamentalists to not be terrified that they’re going to hell, or that there’s something they missed in the Bible, or that maybe we’re really just justifying ourselves so, you know, so much of that. So MCC is primarily people come from those backgrounds. Not as much from mainstream Protestant. And I think that’s a class issue. That’s a hobby horse of mine, is... And that some of, you know, in the early days, especially, you know, some of the groups were starting to come out in these coalitions in other denominations.

And we knew the leaders, we loved them and all that, but there was a kind of gulf there that, from their point of view they were in the legitimate church and we were something else, you know. And they didn’t want to leave that and what that, you know, that was our opinion, I think. And for some of them, they thought they should try to change the more established, mainstream church, and that what we were doing was, you know, kind of ancillary. But we saw ourselves as being the church right now, and that people needed healing now, and change now, and that we were the ones outside who change the church, the bigger church, and we could do that because we didn’t have to fight them every Sunday and every week.

And I think for me that was the better choice. I have friends who fought their whole lives in Methodist church or other churches or, you know, and they had victory, but some of them died before them, and they, you know, they sacrificed in ways that...or had to be quiet, or... I couldn’t do that. Building the urgent need of community now was what appealed to me so much.

Doris M. And do you think AIDS, because so many people were so intimately close to people dying of AIDS in MCC, do you think that AIDS also solidified MCC compared to the mainstream?

Nancy W. Yeah. AIDS was... first of all, I was always thankful we were around 13 or 14 years before AIDS started. Enough to get enough of a sense of our own culture as a church—barely, but, you know, we’d been through a lot of things already. And so women were already empowered in MCC, and other things. We were beginning to deal with race. And we were beginning to be global.

Doris M. What about racial? Did you have a bigger racial mix or was it mostly white at this time?

Nancy W. Mostly white, but there were churches, like the L.A. church was always a very richly diverse church, New York, Washington, D.C. Tend to be those big centers. But MCC as a whole, you know, really... I think sometimes because we saw ourselves in the Civil Rights Movement thing we gave ourselves credit that we didn't deserve, and so there were some of us within that reformed these—these white women, white people healing racism, and we had people...we had...we really started doing that work in the '70s and early '80s. And, you know, that's always a tension with us.

You know, we have a wonderful relationship with TFAM [The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries], and with Bishop Flunder. And I, during the time I was moderator, that was one of the greatest gifts. We did a conference together. We did things like that. And I notice at this conference I feel like there are a lot more people of color. The balance is interesting and different, partly because of where we are and influence of churches that have really become more multicultural or multiracial, and have leadership. So that has been a very, you know, an ongoing struggle that we're part of the struggle that's going on with everyone.

But AIDS, you know, I think I was thankful that we'd been preaching enough for long enough around self-esteem, self-acceptance that we could withstand the onslaught of, you know, that AIDS is God's gift or AIDS is, you know, from God. And the first thing, almost the first thing we did was we had God is greater than AIDS, and we always said, you know, AIDS is not a punishment from God. And that message, we were like...we were very early on.

And in the earliest days of AIDS we didn't really know how it was transmitted, and so we were confronted, because we do communion things very intimately, and we have very close contact, and we served communion to people. And so immediately, well, what are we doing? We just said well, we're just going to do what we do. And I said in six months if I'm not dead from AIDS, then it's not casually transmitted, let's put it that way, you know.

So we just like you step into the fire. We went into the hospital rooms. People had their food left outside their door. We'd see it, we'd carry the food in. I don't know if we wore masks. I don't even remember. But we just, we touched people with AIDS. People with AIDS came with their IV poles to church services and we, you know, we could not... It's like okay, we've been through this now, we have to carry this into we're a whole community. We say we are the church with AIDS, so we're going to identify with the people who are suffering, dying, and...

In 1987 Troy and I were invited by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to be present at John Paul II's service in South Carolina with the National Council of Churches, and Orthodox, and other Christians, and Catholics in this big stadium in South Carolina. And the Pope was on his

way, and there was a storm in Miami, and he couldn't get in, was delayed by four hours or five hours. We were five hours in the heat with this maybe six, seven hundred people from mainstream Protestant churches and Orthodox churches, and me and Troy from MCC. We're there. And we had buttons that say "God is greater than AIDS." And so people would literally come up to us and go "God is greater than AI..." You know, you could see like really how did you get in here? You know, that was the... And I said it was a, you know, a secretary to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who was gay who made our invitation. You just know that it was an underground, and we got it, so... So we were, you know.

So we were in the service, and Helen Hays read the gospel reading from Mark of who is my brother and my mother and my sister, you know, those... And I'm sitting with a group of Orthodox priests. You know, there I am. And Troy was some, you know. And the Pope preached on the sanctity of the family from that passage. Yeah. So I wrote a big article in *Christian Century* about, you know, our experience and, you know, how the scripture critiqued the Pope's sermon, I thought, pretty well. But, you know, so those experiences were like...

And that's—I met Cardinal Ratzinger there because there was a conference of Lutherans and Catholics. I got invited by a Methodist woman who was in the closet, but she was on the Faith and Order [committee] of the World Council of Churches, and so she invited me because she knew I was coming. And I met Joseph Ratzinger, Cardinal Ratzinger. And she says, Cardinal—she knew him very well—I want you to meet Nancy Wilson. She's the ecumenical officer for Metropolitan Community Church—you know, Cardinal, the gay church. Like that, she says. And, you know, he had excommunicated John McNeil, you know, threw him out of the Jesuits just the year before, you know. So there he is, you know. He looks at me. I put out my hand. He takes my hand in his small little sweaty hand, you know, it was just like... I mean, it was really this precious, wonderful moment that, you know—"You know, Cardinal, the gay church." [Laughs.] Just like... You know, you think...oh, my. So, you know. Those opportunities that would come our way were just so precious because, you know, how else could they happen? I mean, just these... And there was this whole underground of older LGBT... [Loud noise.]

- Doris M. And I do want to hear more about the underground network because several times you've said it was people in mainstream organizations—
- Nancy W. Oh, totally.
- Doris M. —who...
- Nancy W. Absolutely.
- Doris M. ....we're going to go back to your saying that there were people who were closeted in other organizations.
- Nancy W. Oh, absolutely.
- Doris M. If you could just give some examples.

Nancy W. Yes. First going into the National Council of Churches, we applied for membership in 1981. And, you know, there were so many people in this National Council of Churches, which was a lot larger organization, that were either closeted and gay or supportive, or... And I tell this story in my book "Our Tribe," and a lot of that. But there were always these allies and friends. And some of them were LGBT who had the courage to support us and to give us clues about what to do, who to talk to, resources.

There's a whole thing being done around the Cuban refugee crisis where MCC played a huge role in resettling LGBT Cuban refugees in the early '80s. And one of the things that happened was the underground Protestant, progressive but closeted folks helped to get us government money, and like support—one of our ministers was a chaplain at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas,—to do intake with LGBT Cuban refugees. So MCC played a role. We resettled people in our homes. We did all this kind of stuff. But the resources sometimes would come from somebody who had access to a fund and who could funnel it to another organization and then to us. Never directly to us. It was never possible. Even though we would do the work and we would, you know, but...

There's a new book about Jimmy Carter. This should be...during the Carter presidency his gay rights agenda. And Troy Perry and MCC is all over that. I'm in that book, too. But it's about the Cuban refugee crisis and that. But all of these were underground networks that we had in mainstream denominations, in organizations in the State Department, in, you know, government, people who were willing to risk themselves to help us or to...

We had an office in Washington, D.C. for a while that, you know, we shared an office with other organizations and MCC could be part of that. So I think we learned well how to use partnerships. And oftentimes Catholic brothers and Catholic sisters were amazing allies. Amazing. Just... I got to finish my M.Div. at a Roman Catholic seminary in Detroit.

Doris M. When was that?

Nancy W. That was...I went there in 1978 and '79 and then I finished long distance in '81. And the—I'm struggling to remember the name of the dean of St. Cyril & Methodius. But he, and there was a woman, Anneliese Sinnott, and she was the assistant dean, and they shepherded me. They got me admitted to this Roman Catholic seminary to finish my M.Div. degree. Took all my credits from BU, shepherded me through finishing my degree, and did that. He wrote the first book on human sexuality—Anthony Kosnik. He wrote the first Catholic book called "A Catholic View of Human Sexuality" or something like that.

Doris M. What was his last name?

Nancy W. Kosnik, K-O-S. He was eventually silenced, and yeah, for his work. But he had a few years in there where... So I was in the little in between time before he was silenced and before... They covered me. They, you know, they just let me finish my M.Div. And that was a hoot. That school was—I took some wonderful courses there. They were kind to me. It was—this was in the late '70s.

And so you would always find...there was one Catholic church in every town where there was a gay priest, or there was somebody who was always behind the scenes, or upfront, depending on how—always. And every MCC pastor could tell you of... Unitarians, UCC, Episcopalians. Sometimes Lutherans and Catholics and just...yeah, yeah. So... So I learned a lot.

Going to a Catholic seminary, wow, that was huge, since so many people at MCC are Catholic, and I'm, you know, I grew up with Catholics, but I didn't understand the institution, and the theologies, and the progressive theology. There's so much Catholic progressive theologies. So amazing, you know. And was really more in line to me with MCC than other things, yeah.

Doris M. Yeah. We have covered so much territory. I know you have to go. Is there anything you want to make sure you tell me that I never thought to ask, maybe about the last, oh, 30 years?

Nancy W. I think one of the great blessings was as we began to expand globally and find people everywhere from Cuba, Jamaica, to Africa, and African folks who are here, Philippines, and all around the world where we...and first with no technology that could do that and then eventually the internet and all that, how that impacted our capacity to find and to change history.

One story I have to tell you, I guess, because I can't resist. Twenty years ago MCC elder Diane Fisher went to Eastern Europe because we had a partner there, Florin Buhuceanu, who, when he was 18, was imprisoned by Ceausescu for being gay, and nearly starved to death until Ceausescu was assassinated, murdered, and then they let people out of prison. He became a gay activist then in Romania, founded Accept. And he was a Christian. He was an Orthodox Christian and wanted to be part of MCC.

And so Diane met him in Eastern Europe and they began this work. We formed a nonprofit organization for human rights separate from MCC, and they had the first Gay Pride parade in Bucharest, Romania, with a couple hundred people, and thousands of Orthodox people protesting. The mayor didn't want it to happen, the president, but we petitioned from all over the world, we got people to help us, you know, State Department and anything else we could do, and they had their parade successfully.

Doris M. What year?

Nancy W. That was 20 years ago, so 2005. And Diane went back and forth to Eastern Europe mentoring and working with young adults and people in Moldova, and Estonia, and Latvia, and all these countries. And three weeks ago they invited her back. The Canadian embassy paid for her to come back to Romania. 30,000 people marched in the Pride parade in Bucharest.

Doris M. Wasn't that just something?

Nancy W. Yeah. So she got to see that. And that was MCC. Without MCC I don't think they would have been able to start then or whatever, but yeah. So. And that's the kind of thing I go, you know, a few people, a plane ticket, and, you know. And she would talk—because she would talk to the press. She was just, you know. And they were fascinated—it was a woman priest, a woman minister and bishop, and it really was so amazing, so yeah. Well, thank you so much. It's...I...you know. So yeah, and if ever you want to follow up with me or anything else...

Doris M. I have a feeling not only I, but many people will want to follow up with this, Nancy. But I think you've really given us such an intimate picture of some times. And as you said, there's not many people now who can represent the early years, and you've done it so beautifully.

Nancy W. Right, right. And there's so much there, and so... And it's very emotional seeing people here. Some of them I haven't seen in ten years and more who... Yeah, and, you know, our old-timers, and some of them are not here. And my closest cohort Troy, and Don Eastman, and Darlene Garner are all not here, and first time for me, so yeah. But they're here in spirit, so yeah. Okay, I thank you.

Doris M. Thank you so much.

Nancy W. Your guidance was just perfect, so...

Doris M. Oh, thank you so much.

