

Oral History Interview: Nokuthula Dhladhla and Paul Mokgethi-Heath

Interviewee: Nokuthula Dhladhla and Paul Mokgethi-Heath

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus

Date: July 5, 2025

Doris M. Welcome. I'm Doris Malkmus from the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, and I am at the MCC General Conference to interview Paul Mokgethi-Heath and Rev. Nokuthula Dhladhla. And I am doing this so that this oral history interview can be put onto our website. Do you agree to that?

Nokuthula D. Yes, yes.

Paul M. Yes.

Doris M. All right. I'd like to begin by asking Rev. Paul if he would tell us a little bit about how he came to be part of MCC in South Africa.

Paul M. My name is Rev. Paul Mokgethi-Heath, and I am originally from South Africa, but now I live in Sweden. And I grew up in the dusty streets of Soweto in South Africa, in Johannesburg, and I have about other two siblings, and...yeah. And I grew up within the Anglican Church. And growing up as a kid, faith was always something that has always been very important to me, even though you know that when you grow up within the religious family you are always pushed and forced—you have to go to church every Sunday. But for me it was something that was just there, and it was easy, and I didn't feel any obligation for me to be forced to go to church, so it was an easy thing, and something that I loved.

And I got involved within the church. As I grew up I was an altar boy and then I joined the youth services, and then from there I also joined the choir, so those were my youthful days. And then growing up, and as I began to start realizing and finding myself, and realizing that I was different, you know, trying to figure out my sexuality, then I found that I was gay. And as a gay person growing up in a different religious space, then that also on its own gives you sort of like challenges and things that you question yourself in trying to find out why am I different, why is the church saying such things, why these negative preachings that are being said in pulpits.

And then I started having a small prayer group with my friends. We were about five of us, and as we started this prayer group, it started as a support system. And so every Sunday in the afternoons we would meet at each others' houses and just to come and chat about how was the week, how can we support each other, and what has been the challenges. And then we were able then to pray together. And so that group then started growing, and then suddenly we started inviting other people to come to the group. And then we saw the group growing, and we kind of, from that group of five it was now a group of about 10, 12, 13, 14 people coming every Sunday meeting together in each other's homes.

Then the challenge was that then the space was becoming a bit small to

meet at each other's houses, and so we needed to find a bigger space. But in that process as well we realized that this group is growing, maybe we need to start something like a church, and we need to have somebody that will be able to lead this whole group who is more educated in terms of spirituality, and somebody who's maybe a clergy or a priest that can be able to hold this group together. And we were told by a friend that there was some man by the name of Tsietsi Thandekiso, who's now late. He passed some few years ago. And we went and then spoke to the late Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso, and we also invited him to come and meet up with the group and see if he can be of any help or assistance within the group. So then he came. He stayed and saw the group. And then he was interested to be part of the group.

So then as the group was growing, and as he was now also taking the lead, we decided that we wanted to have a bigger place, and so we then went and rented a place which was called the Skyline Bar, which was a gay bar. The Skyline Bar, it was also a hotel. And so we went and asked them if we could rent a space. So they gave us their second floor which they used as a hall, and that's where we started having our worship services. And then Rev. Tsietsi Thandekiso was the one who was now leading us into worship every Sunday.

Doris M. For the help and understanding of other people, can you say, when you were growing up, what was the image of a gay person, and when did you find other people who had also gay feelings inside, but still wanted to pray? Were they part of your Anglican circle of friends or were they people you knew from a bar or from out in a job or something like that? And I would ask you the same thing, what was your understanding of lesbians and how they got to know each other?

Paul M. I think for me, as I was growing up, realizing that I was different, I think it was a very difficult moment to find people that I could relate to at that time. But the other thing was that because I, as I was growing up and as I was hearing and knowing that homosexuality was a sin, it was something that was against God's law and all this, so everything that I had as I was growing up, it was something that was always negative.

But then how I then started to find my own community was when I started going to a high school. And when I was at high school I met a friend. His name was [C.D. Machinay] 00:08:31. And so C.D. was the one that I became very close to, and out of that—C.D. also knew one or two other gay folks, and so then we started to put those links together. And at the end of the day we had a group which was called the Ted Dinard, and that group, the Ted Dinard, came out of the soapy that was famous at the time, "Dynasty." "Dynasty" was the soapy that we used to watch because when they started introducing the gay character on "Dynasty," so we were so excited to say oh no, they've introduced a gay character, we have to watch "Dynasty." And that's the reason why we also came up with the name Ted

Dinard.

And the name came out why? Because there was a time where Ted was involved with Steve, and Ted with Steve, they had a relationship, and then it happened that the father of Ted came in the lounge and found them kissing, and then he threw Ted onto the fireplace, and that's how Ted was killed. And Ted died. And for us it was a traumatic thing, but we said out of his death we want to claim that word. And that is why our group then called ourselves the Ted Dinard. And it was nine gay men and one lesbian.

00:10:21 *[End Part 1.]*
 [Part 2.]

Nokuthula D. So I am Nokuthula. Yes, that's the way I want to start. But I grew up in a home where being Christian, we go to church every Sunday, and I was hearing a lot about how God did not like homosexuals. I was hearing the whole story about Sodom and Gomorrah all the time in our preaching. So I was at my teenage where, you know, other teenagers are talking about their boyfriend, and I was not able to engage in that conversation because I found I was looking at women, I was liking women, but it was not something that I can talk to anyone about it because it felt like nobody will understand what I am really talking about. But it was that whole issue of having to deal with that kind of carrying it as a child, a teenager, and I was carrying it to my high school.

My high school then became where now you go to hear that the only conversation that is here is only about boys and girls dating. There's no other conversation that you can hear. And I also then thought ah, probably, maybe I need to have a boyfriend for myself because now, if now everyone is talking about their boyfriend, I'm not able to say I can actually say, because there is no room, there's no conversation, I've never even heard anybody else say that they have feelings for women.

So it was in that kind of time when I was, I think I was turning 18. It was just like a moment where one time then there was someone who came and visited in our church. So this person came and she stand in front, and she was requesting for prayers because, you know, in church we used to allow people to come and say, you know, there's prayer time and then people can be prayed for. So she mentioned that she's struggling with these kinds of feelings, she does not know what is, so that is the reason why she's here, she's needing some prayers. And at that moment yes, she was prayed for. But then I noticed after church that no one wanted to really talk to her, so then I went over and we started talking that me and you are on the same boat. And then I was able to explain to her because exactly what she was explaining in front was exactly what was happening with me. So it was just a moment of that kind of a situation.

Then we became friends. But I think after some time, you know, people were, I guess, noticing that we always come together, we go home together, or even she comes to visit, I'll visit her, so people will notice. So

then one Saturday we were called into a meeting with our elders, and we did not know what we have done, why are we being called, what is it that is going on. So we went to the meeting and our denomination at that time, you know, elders were all men. So then we find them sitting in a circle, and then we were put inside that circle to try and explain. I remember there were questions about how do we sleep together. So we were shocked, why are we being asked, what is happening and, you know, why are we being summoned into coming here, and now we are being asked how are we sleeping together and what is going on.

So there was one guy in the meeting who said how do they expect them, you know, expect us, we are children here, you know, that we will really explain that to them, because that is not the reason why we have been called here. And also, you know, it is inappropriate for them to be asking those kinds of questions. But then eventually we were told that we are going to be excommunicated from church. And it was a shock because, like, what have we done? Is it being friends or what, you know, do other friends get to be excommunicated from church? They said because we are, you know, we have demons. So I could not even go and tell them at home this is what is going to happen Sunday morning in the church.

So church service went Sunday. It was Sunday in our church, and church service started. Then in the middle of the service then we, you know, got to—now normally, as I've mentioned before, that whenever there is that kind of a situation they will ask the kids to leave and the visitors to go, and then the members only. But that service they did not. Nobody was asked. We were asked to stand up and then we were told that they are chasing us [out], excommunicating us from the church because, you know, what we have is transferable, women must be scared of us, we have demons. So it was very embarrassing. It was also humiliating, because now we are standing. Everyone is looking at you like you are a demon, you have something that is transferable, so everyone will stay away from you. And we were just told that, and that was it.

So my mother, my grandmother and my family was shocked, what is happening. I was shocked, what is happening. But me and my friend decided that no, we're not going to not come to church. If we need help, how are we not being helped here? Because if we need help, then they need to make sure that they are helping us, and so why are we being told that we are not going to come? So at home it was not an open conversation. We never...after that service nobody asked me what, and it was just because it was not a conversation that my parents were willing to have at that time.

So we then go back to church. Every Sunday we went and sit at the back. And no one was sitting at the back because then there was us, because we decided that we cannot be told that we can't go to church. So that is the only place that we knew that that is what you're going to get, no helping, help from God. So eventually then the elders decided that no, they're going to organize prayers for us. So for her it was not going to be possible

for them to have prayers in their house, so my grandmother then said no, it's fine, the prayers must come. And every Friday so they'll go and sit somewhere, then by 9:00 they get into their house, and then that is when the prayer started.

So the prayers were had, because we are beaten up. You know when people are chasing demons out of someone, so they do all sorts of things, you know, praying. It was a hard moment. And I think it was two, three, four weeks and then we realized that this is not something that we wanted because it became very, you know, we got to be touched inappropriate, and it was just not something that we wanted and something that was good for us.

So it was then when we decided that at this present moment we want to lie, we're going to lie and say that we are okay and so that then we are being brought back to church, because we're participating with the youth, with singing, the choir, youth leader, so we're doing a lot of things. But because we did not want to continue being humiliated by being beaten up because the demons and everything, so we thought no, the only persuade is for us to say we have been healed and we are okay.

So it was also in that moment when my life, I was realizing that I have a calling over my life, I needed to do something for myself, and understanding that God can really continue using me at that. But that guiltiness of thinking that actually I liked, because I still feel the same way about women, nothing has changed, but the change becomes when you're realizing that I could not continue with these prayers because it was just inhuman how we were handled as women, and also the fact that it makes us feel very uncomfortable, because now you've been touched in places that you are not supposed to be touched, because the assumption was that probably we have two body parts, we have a vagina and a penis or things like that. So that was when we realized that this is not happening.

But eventually I was allowed back, we were allowed, both of us, allowed back, and then we were participating in the church, everybody is okay. But then eventually, as we go preach and...and...and...and so I was gang raped. And that moment really changed me in how I look and think of how God was presented to me as this horrible God who punishes people, who hurt people. It was just a horrible moment. So I think what led to that position was because the people in the church, when they came and see me after the incident, they said to me God was punishing me, so God was showing me that the only time that it is okay is when men are sleeping with a woman.

And in my head it was like do they understand what really happened to me? Because if now this is what, I'm presented with this God who punishes people like me and nobody even say, How are you, nobody has asked me that, but I got to be hearing that this is what they are thinking. So I decided then and there that I'm going to take my life, I'm going to, you know, I'm not going to continue with this God, the one that I have been told to, and the fact that God, this was... So it was it for me. That was the

reason why I decided now I wanted to kill myself. And then I tried. I attempted suicide, but then it did not...

So I find myself waking up from the hospital, and the doctor who are treating me gave me workups and told me that you are very young, God has a purpose for your life, whatever it is that has happened to you, you're going to have to, you know, you can change it for yourself. And that is the day when I came up from that hospital.

Then I made a decision that whatever God that my church has said to me, I don't want that one, I'm going to find the God that is loving and kind from the scripture. So I found scripture, like Psalm 139, I found scriptures like Jeremiah Chapter 1. Psalm 139 speaks about you are wonderfully made.

So I took those same lines, that I am wonderfully made in the image of God, and then I also looked at the scriptures like Jeremiah Chapter 1, Verse 5, where God says I knew you before you were born, I called you.

So for me that was very exciting, and that changed me in how then eventually I got to be given the information to say hey, actually, there's a text that, you know, there's a man, Rev. Tsietsi Thandekiso, who you can have conversation because [about] the struggle with your [spiritual] integration, you know, these words, the church is preaching the message of inclusion, the church is speaking about God who loves, the God who accept. And I kept on asking is lesbian accepted? I did not even know, like, a woman like me. They said no, there's men, there's women, there's everyone there, so you can.

So I met him and we started having to engage. But at first he did not invite me to the church, but it was the conversation in the moment for him to help me personally, because I needed a lot of, you know, I had a lot of traumas, a lot of struggles, and a lot of hate of myself, but a lot of doubting, you know, even in the call upon my life to say why would God choose me, and continuously, even when I decided to divorce God, because then he said no, you did not divorce God, you divorced whatever ideas that people said this is God. But God who loves us, God who does not punish people, God, we can come to God in the way we are. God does not ask us to do anything about ourselves.

And learning from that moment that all of us, we are spiritual beings, we have a physical body, we have a soul, but sexuality forms part of who we are, so you need to embrace that element, that part of your life so that you are able to get to that place of, you know. So I did not even know that it was, and since I needed to know that it was just Hope and Unity where all LGBTI people can go and yeah. So that was my relationship with Thandekiso before I got to be introduced to the church.

Doris M. Wow. Can you carry on from what you left us with?

Paul M. Yes. And so how we began to know about MCC. Rev. Tsietsi Thandekiso was working for [Kindley Tooley] 00:14:24 project at that time, and he used to travel quite a lot to come into the U.S., and so in one of his trips while he had visited here he heard about MCC, and when he got back to

South Africa he told the church that I have heard about this church, it's called MCC, and I heard that it's a gay church, but I still need to investigate more about it. And so then he came back again, so then in his early time he was able to find more and a lot about MCC and to get to know much better about the church.

And so coming back then he told us that I have done more research about this church—yes, it does exist, and I have also made links with the people from MCC. And so then he was then introduced to Rev. Judy Dahl. And Rev. Judy Dahl, at that time, she was in charge of the global outreach. And so Rev. Judy Dahl and Rev. Tsietso Thandekiso, they started having links together. And so in their talks Rev. Judy Dahl promised that she was going to come to South Africa and meet up with the church, and also come and talk about UFMCC and also hear about our concerns, if we had any concerns, and if we needed to know more about UFMCC, she would be able to come and answer those questions.

And then definitely it happened, and she came to South Africa to come and visit, and she met up with the church, she met up with all of us, and it was such an interesting moment because we had concerns. We have never heard of a gay church before, and we never even knew how it looked like. But she came and she explained, and on her departure, then we decided that maybe this is something that we need to embark on. So we then decided that we were going to join the church, and then we joined the denomination.

And for me, getting to know more about UFMCC, it was when I was invited at the general conference in 1998—well, it was in Los Angeles. And when we went to the general conference in 1998 in Los Angeles, that's when I began to know more then about the denomination. And for me it was a warm moment because that was the moment I started oh, to see so many gay folks around you, you know, it's like okay, that does really exist—oh, so many people, look at them! And so it was such an exciting moment. It was like oh! You know, I was so bubbly and like oh, yeah, this is really... So that was my beginning of my connection with the denomination at my first ever conference which was held in Los Angeles.

Nokuthula D. Yeah, but it was in 1999.

Paul M. Oh, okay.

Nokuthula D. So where was it before? Maybe adding. So I finally then made the change. So it was when, then...because in this whole process also Rev. Tsietso Thandekiso passed away, so while this was happening we were affiliating. Then it was then. He passed away in 1997, because then our part was during 1998 or 1996, somewhere there.

Paul M. Yes.

Nokuthula D. So yes, so he passed away. But already now was coming to church, and then I realized that oh, this Hope and Unity, it has a lot of gay

men, and then there was one lesbian, or two lesbians. It did not make sense to me. But at the same time it was a place that I felt home, I felt that I cannot change anything about myself, I can just be myself. And when Judy Dahl was coming, now already, the board, we had a board, and also there was a whole issue of who is going to now lead, take over from his death. I come from, you know, I had a bit of a process with my ordination from my previous church, so I landed into this place.

And then already there was other churches, like Hope an Unity was creating, we had other branches, and so Durban, then Rev. Sikobi also was part of the group from Durban, because that was the group that also was created by Hope and Unity. So there were many little other groups of people that will come and inquire about, you know, like, you know, because we had ministers who were closeted, pastors who were like, you know, this is now something that we are not used to it. But then Judy Dahl said no. And we all came to this general conference. So now it was like a whole process.

Then I got ordained in 1998. But I think for me the whole thing was really—because then I became the first person to be ordained within South Africa as a clergy within the MCC, so it was like a wild moment for all of us. But also, you know those things that when you have found people already existing, they have a board and, you know, Paul is one of the founders. He could have said no, I'm going to take over, or one of the founders, but that whole thing that people believed so much and that they created, like that space, created that space that, you know, we want to be led, you know, in between, you know, I want to learn from you the same way that I needed to learn a lot of things from him because, you know, he is one of the founders, and, you know, and also being very active within the church. You know, we had all kinds of different activities. He was the first gay man to talk about HIV, so it was like these kinds of beautiful things that you realize.

And now both of us landed in this general conference the same way that, you know, like for me it was like a big thing because now we are from South Africa, we thought that, like, MCC is like now having to see. We did not even know about trans issues at that time. So we learned, and knowing lesbian and gays and bisexuals, but then the “T” was like... So the whole conference it was like when, you know, now it was different workshops and then what are they talking about? You know, like what is that now, you know, like LGB, LGBT, or for us it was LGB and, you know, then intersex.

And also we are young people who did not even have gray hair. We were very young. Now we are in this big thing that is happening in his life. And also he was beginning to now think about his calling in his life and, you know, so it was just a beautiful thing that, you know, it ended up having for him to really accept his calling. So when did you get to your—so then—

Paul M. That general conference.

Nokuthula D. In that general conference.

Paul M. I was developing.

Nokuthula D. You know, so ordained.

Doris M. You said colleague. Do you mean his spouse?

Paul M. No, no, the calling that God—

Nokuthula D. The calling. His calling.

Doris M. Oh, his calling.

Paul M. Yes, yes.

Nokuthula D. Calling, yes. So that is what I was meaning. So then he got ordained in that same general conference, and then I came...and also because we were wanting to learn more about MCC at then some point then after we come back from this general conference, then Judy Dahl, who was our global person, arranged that I needed to come to Texas so that I learn from three [MCC churches] denominations, from bigger, Resurrection MCC, and then there was the other church—I will remember the name—so it was a big church and small church so that I can be able to know the governance stuff and how, you know, from a bigger church perspective and to a smaller church perspective how they both have been around. So I got to come here. And when I was there, it was 2001, and then yeah, so I stayed for four months. I think I came a week before the Easter. So then Paul was continuing taking care of the church.

So I was with the Rev. Elder Carolyn Mobley was assigned to me, and you know Rev. Carolyn Mobley-Bowie, you know both of them. And then there was this other person, the pastor from Maranatha MCC also, yes, Maranatha MCC that I was linked on. But it helped me really because it really helped me to, God to open my eyes, but also learn about governance stuff, how do we have a board, what is the role of the board, what is the bylaws, what is happening within the big denomination, so those kinds of things.

So then we came back from that and the church was now really growing because we had, you know, also from that time when we were in the Skyline Bar, then there was a moment that we realized that that place was not safe anymore. So Paul's partner, Father J.P., Rev. J.P., he was also an Anglican priest who then got to have conversations with his church and said, you know, we can be able to rent that space for them within them. And they opened their space because they have services between 9:00 and—

Paul M. To 11:00.

Nokuthula D. Yes, and so from that time, from 11:00 we'll then have our church service. So it became our home for many, many, many years, until 2010. So it became our home because then we see people growing, we see people coming from far. We've seen also people who are coming from—because South Africa has nine provinces, so we have seen other people from other provinces like Nelspruit, where people will come and say I am a pastor, you know, I have been a closeted pastor, I want now information of how we can be able... So we also pioneered into making so that we have helped.

Now South Africa has a lot of LGBTI spaces, so we have done a lot of work into making sure that also people know that we are MCC, even though they did not want to be part of MCC because they wanted to be independent churches. But we have played a role into making sure that that kind of thing is open. So I'm going to give to Paul to talk about the other things that we did like being part of conversation within the constitution, issues of civil union, so what was the role of the church there.

Paul M. Yes. And so after getting ordained here at general conference we went back and we started working. And at that time it was South Africa, and it was also shifting, because it was the time where South Africa was also negotiating now with the National Party that was the leading party at that time, because the National Party was also now feeling so much pressure for them to release Nelson Mandela. And during that time there were quite a lot of things that were happening. So when Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, then when he came out he became even more active, and there was a period there whereby they reviewed the constitution of the country.

So we, as Hope and Unity MCC, played quite a vital role in making sure that we were also actively involved in making sure that the sexual orientation clause was also included in the constitution. So we wrote petitions, we met with other LGBTI organizations. At that time there was a body of organizations in South Africa, and that body was called the National Coalition. So it was the National Coalition. It was the body of all different kinds of organizations that we had in South Africa. And so the church was also part of the National Coalition. So we were then asked to represent the faith, and so the church, you know, also we wrote our petition, our own memorandum.

And so the sexual orientation clause was then included when the new constitution came out. The sexual orientation clause was then also included in the constitution, which was one of the victories that we also have done in the church.

And then when the marriage act law was starting to be...they started a conversation, and we were also involved in that as well as a church. And

as I was saying, the interesting thing was that when they were debating about this whole thing in Parliament, there was sort of like a small umbrella that was launched in Parliament for them to go out and investigate how people are feeling about the marriage act law. And so this group of people were given a task to go to churches, to synagogues, everywhere, and to organizations and at work to ask the question: are they okay that the South African constitution and the marriage act law must be included.

And so those people, they were given a year to do this, but for them, they did not do anything within that period of a year. And when it came on the 1st of December—I don't know if it was in 2006, yes. In 2006, on the 1st of December, they were supposed to go back and report to Parliament, but because they didn't do their work Parliament had to pass the law.

[Laughs.]

Nokuthula D. And then the beautiful thing about that moment as the law passed, we had a gay marriage in our church.

Paul M. Yes.

Nokuthula D. So then in between all the pastors who were part of MCC, so we had Rev. Janine Pressman, who was running another MCC in Pretoria. What was...?

Paul M. Glorious Light.

Nokuthula D. Glorious Light MCC. And then we then, because we all applied for being marriage officers. So in between this process that is happening. We are also part of [that day]. So there's a book that has a bit of that information, "Behold I Make Things All New." I'll find the information about the book, so I'll send you the information. But what was very important to know is that we had the wedding on the 1st of December, and we had the wedding on the 1st of December, and Rev. Janine Pressman—

Paul M. Officiated.

Nokuthula D. —was the one who got to be licensed.

Paul M. Was officiating. Yes, and then we had to—

Nokuthula D. So...and then [she managed], so it was—

Paul M. To officiate that wedding.

Nokuthula D. To officiate that wedding.

Paul M. So it was a milestone, yes. It was a milestone.

Nokuthula D. And the whole thing was full. The church was full for the first time because people were amazed of, you know, what is this happening. So normally, yes, we have blessed a lot of weddings. But this now that we are doing it legal by civil union marriage, it was just...the press was going crazy. Everyone wanted to have a conversation, but because we had to protect the, you know, because this was a moment to celebrate, but also realizing that the people who were getting married, what was their feeling about the press. So some of the, you know, photos and stuff, but we have a whole service, and that happens that they took, you know, other press, they took the photos and every... But it was a moment to celebrate for all of us because this is happening. And it happened inside our own church, Hope and Unity MCC. And I think it was just, you know, like yeah, a beautiful moment.

So from then, [2006], because after that same year, then I got sick, and I had a major spine operation on my spine, because they found out that I had a tumor. So I spent two years in a wheelchair, and I never thought I will walk again. So it was a moment also now you have to be watching for the church and then, you know, like having to take care of the church. I think in 2008 when finally I got to do an operation, and at some point then, you know, by the grace of God, you know, you see I'm walking. And it was in 2010 when I realized that probably I came back too early, back to church, because after that kind of major operation something traumatic has happened in your life, and I then made a decision that I wanted to leave so that I can be able to have a sabbatical. So I resigned from Hope and Unity in 2010, so that is why there is a gap here in 2010. But then I took two years, I think, two, three years before I can come back again.

But what I did was I did not want to come back at Hope and Unity because—Paul will add the story—but when I left in 2010 also Paul remained, and then in 2013 it was the time when he was also relocating to go to Sweden, so now there was no one who can take over the church. And then that's how the doors closed. So as the doors were closed of Hope and Unity, at some point then, you know, three years later, after 2010, three years later, 2013, then that's when I come back. But then I said I'm not coming to Hope and Unity because I think also I was very upset that I left and people did not even give me a farewell. Why would I be going to those people? Because everyone was angry, why am I leaving, and not even considering that I needed that time. So now I come back and I'm like, you know, I'm ready to come back, but then I'm not coming back at Hope and Unity.

So I created another group. I created another group that was called House of Prayer & Worship. For two months we thought it might be then the MCC, so it was not really what I wanted because also I was angry with MCC, the denomination, because we've always felt like we are Africans, and we are being treated like, you know, people are making decisions on behalf of us, we are not really sitting on the table where decisions are

being made. Like we are feeling there's something that is missing there. So at some point then I said no, I'm not. So I wrote my resignation letter to MCC to say me and you, whatever that is happening at that time within the denomination, that I felt it has nothing to do with me, I just want to be left alone. So I joined another affiliation in organization that had different churches affiliating with them.

So it was 2014, 2015 that I got upset and then I was like no, I'm not doing church anymore, so nobody must call me and say church, and why? Because church is not... So then I was in a mission to say and to think that I wanted to define how I'm going to use my gift and talents like for . . . outside the walls of the church. I used to convince myself that is what I can be because then I...even have an attitude—it was that topic about how it was feeling for me at that time that I'm doing a lot of work, and I know that I have touched a lot of people, some people. So then I, you know, so I don't want... So I close House of Prayer, you know, not necessarily closing, but the church, because I have already mentored someone, so in that moment then that person who was part of them got ordained and then she continued with the church. And eventually then the church changed its name. But because it has nothing to do with me, then I was okay.

So life went on. I continued other work because yes, I'm doing work outside the church, the walls of the church. I did not even worry about the church, what is going on there, because it did not make sense at that time. And it was, I think it was in 2022 when now—for all these years I'm doing church outside the walls of the church, yeah, so it's like I'm burying people, I am marrying people, but not Sunday morning. So that whole part of my life was closed. Don't call me a church. And every time even other peers, people will ask me where do you go to church I said church home, I'm churching home, you know, nobody must ask me those kind of questions because I'm okay, I'm doing the work of the Lord.

Then it was also, you know, dealing with other organizations, work with South African, I was working with these other organization that was called SANARELA, South Africa Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV. We also link there. And then I was also now still working for Global Interfaith Network. So for me that was the work of God, whether we're doing activism on issues of violence and also working with women around issues of gender-based violence, for me it was enough. Until in 2022, when I—you know when you have wake up moment? An awakening moment then, yeah, that's when then...how we got back to be now again back to the Hope and Unity MCC together.

Doris M. And you're [looking at Paul] in Sweden, and you restarted Hope and Unity in...

Nokuthula D. In South Africa. So what happened, really, was we contacted each other, say actually, it might be a good idea to do a reunion in 2022.

Paul M. Yes.

Nokuthula D. A reunion of all members of HU MCC. So we got organized. We all were excited. In the group, everyone is excited, and then we got together for a service, Thanksgiving service, because in between we realized that there was a lot of people who died while the church was closed. There's a lot of things that are happening. So those who came, we came with that. We want to do the Thanksgiving, and it was a service. But then there was a question that people kept on asking—are we opening the church again? And me and him was like, no, we are not. Because he came. So we are planning all this thing. So we are not opening the church.

So it was 2022 in April—2023 in April, before even April, which, the same thing now, I called him. I'm like now, dude, I think I am ready to go back to church. And then he said as I am sitting I am also reflecting, and I'm looking at the history books that we have that has a history of HU MCC, like maybe let's do this thing. I said no, we are not going back to that place, we are not HU MCC. Then he said but think about it. There's a beautiful history with HU MCC. So I was caught up with House of Prayer and this HU MCC. And eventually my head was clear, my heart was clear, you know, when God say we are going back to that place [MCC].

And we then say the real one happened in April. The real opening, launching happened in...it was a year later. It was then the reopening of HU MCC. But because during that whole process in between one year planning for a reunion, so I also wanted to make sure that I go back and seek my credential back. I did not want it to be given. So I said since there's a process, if someone has left and then they are coming back, then there's a process that needs to take place. So then that process needed to happen. I was stressed out because now they interview again, the whole process, why are you coming back, why did you leave, why are you coming back? But it was a process that I needed to...

So it feels like it is an honor. So because I did not want a situation where...because everyone knows me. Everyone knows me and Paul. So now if we say now we are opening the church again, then things gets to be given to us without having to work hard for them. So that whole process went on, and then I passed, and then I had to send my police clearance, all kinds of things that you did so that the denomination is sure that this person has not done horrible things out there and now they are coming back. So then the interview and everything, and then the interview, pass the interview, and then everything became...that is where we are now. But also we needed to be in emerging church because we needed to be sure that we are building without having to say things must be the same way that they used to be. Things cannot be the same way because we have already existed. But then at the same time there's a lot of change, even with us. There's a lot of things that have changed, and we find ourselves in that situation.

So it has really been an amazing journey, and it has really been like we are seeing a lot of things like currently, right now, because in between this man bullied me into applying for the role of being an elder, so it was just

like a thing. You know when you are applying for a thing, I'm trying to shut him down. And, you know, applying, and finally then I find myself being appointed, that whole process of within the governing body, the moderator appointing, and also then the churches getting to be allowed to vote. So it's a whole, like, you know, it's a whole process that got me scared for life when it was happening.

But then being the first person who come from Africa as an elder, it's also something that is huge to celebrate, that we realize that actually, for the first time now we feel that we are sitting on the table and we're able to now say to people this is how Africa look like. Because there's a lot of assumption. When we don't know a place we make assumptions that this is how the people are there.

So it has been such an exciting moment for both of us because we are now seeing HU MCC has been now also influential to make sure that now we have a network. Because last year, when we launched in 2023, we launched the church in April, so in 2024, same April, we then decided now it's first year, and also there was a celebration of my appointment as an elder. And then in between also that gave us an opportunity to really now bring everyone together, because it was not a celebration for HU MCC only, but it was a celebration to also find other MCC churches in Africa, you know, how can we now begin to work together, how can we now begin to create a platform.

So last year me and him really worked hard to make sure that we do fundraising, we talk about Africa, and also with the work that I do as Global Interfaith Network, and also the work that he—we meet people everywhere. So with Global Interfaith Network I'm working as a regional coordinator. We are doing work with the religious leaders, especially Christian Council of Churches, but we are also working with LGBT and people of faith in different countries, and then the conversation on dialogue of issues of faith and then sexuality.

So we take them through a process of where LGBTI people are getting to be prepared to have dialogues with religious leaders. But then my question in my head was then what happen after with the people. So that's how then introducing of MCC, that there's an MCC, there's a place where people, you ask them where do you go for church service, they say no, we have been excommunicated, or we don't go to church because we are not accepted, and then introduce MCC. So we now have MCC spiritual groups in Lesotho, we have in Mozambique, we have in Botswana, we have in Zimbabwe. We have where else?

Paul M. Zimbabwe.

Nokuthula D. Yes, Zimbabwe. So we have these kinds of groups of people who now form part of the network of what African MCC network that we have, that we are doing some work. So it has been a whole lot of work that we are seeing that as a church has really been now influential. Now we have three other branches of Hope and Unity, in Pretoria, we are in Welkom, we are

now in Soweto. So because I need to go for my other meeting he's going to add. So I've covered everything. So I have covered my path. Sorry about that.

Doris M. Thank you for sharing with us. And Paul will follow up.

Nokuthula D. Yes. Has a lot of things to say. [Nokuthula leaves interview]

Paul M. Yes. And so as Rev. Nokuthula was talking, in terms of us, thinking of the way of coming back to the denomination. I remember when we started the conversation. She asked, yeah, we are now deciding to go to start the church, but what are we going to call ourselves? What is it we are going to do? What are we going to call ourselves? And I then said to her we are going to continue calling ourselves the Hope and Unity. And she was like I don't want to use that word anymore. Why do you want us to use Hope and Unity again?

And I said we are going to call ourselves Hope and Unity again because when we talk about hope, the record that we have done over the years, we have given people hope. We have encouraged people. We have been there for people that are struggling with their sexuality, people who have struggled within their families, people who have struggled with coming to terms with their own mental health as well. We have given people so much. So this that we are calling ourselves, Hope and Unity, I think will let us continue with this, because every...we have given people that hope. But we are now requiring that unity again because from what we are seeing right now, from where we have left, there are so many other churches that have started, that have mushroomed, that they are also LGBT. But within those churches we also see the squabbling and the fighting, everybody fighting for position, everybody wants to be head, everybody... And I said for us, as we begin this journey again, we are bringing that unity again to say we are here, we are bringing you all together. Let's come together again. Let's be united and work together as the LGBTI+Q community to make one body. Why are we all, you know, this whole separations all the time, it doesn't really work or give us any happiness or joy, you know, for all of us, so let us be united. So that is why. And then Nokuthula said it was like oh, okay, I think you are making sense. I think you are making sense. So yes, let's continue with our name Hope and Unity.

But also within that I just want to go back a little bit to say that after being ordained in 1990, in the year 2000 I was then diagnosed with HIV. And so when I was diagnosed with HIV, then that also became a little bit of a struggle because it was like the whole thing of now I'm living with HIV, and it's just after my ordination—what is it that God is trying to say to me? What is it that God is trying to...?

But I didn't know that that on its own, it will be a ministry, because then, because my acceptance and my working out my issues in trying to accept

my health status, I then became to be an agent of change to a lot of people. Because every Sunday what we used to do at the church, we started having a candlelight memorial service, and every Sunday as we are having that memorial light service, I used to stand and give my personal story, and give a testimony. And out of my personal story and out of my sharing we started having a lot of people coming to the church as well to say I want to talk to you. And people will come and talk to me in person and privately just to say that you are such an inspiration. And more and more people came out to me as people that were living with HIV, just wanted to just come out to me and we will keep that privacy. But other people came out also and began to work and be active in that field.

And so with that I then became involved in SANARELA that Rev. Nokuthula was talking about. It was South African support group for people that were living with HIV. And so as a member of SANARELA at that time my partner J.P., Father J.P., he was then appointed to be the director of SANARELA. And then when SANARELA started growing, and SANARELA grew so much around Africa and elsewhere, and then they decided to make it international. And then it was then called INARELA, which is the International Interfaith Network of Religious Leaders that are Living With or Personally Affected with HIV. And that is also the work that I am doing now.

So I am the coordinator of INARELA Europe, so I'm the one who's coordinating the European network of INARELA. And so this is also part of the work that I am doing now. So as an MCC clergy and also working within the HIV community, and also working within the LGBT, within the HIV organization, that has already strengthened my journey. But I have always felt that whole privilege.

And I say that in a sense because I know that still in Africa we are still battling. A lot of people are still struggling to get even just a tablet, just to get medication. Not even imagining also even just putting food on their stomachs. So when we also talk about HIV we are talking about something that is holistic. And so for me having access, living in Europe and having all this access of getting medication, of being treated and being... And so that is why I am saying for me I see that as a privilege because I know that other people are not able to get this.

And now, it's even worse now with what we are seeing here in the U.S. with Trump, that they have taken aid from Africa. So we are moving a step back. There's so much that is happening that is so, so sad. And so how are we going to mend that, and how are we going to put measures in place that we also are able to support our siblings in Africa. So that is also one of the problems and the challenges, that as a denomination we need to ask ourselves, where do we go from here.

Doris M. This is so moving, and it's such a long 30 years of history. It's hard to put it all in just an hour and a half.

Paul M. I know.

Doris M. I wonder if there's anything you would like to say as you end the conversation.

Paul M. I think as I end the conversation it will be that as a denomination we are an international denomination, and Rev. Elder Nokuthula on Thursday, in her opening speech, she said this is a kairos moment, and she said this was the kairos moment, meaning that as MCC we have a lot to do. Yes, we have a lot to do. And we are seeing churches that are growing in Brazil, in Asia, in Africa. And this whole thing that we keep saying here in the U.S.—oh, MCC is dying, MCC is dying—for us, we are questioning what do you really mean when we say MCC is dying? Why can't you see all these greater things that are happening, that God is opening all these windows and these doors, and we are seeing new—God is creating a new thing. UFMCC is beginning to grow.

And yet there are those—that is why even Rev. Cecilia, when she was talking on Friday morning, she say let's go and leave the past, let's look at now, let's stop dwelling on the past. But let us all look into now and the future. And so I want to encourage the denomination and those that are losing hope, and those that are saying the church is dying—no, the church is moving on. This is the time where the church is moving on. Yes.

Doris M. Thank you, Paul.

Paul M. Yes. Thank you.
01:00:18 [End of interview.]

PAGE

PAGE 7