

Interviewee: Paula Northwood
Interviewer: Rachel Waltner Goossen
Date: October 29, 2016
Place: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Interviewer: This is Rachel Waltner Goossen, and the date is October 29—yeah, that’s right—2016 and I’m with Paula Northwood in Minneapolis. We’re at the Plymouth Congregational Church. And I’m interviewing her about my project. So I’ll just put this to the side. I tested it before. I know it will pick you up, too, Paula.

Northwood: Oh, it will? Okay, good.

Interviewer: Yeah. This morning I was fooling around with it. It’ll be fine.

Northwood: Good.

Interviewer: So we’re going to go sort of through your history, if that’s okay with you.

Northwood: Sure.

Interviewer: So I know that you grew up—I think you grew up around Ohio. Tell me a little—

Northwood: I grew up in Pandora, Ohio.

Interviewer: In Pandora, okay.

Northwood: And went to then Bluffton College, now Bluffton University. And I was planning on...my major was art education, so I was planning on being an art teacher.

0:01:01 But I needed one religion class in the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary at the time. Now I think they’ve changed the name to Anabaptist.

Interviewer: They have, yes.

Northwood: They were offering a January interterm, and they were picking a couple of Bluffton students and a couple of Bethel students, and I was really just looking to do this religion class in the shortest amount of time possible, so I put my name in, and I was one of the students chosen, and so I went to AMBS for this January interterm. And it totally opened my eyes to a number of things. I grew up going to St. John Mennonite Church in Pandora, which is heavily influenced by fundamentalism, so I grew up in a quite conservative family.

0:02:02 And they weren't even that happy about me going to Bluffton because they thought Bluffton was too liberal. I just thoroughly enjoyed my experience at the seminary, and actually met the man who I later married, but I didn't intend on going to seminary to school. But I was not able to find a teaching job, and so in the back of my mind it was well, if you can't find a teaching job, then let's try a year of seminary and maybe get to know this guy better. And long story short, I ended up marrying Tim Lehman, who's from Berne, Indiana—

Interviewer: Your name was Paula Diller, right?

Northwood: Diller, yeah.

Interviewer: I recall that, actually.

Northwood: And then at the time went by Paula Diller Lehman. I added his name. Didn't hyphenate, but tried to use both.

0:03:04 I don't know how much detail you want about seminary, but I'm going to just kind of go into a little bit here because I think it's important. As a student I started out not with the intention of actually graduating, but I enjoyed it so much I just kept taking courses. And finally Marlin Miller, who was the president, called me into his office and he said you almost have an MDiv, and what are you thinking about your future?

And I said I don't really know because I don't see a future for me in the Mennonite church because I'm a woman. And he said, he actually then became my academic advisor, so I met him quite frequently, and he couldn't have been more lovely in terms of supporting me.

0:03:56 There was one time when I had to take an exam and I couldn't find a babysitter, and I brought our daughter, and she was an infant, and he held her while I took the exam. So he personally was very, very supportive of me. And he said to me I think there's a place for you in the church. I don't know what it is, but I predict that you will be in leadership soon after you graduate. He has more vision about it than I did.

At that time Tim was planning on being a pastor. I thought, you know, I might just end up being a minister's wife. I didn't like the sound of that, but... He helped me start to think about myself as a, I think, a church leader. And while I was in seminary there weren't that many women, of course. This was in the late '70s, early '80s. And when I was a senior there were seven of us, and we were supposed to be in a senior seminar.

0:05:01 I might not exactly have the right name, but senior seminar. And we wanted to have an all women's senior seminar, and the seminary wouldn't let us. And we took it to Dorothy [Nyce]—and I don't remember now what her role was at the seminary, but she went to bat for us. And the

compromise was we could be in two senior seminars, a coed one and then we could also have this just all female one.

And people have told me that there is a mythology around these senior seven women, and I don't know if there's truth to that. And I don't remember whether we did anything radical other than we just met together, and supported each other, and talked about women in ministry and the challenges that we saw before us.

0:06:00 As far as I know we all graduated and went on to do various things, but I haven't kept in touch with anyone, so I don't know what happened to the senior seven.

Interviewer: Do you remember what year this was when you were so close to the MDiv and finishing out?

Northwood: That would have been in 1982, I think. I think I graduated in '82.

Interviewer: What was the mythology around the...?

Northwood: That we were really radical, and that we did radical things, and really confronted the administration about stuff. And I know there was tension and that the administration was concerned about us, but we basically were just getting together for support because it was a man's world. And with the exception of Gertrude Roten we did not have many women on faculty.

0:07:00 And I graduated. For some reason the languages, both Greek and Hebrew, kind of came easy for me, that wasn't a struggle. And people talk about a sense of call, and I have often said to them I feel like it's interpreted differently in the Mennonite church, and that is it's a community call. The individual call is of value, but it isn't the only thing. And I felt I continued to receive community affirmation and support of my gifts. And when I looked around at my fellow male students I felt like I'm just as intelligent, I'm just as articulate, I'm just as capable, maybe I really should be a minister in my own right.

0:07:59 And Tim was very supportive of that, too. We didn't know what that would look like, but... So I pursued my MDiv. I graduated. The only point of contention when I had my senior orals was my view of Christology. I don't have a very high Christology, I guess. And while I could talk about all the theories of atonement, I didn't aspire to any of them, so that was a problem. And it's funny to me now because it was Marlin and David Augsburg, and I want to say Millard Lind who were my academic team that was questioning me on my senior orals, and they just...

0:08:56 I feel proud of myself that I stuck to my guns and said I just, that's just not what I believe about Jesus and his life and why he died. And they're like well, that's very unorthodox, and we're going to pass you, but you need to

read some stuff. And nobody ever gave me anything to read, so I don't know. It was kind of funny.

Very quickly after that I was hired by the General Conference Mennonite Church, and Tim was still in seminary, so we essentially moved the office of Youth Education to the Mennonite church offices in Elkhart. So I did work in their building for a year before we then moved to Newton, and Tim became the campus pastor at Bethel College, and then I worked as secretary for Youth Education.

0:09:55

Interviewer: And when you came and you were secretary for this or working with youth both in Elkhart and then in Newton, that was mid '80s onward?

Northwood: It was yeah, from 1982 to 1992.

Interviewer: Oh, a decade.

Northwood: A decade, mm-hmm.

Interviewer: And your title probably changed somewhat, but you were—

Northwood: It did, but it started out Secretary for Youth Education. I think we changed them to director at some point, and then it was like Director of Youth Education and Service because part of what I was doing, I had collaborated with Jane Miller, who was working for the Mennonite church, to create what we called Mennonite Service Venture, and there was Youth Venture and Group Venture, and it was providing short-term service opportunities for individuals and for youth groups, and so we added the service component.

0:10:56 When I first started working for the conference it was very much about we were putting out a sexuality curriculum, and I went around the country, the United States and Canada. Did a lot of speaking to youth groups about sexuality. And I was at one point maybe the co-editor of [*With*] magazine, which is the youth magazine.

Interviewer: I remember it well.

Northwood: And very involved in writing curriculum. I've had some curriculum published. That was years ago, for the Mennonite church. And I traveled a lot. And the sort of other story, I guess, that needs to be told is, in terms of my sexuality, was I just grew up so sheltered, it's almost embarrassing. I didn't date much in high school or college.

0:11:58 I felt attracted to both men and women, but I had absolutely no language for that. I of course had heard of the homosexual, but the description that I

heard just didn't match my experience of myself, and so it didn't connect. And later I realized I'd had this really intense relationship with this woman, and it was somewhat sexual. It's funny to me now because it was very sexual, but I didn't think it was real sexuality because it didn't involve a man.

Interviewer: This was when you were quite young or...?

Northwood: This was in college.

Interviewer: Oh, in college, okay.

Northwood: And so when I met Tim, and what was appealing to me about him was he's very much of a feminist. He was unlike any man I had known. I also, it's funny, I had this attraction to him, and we later realized we had met before, and I think now that was kind of the intrigue, because we had met at Friedenswald.

0:13:00 And I, at the time I was exploring my relationship with him I was also sort of involved with a woman, but I thought that wasn't real and the relationship with Tim was the real thing. And once we got married I realized pretty quickly that I had made a mistake.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: But the Dillers and the Lehmans are very fertile people. In spite of using two types of birth control, I found myself pregnant pretty quickly. And at that point, in some ways I hadn't really had a full-fledged relationship with a woman, but after a couple years of marriage I met another person who was in the same situation as I was, and we started a relationship.

0:14:02 And then I really knew I had made a mistake, but I had a young child and I thought...and I made this commitment to Tim, and I felt like I needed to honor that, and I thought this is a secret that I'm going to carry to my grave. And the woman that I was in a relationship with—and this is where you may or may not have to change the details—but she was on faculty at Goshen College, and loved her husband. They didn't have children. And because I traveled so much we were able to maintain a long distance, long-term relationship that seemed to take care of what we felt we were missing in our lives. I guess I'll say it that way.

0:15:04 So that's always an under theme where I, I mean, I went through this whole like okay, am I bisexual, and this is my experience? I was watching very closely what was going on in the church with gay rights and gay issues, and I eventually had a lot of gay friends.

But it wasn't really until I moved to Minneapolis, where I had gay people in my congregation, that I really—I have said this before and it's really

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true—I felt convicted by my own preaching. It was easy to kind of live a double life when I was a part of the conference because I traveled so much. I wasn't connected to really what—by then Tim was the associate pastor at the church in Moundridge. What was the name of it?

Interviewer: Oh, there's several churches. There was Eden—

Northwood: Eden. It was the big one.

0:16:00

Interviewer: Okay, Eden. He was associate pastor at Eden.

Northwood: He was associate pastor there. I attended, you know, rarely, I guess.

Interviewer: Because you were traveling a lot?

Northwood: Because I was traveling. I was traveling almost half of the days of the month. And that all kind of worked until we moved here, and then to work with a small congregation, and there were gay people in the congregation. It also was the—I now realize it was my own homophobic thing that kept me from fully looking at myself because I still had this impression that gay people had sort of a distorted and disturbed life. And I moved here and really got to know some gay couples and realized that okay, they live just like I do. And—yeah.

0:17:00

Interviewer: And was it till you moved to Minneapolis that you didn't even really know too many openly gay people?

Northwood: I knew a few, but I still didn't know them well enough to know what their life was like. I remember once where I visited Lynn Keenan, and she used to work for Mennonite Voluntary Service, and her partner was Beth [Lindros], I think. They lived in Denver, Colorado. And I remember just going in their house and thinking it's normal, like it's my house, and...

Interviewer: Lynn Keenan worked for General Conference, too?

Northwood: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: I haven't tried to reach out to her. I've heard her name, I think again from Dorothy Nickel Friesen, but I haven't known how to get ahold of her.

Northwood: Last I heard she and Beth had split up and she lives now in maybe Seattle, Washington. She might be hard to track down.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

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0:17:57

Northwood: No, to me now it's hilarious, but I just remember thinking wow, they just like have a kitchen, and dishes, and they cook, and they get groceries like normal people. Like that's how distorted. My understanding of a gay person was more something like some Mardi Gras, sexuality deprived or depraved person, I don't know, who's mentally ill. I think that's really what I thought. Or had mental health issues of some sort.

Interviewer: And when you had this long-term relationship with the woman who was on the Goshen faculty, did Tim know about this?

Northwood: No.

Interviewer: Or this was your double life, okay.

Northwood: This was my double life. Then that person, she and I broke up, kind of, for a variety of reasons, and I got involved with someone else. And that person—this is where I don't know about using names.

Interviewer: I won't use names that I don't have permission to use.

0:19:00

Northwood: Yes. So I'm going to use names in this case, but... Because she might be someone you'd like to talk to.

Interviewer: Okay.

Northwood: Jane Miller, who was the person that I worked with in the Mennonite church, and she lives here. She goes by Jane Ramseyer Miller, and she's the director of the One Voice gay choir here in the Twin Cities.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: She and I got involved. And long story short, we had a little bit of...you know, I think she really wanted to be with me for the rest of my life, and I wasn't quite there yet, but she wanted me to be honest with my husband, and so I told Tim about Jane. I never, at that point had not told him about the prior relationship.

0:19:58 And it was a weird point in my history because I still...we still were living in Kansas. I still didn't understand much about what it meant to be a gay person, and I felt like at that point I was really forced to make a decision, and the decision I chose was to stay with Tim and break it off with Jane. And yes, I'm bisexual, but—or what I said to Tim was that I think I'm bisexual and I'm choosing to stay with you.

When we moved to Minneapolis and started pastoring it just really became clear to me that if I really was bisexual and was just in a heterosexual marriage I wouldn't be so miserable. And I got to a point where I really considered suicide. I just felt like this life is miserable. And then I thought, well, why would I kill myself just because I can't make a choice about being who I really am?

0:21:04 I was so fearful of hurting other people. I was willing to kill myself rather than hurt other people. And I just remember thinking at some point okay, that's ridiculous. So I had a long conversation with Tim. We decided to get divorced.

And, you know, in hindsight it's always better vision than when you're in the middle of it, but I now wish we would have resigned from the church and then gotten divorced and dealt with our stuff because the way it played out the church really got kind of involved in it, and that's a piece that I regret about my history. I took a bit of a leave. We were still both employed by Faith Mennonite Church.

0:21:56

Interviewer: Oh, now I hadn't heard about you both being at Faith Mennonite. Oh, here. This was here?

Northwood: Here, so it's—

Interviewer: So when you decided to get divorced you were already in Minneapolis.

Northwood: We were in Minneapolis, so we had—

Interviewer: Although you had told him when you lived in Kanas.

Northwood: Yes. He knew when we came here.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: And we had oddly—I mean, this is what's so funny about life—oddly, we had resolved it to a place where eventually we hired Jane Miller as our church choir director. And, you know, we...and there wasn't a relationship going on. I could tell in my own life just this was not settled, and I just finally came to the conclusion, you know, I'm gay. I love my husband, but I am gay. And he did what was really loving at that point, like I need to let you go.

Interviewer: Your daughter would have been a—

Northwood: She was like 15 or 16. She was in high school.

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Interviewer: Oh, she was a teenager, okay.

Northwood: Yeah, and when I told her, when we told her she said—because I said to her you could be really angry about this, and I understand. And she said, Mom, I'm not going to be angry with you because, you know, you've raised me, you know, to be open to gay and lesbian people, and I'm not going to hate you for that.

0:23:10 I think she was really sad about the divorce. But oddly, through all the losses I encountered, she was not one of them. Our relationship maintained—

Interviewer: That's fantastic.

Northwood: —in a really healthy way and has been great.

Interviewer: Wow. Well, you—I mean, that's lucky, in a way.

Northwood: I feel lucky. I mean, I know lots of people in my position who lost their children.

Interviewer: Lost their children, yeah.

Northwood: In many ways, even lost custody and lost...and just are estranged.

Interviewer: Oh, it's so sad.

Northwood: Yeah, very sad.

Interviewer: Okay, well that's fantastic, yeah.

Northwood: Tim was initially really supportive, but then he pulled in the conference minister, who was Robert Hartzler at the time that the...I don't know if it's called the Northern District. I think Minnesota is part of—

Interviewer: Yeah, that's Northern District. Or it was.

0:24:03

Northwood: Yeah, was. Yeah, not anymore. And the congregation—I basically met with the church council, and I invited Jim Sauder, because he was then the director of BMC, to go with me. And the church was saying we really, we need Paula to come out publicly and resign and whatever. And Jim was saying to them I think you need to give Paula more options because for her to, you know, publicly out herself has pretty serious consequences on her part, and that's a lot to ask of someone.

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0:24:59 And partly because Jim knew I had, you know, I was on the Bluffton Board of Trustees. I was still really active. I had just spoken at the Bethlehem—

Interviewer: Oh, the big 1980—

Northwood: The big 1980 thing, the big joint conference. I was one of the keynote youth speakers. And I had gotten into trouble. I had spoken about gay rights or something, I don't know. That's maybe a whole 'nother story. But yeah, I had spoken, and then the next day the leadership of the conference, without my knowledge, went and apologized for what I had said the day before.

Interviewer: This was at Bethlehem?

Northwood: It was Bethlehem.

Interviewer: This would have been in like '92 or something?

Northwood: I think it was '93.

Interviewer: Nineteen Ninety-Three. And who apologized?

0:25:54

Northwood: The planners of the conference. And I didn't know about it. Like I spoke, and part—I admit that the piece about gay people wasn't in my original notes or whatever, but there was a little play before I went on, a little skit, and it was about gay rights, and I thought they're going to catch hell for that, so I'm going to join them. And so I included some things.

I did this thing where it was like a top ten things we used to believe and don't believe anymore. And I was trying to be funny. And I just did all these things, like we used to think the earth was flat and we know it's not, and a bunch of those. And I did, you know, we used to think that masturbation would make you go blind. And then I made a joke about I see there's a lot of people wearing glasses out in the audience.

0:26:57 You know, people were laughing, but I also think I made them really uncomfortable. And I just, it was...I said a bunch of stuff like that, and also just talked about...my text was that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And I said a lot of things about social justice issues. And I said that I believed that God created everyone, you know, even people who were sexual minorities, that they were created that way. And that was something that didn't go over very well.

So the next morning when I walked into the conference center, I'm not kidding, I walked in and there was a youth group coming in, and they just

like parted. And one of my friends, who was a district youth minister, who I knew from my previous work with the conference, said did you hear what happened?

0:27:58 And I said no, I just got up and walked over from my hotel. And she said well, they issued a big public apology on your behalf for what you said yesterday.

Interviewer: Oh, my goodness.

Northwood: And I'm like, what? And they're like yeah, I guess people were really upset with the stuff that felt pro-gay. And I maybe had said some other things, too, that were offensive, but... So I was—well, all that to say that I used to be sort of well known in the Mennonite church, and then... And Jim understood that, that for her to public out herself was going to be pretty devastating. And the church council listened to him and they said we want her to do this anyway, it feels really important to us to have her do this.

0:28:55 So an evening was planned in January. And, you know, Faith Mennonite is sort of a small church, maybe 200 members and 100 people show up on a Sunday. And on this particular evening the place was packed. I bet there were 300, 400 people there. I didn't know who they were.

Interviewer: Oh, my goodness.

Northwood: And at one point I thought I can't do this. And Tim said, well then I'm going to do it for you. And I said that doesn't feel right because you're not going to tell the story. By then he had moved from support to anger. And Bob Hartzler was there, too.

And so I sat in the front pew of Faith Mennonite Church. And we rented space to the Community of St. Martin's, which was sort of a renegade Lutheran group, and they met in the basement, and they did a lot of drumming and stuff. And all of a sudden I heard drums going below and I heard them start to sing the—[sings]—“Oh, freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom, freedom is coming, oh yes, it is.”

0:30:06 And honest to God, that is the only thing that gave me the courage to stand up and do what I needed to do.

Interviewer: Oh, my goodness.

Northwood: And so I basically told my story.

Interviewer: To these 300 or 400 people that were packed out in this church, wow.

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Northwood: Right. And then resigned. And people were gracious. But before that I had to call my parents, who were then living in Alaska as missionaries, who were devastated, and really did not have any contact with me for about five years. So in the span of about 24 hours I felt like I lost my whole family of origin. And I have six brothers and sisters, 20 some nieces and nephews.

0:30:58 Of which I always felt like I was like the favorite aunty. But I was really shunned in sort of an Amish way. You know, lost my job. Lost Tim, who really I, you know, was a beloved partner for me, a friend. I at that time had already started at United Theological Seminary. I was working on my doctor of ministry. And I had a book deal with Faith and Life Press, and received a letter that they were renegeing on the book deal, so—

Interviewer: After this Faith Church thing.

Northwood: Yeah. So then I had to actually almost start my DMin project, my thesis again because it was very contextually set up, and I was working on something in the congregation.

Interviewer: A letter that they were pulling out, and you already had some sort of agreement or contract with them to publish what would be your dissertation once it was available?

0:32:02

Northwood: Yes, right.

Interviewer: What was the kind of thing you were writing about?

Northwood: I was doing a thing about youth and service and sort of theological reflection, how that's important when young people do service. Otherwise the service is kind of meaningless. I mean, that's simplifying it, but... And then I was going to put together a more practical guide for helping youth groups reflect theologically on their service project, whatever they do. It wasn't anything too deep and academic, but it was, I think, something that would have been of value to the Mennonite church, particularly in youth ministry.

Interviewer: And the seminary or theological school you were part of here is called Union?

Northwood: It's called United, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. And it's a consortium of United Church of Christ, Methodist, and Disciples, maybe.

0:33:05

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Interviewer: And so you had already been starting that program, it sounds like, when you were still married and still at Faith.

Northwood: Right, right.

Interviewer: And when you all came up to Faith, were you and Tim co-pastors?

Northwood: We were co-pastors, only I was a little bit...they didn't discern between who was like the lead person, but because Tim was taking off his summers to run Wilderness Wind up in Ely I was working more hours at the church. And he was also doing a lot of Creation Care stuff, so in terms of time I would say I was working probably two-thirds and he was working a third. And this is all, of course, just, you know, these are my interpretations of life. Tim might have a different impression of that.

0:34:00 But I think he would agree with that, that he wasn't as involved in the church as I was.

Interviewer: Well, he was gone part of it.

Northwood: For three months of the year he was living up in Ely. And I would be involved with that, too, but less when we moved here. I would move—we started doing that while we lived in Kansas, so I would move my office to Ely for the summer, but I would continue to work, because I would still just fly out of Duluth or whatever. And when I changed jobs and came to pastor, then I worked less at the camp.

Interviewer: I see.

Northwood: So I was devastated. I mean, I lost my spiritual community, my church. And I felt pretty alone, except I had my daughter.

0:35:00 And I couldn't find a job initially. I worked as a courier, a docent at the art museum, and I graded tests, and did that for a year, maybe two years. And then I worked, I finally found a job working for Model Cities Health Center because they had gotten some Robert Wood Johnson Foundation money to start a program called Faith in Action, and they were trying to get volunteers from churches to help elderly stay in their homes.

And I begged and pleaded for them to hire me. They wanted an African American person because the whole organization was African American, and they couldn't find anybody. And I really said please give me a chance. I needed a job so desperately. And they agreed to hire me. And I was like the executive director for that nonprofit for about two years.

0:36:00 And then during that time I... Well, during that time—well, I was also asked to relinquish my credentials.

Interviewer: Okay. I was going to come around to that because I figured.

Northwood: So after my coming out thing and leaving the church—and Tim continued as pastor there for a few months. I don't think he lasted very long. And then he quit, too. Bob Hartzler asked me to relinquish my credentials. And I don't know what gave me the courage, but I finally wrote him a letter and I said, you know, I have lost everything, and I'm not going to voluntarily relinquish them. I guess you're going to have to do the proceedings to take them away from me.

0:36:56 He called me and wanted to visit with me, and he had just come from some workshop on homosexuality, and he asked my forgiveness for his part in outing me.

Interviewer: Oh, my gosh.

Northwood: Yeah. And proceeded to say I can't, like, un-ring a bell that's been rung in terms of your credentials, but I can bury your file, and if you're going to do anything in ministry, like if you—at that point—well, I kind of have to back up. He knew, I guess, I was considering transferring to the United Church of Christ. He said if you do that I will bury your file and I will write a letter that you're still in good standing with the Mennonite church, which I greatly appreciated.

0:38:03 So what happened when I was still working as a docent for the art museum, I was in the conservatory where there's the big Frank Gehry glass fish, and my job was to tell people not to touch it. I know this is getting into too much detail, but it felt like while I was sitting there with this big glass fish, in some ways feeling like I'm the belly of a whale, Kay Welsh, who had been hired to be the new interim minister at Faith Mennonite, came to visit me and she said Paula, you have got to get into ministry, like I have heard nothing but good things about your work at Faith, people love you, they hate what happened. You've got to consider the United Church of Christ. And I'm like I don't know what the United Church of Christ is. I had been so parochial in my upbringing and education and work life.

0:39:00 I knew it sort of from the seminary, but the seminary didn't promote the UCC. It was pretty interfaith. She said go have a conversation with the Minnesota conference minister and have a conversation with some other gay pastors and—

Interviewer: And tell me again who this woman was that came and encouraged you.

Northwood: Her name is Kay Welsh. And she is a United Church of Christ pastor, has been her whole life. But Faith Mennonite hired her as an interim minister, which is odd, but...why they did it I don't know. But she came and talked to me and I did what she suggested. I went and visited. I checked out what

the United Church of Christ was about. I realized I needed to just take one polity and history class at the seminary that I was already working on my DMin, and they could transfer my credentials into the United Church of Christ within a year.

0:40:07 And so I did—that was all kind of happening at the same time I finally started working at Model Cities. And because Model Cities had connection with church I was able to consider that as my call, and got my ordination transferred into the United Church of Christ.

And later Ed—he was the Northern District minister before they...well, maybe after. Ed Kauffman. He replaced Bob Hartzler. And he also was on the Wilderness Wind Camp board, of which I stayed on the Wilderness Wind Camp board until this year we're closing it.

0:40:58 That was my one connection to Mennonites, was Wilderness Wind. Ed told me I've gone through the files and there is no file on you.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*]

Northwood: I said, well that's interesting. Because I do know in the United Church of Christ they still have a copy of the letter that I am still in good standing with the Mennonite church, but the Mennonites don't have any record with me. Like Ed said, I'm serious, there's no record of you, period. It's like you never existed. So intriguing.

Interviewer: When about was this? Was this in the late '90s or so?

Northwood: The late '90s, because I remember—and 1998 was a good year for me because I transferred into the United Church of Christ, I graduated with my DMin, and I got not legally married, but married to my current, now legal, wife. So a lot was happening.

0:42:03

Interviewer: Yeah, I guess so.

Northwood: I mean, I did meet Andrea. She had been a member of Faith Mennonite. We were friends and we were contemplating the inevitable, but there wasn't a scandal around my coming out at that point.

Interviewer: Did she have a Mennonite background?

Northwood: Oddly, her mother was a Stoltzfus from Pennsylvania, but she was raised Presbyterian, because her mother had married a Lutheran, and her mother wasn't very happy with the Mennonite church. She went to Eastern Mennonite College and then joined the Peace Corps, and that changed her life. And so Andrea certainly knew about Mennonites, and that's why she

checked out the Faith Mennonite Church, but she had been raised Presbyterian.

0:42:59

Interviewer: Interesting.

Northwood: So while I was working for Model Cities, and I then had my credentials in the United Church of Christ, a woman came and said there's this Baptist church that I think you should apply to. They've been looking for two years for someone to do children's education. It's like an associate minister position. And I said I'm gay. I mean, I'm not going to go to the Baptists.

Interviewer: Baptists, yeah.

Northwood: And she said they're different. They're American Baptists, and I think you should do it.

Interviewer: American Baptists, okay.

Northwood: Well, I didn't even pursue it because I was so afraid. And the senior minister called me and said, you know, this person told me about you and I really want you to come. And I said I don't know if she told you that I'm lesbian, and I'm out, and I don't want to go back in the closet, and I can't go through the experience of like being out or whatever.

0:43:58 He said you can be fully out, it won't be a problem, I can promise you that. And so I did apply and I ended up getting the job. And that's what got me back into the church. I worked five years for Judson Baptist Memorial Church in South Minneapolis, and it was the most healing experience I've probably ever had in church. Like I think because I could fully be who I am in ministry and in my sexuality, it was incredible. Because I think I became a better minister.

And I had a really wonderful experience with those folks. But I always felt like I got my credentials in the United Church of Christ, I should really work in a United Church of Christ church. And so I always kind of kept my ears and eyes open, and then this church opened up.

0:44:56 Well, it's only a member of the Minnesota United Church of Christ, it's not a member of the national.

Interviewer: This one here?

Northwood: This one here. It's as close as I could get. And so I applied and ended up—I didn't think they would hire me because my background, of course, is total Mennonite, then worked for a Baptist church, and what would be

appealing about that to them? But I guess they still liked what they saw, and I got hired, and I'm now starting my 14th year here.

Interviewer: So you must have liked it as well.

Northwood: I have grown to love it. The one thing that being forced out of the Mennonite church has done for me is to open my eyes to other denominations that are doing good work in the world. The American Baptists couldn't be more similar to Mennonites than anything I know, like theologically. People have asked me wasn't that a struggle. I said theologically there was nothing to go up against.

0:46:01 It was more of a challenge for me to work in the United Church of Christ, partly because of the infant baptism. And within the American Baptist Church there's a strong peace tradition. And of course they believe in immersion, but that wasn't hard for me to work with. I had to learn how to do it, but other than that.

Interviewer: Okay. [*Laughs.*] There was probably a learning curve there.

Northwood: Yeah, I had to have those few months to practice how you do this. But in terms of just believers baptism, that's what they're about. And this particular church is very liberal and very into inclusive language, affirmation of women and gay rights. It couldn't have been a more wonderful time.

0:46:57 But Plymouth Congregational Church is one of the kind of primo churches in the Twin Cities, and it felt like an honor to be hired here. But the intriguing thing for me was it was a step back in terms of inclusive language, and they're very liberal in their preaching, but the worship is very traditional. And...well, when I went through the transferring of my credentials into the United Church of Christ, I had to go through an ecclesiastical council and all that, and what people asked me was, you know, my thinking on Christology, and gay rights, and all that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Does it take you back to your AMBS final exams?

0:47:54

Northwood: It did except what was funny is when I—I had chosen not to be ordained until I actually pastored in a church, and so I wasn't ordained until I moved to Minneapolis. I could have been ordained after I left seminary, but I sort of was in an anti-ordination thing. I thought we're the priesthood of all believers and I was involved in a few house churches, and I was kind of really low on the leadership scale. But then when I pastored a church I needed the credentials, and so I went through that. And they, of course, were concerned about my thoughts on, again, still on Christology and—

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: This was at Faith?

Northwood: At Faith. And gay rights. And so when I went through the UCC process, they were fine with my thinking on gay rights and Christology, but it was baptism that was the thing, like how do you feel about baptizing babies. And, you know, I really just, at that point, had made peace with the symbolism isn't much different than child dedication, what we do in the Mennonite church, except that they're doing the act of baptism.

0:49:01 And then they, of course, do a reaffirmation of that when kids are older, which, the process that the kids go through is called confirmation, and it's a confirmation of the baptism that their parents did on their behalf. And theologically I can deal with that, and have come to terms with that. I don't excuse myself from baptizing babies. I've baptized a lot of babies. Probably much to the chagrin of my Mennonite colleagues, but...

I mean, it got to be a point where, you know, I have to have a job, and I have to survive, and if this is all I have to do to make that happen, I can deal with that. You know, what I've found in the United Church of Christ is just the gay issue is not an issue. It never has been. And we have lots of gay couples and we have lots of kids that have grown up with same sex parents.

0:50:01 And I think that's the beauty of it. Like it just isn't an issue. And I look back at the Mennonite church and the struggle that it still has with it and it just like...it isn't going to destroy your churches or people's faith or anything. They're just normal people trying to get through life like everybody else. They have the same challenges, except sometimes experience more prejudice.

And when I came to this church, it's a very wealthy church, and if anything, that's probably been the thing I've struggled the most with. It's very socially active and it's done some incredible things, but I've had to really learn how to be more compassionate and understanding of people who are extremely wealthy, and what does it mean for them to be Christians in this world. And so that's been the learning curve.

0:51:03

Interviewer: You came out of a Mennonite context that was more middle class, right?

Northwood: Middle class, but even lower. I mean, my personal experience is probably lower class.

Interviewer: I see. Back to Ohio days, you mean, in Pandora.

Northwood: Back to Ohio. My own living in Pandora and growing up in a huge family with parents who basically married out of high school, and my dad was a

farmer and a factory worker and my mother was a homemaker, for the most part.

Interviewer: So the wealth...so interesting to see this extremely wealthy congregation here totally okay with gay life, etc., and really involved in social, so being involved in social justice issues felt like home for you, but the huge amount of money and what the money gets spent on, probably the use of resources.

0:51:59

Northwood: Yeah, although this church has done incredible things with their money. They're very involved in the homelessness issue in the Twin Cities. They bought a nursing home that was across the street and immediately refurbished it and turned it into 40 apartments for people who were on the street, took applications and got them their own apartment. And they provide them with lots of support, both in terms of job training and social work resources.

They then started a nonprofit which is now called Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaboration or something which does multimillion dollar projects now creating affordable housing in the Twin Cities. That's a project of Plymouth. They do have the resources to do pretty incredible things.

0:53:00 Another thing that's awkward or odd for me is just to be around people who have military experience. I've had to listen and learn about what that is. There's a huge number of folks in the church that are very big on advocating for peace and justice issues, and would certainly be antiwar and that sort of thing, but they're also just, you know, there aren't very many children that I know who actually enlist, and I think that's more because of the socioeconomic strata. We're upper class and upper class people don't have their kids go. But there are kids who have been in the military and are in the military, and there are lots of veterans in this church.

0:53:57 And so I have had to think about how I say things. But there's freedom for me to—I can preach as pacifist as I would like. I've gotten our choir to sing “606.”

Interviewer: [Laughs.]

Northwood: I think it has a different number now, but... And I preached a sermon once about *Martyrs Mirror*. So there's freedom for me to speak about my own tradition and history. There are still people from Faith Mennonite who will come over when they know I'm preaching.

Interviewer: Oh. Oh, so you have some friends that—

Paula Northwood

Northwood: I do, yeah. I do. Well, I don't know if you know the history then of the Mennonite, or Faith Mennonite. It split after I left. And this Kay Welsh is the person that helped navigate that.

0:54:56 It's one of those things, when Tim and I were going through the call process, we received like a 100% vote. And I think when we got here we realized, okay, this church is not as healthy as it seems. And I think it was formed because of ethnic Mennonite ideals and not theological. And we made certain assumptions because our secretary was gay, and they rented to...the One Voice gay choir practiced in their basement, that they were really, that they had worked through that issue, but they hadn't.

And so after I came out and left the church, the church split pretty much along the gay issue. And those who were more conservative thinking about homosexuality started a church called Emmanuel Mennonite Church. And I think it's still going, as far as I know.

0:56:05

Interviewer: This is something, these details I don't know either. I've never looked into the history of Faith Mennonite Church. I knew there was turmoil, but I guess I didn't even know about this Emmanuel Mennonite Church, so I'll have to kind of look into that. So the people who would have been the most supportive of you were among those who stayed at Faith.

Northwood: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. And did you ever go back after you kind of were put out?

Northwood: They invited me back when they were celebrating their 50th anniversary, and Tim did not go back, but I went back. And I think there was a little panel. It was pretty light. I have to say that was probably one of the hardest things that I did, because I...

0:57:03 Because in the midst of some people treating me well I also just received a lot of vitriol and some people were really mean to me.

Interviewer: That was in the form of letters you got?

Northwood: Letters, some to my face.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Northwood: But I felt like you know what? If I were a different person I might take on the guilt or responsibility of having split this church, but I really feel like that's not mine to take, because when we got there Tim and I both felt like oh my gosh, like there's some power struggle going on with the older

generation and the younger generation. There's a power struggle between the old, what we called the old Mennonites and the General Conference.

0:57:59 There were just some things that weren't healthy. And I felt like our marriage ended up playing out some stuff that was going on in the congregation, which is unfortunate. And because I'm speaking about it sort of in psychological terms no one's going to want to spend time unpacking that, but if you ever have studied family systems, and think about the church as a family system, that's the kind of thing that was going on.

And I'm not blaming them at all for our divorce, but I just think some things got played out in both directions. And so they split. And to be honest, they should never have been together in the first place, maybe. I mean, that's why there's a Mennonite church and then General Conference, although of course they've now merged, but people are splintering off from that as well. We humans are complicated people.

0:59:02

Interviewer: Yeah.

Northwood: Okay, can I look at your questions? Do I consider myself a Mennonite or Anabaptist?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Northwood: Oddly, I still consider myself definitely ethnically Mennonite, theologically Anabaptist, but I'm pretty ensconced in the United Church of Christ.

Interviewer: I would think so after all these years.

Northwood: And I've gotten very involved in the Minnesota conference. I'm now on their board of directors. I have been a part of their camp committee for many years, and was at one time on the Committee on Ministry, which is the committee that oversees the ordination of pastors. So I've been very active in the leadership of the United Church of Christ.

1:00:02

Interviewer: So opportunities really came to you.

Northwood: Yeah.

Interviewer: I mean, you didn't have to claw your way into leadership.

Northwood: No, not at all.

Interviewer: And you spoke really warmly earlier of the American Baptist Church, the Judson. Was there a similar sort of sense of being in a good place in these last 20 years in the United Church of Christ, aside from the issues you've already mentioned, the infant baptism and the military, and sort of some disconnect there, maybe, or having to just kind of deal with that? Has UCC been a warm home?

1:00:51

Northwood: Yes. It has taken a while for me to use the word "home." I mean, it's probably obvious, just having grown up Mennonite and gone to a Mennonite college, a Mennonite seminary, and then worked for the denomination for my whole life, and then a Mennonite church, pastor of a Mennonite church, where I was well known, to go to a place where I was not known at all, that was a hard transition, and it didn't...

You know, for me going to a Mennonite conference, whether a district conference or the big biannual conferences, that felt like a family reunion to me. To go the United Church of Christ doesn't have that feel. It does more on the, just in the conference level, so the Minnesota conference level. It feels like that now.

1:02:01

But that's 20 years of being part of it. So now, yes, it does feel like home, but it took a long time. And I haven't sought out... I think I was more ambitious when I was in the Mennonite church and I really, had I not come out and left the Mennonite church I think I would have continued to aspire to do great things in the Mennonite church.

I think when I felt so abandoned by the Mennonite church when I came out that I tried to just convince myself that this is a job, and you just have a job to do, and you've got to do it, and right now the United Church of Christ is the place where you can do the job, and that the call is larger than the denomination, it's a call from God to work in the church, and it doesn't really matter what church it is, and—

1:03:04

Interviewer: That's a shift of thinking, though.

Northwood: It's a shift of thinking, yeah. I do know that I come with a certain predisposition to a higher level of understanding of community and how one does church that I think I'm continuing to have to sort of unpack that for people.

Interviewer: That's instilled in you from the Mennonite background?

Northwood: Very much so. I really believe that we're in this together to discern who and what we're to be, and in the Mennonite church that that...like for my call, I felt the call of the community every bit as strong as my own.

1:03:59 I didn't experience maybe a call in a traditional sense because I grew up in a church where there were no models for women ministers. They still have never had a female minister. And it's hard to say you have a call from God when you don't see any modeling of who you are. Although I would say I was a very oddly religious youngster. And even in my own church I remember this elderly guy. I was like the...for a Christmas pageant or something I was like...not like the MC, but kind of. You know, I was narrating. And he said to me you should become a minister. And I thought women aren't ministers. I mean, how could this be?

1:04:56 But I remember it. He felt like he saw something in me that I should pursue. And I kind of just remember laughing, like yeah, right. But it stuck with me because I still remember exactly who it was.

Interviewer: That's actually, I think, a really unusual thing that he said that to you in that time.

Northwood: It was because—right. I mean, he had...I mean, there were maybe women missionaries, but no ministers. What else can I tell you?

Interviewer: Well, you said I felt so abandoned by the Mennonite church, and I would have aspired to do great things in the Mennonite church if things had been different and you'd stayed. The feeling so abandoned, you did talk about this Robert Hartzler asking your forgiveness for having—

Northwood: Right.

Interviewer: Did you...how did you respond to that with him, do you remember?

Northwood: I think I appreciated what he was asking and I'm sure gave him that forgiveness. Like I feel like I've actually tried to be gracious with any kind of connection.

1:06:12 And even with my own family. It took a long time to reconnect with them. And I still think they're probably all at the love the sinner hate the sin.

Interviewer: All the siblings, and the parents, and the nieces and nephews, the whole caboodle?

Northwood: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: That's a lot of people.

Northwood: Yeah, for me right now it's approaching 80.

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: Eighty in the family.

Northwood: Uh-huh. Just by my parents. I mean, my mother's since passed away. In terms of my brothers and sisters and their children, and now their children are having children. Yeah. It will never be what it was before. But it has gotten better—

1:07:02

Interviewer: So there aren't...so no... So in that whole group nobody really moved into...they didn't go become urban Mennonites in open—

Northwood: No.

Interviewer: I mean, none of them ended up in Manhattan or San Francisco and sort of came out of the Pandora mentality?

Northwood: No. I have one niece who I have hope for because her husband just took a job as a professor of New Testament at Oxford and they moved to England. But oddly, they joined the Catholic church, so I haven't had a chance to have a conversation with her about what's going on there. They have like six kids, I think. But they're obviously well educated, and I hope at some point to have—I actually hope to visit them this May because I'm taking a group from this group to go visit the Chartres Cathedral and I thought I would swing over and visit them in Oxford, and just see what's up with them.

1:08:05 But no, I mean, my family has mainly stayed in Ohio. I mean, my dad lives in Alaska, but the rest of my sibs are all in Ohio. A lot of them still relate to the St. John Mennonite Church, which is very evangelical, it's not really Mennonite. And they haven't moved a lot on this issue, I don't think.

Interviewer: Do you go there and visit with your wife or...?

Northwood: My wife usually doesn't want to go. She thinks it's pretty toxic. I actually went this summer and had a great time. But I feel like there's just...we can't talk about the gay thing. So that's just odd for me.

Interviewer: That's your life. I mean...

Northwood: It is my life. Well, it's so funny, like on the day-to-day here I never talk about it, I don't think about it, whatever. But when I go back then I realize, okay, they don't want to let me completely in because I'm still living some lifestyle that they don't—

1:09:09

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: That they don't condone.

Northwood: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's sad. And then you did stay connected with Mennonites through the Wind, the Wilderness camp—

Northwood: Wilderness Wind, right.

Interviewer: And that's closing now, you said. But that's been kind of just one important connection, but sort of the one connection that's been constant.

Northwood: Right. And Tim and I started the camp because we just love the Boundary Waters, and we started it when we were still at Friedenswald, we started taking groups up there. And then it was just a fluke where we... somebody brought this property to the Newton office, and it landed on my desk because I was sitting on the Mennonite Camping Association Board.

1:09:55 And I just took it home and we ended up buying it and creating this nonprofit called Wilderness Wind. And we never affiliated with any conference, so we had freedom. So we, over the years, had gay staff. We were open to gay people coming and using the camp. Not overtly, but just that was, I think, what the rumor or the word on the street was. It was an important place for us to just... because we just felt so strongly about the environment, and that was a practical way for us to have people experience it in a really intense way.

When we got divorced there was some sadness because Tim was the director, and essentially the board fired him, and they kept me on as sort of an ex officio board member. And so he's not had anything to do with the camp, but I have, and that has been... I don't go to every board meeting and haven't over the last few years, but I go to enough to stay connected.

1:10:59 And everybody on the board is Mennonite because our constituency still is mainly Mennonite. But it's been in existence for 30 years, and we were having some financial difficulties, and we just decided maybe it's time, it had run its course, which I felt actually quite good about. And so we just transitioned the camp to a Chicago nonprofit called Chicago Voyagers, and they work with inner city kids, taking them to the Boundary Waters. And they likely are going to keep the name Wilderness Wind, and they would love for Mennonites to still come and use them, so I think it's going to continue in some way.

Interviewer: That would seem like a good... Yeah, maybe some of the board members will even remain.

Northwood: Yeah, I think there might be some connection there.

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: That would be neat.

Northwood: So I actually feel quite celebratory of that.

Interviewer: So it is interesting through that you still dealt with Mennonite people.

Northwood: Right.

1:12:00

Interviewer: I've never been there myself, so I'm not very knowledgeable about it. I know there must be a website and that kind of thing, but—

Northwood: There is a website. Whether it's... They're in the middle of transitioning, so I don't know if it's still—

Interviewer: Do the constituents come up from Minnesota and from—

Northwood: They come from Kansas, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. And our board members represent all those states.

Interviewer: All those areas, uh-huh. But it always stayed independent from the Northern District or...?

Northwood: Right. When we started we did something that then later didn't make sense, but when we started it what Tim and I realized is it's really hard for a camp like Friedenswald to do trips like that, so why don't we be the vehicle for all the camps. So on our board we had Friedenswald, Amigo, Mennoland, the one in Kansas, I forget the name.

Interviewer: That's Mennoscah.

Northwood: Mennoscah. And Swan Lake. Like all the ones in the area. What's the other one in Iowa? Crooked Creek or something like that.

1:13:04

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: I don't know, there's a bunch of them. Is Mennoland the one in...?

Interviewer: There's Camp—

Northwood: Menno Haven.

Interviewer: Menno Haven is around Tiskilwa, Illinois.

Paula Northwood

Northwood: Yeah, Menno Haven. We had staff from all those people be our first board. And then what they all realized is we can't do fundraising for you because we've got—

Interviewer: Their own, yeah.

Northwood: You know, the whole interest thing. So then we just started getting people, whoever. It's always been sort of word of mouth, like we want someone from your area who loves the wilderness. And that's how we functioned, and just created our own support, because it's all done by volunteers, and money that we can raise.

Interviewer: Oh, interesting.

Northwood: And then the people, of course, pay somebody to do it.

Interviewer: I'm sorry I haven't ever connected with it. Our family is extremely connected with Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp in Colorado, and maybe you've been there, but that's—

1:14:00

Northwood: I have.

Interviewer: Oh, it's an awesome place.

Northwood: Yeah.

Interviewer: I have two children, and they're both young adults now, but they have grown up being on staff there many, many years, both of them, and so many of our family's friends are connected with that camp. But yeah, camp life is, it's just the best. [*Laughs.*]

Northwood: I know. No, I've been a big advocate. And now I'm on the...really connected with this UCC camp, so I haven't let that go.

Interviewer: Oh, that's neat. Okay, yeah, because, I mean, it's in your blood, right? I mean, you...yes, that's awesome.

Northwood: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. Well, let's look at...

Northwood: Is there something else?

Interviewer: You did say you consider yourself ethnically Mennonite, theologically Anabaptist, and then of course totally ensconced now for 20 years in the UCC. And you have layered these identities together, obviously. The answer there has been clear.

Paula Northwood

1:14:00 Number eight. I don't want to revisit the whole what's your Christology, but...

Northwood: Yeah, it had to change. I know when I first started pastoring at Faith Mennonite someone accused me of trying to turn the church into a Unitarian church, so I think I've always had a Unitarian streak. I really—and this is where my—it does get down to Christology. I really believe that we follow Jesus, but we worship God. We don't worship Jesus. And that really has always been my theology. It's just I have much more freedom now to push that.

Interviewer: To push that, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I mean, you've definitely emphasized that here when you preach you have freedom to be yourself.

Northwood: Yeah. I mean, I just preached last Sunday and some people would think it was maybe a little too universalist. I mean, we really talk a lot about there are many paths to God, and this is just one.

1:16:00 And my thinking is that in this time in our history there was always diversity within the Christian church and I think now there needs to be diversity in terms of us being more open and understanding of other religions if we're going to coexist in this [world]. So I don't know that it's changed much.

I think what I do bring to the staff is my understanding of community and the church as community, and I think that's important. And I try to pull in my pacifist stuff, but I don't do it aggressively because I think I have learned to be more compassionate about people who feel like violence has a place. I've tried to even maybe learn about that. But I don't know that it's changed my thinking.

1:17:02

Interviewer: I resonate with that, actually, because I teach at a public university and I have now for almost 20 years. I used to teach at Goshen College, but then I switched from Goshen to Washburn. And many of my students are vets. And so, I mean, and they're lovely people. I mean—

Northwood: Right.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*] You know.

Northwood: And they are lovely, faithful people.

Interviewer: Right.

Northwood: I mean, they're trying to be faithful. I don't agree with their presuppositions about some things, but so much is what you—

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: It's what you're born into.

Northwood: Exactly.

Interviewer: I mean, that's why I have my thoughts, is because I was born into a pacifist Mennonite family. These people were born into a different family and their experiences are just as valid as mine, so I—

Northwood: Exactly. You know exactly where I'm coming from. And I just had to get there, and I got there pretty quickly.

Interviewer: Okay, I had this question number nine. Now you haven't been hooked into—and Mennonite Church USA, of course, is the merged—

Northwood: Right, right, right.

1:18:00

Interviewer: Optimistic, pessimistic. You say you sometimes read *The Mennonite* if it shows up on Facebook or something.

Northwood: I mean, I am unengaged, I guess, frankly, but there's a part of it just like oh, you know, what is the big deal? And I toy at times like should I write something for *The Mennonite*, see if would get published, just in terms of my own experience. Because, you know, it feels like there are just two main issues: fear and then interpretation of the Bible. And I guess here in Minnesota, when we worked to abolish the marriage amendment so that we could get married, the thing that we found that was most persuasive was to simply tell our stories.

1:18:57 It wasn't to try and make intellectual sense, you know, that gay people are okay either psychologically or scientifically or medically or any other thing, but it was telling stories. And when people get to know people and care about people then they're willing to change their minds.

And I feel like the Mennonite church has to move away from the literal interpretation of the Bible because that is never going to get us anywhere. And it's got to be just people continuing to tell stories and be open to those stories and move away from the fear. I think that's the only way it's going to change. I know for me I get impatient, and when I visit my family it's like do I have to tell this story again, or do I have to answer these really stupid, ridiculous questions.

1:19:56 But yes. The answer is yes, you do have to keep doing that. And, you know, in the same way that we still have to keep having conversations about pacifism and we still have to have conversations about what it means to be faithful people. That's the nature of humanity. You still have to just keep talking about it.

And the Mennonite church is going to change whether they like it or not because society is changing. And I have a feeling if I actually had a conversation with my nieces and nephews this is not an issue for them. It's just that we don't have the context for having the conversation right now.

Interviewer: To me it just seems like the Mennonite church has just sort of now really gotten very far behind society.

Northwood: Right, right.

Interviewer: And not every part of the Mennonite Church USA. There are certainly lots of urban congregations and maybe even some rural ones that are at a good place, but...

1:20:54

Northwood: Yeah, I think they just get in danger of cutting themselves off from the church if they take too extreme a stance. But Stan Bone—I don't know if you know who he is.

Interviewer: Yeah, I do know him.

Northwood: He, I don't know if he was cruising the internet or what. He found one of my sermons and he really liked it so he wrote to me. And he grew up going to school with my dad. And he said Paula, really you should consider applying—he said there's an opening in San Francisco, in Manhattan, either one of those, they would take you.

And I'm like well, first of all I can't move to either of those places, nor do I want to. But I just felt like I don't think he's maybe accurate. Like sure, they might love me and they might even hire me, but then they risk being kicked out of the Mennonite church, so I don't want to do that. That doesn't seem what I feel called to do.

1:21:56

Interviewer: Right now there is, you know, maybe from reading some things in *The Mennonite* you know there's a church in Denver that has an openly lesbian pastor.

Northwood: Yes.

Interviewer: And I haven't tried to interview her yet, and I don't know if I'll contact her or not. Her name is Theda Good. But I think she's gotten lots of support in her congregation and also in the Rocky Mountain District, the regional district. She's gotten a lot of support. But it's more sort of people from all over the whole nation are upset about that in the Mennonite church. It's not in her local context.

Paula Northwood

Northwood: Right, right.

Interviewer: So that bugs me so much because Anabaptists really are supposed to be about local autonomy.

Northwood: Exactly. Exactly.

Interviewer: And so...yeah.

Northwood: Right. And I think that's where, oddly, the UCC has that same polity, only they live it out.

Interviewer: I see.

Northwood: And so even though churches of course can very quickly discern that, yeah, gay people are okay and we should ordain them and whatever and just live into it, the reason they can't question it is because of that local autonomy.

1:23:07

Interviewer: Local autonomy is really followed more—

Northwood: It's highly regarded.

Interviewer: —is highly regarded, more than what this national Mennonite organization is doing.

Northwood: Right.

Interviewer: That's really interesting. So I didn't quite understand when you said earlier that this congregation here is part of the Minnesota UCC, but not the national. What's that?

Northwood: Well, it's a sort of history. But, you know, it is like—and I don't even know if Mennonites can do this, if you can join like the Central District, but not join the General Conference at the time. I don't know if that's even a possibility.

Interviewer: I don't think that's possible.

Northwood: Well, it is possible here in the United Church of Christ. Well, this is what happened. Thirty years ago they had a minister. His name was Howard Conn, of which our...we have a theatre here which I can show you later.

1:23:56 But he was part of the big merger which created the United Church of Christ, and he wanted to be, I think, the president. And when they didn't hire him he came home here and said we're not joining. And so 90% of all Congregational churches joined the United Church of Christ in the late

'50s, and Plymouth was one of the ones that didn't. But you could be a part of your conference, and so the Minnesota conference voted for Plymouth to be a part of that conference, and they didn't really ask the church. And that's how they became a part of the Minnesota conference. The rest of those Congregational churches belonged to a national association of Congregational Christian churches, which is a really small association now that's I think probably going to fade away pretty soon.

1:25:00 And they also have state associations, of which we got kicked out of that because we're too liberal. So it's just a weird thing. And because this pastor was so beloved, we tried to join the United Church of Christ about eight years ago and we couldn't go through with it because there was so much—

Interviewer: Animosity?

Northwood: Animosity and just people threatening to leave the church if we joined because the United Church of Christ is terrible.

Interviewer: Oh, animosity here in this congregation?

Northwood: Yeah, in the congregation. The United Church of Christ would love to have us.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Yeah, I would think so.

Northwood: Because we're one of the larger churches.

Interviewer: Yeah, you're a big, wealthy church. Why would they not want that?

Northwood: Of course. No, they would love to have us. And the Minnesota conference is happy to have us in what form we show up. But this congregation feels like, well, one, they have Christ in the title, which bugs some people. It's too Christian.

1:26:00

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Northwood: And other people think, well, they're going to tell us what to do. They just don't understand United Church of Christ polity because the United Church of Christ can't tell anybody what to do.

Interviewer: Okay, interesting.

Northwood: I think we will eventually join. I think we'll go through a process and eventually join, but we have to wait for just about three people to die, and they're getting very close.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*] Okay. That's interesting. I'm a historian, so I like those kind of tidbits. It doesn't have much to do with my study here, but it's just fascinating anyway.

Yeah, I mean, before we move on from nine, the Mennonite Church USA about LGBTQ concerns, I was really intrigued that you talked about having thought about suicide when you were going through a tough place in the early '90s because the other women that I have interviewed have all mentioned that as being part of their past.

1:27:09 And those are women that are in their, you know, mid 20s now, and they have come through that. Otherwise I don't think they would have been talking to me. But that just seems like wow, it doesn't seem like a coincidence that four or five people that I've talked to have all brought that up. I mean, to me that just seems like a reason that the Mennonite church just needs to quit being so judgmental of people's selfhood.

Northwood: Yes. I mean, obviously there's a high rate of suicide among gay people, and Mennonites are no different. And I think both the blessing and the curse of the Mennonite church is that tight community.

1:27:57 I mean, my whole life was Mennonite, and my whole sense of family and identity was Mennonite. And when I first started contemplating leaving that I didn't know the world. I mean, I'm overstating it a bit, but I didn't know the world outside of the Mennonite church, and didn't know how I would survive without community.

Interviewer: And you did talk about that you were shunned in a kind of Amish sense by your own family, so that was a feeling of abandonment. You have a lot of distance from that now, and a lot of years, and obviously you're in a happy, committed marriage, but there was a place where it must have been pretty dark.

Northwood: It was so dark. I mean, there would have been a time when I couldn't have talked about it without weeping.

Interviewer: Oh, sure, yeah.

Northwood: I can talk about it now, but yeah, I felt so alone, especially when I couldn't find a job for a year so I just—and I was spending my meager retirement from the conference. And even then they sent me a letter that they were no longer doing pensions or something and I had to take my money and put it into something else. And I didn't know if that was true or it was just me that they didn't want to have my... I didn't have the energy to pursue it. I assume it was legit, like they just weren't going to do pensions anymore, and so they sent me all my money, and I put it into something else which I actually could spend and live off of, so in some ways it was a good thing.

1:30:00 But it was very dark, and I felt like only one thing about me had changed, and it was that they knew about my sexual orientation and suddenly nobody wanted to have anything to do with me. There was something going on where there was a—it must have been a BMC conference or something in Indiana, and my grandmother had just died, and so I went to that conference and I was asked to—I did a little kind of an art installation thing, which is weird now when I think about it.

I built like a big wall with boxes and then spray painted anti-gay stuff on it, but then transformed those boxes into a communion table somehow. I forget how it was done. But anyway, I was invited to do something like that and then I called my parents to talk to them about my grandmother's funeral, and they didn't want me to come.

1:31:00 But I was only two hours away, and I called my cousin, who happened to be the undertaker. Otherwise this wouldn't have happened. And he said come over, I'll give you a private showing. But that was the only way I could say goodbye to my grandmother. [*Choking up.*] I mean, my family was cruel.

Interviewer: Wow. And so you weren't at the memorial service.

Northwood: No.

Interviewer: Wow.

Northwood: Yeah, so see, I can still conjure up some feelings. And I, you know, and it's had to be me who has been forgiving them and moving beyond in order to be in relationship with them. And to be honest, my thinking whenever I gear up to be with them is this is just like pastoral care, and be present to them in their life, and maybe it will move them.

1:32:01 And actually, I think that's worked. I mean, I do feel like I have a pretty good relationship now with my whole family. But there's no—they won't admit to what they did to me, I don't think, at that time. I think there's a lot of rewriting of history.

You know, and I, of course, have fantasies at some point that the Mennonite church will invite me back to speak at something. But I don't really believe that's going to happen. You know, some of it from my own family is—like my dad has never heard me preach. Well, no. No one in my family has actually ever heard me preach. And I've been a minister now for really all my adult life. You know, that's...

Interviewer: That's sad.

Northwood: It's sad. But I get so much support here and so much affirmation for what I do that it, I think I've created my own family or whatever.

Paula Northwood

1:33:04

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Northwood: So I guess I don't spend a lot of time wallowing in sorrow about that. I forget now where I was going with this. Someone's trying to get ahold of me.

Interviewer: Well, we can wrap up here, and I think we should. Additional women and men in church leadership. I mean, I don't know if you—you felt very alone at one point. You said maybe I should talk to Jane Miller.

Northwood: Yeah. Well, I mean, I felt like, you know, she worked for the old Mennonites, and then she was in Voluntary Service here, and she was a church musician at Faith. And now she...the One Voice choir is a pretty big deal in the Twin Cities, and she's been the director for a number of years.

1:34:04

Interviewer: That's a gay choir?

Northwood: It's a gay choir.

Interviewer: Is it men and women?

Northwood: Men and women.

Interviewer: Okay, interesting. I don't know about it.

Northwood: You could Google them and see their website. She's doing something now with—I don't know if you know who Philip Brunelle is. He's the organist and choirmaster here, but he also is the director of VocalEssence, which is a professional choir in the Twin Cities. He's pretty world renowned, I guess, as an organist and musician. And she's doing something with him because she just, I saw on Facebook she was having dinner with him.

Interviewer: And so she is a...she does sort of music ministry, or is it secular?

1:34:56

Northwood: It's secular. I guess she's the artistic director of One Voice. That would be her title. And she—I mean, they do some sacred stuff sometimes, but no, it's a secular thing. Her dad is, I think, was a professor at Goshen, Bill Miller.

Interviewer: Yeah, I know him. I don't know Jane, but I do know her parents because they were very close friends of my parents. My parents lived for a long

time in Normal, Illinois, but then they moved to Goshen, and my dad was a pastor of College Mennonite Church for a long time before he retired, and so they were close with Bill and Phyllis. So I know that older Miller couple, but I've never met Jane.

Northwood: Yeah, she lives here in Minneapolis.

Interviewer: Does she identify as Mennonite yet, or you don't know?

Northwood: I think she probably would say ethnically she does. She used to be really active with St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, but I think she just got tired of... She would have been really active and much more of an activist than me, than I ever was.

1:36:00 Like when I came out I was so devastated that I... Like the church wanted me to fight this fight, like try and keep your credentials and stay our pastor and the whole deal. And I just felt like I can't do...I don't have the... I felt like it would be a losing battle and I would just be crucified in it, and I wasn't up for it. In some ways maybe I should have been or that would have been another way to live my life, but I couldn't do it.

Interviewer: Would she have some theological training, or it's more that she went through college and was a music person and then had jobs, like jobs at Faith as a music director or something?

Northwood: Yeah. I think because St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship was so lay led I just feel like she was pretty active in going to Northern District and trying to...

1:37:06 Because they kept, their standing in the church kept being threatened all the time.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. With the Northern District?

Northwood: You know, it might just be worth an email or something to see if—

Interviewer: If she'd be willing to talk to me.

Northwood: If she'd be willing or if it makes sense.

Interviewer: If it makes sense. So you'll have to give me her email address, I think, because I don't know how to reach her. And I don't think she would know me. I mean, like I'm...a person can read my work and stuff, but she may not have ever been connected into my academic stuff, so my name might not mean anything to her. But yeah, if you would give me—

Northwood: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anybody else besides Jane on this number ten?

Paula Northwood

1:38:00

Northwood: There used to be a person that was in the United Church of Christ in Chicago, but I don't remember her name now. But she was one of the first Mennonites that I know of, women, who couldn't get a job in the Mennonite church and just took a church in the United Church of Christ. That's where maybe Carol Wise—

Interviewer: Carol Wise might tell me that.

Northwood: —might know her name.

Interviewer: Is this person that you're thinking of, was she a lesbian or you—

Northwood: Lesbian, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. I'll ask.

Northwood: I never met her and I don't even know if she's still a minister.

Interviewer: I will ask Carol Wise about—I feel like Carol Wise will have multiple people to tell me.

Northwood: She'll be really good. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So I'm expecting that. The number eleven, maybe you could just know that I'd be really interested in stuff that you might—

1:38:58

Northwood: I'll look for letters, yeah.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier people like the president at Bluffton.

Northwood: Yeah, Elmer Neufeld and Vern Preheim.

Interviewer: Elmer Neufeld and Vern Preheim, and once you start looking maybe there's a couple other documents in there that you think would be of interest to me. It's helpful for me to have some of that historical stuff because I want to give... One of the things as a historian I want to be looking at change over time because I think the Mennonite church has been changing. It's not at the same place it was 30 years ago.

Northwood: No, no.

Interviewer: And so I also want to document that as well as personal stories. So I'll leave my card with you so you have all my contact information.

Northwood: That would be great.

Paula Northwood

Interviewer: And then number twelve, that's just a throwaway question, but maybe I didn't ask you quite the things that you expected.

1:39:55

Northwood: I think this is pretty much what I was expecting.

Interviewer: Okay. [*Laughs.*]

Northwood: Just to tell my story.

Interviewer: Yeah, right. Well, you've been so open and I appreciate that so much. And you're willing for me to use your name, and your name is now Northwood, but how did it get to be Northwood?

Northwood: It is. Only because I took my wife's name.

Interviewer: You took your wife's name, okay.

Northwood: And she had made that name up.

Interviewer: She made the name up, okay.

Northwood: Because her birth name is [*Grotelueschen*].

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: But yeah, I took her name.

Interviewer: You got legally married just pretty recently when it became—

Northwood: Yeah, three years ago.

Interviewer: Three years ago, okay. That must have been interesting after you'd already been married for a long time.

Northwood: It was shocking, but not... It's one of those things where the world is changing because never in my lifetime would I have imagined that. I think many of us were in awe of the whole thing. Really? And then there was pressure to get married, legally married, which, you know, some of our friends have struggled with that. But we decided to do it, more for financial reasons than anything.

1:41:08

Interviewer: Did you do it here at the church?

Northwood: No, we just did it—because we'd had a church wedding we just did it in our living room because we wanted to keep the same date, and it happened

to be a Thursday, which is not very interesting for another church wedding. But then some people here were kind of upset with me because “we wanted to celebrate with you.”

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Northwood: We just did a thing with family and just a few friends, really small.

Interviewer: The earlier church wedding, I didn’t hear about that, either. That was back in ’98 or some?

Northwood: Well, when I started pursuing the... [*Phone buzzing.*] I just want to look, because people are usually not so persistent at trying to get ahold of me. I don’t have time to talk to her, but I will call her back. Well, yeah, Andrea and I got together kind of in my dark period. I mean, that was the light.

1:42:01 Well, and here’s the other piece of it. In spite of the fact that, I mean, I lost everything I had a sense of a deep peace that I never felt before. And then when I got in relationship with Andrea, I just started to experience joy like I have never experienced before, like that life actually could be more joyful.

And this is no exaggeration for me, but colors seemed brighter and tastes, food seemed more rich and... It’s like my senses became alive, like I just became alive in a way that I’d never been alive before. And that just kept confirming to me that I had done the right thing, that being gay is not something evil and sinful and whatever.

1:42:58 It’ll never make sense to me. But I have this story that I use. I’m also a beekeeper. I took a college course on beekeeping. And they tell you every hive has only one queen. And this friend and I, we do it together. And we check our hives, sometimes together, sometimes individually. And I checked this one hive and I said—we keep notes—this is a great, healthy looking queen, but I don’t think she has a marking.

And my friend checked the next week and she said I checked that same hive and there’s a queen with a mark, so I don’t know what you saw. So I said well, let’s check it together. And we went through this hive inch by inch and we found a hive with two queens, one marked, one unmarked. Well, I don’t know if you know, but here at the University of Minnesota there’s a great bee center.

Interviewer: I didn’t know.

1:43:51

Northwood: And we called them and we said we—because everything we learned is that the hive will kill the second queen, that it’s just not possible to have

two queens. And we called the University of Minnesota bee expert and said we have a hive with two queens, and it seems to be functioning fine. And the guy said yeah, sometimes that happens. And we're like well, what do you mean it happens? He goes, well, for some reason they perceive that one queen, there's no way to know which one, as a drone, so as a male, and they just let the queen—

Interviewer: Can be there.

Northwood: Can be there. And I have told that story before because this is what, to me, it's like. I don't get it, but sometimes it just happens, and some of us are attracted to the same sex, and there's no explanation for it. It is what it is.

Interviewer: And it's—

Northwood: It happens in nature.

Interviewer: It happens in nature. That's the moral here, yeah.

Northwood: Sometime I'm going to write an article about that because—

Interviewer: That must have been kind of—

1:44:57

Northwood: Because we kept, we go like this is not natural.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*]

Northwood: Like we were saying this. And she's a lesbian, too. Like this is not normal. I used it, I officiated at her wedding, and it was more of a secular wedding because it was at the Minneapolis Women's Club, and some of her family are kind of iffy on the gay thing. And I used that example that it's not natural, it's not normal. And then there's but sometimes it happens.

Interviewer: Okay. You found ways to work in all sorts of theology—

Northwood: I have.

Interviewer: —including your environmentalism. That's awesome. That's just awesome. Well, Paula, thank you so much. This is fantastic.

Northwood: Well, thank you.

Interviewer: I'm going to turn this off.

1:45:44 [*End of recording.*]