

Interviewee: Sarah Klaassen
Interviewer: Rachel Waltner Goossen
Date: November 16, 2016
Place: Columbia, Missouri

Interviewer: This is Rachel Goossen, and I'm in Columbia, Missouri with Sarah Klaassen, and the date is November 16, 2016, and we're in Sarah's office at the Disciples Church—or it's Christian Church, right?

Klaassen: Yeah, Rock Bridge Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, yeah.

Interviewer: Right, okay. So we've been kind of catching up a little bit. I had talked with Sarah this summer in July and just took notes at that point, but now this interview I'm recording. And I don't know, how about if we start a little bit about your background in Kansas and tell me about growing up on a Whitewater farm.

Klaassen: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: Just visit a little bit about your background.

Klaassen: Sure. Yeah, so I grew up in rural Whitewater at Grace Hill Mennonite Church, which was one of the churches that came over as a congregation in the 1870s to Kansas when I guess it was the...you know, farmers were being recruited to settle the area.

0:01:05 And so my family was part of that original congregation. Johann Klaassen was what is it, great-great-great-grandfather came as a boy, I believe, and my family has farmed land close to that congregation where that church was established ever since. My dad continues on a property. The home place is about three miles from the church.

So I grew up there in that place and as part of the congregation, very much so, with my grandparents and parents as well, so had a great experience growing up there and loved the church. I had good friends, wonderful intergenerational experiences, older people who were invested in my life, and teaching Sunday school, and all those kinds of things.

0:01:59 And developed a very strong sense of if not faith and belief, certainly those were transformed in really significant ways in the last 20 years, but community, the sense of community that I developed and that was formed by being part of that congregation continues to shape how I experience the world and the sense of place as well, the sense of rootedness and commitment to a place. So those were very important values that were transmitted in perhaps a Mennonite way, where it wasn't by telling and

talking about them, but it was by showing them and doing them and living them.

Interviewer: And did you think that you wanted to be a pastor at some point, or was that not really part of your sense?

Klaassen: I don't know if it really occurred to me or not. I certainly enjoyed church and the kind of questions of faith and values that it prompted.

0:03:03 I remember when I was in middle school reading through my Bible in a year, kind of doing that as a young, young person, and kind of wrestling with questions of faith. Not having a lot of outlets, not quite knowing how and where to turn to them, so really developed a pretty significant inner life in terms of those things, which then kind of included wrestling with sexuality into my teen years.

In terms of vocation, I didn't have any models of women ministers. I never thought I couldn't do it because I was a woman, and I remember getting into arguments with my middle school friends about of course women can be ministers. They went to more conservative or evangelical churches, and so we'd get into these discussions, these debates, we'd call them, at lunch about women in ministry.

0:04:01 I was, of course, very pro women in ministry. And war. And I was of course very antiwar. And so kind of one way that I would say yeah, General Conference Mennonite values were just really assumed into the structure of my personality in ways that they still are. I mean, I never questioned either of those things. Perhaps not women, or in a very, very nuanced way.

So then in high school is when I started kind of, as many of us do, learning about my sexuality, but there were no resources for that, not in the church, not in the schools, nowhere. Rural Kansas and many places which were kind of veiled in silence about those things. So much I think there was embarrassment, and there was shame, and there was ignorance, all those things mixed together.

0:05:00 And so I learned some, again, assumed values around those things based on what I saw and based on how affection was given or not. And so when I had developed a relationship with another woman when I was a teenager, someone from a different town who I played basketball with, I didn't know what to do with that and didn't have anyone to talk to about that. And so experienced a lot of grief, and guilt, and suicidal ideation, and questioning of my faith and self and God, and those kinds of things. So my faith and sexuality have always, since I became aware of my sexuality, has always been extremely connected to my sense of faith, and God, and the Bible as well.

0:06:00

Interviewer: It sounds like that was a crisis time. You must have been 16 or 17 or 18.

Klaassen: Yeah, probably 15 to 18, I would say.

Interviewer: Oh, a long crisis, or...okay.

Klaassen: Mm-hmm, yeah. Was I 15? I think...let's see, when I was a freshman in high school was I...? Maybe I was 15 or 16, yeah, to 18, 19, 20, you know. It was until I studied religion that religion was also my savior, my salvation.

Interviewer: Talk a little bit about that. That was in college?

Klaassen: Yeah, so I went to college on a basketball scholarship to Missouri State University, and didn't know what to study. Didn't have kind of a clear direction. Thought I'd do English education. You know, again, as someone who enjoys reading and thinking and writing and those kinds of things. Didn't really like my English classes, particularly British literature.

0:07:06

And I noticed people were actually interested in what we were studying, and I was not. I thought I could find something at least I'm interested in, and so I enrolled in three religion classes the next semester, maybe two, and just fell in love with that. Had a professor who opened up the Bible using historical, critical method, just very basic academic study of religion and Christianity in the texts.

And for many of my peers it was threatening. For me it was completely liberating. I came to a point where I said well, I either have to go down this path and—or I have to go down this path and I'll either, if what I have believed is correct about God and scripture I'll circle back around and find it. That's how much faith I had in intellectual inquiry.

0:08:00

But if that's not true then it'll lead me somewhere else. So it was a bit of a leap of faith or a step of trust to pursue with my whole heart the academic study of religion, and always doing that integrating work which I think is a very...it's probably something I learned in the Mennonite community, that we're always integrating what we believe with how we act and what we think with who we are. And so it was never a strictly intellectual enterprise, it was always an intrapersonal enterprise as well.

And so once the Bible didn't have as much concrete authority, neither did the things that it was supposedly transmitting about who I was as a human being and my sexuality, which...so what I was experiencing as a person started to match more what I believed.

Sarah Klaassen

0:08:58 And I had some good partners in that, a couple of professors. Certainly teammates who weren't intellectuals or anything like that, but they were lesbians, so that's always good to have. Because I didn't know anyone growing up who wasn't straight. I'm sure I did, but—

Interviewer: It was a very different environment.

Klaassen: I can't think—still at Grace Hill Mennonite Church sometimes I sit with my mom and I say surely there are other gay people who've grown up or been part of this congregation, but we have no idea who they are. So that veil of silence and shame and secrecy still hangs really thick. And I don't know if that's a function of being Mennonite, if it's a function of rural America or what, but I'm absolutely thrilled that that's not my life. I can't even imagine trying to live that way.

0:09:59 I mean, there's 150 people in the congregation. There's other gay people there.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, it seems like these changes are happening so that one would guess that down the road even a place like Grace Hill, I don't know—

Klaassen: Yeah, you'd think so. The church is so far behind the times on this. Even as I look at this micro urban area, Columbia, Missouri, we could count our open and affirming Christian churches on a couple of hands, if that, if we needed more than one hand.

Interviewer: Really? Okay.

Klaassen: There will be a lot of congregations who would say yes, we welcome everyone, but who can explicitly say we welcome and celebrate, and our congregation as a whole welcomes and celebrates LGBTQ people, that's—oh, it's shockingly few. Shockingly few.

0:11:00 Even—and this is the mainline churches. It's not just Mennonites with their kind of cultural and ethnic baggage that is really limiting, but—

Interviewer: But you say that you could count on two hands those that would be openly welcoming in this—

Klaassen: Yes, I think so.

Interviewer: —in this area.

Klaassen: I think so. One, this other Disciples church, just adopted an open and affirming position last year, about a year ago, and lost a few members over it. So it's...we have other churches in town who have gay and lesbian members. You know, there's the Episcopal church, so as a whole denomination, as a whole communion they are certainly more than

Baptists or Mennonites. So there's that. But then of the congregationally governed churches it would be, again, shockingly few.

0:12:00 So it seems like there...we should be past—I mean, lots of critical things for faith communities to take on, and this doesn't seem like... It seems like we could—

Interviewer: Be further along, yeah.

Klaassen: Be further along. But it's important work. It's just...

Interviewer: Yeah. You mentioned to me when we met in July you sort of feel ready to have other kinds of things be the focus for yourself and for many LGBTQ Christians, that advocacy for being who you are and your own sexuality shouldn't take up sort of the lion's share of one's sort of time or ministry.

Klaassen: Yeah. And it is important, like we have people who come to my church regularly who find us because they look for an open and affirming church, so had several kind of gender queer people come recently.

0:13:01 And I think there's ongoing kind of pastoral concerns about trauma and all kinds of damage that church has done to people. And there's all kinds of needs for us to make sure people know we're here and we're welcoming. And we do that and continue to do that.

But as I think about the pressing needs in our community, we have a civil rights ordinance that protects LGBTQ people in our town, but we don't have a city that understands structural racism. Which is an almost intractable, it feels like, an intractable issue. Our community, our university, our city was founded on slavery, and our country was. So that seems to me that there's heavy and deep justice work there.

0:14:04 It seems to me to be, even in light of last week, a calling that I wrestle with much more than... And then I feel the church, perhaps, or my congregation, I sense, more of our wrestling is in that area. But we did, they did the LGBT thing 20 years ago.

Interviewer: Right, long before you ever arrived here.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: So back to your a little bit earlier story we were talking about you being at college. Is that when you came out, while you were in college?

Klaassen: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, coming out is kind of a lifelong thing. I, I guess, named it to my mom when I was in college, and to a few other people.

0:15:00 I have found it's a lot more difficult to come out to the past than it is just to be out when you meet people. So then when I went to divinity school I was just out to everybody, which was a lot easier than to try and go back through especially the Christian friends. Christians are just a nightmare to come out to sometimes. You just don't know how they're going to react. They want to be loving. They don't want to be mean. They have all this baggage around being judgmental, but then you can tell they think you're wrong.

So it just...I didn't worry about that. I wasn't one of those people who went through the list and talk to everybody and confess or told. You know, some people found out other ways. I didn't tell my whole family. I told my mom and my sisters and then it trickled through the rest of the family. I didn't feel like that was my work to do, necessarily.

0:16:00

Interviewer: And in college it sounds like...did you end up majoring in religion?

Klaassen: Yes.

Interviewer: That was a major?

Klaassen: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Klaassen: What a happy accident that I went to a public university with an excellent religious studies department. I wouldn't have—I didn't pick that. Not every university has that.

Interviewer: Right. And part of it was sort of academic Biblical study, but also theological openness and connections to sort of future study for you?

Klaassen: Yeah. So I, I mean, we had a degree program that required a range of courses including some Eastern religious stuff, which, I took the requirements there and my electives were all in more Christian areas. So was able to study women and religion and modern Christian thought, which was looking at theological thinkers, so not necessarily doing theology, but studying some theological movements of the—in that class it was the 20th century.

0:17:11 And so yeah, I got to do lots of fun things, and got to experience the breadth and—at least a taste of the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition which relativizes all of the ways that the church takes itself just so seriously. It just is relativized when we see the tradition and context. And the multiple Christianities of the first century and all of that, just awakening and liberating and has had me ever since kind of on the edge of

mystery, and questions, and paradox, and uncertainty, which are just a huge part of how I see the world now.

0:17:57

Interviewer: Did you go straight to divinity school?

Klaassen: Yeah. I went straight to divinity school. When I was—it must have been late in my junior year of college or early in my senior year and I went and sat in a mentor's office, a woman who's a Disciples of Christ minister, and her religion PhD is from Boston, and her MDiv I think is from Harvard, and I said what should I do with my life? And she said you should go to Harvard Divinity School. And I said okay.

And so I applied there. I did some research, applied at a handful of other places, but Vanderbilt was—it was a better fit, certainly in terms of probably location, social justice type things, scholarship money. So I went to Vanderbilt then, graduated on time and went to Vanderbilt for three years.

0:18:57

Interviewer: And that was an MDiv program?

Klaassen: Yes.

Interviewer: And I'm remembering that you had also done, was it an internship or something with Dorothy Nickel Friesen in the Western District?

Klaassen: Yeah, so I—

Interviewer: Was that during the Vanderbilt time or were you still in college?

Klaassen: It was after my first year of divinity school. I suppose I didn't have summer plans, but I don't even know how that happened. My mom just mentioned it or something. I don't know. So I went and worked at Western District Conference for a summer with Dorothy and Phyllis and Nancy and those...I think those three are all still there. Is Phyllis still there or did she...?

Interviewer: I don't even know who Phyllis is.

Klaassen: Oh, Phyllis Regier. She was the business administrator.

Interviewer: I don't know where she works.

Klaassen: And yeah, so I did that for the summer and had a—oh, Dorothy is just such a fantastic, has a fantastic perspective on the church as well.

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Interviewer: Yeah.

0:19:55

Klaassen: So got a lot of good...had a lot of good conversations. And just I've always been kind of a church nerd. And then in the Mennonite, like in that context I got to meet lots of people, but also knew lots of people, lots of people knew me. It was just, I mean, we're a Western District Conference family, and grandparents all, the whole bit, on both sides, and so it's very comfortable.

That's one of the losses that I still feel at times. If I were in a Western District Conference church think how easy it would be to have relationships and just to know people and have that kind of leverage you get when you have that privilege. I do not have that privilege.

Interviewer: That is something I talked about with Paula Northwood up in Minneapolis. She went from being that connected, just like you're talking about, in the General Conference in the 1980s and '90s for 15 years of ministry, and everybody knew her, and she knew everybody, and loved her work, too, I mean, which was very significant in her life.

0:21:06

And then to be outside the Mennonites. And she went through, I believe, quite a bit more trauma than your story has attached to it. And then that sense of building up again kind of a sense of church-y identity in a different denomination where nobody knew her at all. And she's done that, but it's taken a long time. And she's quite...she misses General Conference things just like you have a little bit of sense of loss or kind of miss that, too. She really talked about that—

Klaassen: Even to be able to know the people in other congregations.

Interviewer: Yeah, right, right.

Klaassen: Like I see pastors who...or congre—like my mom knows the pastors in these other, and they know who she is, and I don't—

0:21:59

Interviewer: It's a cachet kind of thing.

Klaassen: Yeah. And I suppose I—I'm actually probably acquiring that relatively quickly and smoothly here. I sense that. But I wouldn't have had to acquire very much had I not found other...

Interviewer: Yeah. Were you involved, in these years when you were like at Vanderbilt, with Brethren Mennonite Council or was that not really on your radar?

Klaassen: Not—it wasn't...let's see. When did it first...? I perhaps first connected with Carol when I was in Seattle, so after I graduated from Vanderbilt. I mean, I certainly kind of kept up in terms of reading and newsletter and things like that. But it was also a, it was just a very different time, even only ten years ago.

0:22:57 So yeah, I don't...I actually don't... It wasn't a primary way of connecting for me. I also was still...maybe didn't have a full understanding of the weight of the system and how it can keep people out yet.

Interviewer: When you were at Vanderbilt working on this MDiv did you anticipate that you would be a Mennonite pastor then?

Klaassen: Not necessarily. I didn't know what I was going to do. I had to do a congregational internship, so that's what took me to Seattle the first time in 2008, as part of my degree program. And so it was after then that I thought yeah, I think congregational ministry is a very real possibility. And the congregation kind of affirmed that when I was there.

0:24:03 I knew in my head the challenges that would happen. Weldon was just coming off being disciplined for doing a same sex wedding in Seattle. Well, I guess that happened earlier. That happened in like 2004 or something, but the process was still just kind of ending and working itself out, was still kind of raw on the congregation.

So they did a congregational discernment process about whether to invite me as an intern or not—a consensus process, actually. And they did invite me to come, and we all had, as far as I know, a wonderful time together, and kind of now longstanding, now I've known some of those folks for eight years and continue to be close with them, some of the congregation, and certainly Weldon. I emailed him this morning about something.

0:24:59 He's retired now. So that's probably when I first thought—and I remember having the thought, I don't know where in the timeline it was, sometime between that congregational experience and graduating, and I thought if anybody can be hired as a gay Mennonite minister it would be me because I have an ethnic name and identity and generations of it. I have connections everywhere in the church. Maybe it could happen. It hasn't ever happened, but surely if it could happen at this time it would be me to whom it happened.

And I still think that's probably true. It did not happen. It wasn't the time for—I mean, if it had—I don't know, could it have happened...could it happen now? I don't know. I mean, the queer people who have been called have been called from within the congregation. But I think it's going to happen soon, at some point.

0:25:58 So I filled out my profile with Mennonite Church USA. It got sent out to a couple of places. I had one interview with one congregation. A lot of other congregations didn't even do anything with it.

Interviewer: It made it clear in the application that you were a gay person?

Klaassen: Yes.

Interviewer: Oh, it did, uh-huh.

Klaassen: You didn't have to, but it asks you to tell your faith story. And I don't feel like with integrity I can tell my faith story without talking about sexuality. And a lot of people make a different choice about that. I went to Vanderbilt and that is not a choice I'm willing to make. That's just not—it's not something my Black friends can do. It's just part of, like, I learned at Vanderbilt that there's nothing, not one thing wrong with me or my sexual orientation. All that's wrong is wrong with the church.

0:26:54 And I developed a great confidence around that, and a great ability to not over personalize the system itself. And so it was a little bit heartbreaking then to see who some of the congregations hired and to think, you know, to try—like not to compare or to try not to be competitive, even, about that, and say I could have, you know.

And I actually had one congregation where I had relatives there who said we really wanted to look at your profile, but they wouldn't let us. So kind of dist—not immediate family, but... So yeah, again those connections and things, and what didn't happen. It was really—we went to Seattle for Jamie's job again and I worked in a UCC church and had a bit of a disaster of a transition into another denomination emotionally.

0:27:59 Like I just got pretty defensive as a minister. Hopefully not externally, but internally, like why don't these people whatever. Why do they have a flag in their sanctuary? Or what's wrong with them that they don't X, Y, and Z, comparing to my ideal vision of the Mennonite church. And I feel quite terrible about that in retrospect.

Perhaps it was part of my development—certainly it was part of my development as a pastor and as someone separating from a system of origin, differentiating. It's part of my differentiating process. It's so sad that it was at the expense of this beautiful congregation, a very vibrant congregation. I should never have criticized them for anything. They were a wonderful church, and wonderfully healthy. That may be irrelevant to what you're asking about, but...

0:28:57

Interviewer: I'm curious, Did you criticize them publicly?

Klaassen: No, no, no. Just kind of my own narrative around like trying to think of who I was in their midst, and why they did things in a certain way, you know, which wasn't the right way because it wasn't the...yeah. No, not...God, I hope not publicly. I hope not. They had a good—their senior minister was a good person for me to be around, too. She was a lesbian and so... And the United Church of Christ in the Pacific Northwest is just a fine place to be.

Interviewer: So were you there about a year or so?

Klaassen: I was there a year and then I took the position as the interim associate at Seattle Mennonite, so kind of returned to this congregation for a year in a term limited. Their associate minister was on sabbatical and a leave of absence while they were living internationally.

0:30:07 So I in heartbreaking fashion left the UCC church that was just getting—we were just getting attached to one another for one last ditch effort at the Mennonite church.

Interviewer: You knew you wouldn't be their long-term pastor at Seattle Mennonite, but the idea was kind of getting your foot in the door with the Mennonites?

Klaassen: Yeah. It was a bit of a challenging discernment process. It was a little bit better of a position. I was doing youth ministry, but more than youth ministry. It was still that sense of identity and self that was kind of calling me into Mennonite world, or keeping me in the Mennonite world. It was an opportunity for the UCC church I was serving to make a little bit of a structural change, so I didn't feel quite as bad, which was good for them.

0:31:02 So it wasn't leaving them in a bad position. I had good conversations with the senior minister before and while I was making that decision. And yeah, I mean, Seattle Mennonite was just a lovely place to be. You know, I felt kind of an external call when that position opened, of people saying hey, would you come or would you apply, would you consider this. And I took that pretty seriously.

Interviewer: And they knew you from a few years [before]—

Klaassen: They knew me. Yeah, they knew me and I continued to relate to them and the community there in various friend groups and things as well. So it was a fun year. I got to do a lot of fun things and kind of meet another round of people in the Pacific Northwest in the Mennonite church, and work with a great group of youth and a great worship teams, and work with their community ministry.

Sarah Klaassen

0:32:13 So it was a really good year, and it was a... Jamie's position was ending about the same time, so we didn't...we were kind of—it was good timing for our family to think about transitioning at the same time.

Interviewer: I think I asked you about this in July, too, but were you and Jamie married out in...?

Klaassen: Well, we became registered domestic partners because that was what the law, what was legal at the time.

Interviewer: In what, Twenty...?

Klaassen: That was in 2009 when we moved.

Interviewer: I see.

Klaassen: So you just pay \$25 or something like that and register, send some paperwork in to the Secretary of State and they send you a little card that says you're domestic partners, which is designed to, if there's ever a question at the hospital or something like that. Yeah, things have changed really dramatically on that front.

0:33:16

Interviewer: Right, yeah, it was first early steps, sounds like.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Uh-huh, okay. And had you and she done any sort of commitment ceremony?

Klaassen: Not like a public worship service, no.

Interviewer: At that point.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And she was interested in coming back to the Midwest or you were both—

Klaassen: No.

Interviewer: —looking nationally or...?

Klaassen: We were looking nationally. We were looking at—I had my Mennonite papers again. I didn't have a conference minister to send them out like I had had, so I don't even know if they went out to anyone that second time, which was a few years after...it was in 2011.

0:33:59 So I got no bites in the Mennonite church at that point. I did go through an interview process with a nondenominational progressive church that I stopped because Jamie got her job as the chaplain at Westminster College. She had a really tough time in the Disciples of Christ search and call system as well, got a little bit more interest. Neither of us had—I didn't have any credentialing anywhere. It would have been helpful to have that, but it was just, I didn't have—

Interviewer: Did she have a Disciples background?

Klaassen: She was ordained in the Disciples at that time. She was ordained when we lived in Seattle and she had been serving a Disciples church for a two year position. So much of that about the Disciples system is the same as the Mennonite system, where it goes to the region or the conference. So much of it is about who you know, your privilege, and what openings there are at the time that you're searching.

0:35:00 And we didn't have any of those things working for us in that transition year. Which, I don't know, we don't know that next time, if we transition again, even if it's in ten years or more—we [just] have the luxury of sitting and waiting for the right thing, which is what so many of my clergy peers do or have done, is you can sit on what you have and wait till the right thing comes.

Interviewer: You mean once you're in a church?

Klaassen: Yeah, once you—yeah. Even if it's an unhealthy context you can kind of...

Interviewer: Status quo or something.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: So she was doing pastoral ministry in Seattle, but then when she came here it was a chaplaincy job?

0:35:54

Klaassen: Yeah, so she's chaplain and director of spiritual life and an instructor at a small college, one of these wonderful small colleges that still has a full-time chaplain. It's a Presbyterian Church USA affiliated, or formerly affiliated, still has some ties to the synod. But she's been there. She's in her sixth year and doing extraordinarily well in that work.

Interviewer: The college is West...?

Klaassen: Westminster.

Sarah Klaassen

Interviewer: Which is not right here, but nearby?

Klaassen: It's in Fulton, yeah. It's about 30 minutes—30 miles, 25.

Interviewer: Okay. It sounds like that has really worked out for her, and she's been here now about five or six years in this?

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Uh-huh, yeah. And she had already been ordained, and one doesn't take away anybody's ordination, and so—

0:36:56

Klaassen: Not in the Disciples of Christ they don't. Yeah. Even when they should they don't, like Jim Jones, for instance.

Interviewer: Oh, I see, okay.

Klaassen: No, yeah, she'd been ordained and standing is just not anything that's contentious in the Disciples of Christ for queer people.

Interviewer: And so it sounds like when you made that transition from Seattle to here, and that was driven by the fact that she got a great job, was that sort of your goodbye to the Mennonites then at that point, or not that clean of a break?

Klaassen: Not necessarily. It was perhaps my... When we moved here I immediately, or soon that fall met with the Disciples of Christ region and started to initiate a credentialing process with them, which involved first joining a church, being a member for a while, going through the process.

0:37:57 I had done basically everything that I needed to do already because I had my master of divinity, and a course of study, and experience, internships, and all those kinds of things, so it was a matter of just kind of having the requisite time and affiliations pass by or develop. With the Mennonites we had, there was a...we have a little house fellowship that we kind of got going, and is still going, and—

Interviewer: Oh, right here?

Klaassen: Yeah, in Columbia. We meet once a month, and potluck and sing, and it's kind of a motley collection of Mennonites or people who've found us who have come here for one reason or the other. And there's no Mennonite church, and so we have that. And that group is...kind of has a little statement of welcoming, and is part of BMC in kind of a loose way that we are, not having a structure, staff or a bank account, even.

Sarah Klaassen

0:38:56 So I've been giving leadership to that for...it's been...has it been three years or four? The years run together now. Three, four years.

Interviewer: Has that been more of a social group than a worshiping group or...?

Klaassen: It's kind of both. Some people think of it as their primary faith community. We sing and we pray sometimes, most times, often. And socialize, and kind of... For some people it's their kind of home in terms of religious affiliation. For others of us obviously it's not. But it's a nice, it fills a nice kind of role in folks' lives.

Interviewer: So leadership is getting together and—

Klaassen: Sending out emails and—

Interviewer: Sending out emails and—

Klaassen: Getting people to host, and—

Interviewer: Host, okay.

0:39:56

Klaassen: —picking dates. It's kind of administrative. And then wrangling people to, like, eat, pray and eat, and sing and leave, you know.

Interviewer: [*Laughs.*]

Klaassen: It's actually something I'd love to pass along to someone else just in terms of the administrative work, but I don't know who.

Interviewer: But you see yourself as staying committed to the group—

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: —even whether you have to stay in this for a while or not, the organizing. You're not looking to undo the affiliation?

Klaassen: No, no. These are friends, and I've known some of them for four years, so almost as long as we've been here, so it's good people. I've done some pastoral type work with some people in that group, so—

Interviewer: Does the group have a name?

Klaassen: Columbia Mennonite Fellowship, yeah.

0:40:57

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know about this.

Sarah Klaassen

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you start it?

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Klaassen: There was a little Mennonite church—I say church loosely—that was connected with Western District Conference. It was a church plant. A guy who had kind of discovered Mennonites, thought they were great, wanted to start a church. Actually, Roger Smith was his mentor. And that was here when we got here, which we were excited about, and quickly realized it was not...it was not much of a community or church.

Which is something that we came to find out a lot of Mennonites who'd been here had had a similar experience connecting with this guy who wanted to plant a church and then realizing that he's not...not really pastoral, and not really someone who can give shape to community, and so they found their way to other faith communities.

0:41:55 And then what we did, another person—a year after we moved another person came and had that experience, and somehow we connected with her and we realized oh, there's a bunch of us who have done this, let's all get together. And so Columbia Mennonite Fellowship was born, and we've potlucked once a month, about, since then, and some families have moved away, some of the original families have moved away. Some other families have come. So it's been a group that is—yeah, it continues to be meaningful.

Interviewer: Do you have a web presence or something?

Klaassen: Yeah, there's a little Word Press thing that I have not been very good about keeping up with, because it's my job, and I am completely full up with administrative, you know. You know, I could give—I had more spiritual and administrative energy before I started here, and—

Interviewer: Understandably.

Klaassen: And so I haven't found the right way to pass that on. It's one of those things where there are other people who have volunteered to do it, but they don't do it, and so I, I don't know, have this sense of obligation, I guess.

0:43:04

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

Sarah Klaassen

Klaassen: If I didn't organize the group it wouldn't happen. I have a pretty clear sense of my role in that. And I don't know, I'm learning about kind of leadership styles, or leadership in general, and so...

Interviewer: Yeah, fascinating.

Klaassen: It is really interesting.

Interviewer: I'm asking these questions because when we met before I actually didn't...this never came up, and so I didn't know you really had one pretty big part of your foot in a Mennonite entity right here locally.

Klaassen: Well, it's interesting because I had some conversations—but when we first started with—Clarence Rempel was the Western District minister at the time, and I actually had coffee with him at...what's the, on Bethel's campus?

Interviewer: Mojo.

0:43:53

Klaassen: Yeah. So we met there, and I just, I still can't quite figure out why someone like him or someone like the church planning commission wouldn't just see this group of 15 people in Columbia and say cool, let's make this happen. It still baffles me a little bit. But they haven't, and they don't. And I've talked with a couple of people, and it's—

Interviewer: There's no interest from Western District to have you affiliate with them?

Klaassen: It doesn't seem like it.

Interviewer: You're just, you're completely independent from any regional—

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Klaassen: Yeah, I mean, I... And perhaps it would be something where I or someone from our group would need to—is it a thing where you have to push pretty hard to get in? I would think it should be the other way around because of the church dying and all of this.

Interviewer: You know—

Klaassen: So I don't know. I don't know what's going on with that.

0:44:53

Interviewer: And Clarence Rempel isn't there anymore. Now it would be Heidi Regier.

Sarah Klaassen

Klaassen: Yeah, and I've never talked with Heidi about it, and I am not going to, like I'm not going to, so... There are enough people who know that we have this little fellowship and...

Interviewer: It's so interesting.

Klaassen: Yeah. Yeah, it is. It is interesting.

Interviewer: And it's not because of any controversies, it's just that there's been lack of interest from Western District.

Klaassen: Well, I've always wondered is it because I'm like the point person, everybody knows I'm gay and they don't want to deal with that. I mean, I don't know if that's the case or not, but that's, I guess we call that—those are microaggressions, or might be. Or they're not, but that's the thing about microaggression, you don't know.

Interviewer: You don't know, right.

Klaassen: So I've always assumed, at least when Clarence was there, that that was part of...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Klaassen: I mean, if we were a Latino group of 15 people who—I just can't help but think people would be very excited. Or when this other guy, who was a church planter, he had a mentor. He was licensed by the conference.

0:46:01 He was meeting with three people plus six family members. And here we have, you know, a half dozen families and some small children. The children are gone, but now we have like people in their 20s. Well, now we're all in our 30s, but—because we all got older. It just, it's kind of a weird thing that I haven't thought very much about in the last year.

Interviewer: And how it connects. It's interesting that you think of it as microaggression, or maybe, because of your leadership. But it would be hard to—

Klaassen: No one will ever tell you that.

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Klaassen: Like Clarence or any other minister would never say yeah, you make me a little uncomfortable. But you can't help but wonder. I don't know.

Interviewer: Are there any other communities the size of Columbia in Missouri that have Mennonite house churches or congregations?

0:47:00

Klaassen: Not that I know of. Not that I know of. There are—and Western District doesn't necessarily have—I don't know if they have any. Other conferences do have this kind of fellowship. Central District has several fellowships like this that are formally affiliated.

Interviewer: This kind of reminds me a little bit of the St. Paul fellowship up in St. Paul, Minnesota that I learned about two weeks ago. They have a longer history than you do. They go back to the early '90s. But they're not any bigger than you are. But according to Lisa Pierce, who I interviewed, and is a longtime member there, they no longer are affiliated with the region they used to be with because that region was always disciplining them and being really difficult for them, and they got kind of exhausted from all that.

0:48:00 And that regional body didn't finally want to deal with them either. It was just unhappy. And so now they are affiliated with Central District, with a lot of Illinois. And she says it is divine. I mean, she used that language. She says that the Central District people are delighted with them and just see them as people.

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So, I mean... But they've had to kind of work at it. I mean, she's been motivated. You've got a different church here, like this church that you're motivated. [*Laughs.*]

Klaassen: I do. I'm not super motivated to reach out to the Mennonite church and offer myself as a...yeah.

Interviewer: But it's interesting how, you know, it sort of depends what people's priorities are, too.

Klaassen: Yeah. And I do—I mean, I have—this raises questions I haven't talked very much with people about, church people about, but about denominationalism and what does it, what would it benefit our fellowship to affiliate.

0:49:08 Certainly if there are people who want to go to convention and those kinds of—or conference, Western District Conference gatherings, certainly. But what do...is there not also something to finding a church here, whether it's Mennonite or not. And this church, Rock Bridge Christian Church, has had a good handful of Mennonites here through the years because it's a peace church. Steve and Janice Friesen are down in Austin now. He's a religion professor, I believe, and he and their family was very active here in the first decade of the 2000s. Another woman who's now at Rainbow Mennonite worshiped here when she lived here.

0:49:55 So there's something to, like, to think about in terms of being a little post denominational, especially as people who are progressive and who are looking for people to share something besides ethnic identity or, you know, denominational institutions. If we can get away from those kinds of things it just makes sense that I'm part of this church, which is a peace church, and which is progressive, and which does social justice work, and prioritizes service.

But nobody has a Mennonite last name, and we can't share a common [borough] identity, so those are larger questions that I'd love to find—I have some Mennonite spaces to poke at a little bit. Disciples, the same way. I mean, I have the same questions for Disciples of Christ. Our congregation has very few Disciples of Christ who grew up in this denomination, so people find different, other ways to—

Interviewer: Had they been attracted to come here because it's a peace church?

0:50:54

Klaassen: We got a good handful of members after 9/11. We have a woman who gave her story a few weeks ago who was a veteran, and is part of Veterans for Peace, and 9/11 was the last straw for connecting with a lot of congregations. We have a lot of LGBT people or people who want a church where—you know, I just found out one of my young families, his sister is a lesbian, and the Baptist church is not a place where you get any kind of affirming message. Not all Baptist churches here, but the one they were at.

So what are other reasons people come? They want a church that reflects their values, so people here tend to be ones who have really integrated, like that Anabaptist impulse to integrate what you believe and who you are rather than people who go to a church because they want a certain kind of programming, or a certain kind of music or something like that.

0:51:55 Our programming is...our children's stuff is great. Other stuff is almost nonexistent. Our music is, oh, ranges from poor, to mediocre, to sometimes okay, to sometimes really nice when we have—we have a few musicians, but not pianists and not like...no four part harmony happens here.

So there are other reasons that people are drawn into this congregation, which are reasons that would probably make sense to most urban progressive Mennonites in the world. But when you have—I think that's a great gift of the coming out denominational, not have a place. I wouldn't be able to see or think these things if I had just found my Mennonite church, and been called, and had this loyalty to the denomination.

0:53:01 I just have...as a now outsider, or someone with feet in a lot of different places, I don't have a vested interest in upholding structures for their own sake. And would love to hear—and am quite open and excited to hear compelling reasons about upholding those structures, but I haven't been hearing those from most denominations.

Interviewer: One question I had that related to the Vanderbilt experience. Is Vanderbilt somehow connected with Disciples of Christ?

Klaassen: Not as an institution. There's a Disciples Divinity House there. It's a nondenominational, university affiliated divinity school. It has some historic ties to United Methodists. And then this Disciples Divinity House is separate, but attracts a lot of Disciples to come.

0:53:59 So it's a big, one of the big denominational presences. There's Presbyterians, Methodists, Disciples, good mainline—some Episcopal, a few Catholic. A lot of Black church, strong Black church presence, which can come through AME, or Baptist, American Baptist or some other kind of—I don't know if I knew any CME people when I was there. And Disciples have a Black convocation as well. So that's the Disciples connection there, and it is a strong presence, but not a formal affiliation with the divinity school.

Interviewer: And Jamie had...she chose to go, when she went to Seattle, to be part of a Disciples church there?

Klaassen: Yeah, so she was Disciples...when she joined a church—she didn't grow up in church, but she joined a church in high school. It was a Disciples church. So she came to Vanderbilt as a Disciples student.

0:54:59 And the Disciples house had a really funded transition into ministry residency program that she applied for and was accepted into, and so that placed her in a Disciples church for a two year term immediately post divinity school.

Interviewer: I'm just trying to think how this denomination became important to the two of you, and it sounds like Vanderbilt had something to do with it.

Klaassen: Yeah. When I went to college down in Springfield, Missouri, I started off, I went to a Baptist church for a while just because the first Christians I found, that's where they went. It turned out to be a terrible idea. I wasn't harmed in any way. I kind of just loosely disassociated myself when there were things like they wouldn't talk to me about God being male or not. So I'm learning in my classes, and they just wouldn't—we couldn't talk about these things. I needed to talk to someone about it.

0:56:00 And then the Sunday, Veterans Day or Memorial, one of those where there was the cross and the assault rifle leaning up against it in the bulletin, that

was maybe the last straw. And so anyway, found a Disciples church to attend for the last couple years off and on. I mean, I wasn't super regular. I actually worked at a Disciples church, that church as an intern in the summer months doing youth, helping their youth minister. So I did have those Disciples connections early on.

A good friend of mine is now the senior minister at that church, so there's some nice full circle things. Disciples have a really strong presence in Missouri. And the reason I found that church, National Avenue Christian Church, is that I was in a class. We were talking about modern Christian thought and my professor said something about that congregation and said it's the most liberal church in Springfield.

0:57:01 And so the next Sunday I went to that church. And this is the mid 2000s. Was it...probably, you know, the wars had started. It was after 2003. But they were talking about peace, and they were talking about justice, and they had lesbians in their congregation, and so I kept going there.

Interviewer: So it made an impact pretty—it was the first denomination you were part of after the Grace Hill.

Klaassen: Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, I wouldn't count the Baptists. That was a confusing time in life. I did have, I had kind of a last ditch effort to retain this kind of literal, more conservative faith perspective, and they were part of that, like this kind of self-hatred. And so there was a...that early college year had some of that and then—

Interviewer: That was the Baptists?

0:58:01

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Klaassen: I mean, they didn't do that to me, I did it to myself. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy, like oh, of course they're right about all these things. But the gender roles were also, the gender roles there were... That's, I mean, the gay stuff, you know, I had all this stuff I had to work through, but the gender roles, that was a really bizarre thing for me in church. Still, also churches all around here that don't let women be ministers or deacons. I...what?

Interviewer: You're probably part of a ministerial alliance or something here? Are you in town?

Sarah Klaassen

Klaassen: We have a... The interfaith council has been disbanded. We have a faith, kind of a social justice oriented group that's connected to... There's a big organizer who gathers us.

0:59:00 And then I have a book club of clergy women, which is maybe the best thing. So we're all...we have one older woman and then everybody else is under 40. Carol just turned 40. So it's seven of us.

Interviewer: It's a support group, it sounds like.

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: Did you get that started or was that a function of...?

Klaassen: We had kind of collective—we had...it's taken several different incarnations. But Jamie and I have been part of it since the beginning, and kind of with our good—we have a good friend who's our age who have kind of brought it into its current form.

0:59:56

Interviewer: When I visited with you in July you also talked about...it was kind of an older lesbians network here in Missouri that had helped you.

Klaassen: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: So revisit that for me a little bit.

Klaassen: Yeah, there's, the previous minister in this congregation was a lesbian. Part of this church's coming out story was her coming out story. And they lost members over it. There was an attempt to kind of oust her, or at least to change a power dynamic here, and the congregation as a whole didn't go for it. And I don't know what year that is. I'm wanting to say it was mid to late '90s, but I'm not sure. I need to find or sketch a history at some point.

So after I was ordained—this congregation sponsored my ordination—I told the elder, who is kind of a, like I don't know what they would call it at Southern Hills—spiritual counsel or pastoral care team or elders are.

1:01:05 So the elder who was my...who walked with me through the process and I had lunch and I said it's great that I'm ordained, but I don't know if I'll ever get a church. So my elder told Maureen, the pastor here, which got Maureen's wheels thinking, well what if I retire and hand this off to Sarah. And so that became about—I think from the time that she first, she and I first had coffee over it, it was right after Ferguson, so what year was that, 2014?

Sarah Klaassen

Interviewer: Two years ago, yeah.

Klaassen: So it was two...was it two years ago that we first had coffee about it. And then eight months after that she introduced the thought to the elders, and then six months after that she retired, and two months after that they called me, and then I started two months after that.

1:02:00 So she was someone who kind of opened doors, as best she could. I mean, she obviously had no control over the process itself, but to plant seeds and to do that. There was another woman who was ordained sponsored by this congregation who's a lesbian who has a small church plant down in Jefferson City, Disciples of Christ, who also does pulpit supply, and she connected me with the congregation where she'd been doing pulpit supply when she needed to step away.

So that gave me an every other week preaching gig for about a year and a half before I started the discernment process with this congregation. So that was a congregation who had 15 to 20 people just desperate enough to have lesbians come and preach, a little UCC church.

1:03:00 Not necessarily progressive. More so than the surrounding community, but not a church that would stand up for gay rights or anything, but gracious country—gracious small town people who needed a...who wanted to have someone preach at them, I guess. And so those two in particular I think of as the good old lesbian girls network.

Interviewer: And both women significantly older than you, it sounds like.

Klaassen: Yeah, Maureen is late 60s, maybe 70 now. Michelle is a gener—well, half. She's probably in her mid 40s. And then there was another lesbian clergy couple in town when we moved. They've gone on off to now one pastors a great church in Davenport, Iowa, a UCC congregation. But they also had me preach in their congregations. I mean, one served a church and that ended badly, but...

1:04:02 And one was also in this. I was actually the third lesbian in this little country, this small town UCC church. Yeah, they—

Interviewer: A little bit of a network going there, interestingly enough.

Klaassen: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: A different kind of network than what we were talking about earlier with the Mennonite world.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: But still opening doors to you.

Klaassen: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: I thought it was really interesting. You said a little bit earlier that if you had stayed Mennonite and in the Mennonite denomination you would have missed these opportunities that you have now that is sort of post denominational with people that don't even want to really identify around ethnic identity and some of those connections that tend to be kind of traditional for a lot of Mennonites.

1:05:04 So that gets to sort of the idea of what you've gained. You've gained a lot. And some of that gaining was happening when you were in Springfield in terms of ideas in your religion classes. Some of it surely was at Vanderbilt. It sounds like Vanderbilt was a pretty wonderful opening experience.

Klaassen: Oh, it was. It was. It was.

Interviewer: Has some of that been... It hasn't just been how you think about structures and denomination. It surely has been theological, like how you think about God.

Klaassen: Yeah. I think the God concept was probably...maybe hasn't... I mean, it first was deconstructed and reconstruction is much too strong to say about what I think about the divine, but...in college.

1:05:54 And that continues to be fed by encounters with mystics, Medieval mystics and other kind of apophatic theology. To be...I am in a denomination, as kind of the Mennonites are, too, where I don't have to confess a certain kind of creed, so that's a good thing in terms of being able to theologically explore, kind of expand.

I think one of the big areas is how I think about peace and justice, which are deeply Mennonite, deep Mennonite values, and of course the Mennonite church in the way it relates in the conferences and everything, that's shifted along with me and everybody else. I mean, we have this great awareness of racial, ethnic issues and privilege.

1:07:00 And privilege is just a category people are familiar with in ways that we didn't, none of us used to be. But I think I learned that ahead of the curve because of religious studies and Vanderbilt. And so to not have a vested interest—to be able to use that learning and social justice framework to interrogate the structures rather than hold up the structures, I think that's maybe something that I've gained, including my own self, including the theological idols, including peace, peace being one of them. I think the great challenge for pacifism is oppression.

1:07:52 And I think Mennonites, by and large, ethnic Mennonites and white Mennonites, are people of great privilege who have used the peace

theology as an opportunity to opt out of politics and difficult conversations, and difficult social justice work, or the service commitment. And I think that's something that—I find that incredibly appealing and very tempting to say well, we're not of the world.

And then I remember how I was formed as a minister at Vanderbilt, and the theological commitments I have, and what they ask of me, which is something different. And not to say that all Mennonite ministers don't have that same journey, but that mine was not fostered by the Mennonite church to this place, or by Mennonite institutions. But it was by a divinity school, so it did its work, good work, I think.

1:09:04 I think how we relate—the other thing that I have evolved on is the church-world relationship. Again I find, I still find myself just defaulting or thinking about after the election last week how I would preach something different if I were in a Mennonite church. I think I could fall back on this great tradition of church-state separation and some of those things.

I don't have that. I can't do that. My people here, and I myself are totally invested—I mean, as many, you are, I know your spouse, like in the well, in the common good in the political arena. So we can't opt out. Our hearts are given to that. And that's part of why our hearts are so broken, is because we've given so much and placed our hope, you know.

1:10:02 And part of that is because of our perspective of the vulnerable, and on the vulnerable. And so that's something that I continue to wrestle with and find some big deficits in, in Anabaptist theology in general. And I'm not a theologian. I don't know all the nuances. But the way that that's been received by me, I do know some of them, and I find it un compelling. And I find liberal theology un compelling in some ways on that, on kind of the great amount of hope that is sometimes placed on government structures.

I don't know, it's hard to be in the political arena and hold a lot of nuance, because you have to make decisions that are imperfect. And maybe the imperfection is really the thing to take away because we have such an impulse towards that as Mennonites, I think personally and systemically. And Disciples don't have that, which is so refreshing.

1:11:10

Interviewer: Okay, say that again about perfection or imperfection.

Klaassen: I feel like Mennonites, at least as I've experienced, have this kind of impulse towards perfection. Even our singing is just, it's perfect, you know, it's so...it's lovely, and very high achieving people. I think about what Sam Voth Schrag at St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship, who's a good friend, and of the people in that congregation, are you kidding me? Like

these people, you know. The same at Southern Hills, like this person does this, and this person does that, and they're just, you know, we have these really high commitments, or high aspirations of ourselves.

1:11:56 And I don't know how that's tied to our theology in our...I'm sure it is. I don't know. I'm making really sweeping generalizations. My best friend, [Liz Lucas], would be saying, she would be shaking her head right now and saying you are...you're too much, you're too much. You don't want to write this stuff down, Rachel. Here I go, I'm like spiraling out of control.

Interviewer: No, but, I mean, I'm just interested. It seems like it has been quite liberating for you to, even though you have these...you're dangling in Mennonite circles yet somewhat, it's been liberating for you to feel mostly like you don't have to go with sort of inherited theological ideas.

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: And so I've just, I've been interested to see where that lands you. And of course it's all a process so you don't really land in one place, so...

Klaassen: Who knows. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it is interesting. It is interesting.

1:13:02 Back to our singing here in this congregation, which is not great. I mean, compared to like Seattle Mennonite or something, you know. But I just want people to feel they can participate, whether or not—like Jamie, my spouse, can come and not feel bad about singing, and when we're in Mennonite circles she just sits back and appreciates the beauty, but doesn't feel like she can participate.

And so that's just one anecdote. It's totally anecdotal. But it's a way that this church calls me out of my...out of certain kind of drives toward a place that is more—it's more healthy for me, for certain, to...yeah. It's about participation, not perfection.

1:14:00 And we're not going to draw a line that says you can't come. The communion practice would be the same thing. At Mennonite churches, my church growing up still kind of struggles. Seattle Mennonite, when I was there, struggled around communion practices, and who can be at the table. Can children, at what age? Maybe we'll do grapes and crackers for them. But here, no, everybody, just come on, you know. Stick your fingers in that juice and take a big chunk of bread and—

Interviewer: Are babies baptized here?

Klaassen: No. No. And some Disciples churches would wait till first baptism or something like that. We have a number of children who have been

baptized because they were United Methodist, primarily. Do we have Catholic? I don't think we have any kids who...

1:14:56 But we just don't tie those together. Which means we have a pretty low understanding of baptism. And a pretty low—I mean, the table is a place of hospitality and welcome. That's our table theology. It's not a place of a visible community or, you know, we just have a different...

Interviewer: Do you have communion here very often?

Klaassen: Every week.

Interviewer: Every week?

Klaassen: Every week, yeah.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Klaassen: That's one of the Disciples distinctives, is communion every week. Yeah, it's one of the founding...our founding fathers, they were.. And one of the catch phrases is "we welcome all to the Lord's table as the Lord has welcomed us." So even in...so the Disciples were kind of a break off of Scottish Presbyterians and some other things.

1:16:01 One of the...there were really strict communion practices that were being pushed back against, and so some Disciples churches would say anybody can get—like we're one that would say everybody come. Confess Jesus or not, just come to our table. Some churches would say any Christian can come, which was maybe the founding intent.

And still there are many churches, we have lots of Missouri Synod Lutheran churches, for instance, who wouldn't—or Catholic churches where I would not be, as someone who's not part of that communion, allowed at their table. So Disciples say every Christian. We don't make a distinction.

Interviewer: So low understanding of baptism, high understanding of the communion table. *[Laughs.]*

Klaassen: Well, it depends on what you mean by high. It depends on what you mean by high. We have a strong sense of welcome in our communion theology.

1:17:06 And yet like Disciples are congregational, so what I say wouldn't represent every Disciples clergy in town. But it doesn't need to. We don't feel like we need to rein everybody into the same kind of box. And that's seen as a positive thing, a gift, that we say—I don't know, "in non-essentials diversity, in essentials unity, in all things charity." That maybe was Wesley or somebody who said that, but it's something that Disciples

really believe in. I don't think it was a Disciples person that said that, but...

1:17:52

Interviewer: The idea of not trying to rein in other congregations or leaders.

Klaassen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Just a little bit about your board leadership with the Brethren Mennonite Council that's developed in the last five or so years.

Klaassen: Yeah. I joined the board probably in 2012 or so, and so have been...I've contributed in various ways since then. And I'm the board chair right now, and will go off the board next year. So have been part of several different gatherings. Was at the 40th anniversary celebration in October.

1:19:00 And now kind of...yeah, now I do that wrangling stuff again. Running meetings, and calling everybody together, so that seems to be a theme here. I need to offload some of that.

Interviewer: You're obviously a good administrator or you wouldn't do all this, but yeah.

Klaassen: It feels...I feel—yeah, I feel like that is one of my strengths, but I feel like it might not be if I have to take more on. Things are going to start to drop. That was a big part of my start here in this church, is administrative leadership and getting—it still is. It will continue to be for a couple of years. Policies, just even like getting the place cleaned, stuff like that. Organizing worship materials. Hanging them up instead of in a pile, things like that.

1:20:01

Interviewer: And so with BMC, with board membership, you'll go off, and then will you kind of really cycle out of that, do you think?

Klaassen: Yeah, I think I will. I think I'm ready personally and in terms of what life is asking of me. I hope that—I hope I can find someplace to serve the wider church, whether that's Disciples. I hope something in the Disciples. I don't know quite what. I don't want to take on something that's a huge time commitment. Although I may have some gifts to offer the denomination or the region. It might be, I can also see it being some of the social justice, faith based organizing stuff. And again, like have some—yeah, probably administrative capabilities or kind of strategic capabilities that I could offer in some way. But I trust that some opportunities will emerge in time.

Sarah Klaassen

1:21:04

Interviewer: Did BMC turn out to be a networking aspect that's been important to you as somebody who's gay, or has it not really been near as—because we've talked way more about Vanderbilt, or Seattle, or certain topics just seem super formative for you, and I don't know that BMC does sound that way.

Klaassen: It's not. It's not. I feel like I have been an important voice on the board and have some perspective because of my dual denomination, and my Vanderbilt and those kinds of things. The BMC connections that I honor and cherish the most are actually with straight ally clergy, who are the people I identify most with, interestingly enough, rather than gay lay people.

1:22:01

Interviewer: I see, okay.

Klaassen: So it would be interesting, if I knew some gay clergy, maybe I'd ally with them even more. But the great, like at the anniversary celebration—well, I got to see Kate, my—Kate Becker, who I've known for a long time, but got to spend time with Megan Ramer, Seattle's pastor. Have known her since she was in Chicago. Ruth Harder at Rainbow. So those are the things that I—Joanna Harader is a friend. So those are the people who I was so excited and so very much looked forward to being with, and talking about ministry, and pastoral leadership, and things that may or may not be connected to LGBT stuff.

Interviewer: That makes sense. You can have shop talk with these people.

Klaassen: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Interviewer: That's interesting that Kate Becker was there, too.

Klaassen: Yeah, she was.

Interviewer: And was this in Chicago or where was this?

1:22:58

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah. Well, a suburb. Oak Park, is that...?

Interviewer: Oh, Oak Park, yeah. That is a suburb of...kind of a tony suburb, I think, is it? Oak Park, isn't that...? I think about it as where Frank Lloyd Wright's house—

Klaassen: Yes, that's the one.

Sarah Klaassen

Interviewer: Okay.

Klaassen: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: I was there a long time ago. Okay. Yeah, I don't know what other questions I have. One of the questions at the bottom of this sheet is who are additional women and men in church leadership whose stories I should solicit for this project? And when I visited with you in July you mentioned that you thought there was somebody who's in the UCC denomination in St. Louis who came out of a Canadian context.

1:23:56

Klaassen: I think her name is—I don't know if she's still there. Taves. I can actually—let me just—I can probably find... Yeah, and I think she may not be in that church anymore. I know that we emailed. Let's just see... Oh, Krista Taves.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, I don't know anything about her.

Klaassen: Krista Taves. It's T-A-V-E-S.

Interviewer: T-A-V-E-S. And Krista is with a...how do you spell that?

Klaassen: K-R-I-S-T-A.

Interviewer: Okay.

1:24:58

Klaassen: And I don't know, she had been at Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel, but yeah, I think she's not there. I don't know what happened, or if she just moved on somewhere or what. But anyway, she...

Interviewer: And this would have been fairly recently or...?

Klaassen: We emailed like in 2014, so I don't know what the—it was just my, I guess my UU minister friend that—

Interviewer: Oh, okay. I could ask Samuel Voth Schrag if he knows anything about her, since he's a pastor there, and he's someone I know through Southern Hills connections. Yeah. That's a name I hadn't heard. I've also been told by several people to get in touch with the pastor at the Hyattsville, Maryland church.

Klaassen: Oh, yeah, yeah. I don't know her, but Michelle Burkholder. Yeah, I don't know her at all.

1:25:56

Interviewer: Michelle, right. I may try to follow up with that. One of my questions here also is—and we talked a little bit about this in July—do you still consider yourself Mennonite, Anabaptist? Are those meaningful identity markers for you?

Klaassen: I think Mennonite is. It just depends on the context. Oh, it's, you know, it's... Sometimes I don't feel like explaining what it means to be Mennonite, which is always a... I mean, I'm sure you and everybody else gets that. Yeah, I do think of myself as Mennonite. A lot of people do, actually. My friends—and I don't know, I should ask them what they mean by that. I don't know that it's... I think they think I'm super wholesome and like I quilt and I bake bread, and so there's some of those things which I guess in some ways I do associate those with kind of being Mennonite, although—

1:27:06

Interviewer: Some cultural things.

Klaassen: But theologically, I think being a pacifist, it continues to be at the center of my faith. So there are certain things, yeah. And I appreciate the Mennonite church very much, and see its shortcomings just like—and it helps me see the shortcomings of my denomination, so that's good. I think...I don't wear membership or anything like that, so it's a lot easier to say I'm Disciples of Christ because I'm the leader of this, or pastor of this congregation. And not that I would never pastor a Mennonite church. So yeah, I don't know how to answer that except to ramble on.

1:28:01

Interviewer: But it sounds like—you put it in a negative syntax, but you would pastor a Mennonite congregation. Is that right? Or you said not that I wouldn't. [Laughs.]

Klaassen: Yeah, not that—it's not that I wouldn't, exactly.

Interviewer: It's not that I wouldn't.

Klaassen: Who knows how life would unfold? But, I mean, I certainly am not and would not be thinking about moving on from this place for, I would think, a decade. But I don't know what... Yeah, I just have no way of knowing what life would bring or unfold in my...yeah, I don't know. Certainly it's more likely than pastoring a Presbyterian church or something like that.

1:28:55

Interviewer: Yeah. So yeah, kind of a sense of openness. And maybe that's connected to your sense of also mystery and not being too [prescriptive].

Klaassen: Yeah, it's weird that I've never had this plan. Like I didn't have a plan to become a pastor. I did have kind of a sense of longing and hope that it would happen, especially after we moved here from Seattle and I thought I just can't see, I have no idea how could this possibly happen, I couldn't see.

Now obviously you can see what's happened, but I don't, like even with my major I didn't have a plan for implementing my religious studies learning, which is—people who know me well find that a little bit laughable because I am, like it's the—they see the administrative, like, structure, plan, organized, you know, get things done. But in this kind of, I guess, journey of life and leadership I...

1:30:01 And my best self, my most healthy and balanced self when I kind of trust the next step and not try and think about the whole thing.

Interviewer: It reminds me. I had a little discussion around these kind of things with Carol Wise two weeks ago and she said it was her thought that women, more than men, just sort of find things to do. That was how she put it. And they may find things to do that are different than pastoral ministry in a Mennonite church because it doesn't seem open to them, but then they go on and find other things to do. But it seemed like she was suggesting that men who have been, like gay men who have been rejected in the Mennonite pastoral context, there's sort of more of a...like it becomes better known or something, and with women it's more...

1:31:02

Klaassen: Ha, that's interesting.

Interviewer: I don't know. And I think that she brought it up because she was wondering if I would also be interviewing men about this, and so far I haven't, and it hasn't been something I've been very intentional about, trying to gather a bunch of names up. And you probably don't have names for me either, really, do you?

Klaassen: Not...I mean, John Linscheid is the one that comes to mind.

Interviewer: John Linscheid, right. Yeah, John Linscheid would be.

Klaassen: And Randy Spaulding.

Interviewer: Okay, you mentioned—yeah, I don't know him, but you said he'd been to Yale or something.

Klaassen: Yeah. Well, I think he's—is he ordained now in the Unitarian Universalist tradition perhaps. Maybe a hospital chaplain right now or something. Or

maybe in [Takari], I don't know. I don't know if he's still in the New England area.

1:31:59

Interviewer: Yeah, I don't have any contacts. But John Linscheid is somebody. I know his—I don't know him so well, but I know his family well. And yeah, I'm on the fence about whether to broaden out my study to include men's experiences. I think I'll stick with women for a while. [*Laughs.*]

Klaassen: [*Laughs.*] It's enough of like—

Interviewer: As long as I can. Maybe like you, it's wanting to—just how you identify with these women that you mentioned that you saw at the 40th, you know, Megan Ramer, whoever. Yeah, there must be something about just who I am and I just am identifying in some ways with the women I'm talking—because I'm interested in...you talk about being a church nerd. You know, I know what you mean by that. [*Laughs.*]

Klaassen: Yeah, yeah.

1:32:58

Interviewer: I had never heard the phrase before, but I instantly know it.

Klaassen: And I—[they] probably hate me—but I end up talking about church with all kinds of people. In all kinds of otherwise polite company for some reason religion always comes up, and people don't seem to mind. I think they like it. They just never get to talk about it.

Interviewer: Right, yeah. Yeah, I had the experience of, at Washburn, which is a public university, teaching many different kinds of U.S. history classes for about 14 years before our department chair wondered if I'd want to teach a class on Anabaptist history, and Mennonite history, which I then did. And I found it so utterly enjoyable because you talk with students about things that don't really come up in all those other U.S. history classes. And so I'm continuing to do that now on an every other year basis, I teach an Anabaptist Mennonite history class. And it attracts people from all kinds of faith traditions, many of whom are still kind of seekers at this point, and they don't know much about Anabaptism.

1:34:04

You have to explain it doesn't mean anti-Baptist. I mean, that's how ignorant people are that sign up for this class. But you end up having really, really interesting conversations in a, you know, in a college classroom that I haven't—that haven't been replicated in other classes that are about history. So yeah, religion is just...it's endlessly fascinating, I think. And the more variety of people you engage with the more that is true.

Sarah Klaassen

Klaassen: There's something about the human spirit, and it's important to people, even people who don't affiliate with a church or—

Interviewer: Exactly, exactly, yeah. So I think we are wrapping up, but there is a question at the very bottom, do you have perspectives or specific information that we haven't covered that you wanted to address?

Klaassen: I feel like I've just rambled at you for hours.

Interviewer: I've taken notes. But there are things that came up here that didn't come up when we met in July and there are things that we talked about in July that didn't make it into this conversation, and if we had more conversations, that would undoubtedly continue to be true.

Klaassen: Sure, sure.

Interviewer: Because we're trying to—I'm trying to encapsulate some of your story, but your story is lots of different things, it's not one narrative at all.

Klaassen: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know. Yeah.

Interviewer: Well, I'm open to you contacting me further and saying wow, I really wish we had brought such-and-such a subject that didn't make it into this conversation, and then I'll be so receptive to whatever it would be.

Klaassen: Okay.

Interviewer: That's fine. But thank you so much. And let me turn this off.

1:36:02 *[End of recording.]*