Oral History Interview: Wanda Floyd

Interviewee: Wanda Floyd
Interviewer: Doris Malkmus
Date: July 5, 2025

Doris M. This is Doris Malkmus. I'm interviewing Wanda Floyd on July 5, 2025, in Scottsdale, Arizona, at the MCC General Conference. Wanda, can you let us know that you understand the purpose of this interview is to preserve a history of what you've done in your life up to this point to be put on our website as an oral history, and that you agree that this is going to be made public and can be used by people who are interested?

Wanda F. I do understand and I give my permission to do so.

Doris M. Thank you. And I think we'd all like to just begin at the beginning, so if you could just say a few sentences, a few words about what prepared you to be ready for MCC. And I'll turn it over to you and be happy to hear your story.

Wanda F. Okay. Well, I grew up in North Carolina, and was born in 1964 into a Baptist family, and so I was Baptist from very early on and attended the Baptist church all my life. And the church was the place where I found peace and sanctuary, and so at a very early age I felt that God would use me in some way in church, just not sure how. And so I was involved in everything—the choir, usher board, missionary group, Baptist Training Union, I did the Christmas pageants. I can recite the passage in Luke about the birth of Jesus pretty much by heart, even now at 61 years old.

And so while I was there, at the age of 12, sitting in the back of the church, and they asked if people wanted to be baptized and give their life to Christ. And I felt myself get up. I don't remember any of this. I just felt myself getting up and walking down the middle of the aisle in a pink dress with black shoes and pony tails. And I got up to the front and did all the stuff we do in the Baptist church—sign my name, and the church clapped and everything. And about a month later I was baptized at the church. And what's interesting about that story is years later—and this is just aside—years later when I was pastoring at Imani, one of the members there was doing video recordings, and she wanted to video my story, and so she used her daughter in the video of me walking down the center aisle of the church in a pink dress with black shoes and pony tails. I was just…when I saw it I just got so excited, and also I just cried because it was amazing to see her walk. I'm like oh, that's probably how I looked at that age walking down the middle of the aisle at age 12.

Doris M. It's an all-Black church?

Wanda F. All Black Baptist church in North Carolina, yup. And for me, fortunately, the pastor always talked about God being a God of love. I never heard condemnation. I never heard any of the stories that many of my colleagues who are African American talked about their pastors saying that they're going to hell because of being gay. I never heard that from the pulpit. And I think because I never heard that it gave me a more positive story to share with other people because when they would say to me, well, my pastor did this, and this is what I heard all Black pastors did, I could say no, that was not my experience. And that would actually give them some hope that not all Black Baptist pastors were that way, and that there were some who were better than what they had.

And so it's very interesting to see how the story and how your life can impact somebody else in a positive way. And I always say that my story can touch someone, just that person, but not that person, and so it's always important to share your story because you never know who your story will touch and who it will impact.

Doris M. That's amazing.

Wanda F. And I grew up and came out in college [NC State University], oh, second year of college. I had boyfriends all through school. And when I was younger, in the third grade probably, nine or ten, I had this habit of hugging girls, and my third grade teacher told me I couldn't do that because it was inappropriate. And I think that's where I stuffed all of that down, and since that time, all the way through high school, I had a boyfriend, and when I went to college I had one, too, but that's when all of the…when I got away from home and began to meet people, that's when I really began to feel you know what, heterosexuality is not who I am. I need to accept the fact that I'm gay. And we broke it off, and I met somebody, and we sort of kind of came out together.

I started going to a church there, and when I went, one of the people there that I shared who I was, I was a lesbian, told the pastor, and I got called into the pastor's office and was told that I had fallen out of the grace of God, and that I needed to come to church the following Sunday, stand up in front of the church, and ask for the church forgiveness and repent. And I looked at him and I said, I don't think so, and I walked out of his office and never walked back into the church.

But I still missed the church. And so after a while—there was a Baptist church on campus, but I just didn't feel called to go. And so I wrote to the head of the gay group on campus, and he wrote me back and said that their group was predominantly male, but there was an MCC church—never heard of MCC—MCC church in Raleigh, North Carolina named St. John's, and the pastor was Rev. June Norris, who was, I think at the time, the only straight pastor in MCC.

And I started going there, and as soon as I walked in the door—it was over

Pride weekend—I got to the church—I was with somebody by that time, a partner—we get to the church door and we're told two things: one, there had been a bomb threat, and two, TV cameras may be there, so one side would be on TV and one side would not be on TV. So at that moment I had to make a choice, should I come into the church and risk being killed by a bomb, and which side of the church should I sit on. It took no time for me to think about it. I went into the church and I sat on the side with the camera. Nothing happened. No bomb threat and no TV cameras showed up. But in that moment I knew I had found my place. And I had such a sense of peace—the recording can't do that—I had such a sense of peace when I walked in the doors, and I'm like I'm home. I'm home. The person I was with at the time, we were both at the same church where I walked out of, and because she had been going longer than I had, I really believe because of what was told to her she stopped going to church, because she just couldn't reconcile it anymore. And so we…we still remain friends, but I was like I'm sure who I am, and I know God loves me, because I grew up in a church that said God loves me, no exception. And so I felt sorry for her, but I realized I was on a journey, I had started my journey.

And so I started attending church at St. John's MCC, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, in 1987, and was involved there. Rev. June Norris was the pastor for the first two years I was there, and then she stepped down, and Rev. Wayne Lindsey became the pastor then. And I actually worked with him there for ten years, and became his associate pastor for a few years there. And while I was there began to feel this urge and this calling to do something else.

And I went away to a district conference and was at a gathering, a party off site, and I'm standing there—and my partner tells me this part because I blanked out. Somewhere in the midst of what was going on I guess I had a conversation with God, because I'm looking down at the people and I hear this voice say, On Sunday morning the people that you see will have nowhere to go to church and they will not know of God's love for them. And a majority of the people in the room that I was looking at were African American, and I said okay. And when I came to myself my partner at the time was standing looking at me, and she was like what's wrong, why are you crying? I was crying. And I had no idea.

And so I went back to Raleigh and told the pastor I think it's time to start a church in Durham, North Carolina. And at the time Durham—well, it still is—is historically African American. At one point it had—from what I was told, I don't know if this is true or not—it had the highest number of African American millionaires at one point. A lot of the Black banks came out of North Carolina, and in particular Durham.

Doris M. Can I ask? So was St. John's primarily white for those ten years, or were Black people starting to come? And was it also women?

Wanda F. Good question. Yes, it was predominantly white. And when Wayne brought me on staff it began to turn, because—I think what some people don't understand, when it comes to church, if somebody new comes in they're like a horse with blinders on. They only see what's upfront, they don't see what's beside them. And so if somebody comes in and don't see themselves either sitting upfront or in service, they don't feel like they have a place there. And so when the women started coming to church they saw a woman sitting up, and then when African American people came to church they saw an African American woman sitting in the pulpit across from this tall—Wayne is tall, he's here—tall, like six-foot-nine white dude, skinny. We always used to laugh about it because when I would hug him, I would hug his waist, because that's how tall he is and that's how short I am.

And so by the time I got ready to leave the church, we had a gospel choir in place, Delta Tom, an African American, and the congregation had really changed. It had become more diverse as a result. When I left, some of that diversity stayed.

And there were 12 people who wanted to come with me to start the church. And I had to have a long conference with God because this was something God was calling me to start. I wasn't going into something that was already there. I had to start a church. I had to figure out how to do that. And I had…once I realized this is what God was asking me to do, I had three different people at three different times with no connection to each other come up to me and say it's time for you to start a church in Durham, and so I had three different confirmations. And I was like okay, fine.

And so the only person who did not have a option to come with me or not was my partner, but other than that about 12 other people said they wanted to come with me. And the only way they could come, I said, if you want to come, you cannot come if you're just coming to get away from the church. If you come, you come because you want to help start something different, and start something new, and you can still go back into the doors of St. John's at any point in time and feel okay. Because I didn't want people who were church hopping, I didn't want people who were angry with the pastor. I didn't want people to come over with their own agenda. This was about God.

And I was told that people had tried to start a church in Durham two other times. And I don't know what process they went through to do that, but I know I went through a lot. Because I'm a processor, so I had to make sure God showed me all kinds of signs before I stepped out. [*Laughs.*] Stepped out to do this work.

And so when the 12 people, like the 12 disciples, said we're coming with you, and the three different people talking, I was like okay, God, I don't need any other signs, I'm good, let's just move on with this. And so we spent a year in the discernment process to figure out what a spiritual community would look like. And we had focus groups, we had Bible

studies. I wanted to find out what people wanted. I know what I wanted, but the church belongs to the people. I know the vision God had given me, but the church belongs to the people.

Doris M. Was this process kind of located in St. John's premises?

Wanda F. No. By that time I had talked to the pastor and told him that I was going to do this, I was going to start a church in Durham, and a month before we had gone to another church in which they were trying to recruit me to do their small group ministry, because I had started that at St. John's. And at one point we probably had 85% of the congregation involved in small groups. And so because of that, I guess, success, they wanted me to do it. And I'm like…

I came back. The district conference thing happened with the conference with God. I reached back out to the person who had asked me to consider it and he said didn't you get my letter? And I said no, I didn't. Well, in the midst of all of this stuff he had put together a whole proposal letter with salary and everything else and had forgotten to mail it. So between forgetting to mail it, these three people coming up to me and saying it's time for you to start a church in Durham, and all this other stuff happening, it was God all the way through it.
And so by the time the doors of the church opened I knew it was a God thing. It wasn't about me, it wasn't about any of the other people that were involved, this was God's church and God starting this church. And so as it turned out the church did end up being predominantly African American.

Doris M. And was this an MCC church, and did they give you much support?

Wanda F. From St. John's?

Doris M. No, MCC.

Wanda F. The denomination?

Doris M. Nationally, yeah.

Wanda F. Yes, they did. They helped as best they could. St. John's, one of—they did have a fund there, and they were able to provide a stipend, some money, like $780, which we used to open a bank account with. And at the time Rev. Elder Arlene Ackerman was still alive, and she had developed this church growth handbook and all these things, how to start a church, and so I had that. I had visionaries with me. I had business leaders with me who were also part of the church, and so they were able to help me along the journey.

And so between having all of that, and having the resources—and I'm very clear on what I can and cannot do. I'm not…I can do a budget. They

don't teach you how to do budgets in school. And so my treasurer was someone who worked for McDonald's and had six McDonald's locations, and so I figured she was good with money. The vice moderator at the time was the dean of students at one of their—well, at UNC Chapel Hill in North Carolina, one of the top schools in North Carolina. She was my vice moderator, and a consummate person. The clerk worked for another large company. And so they all complemented my weaknesses. And I had people tell me later, when I would describe the board of directors to them, that people would pay to have a board like that. I was like well, I didn't pay anything, I just asked the question.
But I think a lot of it has to do with understanding who I am, what I can and cannot do, and surround myself with people who can do what I can't do to complement. And that way no egos are involved. And I've learned that as a person who supposedly has all the power, if I give that power away, then it makes the leader more powerful. And so—

Doris M. You also could rely, fall back on an incredible Black pool of talent.

Wanda F. Yes, yes. At one point we did a survey just for fun. We were trying to figure out—when I went into the church I didn't have a salary. They took up an offering once a month and provided it to me. I was working for another job. And so in the midst of trying to figure out what would my salary be and if the church could handle it, the board decided to do a survey of the congregation based on the salaries and things, and for those who did agree to do it. And we found out that the average income of the church at that time in 1997…probably like the early 2000s, was $55,000. Yeah. Which happened to be the average salary for a professional in Durham County.

And so the board came up with a process to slowly move me to that amount without taxing the congregation. And so each quarter my salary would go up a little bit, and so by the time I got to the next year I was full-time at $55,000 a year, and they didn't have to take up a second offering anymore. And as a result, we kept the second offering and made it a building fund offering so that when I did leave in 2007 they had enough money in the building fund to actually buy a piece of property, another church, actually, outright, as well as contract to get the work done.
And so the church will be 29 years old this year, I believe. And in the 29 years that it's been around we've only had four pastors. Matter of fact the fourth pastor just got installed last weekend. Only had four pastors and they've all been African American. Yeah, so it's been a great legacy to watch that and to be a part of that, and to know that if you start off right, you end up right. I mean, that's the thing, is—and that's something the dean, the vice moderator would say, is that if you start off raggedy you end up raggedy, if you start off good you end up good.
And so the church is still there in their own building. You walk in, the deed is on—the title, the deed, whatever you want to call it—is on the

wall, and it's framed. And to be able to do that, to have that ability was just something that I was just so excited for them to do. The building they have came up for sale when I was pastoring, and they didn't want it.
And so after about ten years—I told God when I went in to start all of this that when doing church stopped being fun, I know it's time to go. And so right around 2006, 2007, it began to feel like a chore. It was not exciting anymore. It wasn't bringing me as much joy as it once did. And so I began to realize it was time to get ready to go. And so I saw the handwriting on the wall very clearly.
And there was no conflict going on. That was a challenge. There was nothing going on. Most times when pastors leave a church there's something going on. Not a thing going on. And so I actually invited in Rev. Arlene to do a consulting for a weekend, just kind of assess the congregation.

Doris M. Arlene?

Wanda F. Ackerman, who was the elder for…I don't know how many years she was a elder. For so many years. And I flew her in and told her what I needed to be done. And she was able to go through a weekend of assessments, talking to people, talking to the board, talking to other people at the church, and when she finally put everything together, we got together on Saturday night, and she sat me down in the lobby, and she said it's time for you to go. And I looked at her and I said okay. She said, you're not upset? I said no, I know it's time to go. I wanted you to come in to make it easier to tell the congregation it was time for a change, so they would understand that it wasn't just me, that it really was God in the midst of all of this, and that the feelings of the congregation was that it was time for me to step aside.

And the only—not really sad part about it—but the only challenge with that is I had just started—and this is the funny part—I had led Imani MCC for ten years without a degree. I went back to school, my first semester in divinity school at Shaw University Divinity School, which is a HBCU, a Historically Black College University in—I think it may be the second-oldest. I had just started that semester of 2007. The church had paid for it.
And so when I told the board that fall that I was leaving, they said please don't tell the congregation until after anniversary. Because our ten year anniversary was in November. And I said okay, I can do that.
And so in December I announced I would be leaving the end of January 2008. And I spent the month of January—because I wanted to leave well. I didn't want to leave in a bad way. So I actually was very intentional and invited people to come and talk to me. I said I want to hear from you. You can come in, you can yell at me, you can be angry with me, you can say whatever you want to say in connection to my leaving, and at the end we're going to pray. And I actually had people come in and tell me I don't want you to leave, I'm not happy that you're leaving, but I understand it is

time for you to go.
And so I'm all about—I think it's so important that pastors leave churches well because if you leave it in a bad way it hurts the congregation. I served as a interim pastor for four years, and worked with two churches through their process of grief with the pastor, because when the pastor left it wasn't on good terms. And so in order for the church to become healed in some way we had to go through a process of grieving to get to the point of having to move forward.
And so because of how I left Imani, when the next pastor came in, there wasn't a lot of grief they had to go through with him. Now, there were a few that did tell him that I didn't do it that way and that they didn't like the way he was doing stuff. And he and I actually had to have a conversation about it because people were upset. And I said I'm so sorry that that's happening to you. He said I understand. He had been a pastor for years as well. He said I understand, but you just need to know I'm struggling here. And so it was only like one or two people. And so he invited me to come to church for the building dedication, which was a good move on his part. And I came in and did the message for that time. And after that it was all good. It was all fine.

Doris M. You were there for ten years, but I notice that in that time you had been a co-coordinator for the Watch Our Welcome, the WOW thing, and I went to that. I loved it.

Wanda F. Yes.

Doris M. But what other things were you doing while you had the responsibility and stability of being a pastor of a really happy church?

Wanda F. Yeah. [*Laughs.*] I like the way you say happy church. I also did—well, outside of being a activist for the community—and one of the things I understood very early on, that because I didn't have all the trappings of being an out queer woman who was Black, I could do things that my congregation could not. I could go to places and talk. And they would say to me, pastor, we support you, we just can't show up.

And so one of the major things I did while I was there was I was co-leader of the marriage equality group of North Carolina, and my co-lead was a heterosexual white man. And I say that intentionally because there were people at that time that it all happened that were trying to say this is all about the gays trying to get marriage equality. And so by having him as my co-partner leading this coalition it gave a very different picture. More people were willing to sign onto it being about a constitutional right to marry as opposed to gays wanted to get married. And the very subtle difference. And because we had that difference, we had many churches and organizations that were religious-based sign on with us.
And so when it came up for vote it got knocked down. It didn't pass

initially in North Carolina. So we did a lot of work around that. And that was exciting. And so I think that was one of the biggest things I did. And they would tell me we can't come to the press conference, we can't come to the capital with you because we're afraid that we would lose our job, or lose our kids, or all these things. And so a lot of them, the only time they were out was on Sundays at church. And so I stopped saying why me to God and started saying why not me.

And so years later—actually, last year when I turned 60—there are two things I wanted to do on a bucket list. One was to get an eyebrow piercing, which I did do, and the other one was to get a tattoo. And so the only tattoo that I have on my body, that I would ever have on my body, says "Here I am God, send me." It's from Isaiah 6:8, where God says who will go for me and who will lead the way. And Isaiah says, Here I am, Lord. I'm not a huge fan of "Lord." And he says here I am, Lord, send me. So that's my… Every pastor has a call story, and so that's my call story, is the Isaiah passage. And so having it on my forearm, on my left arm because I'm right-handed, it reminds me of the call I have to do the work of God, and with the footprints is to remind me that God will send me wherever God needs me to go. And so that's it. Even though people told me, when I got the tattoo, that I would get more, and I said no, you're wrong. I will not get another one. Because it hurts really bad.

Yeah, but the WOW conference was where I first met Mark, and I found him delightful. I love working with him. I loved working with that conference. It was an amazing conference. And the year that I went was when I first met Bishop Yvette Flunder, and she had brought her trans choir to sing at that particular one. And that's where I first heard the song "The Prayer of Jabez," and I was just done. I was just like wow, this is amazing to see this happening. And so…and since that time we kept up. We would pass each other online, or we'd find ourselves in the same places at times.

And so when you reached out to me a couple years ago to do something for the archive I said sure, I'd be more than willing to do something. And when you reached out I was like, of course, whatever it takes to get the story out there. Because I know that a lot of things, there's a lot of history in people's stories, and I don't think people are intentional enough in sharing those stories, and so… When I was at Imani, actually, I had several universities reach out to me and say, Hey, we want to put you in our oral history bank on campus, and so I'm in the oral history archives for Duke University and UNC Chapel Hill, both of those.

Doris M. Duke has many different ones, and one of them is the Southern lesbian collection. And I'm wondering how feminism sat with your Baptist background, if you had any thoughts about that over time.

Wanda F. Well, growing up Baptist I knew that once I realized I was queer that they probably wouldn't want me anymore. And then when I realized that I was queer and would be a person of faith, I knew they really wouldn't want

me. And so the feminist stuff was sort of, kind of there, not a lot for me, because more women's theology, which is looking at the Black women preachers and what does feminism look like in connection to Black women, which can be very different. But it's still there. The essence is still there.

And so a lot of times I would just see the Baptists on the side, and then I was at a district conference when they voted to not allow women to be preachers anymore. And I had to preach that weekend at the district conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, and so I actually was able to incorporate part of that into my sermon. And I think it was at that moment that I really realized that I was Baptist only in name only, that being Baptist and following the Baptist tenets that I followed all of my life was no longer an option for me. I still do a three point sermon—[*laughs*]—like a good Baptist does. I have my three. And they laugh at me when I do that, and I tell them sometimes you get an extra point today, and so give me the leeway, give me the pastor's privilege to give you four points as opposed to three points. But I still do the three point Baptist sermon thing for this church, and they laugh, too, they think it's kind of funny.

Doris M. You mentioned that you hadn't gone to seminary and that you did so much, so well, for so long without schooling, so to speak. Were you inspired to go back at any point? You said you went to Shaw for a little bit.

Wanda F. I did. I ended up going to Shaw for the whole time. That's where I got my M.Div. from.

Doris M. When was that?

Wanda F. That was in 2006 was…no, 2006 was the first semester, fall semester. And the church paid for it because they felt as an African American woman the pastor needed to have letters behind her name, being in the South, being a Black woman, and being part of the good old boys. One of the things I always found very funny to me was I did have colleagues, did have Black male colleagues who were straight who accepted me for who I was, didn't bother them at all, but the running joke among the Black preachers was that I was *that* pastor of *that* church. And so I was like well, at least they know I'm there. They might not know my name, but they know there's a church here that's queer affirming and it's led by a Black woman. I'll take that any day. Long as they don't call me any bad names or anything like that.

And so yeah, it was always interesting being in those gathering spaces. Because there were a few times in which I did find myself in the space as one of the few Black women pastors in the community. And I think one of the most overt parts was when, or time was when I was part of the funeral

service for one of the people who helped me start the church. He was like my righthand man, and his mother had died. Matter of fact, he took care of his mother in their house, and so any of the focus groups, any of the meetings we had, we had at his house because his mother needed care. And so when she passed he said well, I want you part of the service. I said sure.

So when I get there, I actually wore a dress. I was going to Scotland, North Carolina. Real Southern, real Baptist, and real Black Baptist. And so I get there and I was allowed on the pulpit. I saw "allowed" on the pulpit because when one of the men got up to say something, he said I want to acknowledge my brothers on the pulpit, and said nothing about me. And I'm sitting—and he turned around and looked at me. And so when the person who was doing the eulogy got up who was as biggest gay person you could know, who's also a chaplain at the local hospital, he acknowledged me as the pastor of the church where she was a member, and that she came every Sunday with her son Carlton, Rev. Carlton [Redford]. Brought her every Sunday. And yeah, he just totally ignored me. And I was like… I know where I am, I knew the context. I let it roll off of me like water off a duck, and I just said, you know, older man, older gentleman, and he's just not at that place to be able to accept a Black woman preacher. And that was fine.

My dad's the same way. But he didn't love me any differently. He wasn't happy with me being lesbian. He told me. And he wasn't happy with me being a preacher, and he told me. But his love for me never changed. It never changed.

Doris M. I'm thinking MCC didn't have either a strong color bias or a strong gender bias, but that the traditional bias of patriarchal things—and I'm hearing from you it's like that in the South, and it's like that in the Catholic church—is that women had a harder time being strong and bringing to God everything that was in them.

Wanda F. Exactly. It was. It was very challenging. And, you know, for—even now as a queer pastor, even though people know I'm a reverend, when I go out to events or have to speak anywhere I wear the full vestments, which I don't particularly care for. The full vestment is I wear a suit that I have and a black clergy shirt so they know that I am ordained and they know that I'm a pastor. Because some of them could overlook me. I was doing a panel discussion about being queer and around the time of marriage equality, and I had several men come up to me after and pass me notes, basically saying that I wasn't real, I wasn't—oh, all kind of—it was just really, really ugly, disrespectful notes that you would never expect from people who are in a church.

It was a church that came to the town hall meeting about marriage equality at St. John's at the time. I had already left St. John's and gone to be pastor at Imani. And so I came back and I had everything on, and it got so bad

Commented [1]: Imani

that the pastor of the church would not let me leave until they had all left because he was concerned that they would attack me in some way out in the parking lot—verbally. Not physically, but verbally. And so I stayed to the very end, and somebody actually had to walk me to my car.

Because during that time it was real, you know, when marriage equality first came out there was a target on every gay person's back, it seemed like. And if you were of faith it was even worse because they were like, you know, all the clobber passages in the Bible, you know, you're going to hell and all these things.

And what I had to remind people—and I still do it today—is that when you look at the context of all of those scripture passages, especially in the New Testament, they were written by Paul or other people. And what I tell people is that as a Christian I'm very clear Christianity is my foundation, and as such that means I believe in Jesus, and I believe that Jesus died on the cross, and so I follow Jesus' teachings, not Paul. And so when people really want to go at me with stuff the first thing I say to them, I ask them okay, so what did Jesus say about homosexuality? And they stare at me like…but the Bi… What did Jesus say about homosexuality? Jesus said nothing about it, right? Jesus said nothing about it, right? And they'd finally have to say he didn't. I said so all the scriptures that you were quoting me, Paul wrote. Paul had some issues. He had a thorn in his side. He claimed it. We don't know what it was. Some people think it was homosexuality, some people think it was other things in connection to his thorn in the side. But he was the one who wrote all the stuff about being gay—well, not even being gay because the word homosexual did not show up in the Bible until 1946, by accident. But he was the one that said all that stuff. Not Jesus. And Jesus talked about loving relationships.

Even in the Old Testament, if people want to go to the Old Testament, well, Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm like, uh, no. If you back up just a few chapters and you see that God had this conversation with Abraham, and Abraham bargained with God and said if I can find 50, 40, 30 or 10 righteous people will you not destroy Sodom, and God said okay, if you can find me 10 people I won't do it. And so Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed because of inhospitality. It had nothing to do with homosexuality. Had nothing to do with those people who came to the door of Lot.

And so a lot of times when it comes—and that's the kind of stuff that I try really hard to talk about as a pastor, I try and do on a regular basis, homosexuality in the Bible studies, not just in the church, but outside the church. We have a gay and lesbian center in Las Vegas, and when I was doing interim work the first time I did it, I actually spent two years at the church in Las Vegas where I'm pastor right now and did that at the gay and lesbian center, and I had no less than 25 people each week, and we did it for like six weeks in a row. We'd do all the scriptures. And by the time it was done people were like, wow, thank you for doing this. And so we're trying to get it back on schedule for by the end of this year because there's

still people out there that really believe they're going to go to hell because they're gay.

Doris M. Can I make a bridge between Imani and Shaw? Because you're done at Imani and you're attending a historically Black seminary, and also you're talking about a lot of preconceptions and kind of old theology. Where was Shaw at this time? If I can ask.

Wanda F. Yes, you may ask. You may ask. They were still in the Dark Ages. [*Laughs.*] And that's why I was laughing as you were asking the question. My advisor knew that I was gay because we had to do an essay as part of the admission program. Now with Shaw I did a…before I ended up with Shaw I went to Duke University and did a tour, and God said no. I went to Campbell University, which is Baptist as well, and God said no. And then through other people God said you need to go to Shaw. And I'm like God, I've never been to Shaw, I've never been around that many people, that many Black people before. I'm coming out of NC State University, which is a white university in the South, and you're telling me I've got to go to this Black HBCU? You've got to be wrong on this. God was not wrong, obviously. And so I applied and ended up going there.

And eventually the dean knew. And he tried to call me out. I was in a class that he was teaching on administration, and we had to do a project focused on the church. And so I focused on Imani and did my whole project about Imani. And somewhere along the line he tried to out me by asking me to talk about who and what Imani was. And I said Imani is a church in Durham, North Carolina, that's predominantly African American. And I looked at him with a question mark on my face, like do you really want me to say more? I dare you to ask me to say more. And he knew exactly what my face said, and he didn't ask me anything else. I'm like don't do that to me because Shaw University is predominantly Black, it is Baptist, private. It is very sexist, it is very homophobic, and all of the "isms" you can think of.

And at the time the mission statement was they are a school that has been called to teach African American pastors in the way of the African American traditional Baptist church. And I appreciate that because they're very clear on who they are, and if you go there you know what you're walking into. And so there were Muslims. We had Muslims that went that were in my class. We had people who were white, people who were—I don't think we had any Latinx people there. I know we had Muslims and white people, and they understood very clearly what they were walking into, and so I appreciated they put it out there.

And so as people began to find out about me, I had one pastor come up to me, and we had had several classes together—this is probably my second or third year in—and he came to me and he said I want to let you know that I don't understand—"lifestyle" is the word they used. They still use it now, but at that time lifestyle. He said I don't understand your lifestyle,

but I need you to understand that you've changed…you began to change my mind, he said, because I knew you before I knew that about you, and I already loved you as my sister, and I can't stop that just because I found out you're queer. And he hugged me. And of course I'm bawling. He's bawling, too. And so there were like two or three others that did that and said that. And so…

And to me the same thing on Sunday. If I can reach one person with something that God said through me, then I've done my job. Other than me, because I don't preach anything that God hasn't hit me with the week before. And I make that clear when I preach. And so in my three or four years there I was able to at least reach that one person, and probably others.

Doris M. Some people would say, though, that being in a hostile environment was like a kind of slowly grinding down process. But it seems to me that your faith, and who you are, and maybe being a pastor at Imani, or knowing you had a direction to go were part of your identity strength.

Wanda F. Yes. I would agree with that. And I go back to my church I grew up in, and hearing a pastor who was Black say God loves you, period. There was no exception. And I think that became my foundation for everything that I did. And still do. And so when I talk to people about God's unconditional love, and that God loves you for who you are, and you were created wonderfully and in God's image, I can say that with the understanding that that's me. And if that can be me, that can be you, too. There may be some work that has to be done between reconciling homosexuality and spirituality.

And I had men, in particular, that would come to me while I was at Imani and say to me that they love me, they appreciated what I said, but because of their background they just…one person said he just couldn't sit under the authority of a Black woman pastor. Totally understood. Coming from the South. So he would come sporadically, but he couldn't come on a regular basis. I had someone else from a Pentecostal background come to me and say that he wasn't there yet. He thanked me for the time that he was there, he said, but I'm just not…he said I'm not quite able to reconcile yet—kind of thing. And so I'm sure there were other people who also felt that way but just never came to me.

And when those moments happen it let me know that God was doing something right through me, even when I wasn't paying attention. There were many Sundays I would get up and preach and I'm like, God, you've got to use me like you used David, in spite of what David did. Because everybody knows David was an adulterer, he had a hit man to kill the husband of the woman that he was in adultery with, but God still used him and called him a man after God's own heart. And so there are many Sundays I would get up, and at the time I had sinus issues, and I was like okay, God, I need you to remove the headache for a couple of hours, let

me get through church, and just use me like you used David, and I'll be happy.

And I would say two out of three times that's what God would do. I would get through the service, I would get through the sermon, and probably about an hour or hour and a half after worship was over and I was back home the headache would come back. Which is fine. I was at home, I was good. I could take something and it would be all right. I could take something and go to sleep.

And so those moments are still there. There are many Sundays—you know, the reality is that not all preachers want to preach every Sunday. We have moments when we are human and we just ain't got the Word. We just don't want to do it. But we get up there and we do it because in those moments it's not about us, it's about God speaking through us to the people. And so in those moments I just pray God use me as you used David. So every sermon, I pray before I preach. And I can go back in my mind, and the sermons that I did not pray before I preached fell flat. They just fell flat.

And so growing up in a Black Baptist church, and ending up going to a Black seminary, and then after pastoring a predominantly Black church, it was very obvious that God's hand was all in there, because I would not have started a church on my own. Was not going to happen. I would have not gone to a HBCU. Was not going to happen. None of that stuff was going to happen. And so it really was a God thing.

And so when I came to MCC, which is a predominantly white denomination, at the time they had what they called WPHR, which was White People Healing Racism/D as in dog, P as in people, O-C Department of People of Color. That was the first generation of PAD, which is the People of African Descent. And so that at one point were the third world ministries, and so we've gone through a lot of iterations of names. And when Rev. Elder Darlene Garner was elder, that's when People of African Descent became the name.

Doris M. Can you say more about the whole process of how that happened? That you know of.

Wanda F. Yes, yes. So we had Third World Ministries, and then we had the WPHR/DPOC, and then People of African Descent. And when it became People of African Descent, PAD, we decided to have a standalone conference. Up until that time, at any general conference, we either got allotted time before or after, and we felt like a second thought, an add-on. And so there were a group of us, Rev. Delores Berry, Sandy Robinson, LaPaula Turner, Darlene Garner, and what was the elder's name? We had another elder that was a part of this. And we decided that we were going to have a standalone conference for the first time. And so we had the very first one in 1998.

And on the conversation we were talking about it, they—now, I'm young. I don't know…I am very clear they were going to call one of my elders. Very clear. And so we're on the call, and somebody said well, you know, we could still have it attached, because they felt that we couldn't get enough money to have it on our own. And I remember taking a deep breath on the call and saying Lord, give me strength to say what I got to say, because these are people who are older than me, have been around for a long time, and I said I cannot be a part of something that is still attached, I said, because I think it's time for us to be unattached and become our own thing. And so that's what we did.

And so for every two years after 1998 we had a People of African Descent conference somewhere. And then when general conference went to every three years, we would go every two years in between, and so people had a chance to go one year to PAD and one year to general conference. And that's how it's been all the way up until 20…our last big one was 2017. And then we had a mini one last year in Detroit. And so it's been an interesting ride. It's been good.

Rev. Cathy and I, who work together on staff, in 2019 at a general conference, people came together. There was a lot of stuff that had happened. And Elder Garner had stepped back a little bit. And so we wanted to bring back PAD. And we were also very clear that this was something that she started, and as such we needed to make sure she was okay with it. And so a couple of us went to her and said look, this is what we want to do, we need your permission, we need your blessing that this is going to be all right. And she said yes.

And so that's how we started back up. And so since 2019 we've met every month. We've had two calls every month since 2019. Yeah, yeah. And so we have a good core group of people. We have, on average we have our calls, ten to 15 people a call. And it's really important to come on to do it because it allows us to see people who look like us online, and we're in a safe place, safe and brave space, I like to say, that we can talk and share and know that nothing will go beyond the phone call.

Doris M. I thought I heard you say that all the people involved in starting it were women.

Wanda F. The elder that was involved was a man. I cannot remember his name. I see him very clearly. Robbie…I can't remember Robbie's last name. He was involved. He was one of the early lay elders, before Elder Larry. And so most of the people were women, yeah, ironically enough, yeah. And so we've had very successful—I think out of all the conferences I think I've only missed maybe one. Maybe two. And I volunteer for all of them. It's a nice job for an introvert like me. I can sit back and listen and help put people in place for worship and everything else. Yeah, that's what I was able to do all those many years.

Doris M. Now this is an awkward question, and maybe naïve, but can

you explain a little bit about what happens in the PAD conferences? What topics are really relevant?

Wanda F. We try and look at things that are…like identifying… When we first started the PAD conference it was all people of African descent for the first two, three years, and so we would talk about…our workshops were around spirituality, Black spirituality and things like that. Topics, talk about MCC, discuss leadership things, how to be active—it's all those things from the Black perspective. And then the conference that I co-lead with Barry Hundley in Atlanta—I can't remember what year it was—we decided to open it up to the rest of the denomination. Still Black leadership, but people who were not of African descent could attend.

And that really made a difference on some level because part of it was we also had to talk about the fact that not all Black worship is charismatic. I grew up in a very quiet Baptist church, and so worship styles began to change. And we began to understand that we're not all monolithic, that we are very different, very diverse. And so our worship services began to reflect that. We would have a healing service at one. We would have a high church kind of thing if you wore the vestments at one.
Because normally for a conference we would have…we'd start Thursday night, all day Friday, and Saturday. I don't think we went into Sunday because we're also very aware that people of African descent and particularly people of color don't have the advantages to not work. And so a lot of people, because of the jobs they may have, if they didn't work they didn't get paid. And so we wanted to be very conscious of the time that we're asking people to take off work. And so we started Thursday afternoon, Thursday evening, and we had all day Friday, and we finished either Saturday night or Sunday morning, and that was it. And people could go back home and be back at work on Monday. And that was very intentional for us.
And so at the very last one in 2017 we asked all of the African American clergy that attended to wear white, and so we were able to process in in all our white, and we paid special recognition to Rev. Elder Garner, who was stepping off as elder and as a staff person, and so we honored her at that conference.

Doris M. How important were other—I'm going to say Black women, but I'm going to open it up—to you as you moved from Imani into the bigger MCC picture? It might have been men, it might have been white women.
Wanda F. Yeah, yeah, it was—well, actually, before I started Imani both Elder Darlene Garner and then moderator Nancy Wilson pulled me aside and both said to me you know what you're supposed to be doing, so you need to get to doing it. And I just looked at them like I didn't have no clue what they were talking about. Yeah, it's before I started school. And so yeah, that's what prompted a lot of it. And Sandy Robinson, who was around at that time, too. She was the head of what we had then was

Samaritan Institute. We had our own institute within MCC. And the professors they had were college level professors that were doing all the things that were college related, and so when it came time for me to go back to school that was gone, and so…when I went to get in there.

So yeah. Elder Garner, Elder Nancy. Of course Troy was there. Sandy Robinson, for the most part. At the time there weren't a whole lot of men that were as involved, whether of color or white, but mainly the women were the ones that took me under their wing.

Doris M. Are there other things that you want to talk about that we haven't had a chance?

Wanda F. I will say that it's important for people to be their own person, to understand that you are uniquely designed. And find your own voice. And to understand that you may be the voice for the voiceless, and not to be afraid to take on that role. I think if anything, that's the one thing I've learned in my time of being alive, basically, but particularly being a queer woman of faith who's Black.

Doris M. Well, thank you so much, Wanda. I can't believe how much I've heard and taken in my heart, and being inspired, and I'm looking forward to seeing what your next chapter is.

Wanda F. I am, too. [*Laughs.*] I'm always interested to see what God has in mind. Right now I just got voted in as the senior pastor of Love MCC, and ironically enough, in my 35 plus years of being in MCC, I had never had a installation service, because I started Imani, and so I was never installed. I was the founding pastor.

Doris M. Where is Love?

Wanda F. Las Vegas, Nevada. And so I was installed Easter weekend, intentionally. I wanted to do it on holy Saturday, and resurrection and all that stuff, and so…yeah, for the first time. So it was very exciting, very exciting.

Doris M. Wishing you all the best.

Wanda F. Thank you.

Doris M. Along with MCC.

Wanda F. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Doris M. Thank you.

01:01:10 [*End of interview*.]