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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Mary Merriman

**Date:** August 28, 2013

**Location:** LGBT Oral History – Merriman, Mary – 081

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**Interviewee: Mary Merriman**

Interviewer: Mark Stoner

Present: Sylvia Weaver

Date of Interview: 28 August 2013

Location of Interview: Mary Merriman's home in Lancaster, PA

Transcriber: Katie McCauley

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**Abstract:**

Born in Chicago, IL in 1949 to a Catholic family, Mary Merriman joined the Air Force in 1967, where she struggled with her sexuality due to the environment, eventually becoming pregnant and discharging from the military before giving her son up for adoption. She attended Montgomery College in Maryland and received a degree in psychology, after which she and her then-partner moved down to Tampa, FL. Merriman got licensed and ordained as a pastor and started a Metropolitan Community Church in Lakeland, FL in 1983, where she and the congregation dealt with the difficulties of forming an LGBT church in a conservative town as well as the emergence of AIDS. In 1987, she was called to serve as pastor at Vision of Hope MCC in Lancaster, PA, a position which she held until 1995, navigating the creation of Lancaster's Human Rights Ordinance and the process of buying the church's current building in Mountville, PA. Since earning her Master of Social Work degree, she has worked as a social worker at Community Care Behavioral Health in Camp Hill, PA. In this interview, she discusses her involvement in the LGBT community, especially in the area of religion, and the advances that the community has made over time.

**MM:** Hi, my name is Mary Merriman, and I live here in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I've been here since 1987. I grew up in Chicago [Illinois] on the South Side and lived in the south suburbs with my mom and dad and nine brothers and sisters—I'm the oldest in the family in a—of a Roman Catholic origin, though my mom was United Methodist. But the family was raised as Roman Catholic Church. I remained in the Roman Catholic Church 'til about my early twenties. I grew up in a Catholic grade school and then went on to a public high school, and from the public high school then went on into the military.

Just backing up a little bit—my mom and dad—raising such a large family was tough, so both worked outside of the home. My dad had some problems after he got out of World War II. He had probably what's called PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] today, because they saw him broken down in the—in the city of Baltimore [Maryland]. Those mental health problems seemed to become a dominant theme in our lives, too, as he struggled with addictions, he struggled with feeling depressed and suicidal, and that sort of thing. But through all of that, he worked as a truck—freight handler and maintained working for the family and taking care of the family, doing two or three jobs at a time, sometimes. And my mom also worked in an office, as well.

**MS:** Could you say your parents' names and your birthday?

**MM:** Sure. There you go. Thank you. My dad's name is Michael(ph) Merriman, and he—he passed away in 1986, he was 65 at that time. And my mom is Grace Merriman, and she was 74 when she passed in 2000. I am 64 years old, and my birthdate's May 7, 1949.

**MS:** And did you have other brothers and sisters?

**MM:** Nine of them.

**MS:** Do you wanna list them?

**MM:** Oh, I forgot that you like this. My brother Michael(ph) is eleven months younger than I am, and then next to him is Kevin, and then David, and then a pair of twins, Ann(ph) and Grace, and then Theresa(ph), Dominic(ph), Rita, and Becky. Yay! All of them live in Chicago. I'm the only one that lives away, here in Lancaster. Okay? What else do you want to know about the background piece?

**MS:** Well, did you say your parents' occupations?

**MM:** Yeah.

**MS:** Did your mother work?

**MM:** Yeah. She worked as an office manager for the *Sun Times*. And then probably—I think *Daily News* at one point—it was always selling newspapers, or something like that. Or ticking and typing at home, and that kind of thing, so. Just a—kind of working class background. Never had a lot.

**MS:** So you—you graduated from high school and went into the military, what year was that?

**MM:** That was in 1967, and just by way of background to that, I came—growing up in a chaos family, as we called it, and I really was ready to leave, I was really ready to leave home when I was 18, and in fact was running away—was, “Well, I need to just get away from the chaos.” And so I decided I wanted to go in the military, and I was—I've always had a problem with weight, all of my life, and—told my dad that, “This is what I wanna do, I wanna go in the military,” and he said, “What branch are you going into?” And I said, “The Army,” and it was the easiest branch to get in. And he absolutely forbade me to do that. And I said, “Well, why can't I do that?” He said, “There are these kind of people there. I don't want you around those kind of people.” But he wouldn't explain it. He wouldn't tell me what it was about.

So eventually he and I kind of went back and forth on it, we compromised, and decided that I could go in the Air Force because he didn't think those kind of people were there, either. But I had to lose 60 pounds to do that, and I did that.

[Cut in tape]

**MM:** Okay, so, we were talking about when I got out of high school and what I did was go into the military, and I ended up going into the Air Force, which was—I was first in Lackland [in San Antonio, Texas], then at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, and then I was stationed up at Camp Springs in Maryland, so I—I've always kind of been around this area a lot in my life.

I was trained in the Air Force as a dental assistant, and that kind of became a career for a while, until I went back to college—there, started college actually. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the military, because it was really a lot of important things, actually, that I learned about life, certainly learned about sexual orientation there, that's what "those people" were, I think, is what I ultimately learned.

When I first got to—I guess it was to [Washington] D.C., to Camp Springs, to—is that the name of it—in Maryland, it was the Andrews Air Force Base, and it was—it was 1967, sorry, and—which was, you know—that was—Vietnam era. It was Vietnam time. We had gone through basic training, many of us wanting to go to Vietnam, but being unable to do that. We were 18, we thought it was a cool thing at that time. And I didn't understand politics, so I really was naïve.

I remember at one point going downtown to D.C., and—with some friends in a bus and—we actually wore our uniforms, talk about naïve. And of course somebody turned our car over, and things like that, so, we learned it wasn't a good thing to wear a uniform anywhere either. When I was in—at Andrews Air Force Base, I got to know a bunch of women there—that's actually why, it was a wife's squadron, and one night, one of the women that I got to know came down to my room, and she said, you know, "Let's talk," and so we talked, we're out in the day, we're just talkin', talkin', talkin', and by the end of the conversation, she said, you know, "I have to stay away from you." And I said, "Well, why do you have to stay away from me?" She said, "Well, I think I've got a crush on you." Well—I had never heard the word 'homosexual,' I didn't know what it meant, all I knew it was kind of sent me emotionally through every wall in the place. Either maybe out of confusion, maybe some excitement, I never quite understood all those feelings. But it was my first exposure to what the "those people" thing was that my dad talked about.

It became a dance in 1967, '68, a time where a lot of people were having every kind of relationship and trying everything in the books. It was a time in the military where you could not be out, because, you remember in 1967, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness. They had not declassified it 'til 1973. So you were always kind of under a lot of suspicion. We had a commander who was pretty homophobic—I think she was gay herself, I think she was in her own closet—I remember at one point in time, she told me to go—and she was suspecting I was gay because I had had my hair cut too short—and she said, you know, "What I want you to do is go to the psychiatrist, and you tell him you're gonna commit suicide, because you need to get out of the service, and if you don't do that, I am going to put you out of the service. YAnd if you don't do that, you'll be dishonorably discharged."

And—it was always that kind of tension in the military—a lot of investigations if you were gay or hanging around with gay folk, you were always under investigation. Somebody with shoes seemed like—with military-style shoes were following you around bars, it seemed like. You're always kind of—somebody was always asking a lot of questions. You were watching the cars that rode behind you and things, because there were people just watching all the time.

**MS:** So what happened in that case where you were threatened that they—to leave?

**MM:** I went in to the psychiatrist, crying, desperate, all of those things—the best thing I could do was just try to go along—I just simply didn’t know what else to do. And at that point in time, they had just had a shift in the military, because so many people had been drug out that way that they decided that they could help all of us, and so therefore we had to stay in now and be in therapy forever, so. [laughs] It didn’t work. Her plan fell apart. I think she eventually got drug out. As I remember, it was quite the celebration that day.

You also had—you always had a boyfriend, always had somebody that you were seeing, and that kind of thing, and I did actually—met a guy that I was really attracted to, I guess, and I don’t remember how long we were together. I remember a lot of drinking, a lot of partying, and things like that. And eventually I had a child by him. It eventually became the reason that I got out of the military, and my son is now 42, 43 years old, I guess.

When I—so I—I managed to survive the investigations—in the last investigation I remember them distinctly saying, “You are not a subject of this investigation because we know you can’t be one of those people because you’re pregnant.” And there actually is a whole body of literature, if you go out there looking, there’s some writings about lesbians who got pregnant, and it had something to do with—for some—the whole notion that you were always—at that time was always, “How do you know you’re gay until you try it?” Opposite proved that you’re straight. Have a child. And that actually was occurring in that period of time, and I never knew that until recently, as I did some searching to understand the relationship with my son. I think I had told you that I had met him three years ago on Facebook. I’ve never met him face-to-face, we’ve never talked.

**MS:** Well, and let’s go back a little bit—

**MM:** Okay.

**MS:** How that...what happened when he was born, and things like that.

**MM:** Okay. Well, and—and that, too, was—when he—when I finally did leave the military, I was in a gay relationship, and it was somebody who took me in and said, “I can help you.” He had gone and run off with somebody and got married. He wanted to have a child—

**MS:** The boyfriend.

**MM:** Yeah. And he didn’t know I was pregnant, but he was already off and married, and I was like, “I don’t know where I am. I am so lost here. I’m pregnant, am I gay, am I straight, am I on the fence”—all of that confusing kinds of things, and nowhere in society to talk about it. It was—it was very isolating. A bunch of the women in the Army at Fort Belvoir [in Virginia] kind of adopted me. And so they all decided I was keeping him, and gonna raise him, so they started swiping cribs and sheets and everything for Fort Belvoir and they were setting up household, and I was still uncertain with what I was gonna do.

Now, add to that my dad and mom and family, who are all in Chicago, and absolutely blown by my being pregnant. We were Catholic. And so my dad was running around town already

making excuses for what had happened to me. “The guy ran off,” or something like this. “But she was gonna get married.” And all of these things were going on, so it was all very confusing. I had—we got to a—I got to a place to say, “This is not the way to raise a child,” that I wanted something more for him, and I knew that I couldn’t give it. I knew that I didn’t know my own lifestyle, I knew that I didn’t know myself, ‘cause I was only 19 years old by then.

And so I decided to place him for adoption, and the friend of mine who had taken me in—her boss was somebody that, he and his wife wanted to have a child, and he couldn’t, and so we arranged—I arranged a private adoption with them. So I knew his name, I’ve always known his name, or at least his last name. I didn’t know what they did with the rest. And I placed him for adoption—again, more chaos, because Sandy(ph), the person I was with, wanted to keep him, and—it was so hard. At one point, it was supposed to be, like, an open adoption—unheard of at that time—remembering that *Roe v. Wade* was just being passed at that time—it was so much confusion. And I think—I ended up giving him up for adoption, and it was supposed to be open, there was a lot of conflict that went on. In order to protect him and the family, I finally said, “We’re closing this. I want you to raise my son. I want you to be a good family. I’m letting go.” So we did.

**MS:** And how old would he been, then?

**MM:** He was three days old.

**MS:** Okay.

**MM:** When I...when I took him to their apartment. And it was very difficult. People were pretty mean. Nurses were throwing sheets at me and saying, “What’s wrong with you,” and—we live in a world of, if you can’t keep your child, give them up for adoption—at that time it was just—there was nothing right. Absolutely everything was the wrong choice to someone. So I gave him up for adoption, and it was maybe five or ten years ago—I made the commitment in my head, and when I do that, I’m really, really standing on a straight path. I’m very good at that usually.

And so I—I just let go, and said, you know, “If it comes around that I ever see him, okay, but if I don’t, it doesn’t. It’s just not gonna happen.” I would not interfere with his family. But I did start searching when I started having trouble with my health, and I decided to start looking around, and I finally—I called all over the country for the last name. I knew his last name was Zepp(ph), and so I called everywhere, and couldn’t find him. And I’d put it down for a while and come back again. Eventually I found him in central Florida, and I called his—his adoptive father and said, you know, “My name is Mary Merriman, I gave up a son for adoption, are you Carol Zepp(ph)?” and he said, “Yes,” and I said, “Were you at Fort Belvoir in Virginia?” “Yes.” And I said, “And you adopted a son?” and he goes, “Absolutely not!” And he said, you know, “You’ve got the wrong guy,” all of this stuff, on and on and on. I finally said, “I know that I’ve got the right guy,” but I let it go. Five years later, my sister’s now searching around, and they put—my sister put something on WebTV—it was called—put a message out there about—about the whole thing, and it floated in the universe for I don’t know how long, a couple years? And someone finally called her, or sent her an email, and said, “I think I know your sister’s son. His

mother has just died, and I think it would be a good time for her to call him.” So they sent the obituary, and for the first time I found out about him and his wife and their five children, which were my grandchildren. Unbelievable. We didn’t make a connection for another couple years—if we did, we didn’t know that we were doing it. My sister was on Myspace, I think it was, and she had put something out. She said something, and suddenly this person popped up and said, “You found me.” And she was like, “What?” And sure enough, that was him. And that was—like I said, it’s been three years. We’ve never met...formally, we’ve never seen each other formally, face-to-face, never talked on the phone, only on Facebook. His dad just died last Christmas, I think it was, so I think our relationship is evolving again.

We’re extremely different people. He really likes Confederate flags, I really hate Confederate flags. [laughs] He—very Southern traditionalist, he posts all over Facebook things that I can’t even deal with. But then there are some things where we are very deeply connected, and I can feel that, so it’s kind of weird. So. That takes care of the other part—one part of family. And probably, that can lead into what the other thing is: current family is Ruth, my partner, and myself. We’ve been together for 24 years next March. And she has two children by a previous marriage, and they have together four children—so four grandchildren that we interact with. And they know me as Grandma Meredith. One of the other of the grandmothers just passed away a couple weeks ago, and we’d been joking, saying all this time that they walk around with three grandmothers, and they can’t quite figure it out when everybody else has two, so, well, now you’ve got just two. As though—[laughs] we made this right. Kind of funny. And we enjoy a good relationship. The kids are teenagers, the oldest ones, and they—they don’t seem to have any barriers with us.

I think one of them was joking at one point about gay people, and his mom said, “You know, you might find out somebody close to you is gay,” and he goes, “Oh, that’ll never happen,” and so I think he now knows, I’m pretty sure all that’s been out. My partner’s name is Ruth Stetter (ph), I can see it’s coming out of your eyes. [laughs] And she is 71 years old. She is retired, where I’m still working as a social worker, but we’re planning to retire not right now, we’re starting to think next year, maybe, both of us will be retired.

**MS:** And how long have you been together?

**MM:** I said 24 years. Yeah. And we met at Vision of Hope MCC [Metropolitan Community Church], where I was the pastor at the time, and she kind of came in the congregation. She had broken up with somebody and had been alone for a couple—three years, and something happened, a strange story that she tells, get her—her interview, I’ll get her to tell it. But it calls her to come to the church, and it was just kind of an instant attraction, I think. She likes to tell the story that we went out to dinner with friends, it was the pastor of the church, you know, so—everything has its own process, and we went out to dinner, and we were walking back from the restaurant, and I had given the guys a signal that I felt, if it was safe, they could go on. So we had our little signal thing. And like I said, it’s just been—it’s a good relationship. We’re very different in most ways, but, like I said, we’re getting ready for retirement, we’re starting to find some new ways to be, kind of, together again.

**MS:** So, how’d you get from the military to the pastor of a church?

**MM:** Well, what—what happened there was, after I got out of the military, worked as a dental assistant for a while, and I was bored. I was just—and I was too good at what I did, I—said I dive straight in, and I really work things. And so I got to be really good, and then it was getting me in trouble at work, so I was questioning things, and saying, you know, “Why do you do this?” And he’d say, “You’re—you shouldn’t be asking those questions.” And so I went back to college. It was on the G.I. Bill [Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944]. It was 1974, I guess it was. I was considered an older returning student at that point, I was 24, and that wasn’t done much then. That was kind of a new thing. And I went to a community college called Montgomery College in Takoma Park [Maryland], and I did, like, a general studies degree—like I said, I did GI Bill—and the other thing I did was come out for the first time.

I was student president my second year, and it was just on a joke: “Anybody wanna run for student president?” “Oh, I will.” I was the only one running, so all it took was one vote. [Both laugh.] It wasn’t a hard election, but I learned a lot about politics and things. It really did me good for years later. We were doing—it was in—like I said, 1974—in 1973, homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness. So that coming out process, really starting to—you know, there’d been a few Pride events around by then, coming out process was getting going, small community college in Silver Spring, Maryland, and some friends—there were a couple women that I knew, and I was very closeted, again, at that point—they were at this table and they said, “Oh, I gotta go to the bathroom. Do you mind sitting at the table?” “No, no problem.” So I’m sitting at this table, and I realized I was out all by myself. [laughs] It was like, “Oh my god.” Somebody came up and asked a question, “Are you gay?” And I said, “...Yeah,” so it kind of went from there.

The—from there I went to the University of Maryland in Baltimore County and did a degree in psychology, was in Baltimore, and came in contact with MCC because my partner at that time—different than this one—wanted to have—wanted to get married. And that was where you went for holy union. And I—I fell in love with the church, I just really clicked in that space. The church was only a couple years old at that time in Baltimore. The pastors kind of came out of Catholicism—I used to think that Catholics must have an underground here, so it was very comfortable, it was like home church, and I learned a lot.

And after a couple years, I had decided I wanted to go into the professional ministry. At that time, no seminaries let gay and lesbian people in, just—it was—it was still too new.

You might have gotten into some of the elite seminaries in the northeast, but it really meant that you had to stop working and do all these things and—it just—it wasn’t there. So in MCC, in order to get pastors in—and you didn’t have people coming from other denominations, nobody was out—if you hired somebody to tutor you all the way through Bible studies, and stuff like that, those clergy who had gone through seminary were writing exams, so we did our own seminary-level exams, but with tutors and that stuff. And that’s how I eventually got licensed and ordained. We were in Florida at the time—we had moved to Florida, where her—my partner’s parents had retired, and I got an—I started student clergy at MCC in Tampa, and eventually licensed from there, and one of the first things, the first churches I had was MCC in Lakeland, Florida, which is central Florida, which is extremely conservative—kind of the home



of the Klan and the—the not so free. [laughs] A lot of people there were pretty brave, I think. And I started a study there to see if people would be interested in starting an MCC. One of the things that we did was we found a general meeting room in the Polk City Shopping Center, I think it was, or Polk Shopping Center. And I had talked to a few people that I had met through the Green Parrot, the only bar in town, and—

**MS:** The only bar or the only gay bar?

**MM:** Only—only gay bar.

**MS:** Okay.

**MM:** Yeah. No. And not many bars! It was an extremely religious town. I met a few people from there, and they agreed to help me to start doing a search to see if I could pull together a church group or study group, and the first thing we did was lined up people to act as escorts. So we would meet at the Polk Shopping Center and—boy-girl-boy-girl—walk into this meeting room, and we separately—separate in there. [laughs] What you got? Got clear and had cover. And I founded the church there. And it grew to about 40 or 50 people, I think it was. In 1983 is when we started, and we were in a warehouse space that we converted—a bunch of women took down an old auto-paint thing, we took walls down. I mean, we—we really did—women did a lot of the building. And we were in another small house at one time, in a ‘terrian (Presbyterian?) church we rented a space from, so there was a lot of traveling around. But we did okay there. Couple things that just kind of marked that pastor besides being extremely conservative, very depressed—there was a 25% unemployment at that time down there. So attitudes were even more conservative and extremely oppressive. I tried to get involved in ministeriums, and we’d get spit out of those really quick. Women are not supposed to be ministers, and there were a lot of codes around that, too. AIDS came along at the same time. Started seeing people dying, and didn’t know what it was. In our denomination, our treasurer—he showed up on a 20/20 program, saw Larry’s picture in a bed, he was extremely gaunt. We didn’t know where he was. We didn’t know where the money went from our denomination, actually, because he had developed toxoplasmosis, he had—he just simply got lost—he was just gone and had everything. And we saw this picture of him as a very gaunt man, and then started realizing people were getting a little bit sick. In Lakeland, we were the only act in town, and so we started saying, “We don’t know what this disease is, but there is a problem.” So I go to the Health Department director and pound on the door, and I say, you know, “There’s been one death. Do we have a problem?” “We don’t have a problem, there’s no problem.” About a week later, I’d be knocking on the door. Bang-bang-bang, another death. “Do we have a problem?” Because we needed him to declare a problem in order to get access to any resources, and it took probably about three months and 11 deaths before he would respond at all. Meanwhile, the hospitals were starting to call me and say, “Can you come down and help us? We know there’s something wrong. These guys are gay. You’re the only person we know to talk to. Please come down.” And so I go down there. They formed Polk AIDS Support Services, called PASS, and that became an award-winning AIDS organization down there as we gathered as a community, trying to take care of the problem. Eventually, the Health Department did declare a problem, and they started allowing their nurses to go out and teach, but they wouldn’t go unless we went along, because they weren’t getting really good information, and we would feed them information. So I was really

proud of some of the work we did there. The other thing that happened was babies started getting born, and nobody wanted the babies. They didn't—

**MS:** Babies...

**MM:** Babies.

**MS:** That were HIV-positive?

**MM:** Yeah. They were the HIV babies. And I think it was in about—maybe May in '86 that the Children and Youth Services called—Children and Youth called me and said, “We have a problem. We can't find homes for these children, and we don't know what to do. We know that we're gonna have a baby born here before long. We need homes. Can you help?” And I said, “Do you understand—what you're doing is you're coming to the gay community, and you're asking for help from us. So you're gonna get gay people doing this. Are you gonna deal with that?” And they said, “We will. We'll go forward. We'll get the support. We'll do all this stuff.” We tried to find homes, and—first baby was born, and we didn't have homes ready, so we opened the first home for children with AIDS in Florida. And the baby was a little girl, and she was—I think two weeks when we got her out of the hospital, and by then she had never seen a human face, because she had a mask on all the time, had never touched, because everybody had gloves on all the time. She lived in this kind of steel cage, and had never been out of there. I mean they just simply were leaving this baby lay there. So we took her home, and—and started to provide care as best we could without information, because we didn't have the word AIDS yet. So we used to bleach everything with 10 percent, 15 percent bleaching solution—every day, everything—all the clothes were washed every week—we had to have new clothes because we bleached everything, so they fell apart, and we just kept providing this safe space. It was—it was a really difficult time. There was one other thing I need to kind of back up to a little bit, and this has to do with Mom and Dad. After I had the baby, and then had—I came out with them a couple years later, and I think it pushed our relationship too far, and we ended our relationship. So for about seven years, by the time the girls were born, the HIV kids in Lakeland—for about seven years, my family and I had no support. We didn't talk. He said, you know, “You're dead to us,” and wouldn't allow any contact with brothers or sisters or anything like that, so it was—it was—it was a pretty difficult period of time to go through all of that. By the time the kids were born, we had had a reunion. And I was just so thankful to have my family back. Tammy was born in September, but the end of that month my dad died from cancer.

**MS:** And what year was that again?

**MM:** That was in 1986. So we had gotten—I had gotten a couple of months—good months in with my family before he died, but again, it just was draining, oh my god, it was so hard. And people in the congregation were pretty good. Some left the church—they just were afraid. Everybody was so afraid at that point in time. But we loved her. I mean, just loved her. And a few months later, the second baby was born, and they still couldn't find homes in Florida. So we took in Tammy and Shelly. Both of them were crack babies, both of them were HIV-positive. Tammy's mom was a—actively using, and she still believed that she was gonna get this baby back, but she couldn't get her life together at all. Shelly's mom—I think she died pretty quickly,

pretty sure, and her dad was in jail. So we took Shelly in then, in December, and by then I think I had not much of anything left in me, and I think it was at that point that I decided that it was time for me to resign my ministry, because I was just so dead. I didn't understand it. I just knew I wasn't feeling anything, hardly. So I just—at that point, tendered my resignation with MCC in Lakeland and began my search. And it took a few months before I got a call from MCC in Lancaster, from Vision of Hope, to come here as their pastor, where they had a congregation of ten. [laughs] And salary was gonna be about \$400 a month, something like that. We had offset monies with the foster care money, and working and stuff like that to kind of pull it together. They couldn't find homes again in Florida, so we brought the babies here to Lancaster and started the church here. Or—worked with the church here, the church had been here for a while, so.

**MS:** So do you know the—how the church started here, and was that when it was at the Unitarian Church?

**MM:** They were at the Unitarians' at that point in time. They had started in 1980 here, and Arthur Runyan was the first pastor, and he and his partner—was a seminary student at Lancaster Theological Seminary, again, world open differently now. So they had an openly gay man there in seminary—I think his partner got the first spouse award, and it was really progressive at that time because, you know, it was—a gay couple. His partner also died of AIDS not long after that either. And the church had gone through—two or three pastors, as well as lay pastors, Earl Custer and Bob Life. And they had—you know—ebbs and flows. Always, every organization has that. They got through AIDS. Lost people. And the denomination actually changed pretty significantly, I think, through AIDS. Because by the time I got here, it was 1987—by about 1990, I think we had lost probably a third of our clergy because they were men, and they were—all died of AIDS. The church was at the Unitarian Church for some worship, but there were only ten of them there at the time, so in the denominational structure, they couldn't do this full worship thing. When I got here, it really did start growing. It really did start picking up pretty quickly, and people bought in, and they were taking care of the kids by then, and—and it really was a good—good time of growth at Vision. The—I think we opened the storefront then. We were on Plum Street, about a block away from our house, it was walking distance. I talked them into going into a storefront that we could open, like, a community center and had my office there too, because we had been—my office was under the stairs in our house with the two babies that were screaming, and oh, it was—it was a mess. So we opened the first—that was the first community center here, I think, at the time.

**MS:** And—what's the address?

**MM:** It was on Plum Street. I can't remember—it was like the second door down off of—just off of Frederick. At Frederick and Plum. I remember when—Lancaster AIDS Project met there one time, and they were in the early phases of starting to develop their outreach, and I remember John Johnson was one of the teachers there at that time—or one of the people—and he had this meeting going with all of these people with white hair, blue hair, whatever it was at that time—nice ladies that were gonna help, and I remember him saying the word 'condom,' and I was sitting in my office going, "Oh, this is gonna be good." [laughs, speaks in old lady voice:] "You

wanna do *what*? You wanna teach people about condoms, are you crazy?” [sits back] So, fun days. They were really kind of fun times.

Just—finishing out with the kids story, again, very depleted—it was difficult timing, at that time, and through '87 to '88, one of the commitments that was made here was Children and Youth Services said to Children and Youth in Florida, “Yes, we will provide oversight. You provide the funding, we will provide oversight.” And they just didn't keep the commitment. They never came in the house. They didn't want to be near some babies with AIDS. So we didn't have any support. We—we had very little. And I only say that because eventually, she got involved with one of my board members, and eventually started kind of a thing of, “We're gonna take the babies now and go and have this good life,” which meant that we went through a lot of serious conflict and again in the church. Eventually Florida found out about the breakup, and they were furious because they couldn't tell what was going on, because nobody had been in to see what our house looked—functioned like. And they were just—they literally stripped the kids back down to Florida, and then started saying, “We'll never allow a gay person to have kids around them ever again.” And that's still actually standing in Florida. I'm afraid we were part of that—that legacy too. That meant that the congregation was pretty ripped up, because they were all going through losses then, and the babies they were caring for—the girls actually never were AIDS, they were actually only test-positive, they were carrying their mothers' immune system, so they did have the residuals of cocaine. One of the babies—I saw her about four or five years later, and she was still raging at times, but in the other one, the first one, was adopted by another family and seemed to be doing pretty well too. So. Kind of brings us up to, then, Vision, and onto lesbian and gay issues and political issues. So.

**MS:** Yes, 'cause quite a few things start happening here.

**MM:** Yeah, it did. And that went into, what, 1970—'89, to '90.

**MS:** Yeah.

**MM:** And '90 was the ordinance stuff.

**MS:** Right.

**MM:** So that kind of does—political issues, right? Okay.

**MS:** So say—what—what's the ordinance stuff?

**MM:** Okay. The ordinance stuff was—in—there was a discussion, and—and Linda Martin was the president of NOW, and she had been doing some writing in the newspaper about gay and lesbian people not having protection under the law in public accommodations, housing and education, and that, you know, that people needed that kind of protection, that there was discrimination going on. We had Human Relations Commission, it was a County Human Relations Commission. It was not required by law to have a County Human Relations Commission, it was just Lancaster that did that. And they did that to give people better access—particularly people—I think people of color. It was still coming off all of the—the growth that

had gone on in rights of people of color. And so—at any rate. City Council started looking at what—what Linda was writing, was my understanding. At least what they presented was—Human Relations Commission had started the commission, but they never had enforcement powers. And so what they wanted was enforcement powers, so they had to go to the county and the city, because the city was a municipality, especially, to get enforcement powers. And that meant they had to open books in the Human Relations Code. The City Council saw it as an opportunity to try and get a change in the Human Relations Code, in the Human Relations Ordinance, that would grant protection from discrimination because of people’s bias toward gay or lesbian people in housing, public accommodations, employment...

**MS:** Education...

**MM:** Education. And so they invited Linda to come up and speak to that at a City Council meeting, and she called me. She met me, she said, you know, “You can talk from the gay and lesbian side, I can do the women’s side,” because she wanted familial status also in there, and so we went to City Council, and we each got up and we made a speech. She had done hers, and I was up there speaking, and as I finished my speech, I think it was Ingrid Ruuah (ph.) that said, “Well, I think we just should pass an ordinance that allows for no discrimination in these areas.” And somebody immediately said, “Well, I second that,” and I turned around to Linda, and I said, “What just happened?” She goes, “I don’t know, just keep going,” so we just let the thing run, and it ran into a lot of chaos. It became a really tough period of time here in Lancaster. I was thinking about it as we are on the fiftieth anniversary of March on Washington today, and I was remembering—I don’t know if you remember—there was a period of time, as the discussion was going on, there was all of these pros and cons, people fighting about whether or not it’s a good thing or a bad thing, or, “Are we tearing things up here, are we building things?” And it was just craziness. Progressives—there’s always been a great light of progressiveness here in Lancaster, but it’s always been a thin light sometimes, and you have to look for it, because you get overshadowed by all those other kind of—very kind of conservative values that—and so we—we started rallying people to come to the Human Relations Commission meetings, to go to Lancaster City Council. They had put up for first reading a passage of this amendment of the Human Relations Code, and so there was a period of time that they had to have more readings, they had a lot of meetings, and all that kind of thing. And we were trying to rally people to come around and get involved, and that’s where Pink Triangle Coalition came in, as I remember it.

**MS:** Well, that’s how it was formed, it was kind of formed as a reaction to that.

**MM:** Yeah.

**MS:** And—yeah. And that’s when I first met you—

**MM:** That’s when we first met, yeah. We were trying to get the secularists and the religious people—I had a bunch of people over at Vision, but there was also another whole group in the community, and we wanted everybody in, so we formed the other organization, which, I’ll let you do Pink Triangle, because that was your thing. [laughs]

**MS:** Well, but just to say—at that time, there was Vision of Hope, there was, like, Lancaster AIDS Project, as far—but there wasn't really a gay organization, so.

**MM:** Right. Right. And—so we did—we formulated that as well. I remember one—because of today—and as they were talking about on the news today, remembering back the fights and the chaos and bleeding and all of that, and it reminded me of the bloodshed here in Lancaster in that year. I remember a group of people that used to go to the Tally-Ho because there were people being beaten up when they came out of the bar—or knifed, in one case. I remember going to the Tally-Ho and rabble-rousing people to come to the ordinance thing, and—just so excited, so hopeful that something really important could happen here. And I went home, and I got a call from a detective, and I don't know if you even know this story, and this—this detective called me and he said, you know, “Reverend Mary, we had—something happened tonight, it was over in Mustard Park.” And he said it was about 8:30 tonight, and I—I... “So what happened?” Well, apparently, somebody—a young man—had taken a shotgun and blown his head off. And it was all while we're at the same time rallying people to stand up and to be whole in this thing and to respond to thing and not let things become internalized, but he had internalized it. And he said, “His mom doesn't want anything, but I think you should have this.” And—so he gave me the suicide note, a copy of the suicide note. And I don't—I don't remember exactly—she didn't want to talk about—and I really wanted to respect that, but she wanted somebody to know about it, and she wanted me to know about it, because we'd been so open. And in that note—the young man was about 23, 26 years old, as I remember—he used to cross-dress, as they called it at that time. And—you know, don't know that he was pre-operative transgender—there was a few people going through surgeries—or what, but I know that he cross-dressed off and on, and he took on a lot of beatings for that. He also, in this note, talked about being arrested and in one of the Justice of the Peace's office, and being back there a couple times, and the Justice harassing him, calling him names, making his life pretty difficult. And I never knew anything about it. I don't think we'd ever heard the story. And she just said, “There's nothing we can do about it. He's gone. But I want you to know it.” And so I—I kept that for a long time. There was a lot of bloodshed that year in many different ways. There had been people that had gone off the roof of a parking garage—we had those stories for years. The bookstore was blown up a couple times that year. Ultimately, the Klan came to town. We had all kinds of different protests and things going on. There were a lot of coalition building at that time going on, because some of the more progressive members in the community had gotten together, some of the—a few of the pastors that were progressive had joined together to form Unity Coalition, especially when the Klan announced it was coming to town, and marching and things like that. And that became more sources of strength, but also sources of conflict with one another. Ultimately the ordinance got passed, but in that process we also lost our church home, because after the bookstore was bombed, our—the owners of the place where we were, at Lancaster Metaphysical Chapel, became really afraid and they said, “We can't have you here.” So we're homeless again, and I think that's when we got to Friends Meetinghouse, where we were for two years. And two years that were good, until they needed the space and we were back on the street again. So. So—any questions about the ordinance...

**MS:** Well, just to step back. Okay, so you said the ordinance was passed. I just wanted you to clarify who passed what and things like that. 'Cause there was a joint—

**MM:** There was more to it.

**MS:** Yeah. Originally there was a joint City/County Commission, and so the city had to decide to add sexual orientation and marital status, so a lot of the conflict was about what would happen between the city and the county. So, do you wanna—

**MM:** Well, and I think it played out. I think what happened was the ordinance itself was passed, but how it was going to be taken care of became an entirely different conflict. Ultimately what happened was that the County Human Relation—the county commissioners—the Human Relations Commission was involved in this stuff. The director of the Human Relations Commission was involved. At one point, he and I were standing in front of the—one of the other commissioners—on the City Council—City Councilman—and I remember the director of the Human Relations Commission turning around to me and saying, “What are you doing this for? You don’t have any right to have rights yet. You haven’t shed enough blood.” And I just—I was—I was—I almost fell over. I just almost—I couldn’t believe somebody would say that, and say it openly, but he didn’t say it to a mic. The councilmember turned around, and he was an African-American man, and said to him, “I think it’s time that we end the bloodshed, and I think you need to stop right now.” And it was just—it was amazing to see how things in just a few—

**MS:** May I ask—was that Ron Ford(ph), or—?

**MM:** The City Council was—Jerry(ph). What’s Jerry’s last name? Black guy. Harrison(ph)! I think it was Harrison. And Lou Butcher was the Head of Human Relations Commission at that time. [shakes head] I was—I was stunned. I just—and I know what he meant, I’ve known Lou’s work for many years.

**MS:** And that’s the Reverend Lou Butcher.

**MM:** That is Reverend Lou Butcher, yeah, so.

**SW:** [whispers] What bookstore?

**MM:** Hmm?

**SW:** What bookstore?

**MM:** Bookstore?

**MS:** What was the name?

**MM:** That was Nancy Helms(ph)...

**MS:** Ca—The Closet.

**MM:** Yeah, it was called The Closet.

**MS:** On Plum Street—no—

**MM:** It was on Prince.

**MS:** On Prince Street.

**MM:** Right across from Fulton Opera House.

**MS:** Yeah.

**MM:** Yeah. She was blown up twice there. And—and it was—I think she was—I think she was a little bit ahead of time in some ways, because it was pretty—pretty radical looking kind of thing, and she just really wanted to do something. When—the first time it was blown up—it took a lot to rebuild, I think, and then it was blown up again. She just couldn't sustain it. It didn't last through a year. I think it might have gotten a year.

**MS:** [mumbles]

**MM:** Before her funding was gone, she just—people wouldn't go. They were afraid. And it—it wasn't any hate groups that blew it up. I think it was an individual that was pretty bent, but—[laughs] I can't remember—all I know is, we kept getting called at 2:00 in the morning, we'd be running around the streets of Lancaster looking for people that we thought were gonna blow up things, and we said, "What are we doing this here?" It was crazy. [laughs] So eventually, back to the Human Relations Ordinance—it did get passed, but ultimately, the county commissioners couldn't support it, because they maintained that they didn't have the authority to carry out that kind of discrimination stuff because the state law did not have non-discrimination in there, and so therefore, they eventually separated. The county kind of pulled out of—the Human Relations Commission was pulled into just the county, and ultimately then, what the city did was create its own Human Relation Commission to give enforcement to those limited parts of the code that—that had been passed. And—if you—Mark, you're going to talk a little more about Human Relations Commission—

**MS:** Yeah.

**MM:** 'Cause you're more familiar with that piece. What else about that period of time was important? I think that's probably it.

**MS:** Well, and that—so that was when Pink Triangle started. You were—I think a real motivator behind that. You were one—I think people saw a need to have some other kind of organization here. Well then—I—I mean—I look at you at that time as being very active. What other groups and things were you doing through the 90s, and when did you stop at Vision of Hope? When did you leave there?

**MM:** The—the—at the time, I was probably involved with the AIDS, Eagle's Wings—it's the first hospice for people with AIDS. And then just doing trainings and stuff for people caring for children with AIDS. Lancaster AIDS Project, doing some stuff with that. And pastoring, the



church was just growing. But it was a lot of work to do—pack a church. Every Sunday you had to set up—every Sunday you had to take down. And then you had to go over here where you had an office space, and it was—it was kind of difficult way to do church, and like I said, we did that pretty well for a couple years. During the 1990 period, a lot of people said, “If you ever need anything—if you need some help with raising money, you find your own church building, let us know, and we’ll be happy to help you out.” Well, I never kept a list. So sure enough, couple years later, Friends is growing, and they said, “We need our space, you need to leave.” I was like, “Oh my god, we’re homeless again.” And we started talking, and started talking to the district coordinator—friend of mine, Arlene Ackerman(ph), who lives here now, she’s retiring—she—she kept saying, you know, “I think we should buy our own place.” I kept saying, “We have no money. We can’t buy our own place. We barely pay the rent. What do you mean, ‘buy our own place’?” And she kept going, “Yeah, we should buy our own place.” Well, they finally found a building, where the church is located now, in Mountville, Pennsylvania, but we had no money, and the congregation really was keenly aware of how much chaos we had gone through for the ordinance, so really kind of afraid to think about the idea of a gay church opening its own building. Everybody had sense that this might be a big issue. But ultimately we went to the congregation—I think there were 40 or 50 people at that time—and we talked through a lot of those fears, and we talked about what it would take to buy a church, what kind of money, and that sort of thing. “What do we do?” There was a church bond group that had been working around MCC that was pretty good at doing the fundraising part. And we found this building, and we decided to go for it. The first thing we had to do was put money together, so what I did was, I called newspapers, and I did a press release and said, “M—Vision of Hope MCC has found a property in Mountville, Pennsylvania, and we intend to put an offer in.” It was Trinity Reformed [Trinity Reformed United Church of Christ of Mountville, PA], was the church that was selling the building—they were a UCC [United Church of Christ] congregation—and they were gonna be building a new church. UCCs, by that time, had come around and were more accepting of gay and lesbian folk, though I’d not really had much to do with Trinity Reformed—I knew St. Peter’s [St. Peter’s United Church of Christ of Lancaster, PA], and that’s about the only one that I knew of—and so—the tape’s running out. [points to camera] Can you hit the red thing? It’s—

[Tape cuts out. On a different video:]

**MS:** Okay, this is the second of two tapes, and I’m interviewing—I’m Mark Stoner, I’m interviewing Mary Merriman, so, why don’t you just say who you are and your birthdate and go from there.

**MM:** [laughs] Okay. And I’m Mary Merriman, and my birthdate is May 7, 1949. And when we left off, we were talking about the—the church in Mountville—

**MS:** The Vision of Hope—

**MM:** Vision of Hope MCC. And we had been talking about all of the changes with the ordinance that was passed in Lancaster, though the commission did separate into a county commission and the city developed its own Human Relations Commission.

**MS:** So let’s go to the church.

**MM:** Okay.

**MS:** To the—that Vision of Hope Metropolitan Community Church was in Lancaster, you were the pastor there for—at least five years—

**MM:** Seven years.

**MS:** ...Seven years, well, and by—when you're at this point, maybe five years into it or something?

**MM:** [nods]

**MS:** So what date was it when you started looking to purchase a church in Mountville?

**MM:** It was in...1993. And I'm not sure what month or anything like that, but I think that it was around April. And the reason I'm remembering that is that we—as a congregation, as I said earlier—had decided to go forward with the possibility of buying our own building and knew that it was going to require fundraising and that sort of thing, and as I said earlier, when the conflict and everything had been going on in Lancaster in 1990, during the work on the ordinance, any number of people had offered to help out and said, you know, "If you ever get to buying a building, you ever need help, let us know." But I never really had a list of names of people, and I just kind of really trusted that there was a sense of goodwill out there and that people would respond when I told them what we were gonna be doing. So, as we had done a lot, I put out a press release and said, you know, "Vision of Hope has made an agreement with Trinity Reformed to purchase their building, and we would need to raise approximately \$165,000," and that we had nothing at that point. [laughs] We had no money. We had no money in the bank. We had nothing, anywhere. But anyway. So I announced the possibility. "All donations should be sent to..." And it was my way to kind of reach all of those people. What I got instead was a phone call the next day after the press release was out, and it was a quarter of eight in the morning, something like that. State trooper named Joe, and I can't remember his last name now, but he was pretty familiar around here, called me up and said, you know, "Is this Reverend Merriman?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "This is Trooper Joe"—whatever his name was—and he said, "Can you tell us when you're going to actually be going into the church building?" And I said, "No. What are you talking about?" [laughs] And he said, well—he said, "We've been coordinating with the local police and the state police and the federal government, the—all of the security groups, whatever that was, Justice Department—have been coordinating to assure your safe entry into the building." And again, we're in Martin Luther King's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and it was this very weird, weird feeling of—"Oh my god, where are we now? What has just happened?" Well, what had happened was that three years had passed since all of the chaos, all of the pain, all of the injury of 1990. Somewhere there was a little bit of a change in heart, it seemed, and people had begun to say, "We aren't going to tolerate this foolishness." And it started with the police, that they were actually going to protect us in that part of the process.

**MS:** Well, and—one of the other things I think happened around that time that—you had spoken before about the Closet bookstore being bombed twice around '90, '91—the Planned Parenthood also had a bombing—

**MM:** [nods] They also had a bombing.

**MS:** In '93, I think, which would have been right around that time, something like that—

**MM:** [nods] So that may be, that—Lancaster, you know, Lancaster is known as kind of a peace community, and that kind of chaos was not really seen as normative, though I understand that in the '60s and '70s, in civil rights, there was a lot of work done here too, and I'm sure they had their own moments of chaos and everything else, and that that's how some of the civil rights work or Human Relations Commission was even born, was out of the need to address those things. So it's—but—but the contrast of what's known as a peace area, where the Amish live and all these nice quiet people, to be blown up and everything, and to have people hurt and—and assaulted on the street, or beaten up on the street, as gay or lesbian people were experiencing, especially gay men, was not really in its own image. So it really, I think, had started to go through some changes. I did have people that were starting to come forward and say, you know, "We looked into this bond issue," I found somebody in the community that I said, you know, "We need to put down about \$20,000," and he gave me a check, and said, "Here." I said, "I'll pay it back. We'll fundraise against this. This is a loan." And that's what he did, was make a loan, and we did it, we fundraised to get that money back to him, and it gave us the ability to start the bond process, and eventually we did manage to pay for the building with the bonds, which in fact was 20 years ago—about March or April it would have been, 20 years ago now, since we started, so it would be, like, next March, I think, is 20 years since they've owned the build—started the bond thing, and I think the building's been paid off now, I'm pretty sure. So that part was taken care of, but we also then still had to deal with the community at large, and the notion that gay and lesbian people could buy property, even though gay people had been buying property for a long time—this just didn't sit right with some people, especially in a borough the size of Mountville. So there were news—there were things in the newspaper that were starting to come out, again, the whole thing of God and homosexuality and the Bible and all of this sort of thing, but also the idea of moving into a community and being an openly gay church really was unsettling, and it started playing out in the newspaper. And—particularly people living in Mountville that didn't want us around, so we started getting calls, like, from the Borough Council that wanted us to demonstrate that we were a legitimate church, that we—and—and that's where they especially went at—every single day, I was going down to the Mountville Borough with another piece of paper to prove who we were and that we had the right to do this. And it was just—it was like some harassment. Eventually the Borough had to say, "They are legitimate. They have a right to do this," you know, "and that's all there is to it." People in the town were still up in arms. So they would go to the Borough Council meetings, and there would be this whole discussion. Some of the discussion I learned over time—the pastor at the Mountville Church of the Brethren, Dean Brubaker, at one point, started seeing the letters to the editor, and he called me one day and he said, "Pastor, I've got—I know some of the people that are—are writing these letters, and if you would be in agreement, we would like to start some study circles. And you would bring some people from your congregation, I would get these people and people in the community, and we'd just meet, week after week, and talk through the

differences that were going on.” And it was a phenomenal process. We intentionally did not tell anybody that we were doing this. We didn’t want any press involved, we didn’t want anybody intruding on that kind of sacred space, and we eventually did work out everything, and in fact the people that were protesting went to Borough Council one night—there was another big, big to-do going on there, and I had—I had getaway cars that night lined up. [laughs] There had been threats, and people were really, really worried about me. And so they had arranged for—somebody—a security guard—had arranged for getaway cars, and so somebody drove me up to one point, and I would really quick run into the back door of the City Council or County Council or whatever the Borough Council thing was, and then I said my piece, and then as soon as I said my piece, they were running me out the door and back in a car that was racing on, going up and down—[laughs]—it was the craziest thing I’d ever seen, but it was because they were—everybody was concerned. In the midst of this, there were other people, like Human Relations Commission—Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, that were actually at every meeting recording every single word that was being said. It was amazing. And I said, “Why are you doing that?” And they said, “It’s coming out of words from the Justice Department, you ask. We are—we are going to know, if you’re going to have any problem, we know where it’s coming from, we know who’s said what.” They were in bars, they were infiltrating bars. There was a bar that used to have a sign up in Mountville that said “whites only” or something. It was just purely racist. They were in there, they were in skinhead bars, they were looking for anybody that was gonna give us trouble. The group that—Reverend Brubaker had gotten together also went to that same Borough Council meeting where I did—I actually quoted Martin Luther King that night, and—you know, I don’t always think context really well. [laughs] All I remember was saying to them, “In the words of Martin—Dr. Martin Luther King, either we will live together in peace or we will die together as fools.” So they—[laughs] And it was like, it was taken as a threat. Everybody thought I was gonna bomb something, and I said, “No, that’s not what this is about.” [Both laugh.] The people that had strongly protested actually recanted their protest. They said, you know, “We have been working for weeks talking with one another and really getting to know one another and we’re just removing our—we’re withdrawing our objection.” Everything started to come together. Again, there were threats, but again, out of the past, it was really, really kind of scary. Eventually we decided to move into the property—it was in August of ’93. We didn’t actually finalize the purchase stuff ‘til March—that we had the bond stuff done. But the first—the Trinity Reformed folks were okay. There were people from—I remember the night before, we went to the church—MCC of the Spirit [Metropolitan Community Church of the Spirit in Harrisburg, PA] came down, and they were presenting us with a pew Bible or a church Bible or something, as a gift kind of thing. I remember Ruth and I had been in an argument that day—that day. And we were sitting in a parking lot, had not gone into the picnic at whatever park this thing was, and Ruth was telling me that she was coming to church and she was bringing a gun, and I was going, “You’re not coming in my church bringing a gun, are you absolutely out of your mind?” [Both laugh.] And she said, “Look. I’m not gonna see anybody hurting you.” She and I are very different on the issue of gun rights. And I—finally I think—I was—I remember being in tears, I remember that we were so close to breaking up that night, we were in so much trouble with trying to figure out what to do, but it was coming out of the mixture of excitement and fear, and I finally said, “I promise you, I’m not here to martyr. If anybody stands up and points a gun at me, I’ll duck.” [laughs] With that we found some agreement, but she also knew that Brinks Security had been already—had made plans to come to the church that day, and that I—I didn’t know somebody was around with some sort of a

Magnum something, and they were running behind me everywhere. [laughs] Everywhere I went there was a security person somewhere with a gun. It was ridiculous. 170 people showed up for worship that day. Every community leader around. It was the most phenomenal day. But going back to the picture, the next day the picture was in the paper about the opening service. Nobody could take any pictures because there were closeted gay and lesbian people in there. There was one man, Norm—he went up and he sat in the sanctuary, and they took a picture of one man reading a Bible after this great celebration. 175 attend worship and it says in the headline, “Here you see one man.” [shrugs] So go to the pictures.

**MS:** Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that the first church building that was owned by—[laughs] Why don’t you say the—?

**MM:** [nods] By any gay/lesbian group.

**MS:** In the...in Pennsylvania, or...?

**MM:** It would have been in... It may have been in Pennsylvania. I would imagine Pittsburgh, I think, had their own building. I don’t think anybody else did. I think we were the first ones.

**MS:** Definitely in this region.

**MM:** Yes, I believe, in this region. And as far as I know, there were not any other, you know, the UCCs hadn’t made changes yet, I think the Unitarians were—and the Friends were the main congregations that were accepting. So there were—there were only a few of us around. There wasn’t a lot of—certainly were not women in town. Once we got the church started and we were in Mountville, I started attending—Dean Brubaker called me, and he said, you know, “We go to the ministerium. We meet every quarter or month or whatever it was, and I’d like to invite you to—they want you to come and make a presentation, you know, about what the church is about, what you believe, and this sort of thing.” I’m thinking, “Oh, yay!” You know. So I go to this thing and I do the whole—whole spiel. I learned that one of the churches down the street—I want to think it was a Methodist church—he was doing deliverance ministries for gays. So he was one of the change groups. The exodus groups, or something like that. It was like, oh man. And then Dean called me, about the next week, and he said, “Mary,” he said, “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” And I said, “What’s that?” And he said, “I’ve been asked to un-invite you. You’re not welcome to come back.” Again...I was just hurt. And it—you know, you have to kind of step back and say, “Well, we’ll build on that again.” I was talking to the pastor at UCC—Mount Trinity UCC, Mountville—a woman in—I think her name is Megan(ph)? I saw her at Lancaster Pride this year. And we were talking some stories from back then, and she says, “The story of the building, all of that stuff still is alive—well and alive—in Mountville.” And she said, “But”—she said—and I said—well, I was telling her about the ministerium, and I said, “There were never many women.” When I was a pastor, I was the only senior pastor in Lancaster County that was a woman. I think there were maybe three of us total. And most were staff pastors. Senior was not the natural thing. And she said, “Well,” she said, “Times have changed, because in Mountville, there are no male pastors left anywhere.” [Both laugh] You know, it changes, over and over again. It’s funny.

**MS:** So from there, when did you step away from the ministry there, and...

**MM:** I was there for—let's see, 1994—in March, there was a big snowstorm. It was the end of the bond drive, and we were down to the wire. We were down to the wire and still needed to raise some more money, and I was kind of—I call it my religious preoccupation days. [laughs] I work in mental health now, so we call it 'religious preoccupation.' I really was—you know, I—believing very strongly that God would help us through this, and everything else—went on a fast. And it was—it was snowing really bad at that time, I remember there was this huge snowstorm, and I remember that I dug snow one week, and then the next week I was doing the fasting thing, and I think it was the next week that... I was going to a meeting at St. Joseph's Hospital, and it was Lancaster AIDS Project, a number of groups working on AIDS at that time—that would have been in March of 1994—and I went to the meeting, and I was—I had a sling on my arm. Thought I had been doing some crafts and hurt my arm. And—went to this meeting, and I was sitting—I—from the car into the old St. Joe's Hospital, near the parking garage, and I just sat down—parking attendant looked at me, and she said, "Pastor, what are you doing?" And I said, "I gotta go up this meeting." And she said, "Well, let me help you." She took my—my bag and walked with me up to the—the meeting, and I did the meeting, took minutes at the meeting—I am so good at—like I said, I work straight through what I'm doing—and I came out of the meeting and got out to my car, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. I just suddenly had no breath at all. And I thought, "Oh my god, what's wrong here?" So I decided—I can't remember. I guess we had bag phones at the time, I don't know. [laughs] I remember calling Ruth and saying, "I'm going to the church, and I'm going to let the copier guy in." The night before, I had been at a late meeting at the YW [YWCA, or Young Women's Christian Association (?)] on violence or something. When I got home, I wasn't feeling well, and Ruth had me go to the hospital to get checked out. She said, "I think you're having heart problems." I was having a headache, I was nauseated, and she was an EMT [medical technologist] at that time, and she said, "I'm sending an ambulance for you." And I said, "No, you're not sending me no ambulance." And she said, "No, I am sending an ambulance, you're going to the hospital to get checked out." I got to the hospital, I got checked out, everything seemed fine. They said, you know, "We can keep you here, or you can go home," and I said, "Got a meeting in the morning." She said, "EMT," I feel fine. All of the—all of the signals were good, blood tests and everything else, and I said, "I'm gonna go home." So, like I said, I went on home, got up and had gone to this meeting, but now I couldn't breathe. And I said, "You know, I think I need that stress test they scheduled for a few days from now. I think I need it now." And she said, you know, "Forget the copier guy, just go over to the hospital." So I did. I got in my car, and I drove to the hospital, and we got into the hallway, and suddenly I could barely get to this—the lab, because I couldn't breathe. I just was—just constantly stressing. But we did. I got into the lab, and I said, you know, "I need to get the stress test done, but I don't know that I should be doing a stress test. Something's wrong." "No, do the stress test." So they get me back there, doing the stress test, they've got me in a gown. I just keep going and working and working and working, I think we went up through six levels, I think we did the whole thing. The entire time I was flailing everywhere and couldn't breathe, I was having pain. Finally, they said, "Okay, go cool down." I was there 15, 20 minutes, and I was in enormous pain. And I said, "I am having so much pain, what's wrong here?" They said, "We don't know, but it's not your heart." I said, "What am I supposed to do?" and they said, "Go home." I got up, I got dressed, I went out to the waiting room, Ruth said, "What did they say?" and I said, "They tell me this, this, and this," and

I said, “And I can’t take it anymore.” I started crying. I started hyperventilating. I thought—and I collapsed. She picked me up. She got me into—they grabbed a gurney, they got me in there, and the doc is putting leads(?) on me, and this thing is going like crazy—and I was having a heart attack, at that point. The tech couldn’t—she couldn’t hear my blood pressure, or something. Ruth says, “Let me take her!” [laughs] and puts on the headpiece, and she’s checking, and she’s getting my blood pressure, she’s looking over the doc’s shoulder, she goes, “You know, what do you think here now? What do you think is wrong here?” He goes, “She’s having a heart attack.” She goes, “And you’re gonna take care of her now, right?!”

**MS:** [laughs]

**MM:** And so he said—yeah, I was right across from the cath lab [catheterization laboratory], and they were able to open up the—the vessel in my heart, and I—you know, I have maintained, to this day, two things that were all, all just miracles: was that Ruth was sitting there as bold as she can be, and—and as informed as she is. She’s always been my kind of hero, in that way. We were right across from the cath lab. So while I had a heart attack, I got instant care. And that meant that, for a while, it showed damage on my heart. But there’s no damage today. And, you know, that’s just a really important thing to know, is how important it is to get care. That particular summer, there had been several women who had been in and out of the ED [emergency department], many of us political allies, and our cronies sitting right around there—seemed to be having these chest pains, and, in fact, one person died that year. A young—my age group, I was 44 at the time, and that’s when we learned that—that heart disease in women looks different than it does for men. And it’s—it’s really important for women to know what heart disease is for themselves. I finally—after some time, went back to the church—church had grown over 100, and it was taking a lot of work, and I was going to have to really rethink how I was doing ministry for the church to grow, and it was at that point that I re-blocked again. And I had another—like, the silent heart attack thing. And it was—that scared me. I just finally said, you know, “I can’t take care of myself and them too. I can’t do all of this.” And that’s when I decided to resign. So I did that in January of ’95, was when I stepped down. Went back to school eventually, I had a bachelor’s degree in psychology, had not made any money in all the years of ministry—I think my—I think that was the first year that I had an \$18,000 salary, and I was 44 years old, so I really didn’t have anything to retire with, you know, just—just really was push to shove. And Ruth and I talked about, what was I gonna do? ‘Cause I couldn’t find jobs that could pay anything, and that’s when I decided to go back to school. I said, “You know, I could do a master’s in social work. I could come back and do individual, group work, maybe under my license, maybe with MCC of the Spirit,” and that’s what I was gonna do until that fell apart too, it just didn’t work out. And I ended up just going into social work, and that’s what I’ve been doing for the last—graduated in 1998 with a master’s degree in social work, went back to school for a little bit, did all the dissertation and a doctorate—when the economy crashed, I said, “Nah, that’s enough of that.” And that takes me up to today. I’m a—a licensed social worker, I ma—I work in a managed care organization, Community Care Behavioral Health, and manage medical assistance, mental health, and drug and alcohol benefits. So.

**MS:** Yeah. But definitely during the ‘80s and ‘90s, I remember you as being always at every meeting—

**MM:** Everything that there was. [Both laugh]

**MS:** Everything there was. Yeah.

**MM:** It wasn't—you know, there wasn't many of us out there really doing things, and we were creating everything then. That was kind of the fun part of it, was that we were actually seeing the building block. There were—there were many things in place already, there were potlucks out there. There were places where there were connections to—to be brought to the table to get work done. So—some of it was just kind of chaos, like—“Come on, speak to this issue at City Council!” And suddenly this whole kind of movement thing grows. Some things were a little more intentional, you know, whether or not it was doing policy work in racism and all that kind of stuff, but it was important that gay people were at the table, and every table I could find I got to. [Both laugh] I just thought it was a good thing. And it—and it did. It worked.

**MS:** Yeah. You were at many tables.

**MM:** Yep.

**MS:** And a lot of the things that you started are still around in Lancaster County.

**MM:** Yep. Some are. Some are.

**MS:** Lots of things have grown from the seeds you planted, that's what I'd say. I know I really appreciate your presence here all these years, even though you've receded a little bit for a couple years now. Now, have you been active with other groups in the area or outside the area or, you know, since—since you left...?

**MM:** Mostly, I've been working a lot. I worked at—I work in Camp Hill now, and I—I had a—I started directing social work and a couple of—directive social work in a couple of nursing facilities, and then—and thought I was gonna go that direction, but ultimately, I ended up in the mental health field, and then I got a chance to work at Hershey Medical for several years. Eventually my back started caving from that one—pounding the floors every day. We did some social justice work there in the hospital—Penn State really—kind of got on the—the burner for their policies on discrimination and stuff in gay and lesbian, so there's a lot of opportunities that started there. So I was able to work with a few communities—or a few committees, but largely it's getting older and just working and trying to put things back together that weren't attended to financially and stuff like that, for retirement. And—and—60 hours a week of work and driving. So, kind of takes your energy out, have to kind of step back. So I've been kind of—getting back involved again, and starting to—trying to re-find my path back into churches to see—test the waters again and see what's changed, see what's better, see if there's any place there, because it—it just...there wasn't any place. And as I've been saying, it was—it was kind of a dramatic period of time that leaves me a little apprehensive sometimes. I get a little bit concerned with, “How's this gonna go,” you know?

**MS:** What changes have you seen with denominations over your span?



**MM:** From the point where—well, as Megan(ph) had said, so many women in pastorates now. That's the—that's the huge change. In MCC, by—by intention, there have always been men and women in pastorates. When AIDS came along, I think—the entire structure of the denomination changed because so many men died. And it really did move from—almost a little bit of a patriarchal—with women interjecting and pushing for inclusive language and everything else—but still that kind of—a little bit more aggressiveness, I think, that was in—a part of—important part of the birth of the—of the denomination. One friend of mine, I think, she summarized it really well. She says, “What are we gonna do without the bad boys?”

**MS:** [laughs]

**MM:** And it really meant—people were testing the limits all the time, everybody. We were into theologies of sexuality and all kinds of things that—that—you know, inclusivity, I remember one conference—“God is a woman!”—you know. [laughs] “MCC says God is a woman.” And it was—we were working inclusively. Few years back, I was at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, and Ruth's mom was a Sunday school teacher there for 70 years. And I was standing next to her, and I inclusified the Lord's Prayer, I think it was. So I was doing the “Creator,” or whatever, and she turned around and she said, you know, “You'll never get away with that here.” [laughs] So, it was just funny. It—it changed. It changed the way the denomination has grown, with lots more women in leadership, and I see some of that same change, I think—it's either a softening or a more relational form of ministry in many churches now today. The—and—so I think that's a change. I think the other thing that has changed in churches is the role of laity in the congregations. It's not as—there's still the role of pastor, who—and each denomination seems to do that a little bit differently—they still are seen in the leadership role, but really empowered laity is a really strong component of many mainstream churches today, though not all of them. I think the ones that are growing are the ones that really have focused on that, you know, and I really know how to develop that, so I think there were some big changes. In terms of gay and lesbian people, there's a lot of changes going on. UCCs, 50 percent of the churches here are open and affirming congregations, I think that means four out of the eight, so to speak. Apparently the denominational structure has opened the door and churches are individually making decisions on what they can and can't accept. Certainly Friends, and—Quakers and Unitarians have always been gay-friendly. Lutherans—again, there's a mixture of things going on. So, all of the churches have really started to address the issue of homosexuality in Scripture. I'm currently involved with a Methodist church, because I followed you this year. [Both laugh] I said, “Whatever Mark is doing, I'm gonna do this year!” And that was my way of testing the waters of the community. I figured you probably wouldn't be in too many waters that couldn't be tested. [laughs] And—and that's been an interesting relationship to form, to get back involved in the church and the congregation that we're in at Grandview [Grandview United Methodist Church of Lancaster, PA]. We're introduced as partners, and that's been amazing because that was—you know, I've grown up in a fairly closeted environment. And I really did learn that I was really blessed in MCC to come from the kind of closetedness that I went through growing up and everything to work in a job where I didn't have to worry, I didn't have to be afraid. I had to be afraid of the people outside, you know. [laughs] They would take their shots, so to speak. But I always knew I had a job. It didn't pay much, but I had a lot of support. After I left—and then I had to start dealing with the pressure of organization that were—either closeted, or pushed you in the wrong way—or where you had to hide a little bit more again—it

really caused me to think about all the years of ministry and that I didn't value enough how hard people's lives were. I—I really got in touch with that. So I'm really thankful again that I'm starting to find some open doors. I've got a great, open place where I work, and that's—that's never been an issue there, though everybody's not out that's there, but, you know. It—it's a safe place. And I'm getting to a place where I'm gonna retire in a year, so I survived. [Both laugh] And I actually got a little bit of money to retire on, it's just not much, but. [shrugs] So I think from here out, what I'm looking for now is I'm starting to work with organizations again and getting a chance to see how they grow. But I think in a lot of different ways, because I think gay and lesbian folks are really doing better. When I was doing my master's, I remember sitting in class and—sitting there in tears, absolutely in tears. And the professor—Darla Henry—I went up to her, and she said, “Mary, what's wrong?” And—I was reading things like, you know, developmental—cycle of developmental theory, how a child grows in this age and this age and this age—I was reading stuff about gay and lesbian people and the coming out process, and that people have already started writing theory around what it means to come out and to live closeted lives and all this, and it suddenly occurred to me that everything I had been doing in my life and many others around, like yourself, actually had made a difference. Because the doors were open enough for schools to start writing and people to start theorizing, and certainly is part of the storytelling right now, is that universities want to do an oral history project. How amazing is that? In one lifetime. So, pretty good.

**MS:** Yeah, the amount of change...

**MM:** Amazing. Yeah. Absolutely amazing. Are enough people involved? No, absolutely not. That we're struggling with [Pennsylvania] House Bill 300 and getting that passed, and that one—Representative [Daryl] Metcalfe can actually stall a bill or almost kill it by not letting it come out in committee and that that's being allowed is beyond me, because there are 70 cosponsors there. I don't understand that. But I think people need to really step up to that, and I don't know how to get that right now.

**MS:** Well, and—do you have any thoughts about—I know for me the things that have changed and the things that have not are not really what I would have expect—as far as Pennsylvania law right now, the fact that there's really still no discrimination protection unless it's a local ordinance—

**MM:** [nods] But we're doing marriage.

**MS:** Right. [laughs]

**MM:** That's what I don't get, is we didn't do civil rights, we've jumped to marriage now! And I—and that's confusing me a little bit. But then I don't understand why the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has not been amended, because that would change everything in the states. They told us that in the state. If—because what they do have is only a reflection of what the federals have. So why not change that? I don't know. I don't understand. So I'm a little confused. And—and part of it is—new generations. Younger generations that are coming up with totally different ideas of the world because of the internet, because of all the technology, we're seeing things so differently, you know. [shrugs] Getting older, having a good time looking back at it.

**MS:** [laughs] So—what are—are there any most important things that happened that we haven't really talked about? Like, what would you say was the most significant thing in your life?

**MM:** [pauses] Most significant thing in my life...oh my gosh.

**MS:** How about the most important event?

**MM:** [pauses] Probably actually... Wow, it's really hard to say. Because you—because I can look at things like ordinance work and buildings and AIDS and—and having a child, and I have a hard time in laying of them. All of them had some really important lessons. All of them had some really important implications for my personal growth and how I see the world and what I expect from it. And—and I expect a lot. And... [Both laugh] You know. So I—I don't think I can really lay one thing out over the other.

**MS:** Are there any books or music or objects that are especially significant?

**MM:** [pauses] I've got a binder that follows me around, and it carries—over the years, people have collected tons of newspaper articles, posters, flyers, everything else—and I remember one time building just walls and walls and walls at Vision of all of these things, because one of the members had really scrapbooked and collected. And we put it all up, and it was around the time of AIDS, was one of the anniversaries, and it was huge. And so—finally it all came down and got put together, and over the years it got lost. Well, I have a handful of things that I did collect and I still have—it's down to a small binder. And I loaned it to somebody about a year and a half ago, and he's moved on now to Boston and took it along, so I don't have those things. And sometimes—I always wanted to give it away, just say, "Get it out of my way, it's not that important. It doesn't mean anything." But then I come to points like this, and now we've got a history project where I really want this stuff out there! Because it tells a story that—of a world that's very different, of a way of thinking about life and people just really struggling with the concepts around homosexuality, society, church, all kinds of things that are in there. AIDS, you know. And—and—and I can't say enough about the way in which the liberties that everybody is enjoying now came because people died and because people were so desperately ill, and the government and everybody else was not helping. And so suddenly people started to see human suffering in a way they had not seen in this country, and—and—and the community had to struggle with coming out and whether or not we were going to come out, and suddenly there were groups saying, "I'm pushing you out. You've got enough power and you could really make a difference." So we struggled with that. Do we come out, or do we push somebody out? Do we—you know, do we set that up? All of that was really important to the day. And I think, probably, there is a central turning point that is the turning point. We all had to come back together as a community, we had to appreciate life differently, we had to kind of get off of our—kind of "Who is or who isn't in the closet, or out of the closet"—and finally just lay that piece aside and start living as best we knew how to do that in whatever situation we were in. I think as people saw AIDS and AIDS suffering they came around on homosexuality in a way that we could not have maneuvered. This didn't happen this fast for no reason. There was—there was like a—a place, and I think that's where it was. So...that's probably the biggest place.

**MS:** Is there anything else that you can think of that we've missed or haven't covered right now?

**MM:** Well, we—we wanted to talk a little bit about the one flyer.

**MS:** That's right. That's in the ordinance, right?

**MM:** Let's go back to the ordinance. And there was a guy named Lee Stoltzfuss, who also has—he and his partner Clarke, has—have one of the interviews and did that last week, and we got to talk a little bit about one of the contributions, and Lee remembered this. At one point, after the Klan rally, Lee in particular became really moved by the generosity of people that really were helpful, and he wanted to say thank you to people for standing with the gay and lesbian community, so he approached me, and he said, you know, "We've got the money, but we'd like to ask"—because at that point in time, he wasn't that out—"we'd like to ask some help from the church. And would you take out an ad in the name of Vision of Hope"—'cause we were way out there—"and, to say, thank you for standing with the lesbian and gay community?" And it had a rose in it, and it was a full page ad, and so we agreed, and we took the ad out. I think there were some other people that contributed to it, I—it wasn't just him, it was a number of people, but Lee certainly was the impetus to this one—and the ad came out in the newspaper, and it was—it was phenomenal. And again, that ad is in that same notebook, if I ever get it back.

**MS:** [laughs]

**MM:** And—'cause I'm gonna frame that thing. And it was—it was just wonderful. It was an absolute—"for standing with the gay community," and—and it was a neat thing, a neat way to end the chaos, and it kind of put a bow, if you will, on the—on the year, of all of that, the ordinance was passed, again, there was more struggling that had to go in the County Commission yet, but nonetheless, it was a done deal. About a week later, another ad came out. This time it came out in the merchandise or which—if you see a newspaper that's this big [gestures, hands spread wide], well the merchandise, it was about this big [gestures, hands about 10 inches apart]. But there's a full page in there, and again, it's got an American flag, and it's almost identical language, but it was something to thank you for those who stood for purity and—[Both laugh] Half of the language was, and it was kind of a right-wing, evangelical group, or conservative group that paid for that one, and it—it had, like, the same rose, it looked almost the same, but it just kind of twisted the words to support the other group. It was just—it was just a laugh that—at the end of it, we were all saying thank you to our own side. [Both laugh] Oh, it was fun. I have to—I have to get a copy of that thing and make several copies. I think many of us would like to have it, after all these years.

**MS:** I think I have one somewhere. I haven't found it yet though. But it was—I think the first time—and for a long time, the last time—that I think the words "gay" and "lesbian" showed up in an ad in the Lancaster newspapers.

**MM:** [nods] Well, the ads then afterward went—( [redacted] ??? ) and Company, all of them putting the personal ads in—you know, the advertising stuff started coming out after that, but yeah, it was.

**MS:** Yeah, but they were resistant to—I mean, that was an effort to try to get personal ads that would say “gay” or “lesbian,” and they did not succumb to that at the time.

**MM:** [laughs]

**MS:** And now classified advertising has passed the newspapers, for the most part. [laughs]

**MM:** Well, and newspapers are pretty much going by the wayside by themselves. [laughs] And media’s now a little bit more uncensored than it ever was.

**MS:** Yeah.

**MM:** People do or don’t partake, so. Interesting.

**MS:** Well, I’ll have more to say about that when you interview me.

**MM:** Okay. [whispers inaudibly] Don’t...I think that probably does ‘em up.

**MS:** Okay. We’re over our time limit to wear out people.

**MM:** Okay.

**MS:** [laughs]

**MM:** We get to do you tomorrow night. [laughs]

**MS:** Then we’ll be worn out, right?

**MM:** Yeah.

**MS:** Okay!

**MM:** All right, thank you very much!

**MS:** You’re okay with this?

**MM:** Yep.

**MS:** Thank you very much.

**MM:** Thank you.

**MS:** Bye-bye.