

Sacred_Journey_Johnson_Blons_Brinkley.mp3 / Sacred Journey: Sally Howell Johnson, Steven Blons, Robert Brinkley / Duke Digital Repository

- And thank you so much Steve and Bob and Sally for agreeing to be interviewed about reimagining. I'm gonna start with some background for each of you. Sally, why don't we start with you? Could you say your name and maybe spell it for us?

- Okay, Sally Johnson, J-O-H-N-S-O-N

- Okay thank you. And are you lay or clergy?

- I'm clergy, I'm an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church.

- Thank you so much. And Sally, when and where were you born?

- I was born in Oak Hill, Ohio.

- Okay, and when were you born?

- Oh, 1953, a fine year.

- (laughs) It must have been. Where did you go to school, graduate, divinity school?

- I graduated with a degree in music from Ohio University and then from United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities, in 19, I don't know 95.

- Okay good, good, thank you. What work or ministry were you doing at the time of reimagining? Let's say it was 93 to 2003.

- I've had a lot of hats here at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church. At that time, I probably was doing, um, let's see, what was I doing? I was doing things related to worship, certainly. And adult education and before that I was doing children's ministry, so it's, there's sort of an overlap of that.

- Boy, you did wear a lot of hats, that's great. And what work or ministry have you done after reimagining? What are you doing now?

- I'm still doing worship, adult education, spiritual formation and now also congregational care, pastoral care.

- Wonderful. I have one last background question for you Sally. When and how did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- Well probably at seminary because I was at United at that time and we were reading a lot of feminist theology, the women's bible commentary and all that. And so that was a part of it, and probably just from the stuff that I was reading as well.

- Sure, and how did you react to it, do you recall?

- Well, it felt like finally, ya know? Finally.

- Yes. (laughs)

- And it felt very illuminating and also freeing. To have a voice, to be heard. Well, no, I take that back, to have a voice. I don't know that it was always being heard at that point.

- Exactly. That's great, thank you Sally. Bob, could you say your full name and spell it for me please?

- Bob Brinkley, B-R-I-N-K-L-E-Y.

- Thank you, and are you lay or clergy?

- I'm clergy.

- Yes, and what denomination?

- Southern Baptist denomination, graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, think it was '62.

- Yes.

- Yeah.

- Great. When and where were you born, Bob?

- I was born in Kansas, but because of that period in time, family was moving a lot, and eventually during my early years we finally moved to Texas. I'm a graduate of Baylor University.

- Oh sure, yes, great. What work or ministry were you doing at the time of reimagining?

- Because of my connection with this church, Hennepin Avenue United Methodist church, and at that time as I recall, I was on support staff and also a contributor or participant in Sacred Journey worship. So I think that was what introduced me to the reimagining.

- Mmhmm, great, okay good. And you still on the support staff for Hennepin Avenue United Methodist?

- No, mostly now, I'm working with Steve and Sally in developing worship for Sacred Journey. Yeah, and did a period of years making pastoral calls here too as well.

- Nice, great, and Bob, one last question, when and how did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- Well, I think at its inception actually because my associations with people who were involved in that very much. Yeah, so it was very early on.

- And how did you have connections to people involved?

- Through work and friendship and a worshipping group. Yeah, in those ways. And I think but at another level though, it was, I heard Sally use the word freedom, it was very liberating for me that there was something that was searching to have this experience and understanding of the movement.

- That's interesting. How was it liberating for you, Bob?

- Um, That's a big, big question.

- (laughing) It is!

- And an important one. I think it was liberating, it was exciting, it was encouraging. I felt more hopeful because there were moments when I became very kinda disenchanted with organized religion. And so I really grabbed onto this in a personal way. And hoping that it will still have a great influence in our society. Hope it does.

- Great, thank you, that's great. Steve, could you say and spell your name please?

- Sure, my name is Steven with a V, Blons, B-L-O-N-S.

- Great and are you lay or clergy?

- I'm lay.

- And your denominational affiliation?

- I'm Methodist, United Methodist.

- Great. And Steve, when and where were you born?

- Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1943. Bob, you actually escaped without having to say your--

- You know you're right, thank you! Bob, you didn't say when you were born.

- Oh, yes, I was.

- You were born? Good! (laughs)

- November 1934.

- Great.

- So I'm 81 right now.

- Great, thank you. Thanks for catching that Steve. (laughter) So where'd you go to school?

- Grew up in the Twin Cities, University of Minnesota undergraduate and graduate school.

- Graduate school in?

- Educational psychology and counseling. Masters degree and most of the course work for PhD which I never finished.

- And that area was in?

- Educational psychology also. Counseling student personnel psych is what the program was called.

- Great, good. So what work or ministry were you doing at the time of reimagining?

- So I had just finished being the, I'd been the director of Koinonia Retreat Center, the retreat center owned and operated by Hennepin Avenue United Methodist church for nine years. And had, was on sabbatical from that position. A sabbatical from which I never actually returned. And was spending the sabbatical in Berkeley, California, participating in a renewal program, enrichment program during the time that the first reimagining conference occurred. And then upon returning from Berkeley, getting back connected here at Hennepin church, so that would have been like the following year, the Sacred Journey service was just starting and I got involved on the ground floor of that. And so for the next period of time, during the lifespan of reimagining, I was involved here helping with worship and also playing as a freelance musician and giving music lessons and that sort of thing.

- Yes, and what are you doing now, Steve?

- Exactly the same things. (laughter) I've continued to do the same things, play music, teach guitar, work on Sacred Journey service, and so I'm sort of retiring by attrition, things keep kinda shrinking little by little, but I keep doing all the same things.

- That's great, that's great. And Steve, when and how did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- Well, first of all I was married to a woman who became influenced by the feminist movement in the second wave feminism in the 60's. And we were caught up pretty much early on in all that and this was in my first marriage and she then went on to seminary. To United seminary and graduated and was appointed as clergy of the United Methodist Church. So it was just part of the conversation for a long time. And along the way I became a member of an organization called COSROW in the United Method Church community on the status role of women. And so helped to plan some events and so it feels like it's been, it's been in the water for me for a really long time. And you know, it was about feminism and then because of my ongoing life in the church, it was almost immediately about how does this relate to what we're doing here? And language became obvious right away.

- Yes. Great, oh that's wonderful, great background. I know at some point when we get to Sacred Journey you'll all chime in, but you all have different relationships with reimagining, so I might still go around and do you individually. Sally you were at the '93 conference.

- I was.

- And I would love to hear what you remember about that conference.

- Well, I think that, so right out of the shoot, the very first song, what you hold, I'll start to cry talking about it. What you hold, may you always hold. I'd never heard anything like that and it just went right, right to my, you know, right into my body, into my soul. And I still remember what the room looked like. I remember they used this tinkling bell chime thing as a part of the music and I just thought oh my gosh that's the most beautiful sound. And there were dancers. I think that one of the things that I remember so much was the attention to beauty. That we were meeting around round tables. Just sort of all of the attention to symbol. And that I later unpacked, I mean, I didn't necessarily know that at the time. But dance, the movement. The fact that there were these three canvases happening and painting on them that the artists were responding to what was happening in the room and then the fact that they didn't stay with their own canvas, but then when we came back to it, they took up, the artist took up another canvas. Now somebody may remember this completely differently, but that was my memory. The fact that the speakers turned. It was the first time I'd ever seen one of those Plexiglas podiums, and so you could see through it. You could see the person, they weren't hiding behind the podium, but they were an extension of it in some ways. And that they would, periodically because we were in the round, they would just turn the podium and we got this different glimpse of the person speaking and it just seemed really right. I do remember the different, some of the speakers, but not so much what they said as much as the experience of it. And sort of all the way that the arts were incorporated throughout. It was my first experience also, I will say, of womanist theology. And that was like a slap upside the head. You know, because it was like woah, I didn't even know that this language was there, that people were talking about this, that there was sort of a rejection it seemed in some ways of sort of the kind of, seemingly dominant culture feminist theology that got a different face on it with womanist theology. So there was that. And the fact that there were people from all over the world. And I'd

certainly experienced that before at some United Methodist things, but the fact that all of these people had come to have this experience together. And it never occurred to me, not one moment did it ever occur to me that this would be dangerous for anyone, that people wouldn't think that this was just the best thing ever. And so the fact that there was a backlash just was incredibly surprising.

- Yes, well, let me follow up on that for just a minute. So it was incredibly surprising to you. How do you, as you reflect on it, how do you account for that backlash?

- Oh, fear.

- Fear of?

- Change, the fear of women, the fear of the power of women all together, like what will this mean for the institution? Because you know, institutions are meant to preserve themselves. And this was not going to preserve things because it was really the power of all of these women, and there were some men, I remember sitting at tables with men, but the power of women speaking all together just was more than the institution could bear, I think.

- Yeah. That's really good, Bob or Steve, did you want to add to that about the backlash? Any other thoughts on how you account for it, your reactions to it?

- I have uh,

- This is Steve.

- Yeah, this is Steve talking. I have an interesting little incident that happened that reflected the backlash. So down the road, I was asked to serve on the board, on the conference, after Reimagine became an organization. And we were on retreat and we had a task of revising a pamphlet to describe reimagining so we were kind of sitting around the table brain storming, talking about stuff. And for me, the essence of what, this is now me speaking as a man, so I'm not affected in all the same ways, but to me, one of the powerful things that came out of reimagining was the concept of proclaiming the gospel of our experience. And I lobbied really hard to have that be a defining sentence in this pamphlet and we couldn't go there because of the backlash. Because saying that so clearly and boldly up front was seen as too risky. But I still to this day think that that's one of the powerful legacies of the reimagining movement. And you know, even right this minute, virtually, we're spending the whole summer in the Sacred Journey asking people to speak out of their experience, what their gospel is. So you know, it's like, it's, and I think that's what, that's one of the other things that really scared the established church, and probably should have, to lift up experience as valid over and against tradition and scripture even though the Methodist sort of have that as part of the, but still to really say no, this is really, We're lifting this really up. I think that just scared the heck out of people.

- Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. Good, good. That was great, I'm gonna move on to Bob about how you got connected to reimagining. Could you say a little bit about your connection to reimagining and how you got

connected?

- I was thinking about backlashes.

- Oh please, please do. Any thoughts on that too, I'd love to hear.

- What I'm hearing from these two helps to jar my memory a little bit. I thought it was a nation-wide backlash. Which was sorta surprising, not entirely. At that conference, I--

- The '93 conference?

- Yeah the '93 conference, I was aware that there were a few men there. Which was encouraging.

- Yeah.

- Encouraging. Some clergy as well. I wanted to say, because now I'm going tripping back into my memory, that remarkably, this kind of backwater seminary in New Orleans had a course on the mystics. And um, some women mystics. And I was reading, early on, that was like in the late 70s early 60s, I was reading women theologians. I wish I could remember some of their names.

- Yeah.

- If I could probably something you all would remember as well. So, that was present in me. And the fact that years hence, that I could see the connection between the mysticism of the Middle Ages and what was happening now. And not at all surprised at their reactions, negative reactions and digging in of heels by traditional religion.

- To clarify, because that's been the pattern in the past, is that why?

- Yeah.

- Yeah, mmhmm.

- It's changing.

- So how did you get connected to reimagining?

- Through these two people that are either side of me. But also women in the Sacred Journey community gatherings. That and just following something that I think was always open to this and um, so that when I learned about it through others mainly, I was happy about that. I think that's as much as I can say right now.

- Well that's great Bob. Go ahead yeah, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off. Steve, I just wanna talk about you also had the experience of serving on the coordinating council as you were mentioning.

- I did.

- And I would love to hear about your memories of what it was like to be on the coordinating council.

- (laughs) So would I!

- (laughs) Do you remember when it was exactly?

- Uhh,

- I can look it up so don't worry about it.

- Yeah, I it's pretty vague, to kind of pin it down. I'm trying to, I can't attach it to other things very easily in my memory so it's hard to pin down a time. So what do I remember about that experience? There was a lot of energy still around creating additional events, about communicating with people who'd been to past events. About encouraging people to get into some kind of small groups or communities, recognizing the need for support, especially people who were not near major urban centers and isolated and who you keep those people kinda going, so, the fact that there was a newsletter. And people were still concerned about the welfare of those individuals whose careers had been jeopardized and in some cases lost because of their involvement in Sacred Journey, so there was a lot of concern and grief and anger around that. And I don't remember if, I don't think I was still serving at the time that the council had to start dealing with what was sort of the dwindling energy of reimagining as it was trying to either continue or not continue. I wasn't part of that decision I know. I do remember toward the end, that there was, this is after I was off the council I think, that there was this compilation, a book of resources. Worship resources, ideas, it was really kind of a grab bag of stuff and I participated in that.

- How did you participate in that?

- I wrote one or two pieces for that.

- Okay.

- And um, and I still have my copy of that.

- Is this the Blessed Sophia book?

- Yeah, I guess so, yeah yeah yeah.

- Yeah, like a wire, a binder? Yep, mmhmm, yes, yes. How did you get on the coordinating council? How'd

that happen? Do you remember?

- I don't think I just jumped up and said hey! Is there any, ya know, someone must have invited me to do it, but I don't remember who.

- Sure. And if you think about it, how would you say feminist theology affected the way that that council worked?

- Well the, it's hard for me to kind of separate because I've lived, it feels like I've lived so much of the last 25 years of my life in collaborative circles that it's hard to remember a time when I didn't. So um, so the sense of respect and collaboration that existed there, in the way things were talked about and the way decisions were made, was certainly a part of it. And um, there were some strong voices. There were people who had, you know, definite ideas, there wasn't an absence of disagreement. But you know, this'll sound sort of self-serving I suppose in a way when I say it this way, but it felt completely natural and comfortable to be a man in the midst of this group of women talking about feminist theology. 'Cause it's like who I am and how I operate.

- Exactly, yes, yes, that makes sense. Thank you. Well, one important connection that you all have, a huge connection is Sacred Journey. And that was the group that provided music for the very last gathering. So I'd like to hear from you, first of all, how Sacred Journey got connected up to reimagining. Let's start with that and then I have other questions.

- Well I'm not sure connected up is it. I think that what we recognized early on when we began to have this service be more than just like an alternative service you know, here in a place that's pretty traditional was that we had been influenced in ways that, as I said when we were talking earlier, that I'd had this experience and I could no longer be the same. And so it began to be sort of woven into what it is that we were doing. We often say that we're a creation centered spirituality service, and there's truth in that, but there's also or and, I guess I should say, you know there's also threads of Celtic spirituality and Native American, sort of lots of indigenous cultures. And that reimagining was a way of saying, oh and all of that is okay. That the sort of bringing all of that to the table of creating worship. And so it was, and, that became very important in the weaving it together, and the idea that how it is that you use language is really really important. And how it is that you use language in worship is extremely important. And the ways in which we also use the arts, so that it became a multisensory experience out of, ya know, the experience that certainly I had at the first reimagining. And that was probably my first experience other than you know those kinds of experiences that you have like when you're at camp. Where it seems to be okay to do all kinds of wacky stuff and do it all together and call it worship. This was an experience of oh we do this because we are multisensory human beings and you know, we worship out of our experience as Steve said.

- Yeah. Lemme step back just a minute. How did Sacred Journey itself start? How and when did it start?

- This is a very pedestrian story.

- Okay. (laughs)

- I'm sorry, I'm away on sabbatical and there's a congregational survey that's done, out of which comes some fairly significant interest in having some alternative way of worship. In particular--

- But in the summer.

- In the summer, yeah.

- Ah, yeah, okay.

- In particular the two things that people wanted were can we wear our shorts to church? And can we be done early enough that we can get the heck out of here and do other stuff on Sunday? So this worship service started as a Sunday morning summer service in the sanctuary. And it was pretty successful for the summer as I understand, there were a couple hundred people who showed up pretty regularly for the service and enjoyed it. And when the summer came to an end, there were people said, this is cool, can't we continue this? So initially it was this kind of little barnacle on the hull of the big ship of worship here. It was this group of about 25 or 30 people that met at 8:30 in the morning in the sanctuary 'cause that's where it met, but had to be done in 45 minutes to get out of the way for the main worship, right? And it continued in that format for a while, and then later on said this is crazy, let's move to the art gallery. And then so what's become Sacred Journey started out looking not at all like what it is now. And just evolved, evolved, evolved as people came, wanted this, ya know, ideas got fed in, influences got fed in and it's an example to me of a community intentionally deciding how they want to be together in worship and making that happen. It's literally ongoing, it's still 22 years down the road, it's still an ongoing experiment.

- Yeah.

- In which we periodically call the community together and say, how's it going? Are there things that are working or aren't working for you? And then we've made, you know, with those responses, made some shifts in how things work. And,

- This is fascinating, I'm curious, is there sort of an over arching mission or vision or how do you determine what fits in? Is it sort of, whatever, how does that work? It's really fascinating.

- Well, (laughter)

- You're looking at the (words obscured by laughter and cross talk)

- It's also every week after the service there's what's called seeds of celebration. And seeds of celebration takes the scripture for the week that is coming up and hash it out and have pretty free form--

- Very.

- Very free form bible study.

- It's like, it's like, it's pretty much midrash is what I would call it. Just like open the whole thing up.

- And the intention is we try every week to make sure all of those sensory pieces are also touched on. And I think that that sort of process is also very reimagining-like.

- Say some more about that, that's fascinating, yes.

- Because, number one, it is always in process. And what happens, many many people have had input in, not one particular person. And that's a core value.

- Yes.

- Right.

- And so that's--

- And then when the three of us sit down as we do on Monday mornings, as we just did, to actually put the pieces together that are going to make up worship, we're building on the conversation that happened the day before. And then we're, ya know, playing this through our own experience and our own filters and thinking of ways that we can attach elements of worship and stuff. And this process for me, you know, again I said earlier about collaboration. And this process is very collaborative. And it frees me up, I often think this, it frees me up to throw out the most outlandish ideas I can think of, knowing that if I don't get any kind of support for this, I'm not gonna risk like throwing us off the edge of the earth, ya know, with some crazy notion. So, the collaborative process allows us to bring a lot more to the, then, I mean I can't imagine, and this happens all the time, I know, where some one person sits down and figures out this prayer and that hymn and it's oh my god I can't imagine how you create worship like that and have it have any connection to the life of the community.

- Yeah.

- Mmhmm.

- Very interesting! Well, I'm wondering how, am I correct in saying that reimagining was one influence among others to form the community?

- Yes. And that the influence was through people who had experience reimagining and joined this community? And how would you describe how that worked? It was sort of through that? I know,

- Um, I think yes to a certain degree, but mostly I think that it was the influence of, I mean, there certainly

are people within the Sacred Journey community now who were instrumental in that first conference, Sara Evans, for instance. And yet I think that it was really, let's see if I can say this in the way I want to. That what it did was it tripped a switch in me and several others that this is how worship could happen because of what we experienced there. And that not only could it, but the power of having that happen. And I think that it's only been at some point along the way we named that. We named it and then it was like oh yeah.

- Say some more about you named it. What do you mean there?

- Well that we named that we're doing this in the way that we're doing it because of the way reimagining was created and what it conjured up in the people who were there. And certainly in me.

- Yeah, so in this, go ahead Bob.

- Okay, Bob, go ahead.

- Just the thought that okay Sacred Journey, we were reimagining from the very beginning without calling it that exactly. And one big word would be participatory. Because we'd meet in a round. No pulpit presence. But I think that some of the women much connected with reimagine community because of our coming together at those meetings found that this is where they could worship.

- Ah yes.

- But that same kind of liberation got into them.

- I would use the word safety.

- Safety.

- So as we began to create a space that felt safe for people, and it's like, and people wanted this and so let's keep doing this and so other people were looking who couldn't feel safe in worship where they were would find us and say oh, here's a safe place. You know, these people are not gonna talk down to me, they're not gonna ignore me, you know, et cetera, et cetera. So it was out of, there's this kind of I would call it a pastoral element to this as well. It's like caring for the people who were disenfranchised, who are alienated, who are exiled from their communities, here's a place that you can come and belong and feel safe and let's just figure out how to do this together. I mean, that's what the women who did reimagine, they just sat down, let's make this, let's create this out of thin air. So yeah, okay, if we can do that, let's do it!

- Yeah, yeah. And you do actually use some reimagining materials or have?

- Yes.

- Could you say a little bit about that?

- What you hold may you always hold is one of those, we use that a lot. And I think that in some ways, I mean it's such an affirmation for whoever walks in the door. You sing that it's like, you're not giving up anything to be a part of this worshiping community, to be a part of what's happening there. But it's like what you have is what's important and hold on to that.

- You teared up earlier when you talked about it. Is that because that's what it means to you?

- Absolutely, absolutely. And every now and then I just know that I have to sing that because you know, that institution wants to knock you around a little bit about that.

- True about reimagining community and ours as well, is the use of ritual. And through experientially realizing that spirit speaks to us in ways other than the word. In some of us moreso than words. And the use of, of art. We meet in an art gallery, the music, all of it. Because we're different places from time to time, and so this part of the worship spirit speaks most loudly to me and some part of the worship service speaks more loudly to someone else. I'd like to hear Steve on the safety factor. That meant a lot to me.

- Did it Bob?

- This is a safe place, there are people here. You know, we're not underground. But sometimes felt that way early on, I think.

- I have to be bold about saying this was much the work of the spirit, reimagining.

- Mmhmm. Mmhmm yeah.

- Yeah, because in the fact that it was allowed to continue, because there were people in the early days who thought that you know, what the heck are they doing up there? And would come and kind of stand in the door and just kind of look and then would say things to either the lead pastor or whatever. And yet, here we are. So it really is, it sort of defies the odds in a lot of ways.

- Yes, yes. Did it ever become tenuous do you think or did you always feel like it was secure? Sacred Journey.

- Oh I didn't feel it was secure for a really long time. I thought that we were sort of an accidental creation of this church. And this church has a, actually has a, I mean in a way it has this long history of initiating things, has a hard time ending things as many churches do. And this was going, it wasn't really interfering in any particular way, it wasn't costing the church that much additional money. We kind of existed sort of on the margin on the edge of the page sort of. That's how it felt to me and we had a certain freedom, but I had the sense for a long time that at any moment the hammer could drop. Someone could come in and say, what is this? Is this Christian? Is this Methodist? What is this? And it never happened. And eventually, we sorta, it became clear that this was a significant, significant part of the whole of the life of this whole community,

and was making a contribution in ways that were important to the larger community, so,

- What kind of contribution?

- Well, a number of people who have occupied positions of leadership in the church structure continue to be fed in their spiritual life by their participation in Sacred Journey. I'm not privy to these kinds of statistics, I don't know this for sure, but I'm pretty sure that we carry our weight financially in terms of the support of the church. And there have been eventually over time, as we've gone from one senior minister to another to another, people who in their heart feel drawn to this kind of worship even though they're responsible for leading a completely different kind of service. So we kinda won the hearts of the clergy leadership. The significant clergy leadership, for the most part in recent years, so that's helped.

- And attendance is not the most important predictor of success, but roughly how many people would come? On a Sunday morning would you say?

- We usually have an average attendance, now it's between 90 and 100.

- Oh wow, yeah, that's great. Yeah that's good.

- Yeah, we may be outgrowing our space.

- Really.

- Then what, huh?

- Yeah.

- So I also wanted to say in terms of the input of, You said something about your experience in the first conference and I just kind of build on that because I think we pay attention to the beauty of liturgy in particular ways, you know, that way it's crafted, the way it connects, the way it flows. Besides the use of multi-sensory stuff, just recognizing the importance of that and connecting us to each other and so on. The other thing I would say is that we're shameless. I speak for myself, 'cause I do this a lot. I'm shameless in banging around with the words in songs. You know, we're not only trying to make to get rid of all the inappropriate gender references in songs, we also go after the theology.

- Mmm, give an example, what are you thinking of?

- Well, we don't use the word kingdom. We just lop the G off of that word all the time. And ya know, every once in a while when people wonder about that, we'll kind of re-explain how we're a, that Jesus came to call us into a community of kin, you know, he wasn't proclaiming some kind of rule. So there's that. We just have no time, there's very little of the cross in our theology. You know, the suffering Jesus, the atonement theology stuff. So we either, if we can't figure out a way of rewriting a verse to get rid of that stuff, we just

don't use the song. Because the songs, that's the thing that continues to amaze me, how the people who embrace traditional worship, and therefore the traditional hymns are inadvertently embracing all this traditional language. And how can you not be shaped by that. So we're very vigil and ruthless about that.

- And I want to include too, the inclusion of other world faiths their spirituality that speaks deeply to us is often used as well as Celtic and Native American. Which is a remarkable thing to have in this day and age, I guess.

- Mmhmm, yeah, thank you, Bob. I wanna ask, you did, you provided the music for the 2003, the final gathering of reimagining, and I wonder if you have any memories of what that experience was like. I know it's been a few years now.

- Well, I think, ya know we were, that's when we really were on the, like with the group. Because we knew that it was a planning of an ending of sorts and so that the central theme was river. And there was some great language created and recognizing that yes, it was an ending of sorts, but it was really like a river, that the river was flowing into something greater. And that that was the image that we were going for. And so all the music and the liturgy that was created was all around that. And also we kinda made this chuppah thing over the stage with fabric and I think we got, Mary Plaster, I believe, right?

- Maybe.

- Yeah, yeah, a puppeteer from Duluth and visual artist. And so we were doing that. So the idea that yes, it is this particular iteration is ending, but it's flowing into something else and that became the real, the metaphor that held everything.

- So you were involved in planning this?

- Yes, yeah yeah, and then doing the music for it as well.

- Would you see Sacred Journey as part of that river flowing on?

- Oh, absolutely.

- Metaphorically speaking, sure sure.

- Yeah yeah.

- Not to say that reimagine is the only influence on Sacred Journey, (cross talk)

- So, it was a hoot (laughter) is what I remember. It was just a great, it was a great time. And you know, by this time we'd had about almost 10 years of doing Sacred Journey under our belt. So we were basically taking all of that stuff that had learned and were doing and were embodying and sort of turned it around

and brought it back in to the reimagining space and had kind of another playground to play in, a bigger playground. And so that, it was just a lot of fun to do that. And um, I remember Rita Nakashima Brock was a speaker. Was Rebecca there too?

- I think so.

- Yeah, I think so, they were both there. And that was great. And there's a little personal bit memory that I associate with this event which I wanna share.

- Please.

- It has nothing to do specifically with reimagining but so this was 2003. And by this time, my son, who's now gone to seminary in Berkeley at BSR and is serving a church in Berkeley, an ACC church in Berkeley. So at the end of the conference a woman comes up to me and she says, "I was just in Berkeley. "At a church in Berkeley, do you have a brother?" (laughter) And I said, oh sweetheart, you just made my week! That was my son. So whatever was happening to me that made me look young enough to be this guy's brother was good.

- Yeah, I love it, that's great Steve.

- Well, I do remember the final song that we got everyone involved in, and I think they had pieces of blue fabric that they were, or like streamer kinds of things. And it was the song swimming to the other side. And it's a great, a great song. And everyone sang that, and it was, it felt like, while I remember I believe it was Sara Evans did a lovely sort of this is where we've come to, this is where we've been and then we sort of launched into that and it felt like we really were sort of like (makes whooshing sound) going to someplace. I mean it didn't feel sad. It didn't feel as if there was a defeat or anything, but that there really was this, maybe I'm dramatizing that as I am wont to do.

- I'm curious whether this would resonate with you Sally, so, 'cause it's feeling as I'm thinking about this now, it was almost as if, by being invited to do this we were sort of being blessed by the,

- Yeah, yeah. And the thing is that I don't think that we necessarily recognized that until I saw that you were doing this, and then I thought, we should be in on that somehow. Because this is a connection and so that's what led me to say to Bill, ya know, I think we should be in on this. And so maybe yes, yeah, and I don't know that I've really sort of made those connections until--

- I'm so glad you did. You absolutely needed to be. So, two other things I wanted to ask about before we talk about kind of legacy things. You mentioned something about a Loring Park Easter Service. What was that about?

- So this was our taking the reimagining concept and running hard with it. It was actually an idea that was given to us by a person came, was on our staff for a short time who was this wild cauldron of creative pushy

energy. And so among the ideas that he suggested is that we do a service off site on Easter Sunday, at the Guthrie theater, so we did.

- So we got our, the Hennepin foundation actually make this little statement, we got them to, we had a grant from them to be able to do this.

- Charles Gavue is this guy's name, he also thought that we needed a labyrinth. And so the labyrinth arrived literally like 48 hours before, because it was to go on the stage in the Guthrie and kinda be a part of the scenery. So we created an Easter Sunday celebration around the fundamental themes of Easter that wasn't at all based on the traditional Easter story.

- Say some more about this.

- It wasn't about the cross, it wasn't about, so you've got resurrection, you got life, you got possibility, you got hope.

- You got death.

- You got death.

- So, but we also saw those things grounded in how creation is, and so ya know, birth, life, death, rebirth, and we sewed all of that together into liturgy and music and--

- So I think this might have been Easter of '95, that's when I guess this would have been. I don't think we would have done this as early as '94. I think it was '95 or '96. In any event, the Easter Sunday event at the Guthrie was called Sacred Journey. And until that time, we didn't have that name for this service, we were just the 8:30 service.

- Really? How'd that name, where'd that name come from?

- That's Charles. (laughter) (cross talk)

- And when we decided well we have to have this, what are the visuals that have to happen with this? We contacted In the Heart of the Beast puppet and mask creator. And I believe, now maybe I'm mis-remembering this, if that's a word, but I believe that Sandy Spieler was a part of the original,

- Yes.

- Yes. And so what we basically did was use their big puppet that they use at Mayday, was buried underneath fabric on the labyrinth at the Guthrie and when it came time for resurrection, that big puppet, you know, rises up out of everything.

- It's funny because ya know, I know we were at the Guthrie twice, and I'm not sure that Heart of the Beast was with us both times, so we may be conflating this--

- No, no, no they were, they were.

- Both times?

- Yeah, they were.

- So we did this probably seven times.

- Did you really? Seven Easter services at the Guthrie?

- Well not all at the Guthrie. The Guthrie turned out to have, I mean it was expensive.

- Well, what we should say is that first year that they were doing it, they were doing some musical that they thought was going to be a big hit for them, that ended up not being a big hit. And they were losing money like crazy only to have us rent the space for a Sunday morning, so we never were able to rehearse on the stage. We sort of walked through how we thought it would look and then we showed up early in the morning, loaded in all the stuff, did this, and when they opened the doors, Well, what happened was the puppet, we rehearsed with the puppet in the sanctuary and it made the paper, the Star Trib. And so here was the puppet in our sanctuary and so what happened was they opened the doors and 1400 people showed up, and they had to sit, they were sitting in the isles. And the Guthrie folks were flipping for all kinds of reasons, you know fire marshal and all of that. But what it said to us was man we scratched ya know, an itch that was there.

- So over the years we were at the Guthrie a couple times. We were at the women's

- Club.

- Women's club, they have a little theater. That was a good space for us. We were at the Metropolitan Community College one year. And you know, we had people on stilts, we had, it was kind of like a, one of those medieval um,

- Like the mystery plays.

- Yeah yeah, sorta like that. And every year we'd have to kinda come up with another way of trying to figure out how to tell this story and we kept getting pushed, I mean for us, it was like having to confront the theology of Easter over and over again in some new ways. So it was very, it was very significant. And the pagans loved it. The pagans came in droves to this thing. (laughter)

- The Wiccans.

- Yeah, it was so great.

- But it was it was so obviously inter-generational. Children were involved in all these services in big ways. In speaking and helping with creating art, visual stuff.

- That was part of the event that the children were creating art?

- Well, they were, I mean they created things before hand but they were intricately involved in the whole service. I don't think my children actually ever went to a traditional Easter service until they were like maybe in high school. (laughter) So they didn't really know all that stuff until that point. You know, just in time to reject it.

- Did interest in this continue over the years?

- It did, I mean, I think our attendance wasn't, I don't think we hit 1400 again, but, and we had smaller spaces and um, I think if we'd have had the energy to continue it we could have run it a little bit longer too, but eventually we were, we were done.

- Yeah, a lot of work.

- Well, and also it's, ya know what happens when you try to reimagine that particular Sunday in which even the most progressive liberal folks still sing Christ the Lord is risen today and want to do so, seemingly. And at some point it's like hmm, well, (laughter) well,

- And we did have this group of people, this group of people who would come to the Loring Easter Festival at the Women's club and come here for the traditional service, both.

- Oh interesting.

- Yeah, yeah, yeah.

- Some people, I have no numbers but came to these festival services who had given up on the traditional church. Darkened those doors for some time. This caught fire with some of those folks, and they came over and started being a part of Sacred--

- Okay.

- But I wouldn't say that in, ya know, in sort of the traditional church growth stuff, no, we didn't do that.

- Right.

- Because mostly, the folks who came to that, I think knew that that's the kind of thing that you can't do Sunday after Sunday. And we knew that certainly.
- Did you experience any backlash against it?
- Can't remember, community at large?
- Hmm, no I don't, I mean, there was folks who thought it was crazy and nuts, but I don't think that, for the most part particularly this church, you know if you bring in 1400 people and it happens at the Guthrie and your name is in the paper, then you know, that's a pretty good thing.
- No demonstrations against us.
- Yeah, right.
- Yeah, I don't think so. I mean, there would be folks that would say well that really wasn't Easter.
- It may have crossed my mind that we might get some flack given this is post reimagining and all the things that happened there.
- I do remember the first couple that I would always take the script to our staff meetings a couple of weeks before hand and say, just so you know, these are the words, these are the songs, just so you know. And no one ever said don't do that.
- Great. One last thing before we move on to legacy. Steve you mentioned that you worked with Madeline Sue Martin at United Theological Seminary. She was so important to the reimagining community. So any memories you have of her, we would appreciate.
- Well, I think, my hunch is that everyone who spent any time with her would probably say something like I'm about to say about her. She was consistently extraordinarily supportive of every single person I think that she ever worked with. She only had words of encouragement. And she was your champion. You know whoever, ya know that's certainly what I experienced. And it was, I felt very privileged that she asked me if I would assist her with this class. This is a time, I mean she started with health issues all through this whole period of her life, most of her adult life, I think. So but at this point she recognized that she needed some help to do this class. So I got to be there for a semester.
- What class was this Steve?
- Well, she was teaching a class on liturgical music at United, or liturgy I'm not quite sure what the title was anymore. And she got to expound her ideas, which I got to hear, and people did projects and people created little tiny ritual events that we did in the class and we ya know, talked about them and critique them. It was

very experiential. There was kind of a sharing of resources among people and so it was the kind of a class that had the potential of encouraging these seminary students to think beyond the typical structures of worship. How it may or may not have been manifest, I don't know. As was true of United, there were people who were not going to go on to work in churches, they were actors in there and they were, And then of course this diversity of theological orientations so the Unitarians had to do their thing in a different way than the, And Madeline actually came here on one occasion I remember, we invited her here and she did a little, a little adult kind of workshop on my music, talked about stuff. And I still use, not, I would say I don't do this very intentionally, but I'm still very much aware of this, the way that she thought about these four heart spaces that she talked about in worship. Have you come across this reference?

- I don't think so, remind me.

- Well, she had her own, her own language for this. She talked about worship, that the worship experience created what she conceptualized as a village that she called Makea. And these letters of this word stood for these four heart spaces. So the concept is that people come to worship in one of these four heart spaces. And that effective worship, for people to feel connected, and as if they're being spoken to, and being met, should somehow try to connect in these four different ways. So, M was for maranatha. And marantha had to do with this sense of mystery about God meaning spirit, so God is Spirit, God is mystery, God is invisible, God is unknowable, God is maybe so far away from me that I have no experience of God, you know, that kind of place of, And then, there's an E in there, which is the other side of that dimension which is Emanuel, Which was God, completely present God here in my heart, God in my body, God, so full of God, so, M and the E. And then A was for Allelujah which was all about joy and celebration and praise and all that. And the K was for Kyrie. So for lament. So as I thought about this, I kinda thought of it as so there's one, it's like a cross intercepting, like this dimension, where am I with God? God's close, God is far away, where am I in my life? I'm in joy, I'm in lament, and so all those four ways, people come into the worship space. So she would say, for example, there are denominations or individual churches that spent all their time only doing alleluja, there's nothing other than hallelujah. And you can't connect with the people who are in lament. You can't connect with the people for whom God is absent or distant if you don't go there in your prayers in your music some how. So I thought it was really helpful.

- That's great, oh I'm glad you--

- And I think it's in that Sophia--

- Blessed Sophia book, yes, yes. Good, that's really good. I wanna move toward the future and just kind of end up with the last couple of questions. In the end, what do you think is the greatest legacy of reimagining? The reimagining community.

- Hm. Well, I think that for me, I mean, greatest is really, that's big, but this idea that not only is worship but also how it is that whatever it is that we're calling our communal faith life, that that is about the collaboration of who's present, who's gathered. And that saying of whoever shows up are the right people. I claim that with great regularity on a Sunday morning because sometimes you know, you look around and

you wanted so and so to be there, or so and so is there, and you don't want them to be there necessarily. (laughs) But the idea that the collaboration and that seemed to me to be one of the pieces that was in the planning, in the execution, in the visual and in the experience. That it was no single voice. Even though there were some powerful ones there, not one single voice rises up as authority, but it was the authority of the gathered people. And that seems to me to be one of the greatest pieces of the legacy and certainly what I have hoped. Like this summer when we've been doing this series with people sharing their, a scripture that has been a part of their lives, challenged them, or that's been a favorite and then having them tell that story out of their own experience. A couple of weeks ago, I had this full body experience of sitting there and feeling this is what you do. And it was like having your calling affirmed all over again.

- Yes, yes, this is who we are, this is what we do, yeah.

- Well, there are, there are kind of specific things that I associate with reimagining that we talked about. There are forms, there's the emphasis on process, there's collaboration, there's a flatness of leadership, there's attention to beauty, all of those things I think are part of the legacy. But I also think that, and I said this before, before we were recording that this reimagining event to me is one example of how as human consciousness evolves, energy builds and suddenly starts pecculating up in these very specific ways. And reimagining is one of these just bold examples of an emerging kind of conscious you know, kind of showing up. So by its showing up, it teaches all of us we're not stuck in these forms. We're not stuck with these one set of ideas. There's possibilities and the resources that we need to realize the possibilities are here. They're right here, that's us. So, and you know, in some ways Sacred Journey is the same thing, I mean, I don't know how long any of these experiments are going to continue or last or whether archivists a hundred years from now will find evidence of this or not, but it keeps, it keeps evolution going. And that's to me the real legacy. It's ya know, so that the energy is still alive and can be caught by another generation of people to be expressed in some unimaginable way.

- That's great, thank you.

- Yeah, it's um, this may be too strong a word, but I think it started a revolution that needed to start. And it's continuing emboldening people. That persons are getting in touch through that community what's most deep within them and we can live with the questions. Questions that relate to ultimate values. So yeah, I think it was a revelation of sorts in its own way. May it continue, grow.

- Great Bob. And speaking of continuing and growing, here's my last big question. A big question and a very specific one. What needs to be reimagined today? Or what is being reimagined? And I'm not just talking about the community now. I'm talking about the church.

- Oh boy.

- What needs to be reimagined or is being imagined?

- Well, um, I don't know that we're in a very different place than we were before reimagining happened. I

mean when I see the things that people within the institutional church are embracing as successful, as ways of growing, much of that has to do with what I would say was not much different than what was happening in the 50's, 60's and 70's. And it's, and a part of that I think is, Well, ya know, Phyllis Tickle was here before her death a few years ago and she talked about, ya know that we're at this place where we're just about ready to get through this 500 year gap of growth and we're gonna swoosh through. And I think that a part of this going back to I think that there's some real male dominated ways, power structures that are at work within the institutional church that are the ways in which, that are lifted up particularly for young clergy. And that that has, I mean it really hasn't changed. And maybe that has to happen before there can be that swoosh into something new. Or that the institutional church has to fall apart. That it can't, that there can't be that kind of growth that really is demanded by the evolution that's happening in culture. So, yeah, I don't know, I don't have much hope in that part of the church. But I do believe that in, out, with the whole spiritual but not religious thing, I think is really serious and that there's wonderful, wonderful things happening in those spiritual people that don't want to be a part of the institutional church.

- Or maybe not even a part of traditional Christianity.

- Right, yeah, yeah.

- And theology is kind of a, well, anyway, theology is important to me and as long as there is the viewing of human, concepts of human sin et cetera and a need for sacrifice to appease an angry God, which really is still very present in popular Christianity. Preparation in this world for the one coming I 'spose. But rather than finding that Jesus is about helping us that as he demonstrated from his own life and his compassion and the people he associated with, we too have this within us to become the best that we can become. It's not about payment for something.

- Mmm, mmhmm, thank you Bob. Any thoughts Steve?

- Yeah, um, I don't actually at the moment have a lot of optimism that the church will be able as an institution to have a significant role in these next chapters of the evolution of consciousness. I mean, I think as much as the church as been involved in past movements, social movements and civil rights movements for example. Until the last generation of, this is me talking now, until the last generation of careerists who were shaped and formed back in the 50s have kinda passed through and are gone, there won't be much of a possibility for very imaginative, creative thinking to happen in the institution. Meanwhile, the Spirit is not tampered down. So what do we need to reimagine? We need to reimagine what power means. We need to reimagine what success means. We need to reimagine what it means to live in a diverse community, oh my God. And so, if it's not gonna be the church it's gonna be Black Lives Matter, and it's gonna be Occupy Wall street, and it's gonna be, ya know, the Bernie Sanders people, and it's gonna be, ya know, it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. In its own messy and imperfect way because the Spirit, you can't cork the Spirit.

- Thank you, oh wise answers. Bob, yes?

- But, what you just said at the very end is what keeps us hopeful.

- My last question's very specific. Reimagining has reincorporated, doing a web site, part of it is archival, we're digitizing the gatherings, making them accessible, those kinds of things. We also wanna have links. You mentioned earlier, I think Steve, that people are often doing things and they're not connected. So part of the goal of the website is to bring together the different places where this is happening. So do you have ideas about links or resources? What would you want in this web site? Who would benefit from it? What could be included?

- Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is community. I'd want to know where are the communities, however they're organized, however big or small they are, who are trying to support each other in work and live intentionally in the spirit of reimagining.

- Hear their story.

- Yeah.

- Say a little bit more about hear their story, Bob.

- Well, as we are freed up to tell our stories, it always feels like it's complimentary or it's helping to complete me. And you can get very discouraged and disheartened if you feel like we're this little group and there are no others of like mind or spirit out there. And we often talk about that, how we can make connection with some of these other groups.

- So in the, can't remember when it was, but a few months ago, but I did an online retreat with a group called Abbey of the Arts. And they are also connected to the Holy Disorder of Dancing Monks.

- I love it, okay!

- And in many ways the Abbey of the Arts, the retreats, they're online retreats that they do, and they're people from all around the world and it's a theme and it's usually six weeks. And there's something that you connect in every day with and you know, there's always a piece of art that's created, some writing that happens. And it's very reimagining-like. And it's a way of people sharing. And the wonderful part about it is that there's kind of a wide diversity of the ways in which people express their theology. But there's this connection that is affirming. Like you know you can post a photo that you put on there, or something that you've written and you get this feedback from these people who, and so there's that connection that's really, that's really powerful.

- Wonderful, I will look into both of, that's great!

- You know Sally and I and Steve are long connection with Jubilee in North Carolina.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Mmhmm, mmhmm.

- We've made trips there, and exchange of ideas and participating--

- And we've stolen (word obscured by cross talk). (laughter)

- Yeah, we've stolen some--

- They're great, yeah. Very good.

- And certainly Matthew Fox's, You know because that's one of the other reasons that we've gone to Jubilee.

- And I don't have a specific resource here in mind, but for a long time, this whole power of the arts as a language for, as a spiritual language and historically the church has asked artists to tell the church's story, ya know, and if they don't do it correctly then they don't mount the painting or they don't show the sculpture or whatever. But to take the position that art is inherently spiritual and therefore we want to hear and see the artists in the own terms. And just that alone is a spiritual conversation. So it's listening to the poets, looking at the paintings, listening to the music. Don't have to theologize it, just receive it. Just receive it and acknowledge it and name it as spiritual. My experience from talking to jazz musicians about this is that there are some who are aware and think about what they do as spiritual expression and some of them don't. I would say that it's impossible to do art and not be spiritual.

- You may not have the language.

- No, right.

- The experience and the language to talk about it in a way that another person might understand it.

- Right, and I wouldn't wanna like insist with someone agree with me about that, but,

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- Ya know, I'm fairly certain that we can give ourselves credit for introducing the wider community to the labyrinth. Lauren Artress came at one point, after we got ours here. Patterned after the one in Chartes.

- Yeah, we got ours in '94 so that was just,

- And that's enduring, you know? And then there was this spurt.

- Labyrinths coming out your ears.

- Exactly!

- History of arts has one.

- Yeah, yeah, yeah, they're great.

- Other places.

- That's a great idea, absolutely. Yeah, yes.

- Spiritual practice, it's important.

- Absolutely. You have been very generous with your time and your insights. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you want to make sure that you mention before we end?

- May it be an ongoing one.

- Yeah, the reimagining.

- Yeah.

- And it's exciting to--

- Thank you for doing this

- It's exciting to hear that you are still going on. It's very inspiring, so thank you. Thank you.

- Thank you.