

(chattering)

- OK, we're now recording, and if you could, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed. And if you could just say your full name, please.

- Rita Nakashema Brock.

- Thank you very much. And are you layer clergy?

- I'm neither nor and both in.

- Oh, great, explain this.

- A period of my life where being clergy was useful to the work I did. I applied for and got regional commissioned minister standing in the Disciples of Christ denomination.

- OK.

- So I was at the time I started doing this, they called it licensed ministry, rather than ordained ministry, now it's commissioned rather than ordained, but I did , I think it was, three years at Chapman University as a campus minister while I was a PHD student, so I was reverend in that period, when I was a chaplain. And then when I moved out to Oakland in 2002 and I was doing progressive faith organizing, it was helpful to me to be working with rabbis and imams and people, and be able to call myself reverend. It marked me in a certain way, so I applied through Northern California, and I had commission standing for about eight or 10 years out there. And then when I moved to Texas, I got it there. So for about the last 13 or 14 years, I've been a commissioned minister for the work I've been doing, but I'm not ordained, so I can't just leave the region and call myself reverend and take a church or something. That's, it's just a different category from what the work of ministry outside traditional ordained church membership.

- Oh, fascinating.

- Or ministry. Yeah.

- Yeah, OK. Well, thank you.

- So I could work in a church if I wanted to, but I've never wanted to.

- Sure, oh, that's interesting. So Rita, where and when were you born?

- 1950 in Fukuoka, Japan.

- OK. OK, great.

- Yeah.

- And then you grew up in Kansas, is that right?

- Well, no, I grew up for six years in Japan. And then I moved to Fort Riley, Kansas when I was six and changed language, culture, religion, and geography all at once.

- OK.

- And I was raised in a military family. Six years in Fort Riley, a year in Emily, Mississippi, in a civilian, very racist environment, and then three years in Landstuhl, Germany. And then the last place my father was still in the military is Barstow, California, where he was sent to Vietnam.

- Wow.

- So because I was already in Southern California, I went to all my higher education there. So Chapman in Claremont.

- Great, oh, thank you. And you've already talked about where you went to school. So Chapman in Claremont, yeah. And then what work or ministry were you doing at the time of 1993 to 2003?

- I was a professor in the endowed chair and humanities at Hamline, University. And I was there from 1990 to 1997. I was teaching a women's studies class in religion at the time, I don't remember what it was called anymore. But I had about 25 students. And I made Reimagining a class assignment.

- Really?

- And I talked to Sally and the planning committee about letting my students attend without attending the whole thing, I just said you have to go and attend one thing.

- Yes.

- And they let me do that. And a lot of them didn't go to the planning events when they went to the workshops on topics.

- Yeah.

- But they all found it amazing, even the men. I had quite a few men in the class.

- They did, so they were really positive about it.

- I used to have a lot of men in my women's studies classes, it was great.

- Yes, yes. That is great.

- Yeah. It was Minnesota. (laughing)

- That's right. And I know you've done several things after Reimagining. I'll give you a second there.

- All right. (laughing)

- We're having lunch. We want to leave you a little time to eat, too.

- So, what like?

- Just briefly, what you did after Reimagining. I know it's been several different things.

- You mean occupationally?

- Occupation, right, yes.

- Oh, I left Hamline to run the Bunting Institute at Harvard University, at Radcliffe College, at the time. And it was a one year residential fellowship program for exceptionally talented women early in their careers. And I ran that for four years, and there were 40 fellowships a year. And I directed it. I was also in the same time put on the strategic planning team for the Radcliffe Harvard merger, which my group put together, the plan for the merger and then the leader of our group was on the negotiating team with Harvard, and we got everything we wanted.

- Wow.

- And in my second year, we became the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. And my program became the premiere institute for this advanced research institute. And so the last two years I was there, we were at Harvard University and because we got a lot of money for going in, \$250,000,000 to our, they doubled our endowment, we got this little cash fund to bring six senior fellows who had originally been fellows and early on, and the institute was 37 years old when I took it over. These were all women, early fellows that I could invite back and I got to basically pick a lot of them. So, I brought back Judith Glasgow.

- Oh, goodness.

- She'd been a fellow. I brought back Judith Herman, common recovery.

- Wow.

- I brought back Nancy Totoro, pre-production of mothering. I brought back Sue Miller, the novelist. I brought back, I'm thinking who I brought back. Judy. Judith. Sue. Nancy Totoro. I'm trying to think, there was a whole group of them. It was really fab, oh, Mary Katherine Bateson.

- Oh, really?

- She was a fellow. So these were all fellows while I was there, but they were sort of the senior group. But the, you know, there were people, Alice Walker wrote her first novel there.

- Did she really?

- She did. And let me think, what else? (chattering) The first two poets were Maxine Cuman and Anne Sexton. They both won Pulitzers. The number of the writers that won Pulitzers. Sue Miller wrote her first novel on our kitchen table while she was at the Bunting. Marsha McNutt is a junior biologist at MIT came, now she's editor of Nature Magazine. Or the Nature Journal, I'm sorry. And she was chair of the president's science advisory board for Obama, she was head of Monterey Bay Aquarium Association. One of my fellows is now head of the Iowa Writers Workshop.

- Really?

- Samantha Chang. You know, it's just, these are the kind of caliber of women that I got to work with for four years and one of the women I had was on the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa, (foreign language spoken) was her name. She's a social psychologist. And a friend of Desmond Tutu, so she got an endorsement for proverbs of ashes for us from him.

- Oh my goodness.

- I said, "Do you think?" I said to her, "Puma, I know that the theological ideas "in this book are kind of out there, "but do you think that, you know, Bishop Tutu might "possibly endorse it?" She said, "He will if I tell him to." (laughing)

- Oh, I love that.

- And he wrote us a three page critique of our theology, but he endorsed it.

- Did he really?

- Yeah.

- Oh my goodness.

- It was wonderful, actually.

- It is. He really took it seriously.

- He did. He was very upset.

- How fantastic. (laughing)

- But he was like gracious about the endorsement, it was all right. And so I had an amazing experience. Annette Smith was another graduate of the program. She was an unknown theater professor at Harvard and she went, she went, I mean, at Stanford University, and she went to Broadway with her Bunting project. Fires in the Mirror was her Bunting project.

- Really?

- So it was just an astonishing array of talent. I now know things about incredible research areas that, you know, I know how an X-ray telescope works, I understand anti-angiogenic cancer therapy. I understand the P53 grim reaper gene flip switch that cancer uses to turn. I know how certain kind of computer science things. It's just bizarre what I learned in four years. It's wonderful to know.

- What a fantastic experience.

- So, of course, now my work with veterans involves a lot of neuroscience.

- Yes.

- I had a neuroscientist explain to us what an MRI was, and then she had this project and all the fellows volunteered to be part of it and you know, so I'd had an MRI done and it's like, OK, it's really very cool. Yeah, so I just, I understand, basic science stuff doesn't scare me anymore, you know? I mean, I was a science major in college, but it's changed so much, so I had a little tune up in those years. And so now, you know, neuroscience is hot in pastoral theology and there are all these people that are writing books on neuroscience. You know, they're good books, but what I prefer to do is to read the journal articles.

- Yes.

- And I don't get the entire formulaic and the, you know, I don't get all of it, but I can read them well enough to understand whether they're solid studies or not, and what the conclusions might mean.

- Yes.

- And that's fun.

- Yes.

- It is fun.

- Well, that's wonderful. And it's so relevant for what you're doing.

- Uh huh.

- Great, that's great. Shifting to the Reimagining.

- So sorry.

- Yes, no, that was fascinating.

- Five years at Harvard cured me of academia. So I moved to Oakland to finish this Singing Paradise book with Rebecca, I thought I'd do it for two years, and then become a dean or a president or something, and the book took six years, so I wound up self employed for 10 years and in there I had a half time contract as a senior editor in religion for the new press in New York, so I got totally introduced to the world of publishing in New York City. And they asked me to do a progressive religion series, so I invited my friends to write books. Or I asked them who should. So, you know, I did Jim Forbes' last book. Dan McGwire did a book for me. Rebecca Alper. I had so much fun doing that series. I got laid off in the LA crash.

- Oh, yes.

- And now you're doing soul repair.

- Yeah, in that 10 years of self employed work led to this Truth Commission on Conscience and War Project, and then the Moral Injury Center, and I decided I needed a pay job anyway, so we wrote a grant to create the center. And we waited a year, Lily was the funder, and they held the money for a year until I found a home for the seminary, because I wanted it to be at the seminary. They wouldn't fund in California, so I had to find a place outside of the GTU. Which is where I had originally wanted to do it.

- Sure. What a fascinating career, and so many different things coming together, it is fantastic. So, I know you presented at many, several of the conferences. And I'm wondering what led to your initial involvement in the Reimagining gathering. Do you remember?

- Well, I was in the Twin Cities, and a feminist theologian. And I knew some of the people at United that were on the planning committee and so I kind of knew it was happening. I don't think I followed it super closely because I wasn't one of the clergy people involved. But I was all excited. I was really thrilled that it was

happening and I was excited to be presenting at it. With so many amazing women. So, you know, I don't know, clearly it became the feminist theology event of the decade. And the first one really, of it its magnitude and scope.

- Say some more about that. What do you recall from that 1993--

- I remember Mercy Odiyoya, to have a feminist theology conference in the US, have somebody from Africa, Asian women, the 27 countries sent women, I mean, they didn't send them, but women came from 27 countries, was a testimony to its scope. And at the time, I think I was a member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, and it felt like they were really tapping into this international energy around feminism that was emerging and so, I wouldn't have missed it. I mean, in fact, you know, I sent my students because I thought it was a really important event, and who knew how important it was going to become, right?

- Exactly, that's right, yeah. Are there any specific moments from that '93 conference that you mentioned, Mercy, yeah.

- Mercy was fabulous. Bernice Johnson Reagan was fabulous. I remember all of those LGBT women. It was a huge group. Some of them had to wear things on their heads. That was sad, but that they all stood up there was fabulous, I remember that moment. I remember the artists painting in the background. I think Tiny Heck and Judy Chin were both at it, right? I don't know, I get it confused, but anyway, there was art going on. And I remember the set up of the round tables and the whole way, you know, I haven't even turned that podium, was really kind of neat because if you had a transition in your talk, that's when you would turn the podium and you didn't have to fake a transition, you could just turn the podium.

- Yes.

- Next section.

- Uh huh.

- SO I really enjoyed that and it was the only time in my life I ever wore my mother's kimono.

- Is that right? Wow.

- To give a presentation because the back of it is beautiful.

- Oh.

- And whoever looks at your back? Right, but in the round, you need to have your back interesting.

- Oh, I love that detail. Yes.

- Yeah, so I wore it. And she had gotten it, it wasn't an antique or anything, she had gotten it like in the '70s when she went back to Japan, she just wanted to own one. I got married in it, actually.

- Wow.

- It doesn't fit me anymore, but I wore it as a robe rather than as a kimono, so I didn't have all the accoutrements, I just wore it so that you could see the back, my back wasn't so boring.

- Oh.

- And that was fun.

- Yes.

- That was really fun. But I remember, there are several things that still stay with me, one is the energy in the room.

- Yeah, yeah.

- The hunger for this, and the joy of having it. And all the rituals.

- What do you remember about the rituals?

- They connected people. A lot of them happened around those round tables. Little tobacco things and the crayons and then the singing of La Sofia every time, that sort of punctuated everything. I think that was the strength of the whole conference was the rituals, actually. I think the content of the talks disappears, but the embodied ritual process is really, is what changes people, is really powerful, and that's what Reimagining did really, really well. They attended to that with great care.

- Yes.

- And I think that's why it was so powerful. I mean, the talks were inspiring. What I know from the neuroscience is, it's really the rituals that make it work. And I didn't know that at the time, I just knew they were really fabulous. And partly, you know, Mary Hunt and I, because Mary presented at one of the workshops, she was asked to do the Nightline show, I wound up doing. Where she was on vacation, and they asked her, "Well, who else?" She said, "Oh, call Rita Brock." So they called me and I agreed to do it. Well, Mary Hunt, you know, the backlash and the controversy erupted, and Mary Hunt one time had, and I had a conversation about, we said, "You know, "it's just kind of weird because none of us did "our really radical feminists, it was a church "lady conference, so we did church things." You know, we tried to be attended to who would be there and help them understand their life and stuff and so, we didn't do our really radical stuff. So why are people so upset? It was like so puzzling to us. We just, you know, like, well, OK, this must be

a real threat to people, that they're on their high horse about something so moderate and nice.

- Exactly.

- So that's what, you know, yeah. So the ideas, I don't think it was, I mean, I think some of the workshops were better in terms of like Dolores and Prelan and the Christology one and a lot of my students went to that one, push it forward, but in terms of the planetary talks, they were inspiring and really good, but you know, I don't think that was what made it work. It was really the power of the ritual and the connections and women not feeling alone and so many women came from places where they were the only feminist in the town and they were pastoring a church and feeling really alone and for them it was transformative.

- Exactly.

- Because they really made a carefully designed so that women who came alone had people to sit with. They got to know. So I don't think anybody had to go eat alone. Or you know, they really took care to do that. I thought that was really fabulous.

- Yes, yes. Exactly. And even thinking about mittens for people, I mean, all the details.

- All the details.

- Exactly.

- They got the details right.

- Yes. Now, you were starting to talk about the backlash. First of all, did it affect you directly?

- Mm mm. Well. It affected me in a positive way.

- Oh.

- I mean, I'm not grateful for it or anything, but I thought it was stupid, but I worked at Hamline, which is a liberal university, so when I wound up on Nightline, they were just thrilled I was on anything. So the PR person came with me to make sure they said the name right and spelled it correctly.

- Really?

- Oh yeah. My name, the school's name.

- Oh.

- She still, she's a Facebook friend. (laughing) We used to, you know, so I made a deal with her office, I said,

"I will do this if you agree to screen any comment "comes to the university switch board for me."

- Oh.

- Because people get death threats and stuff.

- Right.

- So she said, "Oh, we're happy to do that." And I said, "And I want," and I told the university, "I want somebody to open any mail of a name I don't "recognize--"

- Very smart.

- And if there's any threats or something, they need to go in a file and reported to the police. They said fine. And so I agreed to do it. Then Barbara came with me to the studio and it was kind of neat to have somebody standing there rooting for me because you don't see anything. I can't see what's going on on the TV set, you've got this little thing in your ear, and you're only listening. But I got a call from the producer ahead of time and it was really clear they didn't really understand what the controversies were. They thought it was about whether the Bible was literally true or not. And I said, "You know, that's kind of like asking "if Newton's true or not, after the era of Einstein."

- Right.

- And I said, "You know," it was just when I was working on the opening chapter for an introduction of feminist theology that my denomination was doing, I said, "Let them see this little introduction I was "for clergy women," and so I sent them this 15 page, you know, double space introduction on what is feminist theology. And all the producers that called me were female. Well, when I got on the, and then I talked to the communicate, this is all stuff I learned about when you do these things, what you need to do. Because I didn't know anything. I asked the communications people at Hamline about Nightline. And this woman said, "Be careful." She said, "That show is always stacked. "That first set piece they do that describes the problem, that always has a slant, so you need to listen carefully to see if it's gonna go your way or go against you. And if it's going your way, you're fine, but if it goes against you, you need to have a strategy to returning the momentum of the show.

- Wow.

- I should really should, they said, "Yeah, be careful. "It's not a neutral news show." So I thought, "Well, OK." So I, you know, I sort of called people and said, "What if they do?" Sort of strategized how I could turn the momentum of the show, well, I'm listening to the set piece at the beginning thinking, "OK, is this going my way "or not?" They plagiarized my introduction.

- No, seriously?

- No, it was fabulous, I'm just like sitting there thinking, "I'm riding this baby home." (laughing) It was like, "Oh, yes." Oh yes, right, right. That's when I learned, be nice to the media. Don't be offensive. Give them all the information that will help them. All of that. Have a good friend, even if you don't like what they're asking you, give them, you know. So that was, so all I had to do was stay with that energy and the woman from the IRD was--

- Susan Cride.

--Stryden, yes, she just wasn't very smart about, she didn't know, obviously they hadn't coached her very well, and she didn't have, she wasn't very sophisticated, right? So I remember, and the guy came on the earphones and he says to me, before the show starts he said, "Now, remember, this is a debate, don't, you know, "you need to let your opponents make her points, "but you don't need to let her go on and on "if she's already made her point. "You're free to interrupt." So, she was saying, she had one point she repeated over and over, "You can't change God, you can't change God." So about the second or third time she started into that trope I said, "Oh, please." I said, "No right minded theologian ever thinks you're "actually talking about God, you're talking about "symbols for God. "Those change all the time. "And in fact, people who get PhDs in theology, "that's what they do. "They think about how you think about God." And I said, "We've earned the right to do that "because we have our doctorates."

- Great.

- I just wanted to flat out say that. We're doing a good job of that, or something like that. And it just completely took the wind out of her sails.

- That was her one point.

- That was her one point, and she really didn't have much more going for her. So, so, I just learned a lot about how you do media stuff, from that one experience, and then I got calls from all over the country, as soon as the show was over.

- Did you?

- When it aired? Yeah. I think, I don't think it was live, I think it was taped and then aired. And I got, you know, the woman who was head of the National Council of Churches call me. Campbell, Joan Campbell called me. Her daughter's Joan, is that it? Jane, her daughter's Jane, she's Joan. Anyway, she called me, this woman at Connecticut College of Rights on Women and Humor that I'd had a conference invite her to, she called me. She said, "Oh, Michael and I were laying in bed "watching Nightline and there you were. "It was really great, you did a great," it was really funny. An old boyfriend I didn't know for years called, I mean from, it was just strange. So that was, that was a really interesting experience, but I was protected at Hamline because they were delighted I was on TV. They didn't care what I said. And Barbara would call me, oh, I don't know, for six months or so, every now and then, she'd call me, she'd say, "Hey. "You want to

know who called you?" And she'd tell me the funny calls, the crazy crackpot calls that would come in for me.

- I was wondering, did you get those? Yeah, yeah?

- And I got a few crack, I didn't get any threats, but I got a lot of crackpot letter kind of things I didn't have to leave. I just decided I didn't want to have to deal with 'em. And I didn't read them. But Barbara just enjoyed the funniness of it, and so we would have these like humorous moments where she would tell me, "Oh, we got a call today "from a mister blah blah blah. "He thinks some blah." (laughing)

- Oh, I'm so glad, I'm so glad. By the way, before I forget. I have been trying to get, I have a couple people who might be able to send me the video. You don't happen to have access to, or know where I could get it?

- I have it. Somewhere in a box on one of those tapes.

- VCR tapes?

- VCR tapes.

- Yes, yes, yes.

- I do. I have that.

- Well.

- I would love to turn, I'm sending my archives to the Radcliffe Schlesinger Library.

- OK, great.

- So, it would go there otherwise.

- OK.

- So, I mean, I can just send it to them and it can be accessible, but it does exist and I have it.

- That's great, that's great. Well, good, so. Because the other thing is, we really want to get it digitized because that technology is not going to be, I mean, it's already virtually inaccessible.

- It actually might be more useful in your hands then, because I don't know that Radcliffe would do that.

- Yeah, well, if you don't mind doing that, that would be great, and then I can give it to, well, we can talk later about which archive might want it, because I'm sure they might want that, too. So, that'd be great. But

we're trying, we would like to digitize it.

- Might be union because of the media piece.

- Yeah, that's a good idea. Yes, that would be great. So, how do you account for the backlash? You mentioned that a lot of these ideas were fairly moderate, so what accounts for the backlash?

- The IRD? The main leader of that. Was created by Jim Watt and Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Skip Jackson. When the Democrats, it was during the Reagan years. It's all part of the Reagan resolution, right? Which killed the mainline churches because it wasn't created to take out feminist theology, but it was created to take out the mainline churches because of the Iran Contra opposition to the Reagan illegal, and the cocaine trafficking, and the government used to pay for it. So all the just say no, drug thing, was also aided and abetted by Birches, the head of the CIA and Reagan, the administration using cocaine money. That's when the streets of the drop, street value of cocaine dropped a tenth of its original value because it was so much cocaine in it. And then crack cocaine epidemic and all that, that was part of the Contra war thing.

- Wow.

- I've researched all this really carefully because I wanted to know who my opponents were.

- Right.

- So, the IRD's mission was to destroy or sort of defang the mainline churches. One step removed from any political involvement of any administration. They called it one step removed. And so, that's its job. Still is. And it tried everybody, and even tried to make the, their job was to destroy or make the mainlines go rightward, those were the two objectives. They even tried to do that to the UU's, but they gave up. And they gave up when the UCC pretty early, too. And the disciples because our right wing screwed up. It wasn't very smart. And so it narrowed, finally, its choices to the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Methodist churches, and they're still working on them. But we got in their crosshairs because we were an easy target. They could caricature things and they didn't, their people didn't identify as media, but they wrote all these trashing articles and I think by then, abortion had become a big deal as a wedge issue for them, because that was a change that happened in the late '70s, a Southern Baptist convention, and then pro Roe V Wade suddenly went anti-abortion, all that stuff happened with the right wing as a strategy for defending Bob Jones. It was a racist, white supremacist strategy, and the IRD became all part of that. So, I think the feminists, there was a lot of, you know, there was anti-gay, anti-abortion, all of that stuff was going on and so, Reimagining just got in those crosshairs. As collateral damage. And an easy target.

- What exactly made it an easy target?

- Well, it's like Bless Sophia and is it gay things? Now it seems so tame, so utterly tame, but at that time, it was really radical. And it was multi-racial and international and they were using Native American things and oh my God. So it became a really good target and the Presbyterian layman was the front cutting edge of

that. The Good News Methodists tried, but since the Methodist's women's desk doesn't care, I mean, they had their own Good News women that tried to take out the women's desk and totally failed, so Methodist women didn't pay the same price as Mary Anne Lundy did because the layman was really potent and nasty. So, that all happened. And what's interesting is, and this is the unintended consequence of that backlash attack, is that Reimagining generated more column inches of media reporting on progressive religion than any event since the Vietnam war. Now, I know that because I have a scholar in the academy who studies media reporting on religion, and he studied it. And he said, "Weren't you with?" You know, we were at some meeting where it was kind of irrelevant to this, but he said, "Weren't you at Reimagining?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah, I was even on Nightline, "it was just awful, you know, then it was on "Neil Nair News Hour stuff." And he said, "Yeah," he said, "You know, "Reimagining generated more column inches for "progressive religion than any events since the "Vietnam war," I said, "Your kidding." He said, "Yeah, I've checked."

- Wow, who was this?

- Some religion scholar. I can't remember his name anymore. It sort of came, it went by in a conversation about other things. And I remember thinking, "Huh, OK, wow." So I mean, somebody else could research this, it's not hard to dig through, but you know, it was a little one inch column on page 16 of the New York Times was the first media report and then suddenly exploded into Nightline and you know, News Hour and everybody picked it up and it became a big story. Not since the Vietnam war. Had progressive religion done anything controversial enough to warrant news coverage, right?

- Wow.

- So. I was pleased.

- Yes.

- But it was a horrible price to pay. But it did kind of jettison feminist theology into the public sphere in some kind of way. Suddenly, this is the other benefit of it. Suddenly churches were talking about it. Theology and wondering what the hell it was.

- Right, yes.

- I had so many theologian friends that were asked to go to churches and explain atonement theology.

- Yeah.

- And what were the feminist's objections to it, right? Yes, that whole conversation was--

- It disrupted the sort of autopilot acceptance of atonement theology. It is now really being rethought in a lot of churches. I think that's a long legacy of Reimagining is it's gonna kill atonement theology. (laughing)

- Hooray.

- Yes.

- And in fact, that's what you talked about in the '94 gathering, you talked about Christology and Soteriology and you laid out beautifully those issues. Do you remember anything in particular? I know it's been a long time, but anything about the '94 conference or your thoughts about going back to another Reimagining conference after what happened?

- Oh, I loved it. I felt like I was with some communion of saints. I mean, you know?

- Yes.

- At that moment, it was a pivot point in feminist theology.

- Say some more.

- Beyond the church thing. Beyond the church thing. Churches were asking feminist theology, feminist theologians who knew about it to come and talk to them. That Mary Anne wound up at the World Council, that was huge. I remember saying at one of my talks, about the backlash, I said, you know, "Poor Mary Anne Lundig, you know, what happened to her," I said, "But I kind of think she got fired up."

- That's a great line, yes.

- You know, and I really thought that, I thought, talk about feminist influence. It went international because of Reimagining and it, you know, not in a way that anybody would have wanted to happen, but it happened.

- Exactly.

- And I'm not sure it would have for a much longer period of time.

- Yes.

- It sort of forced the issue, which it was designed to do. It would force the issue in the World Council because they weren't doing anything about the Decade Aid Committee, or not enough, anyway.

- Yeah. You know, I saw an online interview with you where you mentioned that your commitment to, you saw in 1994, in the crisis in Christianity, really influenced you. And the direction you took. Can you say a little bit more about that? Because that was really interesting.

- I don't remember what that was. (laughing) But I did think the mainlines were already in trouble and they

have not, I don't think they're gonna make it.

- Really? Yeah, say some more about that.

- I don't think they're gonna make it. In any recognizable form because I think with very few exceptions, the whole Protestant project of sectarian denominations is bankrupt. It's a kind of strange, now nobody knows, first of all, the feminists don't care. We don't even care about the religious differences, I mean, you know, we don't show up at meetings and say, "Well, are you a Christian, Jewish "or Muslim?" It's like, I mean, those things matter in some ways, but they're not the main agenda, so I have feminist colleagues in Catholicism and Judaism and Protestantism of various sorts and even Evangelicalism, it's just, those boundaries, they're judicatory structures, they're not an expensive judicatory structures that I think actually are a part of the problem. The resources spent. Sort of like these tiny little seminaries that are dying that have a president and a missions, I mean, it's like the money spent on administration is outrageous for the delivery of the product. You know? There are universities that manage to have one president and have 5,000 levers, or whatever, students, and yeah, you have to have staffing to run those places, but it's a matter of economies of scale and the seminaries are in the opposite direction. Especially the freestanding ones. So, it's just, these models don't work and people are so, I think, obsessed about their own survival that they can't let it go. They can't move far enough out of that structural thinking to actually reimagine church and seminary life.

- Which brings me to the question, what does Reimagining look like today? And I mean that in the broad sense.

- I do mean it's to reimagine Christianity.

- Yeah, and what does reimaging Christianity look like? That's fascinating.

- I don't know. I don't know anyone knows, but I do think that the seminary, you know, seminary is the most endowment driven of all the higher education institutions because it's an expensive education for alumni that can never pay you back. You know, they're not gonna make, and less and less are they gonna make enough money, unless they do something besides ministry.

- Right.

- So, it's not a good model, and I think that this sort of graduate education model that seminaries have followed where they, you know, somebody comes and they do three years limping along, working, and sort of trying to get their education done, I think it would actually be a better education to do it in 12 months full time. And I've thought this since I looked at what the military does.

- Oh, interesting. Yeah.

- They can take an 18 to 25 year old in eight to 12 weeks and change them so dramatically because it's a complete immersion process.

- Right.

- Everything's ritualized. And I don't want to do that, but I think you could, but I know that if you learn a language in a month, 40 hours a week, you can do a whole semester. I did Chinese that way. And I did enough, I did half a day, five days a week, for eight weeks, in German, then I enrolled in the University of Basil. Now, I had had sixth grade or junior high German, but you know, I hadn't had anything since. So I knew a little German, but you know, I kind of knew how the letters were pronounced and stuff, but the course I took wasn't like that. We couldn't, we read things in German on a screen that were conversations, then we repeated them and repeated, it was very ritualized. We weren't allowed to use dictionaries, we weren't allowed to translate anything. So I learned to think in German, I started doing German in eight weeks.

- Amazing.

- Right? So because why? These intensive things reinforce themselves by constant repetition the way you'd train an athlete for hours a day to learn a skill, right? So I think if you did seminary education in one year, you figured out how to pay for it so that people didn't have to work, some people could afford to do it anyway, but for the people who couldn't, you have scholarships, but you have to figure out how to make it work, and figure out what you have to do about, with those with families and things. And maybe this is a special program for people who can do it, but you do it in a year, and you do it with understanding they come in cohort groups. Of maybe a dozen. And the rule is that the whole group graduates or no one does. And you don't use grades. You have standards and you have feedback and you have people evaluating saying, "You haven't met it," but you don't do grades.

- Yes, yeah.

- And all that bureaucratic silliness.

- You know, one of the goals of Reimagining was to bring, to bridge the gap between the academy and the church. And I'm wondering how you would evaluate, in terms of inclusive expansive language, feminist theology, where do you see the church now and where do you see it going?

- It slid back so far. I know churches have stopped using inclusive language. Lord is back, God the Father is back. I think it, I think the feminist movement lost traction. Because we didn't attend enough to the rituals. So the rituals of the church are 500 years old and molded. And they're very comfortable for people, but they're not transformative rituals. So what happened at Reimagining was a one off rather than being a thing that began to be used in churches and permeate churches. And you can't, you have to change the art forms, you have to change the structures, the choreography, you have to do a lot with the ritual world. Because it's not the sermons and the ideas that deliver the change, it's the constant repetition.

- Do you see that happening in the mainline church or do you see it happening more in feminist interfaith

things, or something different?

- I don't see it happening much. I mean, I haven't been recently to a lot of, I just dropped out of the theological world for a while and I go to the American Academy of Religion because it's a professional thing, but I don't remember the last feminist theology conference I went to, I just haven't been to many in recent years. So I just don't know what's going on in that world, but I don't see it permeating in a profound way in churches and you know, it's been almost 25 years.

- 2018 will be 25 years.

- Yeah. It should've done that by now. If it had been a sustained initiative to do that. I think what we needed to do was to start rewriting books of prayer, books of prayer and really pushing forward on the art of ritual.

- Yes.

- And figuring out ways to get it into the hands of men and women clergy who really wanted social transformation and didn't know how to do it. I think that's what's needed. And I worked with Silvia Thorson Smith who's with Voices of Sea. And a woman named Alicia Lola Jones, who's a black musician, musicologist who's a really talented music person. When we were gonna try to do a summer intensive course on creating new ritual materials. But it didn't make.

- Really?

- Yeah. Uh uh. I think people don't get that.

- Yes.

- Anyway, so that's what I'm, I think has been the missing piece, and it may be too late. Because the people left in the churches are, with a few exceptions, over 50. And the fastest growing group are nones and spiritual but not religious. Yeah, so, even the Evangelicals are losing their young people, so.

- So where do you think the spiritual life is moving or the focus should be, when we look at Reimagining?

- I really think it might be interesting to just give up on the mainline churches and start designing rituals and community life for people who don't have, for the nones and spiritual but not religious. Who are feminists and want a spiritual life but not the moldy kind of thing that they, most of them walked away from something, they're not nones because they didn't have a family or, you know, a lot of them have a religious experience and they didn't find it satisfying.

- Yeah, yeah. In the end, how would you define Reimagining?

- Hmm, that's an interesting question. An international pivotal moment in the life of feminist theology, and

women in the church. And not because it changed feminist theology content, but it moved it suddenly out into the public world, in a way it never had been before.

- Great, yes.

- For all the good, and it was controversial, but it happened, yeah.

- Yes, yes. And you mentioned ritual, so I'm asking what aspects of Reimagining are most significant and why, and you said ritual, is there anything else you would want to add to that?

- You know. I really enjoyed the presentations, but they weren't new, you know what I mean? They weren't, I didn't suddenly go away thinking, "Oh, I have to change this thing in my theology," you know, that isn't what happened to me, it was just the power of seeing that many amazing women in one room together.

- Yes.

- Committed to feminism, you know, it's sort of, do feminist work, you sometimes feel kind of like you're the only person on the planet, especially in the places I was, like Hawkins, Texas, and I was in really Podunk little places often. So, for me, I mean, by the time I was in Minnesota, I didn't feel that way so much because I had plenty of feminist friends here, but I just, I was just amazed.

- And for many of the women there, in small towns across the country, this was, yeah. Exactly.

- Yeah, I get that.

- Yeah, well, and it's clear it didn't change your perspective on feminist theology, did it change your perspective on the church at all?

- No.

- OK. (laughing)

- I was in a great church here.

- Were you?

- Yeah.

- Where were you?

- Spirit Lakes.

- Oh, yes, yes. Yeah, and what was great about that church?

- It was about as far left as you can go in Christianity. You know, with 95% LGBT, liberation theology oriented. You never got an argument you raised a feminist issue, you might get some pushback, but you know, people were like, OK. And they tried to be inclusive of people of color.

- Yes.

- I mean, it was, we had a people of color interest group, we had potlucks every month. We had a support system within the church that way.

- Nice.

- It was a life giving church in all of its messed up ways.

- Mm hmm, mm hmm.

- It did have major controversies, but you know, yeah. It was worth the struggle.

- Yes. I was thinking about your talk where you talked about perfection is not the goal. Integration and wholeness--

- No, life. Some liveliness, some creativity, some sense of energy. And that church had it.

- Yes, yes, yeah. So in the end, what do you think the greatest legacy of Reimagining is?

- I think it is that sort of launch of a process of mainstreaming feminist theology.

- Yes, yeah.

- It's no longer some exotic fringe thing.

- Mm hmm.

- I think one reason I haven't gone to very many conferences in recent years is it's so established now that virtually every mainline seminary has feminists on the faculty and read books all the time, publishers want them because they sell, that tells you something.

- Again, it's not in the mainline churches.

- No, because it's the idea stuff that is popular, but the rituals haven't changed to go with them.

- Yeah, yes, yeah. My last question for you, and it's a very specific one, is the Reimagining community is working on a website and part of it is going to be historical, making the conference talks and other things accessible digitally. But also looking at ways to maybe network, and do you have any ideas about who maybe benefit from it, what should be on the website, any thoughts about what would be valuable?

- I think it would be really valuable to have a section on trauma.

- Oh, yes. Say some more about that.

- Well, trauma studies is the hottest thing right now in religion, or in theology.

- Yeah.

- And I think it's not all good work. This is sort of like, now if you suffer at all, you are traumatized, which isn't true. But I had this conversation of Shelly Rambo about her book Spirit and Trauma. And she said, "You know, I didn't write that book "to bring atonement theology back, so I don't want you "to think that's what it's about." And she said, "But what I noticed was that after "the feminist theology movement sort of made "the atonement anathema and you "just don't read feminist atonement "theologies anymore, it's like nobody does that," she said, "But then nobody was writing on trauma." And she says, "Well, what do you do with human suffering "if you don't believe in the atonement?" And I think that that is important. And so I think something on that goes deeper than the sort of surface level of anger on feminism. And I think that would be good to have. And I think having a whole lot of stuff on art and ritual would be really, like maybe even a regular new feature on electionary cycle of prayers and litanies and sermon ideas to take you, and take you beyond the stuff that's going on now and I have to say, you know, there was this era of new hymn writing by feminists, most of it sucks. Because it's like singing a lecture. There's no poetry in it, it's very wooden. Or very preachy. And a lot of new hymns are that way, anyway. So, they don't hit you as poetry. You know, and your brain is changed by poetry. It's affected by poetry far more than prose. Because prose has little emotional content in it. Poetry has a lot of emotional content and that's how it works. Memory works by what you perceive hitting your limbic brain and then it circulates, the perception circulates in there, and if it flares any kind of emotional content, it will be stored in your memory banks, but if it doesn't, it's forgotten. And so so many hymns are just easily forgettable because the language is clear this is like ideologically driven language and poetry doesn't work very well that way, so I think we need better resources and I think it means bringing in real artists. I remember I was on a panel at Green Bell in England, which is a religion and arts festival that thousands of people come to. It's a religious Woodstock of England, it's fabulous. Wild Goose has attempted to do it here, I've never been to a Wild Goose one, but the one in England is really interesting, and I was on a panel with a woman who's a senior minister of a church, she was maybe in her 30's, she had tattoos and spiky hair and she had a rock band that did the main stage worship service that weekend. You know, piercings. She did not look like, and she'd have loved it. You know? And she was on the panel and then there was a guy who was a poet on the panel, and a visual artist. And the question for the panel was, the difference between art and propaganda. And we concluded that almost all religious stuff is propaganda. Because it's intended to evoke a certain outcome. Whereas real art is multivalent, it makes you think, it's transformative because it doesn't prescribe the outcome, right? So

almost all liturgy is propaganda. I'd like to see it be art. I'd love to read a litany sometime that moved me and didn't preach a theology at me. To hear a prayer that wasn't like a sermon with your eyes closed, I mean, you know?

- Yes.

- It's pretty, the stuff in services is just pretty mediocre. It's even mediocre propaganda. It's not even very good propaganda. Real good propaganda actually works, but. So, yeah.

- Those are great ideas, absolutely.

- And even some art, some things that people, you know. This is why I think the mainlines aren't gonna make it. Is that one of the agendas of the mainlines, coming out of the Protestant Reformation, was to attenuate as much as possible ritual. Even to demonize ritual and call it superstition as a Catholic thing. So, what the mainlines did was retain a very thin and not very effective set of rituals. And so ritual that's powerful has huge juice and creative energy in it. I think, I mean, why Protestantism is so desiccated, it's gonna be hard to revive it without a whole infusion of a very different set of, a real belief that ritual matters. Most protestants don't pay much attention to it because it's not in the forefront of their thinking, they're interested in the sermon. And the Bible. And so scripture is a really dumb basis for a religion.

- And you said that it was actually the Reimagining ritual that was so powerful.

- Yeah, it was, I think it was. I think partly because it was a ritual designed to bring people together. And to implant the ideas through the symbol systems and the things on the tables and the interactions.

- Yes.

- And the singing.

- Yes, yes.

- You know.

- And there was art and there was music and there was dance.

- There was a lot of art. And some of it was very high quality. You know, they really worked hard to make everything really, really high quality.

- Yes, they sure did. So is there anything else you would want to add that we haven't talked about? This has been wonderful.

- This is, my hobby horses are education is better when it's prolonged and intensive, rather than dribbled

out in drips and drabs and very expensive, and it's much better when you do it with a group and there's something at stake for the entire group to succeed together.

- Yes.

- People will try harder for other people than for themselves a lot of the time. And what really matters in life is art.

- That's a great place to end, thank you. That's fantastic.