

Niles_John.mp3 / Niles, John / Duke Digital Repository

- Well, John, thank you very much for being willing to be interviewed. I was wondering if I could get some background information. First, could you say and spell your name?
- It's John Niles, J-O-H-N N-I-L-E-S.
- Thank you very much. And are you lay or clergy?
- Clergy.
- Yes, and your denominational affiliation, if any?
- Presbyterian Church, USA.
- Thank you; and John, when and where were you born?
- In Alma, Michigan.
- Great, and when was that?
- October 1, 1945.
- Okay, thank you very much. And where did you go to graduate or divinity school?
- I went to Union Theological Seminary in the city of New York, that's what it's now called. (laughter)
- Yes, that's right, good. And John, what work or ministry were you doing at the time of Reimagining, which was 1993?
- I was pastor of a church in Maryland.
- Okay, wonderful. And what work or ministry did you do after Reimagining?
- Well, I continued there, and then I went to a church in Huntington, West Virginia.
- Okay, wonderful. And, I'm curious, how and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?
- Well, when I was in seminary.
- Do you recall what your reaction was to it?

- Well, my reaction was, I had a lot to learn, and so I listened very well to the women in our seminars, and in our hours when we were not in class, also.

- Yes, that's great. So, you were at the 1993 Reimagining Gathering, and I'm wondering what brought you there.

- Well, my friend was and is, of course, Judy Strausz-Clement. On a trip back to Minnesota from Maryland, she said, "You really need to put something on your "calendar that's going to happen here in Minneapolis." And so I did, and went through the procedure to come to the event.

- That is great. Well John, what do you recall from that conference? What are some of your memories of that event?

- Well, I was so impressed by the whole arrangement. It was round, very frequently round, and everybody, or each person, was assigned to a round table where maybe 8-10 people were around the table. So you got to know people, and we would discuss the presentations together, and get to know each other from all over the country. So that was an excellent thing. I remember when people would use a podium to make a presentation, they would keep moving the podium around to face different parts of the thousands of people who were there, and I just thought that was wonderful. Also, there was a Native American drum group, which I think did their drumming in a circle too, and I was just very taken with that. You know, I can't remember the numbers, but I think I was one of 17 or 19 men out of the 2,000 or 3,000 people attending.

- Yes, you're often referred to as a handful of good men, a few good men. (laughter) And I'm wondering what that was like being a man in a predominately female conference.

- I found it refreshing. It was happening more and more in my Presbyterian meetings, and of course often the elders of the session were more women than men; I thought it was great. My wife was a flight attendant, too, and she was very assertive about the rights of women, and even brought a lawsuit against her airline. By the way, we won it.

- Did you really, wow!

- Another thing that I remember about it, I kind of, two or three times, I fell in with a group from the United Church of Canada. It was mainly young people, but there were some older people, and I was impressed by them of how they just thought this was a very good... A very good gathering. They got a lot out of it, they weren't surprised by anything, it was real good.

- Oh, that's great. And I know it's been an awfully long time, but do you remember any impressions of the ritual and worship that happened?

- Hum, you know, I really don't have any... (laughter) many memories of that.

- Any other things that you recall about the presentations or the liturgy... Any experiences you had? I know it's been a long time, so don't worry.

- I did have some experiences afterward as a result of my having been there. I don't know if you want to--

- Actually I would like to hear that, very much.

- Well, you know, this was kind of surprising to a lot of people in the different denominations, that people had attended. In my denomination, the Presbyterian Lay Committee, we did about eight months, and then mounted a full-scale attack on Reimagining and feminist theology, and anybody who attended. So I became one of the two spokespersons in the Presbytery of Baltimore defending the Reimagining Conference, and telling all the positive things. There was a young woman who was an associate pastor in the Presbytery, and she and I got tired of going to these meetings with Presbyterian Lay Committee people attacking us, and after about the sixth time, we agreed we're not gonna do this anymore.

- John, that is fascinating, I'd love to hear more about that. First of all, where were you giving these presentations?

- Well, different churches that wanted to have a discussion on this issue.

- And how, other than, how did people generally respond? Obviously the Presbyterian Lay Committee members were not open, how did other people respond that you recall?

- I was satisfied with their discussion, but often it was kind of stacked by the Lay Committee to have people in the audience, so to speak, so they would continue their complaints.

- And how would you characterize what their complaints were?

- Well, there was some language about the Holy Spirit being female, and this disturbed them. And I can't remember their complaints, but it was kind of an issue in my congregation, too, so I had a few people who were mildly upset about it, but I guess not surprised that I was continuing as I had before.

- I know some people were called heretics and pagans. Were those charges brought against you directly?

- No, uh-uh, no.

- Okay, yeah. So you reacted to it by actually defending it in presentations.

- Oh yeah.

- I know it's been awhile; did you feel as if the description by the Presbyterian Lay Committee was an

accurate one of what happened at the gathering?

- No, not at all. It was extremely slanted. The group at that time was trying to break off as many congregations or denominations as possible. There's still something like it, but they changed their name four or five times, and they're... I don't think they're as strong as they used to be.

- Do you happen to know what the current name is?

- No, I've repressed certain things. (laughter)

- I don't blame ya.

- They were always very sneaky and, twice when I was in West Virginia, they were kind of issuing a list of churches that were about ready to break away, and they listed my church in West Virginia as one of those, which was a total lie. So I had a rather loud telephone call with them to tell them to get us off the list. And then at the next presbytery meeting, a minister got up and said, "The Lay Committee has said "we're about to leave the church, and it's totally wrong." So that was just something they did all the time.

- Now just to clarify that, were they saying your congregation was leaving the church because you were too liberal, or too conservative, what was their argument?

- They were saying that our church was tired of all this liberalism, and so we were going to join some very conservative Presbyterian group.

- I see; I think you're already starting to answer this question, which is really important, you're giving the context for it. How do you account for the reaction against Reimagining? What was going on there?

- Well, it was just kind of the old-fashioned thing that men ought to be the leaders, and we had a battle over women as pastors, and a battle over women not being just deaconesses, but full-fledged members of the session, that is elders, ordained elders. So these were issues back in the 90s. With all of them, 10 or 15 years, just a constant battle.

- Yes, yeah. How would you define Reimagining, John?

- Hum, well, I would say they gave people a gathering for discussion on the wonderful freedom we have as Christians to be male or female, and with diversity. It was a very positive thing for me. And then the reaction I had in Maryland, I remember one day after having some discussions, or angry discussions with people, I had on my bumper sticker from one of the general assemblies, saying Presbyterian Church USA, Open-handed, Open-minded, Open-hearted. And I remember one day tearing it off my bumper because I was not seeing very much of that.

- Wow, that's very dramatic, John, that says a lot. You know, you said it was a very... Oh, one thing before I

forget, where you happened to be at or heard about the 1994 General Assembly where they talked about Reimagining and came out with the study, the report on it?

- Let's see, I don't think I was a commissioner to that, so I really don't remember it. There's quite a bit I have forgotten, although my long-term memory is fairly good.

- Oh, it is, let me tell you!

- I have trouble remembering last week, but--

- Well, you're doing a great job of remembering Reimagining and talking about it, believe me. You said it was a positive experience. What aspects of Reimagining would you say were most significant to you, and why?

- I think the roundedness really had a great affect on me. So when I went to McCormick Seminary and I was to finish with a thesis, so I did a thesis after all the preparation, I called it the Round Table Church, and how important that it for a congregation. So that was my thesis.

- And was that provoked by the experience at Reimagining in particular?

- Oh yes, I would say so. And also it helped that my church in Maryland, in building a new sanctuary, also had a round communion table. And the new sanctuary kind of focused very much on that, so the elders would come around the table for communion, then they would go out into the seats, radiating from that table. So I think that is very Reimagining.

- Yes, was that design in part due to you?

- No, I don't remember proposing it, but I certainly thought it was a very good idea. We were kind of being pressed by the presbytery to have moveable chairs and all this, but instead we opted for that round table and then the pews kind of radiating from that. So I was glad about it, but I don't think I proposed it.

- You know, John, I'm really fascinated by this. Could you say more about what about the roundedness was so important to you?

- Well, there's an equality, nobody's at the head of the table. I liked that at seminary, when we did have round tables. But the thing about seminars when you are in theological school, is that nobody's really at the head. Well, sometimes the professor is, but sometimes he or she doesn't really care about being at the head, they just want to hear you.

- That is great. You know, you mentioned your thesis at McCormick. I don't think you had mentioned that earlier. What degree were you doing there?

- Doctor of Ministry.

- Oh, you did a Doctor of Ministry there, okay, wonderful. I was gonna ask, and I think you may have already answered this, but I sometimes ask questions because sometimes they provoke different answers. How did your involvement at Reimagining change your perspective on feminist theology and/or the church?

- It just reaffirmed what I had begun hearing at Union Theological Seminary.

- Yeah; and do you think that Reimagining made any specific contributions to feminist theology, Christian theology, or liturgy?

- Well, I think to feminist theology, definitely. Yeah, I think it's a landmark kind of thing.

- What about it made it a landmark, would you say?

- I'm sorry?

- What about it made it a landmark?

- Well, (chuckles) it was a very large group of people, for one thing, and I think the people who went there kind of got the impression that they should go back and talk about the experience, which most of us did.

- You certainly did, that's great. And I think a lot of other people did too, you're right. I want to end with looking toward the future. What do you think is the greatest legacy of the Reimagining community?

- Well, I think the creativity that comes from both men and women working together, and being open to that kind of full humanity. So I think this is becoming, for people now who are going to seminary, just assumed. But for a long time, it was men, men, men.

- Yes, that's great. I was wondering, I've been asking everyone this, a couple of the things Reimagining wanted to do was to bring inclusive language... I'm sorry. I apologize, I was getting another call. I'm trying to turn that off, I apologize. Okay, it's set. (laughter) Reimagining was trying to bring inclusive language and feminist theology to the churches. How would you evaluate where that is today? Maybe in particular, the Presbyterian church?

- Well, I think, there was a period that lasted 20 years or so when denominations were very careful about using language that was inclusive, and I think now, there's kind of a falling back by some of the younger pastors. When I go to services in different churches, they still use a lot of male pronouns. I think we need to be much more careful about that. For awhile we were. I remember a Presbyterian meeting in West Virginia when a woman was coming up for possible ordination, and she gave a sermon that was all in male terms, and a woman who was a minister in our Presbytery got up and really, really was angry about it. And the woman who had given the sermon was kind of, you know, she didn't know about this, or something. It's something that we have to do, and in my little group of ministers that talks about the passages for the

upcoming Sunday, sometimes I remind them that they need to remember the language that they have in the bulletins.

- Oh, that's great. Well John, you can't answer this question, don't worry, it's a toughie, but do you have any ideas on why the language has gone backwards?

- I really don't know. I guess I'd have to talk with a couple of the young ministers, and some of the older ministers who have just become ministers, like didn't you have any discussions at seminary about this?

- Yeah, I think you're right, that's the way to find it out, isn't it? (laughter) I just have a couple more questions, I'm almost done. A big question here: what does Reimagining mean today? And I don't just mean the conference, I mean what needs to be reimagined in the church today?

- Well, I think it's a biblical thing. So much in the Bible is moving you toward reimagining, getting away from the rules of your society. It's often very shocking when you look at the words in the Bible that Paul uses and Jesus uses, and of course the book of Revelation is just a wild reimagining, that's glorious.

- Yeah; oh, go ahead.

- I think that's about all I have to say.

- Well, that's great, that's good insight.

- Without sermonizing. (laughter)

- I have one last specific question. The Reimagining community has reincorporated, and we're working on a website; part of it will be historical, including, for example, the digitized--

- You're working on a what now?

- I'm sorry, a website, a Reimagining website.

- As I indicated, I really don't get on the web very much.

- That's right, sure, that's fine.

- I get angry at my computer. (laughter) I think I'm gonna have to change to an Apple or something so I don't get interrupted constantly on this thing.

- Yes, I sympathize, believe me. (laughter) Well John, is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to add?

- No, and I think you've really asked some very good questions, and some of the things that I had made a little note to bring up, you asked about them, and so that's about as much as I know and remember.

- Good, I'll turn the recording off right now, thank you.