

- John, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed. If you can just say and spell your name.
- My name, my full name is John, J-O-H-N Edward, E-D-W-A-R-D Strausz, S-T-R-A-U-S-Z Clement, C-L-E-M-E-N-T.
- Thank you very much. And, are you lay or clergy?
- I am clergy.
- And, your denomination is?
- Presbyterian.
- Thank you. John, when and where were you born?
- I was born in Enid, Oklahoma.
- Great. And, when were you born?
- January 9, 1934.
- Thank you very much. Where did you go to school? Graduate, Divinity school ...
- I graduated from Oberlin College and went to Union Theological Seminary.
- Oh, great. Thank you. And John, what work or ministry were you doing at the time of Re-Imagining, in 1993?
- I was the executive of the Presbytery of Pittsburgh.
- Okay. Thank you very much. And, what work or ministry did you do after Re-Imagining?
- I did an interim ministry in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in the Presbytery of Carlisle in Pennsylvania, for an interim after I left Pittsburgh. Then I went to a permanent position in Blackhawk Presbytery in Illinois. Oregon, Illinois.
- Okay, thank you. John, how and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?
- With my former wife, Jan Simpson Clement, who died before the conference began, but she was a strong

feminist and did read feminist theology. She was an elder in the Presbyterian Church.

- Oh, okay. That's great. Okay. So, you attended- you're wife at the time, Judy, was involved in planning the 1993 gathering, correct?

- Yes, I knew- it was after my wife had died. Judy and I began conversations and she ended up- before we got married, she was working on the conference. And, she suggested that I might want to attend. I had never heard of it. And, so I did. I did go to my committee, my personnel committee and ask if I could use my Sunday leave time to go to the conference, and Sunday leave money, and they approved it.

- John, what do you recall about your experience at the Re-Imagining conference?

- I found it very exciting. Of course, I was only one of the 83 men, out of the several thousand women who were there. I was welcomed, and I sat at a table with all women, except myself, and I had a very positive experience with that table and with the conversations that went on there, and with the whole conference.

- Oh, that's good to hear. Are there particular memories that you have from that conference that were very meaningful to you?

- Well, yes, I had not been familiar with the theology of Sophia, and wisdom. So, that was a new experience for me, and new knowledge, so that was one of the very positive that I got.

- That's great. I know that you were directly affected by the backlash. Could you talk about how you were affected by it?

- Well, let's see, how do I go about that? After my wife died, I went- I had- My ability as an Executive was focused on being with her and with her death and sometime thereafter, in the- after that death. So, I don't think- I just- My own impression was that I was not being as effective as a Presbyterian Executive that I should be. Anyway, after, after my wife died, and Judy and I- Judy had mentioned the conference and she- about five months before our marriage. Then when we got married in November, I mean, we got married in May 30th, let's see what was the date? It was in May 30th, 1993. And the conference took place in November.

- Right.

- And so, well I had already heard about the conference before we got married and I had already made plans to attend it. Now, did I answer the question, or is there still more that I need to say?

- Oh, well that's helpful, that explains how you went to the conference. Now, just to be clear, were you already- you were already Executive Presbyterian in Pittsburgh at the time of the conference.

- That is correct.

- Okay.

- I was Executive with my wife Jan there with me in '92, so, yes, I was there.

- Okay, good. So, then you and Judy got married in May. You attended the conference. You were in Pittsburgh Presbytery.

- Correct.

- And then you were- How were you affected by the backlash against Re-Imagining?

- Well, I think, you know, there was, what happened was that on the- in January, the conference was in November, the first Presbyterian meeting in January. I was attacked verbally on the floor of the Presbytery for attending the conference. And, the next meeting of the Presbytery in February I gave that statement, which you have,

- Yes.

- Defending the Presbyterian understanding of reformation and reform, reform and constantly reforming. And that Presbyterians are open to hearing new ideas and new ways of thinking about the scripture and faith. And, that statement clarifies what I was trying to say. That's how it affected me. Following that, through the year following that, that was in 1995, was it? Or, 1994.

- Right.

- Following that year there were some I guess people who felt that I was not, was not the executive I should be, and Pittsburgh Presbytery is a very, very conservative Presbytery. And I am not a very, very conservative person. Or, theologically I am not. So, there might have been some minor conflict there. But, there was a group that I suspect, I cannot say for sure, but I suspect formed a cabal to get rid of me. And, I do remember saying to my staff, I'm not planning to leave, I'm planning to retire from here. So, I knew there was something going on in the background. But, I didn't know exactly what it was. They, or this group, or persons who didn't want me around finally got our general council in January to set up a special committee to review my work. And, I had already been reviewed by the personnel committee, so why did they need to do that? But, they did it anyway, and the committee was set up to review my work. And that committee interviewed me several times, had several meetings with me, and I realized at the time that I was in trouble. So, I asked some Executives in nearby Presbyteries, whom I knew, to go to the meetings with me, well none of them were able to make those committee meetings, and so, one did, and one came one time. So, I asked the Synod Executive, which is- do you know the Presbyterian system?

- Not all the details of it, honestly.

- Well, the Presbyteries belong to a geographic area called a synod, and the Synod Executive is kind of the

coordinator for the Executives and the Presbyteries within that geographic area. I asked the Synod Executive to come to the meetings with me, and he was also unable to come, or decided not to come. And, I believe he might have made a phone call, but that was all, and then he gave Tom the equivocal support. So, I felt very much alone. So, I went, I got a retired attorney who was known to be very feisty and very supportive of his clients, and he went with me pro-bono to some of the meetings, and let the committee know that I was not going re-routed. So, that's how it went. The committee, the personal, special committee that was established came to me in May of that year. I believe it was May of that year. They had a special meeting with me first, I guess. They came to me with the- They invited me to come to lunch with two of the members, three of the members of the committee. So, I didn't know what they wanted. I didn't know why they were inviting me to lunch. They didn't give me any agenda for the lunch. So, I went to lunch, and at the lunch they said that they were going to ask me to resign, they had a report and they were gonna bring that report to the Presbytery meeting on May the 25th. And, they said they were gonna- They would offer me a three month's severance. If I would resign. I was totally surprised. Totally surprised. I wasn't expecting this. I refused to give them- they pressed me for an answer, and I refused to give them an answer. Left half my lunch on the table and walked out. And then Judy and I spent a lot of time thinking about this, talking about it, in fact we had been thinking and talking about it even before that meeting took place. And praying about it. And so, on May the 10th, I announced at the Presbytery Council meeting, I decided I wanted to take responsibility for my own life and not have somebody push me out. So, I chose to announce my retirement. I would take charge and announce my retirement, effective May the 31st. That then got published in the Presbyterian. Quite a few members of the Presbyter, they called me and asked me to think about rescinding my resignation, because they felt like I was well enough liked and supported that I had enough support that I could win this challenge. And, on the 25th of May, when the Presbytery meeting met, the Presbytery voted to accept my resignation, although they had to send somebody to. I sat in a separate room, I didn't even go inside where the Presbytery meeting was meeting. I sat in a separate room, they sent a person to that room and said, "Would you be willing to take your resignation off the table?" And, I said, "No, I've made the decision, I'm gonna stick with it." So, we went back, and the Presbytery voted to accept my resignation, but they gave me a year severance pay. Or, as much as- up until I got a new job. So, if I could find in six months, I would get six months severance, if I got three months, I'd get three months, if I got ten months, I'd get ten months, and so forth. So, that night, after I had resigned, they voted that, for the full year. Then my friends came to me and said, look, you've got a year's vacation, take it. I didn't. It was tempting, of course. But, I didn't take it. And, within two months, I was the Interim Executive in Carlisle Presbyterian.

- Wow, John, that's quite an experience you went through.

- Judy-

- Yes?

- Judy later on said that, if I hadn't- let me say a little bit more about the Presbytery.

- Yes.

- Let's see, Judy and I spent many hours talking about this, resignation is effective. Friends urged me to take a vacation, yes. Okay. Oh, letter to the editor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. On June the 6th, after that Presbyterian meeting where I resigned, the reverend Robert R. Kopp, the conservative pastor of Logan's Ferry Presbyterian Church wrote in the letter to the paper: "While being an Executive in Pittsburgh Presbytery is like putting on a deer skin and walking through the woods on the first day of hunting season, it must be said loud and clear that most members of Pittsburgh Presbytery liked and affirmed our recently resigned Executive Presbytery. His ministry was liked and affirmed by liberals, conservatives and moderates. He was undermined and eventually encouraged to resign by folks with dubious motives."

- Wow.

- Then Judy said later, reflecting on our experience noted that the tensions, the stress, and the pressures of the job, with the conflicts that went with it said, "If we had stayed you probably would be dead by now."

- Oh, John. Wow.

- So, how did it affect me?

- Yeah. Wow. I just- this all happened in 1994? Is that correct?

- '94 and '95. I was attacked on the Presbytery floor in January of '94, and my resignation took place in May of '95.

- Oh. And, so that was a long time.

- That period in '94, that period is what I was talking about when I knew there was rumblings going on in the Presbytery, and then the Presbytery general council formed a special committee in January of '95, and then my resignation took place in May of '95.

- Thank you for clarifying that. Now, who were the members of the committee? I don't necessarily need names, but who would be on the committee? Elders?

- Some pastors and some laypeople.

- Okay.

- And there was a judge on there that I will not name, who was on the search committee when they called me and they put him on the committee as well. But there were members of the Presbytery, some pastors and some laypeople, I do not now know how many. It was probably six or seven.

- And you had mentioned they asked you questions, John. What kind of questions were they asking you?

- Well, I think they asked me- they asked me questions like, do you return your phone calls? Do you answer your letters? Of course I did all of that, stupid questions. The- The committee wanted to know- I think I remember now, I read the committee report that's been destroyed, and I don't have it. Because the committee report never got on the floor of the Presbyterian. Because of my resignation, that was never read, never brought to the floor of the Presbytery. So, that report is dead and gone. And, so, I'm just doing this from memory, but they- one of the accusations that I felt was very wrong was that I hadn't raised money for the Presbytery. And, of course, I had, but- And, there were other questions in that report that I could have fought, and my attorney could have helped me with that, but I chose not to do it.

- What do you actually think was behind this committee?

- I think probably the fact that I was too liberal for the Presbytery and I admit that. I was really surprised that I became the Executive of the Presbytery, I had been warned by the Synod Executive where I was Presbytery Executive in Syracuse, New York. The Synod Executive Eugene Turner was counseling me, said, that's a very conservative Presbytery, I wouldn't go there. Well, I didn't listen to him. And, I went, and so, I think the fact that I was not a good fit, theologically, for the Presbytery was behind it, as well as the fact that I went to the- publicly went to the Re-Imagining conference.

- How big a role do you think your attendance at the Re-Imagining conference played?

- Well, it was certainly a start. I think the fact that my wife had died, I didn't function very well for a while, even though, as I look back on it, and I look back at my reports, I had work objectives which I had accomplished, even while all of that was going on. But, I think that the fact that- that probably helped, plus the fact that I was theologically liberal, and that I attended the conference. All three probably contributed to the fact that I was asked to resign.

- John, how do you account for the backlash against Re-Imagining in general?

- Oh, well, the late committee was very- and you've probably heard this from a lot of people, the late committee had a published paper called, "The Layman," and it's a conservative element of the whole Presbyterian Church. It's constantly attacking social justice and liberal issues of the church. And, they just lambasted the conference, calling it heretical. And, I had called the conference - not publicly, but to Judy and to friends - it was a watershed for the Presbyterian Church.

- In what sense would you say it was a watershed, John?

- Well, it totally opened up new avenues of thinking about the scripture. The feminist theology saw things in scripture that the men had never seen. And that new knowledge, new insight into the scriptures, from a woman's womanist point of view, was very significant. And, it was a new turn in the whole understanding of the theology. And, that's why I call it a watershed, because it was a turn, a switch, a movement in a new direction. A lot more women coming into the Presbyterian church, through seminaries and through being called in the church. That had already begun, and it was becoming more and more so. And, I think now,

seminaries now probably have more women, or at least have women in the seminary, as there are men. And, I think that that whole element gave women a new enthusiasm for their theology, and their faith as well. As well as men.

- Yes. Yes. Before I forget, I wanted to ask if you attended the 1994 General Assembly, where the report was issued about Re-Imaging, and if you have any memories of that?

- Yes, well I think John Buchanan was the chair of the committee, I believe he was.

- He was, and I've interviewed him, yes.

- So, I do remember that, and they gave a very balanced report back to the whole church that was adopted by the General Assembly. It wasn't a condemnation of the Re-Imagining conference, they did not do that. They supported the women in the Re-Imagining conference, but they gave a balanced report. Now, I can't remember how the balanced- what the details of that report was, but I was watching that meeting and sitting in that meeting, both Judy and I were sitting in that meeting while John and the committee worked on their response to the Re-Imagining conference. And, I think they gave a very balanced report.

- Oh, great. Thank you, I appreciate that. In the end, John, what aspects of Re-Imagining were more significant to you, and why?

- Well, I think I've already spoken to that, the fact that there was new insight in scripture, and new insight into our faith, from the womanist point of view, was the most significant thing that had happened, and it was the most significant thing for me.

- Yes, good. Did your involvement in the Re-Imagining conference and the backlash change your perspective on feminist theology or the church?

- No, it just confirmed it.

- What did it confirm?

- Well, I was subliminal feminist before the conference ever took place. So, it simply affirmed, as I said I got new knowledge and new understanding, but it was, I thought it was great, and it affirmed, for me it just affirmed what Jan and then Judy had, and I had talked about, and studied.

- Yes. Yeah. In the end, what do you think is the greatest legacy of Re-Imagining?

- Well, I guess I just have to repeat myself, the new understanding of the scripture, it was not cold, but looking at Sophia, looking at the Orthodox Church, there's a church named Sophia.

- Yes.

- That's not new, but it was new for Presbyterians and it was new for me. I think the most significant thing was that they opened up the eyes of women, and ears of women to theology that they can affirm and be part of.

- Yeah. That's really helpful. And, it sounded like the word Sophia resonated with you as well.

- It did.

- In what way, John?

- Well- It did for me, because you think, as Presbyterians, we think of God as God the father or mother, and that also is important, to think of God as mother as well as father. And, there are other images in scripture, we think God is mocking other things there are in scripture, and the God as the son, Jesus, and God as spirit, but spirit could be translated: wisdom. And, God could be female as well as male.

- Yeah.

- Because wisdom in the scripture is female.

- Right. Yeah. Two of the goals of Re-Imagining were to bring inclusive language and feminist theology to Christian churches. How would you evaluate where we are today in that?

- Well, I think that's what the watershed is all about. A lot of our churches now are inclusive in the language, the new pastors that are coming in, more inclusive. The women pastors had been there for a long time, but the new male pastors coming in are using inclusive language too. It's only the perhaps very conservative who simply will not accept anything but God the father and male theology may still be resistant, but I think as a total church, I think the church has moved to inclusive language.

- Mm-hmm. Great. And, I have two final questions. John, what do you think Re-Imagining means today? In other words, what is or should be Re-Imagined in the church today?

- Huh. Good question. I haven't been thinking about that. What should the church be doing today?

- Yeah.

- Well, I don't know, I would assume that maybe the church, maybe the more conservative element of the church may come along and join in the inclusive language and the understanding of scripture, not only from their point of view, but also from the point of view of feminists.

- Yeah, yeah. Good, thank you. And my final question is, we are working on a Re-Imagining website, it will be both historical, we're digitizing all the conferences, but also including resources, current resources, and I'm



wondering if you-

- Current what? Resources?

- Resources, yes, links to other organizations, or-

- Oh, okay.

- And, I'm wondering if you have ideas about what could be included in the website. That would be helpful.

- Huh. Huh. You've probably got more ideas than I do about this. I'm on the computer every day, but I don't know, I suppose an interactive website that people could put information in and receive information back, and get in discussions, but I'm sure you already do that now, or are planning to do that, but that, I think, would be a good website.

- Yes, well, that's good to hear. That's encouraging. I have so appreciated your thoughts and time, is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add?

- Um, not that I know of, Judy and I are very appreciative of the fact that you're doing this and, oh, is this going to end up in the book, as well?

- Yeah, hold on one second, I'm gonna turn off the recording so hold on one second.

- Okay.