

- Well, thank you so much for agreeing to do this, Emily. We're now recording. Could you please say your full name?

- Emily S. Wiggers.

- Okay, thank you, and are you lay or clergy?

- I'm lay.

- Good. And what is your denominational affiliation, if any?

- Presbyterian Church USA.

- Thank you. And, Emily, where and when were you born?

- I was born Cape Girardeau, Missouri. August the 12th, 1937.

- Oh, thank you very much. And, Emily, where did you go to school?

- Well, I went all through elementary and high school in the Cape Girardeau school district. I went to college at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. I graduated from there. Since then, I have done some graduate work at Lewis and Clark College in our area, and I was taking some classes at Eden Seminary.

- Oh, neat. And what is your graduate work related to?

- My original graduate work was related to Early Childhood Education. Of course what I did at, and actually, what I did at Eden was more Christian Education related.

- Okay.

- And, interestingly, we have a son who's a Christian Education PhD professor at a local seminary.

- Oh, really (laughs) oh, that's great.

- Teaching tends to run in our family.

- It sounds like the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Right? (laughs)

- Right.

- That's wonderful. So, Emily, what work or ministry were you doing at the time of Re-Imagining? That was '93 through 2003.

- I think, no, I was, I think I was still serving Presbyterian Women, but would have also been, all of this time runs together and it's been a while. I was serving Presbyterian Women at that time, and then I went on the Ecumenical Decade Churches in Solidarity with Women, joined with the Women's Ministry Unit. I got involved in the Women's Ministry Unit because of, that was part of my portfolio as vice moderator of Presbyterian Women. So I was serving with the Women's Ministry Unit, and also worked some with Women Employed by the Church.

- Okay, that's interesting. Would you mind, just saying a little bit about what responsibilities were associated with those positions, what did they mean?

- Well, the biggest issue probably was trying to have connections and cooperation between Presbyterian Women, which was a brand new organization at that point in time. I served when it first came about, when the Northern and the Southern branches merged. And, (sighs) there, there were tensions. Not always bad tension, but (laughs) tension. Partly because we were living into a new organization, and the PC USA was also living somewhat into a new organization with all of the various ministry units. And my responsibility was to carry the communication back and forth between Presbyterian Women and the Women's Ministry Unit, Women Employed by the Church, and to be very honest, in some respect, I found my relationship with the Women's Ministry almost stronger than with Presbyterian Women. At that point in time, we were trying to, Women's Ministry was trying to be broader than just the local church organizations. And there was some resistance to that. (laughs)

- Could you say more about what the resistance was about?

- I think the resistance was, it came, I'm not sure it's fair to say, it came primarily from the Southern stream. That's kind of the way it felt to me, but then, I came from the Northern stream. They wanted to be sure they continued to have control. The PW wanted to have control, and yet, be part of the larger church.

- I'm sorry, who wanted to have control?

- The Women, the Presbyterian Women wanted to be autonomous and have control, and yet at the same time, be part of the larger church. And sometimes what the larger church was recommending, or suggesting, or wanting to move in that direction, didn't sit well with all of the people in Presbyterian Women. They felt like they were losing some control.

- Okay.

- It was just, it sounds kind of negative. I want to counter by saying, I think some of it was just growing pains.

It was a brand new organization.

- Sure, and trying to figure out how this is gonna work. Yeah, okay, that's helpful. So you were kind of a liaison in a way, between Presbyterian Women, Women's Ministries, and Women Employed by the Church. Got it, okay, that's great. How did you first become aware of Feminist theology? Do you recall that?

- Well. (laughs)

(laughs) I've been pondering that question. Feminist theology per se, probably in the early '80s. But looking back, I grew up in a very egalitarian home. Didn't know it at the time. (laughs) But interestingly enough, some of my friends knew it. No, they didn't know it was egalitarian. They knew it was different.

- Yeah.

- But, so, I had always seen things a little bit more equal, probably, as far as the pastors were concerned. They had many people my age.

- Yes.

- Which you know, I'm approaching 80. (laughs) That was very unusual for that era.

- Yeah.

- I didn't know it.

- Of course. (laughs)

- But then in the early '80s, I began to hear things about, I wanna say the feminine thing. The feminine side of God.

- Yeah.

- It didn't come as any shock to me at all. I guess, in some respects, I had always kind of known that at a deeper level, but it had never been articulated. So it was really in the early '80s that I began to see. And it was the real language primarily.

- And where were you getting this language from? These images?

- Probably first got it from, the images from Johanna Bos.

- Yes?

- Our son was a seminary student at the time, and, I, Johanna spoke at a PW gathering, (laughs) I hope I'm

coming up with the right course of time, you know, it's been a long time.

- Oh, of course.

- She spoke at a Presbyterian Women's gathering, an area one, that would be actually I think before we became, it was before we became Presbyterian Women, it would have been a PW gathering. And she talked about the various, the differences in language, and how it opened up the images, the image of God, or how it opened up how we viewed God. And that was probably my first exposure, and it was quite controversial, as you can imagine. And not for me. For me it was, a-ha, this is where I've always been, but that's not where everybody was.

- Everybody at that meeting. Some people reacted against it at that meeting?

- Right, right.

- Yeah, yeah. Great.

- So that was, does that answer your question about the beginning?

- It did.

- And I would say from that point on, it's grown in a variety of ways. And certainly when the two women's organizations became Presbyterian Women. The language was, I will have to say, they were really good about, well, the organization was, we were very conscious of using good inclusive language. And then of course there was Izzie's book. Izzie Rogers' book on, I can't remember the name of the book, but it was about inclusive language. I would say from the early '80s on, it just grew. And PW did try very hard to use inclusive language. There was still some resistance, I'm not gonna lie, to women, you know, God was Father, and, there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. (laughs)

- That's very helpful, Emily. That is great. I wonder if we can move to the Re-Imagining community, and if you could talk some about some about your relationship to the Re-Imagining community. How did you first get involved?

- Well, at that point, I guess I was on the Ecumenical Decade, Churches in Solidarity with Women. And Mary Ann Lundy was I think part of the Minnesota committee. And so because of her involvement, the Churches in Solidarity, or the Ecumenical Decade committee, was invited to come to Minneapolis, at least once and I think twice, I just don't remember for sure, to help in the planning of the event. And then because of Mary Ann's involvement, and because of my involvement in the Ecumenical Decade, we became, for lack of another word, kind of a sounding board, an advisory group. Sometimes they would run ideas past us for our reactions, because we possibly represented the wider church.

- When you say they, just to clarify, was that the planning group in Minneapolis that was doing this?

- Yes, yes.

- Right, got it. And, Emily, this is an important part of the story, do you have, I know it's been a long time, do you have any memories of what that was like, working with this group, or what that process was like?

- Well, it was, I found it, I'm looking for the right word. Exciting and encouraging. Mind-expanding. Theologically expanding.

- Could you say a little bit more about what was exciting about it?

- Well, some of it was about just listing so many aspects of women's gifts, and women in leadership, and, exploring theology from a Feminist perspective. Although I'd been into a lot of language issues, which certainly were Feminist, I hadn't really had the experience of looking deeper into the theological issues around women, and how, how biblical, how you could read biblical stories from a Feminist perspective.

- And just so I--

- I'm a woman. (laughs)

- Go 'head, this is great, Emily. I was just, was this happening during the planning process, these issues were coming up?

- During what, I'm sorry.

- Oh, I'm sorry, sure. During the planning process, were these issues coming up?

- Probably. (laughs)

(laughs) Oh, you're testing my memory.

- I know, I know, I understand.

- That's a good thing. (laughs) Yeah, I'm sure they were. I don't have, I can't name specific instances, but the fact that this is what I'm remembering, tells me, yes, it had to have.

- That's exactly right. And a lot of times I think, I can work out the details later, but your impressions and memories are really important, 'cause that's what's important. That's what you remember, right? (laughs)

- Right.

- Yeah, yeah. So you went to the '93 conference. You mentioned you might have gone to one or two more, but let's focus on the '93 one. What was that like for you?

- Well, it was very exciting. It was also very, mind-stretching, it was challenging. It stirred my thinking, in some very exciting and positive ways, and in some ways, hmm. (laughs) I wouldn't say negative, I'd just say, hmm.

- Yeah, now that's interesting. Do you remember what were some of the exciting ways, and what were some of the hmm ways? (laughs)

- Well, I think the hmm ways, I particularly remember around Delores Williams and the atonement, and of course that's one of the things that got blown way out of proportion. (laughs)

- Yes.

- But that piece was very new to me, particularly, from the black theology perspective.

- Right.

- Not, I started to say not mind-blowing, yeah, in a way it was. (laughs) It was mind-blowing but it was the hmm, I'd never thought about that, and it took, because it was so nontraditional, it took some time to sort through, digest.

- Sure.

- And I think to some degree, it still does. I mean, that's not a bad thing.

- Right, mm-hm. Are there are other things, memories you have of it, things that you found particularly exciting or striking in some way?

- I found it very exciting to be a part of a group of women who were so on the cutting edge of, not just theology, but of society. It was the beginning to some degree of being, affirming the gay and lesbian community. And that was exciting to me. A little bit scary at times, but all of this was like. (gulps) (laughing) But I find,

- Yeah.

- you know, all of these people that are different from me, have just as much faith as I do. They have gifts to give to the church, to the world, to the community, and I found that very exciting.

- That was really well-put, thank you, Emily. (laughs)

- Contrary to (laughs) to other people.

- Yes, yes. I wanted to make sure I understood. Now, you were there, were you there in any official capacity? Or were you there just as a participant? What was your role there?

- I was there basically as a participant. And a participant because of my involvement with, peripheral involvement with planning through the Decade committee. So it was not in official capacity.

- Sure, yeah.

- Well... No, it really wasn't official capacity, however, I was representing Presbyterian Women, now that I think about it. I was doing so many of these things kind of simultaneously, and it's hard to say for sure.

- That makes sense. You were wearing many hats.

- I was wearing many hats, but most of those hats had come about as a result of Presbyterian Women.

- Yes, that makes sense, okay, yeah. Can we move to the backlash?

- Oh, yes.

- I'm sure you were aware of it. First of all. (laughs)

- Oh, yeah.

- Were you directly affected by it?

- I was pondering that question too. Yes, in two ways, I was. And not horribly, but. The conference was over, and there was a small group of Presbyterian Women, and I honestly don't remember, but we were piggybacking a meeting, regarding Presbyterian Women, and I really don't remember what that meeting was, on the back of the Re-Imagining conference. There were about four or five of us that had been there at the conference, and then we were meeting afterwards. Most of the other women, at least a couple of 'em, were very disturbed by the conference. It had just gone too far. And, I was listening to this, and, I mean, some of that is backlash, but then the one woman, I remember this so vividly, looked at me, I had just been listening, and she said, "You're not threatened by this, are you?"

- Wow.

- And I said, "No. "Are you?" And she said, "Oh, yes." And I said, "How?" And she could not articulate it. So that was one, I mean, that's a form of backlash.

- Emily, before we move on, I'm sorry. When you said they were disturbed by it, do you recall what specifically disturbed them?

- No, well, yes, yes, I do. It was primarily over the gay and lesbian issue.

- Mm-hm, mm-hm.

- I would say not totally but, that was a big part of it. They were not ready, they didn't seem to want, they couldn't articulate, but it was related to the gay and lesbian issue.

- Okay, that's helpful. And I interrupted you. What was the second thing you were gonna say?

- The second thing was, it had been two of us from this Presbytery, a very good friend of mine and I. She was there in a totally different capacity. But we had been to this, and, I came back and primarily got good support from the folks that we dealt with within the Presbytery. But then, and that, I guess I wasn't. I can't remember whether if I was moderator of the Presbytery at the time, don't think I was. And both of us, the other woman and I, had been in a covenant prayer group that met about once a month. And, then a pastor of one of the churches here was also part of that covenant group. And I was at a Presbytery meeting, walking down the hall, caught totally off guard, and was basically attacked by this pastor, saying, "You went to that awful Re-Imagining conference didn't you?" And I said, yes, and I said it was very good. "It was not, it was heretical, it was," and he launched in, and I sorta interrupted him and said, "Well, you know, I was there." And he said, "I've listened to all of the tapes," and just went into a tirade. Well, it obvious that anything I said wasn't going to matter. So I just walked away. But I lost so much respect for a person that, and I think he probably lost respect for me too.

- Yes. (laughs)

- That's his problem. (laughs) I lost so much respect for somebody, that I had respected. He did not wish to hear anything I had to say. Now, I wasn't horribly offended by this, because I, a lot of other people got a lot worse backlash, like Mary Ann Lundy who lost her job. But I remembered it. And I lost respect. Those are the only instances where I personally experienced the backlash. Of course, I did within Women's Ministry, and it took a long time for Women's Ministry, in the PC USA, to recover from the backlash.

- What, your memories of the Women's Ministry Unit, how did that affect them?

- Well, first and foremost, Mary Ann lost her job, which I'm sure you're aware of.

- Yes, yeah. I've actually interviewed Mary Ann too.

- Oh, okay, yeah, good. I figured that.

- Yes. But do you have memories of how, when you said it took a long time to recover, could you say a little bit more about that, 'cause I think that's really important.

- I think it's taken the church a long time to recover. Women's Ministry no longer exists as it did in those



days. I almost equated Re-Imagining to Angela Davis, (laughs) because the two shall never die. However, people would for years, refer to, oh, that Re-Imagining conference. But what I find interesting, and I've just become aware of this in the last, say year or two, is that the term, well, the term Re-Imagining was a dirty word. You know, oh, those uppity women. But now, Re-Imagining is a word that is surfacing in a lot of areas.

- Sure is.

- You know, let's reimagine this. Which means rethink, renew, look into deeper. But it has probably taken 20-plus years for the church, for that to not be a dirty word.

- So you're seeing that term being used in the church as well, Re-Imagining?

- You know, I'm not sure about that. I wanna say yes, but I'm not real sure that's the, if it is, it's not embedded in it. It's on the periphery.

- Yeah, yeah. Emily, were you surprised by the backlash?

- Oh, yeah.

- And why were you surprised?

- I expected to create some conversation, discussion. Did I expect the kind of backlash within the church? No. I was both surprised, astonished, and disappointed and hurt by all of it, and I don't mean necessarily hurt personally, but just hurt that the church could be so vicious.

- And looking back on it, how do you account for the backlash? What led to that?

- Change. And, women beginning to gain some more power. Boy, I hate to say those things, about my church.

- Yeah, yeah.

- It's painful.

- Is it, I mean, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, is it because you care about the church? Is that fair to say?

- Yes, that's fair to say.

- Yeah, yeah.

- And I have to say, not only do I care about it, because the church, not always, the PC USA, but most of my

life, has nurtured me, nourished me, supported me, challenged me, provided opportunities for me, so, yes, I care about the church. And in some respects, I think, and I haven't thought about it quite like this before, until I just said that, in some respects it was, the church was saying they didn't care about me.

- Say some more about that.

- Well, it wasn't necessarily me personally, but, they didn't care about women, they cared about women as long as they realized that it was a patriarchal society.

- Mm-hmm. Yeah. And that kind of relates to, were you at the general assembly? Do you remember the report about Re-Imagining? Is any of that, do you have any reactions to that at all?

- I was not at that assembly. I was astounded that, I wasn't surprised that there was some moderate backlash, because it was new, something new, but I was astounded by, the depth of the backlash, and the viciousness, and, these evil, I mean, that's the way it felt, these evil women, what? They don't know how to do theology.

- Yeah. Mm-hm. Yeah. So, Emily, how would you define Re-Imagining?

- I think it was, hmm. Life-changing for the church. But it certainly went through the birthing process. I still am sure we're fully born yet. (laughing) But we have come a long way.

- And what would you point to that has developed over the years? Where we are now that's there.

- I think there is a broader acceptance of Feminist theology, Womanist theology, Mujerista theology, and a recognition that there's validity in all of 'em.

- And you're saying that--

- And that--

- Oh, go 'head. Sorry, go 'head.

- That doesn't necessarily mean you have to agree with every bit of it. But there's been a much broader acceptance of those theologies, and integrated into the life of the church. And there's been some real concentrated efforts in doing so, along with a little resistance here and there.

- That is really important. How do you see it being integrated into the church? That's important.

- Well, for one thing, just trying to be very, in every aspect of, and now I'm talking about the larger church now, not congregations.

- Okay, the larger Presbyterian USA Church?

- Yes.

- Yeah, mm-hm.

- And I think some other denominations too. Really lifting up and affirming the different theologies from black theology, womanist, mujerista, whatever. And also, and whole committees and whatever, groups, trying to really make sure that these various groups, theologies, races, sexes, are being recognized and lifted up. And sometimes that creates some real difficult issues, and not necessarily in a bad way, but much like Re-Imagining did. It makes you think. It makes you understand our differences.

- Now, you made a distinction with the local church. Do you feel as if that is happening at the local level in churches? (sighs)

- Well, some. (laughs) Not in mine.

- Yeah.

- It kinda depends on the church, go 'head.

- However, you may not realize this, but I'm only 15 miles from Ferguson.

- Oh, I did not realize that, wow.

- No, you wouldn't have any way of knowing, 'cause I'm in Illinois. (laughs) And the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ferguson happens to be one of my very best friends.

- Wow.

- So, yeah, some churches are, and that one certainly is. Is my church, no. Do they think it's an issue, no. And I'm sad about that, but.

- Well, that's a stark contrast, isn't it?

- Yes, it is.

- Yeah, yeah. Wow, I'm just taken aback. That's powerful, Emily. What aspects of Re-Imagining were most significant to you and why?

- Well, I'd say, the most significant was really just to see this wonderful gathering of faithful Christians, who were curious enough to want to come together, ecumenically, and experience, experience our differences.

- What differences are you thinking of?

- As well as our connectedness.

- Yes. And what differences were you thinking of?

- In the beginning, primarily theological differences, is what I was thinking of. But we also experienced the differences of sexuality, of race, and theology.

- I'm curious, did your involvement in Re-Imagining change your perspective on Feminist theology, or the church at all?

- Well, probably to some degree, because it, it changed, I wouldn't necessarily say it changed, but it expanded. Well, probably changed too.

- Changed or expanded in what way, would you say?

- Well, more the, I think, to say change is really probably not accurate, but expanded, a better understanding, I came out of it with a better understanding of different theological perspectives. And I probably also had a better understanding of sexuality differences. I can't say that I, it wasn't like, oh my, gay and lesbian people do not have a place in the church. I didn't feel that way at all. But I probably came out of it with a better understanding.

- And did that understanding come from that, when they came forward, during part of the conference?

- I'm sorry, I missed that.

- Oh, sure. Did that understanding come from when they came forward as part of the conference? Or was it one of the workshops, do you recall?

- No, I can't, I would say probably all of the above.

- Yes, (laughs) yeah, yeah. Do you think that Re-Imagining made specific contributions to Christian theology or liturgy?

- Oh, yeah. Made what, better contributions? Is that what you said?

- Yeah, what specific contributions. What do you think--

- Oh, specific.

- Yes.

- Well, I think, I think it, in a backhanded way, forced the church to begin to look at the different theologies in a more serious way. The church had already, looked at... Oh, boy. (laughs) I was looking for the word. I couldn't remember it.

- Sure.

- Liberation stuff. (laughs)

- Right.

- They had already begun to look at liberation theology, but they really hadn't looked at the, at least from my perspective, they hadn't looked at the Feminist theology, other, or the black theology.

- Yes.

- And I think it forced the church to begin to deal with those. It was a backhanded blow. They resisted, obviously, but, when the dust finally settled, they began to (laughs) really look at, and advice.

- Yeah.

- You know, I have a grandson that just graduated from seminary last year with an emphasis in black theology, and listening to him talk about, not just black theology, but liberation theology, Feminist theology. His father who graduated some, what, 30 years or more ago, with his PhD, did not, I mean, he has come that far, but, he wasn't talking those things when he graduated. So the church has, we have moved forward.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Some days, we still have ways to go. (laughs)

- Well, Emily, looking back, it's been almost 25 years. As you look back, what do you think is the greatest legacy of the Re-Imagining community?

- Probably the recognition of, both Feminist theology and the gifts of women.

- Mm-hm. Yeah.

- And by Feminist theology, I'm encompassing all women.

- Womanist, Mujerista.

- Yes.

- Yeah, mm-hm. Yeah. So what do you think Re-Imagining should look like today? And I don't mean just the Re-Imagining conference, or the community, but what in the church needs, and/or society, needs to be re-imagined today?

- Well, it's probably more around the African American community, and, part of that comes from my location here.

- Yes.

- And how we can, it's still the most segregated, Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour we have, and how we can move forward together and not separately. And still, you know, I'm still a woman. (laughing) How we can still be our own person.

- Right, yeah. That's great. And, Emily, I have one final very specific question. The Re-Imagining community has reincorporated, and were involved in a website, and the website is going to be part archive, including for example, digitized versions--

- Give me just a moment.

- Oh, sure.

- What, we don't, okay. Oh, I'm sorry.

- No, that's fine. That's fine. (laughs)

- Okay.

- Oh, I was talking about the website, and it's gonna be part archival, but partly including resources for people, and I'm just wondering if you had ideas about what should be included in the website, who would benefit from it, how could they find out about it, just any thoughts you have. We're just collecting ideas for the website.

- Well, not really. I pondered that question. (sighs) I, and I Google lots of stuff. I look up lots of things. But just maybe good resources for... No, I don't really. (laughs)

- Sure, that's fine too. (laughing)

- I'm sorry about that.

- No, oh, this has been wonderful. You had so many good things to say. And before we go, I just wanted to find out if there's anything we haven't discussed that you would like to add.

- Well, I really can't think of anything. It was a wonderful, you know, the years that I worked with Presbyterian Women, and Women's Ministry, the general assembly council, were extremely enriching years for me in my life. I would like to see, I miss the community. I don't miss the work, but I miss the community. (laughing) Just, I'd like to see more people have that opportunity, particularly women, and some of the more younger women.

- Yes, yeah. Well, Emily, this has been just delightful. I'm gonna turn off the recording now. Thank you so much.

- Okay.