

- Well, Vivian, thank you very much for your willingness to be interviewed, and if I could just get some background information. If you could say your full name.

- Okay, Vivian Jenkins Nelsen, and Nelsen is spelled N-E-L-S-E-N.

- Oh, thank you. That's very helpful. (laughs) And are you lay or clergy?

- I'm lay. In the Lutheran Church, I'm a lay preacher.

- Oh, okay. Great! And so, that's your denominational affiliation, then.

- That was, when I was part of the community up until recently, actually, and I'm now Presbyterian.

- Good, thank you so much. And Vivian, when and where were you born? I was born in Selma, Alabama in 1945.

- Mmm.

- Yeah.

- Very interesting. And where did you go to grad school or divinity school?

- I went to graduate school, and I took course work at Luther and also in my college, which was a Lutheran college.

- Which college did you go to?

- Dana. D-A-N-A.

- Oh, where's...

- And that's Latin for Denmark. And that was in Blair, Nebraska.

- Okay.

- And, so anyway, I built a religion minor. I was thinking of the time of first going into our diaconate, which my dad was very interested in as a pastor. And instead, I did medical drawings and such for their New Guinea work.

- Interesting! So what did you do your graduate work in?

- I did my graduate work in Educational Psychology at The U, and also at Harvard University.

- Wow, interesting! So, what kind of work or ministry were you doing at the time of Re-Imagining?

- At the time of Re-Imagining in 1993, I had left work as an executive for the American Lutheran Church, and I was back at The U.

- Mmm. And what were you doing at The U?

- At The U, I headed up the human relations department for undergrads, and then I went Hamline, and then I went back to U.

- Okay.

- Doing the same thing.

- Doing the same thing, yeah. And what kind of work or ministry did you do after Re-Imagining?

- Well, after Re-Imagining, I got more interested in public policy, and that was really the gift of the civil rights movement that my dad was involved in. So, and that's the tedious grinding work that has to be done. And so, my doctor was initially on ethics and moral development, using the Kohlberg scale of race and gender issues in the Church. And so, as it turned out, I got ill during graduate school. I had to have major surgery, so I never did finish it, but it was a very... It was a very interesting living, an interesting direction, which is studying how people learn moral and ethical behavior. How they unlearn it and how they relearn it.

- Wow.

- So, everything that I was dealing with the whole palette of diversity issues on the desk that I had been on, and then that went on into my graduate work and then, that went on into my work work. So, being at the Humphrey was challenging because that shut down the whole fate side of the work.

- You were at the Humphrey Institute.

- Yeah.

- Yeah, yeah. Very fascinating, wow! So, how and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- Oh gosh, that was I would say early, no, it had to be mid-70s. And that movement was bubbling up nationally and also inside of our denomination.

- Yes, yeah. So, do you remember how you got exposed to it in particular?

- In particular, yes. In a nutshell, there was a woman writer, and I'm blanking out her name now, who wrote a seminal book, who's Lutheran, who wrote a seminal book on theology, and I was on the desk that dealt with women's role in the Church. And so, the first woman was ordained shortly before I got to that desk.

- Wow.

- Yeah. And, so then, there was all of the work to do with helping churches now make this change and so forth and so on. And, actually, there's a book about it, which is called In Our Mother's Arms.

- Oh!

- A wonderful steal from that great old hymn.

- Yes, yes! So that this point, it was before the ELCA. So which branch was this you were working for.

- This was ALC.

- ALC, okay.

- American Lutheran Church.

- Right, right.

- And this was basically a Nordic branch, Norwegians, and the Germans were in Iowa. And their seminary was there. And Luther was really the seminary where everybody went if they could because it was the biggest.

- Right, right, yeah. I know we need to move to Re-Imagining, but I just wanted to hear a little bit more about your work with the women's division of the ALC. Tell me what that was like because that's important.

- Yeah, it was very challenging. That seems to be my work for today, but the Women's Auxiliary is something different. So, the Women's Auxiliary, which was the, in other... We would call it in the Missouri Synod the Ladies' Aid.

- Okay, I got it, yup.

- And so, they were not particularly interested or connected with this part of the work, although there was a really good person who was in charge. So, my role was really more, you know, meeting with bishops, holding conferences, that sort of thing, bringing in speakers, you know, doing workshops, etc. Trying to get people more accepting of this role for woman. And, of course, the Lutheran women in Europe, particularly in

Denmark, I knew most about, and eventually were ahead of us.

- Mmm, Mm-hmm. Yeah, interesting. That's fascinating. Well, talk about the Re-Imagining community. So, could you talk about your relationship to the Re-Imagining community?

- You know, it was good. I had been through kind of the turmoil that this work experienced earlier, so it wasn't new to me. And the fact that I worked within the church hierarchy gave me a certain amount of cover that other people didn't enjoy. And so, I was in a recognized power position, so, I was sent to the United Nations Decade for Women meetings and wrote essays on such for those conferences I was in. When it was in Copenhagen, the bishop gave me the keys to the newest church so we could have meetings there.

- Wow, how cool!

- So, it was really great, and a great experience. And one of the women I met there, she and I are still dear friends. In fact, she spent two weeks with me recently.

- How nice.

- And she's a Lutheran pastor, and also an attorney, interestingly.

- Wow!

- Both her sisters are attorneys. But the long and short of that is that the Church gave me access to other women in other countries, so I was able to have a vision that was in fact real in other places. It wasn't just, well, this is what we think it could be.

- Right!

- It already was.

- Yes!

- And one of my favorite theologians that I had great good luck to study with... (ringtone) Oh, excuse me, I need to take this. Hello!