

- Thank you very much. If you could, I'd just like some background information. If you could say your name.
- My name is Kwok Pui Lan.
- Yes, and are you lay or clergy?
- I am lay.
- Yes, and denominational affiliation, if any?
- I am Anglican.
- Anglican. And when and where were you born?
- I was born in 1952 in Hong Kong.
- Mmmm. And where did you go to school? Graduate or of any school?
- I went to the Chong Chi Theology Division at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for my undergrad, and also for my masters degrees. And then I pursued my Doctorate from Harvard Divinity School graduating in 1989.
- Mmhmm, thank you. And how and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?
- Um, that was back in the '70s. Because when I was an undergraduate, I had the fortune of having a visiting professor who, at that time, was studying for his Doctorate from Union in New York. And so he introduced the works of Mary Daly and Rose Mary Woods to me. Years later, when the three of us, this is Doctor Raymond Whitehead from Canada and I and Rose Mary, were all attending a conference, and then I told Rose Mary, I said, hey, this is Doctor Ray Whitehead, and Doctor Whitehead introduced your book to me. So that was a very good reunion.
- Oh, yes! Do you recall, what was it about feminist, how did you react to feminist theology when you first encountered it?
- I was very open to it for several reasons. One, personal reason, I came from a very large family, and a family of seven kids, and we have seven girls before the two boys arrived. Needless to say, I come from a patriarchal family, and my parents were waiting for the sons to be born. And so that was the first thing that I know, women must struggle for ourselves, because in our societies, boys and girls are not treated equally.

And then the '70s was also a time of student protest, you recall, the demonstrations in Berkeley and also in New York. And it was also the same in Hong Kong. And during that time, and then we became concerned about social issues, and also, look at China, again, because China was then, during the Cultural Revolution time, advocating equality between the sexes. And that is why it was this wider social situation that prompted me to engage with feminist theology. So when I read Mary Daly and also Rosemary Woods as well, I became aware that women in other parts of the world were beginning to articulate an alternative vision about God and also about the future of Christianity.

- Mmhm, thank you. That was helpful background. I'm wondering if you could talk about your relationship to the Re-imagining Community?

- I had participated in the Re-Imagining Conference because I was one of the panelists on that panel that talks about re-imagining Jesus Christ. And, except for that, I did not have very close relationship to the community, because I know that afterwards, women have been meeting because of the backlash, but I did not have opportunities of participating in any of those events. I certainly was aware of the kind of controversy and debates that the conference had brought out in the churches.

- Yes, now I know it's been quite a few years now. What are your recollections of that 1993 conference?

- I think that, when we had the conference, we were in a mode that is very celebratory. That is, not only were the speakers great, and I recall the liturgy and also the variety of people there. And then they thought that women were gathering to imagine what the future of Christianity would look like. That is very challenging and interesting. So I did not perceive or forecast that there will be that kind of very strong reaction. And especially targeted at some of the speakers. For example, Delores Williams, who served on the same panel with me. So I think that, because of the backlash, that really heightened my awareness that the Church, at that time, in '93, are different, though we had been talking about inclusive language in the Church or feminist theology for that case. And the Church was not quite ready. Not only that, there was a very strong group of people who really criticized the conference and also wanted to censor, if not harass some of the speakers and also some of the organizers.

- Were you directly affected by any of that?

- I was not very affected for several reasons. Because I know that Delores Williams and the colleague from the Presbyterian Church who was also one of the organizers, they had been criticized much more severely. I think, for several reasons. I do not think the Episcopal Church was a heavy supporter of the conference, that is, not giving so much money or promoting it among the parishioners. That is one reason. And then so there was some, I think, publications in the Episcopal circles talking about the Re-Imagining Conference. But by and large, there was not as much criticism or discussion as in other denominations. I had only one incident that recalled that happens to me. After the Re-Imagining Conference, I was invited to lead a workshop in some place, I think, in New York. And then there was a reporter or whatever, from a conservative journal who came. Days later, I became aware that he came to sort of monitor or to check me out, what I was speaking at that workshop. So that was only one concern. So there were other colleagues within my school,

Episcopal Divinity School, who also became aware of the controversy. So they asked me about it, and because my colleagues are much more open-minded, and then, at that time, pro-feminist, and so, they were saying that this is the more conservative wings of the Church trying to accuse the women who were speaking as either heretics or out of bounds. So they did not take that criticism very seriously. So in general, I did not have any particular, that is, harassment or the kind of criticism that some of my colleagues who participated, and who were speakers, they had experienced.

- How would you account for that backlash? What do you think motivated it?

- I think that's for several things. One, and some of the people might think that this is a women's gathering, and they're going to change the Christianity as they have come to know it. And this is always frightening, because this is not just about inclusive language, this is re-imagining what Christianity would be, or can become. So this might be one of the reasons. Secondly, I think some criticize the conference, especially, regarding the liturgy. Because in some of these liturgical expressions, there might be Sophia. And I recall that the pressing that was introduced by the native people, that talks about the coming of Sophia and then pressing us. And so I think some people, they criticized the conference as deviating from this traditional understanding of God. And instead, talking about the Sophia, or Goddess. So then, it is a gathering of women who want to subvert the Church by propagating a new doctrine, or a new understanding, using the feminine expression of the Divine, and they are not accustomed to it. So I think it has all these ramifications, and so then it stirred up peoples' anger and frustration. And some people who have not been there, they have just heard this hearsay, and thinking that this group of progressive women, they're just going too far. And I think that power may be an issue.

- Could you say a little bit more about that, the power of women, or?

- Yes, I think that because whenever women gather and want to reclaim our power, that is when we look at history, then we can see, there is always this counter force. Because they just cannot allow women to have their voices in the Church and more specifically, they do not want women to be theological subjects. That is, women are supposed to be subservient, or obedient, and we should be consumers of religious goods given by men, and we should not be the ones telling ourselves what we should believe, or what we should practice. So I think this subverting the traditional roles in the Church was very alarming to these more conservative people in the Church.

- Yeah, thank you. What aspects of Re-Imagining were most significant to you and why?

- I think that it is significant that we have leaders who work across the board together, and then to share our different perspectives and stretching our comfort zone. And that is one dimension. The other dimension, I think, I would say, will be the holistic experience at the conference. Meaning that I recall at the opening ceremony, that is, one of these plenaries, that we have these white papers, and then we have crayons, and then we can draw, or there are those little eggs that you shake, you know? And then, so, you can respond in multiple ways. Not just purely listening. And you can also sing, there are also rituals that you can engage, and so it is not just about the head. It is also about the body. And so I had learned from that experience.

When, last year, I taught a course on Eros sexuality and the spirit, so then, in the beginning, I also then created something that is similar, a mini-version. So then they can draw and then each class, they can pick up a musical instrument, and then they can do their little, create. So this is from that class. And so then, now, they did, they made all these wonderful things, and then, so, that is multi-sensory.

- Yes! And how did the students respond to that?

- I think they responded very well! And because we are talking about Eros, I said Eros should be expressed in multiple ways. Not just, "I speak, you listen." And then, so, they engage, and then in their journals, they have to write their journals, I encouraged them to compose poetry, to draw pictures, to take photos, because I said, again, the Spirit works in many different ways, there are many modalities of learning, and you should use the medium that you feel most comfortable with. I used that because I was reminded of the Re-Imagining Conference, because last fall, we had a visiting proctor scholar. So she was with the Presbyterian Church. She was hired after this Imagining Conference, because there were people fired, right? So she was hired, and then, in her job, she had to sort of deal with the aftermath. So in her sermon, she talks about her own journey, and how she was in that situation, and then talk about her own work. And so then I was reminded of, oh! At the Re-Imagining Conference. So I said, what was I most impressed by at the conference? And then I said, oh, it was what we have learned in that was that way we have engaged our full bodily self. And so I thought, in teaching this Eros class, I must introduce a little bit of that. In some years back, when I was teaching the class on Christology, I also asked the students to listen to the tapes, because our library had the full set of the tapes. And so sometimes they also listened to what happened. And then, because some of them might have heard about this Re-Imagining Conference. So I think some of those things that I have learned, the kind of fellowship, the kind of liturgical expression, the kind of multiplicity in terms of learning modalities, I used in some of my teaching.

- Oh, that's really wonderful to hear. These questions might be related, so you can choose which you respond to. But, did your, your involvement in Re-Imagining changed your perspective on feminist theology and/or the church. And it sounds like it made you aware that the church is more resistant.

- Yes. I especially recall that Delores Williams was challenged because she was really bold in saying that, in her writings too, that she did not think that the kind of traditional atonement theories are helpful for men or for women. And that she insists that this Christ, that is dripping blood, this Christ portrayed as a victim, certainly, is not the only way we can think about atonement. And in her presentation she also was insisting, it is not the death, but the life and ministry of Jesus that liberates, that saves. And I think many people did not find that within the traditional framework of atonement theory. And insisted that she was heretical and out of the parameters or the kind of diversity we can accept as Christians. So I think that some of these issues, or some of those people, some of the things that people were concerned, that prompted me to think more deeply about the meaning of atonement, the meaning of the cross, and then why people have this kind of obsession in thinking about the suffering of Christ helps. And certainly, we also had a plenary by Rita Nakashima Brock who argues against this more traditional understanding of atonement. So in my own work, in my post-colonial theology, I began to be much more aware of the range of options the feminist theologians, including the womanists, that they have portrayed about Christ, and also the different theories

about atonement.

- I don't know if you remember this, but you were at that panel with Dolores Williams.

- Yeah.

- Do you remember thinking at that time that this was going to erupt the way that it did?

- No, I must say that, because I, even at that time, knew the work of Dolores Williams. So for me, it was not as shocking. And not only that, but I think that there are people who agree with her. Because there is also the subjective theory of atonement. Basically, it's not what Christ has accomplished outside us, it is Christ's model that prompted us to be followers of Him, and so that we will be as loving and caring and compassionate as Jesus. So then within, even, the so-called mainstream of Christianity, you do not just have that gruesome sacrifice of "Jesus atones". There are also other theories. So then, for me, it was not shocking, because I knew her work before then, and also, I think that there are other people within the Christian circles who think, no, it is Jesus' love as a model for us. Since 19th Century a lot of liberal Christianity talks about that. The ritual, and others, they also talk about the same thing. And so I do not think that it is completely off-the-wall. But there might be people who have heard this for the first time. Who think that, wow, in the Church, it's always the suffering and the blood of Christ, especially those from traditions that emphasize Jesus' sacrifice. Then they think, oh, without Jesus' sacrifice there will not be atonement for you. So I think that there might be people who would find that very jarring. But for me, I did not think it was completely off-the-wall, and therefore, I did not expect that kind of backlash against her. Because you'll recall that, oh, there were people that criticized her, and said that Union should not hire her, she should not be a professor in theology, because she really did not believe in what Christianity's saying.

- That's right, yes. What do you think is the greatest legacy, now that you look back on it, the greatest legacy of the Re-Imagining Community?

- I think that, to have a group of women that continue to meet and then to work and then to say to the Church that this Re-Imagining Conference is not a one-time thing. Because, it is a symbol that women really want to do our own theology, and to have our voices heard. And then, periodically, this group of women will then, I think, produce pamphlets or bulletins or literature or resources to keep on with the work, I think that is very important. Because as you know, now, feminism is even a bad word in colleges!

- Exactly, yes.

- Many young women will say, "No, to call yourself feminist "is so outdated, this is our parents' "or grandparents' generation. "This is all gone, we are much more liberated." I think my daughter belongs to that. When she was a teenager, two things she will not discuss with me. One was feminism, one was theology. Why? Because, she said, "You talk about this all the time." Because of the teenage rebellion.

- (laughing) Yes!

- And then! She thought, okay, feminism belongs to my generation. But then, different incidents change her mind. When she was a teenager, one summer, she went to an interview for a job in a store that sells these groceries. And then they said, oh, you are a woman, you cannot lift the heavy boxes. So they didn't hire her. Then, she said, "Oh, wow, it is not all equal, right? "It is not that my parents' generation," now that she experienced that. Now, she is a mother of two kids. And then she just posts on Facebook, "Oh, wow, "it's difficult to juggle having two kids "and sending both of them to daycare before my work. "I woke up last night, yesterday, at 4 a.m.," okay? Her husband, my son-in-law, helps a lot. But still, you have this idea that as mothers you have to do more to take care of your kids. So then, I think, when they have experienced the kind of difficulties, if not discrimination, as a woman, then they think feminism may not be their grandmother or their mother's problem. That they will face this glass ceiling or all the things that women experience as a working parent. So I think that, by keeping this up, by saying that feminism is not dead, not only not dead, that the Church had a long way to go. And recently I had a conversation with my students about Pope Francis. Because Pope Francis just visited the United States, and my students, they listened to his speech to the Congress, and then they were mesmerized by his visit. And then suddenly, Pope Francis had changed a lot in terms of putting out a new face, a new kind of direction for the Catholic Church. But many of my colleagues within the Catholic Church are saying, even though Pope Francis may be very vocal about the climate change or about social justice, had already issued statements, or his work on this. But during his tenure, he may not be able to change the kind of discrimination against women. And if Pope Francis is really keen on changing the situation of the poor, without changing women's situation, then the poor, because the majority of the world's poor, they are women, and then Pope Francis is not dealing with the root problems. So I believe that we still have a long way to go, both in the Mainline and the Catholic churches. And so, I think the Re-Imagining Community carrying on with the work, and that is, stimulating discussions or organizing events to promote a kind of continuing discussion and dialogue will be very helpful for the health of the Church community.

- Thank you. We are developing a Re-Imagining website, and I'm wondering if you have thoughts about who would benefit from it and why, and how could they find out about it, any thoughts about that?

- There are several websites that might have the same purpose, that is, to promote this conversation, that I know of. One is the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, their website, and now they have some blogs, because I know that Mary Hunt and my colleague, Grace Kim, sometimes they write for that. And then the other is the, one that is called Religion and Feminism. And then that one was founded by a group of younger feminists. So every day, I think, they would have a person writing. Some years back they asked me to be a contributing blogger. I said, I just don't have time. But I have read some of their blogs, and these younger women, they're doing quite a good job. So, then, the Re-Imagining website can also try to see, in what way are the materials in that website can compliment what we have in the other two. First, the other two are not for Christians only. Because they are the studies of religion, and they welcome people who are Buddhist, and who are Muslim, and who are Post-Christian, and who belongs to the Goddess movement to contribute. So then, the Re-Imagining Conference can be particularly for Christians, because originally, it was mostly attended by Christians. So they can talk about particular issues facing the Church, and what are the frontiers of some of the work, and how we can share ideas of what other churches are doing and the success

stories, as well as, what are some of the avenues for continuing the work? So I think that it has a particular role to play.

- Mmhm, thank you. One last question, before I ask you if there's anything else you want to add. I appreciate what you're saying about where we are now, and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about what Re-Imagining should look like now? What should it talk about, what should its concerns be?

- I think that, at that time, we were more interested in re-imagining the categories of Christianity, and that is why we organized a conference in that way, re-imagining God, I think, re-imagining Christ, and then, maybe re-imagining something else. So it is more according to the Christian categories. I think this focus is still needed. Because, I think it is an ongoing theological reformulation and it's continuing work. But then, I think some new directions, that is, issues that we face today, for example, climate change is a big thing. And then, not only that, now, with what has happened in France last week, in Paris, and then how can women in the Church, or Christian communities, contribute to a dialogue with people of other faiths. And then, the whole notion of peace-building and peace-keeping. So some of these more current issues should be in the purview. I'm not saying that these are all left out. I'm just saying that, given, now, we have come to a stage, that is, the polarization between the so-called "western" nations and the Muslim nations, became so profound, so I think that more effort needs to be on how can we build a coalition across religious boundaries to talk about peace and justice? So I think those are very important issues now. Maybe more urgent than in 1992.

- Yeah, yes. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to say?

- I think that, how to, then, generate interest among the younger women would be important. Because I know, I observe one thing. Because many of my students, that they are interested in the Emergent Movement. That is, as you know, this Emergent Movement is forming new communities. Not just traditional Mainline Church communities. But this may be students, it may be professionals, it may be younger people together at home, they gather in bars, they gather in other arenas to talk about their faith. Because all the Mainline denominations are suffering from membership decline. And this Re-Imagining is already ahead of its time, that is, you imagine what would happen. I did not remember, I think we might have a Re-Imagining Church or something like that, but I did not remember that particular session now. And so I think much more can be done or can be said in this new form of ecclesial communities that are emerging not only in the United States, but also in Britain. They call themselves First Expression. And surprisingly, in both situations, there is certainly a revival of the monastic expression of Christianity, and a more disciplined weight of prayer and then, and also, it is not so much tied to denomination and so this kind of new expression, or new ecclesial communities, would be something, I hope, the Re-Imagining community will also have conversation or dialogue with. Certainly, many younger women, they are very attracted by this, because it is less hierarchical, and then, there is no clear boundaries between what is sacred and what is profane. And then as laypeople they can participate more fully. And also, they are more rooted in the community. And I think that this might be something that the Re-Imagining Community might be interested to explore deeper, or to have more conversations with these younger folks.

- Excellent, thank you so much!