

- And if you could say your name.

- My name is Mary Lee Fithian.

- And are you lay or clergy?

- I'm a clergyperson, retired.

- In your denomination?

- United Methodist Church.

- When and where were you born?

- I was born April 1st, 1936, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

- Oh okay, where did you go to school, graduate or divinity school?

- I did my BS and an MA at the University of Minnesota and an M. Div at United Theological Seminary in New Brighton.

- Mm, okay. And how and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- Oh gosh. Way, way back. When I was in my 30s and 40s, I would go to church, I would come home in tears, and I never knew why. And my family would say, "What's the matter?" And I'd say, "I have no idea what's the matter" but I've been at church and I wasn't there, I wasn't there in what was talked about, what was sung about, anything, and the language really hurt. And my kids said to me, "Well why don't you quit going to church?" Because that's not god that's made me sad, it's the people in the church. And so I stayed in this church for a long time and along with two other women, we tried to get the church to move toward using inclusive language and instead we got shunned, we'd be standing with a person on each side and they'd talk around you as if you weren't there and it finally, it got to the point where I just had to leave, but just left that church, and it was after that that I went to seminary where my friends said to me as we were talking about this, "Well, why don't you go to seminary?" And I said, "Oh okay." But actually I had wanted to be a pastor way back when I was a kid and I couldn't because I was a woman so I guess maybe that was the first time. I could not become a pastor because I was a woman and so I went on to do other things that I considered ministry but they weren't in the church. And so I guess it really goes way back.

- You know, I'm intrigued that you started. How did you know about inclusive language to even be able to

talk about it at your church, do you remember?

- I probably didn't use that term but it was just the feeling that everything that was good was male and everything that was bad was related to Eve and to women and women were discounted and women were, actually it must have gone even further to that 'cause we were at another church for awhile before this one, women couldn't even be ushers, they couldn't serve on the church council and I remember a pastor coming to me, or not coming to me but coming to a group where, I guess it was a bible study and he said, "Oh, we called 200 people this week "and we can't get anybody to usher, "we don't have enough people to usher." And I said, "Well I'd be happy to usher." And he said, "Yeah, but we usually have men," and I said, "Well what difference does it make?" And I said, "If it's a matter of wearing pants, "I'll wear pants, if you need to have matching set, "I'll wear pants," and he hesitated and he said, "Oh, well I'll get back," and he never did and I went to church and I was in the choir and we were lining up to march in and there were four young girls, teenage girls, ushering, and he said, "See," he said, "we're letting girls usher." I said, "Yeah, but what about women?" So I guess there's wild little incidents in my life as I go back and look at it that I probably didn't realize it was theology, it was what was happening to me and what was trying to separate me from god.

- Mary Lee, what denomination was that?

- Well that part of it was Lutheran.

- Was it?

- Yeah, and there was an incident in that church that a lot of us left because of some harm they did to another person and so we went over to the Methodist Church and Jack, my husband, had grown up in the Methodist Church so it was kind of a good fit. But anyway, so the part with the shunning and the going home with tears and so forth, that was the United Methodist Church.

- So when and where did you experience formal feminist theology?

- Well probably in seminary.

- Yeah yeah.

- Yeah.

- Do you remember?

- 1984, I went to seminary.

- Do you remember anything that you read or something that really grabbed you that made you think?

- Well everything at UTS was you had to use inclusive language, it was required at the time, I hear it's not so

required now but it was required at the time and everybody talked about it but I don't think I actually took a course in feminist theology but it just was sorta interwoven into everything that we did there at seminary, so yeah.

- If we could move to Re-Imagining, that was really helpful, Mary Lee. Could you talk about your relationship to the Re-Imagining community, official positions, planner?

- Okay, when the World Council of Churches did their Ecumenical Decade For Women, I was a part of the original planning committee in the Twin Cities and Sally Hill was representing, well she was staffperson for whatever effort came out of that and so that committee had to think about what it was that they were going to be doing to recognize that decade, and we had all kinds of ideas, we'd have hearing sessions around the state, it was all little kinds of things and so then, what's her name, not Sally, but the other Presbyterian.

- Marianne Lundey.

- Yeah, yeah. Senior moment there. Marianne Lundey was like the staffperson for the National Council of Churches and we had thought maybe doing some kind of a conference but we weren't really thinking real big but then when they had their committee and they were thinking about doing some stuff, Marianne kinda suggested we get together and talk about maybe ways in which we could work together and they held their meeting in Minneapolis and we sat down and talked with them and they kind of, now this is my interpretation of what happened but as the thing went on, we kinda were getting the message, who do you think you are trying to do something big like this, you're just a small little group and it'll never work and no, we don't wanna work with you and we were stunned, we were stunned. I remember afterwards we just sorta shaking our heads and some almost in tears because they didn't seem to want to work with us and we said, "Well, we can do it anyways," and so then we started planning the conference and it just kept getting bigger and bigger and thanks to people like Marianne and people out of various denominations, we got some backing in different ways from various denominations so we could do something and it turned into being something really international, we sat down down and thought, "Well, what are we gonna call this?" And we came up with the word re-image and Sally wrote it down, but it turned out she wrote the word re-imagine instead of re-image and we liked that better.

- Mhmm, I love that.

- Yeah, yeah.

- So really the actual planning was very local.

- It was very local, oh yes, yes, it was very local.

- And it is amazing that it became, that you all had such a huge conference.

- It did and there were over 2000 people there and they were from all over, I mean, all over, we managed to

raise money so that we could get scholarships to people coming from other countries and it was just amazing.

- And what was the original idea? What were you thinking the conference was gonna accomplish?

- It was basically, I think, at least in my mind and that's almost 25 years ago so I can't remember for sure but part of it was that we just felt that we needed to bring the woman's voice to the church. And the way to do that was to help people to realize that we're all theologians, you don't have to go to seminary to be a theologian and when I was dealing with those women in that church, I was being a theologian and I didn't know it and part of, at least my part of it, because I at one time got told I was dumbing it down, was that I wanted to do it in a language that people could understand. 'Cause when I went to seminary the first time and they started using words like hermeneutics and whatever else, all those theological words, I thought, "What am I doing here? "I don't understand any of this." And so we weren't planning on doing a conference, I think, that was just for clergy, it was meant to be for mostly women and to celebrate women. And to realize that when we talk about being made in the image of god, that god is female too, male, female, none of it, all of it, because it has more to do with soul and spirit than it has to do with gender.

- And when did you, do you remember, as a planning group, when you started to realize that this was going to be 2000 people and it was gonna be large? Did you anticipate that?

- I don't think we did initially but when we had to start putting people on waiting lists.

- That's when, yeah.

- Because at first we were thinking, wow, here we are committing to contracts with the convention center, we're working with hotels and saying, well we'll have this many people and what if it doesn't happen because we'll be stuck for all of this expense and then we also weren't sure about speakers, were they gonna be interested enough in doing something like this and we had some rules that no matter what kind of a speaker you were, whether you were one that talked in a plenary session, in a big session, or one of the workshops, you got paid the same, that we weren't, and I think people were curious and one of the things that really delighted me, 'cause I was in charge of registration and one of the things that really delighted me was seeing that some of the people from that church where I'd been shunned came, I don't know what their response was but when I saw them there, they were very excited to be there and I don't know how they felt when they left but. So we were reaching some of the very people that needed to be reached.

- And I'm curious, do you remember how you came up with the speakers and how many of them accepted?

- I don't remember how many accepted, however many were in the program.

- Did you get a pretty good percentage of acceptance rates, do you remember?

- Well Sally Hill would have been the one to ask about that because she was responsible but we did a lot of

brainstorming as are we representing the whole world, is there a diverse voice, not just white middle class theologians, are we looking at a lot of different kinds of things, the way theology addresses different aspects of life?

- Meaning for example god, Jesus, community, is that what you mean?

- Well we said re-imagining god, re-imagining the church, re-imagining Jesus, that was what re-imagining was referring to. Yeah, so there were just those, and also the lesbians. We had a large contingent of lesbian women there and one of the most exciting parts of it was when so many of them came out at that conference, they were invited to come forward and they did.

- Now, how did that happen?

- I don't even know, because I was out at the registration desk.

- I was gonna ask about that, your experience of the conference. Before I do, though, I wanted to ask one more question. You said re-imagining was the word that grabbed people. Do you remember why for you or for anyone else, why re-imagining, what did that mean to you?

- I think because most of us have imagined god and the church and so forth in a masculine way, the old man with the white long beard is god and the ones made in god's image are the men and I wanted to re-imagine that because my life was affected by it and it had hurt me so much. And part of that hurt is still there because my children have rejected the church, claim themselves to be atheists and I hear that from a lot of my friends too, that they saw me be hurt by the church, being hurt by people who represented god, being hurt by people who were supposed to be in community with me because of our relationship to god and they didn't want any part of it. So it still kinda hurts, you know?

- Yeah, yeah. How about the 1993 conference, what was your experience of that?

- Well it was mostly at the registration desk but one of the things that was interesting to me was that we assigned people tables because we didn't want friends sitting just with friends, we wanted to expand the community and so that was, people would say, "Well why can't I sit with so and so?" And we tried to explain to them and I think as the conference went on, that wasn't as much of an issue, but that first day kind of was, and then the tables got moved in different places in the room. I'm not an artistic person and so if I had been sitting in there doing the stuff at the table, I probably would have been a complete flop. (laughs) But to me that was exciting because it was letting, women have a way of being creative, well so do men, but I mean differently than men do, I think, anyways. I look at my husband and we both are creative creatures in our own way but we aren't the same and so round tables was exciting, doing the artwork and then the other part of it was having to deal with the people who were there to cause trouble.

- Was that part of, did you end up doing that?

- The backlash.

- Oh you mean after the conference.

- No, in the conference.

- Oh, say something about that.

- Wanted to be in there and we let them come as press, we had a place for press but no, they wanted to be at the table and we knew at least one person who was representing a real fundamentalist anti-re-imagining group that we ended up moving and sitting with Gina Powers.

- Really?

- Yeah, who knew her and was able to keep that under control and I think it was that one or maybe it was one of the following ones where I actually had to go out on the floor and ask somebody to leave.

- Really?

- Yeah. And somebody from the IRD who registered, wanted to register as a participant but we said no because people were promised that there'd be some confidentiality and we knew if they were there, they'd be writing about it and so forth. And we sent them their money back and said, "You can come as press and it won't cost you anything," but they still tried to get out on the floor.

- Do you remember why the person was asked to leave?

- Because they were press and they were supposed to stay in the press.

- And they were sitting at the round tables?

- Trying to.

- They tried to, I see.

- Yes, yes.

- Do you remember, were you expecting that these groups would come?

- We were expecting something but we didn't really know what because when some of the publicity went out, there was a reporter here in town, also United Methodist, by the way, was a religious reporter for the local paper and she published some of the words of one of the rituals that talked about the women's menstrual flow, et cetera, part of what it means to be a woman and that just caused this explosion from the

right wing. And so we figured because they're already, even before the thing had started, we were getting that kind of thing.

- And was that a surprise, do you think? How did people feel or react to that?

- I don't think we went into it thinking we were gonna have people, what should I say, react in the way that they did. It's just something, and it was, and we knew that they were going into some of the workshops. I have a friend that happens to be a lesbian pastor and she got outed because somebody went into the workshop and they were talking about the United Methodist self-avowed practicing homosexual and she laughingly joked, "Well, who's practicing?" And she got outed to her congregation.

- And what happened?

- Well she got moved, she ended up having to go on honorable location. And so, you know.

- Yeah, yeah.

- That kind of thing already was starting there, it was starting there and then it just kinda got more and more as the Presbyterian laymen and IRD and the Good News folks started doing their publishing and it just was an interesting phenomenon, I really don't think we were expecting it.

- Yeah, well did the backlash affect you directly?

- No, and I think the reason is because I was looked on within the conference as being that radical. I was Chair of the Methodist Federation for Social Action chapter here and when we would put in legislation at annual conference, we believed that people should know who it was that was putting in the legislation and we put in Methodist Federation for Social Action, Mary Lee Fithian, Chair, and so everybody thought I was writing it but I wasn't, we just wanted to know who the people were, and so I was looked on as kinda radical by a lot of people. And so, no, it didn't. The one thing I did have was that our bishop had been on the advisory committee, just for names of important people and one of the people in the Minnesota Good News group called me on the phone and said, "I see our bishop was on your advisory committee," and I said, well yeah, she's listed there, but I can't think of a time we ever asked her for any advice and he said, "Oh, thank you," and he hung up. So no, personally, it didn't, because they knew how I would respond.

- Yes, yeah. So how did you react when this was happening?

- Well I was annoyed, I was angry, and I was sad because, and it goes on today yet in the church, because we should be, even if we aren't of one mind, as John Westley said, you know, can't we love one another, can't we get along? And obviously, the answer is no. And we had intended just to have one conference and that was gonna be it, and then with this backlash, we knew we couldn't let it go.

- I wanna hear more about that, Mary Lee.

- Well. There was a lot of discussion about how we should respond by the committee.

- This was the committee that planned the conference.

- Yeah, well at that point, that's what there was.

- Yes, right.

- When we were evaluating and doing the thing and it was finally decided that we were not going to respond in the same way they were responding to us, that what we were going to do was what you do when you're nonviolent, you respond with love, you love your enemy, you love people that are attacking you but we also saw what was happening to people, people who lost jobs, people who were suddenly a litmus test if they wanted to be ordained, did you attend that conference? Well sorry, we're not going to ordain you. Just real problems, particularly, in particular denominations I remember somebody who'd been on the planning committee who didn't want anybody to know she had been on the planning committee 'cause she was just going into a new job out east in a kinda conservative area, her husband had just been called to a church and she was afraid of what was gonna happen, and so that should not happen to people, life shouldn't be that way, and I'm still kinda angry and annoyed at it, so what we'd decided to do was to become an organization and we formed the Re-Imagining community, we got a 5013C, we met on a regular basis, we had a steering committee or a board, whatever you wanna call it, and officers and we began advertising that we were still around and we started this wonderful newsletter that Nancy and Pam did and eventually was basically Nancy and again, a thing that helped women realize that they were created like god, in the image of god, that they could do theology even if they weren't professional theologians and that was just, and that went on for 10 years.

- And just one other thing, was it a fairly easy decision, did the committee quickly come to the decision that we need to form an organization, we need to do more conferences?

- I think we did a lot of discussion about how we were gonna respond, but the thing that we did decide, definitely, is we weren't going to do what they were doing to us, we weren't going to attack back.

- Yes, yeah.

- And so I can't even remember exactly how we ended up becoming an organization, but we did, and so I was on that board for awhile and then at one point I became one of the co-chairs.

- Oh, do you remember, did you help in planning, do you remember roughly when you would have been a co-chair?

- It was probably end of the '90s or early 2000, I think. I left in 2003 because we were moving to California and that was the year that they decided to disband because we were all getting older, we just, somehow or

other, young people tend to think that after the fight's been fought, that the fight's over. Sorry to use that kinda language, but it doesn't, if you don't stay on it, it just comes back and so we had a hard time involving younger women and just to go outside of Re-Imagining, I have daughters, so my own daughters, when they went on to college didn't think that they had to deal with anything to do with feminism anymore, it was all done, our parents had done this, our mothers and so forth had taken care of, everything was okay now and then my oldest daughter when into biochemical engineering, she wanted to be a biochemical engineer and she hit the classes where they would say, "Well what's a beautiful girl like you doing here?" And all of a sudden, she's starting to see, no, it hasn't been solved, it's just sorta underground now and she went out of there and ended up into biochemistry and got her degree there and ended up in law school.

- Wow.

- But that's a jump, but what I'm saying is that generation just wasn't ready to do anything and by the time the rest of us got to 2003, we're in our 70s, most of us, not all of us, but most of us and you just get tired after awhile.

- And you were involved the whole 10 years of the community. On the committee or co-chair.

- And I also volunteered in the office when we didn't have staff, we only had part-time staff so I was in the office answering questions and answering the phones.

- Were you actually able to participate in some of the later conferences?

- Yeah, yeah, I did, one or two of them, I didn't go to all of them but I went to one or two of them.

- Yeah.

- Yeah.

- Well you have a lot of experience here so it would be really helpful to hear what aspects of Re-Imagining were most significant to you and why.

- Well one was that we were able to reach so many women who were out there alone and I mean, there are still some of the small groups that we had formed that are going, have been for almost 25 years and that's significant, I think, I think that's really significant and that there began to be movement even among male clergy, et cetera, to be thinking more about what the language was in the church, in the services, and so forth, I think they've gotten away from that a little bit now, but starting to see that there were things happening in churches, at least the more progressive churches, that were positive and when I say positive for women, I really mean it's positive for everybody, 'cause if it's positive for women, it's gonna be positive for men as well. But our target audience was those women who just thought, "My place in the kitchen, in the Sunday school, "and in the choir."

- How do you think Re-Imagining helped with that, what did Re-Imagining do?

- I think it stirred the hearts of people, I think it stirred the hearts of people both negatively and positively but it did, it stirred something in the lives of people, in the hearts of people that caused them to think differently about their relationship to god, relationship to Jesus Christ, the relationship to the church and to one another.

- And did it do that for you?

- Pretty much. Yeah, and I was in churches where sometimes I had to deal with that from this angle.

- The underground, the resistance.

- Yeah, but always managed to say, "Well we're not singing "that hymn because look at the language." That doesn't reflect my understanding of god and I'm the boss today.

- And how do people respond to that?

- Most of them would say, "Oh okay," but then we would talk about it and explain, and one church I was in, they'd had a woman pastor at one point, but that must not have been a good experience because she ended up going out of ministry, at least parish ministry, so then there were several pastors in between and some of them had been bad experiences for them so when they got this woman, they didn't know, this lady came up to me and she said, "What do we call you?" I said, "Well what did you call," and I named one of the former pastors. "Well we called him by his name." And I said, "Well that's what you do me." "We don't call you ministress?" And I looked at her, I said, "If you ever do, I'm gonna kick you in the butt." And then I walked away. And that was my exact language. And she appreciated that, and I never got called ministress. And they were people who were really supportive of my ministry, they'd say to me, "Mary Lee, you're working too hard. "Don't work so many hours," I mean, they really watched out for me but there still were areas where it didn't necessarily be women but it would be other groups like LGBT people in the church and so forth that we really had to start working on too. And I think this helped us in a sense to get a handle on that and to begin to do that.

- Re-Imagining did?

- Yeah, I think so.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yeah, yeah. Got us past some of the fears.

- So despite the backlash, you feel like the end result wasn't, it got past the fears, could you say a little bit more about that?

- In some churches, I think that they probably were churches where there was a sense of progressivism already, maybe not real actively progressive but they were not real fundamentalist and literal bible interpretation and that sort of thing, and yeah. I think it's had an impact but then over the last few years, I think that some of that's gone kind of by the wayside 'cause we haven't been able to keep the movement going. I saw it as what we ended up with as a movement and we just haven't been able to keep that going and I'm hoping that this new thing will start some of that again and some of the ways in which we're thinking about doing things will put us in a position where it isn't a bunch of old ladies talking down to young women.

- And as you think about moving forward with Re-Imagining, what do you think are the contributions in theology or liturgy, what contributions can it make to the next generations?

- Well I think that, whatever the contributions would be with language because language is a big thing that affects people kinda without their knowing it. When I would go home and I'd be crying and it took me a long long time to figure out what was going on. There was something deep inside of me and I think you could talk about it in a lot of places now where you couldn't have talked about it before, could say, "Hey, isn't there a better way of saying this?" And I think that it can contribute to the fact that people can start to question, they can question the theology that's being preached in their church, they can question what's happening, are we a church that's sitting back and just being comfortable and coming to church on Sunday and having our bible study on Wednesday and so forth, and not doing anything outside the walls?

- Mhmm.

- I think that all of that.

- How would you compare where we are today to where we were in 1993?

- Well I think we're way ahead of 1993.

- In what ways?

- I don't think I'd be shunned. I think we're at a point where women just need to be reminded and other people need to just be reminded.

- Reminded of?

- That this isn't an all-man's world, man's church, man's god, we can bring it up pretty much without fear, at least in some places.

- Yeah, yeah. What do you think is the greatest legacy of the Re-Imagining community?

- The greatest legacy is having women's voices heard.

- And when you say women's voices, are you thinking of the speakers?

- I'm thinking of that, but I'm also thinking that from that has expanded into those who weren't speakers but are now able to say, "Hey, what about this?" or "Hey, I'm not so sure about that thing." Or, "Do we always have to use that kind of language?" Women's voices can be heard.

- Mhmm, mhmm. How did your involvement in the Re-Imagining change your perspective on feminist theology and/or the church, if it did?

- It probably didn't because I think I was already pretty much there, but I did, probably heard more, different voices than I would have if it had just been up to me to read, because it was all there in one place or it led me to things that I could read and that I could hear in other venues that I wouldn't have otherwise.

- There's talk about a Re-Imagining website and do you have any thoughts about what we should include, who would benefit, and how could they find out about it, any thoughts about the website?

- I think we wanna list resources for people.

- Such as?

- Well if somebody writes a really good article someplace, a lot of us won't know about it unless there's somebody who tells us and so the website can do that kind of education, I think it can maybe a question-answer kind of format somewhere along the way.

- And who would do the answers?

- Well that could come and we could say, "Oh, well what do you think?" and we could say, "Well here's what we think."

- Okay, yes.

- Somebody else may have another viewpoint, here's a resource, you could go, I mean, you know, I don't know, just thinking.

- Good! No, this is good, brainstorming is good.

- Brainstorming is good. Yeah, I haven't really done a lot of thinking, you've probably done a lot more thinking about it than I have at this point.

- Who do you think would benefit from it?

- Would would benefit from it?

- Yes.

- Well, I think women in seminary, one place, women who don't go to seminary. I think, I remember the newsletter where we had interviews of people and there was always a theological discussion going on someplace, kind of a little more academic but theology talked or said in a way that the common person can understand it. That's, we have a father of the month or something. (laughs) I don't know.

- Yeah! Oh this is good, this is good, creative, yes. This has been great, is there anything we haven't talked about or haven't discussed that you would like to add?

- I don't think so.

- Mary Lee, thank you so much.

- Yeah, you're welcome.

- Really appreciate it.