

- OK.
- Donna, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed and if I could first get some background information from you. Could you please say and spell your name.
- Donna Blackstock, that's D-O-N-N-A B-L-A-C-K-S-T-O-C-K.
- Oh, thank you very much, and Donna, are you lay or clergy?
- Excuse me, do not write Blackstone, okay.
- OK, it's Blackstock right.
- I get the other one all the time.
- I bet you do. (laughing) We want to make sure we get this right Donna. I don't blame you. Are you lay or clergy?
- I'm lay.
- Uh huh, and your denominational affiliation?
- Presbyterian Church USA.
- Thank you and Donna, when and where were you born?
- I was born in Salt Lake City in 1942.
- OK, where did you go to school? College, graduate school, divinity school any of those?
- I got my undergraduate degree at California State University in Los Angeles. They changed the name after I left, I never remember what it is now. Got a Masters degree at New Mexico State. Got a M.Div at Union Seminary in New York.
- What was your Masters degree in, besides, not the M.Div, the other one?
- The other one, oh yeah, that was Educational Administration in Multicultural Areas.
- Oh, interesting, OK.

- Then, well you were involved in curriculum development, is that correct?

- That's right.

- Good. So what work or ministry were you doing at the time of Reimagining Donna?

- I was providing the people who made up the let's see, made-up isn't a good term. Um, supervising the editorial staff. The editorial staff for curriculum and other educational resources.

- Good, was that in your title as Coordinator of Resource Development?

- No I think that was all the title because it's been so long. But, yes, Coordinator of Resource Development was I think the title. (both chuckling)

- Right, it is rather a long title, yes, and then what work or ministry did you do after Reimagining Donna?

- Basically the same thing until Ossinger moved to... Wait we were already there. I don't know.

- You were already where? In Louisville?

- No, okay yeah, we were in Louisville. So when we went to Louisville, that's when I became the Coordinator for Development of Educational Resources. And after Reimagining a couple or three years later, I became a publisher for educational resources. A few years after that, lost my job, that was stunning.

- Yes, yep, very common unfortunately. How and when did you first become aware of feminist theology?

- I was in New Mexico at the time, I worked for awhile in New Mexico for the Church. for Board for National Admissions. Then they restructured themselves and got rid of the Board National Admissions. I was working in Taos we had finally set up a center for children with learning disabilities in Taos. That was in the 70's, late 70's, then I started reading feminist theology. Really got pretty much into it and branched a little bit into church related stuff, but didn't really get into that until a little bit later when I moved to New York to work in the offices there. Then I had easy access to resources and stuff for teaching myself. After a while I decided I'd taught myself as much as I could, besides I turned myself off to seminary. Then I really got into it.

- Yes, I'm sorry, in New York, what offices were you working for in New York?

- In New York, I started out with the Christian Education Team developing curriculum. And I was a minister at that time.

- OK, Donna I'm intrigued. What lead you to even start reading feminist theology? Do you recall?

- Well, the same thing that lead me to read. I was reading theology written by men, reading the theology of the day, whatever it was. The Church had always been a part of my life and a part of my thinking in theology and so forth, and just kind of broadened out to theological reading and some feminist stuff I could get into. I don't remember a whole lot how I did that in those days (both chuckling)

- Well obviously you got very intrigued because you went on and pursued it even more.

- Yeah.

- So I'm curious, what brought you, I know you attended the 1993 Reimagining Conference, what lead you there, what made you go?

- Annie said go.

- Annie said? Annie King?

- Yeah. Women were staffed, they tried to be really friendly and close with each other because it was so rare to have women staff in those days and we were all learning, because there hadn't been that much in the women's leadership and so forth over the years, except in women's ministries. So I had to kinda look to them to learn how to do things. Annie said, hey this great conference is coming up and you don't want to miss it. Bring your staff and I said okay. Go tell my staff, hey there's this thing here we can go to. So we had a great time there.

- Yeah, did many of your staff go Donna?

- Almost all of my female staff went.

- You said you had a great time, I'm curious, what do you remember, I know it's been awhile, but what do you remember about that gathering?

- I remember the feeling that went with it, being part of this group which was part of. I don't know how to put it. It was kind of giving us bits, little bits of heaven I guess. Little bits of how it's gonna be when we all know how to act with each other.

- I might have missed a little bit of what you said, you said you figured out how to act together, is that what you said?

- I don't know what I said, something like that.

- OK.

- Peace, justice, good news.

- Yeah. Are there any particular moments that stand out for you?

- Not that I recall specifically. I know there were times when there were very high spirit going through the ritual or what ever was going on and other times you say oh brother because it was wonderful, because even when you thought that it was okay because you knew there was gonna be differences in the, it was ecumenical, it wasn't going to be Presbyterian, like the small bridges that it ought to be. It was great to be able to experience that.

- So overall, it was a positive experience for you it sounds like.

- Oh yeah.

- Yeah. Now I know you were aware of the backlash. Did it effect you directly Donna?

- Yes it did.

- In what way? Well, all of us at one point were vilified, and called names, in print and not in print, and we were all criticized. There were a lot of calls for our dismissal there were a lot of calls for women to be restricted not allowed to go to conferences because we were so dumb we didn't know the difference between Presbyterian and something else. That our travel money be taken away from us, all women's travel to be restricted until we could get an approval from somebody. None of this went into effect. But it does have an effect on you as you listen to yourself think it as people talk to you directly about how dependent and how they screwed up the whole theology of the church forever and ever and ever amen. Because you went to ecumenical conference and said Sophia and all kinds if things like that. It got pretty nasty, very nasty. The Church can be really nasty when it wants to, all of them.

- Could you say something about the, what were some of the charges that were laid against you and the other women who attended.

- Well, we didn't have official charges.

- I guess I was, what did people say about you?

- They said we were heretics, we were femi-nazis, we were I don't know what they called us a lot of other names.

- I know, well, first of all, how do you account for this backlash, were you surprised by it? And how do you account for it?

- I was surprised by it, because the church had been working pretty hard for the past several years to hire women on the staff and to mention the quality of the staff all that kind of stuff. I suppose that was part of

the backlash to that. Where men were getting scared that we were taking their jobs or something, and we didn't even know how to take them over. Because we didn't have our theology screwed on straight. I don't know, I'm not the kind of person who wants to mess with theology. And how to do those studies and so forth. So I don't really know that I can do any evaluation of it at the time, moving in that direction we were just trying to survive. I was just trying to bring home right away. Writing a couple of papers and showing them might be something. Showing what's going on, I don't know. But it was a bad time and there was a lot of fear that in my case since I was in higher management, that it could have a negative effect on everybody else's work and all our positions at work would be discredited because I couldn't think right, you know, theologically.

- Right, well I know one of the ways you reacted was by writing a response to the small Burgess paper, The Theological Appraisal.

- I know I let that one get away.

- Yes, so I'm very interested in the background to that. I've read it and I was very interested in reading it. So what motivated you, I assume, was then, well, tell me some more about what lead you to write that response.

- There, what they wrote was ridiculous. How can you not go to a conference, and then sit and write an evaluation of it? And accuse all your colleagues of mal-theological practice? That's it, they weren't going to get away with that without some kind of response from somebody. Since I was one of the writers, I just decided I better write something. So I decided to look at what they had, and took apart all his stuff that I thought needed to be picked apart and exposed, so that was basically what I was doing, hoping that somewhere, someplace in the Church there were some sane people who could see this and not be railroaded by those other two as well.

- I'm curious Donna, did you, they were at the theology office or something, did you know them personally?

- Oh yeah, we were on the same larger staff, the Congregational Ministries staff. I think that was it, a little something. Plus I could keep the names straight for a few years. Anyway we were on the same staff, we would go to staff meetings, was kind of interesting.

- What was it like to be on the same staff while this is going on?

- Yeah, so we were sitting around this table having a staff meeting and another Director passed around a copy of the paper and it was discussed some. And the whole staff seemed to agree with me, except for a couple of men. Small and Burgess, but there we were on the same staff, sitting side-by-side while all this was going on and me just finding out our side of the controversy.

- How were you able to deal with that?

- I just did my writing thing and let it go. So I'd done that and after a while I thought Joe and I we had previously, before the conference had ever happened he and I would try to come to some sort of amiable terms because we were on the same staff and we needed to be able to work more graciously with each other than we had been doing. So we had made some small steps in that direction and I finally decided well, paper or no paper, I'm gonna go speak to Joe and see where we are. So I did, you know they just agreed that we would try to work together when we had to, even if we didn't agree on anything.

- Was this Joe, was he Small, was this Joe Small?

- Yes.

- OK Yeah, how was your paper distributed? I found a copy in the archives, but I wasn't clear who received it, or how it was.

- Me neither.

- Oh, okay.

- I wouldn't have had a copy, so thank you for the one that you sent.

- Of course, of course. Was it mostly just an internal thing that was circulated among the staff?

- I think it was printed in the Outlook at one point. I'm not sure on it, but I think shortly after I wrote it they grabbed it and asked if they could print it and they did.

- Good, I can check on that.

- Feels like a dream or something but I'm pretty sure it happened. I don't know really other ways to get distributed I didn't have a way to distribute it. I don't know if anyone ever picked that up and did something with it.

- Because the Small Burgess statement was adapted and published in the Christian Century.

- I think they would always get the publicity.

- Small and, those two people would get publicity?

- They would, if they had the chance they're theologians. Whatever they say people sit up and listen.

- Did you get any response to what you wrote Donna?

- Yes, there were some women here and there across the country who wrote and said thank you, thank you,

thank you, thank you.

- What would you say was most significant to you about Reimagining? To you personally?

- Let's see. I guess it was the chance to get to sit around the table with people from other faiths, other forms of Christianity, other ways of understanding the holiness around us. I really appreciated that a lot, it was very meaningful.

- Did it change your view on feminist theology and / or the church at all Donna?

- It didn't change my views on feminist theology. But the whole backlash did have some effect on my views of the church. It was so hard to live in the Church at that time. Particularly if you were a woman. After I lost my job, there was quite a spell there where I just couldn't bare to go to church. It was just too painful, so it had an effect on my relationship with the Church. That was delayed effect I think.

- Was there a time when you feel like you could you wanted to return to church eventually?

- Well, I never totally left, I'd still go, sometimes I was going every Sunday again. I know I belong in the Church. That's part of who I am. I'm gonna get that reconciled some day.

- What is it that keeps you in the church, why do you feel you still belong?

- Well, first of all, it's the relationship that I have with God then I really love the church. I've been in the church my while life, I enjoy being part of whatever's happening, going to the General Assembly and see what they're doing and all kinds of stuff so. Actually church has always been very very important to me. I don't know, it's kind of strange not to be a part of it.

- Yeah. Well I have just a couple of final questions. What do you think is the greatest legacy of the Reimagining conference or community?

- I don't know because I was never really close to the Reimagine community, I was out on the fringe of but I think with their Sophia groups and the groups that carry on an stuff, they probably did crack a window open a little bit so that people could Reimagine. So I think that a wonderful legacy to have.

- Yeah. You know part of the goals of Reimagining was to bring feminist theology and inclusive language to the church. In your experience do you feel as if that has happened?

- Yes and no. In education and in our educational resources and our Presbyterian Publishing Corporation we all have been writing editing, printing, in inclusive language since 1978. You would never know that because even though that's the way that we write it and print it up people just skip over all the inclusive language and use plain old, well man is everybody. It drives me nuts when you work so hard to smooth out the language so it doesn't look all bumpy and disjointed with the inclusive language, make it read well and so

forth. And then there's people who say, well how come we don't have inclusive language. Well we do, it's just kind of nutty.

- Why do you think that it's not actually used then, after all that work why so you think that its not.

- Well people don't realize what they're doing. They just, well, we take Sunday school classes this one year, and help them use the material and this one woman, when we gather the kids around, she said okay, now we're gonna have a story about Jonah. Jonah was the only word that she used that we had in the material.

- Wow.

- People just take the stuff and they do whatever they want to with it. Even to not being able to read the material and saying anything in the class that's in the material. So its really mind boggling, so they own you and they'll eventually type teflon. Some people just read it, then it doesn't end up being imposed, but some people they sort of see what it is and sort of talk it out and (audio skips out)

- It must be frustrating.

- Yah, it is. But we keep plugging away. Well I don't know what they're doing now, I haven't been there, but I think they keep plugging away at it.

- Well Donna, this has been really helpful. Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't discussed?

- Not that I can think of.

- Well, I really appreciate it. I'm gonna turn off the recording now, but thank you so much.

- You're welcome.