

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project  
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Rev. Catherine Houchins  
March 11, 2019**

Interviewer: Joel Bowers

Interviewee: Reverend Catherine Houchins

Date: March 11th, 2019

Location: Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge, 806 Jamison Ave SE, Roanoke, Virginia

Transcribed by: Joel Bowers, Claudia Dodd, Shamira James, Dalton Rogers, Khira Smith

Duration: 56:00

Topics:

0:00 = childhood in Christiansburg, Virginia (c. 1951 – 1969); experiences in college (c. 1969 – 1973)

2:25 = religious upbringing

4:08 = understandings of sexuality; first lesbian relationship (c. 1970s); life in New Jersey; living in the closet

7:50 = moving back to Virginia, to Portsmouth (c. 1979); coming out; discovering the MCC congregation in Norfolk, Virginia (early 1980s)

11:07 = experiences at the MCC church in Norfolk, Virginia (early 1980s)

13:26 = Becoming clergy at an MCC congregation in Ventura, California (c. 1986 - 1997); and then becoming clergy at MCC of the Blue Ridge in Roanoke, Virginia (1998)

15:33 = MCC community engagement in Roanoke (c. 1998 – mid-2000s); the Backstreet Cafe shooting (2000) and aftermath

19:38 = the AIDS Crisis (1980s-1990s) and experiences as a pastor at that time

21:27 = The Wasena Park police sting on gay men cruising, and aftermath (1998-1999)

24:02 = Coming out to her parents

26:26 = On being an out LGBTQ pastor; churches and controversies around sex and LGBTQ

29:10 = Changes in Roanoke's LGBTQ community from the 1990s to today; reflections on Pride in the Park & the LGBT Library

33:12 = "Open and affirming" churches vs. MCC

35:56 = Reflecting on personal changes over time

38:22 = Mel White and Souforce vs. Jerry Falwell; knowing when to be in your face vs. step back

41:49 = Challenges for Roanoke's LGBTQ community today

44:30 = Retirement, and return to pastoring

45:52 = Absence of an LGBTQ publication in Roanoke

47:58 = MCC's community engagement today

49:12 = Rebuilding MCC's congregation; community outreach in SE Roanoke

52:54 = Closing Remarks

00:00 [checking sound levels ~ 8 seconds]

00:09

JB: This is Joel Bowers interviewing Reverend Catherine Houchins for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project: Oral History Initiative. We are sitting in the Metropolitan Community Church of Roanoke on the 11th of March, 2019.

So Reverend, where were you born?

00:29

RCH: Catherine is fine.

JB: Catherine is fine?

RCH: Yes.

JB: Perfect. Where were you born?

00:35

RCH: I was born here in Roanoke. My family moved around. I actually lived in Woodstock for a little bit, but I grew up in Christiansburg. [Which is] up the road near Blacksburg.

00:45

JB: That's awesome. How long did you live in Blacksburg?

00:50

RCH: In Christiansburg. I lived there until I went to college when I was eighteen. Then I went to Bluefield College, which is a Baptist college, for two years. Then I went down to Tennessee to Carson Newman, which is also a Baptist college, for two years.

1:04

JB: Interesting. What did you study in college?

1:09

RCH: My major was English and Education. I had a minor in Religion.

1:12

JB: Nice.

1:14

RCH: I taught for six years in Parochial Baptist Christian schools.

1:20

JB: Wow, interesting. So, did you grow up in the Blacksburg area?

1:26

RCH: I grew up there until I went to college when I was 18 and have seldom been back to live there at all, except for a couple of weeks one time.

1:35

JB: How was your college experience? What lead you to want to do Education and also Religion?

1:47

RCH: Well, I think that probably the education was something my parents had really pushed, you know? Neither of them graduated from high school and it was never “if you go to college” it was “when you go to college.” So, teaching seemed to be an obvious thing. I did not want to be a nurse and at that time, fifty years ago, a lot of women were not jumping into being doctors and such. So I got an education. I grew up in the church from the time I was three, so religion was always a part of my life, my experience. I had some great teachers at Bluefield. I had a Dr. Delgato and at Carson Newman Dr. Bill Glovens, who was just amazing. And it just was a natural fit.

2:25

JB: That’s nice. You said that you grew up in the church since you were three, how was that? What denomination was it?

2:35

RCH: I have to say... it was a Southern Baptist church. I have to say that, again, in that time period, homosexuality was not discussed much in any area but even in church. It was a fairly moderate, moderately conservative congregation. They did not allow women, of course, to be deacons or preach but they let me speak often. But you just couldn’t say that you were preaching, you spoke. It was a good experience, I learned a lot. I learned a lot about public speaking. I received a lot of positive feedback from people when I did speak, and today I have no trouble speaking in front of any sized group.

3:17

JB: Nice. How was it growing up religious?

3:24

RCH: Well, I was kind of, [what] might be called Catholic Christian. I was a real sweet little girl. I didn't get in trouble. I didn't drink. I didn't smoke, mainly because my parents smoked and I never wanted to do that. And if I ever got caught drinking I would be put under the house. And so it just wasn't a part of my experience. I, of course, was not out at that time. A lot of young people weren't aware, and if you did you had other thoughts about it. I didn't have any sort of LGBT experience until after my junior year of college. It wasn't a struggle then. People just assumed I didn't date a lot because I was such a little church girl.

4:08

JB: Interesting. You mentioned it wasn't until your junior year of college that you had any experience with LGBTQ. What was it like growing up? I can imagine it was lonesome knowing you were gay but not being able to express it or be yourself?

4:40

RCH: Well, I had a lot of friends and, again, I'm not sure that term really came to my mind. It was just not something that came to mind. People didn't talk about it, and if they did it was, you know, "that guy over there," and that sort of thing. I knew I was different. I knew I was different from like six or seven, but didn't have any concept, didn't have any words for it. I had lots of crushes on girls that of course went nowhere [*laughter*] and was not even acknowledged. I was working in a camp, a summer camp for the youth group, the summer of my junior year, summer after my junior year. I fell head over heels for the director, who was 12 years older than I, and just got very involved in her life. I barely made it out of college because of that, and we were together for almost eight years.

5:35

JB: Really?

RCH: Hmm-hmm.

5:38

JB: Did that affect any of your religious views?

5:47

RCH: It didn't interfere with any of my religious views because I always knew that God loved me and that God accepted me. One of the good things about the Baptist faith is that they teach you this internal authority, between me and God. And I knew that was a clear open path. That was good. The problem [in] those eight years was being extremely closeted. I don't think either of us ever said "gay" and I know we didn't say "lesbian." You know? Any of that whatsoever. No acknowledgment whatsoever, verbally. So that was always kind of the thing with me. I mean we lived together. We're teaching in Christian schools and we're 12 years apart but it was

always “Ms. so-and-so and Cathy.” Obviously there was an awareness of some connection there. So the closet got really tight. And in 1978 I was teaching in New Jersey, I went to a conference for Christian school teachers and one man said, “I can’t imagine ever doing anything in my life other than teaching in Christian schools.” And my brain screamed, “Not me. Not me.”

6:55

JB: Really?

6:56

RCH: Shortly thereafter, I walked into our apartment in New Jersey, and I always look up when I say this because the radio was on top of the refrigerator, and the radio was on and they were just announcing that Harvey Milk had been killed. In November 1978. I didn’t know who Harvey Milk was, never heard of him, but my spirit knew when I heard that, I had a connection. Shortly thereafter I began making plans to move back to Virginia, to leave that relationship. I couldn’t stand the walls and it’s just like that’s my little watermark time, November 1978.

7:36

JB: Wow. You found as time went on that it was too much to be that closeted?

7:44

RCH: Yes.

7:45

JB: ...To be that intimate with her but not being able to ...

7:50

RCH: No one knew. I didn’t know any gay people. I didn’t know any LGBT, and there wasn’t even a Q at that time [*laughter*]. I didn’t know any folks. When I moved back to Virginia, I moved back to Portsmouth, Virginia where I had lived before. And, again, I didn’t know anyone. I started out working in a truck stop part time to get some money to survive. A friend of mine that I made there was a gay man. He began telling me about Metropolitan Community Church, and for three years he pushed me to go until I finally went. But, he introduced me to some people. I came out to my... I later got a job at the public library. I came out to my boss there because there was a young man there who was flamingly queer. I knew that one day someone was gonna to say something to and or about him, and I didn’t want to get caught in the backwash. “Well, what about her?” So I went to my boss and said, [and] she just laughed. I’ve never had anybody say “Yeah, I knew.” It’s always a surprise to people from my past. But, anyhow, I came out to her and then slowly began working into the community there in Portsmouth.

9:03

JB: In Portsmouth, Virginia?

9:05

RCH: Portsmouth, Virginia, yes.

9:06

JB: Where about is that?

9:07

RCH: It's near Norfolk, near Virginia Beach. After I got involved in the church then, my first pastor, I was called to a church in Ventura, California. Which is just north of Los Angeles. I had a delightful 11 years out there, would love to be there today if I won the lottery.

9:29

JB: If you won the lottery. If we all could win the lottery. You mentioned it took three years for him to get you to go to church, what was the reason? Was it because of your foundation in a Baptist church and not wanting to leave Baptist? Or...?

9:49

RCH: I wasn't going anywhere those three years. At all. The churches I had been involved with before, when I lived in that area before, they were all pretty strict. And I was very careful not to out my former partner like I didn't use her name a while ago. When the word got out, they would often come to my door and try to re-save me. So, I was just avoiding it all. I also didn't go to Metropolitan Community Church because I had heard very little about it. All I knew, it was a church where a lot of gay people went. In my mind it was like, "I'm not sure." When I finally decided, I was at a really low place and decided I had to do something. I would go, the church was in Norfolk, and there was a street, a body of water called the Hague, and the church. I would go, before that church started, and sit and watch across the water to see what kind of people were going in there. After about three weeks of that, I finally got my nerve and went, went over there.

10:56

JB: What were you looking for in particular?

11:00

RCH: I think I wanted to see if they looked like regular people. I know that sounds so strange.

11:06

JB: That's not strange.

11:07

RCH: I was looking to see if anyone carried a bible in. I was looking to see how many people were going in. Men? All men? All women? What was the case there? I'm having a little bit of statistics in the back of my head all the time, checking out groups. I just wanted to see what was all that. The first three Sundays I went, the minute it got close to the ending cause I looked in the bulletin and they would join hands and sing the Lord's Prayer. I don't want anybody touching

me. Not because they were gay, but because I was so internalized. I would leave right before that. The third Sunday the pastor chased me down the steps and said, “You! Come back here. Who are you? You laugh at the right places. You know what I’m talking about, stuff in the Bible, who are you?” And that person was my first-ever female pastor, my first-ever African American pastor, and of course, my first lesbian pastor. I was scared to death. I stopped and talked to her very quickly [*laughter*]. So yeah ... I didn’t have any trouble aligning myself in God. Jesus had been in my life forever, but I wasn’t sure that there were that many other people who had also had that experience, not judging. I just didn’t know there were others. And then later on, long story, I won’t get into it right now, we were in the newspaper and one man came running in one Sunday, literally ran into the church, his name was James, and he said, “I saw this article, and I thought that I was the only gay Christian in the world.” Now again, this is like 1982-83, and it was just wonderful that he found us. But he had been living for years, he was probably about forty at that time, and living for years thinking that he was the only gay Christian in the world.

13:01

JB: That’s lonely, and to find this community, yeah it’s definitely possible. That’s for sure. That’s awesome. So, that was how you got involved with MCC?

13:16

RCH: Mmhmm.

13:16

JB: How did you end up getting into Los Angeles?

13:22

RCH: That’s where my first church was, [it] was just north of Los Angeles.

13:25

JB: Well how did you get to be...?

13:26

RCH: Well they sent out these little fliers. I had become licensed as clergy...it’s the step to get ordained, the denomination had ordained me as clergy, the Metropolitan Community Church denomination. We have churches all over the world, and I had gone through a bunch of classes and tests and things and I’d been ordained. And churches, when they were looking for a pastor, back in that day before the internet, they would send out fliers. And I had picked up one that had come to our church, and at that time I really liked collecting eagles. Our God is like an eagle and on eagle’s wings and all of that stuff. I looked at this folder and I thought, “oh, that’s nice” and located at the very bottom, there was an eagle. And I thought, “Okay.” I never expected to go across the country, but that’s how I got to Los Angeles, and from there I got into some groups there, and I actually took... one of the schools had classes, one of the churches had a school, MCC churches, and I actually took a class on “Lesbian 101,” and lots of different groups— hearing different groups speak and be involved there, so like I said, I was there for 11 years.

Time came to come back, my parents were getting older, and [I] came back to Virginia. At that time, I had not been in the ministry for a couple of years, so I wasn't really coming back to a church. And I ended up working at a home for mentally challenged adults, down in the eastern part of the state, got back into the MCC there that I had been in before, [and] started coming here to Roanoke once a month to preach. They were without a pastor, and once a month my partner and I would drive out here to speak. They met at the Unitarian church at that time, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

15:07

JB: That's an odd Sunday service.

15:09

RCH: Very.

15:10

JB: Did you, were you able to have many people come?

15:14

RCH: I think that about that time, over there would be about 15-20 people who were looking and were new to MCC and looking. The church was founded here in 1986, which was the same year I moved to California.

15:26

JB: Oh really?

15:33

RCH: And I remember telling the denominational leaders, before the church was founded ... I said, "I don't know any gay people in Roanoke, but I know there have to be some there. I could smell them when I go by." You know, just laughing and teasing. So shortly, and I would tell people, "You've got to find some people in Roanoke," and so shortly after that, about the time I went to California, the church here was formed. So I came out here to preach and decided that I wanted to get back into ministry, so I began and was called as the full-time pastor here in 1998, and I was here for almost 10 years.

16:03

JB: Wow.

RCH: Got real involved in the community. We were very involved in Pride back in the day and other groups. We used to have a group called "ISM," Interfaith Sexual Minorities, and we would hold a big forum every year, we had Bishop Song...

16:21

JB: About when was this?



RCH: Um, 2005-6 maybe?

JB: OK.

16:28

RCH: Mary Boenke, I don't know if you've ever heard of her, she used to be really big in the community here, she had a daughter who was lesbian and then was trans.<sup>1</sup> She would get this together and it involved the Unitarian church and a couple of others and we would have different speakers come in. Jimmy Creech, who was a Methodist minister, he fought for performing gay marriages, he came and spoke once. [We became] involved with things like that. Then, of course when the shooting happened in 2000, I was very much put front and center. Because there wasn't a Diversity Center, there wasn't a contact person, and since MCC was the main group, yes, so immediately [we] got lots of interviews and things, which I made it very clear that I couldn't speak for the community. But you might want to go back and research that some. You can Google and find out lots about it there.

17:17

JB: Yeah definitely.

RCH: I was even interviewed on NPR.

JB: Really?

17:22

RCH: Yes. He tried, the interviewer, whose name I don't remember, kept trying to say, "Well, isn't this going to put everyone back in the closet?" and I said, "Well, that might happen, but that's not what is happening here." Because our church experienced a tremendous growth after that, because people found out that we were here.

17:39

JB: And hard times bring people together.

RCH: Uh huh. I conducted the funeral for the gentleman who was killed and at that time there was just media everywhere, and, again, it showed Roanoke in a good light because we didn't riot, we didn't tear down things, we didn't get into ... We presented as a community. We presented as a community. It was sad, horrible, and phenomenal times all at once.

18:06

JB: Yeah.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Boenke has recorded an oral history interview with the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, as well. Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Oral History Interview with Mary Boenke," October 6, 2016, [www.virginiaroom.org/digital/document/BoenkeMary](http://www.virginiaroom.org/digital/document/BoenkeMary).

RCH: In fact, Richard [Ward III], whom you were going to interview. I am sure you've heard of Matthew Shepard, and there was a group that at his service would put on angel wings to protect the family and whatever. Richard got people together and had them construct wings and be at the funeral for that, and he was in charge of pulling that together.

18:30

JB: Wow. What a strong community.

RCH: It can be.

JB: Yeah.

18:37

RCH: Like whether it's in Norfolk, Ventura, Los Angeles, or here, if all of the communities within the community could come together, there would be a phenomenal force. But there's lots of splinter.

18:53

JB: A lot of diversity.

RCH: Splintering.

JB: Splintering.

RCH: Diversity is when there's a lot of groups. Splintering is, in my mind, when the groups can't come together.

19:02

JB: Uh. Yeah.

RCH: [Refers to something off record]

JB: Oh I get it.

RCH: [*laughter*]

19:08

JB: Um, so you mentioned that you were down in southern Virginia working at a mentally handicapped...

19:27

RCH: Mentally challenged adults.

JB: Mentally challenged adults.

RCH: I was the Chaplin.

19:28

JB: You were the Chaplin and so that's why you weren't in the ministry for three years?

19:35

RCH: I had taken some time off.

JB: OK.

19:38

RCH: That was during ... I was in California in the late [19]80s, early '90s, as a pastor, and that was during the time when AIDS was rampant, and in four years, I buried 25 friends. And I probably performed in those four years about 50 to 100 funerals for people who just needed a pastor. That took a tremendous toll.

20:00

JB: I can only imagine.

20:04

RCH: And I had a hard time even letting God lead me back into ministry, and I surely had a hard time falling back in love with my gay men, brothers, because I had buried so many. And I've always been, I've always been a pastor who has an equal female-male congregation, so it's not like I am a separatist, but that hurt made me hesitant to renew those bonds. So I took some time off. I don't want to say that I was burned out. I was used up.

20:34

JB: Emotionally dried?

RCH: Mm-hmm. That's what having three funerals in this next two weeks, these last two weeks, has brought back some of that memory.

20:44

JB: I'm sure. It's never easy to bury the ones that you love. For sure.

20:53

RCH: And it is a blessing that God has given me a gift that if a family somewhere needs me to help with a funeral, I am very comfortable stepping in and getting to know them and doing it. When I was in Charlotte, I was there for eight years, two different couples in my church ran funeral homes, and whenever they had people who did not have a pastor, they would ask me to

come and be with the family and conduct their service. And because the experience that I had in the [19]80s and '90s, I was very comfortable quickly connecting and being able to share that.

21:27

JB: Yeah, so when you came to Roanoke, how did you, how were you able to become a minister here in Roanoke.

21:35

RCH: Well because my denomination was licensing. My license was good anywhere, my ordination was good anywhere in the denomination. And this was an MCC, and so they called me, voted on me, and brought me.

JB: How cool.

21:49

RCH: And not long after I got here was when the gentlemen were arrested in the park for soliciting, for talking about soliciting. I don't know if you're familiar with that case or not.

21:58

JB: No, could you refresh me just a second.

22:00

RCH: I'm trying to get some time frame in. I think it was around 2000, the police did a sting in a local park [Wasena Park] and they arrested 12 or 13 men for talking about having sex. And supposedly in the state of Virginia, I was told, talking about a felony is a felony.

22:20

JB: Really?

RCH: And so, they were taken to court. Sam Garrison was their lawyer. Sam is no longer here but he was one of the main lawyers in the Watergate hearings. Way ancient history. And he was a lawyer here in town, and he was in charge of these gentlemen. And, of course, I was trying to work with them, and I got called to testify before the courts here about, I'm not quite sure what. He called me as a witness to talk about being able to be fully human and gay, and life, liberty—his [Sam] thing was “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was his battle cry. And I'll never forget when the Commonwealth attorney came to talk to me. First of all, he said, “Ms. Houchins,” and I said, “that's Reverend please.” And then he said, “Have you... how many times have you had sex,” and I was thinking, “what?”

23:20

JB: That's a very personal question.

23:21

RCH: ...and then he said, “how many times have you had sex in a park,” and I’m going—I’m still lookin’—he said, “in Virginia?” And I said, “oh, good, never.”

23:33

JB: In Virginia, oh [*mutual laughter*].

23:35

RCH: But that was the week before my partner and I were headed to California for a big conference. My parents were still living in Christiansburg; they got the *Roanoke Times*. They always watched WDBJ, so before I went to court that day, not knowing how it was gonna happen, I had to basically come out to my parents officially.

24:01

JB: Yeah.

24:02

RCH: Especially my father. And when I told him the situation, and he said, “well, a felony for talking about a felony? That’s a stupid law.” He didn’t even go into the other.

24:12

JB: Really?

24:12

RCH: Yeah, so that got me real involved in the community because of standing up and representing us at that time.

24:21

JB: Mhm. And I’m sure the support for the... your father’s response really helped.

24:30

RCH: It was really positive. It was the only time, in my whole life, that we ever talked about LGBT issues.

24:37

JB: And from then on, was it the only time?

24:39

RCH: There was never anytime after that. He died about 12, 13 years ago, so there were a bunch of years.

24:46

JB: Yeah.

24:47

RCH: We never talked about it.

24:49

JB: And your mother?

24:50

RCH: My mother was interesting because when I first came out to her when I was in Norfolk way back, I'm jumping around...

25:00

JB: Oh, so you came out to her...

25:01

RCH: ...I came out to her in a letter.

25:02

JB: Okay.

25:02

RCH: In a letter. And her first comment when she talked to me was, "if you'd only told me we could've gotten you help," and I said, "I don't need any help." And she went on and on and on. And I finally said, "mom, do you want me to tell you the people that come in the grocery store where you work every day that I've had crushes on?" That kinda stopped that. She finally came to hear me preach. I was visiting from California and was asked to preach at MCC here, and I invited her and two of my aunts. And the aunts came, and my mom and I were driving home back to Christiansburg from being here. And she looked at me, she said, "there should've been more people there to hear you," which I took as a sort of left-handed compliment. *[laughter]*

25:49

JB: Yeah.

25:50

RCH: The fact that, a) she thought there might've been more gay people in Roanoke, but, also, that she was complimenting me. She came to hear me preach twice. She died about a year and a half ago. She came to hear me preach twice when I was here ten years ago. Yeah, and she was uncomfortable, but she came. And in our church, we serve communion every Sunday.

26:13

JB: Yeah.

26:13

RCH: All three times she was at MCC, she came to me for communion.

26:17

JB: Really?

26:17

RCH: Very poignant.

26:21

JB: Aw, how special. And...

26:26

RCH: So, one of the things they asked me when I came here to be the pastor for the first time, one of the gentlemen said, “now, your parents live thirty miles up the road, thirty-five miles up the road, are you gonna be able to be out with our church?” And I said, “I’m called to be your pastor, and I’ll be everything I have to be. My parents will have to deal with that because I’ve been in that closet so long before there’s no way I can walk back in the closet.” And I can’t be an MCC pastor, not that MCC is all about LGBTQ...

26:59

JB: Of course.

27:00

RCH: It’s a Christian church, and a good number of our folks are [LGBTQ]. We have a couple of heterosexual families that have begun coming along with other heterosexual folks, but there’s no way that if I’m gonna be authentic that I could be a pastor here and deny who I am and all the things I am.

27:20

JB: As you shouldn’t. As nobody should.

27:23

RCH: Exactly. But you know there are a lot churches out there, with very closeted pastors, not MCC’s necessarily. Of course, the local.... the reason they choose the Methodist church [is that] they go really hard on Methodist pastors who are closeted.

27:39

JB: Yeah. I believe that happens everywhere. It’s just...

27:43

RCH: This one’s been really public.

27:43

JB: Yeah.

27:43

RCH: [*laughter*]

27:46

JB: Everything hits the fan eventually, I believe.

27:47

RCH: Mhm. Well, Southern Baptists have been through it many times, and they're going through the sex scandals now.

27:54

JB: Mhm.

27:54

RCH: The Catholic church, ya know, it's just, it's an inability for people to be who they are, regardless. Be who they are both in gender identity and to whom they are attracted to, whom they want to be with, to be who they are where they stand on Biblical issues, not just those few verses, to be who they are about social issues, and people just are hesitant to just be themselves. The person you see sitting here talking to you is the person you'll see in that pulpit on Sunday. I just can't do that duality.

28:31

JB: Yeah. Live a double life.

28:32

RCH: Mhm.

28:35

JB: It's a lie. We're not supposed to live in lies. So, in your time in Roanoke, from.....well even growing up here, what would you say, I mean I know a lot of things have changed, what would say is the biggest change, the biggest changes?

28:59

RCH: In the LGBT community or...?

29:00

JB: LGBT community or Roanoke's perception of it and the community aspect of it...

29:10

RCH: Well, I think Roanoke is slowly realizing they're not a little railroad town, and they're not just all white, sliced bread. When I lived here to go to California in 1986, there were very few ethnic restaurants; no nice, big chain restaurants. And when I came back, it was like, "oh my



goodness.” Like at Tanglewood [mall], that was brand new when I came back [*laughter*]. But I think that what I’ve seen in the, basically, twenty years I’ve been associated here, is that the LGBTQ community has gained more personhood. More ability to speak out and be involved in other things. Although, this community was more out than some I’ve lived in way back then. I came to my first Pride, came up from Norfolk to go to Pride here one time when I first heard about the church being here. That was probably about 1997-8 and it was, then, in one of the parks, I don’t remember which, but a smaller park. It really was a little picnic.

30:21

JB: Yeah.

30:21

RCH: Okay, with a few booths and things, and I remember driving through the park, and I wish I could call to mind the name of it. It had one driveway, okay, you know one driveway in, circle around, and about every third car had a big old rainbow on it.<sup>2</sup>

30:37

JB: Really?

30:37

RCH: And I thought, oh my goodness. Don’t they know people are gonna drive around here and see this? And there’s only one way out? [*laughter*] But, um, and it was a great time. I just saw Pride just grow so much through the early ‘90s, or the late ‘90s and early 2000s. It was a real exciting time. We had name-brand people coming in to be speakers and entertainers, and, so I’ve seen some of that falter a little bit, it appears, lately. I think that more people now than even twenty years ago are comfortable presenting who they are. I can remember I had a rainbow ring, and I was a little nervous about wearing that. One time I was in an elevator with a lady, and I had a necklace on that had rainbow rings on it, and she said, “oh, the rainbow, like Noah.” And I said, “yes ma’am, but, also, it stands for the gay community.” And, just, you know, several of my friends would have fallen over if they heard me say that back then. I like the fact that there’s a Diversity Center. I love the fact there’s the library. When Ed Harris first received the books that began the library—it was housed in our church for a long time. I, at various times, have gone through my library and given a lot of things there and I look forward to the day, one day, where that’s open and accessible to more people. So many of young people today, even though things are much more open about LGBT issues, there’s a lot of history they don’t know.

32:18

JB: Oh definitely.

32:19

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Houchins is referring to Highland Park.

RCH: And there's a lot of, um, not just history, but varied experiences, and sometimes you get that through books. I was a reference librarian for a while, too. *[laughter]* You get that from books that you may not ever experience. Patricia Nell Warren died about a month ago. She was one of the first popular gay book writers, and I say "gay" because it was just men. She was published; she was in public libraries. And my brain was so fogged, that the first time I read *Front Runner*, which is all about a gay boy and his coach, I missed the whole storyline. And my library friend gave it to me to read, and I go, "wait a minute," and I read the back cover and I thought, "let me read this again." So it's things like that, that you learn through reading, whether you have the experience or not, so I'm looking forward to more of that.

33:12

JB: Yeah.

33:12

RCH: Course, there are more, churches that use "open and affirming" in their publicity. And I'm glad that there are more that have that in their publicity. But when you start talking to them, how far does that go? Will they let you come sit in their pews? Of course. Will they let you donate money? Of course. Sometimes they'll let you sing in their choir and many of them have us playing their instruments when they don't even know it. But will they marry you? Will they bless your babies? Will they bury you? With your true authentic self? And more churches are coming into that, I'm not being selfish about this, and we have several communities here in town that are in the process. But I get a little bothered sometimes when a church in this neighborhood has a sign out front that says "All Welcome," and I know all are not welcome.

34:08

JB: Yes.

RCH: But it's not my calling to go knocking on their door and say "excuse me your sign is wrong." *[laughter]* What my job is to make sure that people knows these doors are open and that everyone's welcome.

JB: Well I think that's very evident from everything I've heard and I mean I've mentioned to a couple people that I am coming here to do an interview and all great things have been said.

34:35

RCH: Well now let's be real, there's gonna be some people that say...

JB: Well...

RCH: "Haven't you heard about that church?"

JB: Oh of course.

RCH: And my line after that is, "Come try us anew, come try us again."

34:37

JB: What would you say MCC's role is in the community?

RCH: I would like to hope that we're seen as a place of peace, a place of encouragement, a place of hope, a place where you can come, literally, just as you are. We're also seen in this neighborhood as a very active food pantry. We have a food pantry open one day a week. Last Thursday, in two hours we served twenty people which fed fifty-six people. Nonperishable goods. They come in and they pick out from the shelf in categories, what they need. I hope it's seen as that.

We're also seen as a meeting place, the Diversity Center, there's a very large NA meeting [Narcotics Anonymous] in here on Sundays. I would like it to become more and more a place where groups can come together. I also want it to be known as a place that if you have a spiritual need, whether that's to talk, to pray, to marry you, to bury you. That we're here, too.

35:56

JB: And how has your perception changed through growing up in Blacksburg.

RCH: Christiansburg.

JB: Christiansburg. How do I keep getting that wrong?

RCH: Because I said it was near Blacksburg because people know Tech [Virginia Tech]

JB: Oh yeah, yeah. So in Christiansburg, how would you say you have fully changed since then to now.

RCH: I'm much more open and comfortable in my own skin.

JB: Really?

RCH: I'm okay if people acknowledge all that I am if not. I went to a high school reunion and most people didn't want my partner—my partner didn't go with me at that time—most people didn't ask if I was married or had children because they knew, in one way or another. I did have one teacher, my typing teacher, he said "Are you still preaching?" Because of having been in the paper, with the shooting. And I thought that was really great.

36:57

RCH: My fiftieth high school reunion is coming up and they're putting together a little booklet and they did not leave a place for what you're doing now. And I asked about it, and I added my thing and she says "Oh of course, we would have asked that with everyone, but we know you're a preacher." So I can appreciate that, nobody's gonna use those letters. You know?

JB: Yeah.

37:21

RCH: But I see that for me the change has been that I had a good foundation, especially spiritually, but I had a good foundation. I was taught early on that you are who you are. The people that taught me that didn't know all the parts of that when they taught me that. And from that I was able to grow into, hopefully, who I am today. Be comfortable with being that for me, not requiring it for you, for anyone else, but being able to meet you where you are and help you to get to where you want to be, on all levels, not just religious levels. That answer what you were asking about?

38:00

JB: Yeah, what would you say has been the biggest struggle for you in Roanoke in dealing with, and this is in all aspects of just being gay in the area, or being religious and gay, or just, you know, the area in general.

38:22

RCH: One of the struggles is knowing when it's necessary, important, valid to bring up any of that.

JB: Yeah.

RCH: Another is to be able to do it in a way that will create understanding, not alienation.

JB: Yes.

38:39

RCH: I don't wear a big "L" on my chest, saying "By the way, my name's Catherine, I'm a lesbian." I don't deny that. This sort of goes back to another dynamic real quick. You may have heard of Mel White and he used to have a group that would go to various colleges, churches, groups, and try'nna convince them to stop the hate speech. And he had an organization and he came here and we all went to Jerry Falwell's church. And this had been set up ahead of time and Jerry—in fact, Mel had been a ghost writer for Jerry Falwell, you know who I'm talking about? Jerry Falwell, Thomas Roads Baptist Church.

JB: Okay.

RCH: ... anti-gay place....

JB: Yeah.

39:23

RCH: ...in Virginia, at least. And we were all supposed to be a bunch of us from Mel's group and a bunch from Jerry's and we were supposed to meet and have dinner. I grew up here. I knew what Jerry is all about. And I told Mel, I told the group, we're not going to have dinner because they will not eat with us. They would not eat with our kind of people.

JB: Yeah.

39:43

RCH: Dinner was canceled, of course. We got bottles of water we sat around and kinda talked. But I realized after that that Mel's calling was to go and confront, in your face. Almost like the ACT-UP group that started 35 years ago about AIDS. My calling is to learn your language, show you who I and my people are and win you over by love, win you over by finding out that gay people are not bare-butt drag queens in the parades, only.

JB: Only [*laughter*]

RCH: You know what I'm saying?

JB: Yeah.

40:18

RCH: Yeah, you know what I'm saying? Because a lot of people will, they will tell you they've never known a gay person. And you say "Oh yeah, you have, you may not have known, but you've known." But once they have a face, a person, and a label, they have a different confrontation they have to come up with then. How do I reconcile that neighbor of mine that will come sit with my elderly mother, knowing she lives with a woman, knowing you hear them say "I love you" all the time? How can I be anti-gay with this situation? So the challenge is knowing when to speak up and in what language. I had a neighbor today say, "You look really familiar." And she said something about, "I just feel like I've seen you somewhere." And she said that and I said, "Well, back in 2000 I was in the news a lot because..." "That's right! Because whenever I see you I think rainbows." [*laughter*] But she was very positive about it.

JB: Yeah.

41:22

RCH: Very positive. So the challenge is simply to be myself, and to be comfortable in my skin and in my spirit and be able to relate to people.

JB: That's great.

RCH: [*pause & laughter*]

JB: So...

41:49

RCH: I think one of the challenges for this community is to find a focus. To find a focus.

JB: Is there too many focuses?

RCH: Hm?

JB: Do you find that there's too many focuses?

RCH: I'm not sure there is a focus.

JB: Oh really?

RCH: My, again from the perception...

JB: Well of course.

42:01

RCH: ... that I've only been back here two years. I retired from Charlotte MCC, Charlotte, North Carolina. Came back here and they were without a pastor and I eventually became the part-time pastor here. So I was gone for a while in between there, but always connected with the people here. Pride is coming up in a few weeks...

JB: Yeah.

42:22

RCH: I haven't seen much advertisement about that. Haven't seen much publicity about it.

JB: I haven't heard of it.

RCH: We have a meeting tomorrow night, a phone conference with one of the leaders of it. If you want a good turnout for something like that, you need to get it out there.

JB: Social media.

42:39

RCH: One year there wasn't one I understand, it just never came together and so there needs to be that focus not just for entertainment and fun, but also for education and for being there, so people can know who we are and can know who we are among the community themselves. I don't see a lot of activities. Michael Smith has his brunches and I think that's great, I love him. Love Michael. But there needs to be more of those kinds of activities, too. That have a place for a lot of people, I just don't sense... a lot of direction I guess is the best way I can put it.

JB: I can see that.

43:22

RCH: Now if something happened, if there was another issue like in 2000 with the shooting, I'm sure this community would come together, in a heart beat, I have no question about that, but it shouldn't take something like that.

JB: No.

RCH: To bring us together.

JB: No. It's an unfortunate part of humanity I think.

43:39

RCH: And I love the fact this History Project is going on because a lot of people, especially newer people coming into the community, into the town, don't know anything about this, don't know anything about our history as a town. They come in and they see Roanoke, this little town, 100,000 people, you know? City, excuse me. And so they need to know that there's been a history and that we've always been here, we've always been here.

44:06

JB: And you mentioned that you were, you preached in Charlotte?

RCH: When I left here, I felt like it was time to move on.

JB: So you were here.

RCH: I was here ten years.

JB: Sorry to interrupt.

RCH: And then I went to Charlotte, North Carolina and pastored the MCC there for eight years.

JB: About what year? About what time was that?

RCH: I left here in 2008.

44:30

JB: You left here in 2008 and you were there for 8 years?

RCH: 8 years.

JB: Okay.

44:32

RCH: And then I retired cause I was 65 and I wanted to be back here in town where my wife was, we had been back and forth all the time, and that lasted for about a year and a half. I started speaking when they were without a pastor and when they began a pastoral search I did not want to apply and I did not want to be back in the office but the night before the applications were due, I was telling God what God needed to do cause they really needed someone here and this quiet still voice said "you're here," so I quickly filled out the paperwork and there were four applicants and they chose me, so yeah. And the Charlotte community, as large as Charlotte is, large city as it is, has many of the same challenges that Roanoke has.

JB: I'm not shocked.

45:20

RCH: Mhm, like I said I've seen it in LA, I've seen it in Ventura, I've seen it in Charlotte and unless there's a strong person or a strong group or a strong event to pull people together then you have all these little groups out.

JB: And not a lot to unify everybody.

RCH: And whatever one hears about this group, they get upset and then this group hears something else and there's no combined communication.

JB: Just a lot of pointing.

45:52

RCH: For example, I can't believe we don't have any kind of publication here. For years, we had something called the Pink Pages [the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press*]. Which is a great way of getting news out, informing the community about nationwide and worldwide events and that disappeared somewhere along the way.<sup>3</sup>

JB: When did this go on?

RCH: Oh, the Pink Pages, I'm sure there are some in the archives. That was a really big activity and again – 1996 or before until about 2004, 5, 6. Because right now if you all were going to have a program about the Southwest [Virginia LGBTQ+] History Project, how would people know about that?

JB: We'd have to go to the newspaper and that would be a challenge.

RCH: That would be a challenge. You could put it on the internet, but a lot of people aren't on the internet.

JB: I mean, it is on the internet.

RCH: But if they're not on your site or have some connection. Whereas with a printed publication... [or] a print and online. In Charlotte they have something called *QNotes*. And it actually comes out in a magazine form, or a paper form, and there are actually some in the street at the boxes where you get newspapers?

JB: Really?

RCH: Oh yeah, it's really exciting, I mean it is...

JB: That's a good idea.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a full run of issues of the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press* (1983-2008) available in the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.



RCH: ...to see that. But if there were a publication of some kind then open and affirming groups could advertise, there could be opinions, there could be interviews with people. So I just hope that's something that will maybe come about down the road.

47:32

JB: And, at MCC, do you guys try and... obviously community is in the title, how do you incorporate the community? I know you mentioned you do NA groups and you have the Diversity [Center] here and ...

RCH: The food pantry.

JB: Yeah, the food pantry. You basically just answered my question!

47:58

RCH: That's okay. Well, and then hopefully being open to... At one time when Pride had a committee, they would use our building to meet and plan things. We have had other groups at other times that would use—we make our facility available is what I'm trying to say. We have, in the past, gone out to things like Relay for Life as a team. We have tried to be present in years past in other places and we're working on that more again so that people know that we're here. Quick story: when we bought this building, and we were looking at the lettering outside, I'm sure you saw the name on the outside of the church. A bunch of us were sitting around and we said "gosh, it's gonna take a lot of money to put those letters up!" and one of the women said "Can I buy a vowel?" which reminded us of *Wheel of Fortune*.

JB: Yeah, of course.

RCH: Well as it turned out, a lot of different people bought letters. The bowling team at that time paid for "community."

JB: Really?

RCH: That word. Another woman, her son had died and she paid for his initials. So, it kinda involved a lot of different groups like that, mm-hmm.

49:12

JB: That's really cool because I noticed the senses of community within the church is just—it sounds astounding. Especially when we were walking through the church, you showed me the cross that was made from the rose trellis and all of these little relics that come together through time. What would you say is a big issue in the church today?

RCH: Rebuilding.

JB: Rebuilding?

RCH: Rebuilding. The attendance has dropped off and we're in the process of rebuilding that, and reminding people we're still here. To reach out, like I said we have some folks who are

coming in from other places that we didn't quite expect. We want to start reaching out to the neighborhood more. People know there's been a church on this corner for over a hundred years and I'm not sure a lot of the local neighbors have quite figured out who we are even though we've been here 14-15 years.

JB: Oh yeah.

50:18

RCH: So, we're gonna start, but we've don't things before like one year, the time of the year when you change your smoke detector batteries, we went out to the neighborhood and gave out batteries.

JB: Oh! That's a creative idea.

50:31

RCH: One of the gentlemen in church has a garden and he wants to do a bigger garden and this summer he wants to be able to bring fruits and vegetables and just have them out there beside the door available because this neighborhood does not have good access to fresh fruit and fresh vegetables in grocery stores. So we're trying to branch out that way. It's not just getting people in to fill my pews.

JB: Oh, of course.

50:58

RCH: That would be great. But letting people know that this is a house of prayer for all people, it's a place for all people and we care about more than just your soul, you know? We care about more than just you being able to say the Lord's prayer in correct order.

JB: Yeah.

RCH: If you're hungry, if you're needy, if your smoke detector won't go off and your house catches on fire, then all of the bible verses in the world aren't going to help a whole lot and I'm very much a Biblicist don't get me wrong. Any Sunday you come you can be sure of two things in a church I'm pastoring.

JB: Yeah.

51:29

RV: Number 1, communion will always be offered. And number 2, you will hear from the word. MCC has in its bylaws that communion is offered every Sunday.

JB: That's awesome, I grew up very scripture heavily, and I can hear, just from you talking, I can hear the scripture, I actually hear biblical verses... you paraphrasing things.

51:56

RCH: See, I'm talking a language you understand, and you understand it's a good communication. If I had come in and tried to talk totally in political issues—would totally be me, I'm not anti-political don't get me wrong. But if I tried to talk in super high church terms, you just told me the faith you grew up in, that doesn't use a lot of high ecclesiastical terms so a lot of it is figuring out how you can talk to people. Now when I retired—my bookshelves look kind of empty—when I retired I didn't think I'd ever be pastoring again and I gave away 15 boxes of church bible scripture books to fellow pastors. I gave away probably another eight boxes of fiction books, so when I realized I was going to have all these bookshelves to fill up again—cause I used to have them full, I just thought okay, I have to work on this!

JB: Work on this. That's cool!

52:54

RCH: Are we finished?

JB: I think so, well is there anything else that you would really like to share or say?

RCH: I'm just excited about the project. I'm excited to see what goes on with it and be involved in any way I can be or that we can be. I donated some papers to the library, to the room [Virginia Room] there. But I have not been to see the gathering of the group yet. In fact I did that, I think, when I was still in Charlotte, someone commented about something they needed, and I'm really looking forward to—I love the class. You have a group that's involved with us.

JB: Yeah.

53:02

RCH: And I'm looking forward to working with the class at Roanoke College, so those are fun things. I often would speak to a group of social work students from Radford that would come and I would explain to them how you deal with LGBTQ families. I've spoken at Hollins a couple of times and I just like the fact that our church and our community is putting the word out about who we really are to so many people.

JB: Planting the seed as I like to say...

54:00

RCH: I like the idea of putting a face with a description with a life. Because once I know your story, I have a hard time being upset with your group.

JB: Yeah.

RCH: That's all. I'm glad you asked me to do this. I'm sorry that Richard couldn't do this but I enjoyed it.

54:16

JB: I am, too, but this has really been awesome and I'm very happy and excited that we were able to interview you and have this documented for years and years and years to come. Because,

like you said, the history is so important and as a young gay man, I am very naive in the history of all the people and all the steps and the events that led to me having so much privilege in my sexuality.

RCH: Absolutely.

JB: As you were saying, you never even talked about being gay, never even passed your mind that... I empathize now. I understand. So that's why these stories are so important.

55:08

RCH: It is. It's very important that you hear them but it's also important we share them.

JB: Exactly.

RCH: I started... I had some notes to make to try and remember to talk about this and this and this, and I was making phone calls about the funeral. Didn't get back to them. So when I first sat down here I was like, "what is he going to ask me?" But it helps me, going back through the history of some of this, too.

JB: Yeah, it's always fun to remember.

55:32

RCH: And to put it in perspective. And realize that had I not conducted all the funerals I did, during the heyday of AIDS, especially for people I didn't know, I wouldn't have had the ability to fill in where I'm needed now. Until we were talking tonight, I never made that connection of why I could do the others so easily, so thank you.

JB: Of course, thank you, it's been great.

[END]