

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

**Interview with Joe Cobb – in four parts
February 21, 2020**

Interviewer: Eve Allen
Interviewee: Joe Cobb
Date: February 21, 2020
Location: Fintel Library, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

Transcribed by: Miranda Lawhorn, Buck Parrott, and Eve Allen

Duration: 82:58

Part One (24:12):

0:00 = Early life in Wichita, Kansas (1962- 1970s)
3:20 = puberty and sexual awakening (1970s)
10:36 = Life in the United Methodist Church and College at Southwest College (early 1980s)
13:06 = Call to seminary school at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas (1983)
15:15 = hiding sexuality in seminary school (mid-1980s); meeting wife there; marriage (1985)
19:36 = work life and abroad experience in England (mid- to late-1980s); returning to Kansas
23:09 = Wife's first pregnancy and miscarriage (late 1980s)

Part Two (9:50):

0:00 = A former sexual partner makes contact (early 1990s)
5:37 = Having children (1993); moving to Wichita (1995); periodic contact with the former partner

Part Three (39:06):

0:00 = Having an affair; the consequences and realizations that came along with it (1996)
4:39 = speaking to therapist; telling the truth to wife about the affair and conflicting sexuality (1997-1998)
12:42 = coming to terms and accepting his homosexuality; coming out to his parents and family (1998)
16:35 = Separation with wife and its effect on family life and children (1998)
20:01 = Explaining homosexuality to his kids; wife and kids move to Blacksburg, Virginia (1999)
23:01 = fears associated with coming out to family/ fear of rejection and being cut off
25:00 = living in Wichita without family (1999-2001); retiring as a United Methodist clergy and moving briefly to Atlanta (2001)
30:00 = events of September 11th, 2001; Backstreet Café shooting vigil; meeting future husband at Pride event (2001)
34:47: Life in Roanoke (c. 2001-2017), including work as pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge

Part Four (9:50):

0:00 = Grassroots political campaign for Roanoke City Council (2017-2018)

3:00 = Running for office as an openly gay man

4:54 = Thoughts on the relationship between LGBTQ communities and the police

8:27 = Thoughts on public service and role that LGBTQ people can play

Part One (24:12)

0:00

EA: My name is Eve Allen. I am interviewing Joe Cobb on the 21st of February at 2:06 pm in Room 60 on the ground floor of Fintel Library for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project.

Alright, so, welcome. Just kind of to start off, do you want to give us an idea of kind of your early life? What was it like growing up?

0:27

JC: Ah... well, I grew up in Wichita, Kansas, which is kind of right in the heart of the United States. I was one of four children. My parents were not able to have biological children so they adopted each of us and so all four of us came from different birth families. My parents were great. They created a household full of love where all of us knew we were loved, knew we were chosen. We were very special to them. They made a point of telling us from as early as we could understand that we were adopted. Not to say that in a negative way, but just to say that we were special, we chose you. All of our baby books reflected that.

So, I love that from the beginning, our adoptions were not something that were secret, or closeted, or hidden; we knew from the beginning, and as we grew, they would continue to tell us that story and were always very open with us so that if we ever reached a point in our young adult or adult lives that we wanted to seek out our birth families or learn more about our histories, we could do that. My parents encouraged me and my siblings to find things that were

of interest to us. They didn't want us to conform to how they thought we should grow up but to give us the space to discover what we were good at, what we loved, what inspired us. So for me, from an early age, I loved to sing. Singing was really important to me. We lived out in the country so when the weather was great, we were always outside, during the day and evening after school especially. Got along particularly well, considering there were six of us in the house. I was a good student. I loved school. I loved history, loved music, as I said, loved reading, loved to write and kind of carried those things through my adolescence and into high school where I really continued to explore my singing.

3:13

EA: So for you... what year were you born first of all?

3:17

JC: I was born in 1962.

3:20

EA: 1962, okay. So high school would start about when for you?

3:23

JC: High school started for me in 1976. We had elementary, junior high, and high school and our junior high was three years and then high school was three years.

3:34

EA: So, in high school, a lot of us start to figure out, you know, who we are and where we are going. For you, what was that process like?

3:43

JC: Well, that process actually started out for me much earlier. It typically, I think, it happens when our bodies change through adolescence and puberty. But there was a particular memory that I had when I was about ten years old and I remember going with my family to Dallas, Texas to see my uncle, my dad's brother, in a play. He was in a play. I don't remember the name of it but his co-star was Judy Carne who was very famous on the show "Laugh In," which was well before your time, but it was a great comedy show, and my uncle Rhea had a roommate who was

also cast in the play and when our family went to go and visit my uncle and his roommate, I just remember thinking what a beautiful man his roommate was and what was most striking to me about him were his beautiful feet. Don't know why, I just thought those were the most beautiful feet that I've ever seen in my life. Ten years old! And I wanted to be close to him, I wanted to sit close to him but my two sisters got in before me and I have this wonderful picture that my grandma took from the trip and it shows one sister on one knee, another sister on another knee, and I'm right up next, as close as I could get. That was my earliest awareness of recognizing beauty in a human being and I guess what didn't at the time strike me as anything other than normal was that it was a man and the particular feature, that you know, his feet, were just significant to me in recognizing that I could see beauty, not only in another human being but also in a man. So that was probably my earliest awareness of natural beauty, sexual understanding, and that sort of thing.

6:07

EA: So, going through with your family and going through those years, were you able to explore that more openly within your family? Did you have to hide more? What was that, growing up for you?

6:18

JC: I didn't have the capacity to explore it openly. I did it very secretly, kind of in the treasure house of my own heart. After that experience and that memory, I recall in junior high... I was awkward in athletics. I didn't like P.E. or gym. I wasn't naturally athletic so I always struggled to feel at home in those kinds of classes and particularly in the locker room when, you know, you're completely vulnerable and so I didn't feel particularly striking. But I began to notice how all the boys were just developing at different stages and levels and some who were my age that appeared to be grown men and I had no hair on my body [*laughter*]. So that kind of experience of trying to figure that out and make sense of it. I remember one night when I was concerned that I didn't have any hair and then suddenly like a Who in Whoville in Dr. Seuss, one hair popped up [*laughter*] and I remember asking my dad to come in and explain to me what this meant. What's happening to me? And he was great, he's always very patient and kind and we talked about it and it was reassuring to me that I was—this was my way of developing physically and it was different from other guys.

8:09

EA: So, kind of moving from that to life as an adult. So what—where did you wind up going into your life? I know you're in politics now but it looks like you've done a lot.

8:25

JC: Well, you know, just to add a little bit to that developmental experience, from that experience in junior high, I really began to wrestle with my sexual orientation. I knew I was different, that I felt different, that I felt unique but I didn't have really anybody to talk with about that, so I think because I internalized it and didn't feel like there was a healthy climate for me to talk to anyone about the risk of that. That internalizing I think began to develop a little bit of a feeling of shame within me because I had to hide it. But once I got into... and in high school, I didn't express attraction towards boys or young men. When I went to prom, I went out, you know, I asked a girl out but I didn't really date anyone seriously. The first time I dated a girl seriously was probably in college and she was more of a friend and I discovered that, you know, that it just felt awkward trying to navigate that while I was also sexually active, starting in high school, with guys. So that tension became very real in me but it remained hidden. When I was in my first year of college, I was trying to discern what vocational path my life would take and was working part time in a church as a youth minister and I had grown up in the church. I was very comfortable in the church.

10:36

EA: Which denomination?

10:37

JC: United Methodist.

10:38

EA: United Methodist, okay. Thank you.

10:42

JC: And, always felt surrounded by love. I did not grow up in a fundamentalist or evangelical religious climate, it was... it was very much a love centered climate... the whole teaching of unconditional love. But again, we rarely had conversations back then about human sexuality or the gift of sexuality within the religious context, so I didn't have the framework in which to talk about that. So, in college, working at this church, I experienced a call into ministry and that call for me came during a church meeting when I was seated in the back of the sanctuary of this small, white frame, old, rural church called Grandview United Methodist Church near Winfield, Kansas, just outside of where I was going to school at Southwestern College. And in the moment, I was present but absent. It was almost like I was outside of my body. I was so in my body that I felt outside and I had this powerful sensation in my heart of clarity and along with

that clarity, a voice that said I want you to be a pastor. And I was so compelled by that that I went back to my college, talked to my advisor who recommended that I change advisors just so that I could focus more on the path of philosophy and religion and kind of made a beeline for finishing college so I could go to seminary and I finished college in three years. I did independent studies, took classes during the summer, all of that designed to get me on a trajectory to go to seminary and to become an ordained clergy.

12:57

EA: So that would be—you would have graduated about when?

13:04

JC: I graduated from college in 1983.

13:06

EA: 1983, okay. So you felt this really big call and you're going into seminary, so what was the process of choosing a seminary to go to? What was that like for you?

13:21

JC: I looked at a couple different seminaries. I mainly wanted to go where I could get the best seminary education. Because I had never been very far from home, it was a big step for me. I was the kind of kid that loved being at home. I loved hanging out with my parents. When I—the first day that my parents took me to school and moved me into the dorm, I just kept delaying, delaying, delaying because I didn't want them to leave and then finally my mom, who was about 5'4, got out of the backseat, opened my door. I was in the passenger seat next to my dad and she said "Joe, it's time to go." [*laughter*] That was her power move and I went. So for me to have that kind of propelled motion to finish college early and go to seminary was really extraordinary. It reminded me that I have this kind of resilience and ability to risk within me. So I looked at several seminaries and the one I chose and was accepted to was Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, which was about six hours from where I lived and I remember part of the reason I chose it was because I had relatives who lived in the Dallas/Fort Worth area so I knew that I would have some family support close by if I needed to draw on that. And I loaded up my 1970 pea-green Toyota Corolla with all of my stuff and I drove straight through to Dallas and began my seminary education. Perkins is part of Southern Methodist University so I began that in the fall of 1983.

15:15

EA: So in this calling and doing all of this, how did you match your faith to your sexuality?

15:25

JC: Great question. I totally hid it. Years later, I shared—I had three roommates, we had kind of a quad section of one of the dorms and one of my roommates was really good at asking me very directed questions and one day he asked me very pointedly, “So are you going to seminary to run away from your sexuality?” And I apparently said yes. I did not remember this but he had a very clear memory of that and it makes sense to me. I was looking for a way to not have to wrestle with the thing that I really needed to wrestle with. And so I was so focused on my studies and becoming ordained that I set that aside, I compartmentalized it. I just put it over here, didn’t get rid of it but put it over here knowing that it was still very much an integral part of me. So in my first year—actually my second year of seminary... we lived in a co-ed dorm and I had a roommate who was gay, he didn’t officially come out to me but I pretty much knew he was and we didn’t talk much about that but this young woman moved in right next door to us. She was from Shawsville, Virginia and she had the most distinctive southern accent that I had ever heard. I was moving back into the dorm for the beginning of my second year and down the hall I could hear, “Well hello, my name is Leigh Anne Taylor. I don’t believe I know you.” And every person down the hall, she was introducing herself to, so extroverted. And I was an introvert. So there was something really fascinating about her. So we just kind of hit it off. We loved some of the same things. She was such a force of light and encouragement and positive spirit that I—we just hit it off. We started walking to Seminary Singers, the choir that we sang in together, and there was something about her and something about me and we fell in love. And it was a very short, relatively speaking, courtship. We met in September, we were engaged on Valentine’s Day of 1985, and married in August of 1985. So it was kind of a fast thing but, she was getting a Masters [degree] in choral conducting and sacred music and I was getting a Masters in Divinity and so our trajectory just seemed kind of ideal. Lots of support, encouragement and we [were] very compatible in so many ways. One of the things, though, that was interesting about our early courtship was that as she was very open with me about previous relationships, previous sexual experiences, I was more hesitant. I just stopped at a point and didn’t talk about what I was wrestling with, so again, I kept that compartmentalized and didn’t talk about it until later and we’ll get to that part of the story.

19:36

EA: So you’ve gotten through kind of this whole part of your life while...while putting part of yourself in kind of a box, what did that do to you? How do you... how do you box in part of yourself and how does that affect you?

20:07

JC: When you...when you don't tend something that's such an essential part of who you are, it keeps showing up. It's like it keeps knocking on your heart to say I'm over here, don't forget me. I've got things I need to tell you. I've got some work you need to do. And so not tending to that began to show up for me in ways that really, I think the best way I can describe it is when I would think about it, I would begin to feel a little depressed or down and so I tended to just acknowledge when I felt that way and then try and immerse myself in something that would help me feel better.

21:10

EA: So what things did you immerse yourself in?

21:15

JC: Well, doing my work. I probably, it was probably the beginning of me having some workaholic tendencies. I just threw myself into my work or if we were doing something together as a couple, we would just do that and... so, it was kind of a combination of those things. Fortunately, during seminary, we were both very busy, not only studying but working in different churches and in our free time, we were just enjoying each other's company, we were making new friendships. Toward the end of my seminary career, we had the opportunity to travel to England, where I served as pastor of four Methodist churches in Plymouth, England in Devon, South England and that was such an incredible experience to be able to live abroad and to be a part of a different culture. It was the year of the 250th anniversary of the conversion of John and Charles Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement so being a part of that was pretty extraordinary. And then coming back from that in [19]88, '89 to finish seminary, the momentum then was to go from that seminary experience into serving a local church, being appointed in the United Methodist system and going back to Kansas where I grew up. So, for me, it was like going home; for Leigh Anne, it was like continuing to be far away from her home because she grew up, you know, right here in Shawsville, Virginia.

23:06

EA: Yeah.

23:09

JC: So when we moved back to Kansas, I began... I had two churches. I had plenty to do to keep me busy. We were wanting to start a family and so when we moved to the small community of Lyons, Kansas in central Kansas, Leigh Anne was pregnant, but a few months after we arrived there and went to the doctor to see how things were progressing, we learned that the fetus had died and it was what was called a molar pregnancy which if gone unchecked, it could have

become cancerous so... she had a miscarriage and the early stages of our being there were kind of a mixture of delight and starting something new in our life together and grieving the loss of this potential new life.

Part 2 (9:50 total)

0:00

[After a pause of about three minutes due to outside voices being picked up by the recorder, we resume the interview. This begins part two of the interview.]

EA: Alright, so, picking up you have just moved. You and your wife are going through this miscarriage and kind of a new place, a loss of life—all of this. At this point, are you seeing more of—because you put part of yourself in a box—is this a time where that is kinda coming knocking at your heart more and more, or?

0:27

JC: In a way yes, and in a way no. After the miscarriage, we kind of went through a process, especially Leigh Anne, of redefining her purpose, because she was looking forward to being a mom. So, she shifted toward finding work in another town, where she could be at least a part-time Minister of Music—so she was not the traditional pastor's wife. And when she got a job in another community, I remember announcing to the congregation that she would not be with us on Sundays, umm... and so that was a bit of strangeness for the congregation that was used to having a minister's spouse there. But we worked through that, and the two congregations that we served had—we all had kind of a mutual love for each other, so we managed that beautifully.

Probably halfway through my four years there, there was a tornado that went through Wichita, Kansas. And it wiped out a section of—on the east side, where we grew up. We went to church in Andover, Kansas, which is on the east side, and it killed a number of people that were very special to us. And during that time, I got this out of the blue phone call, left as a voice message. In those days we had answering machines... *[laughter]*

2:09

EA: *[laughter]* Yep.

2:09

JC: ...the old clunkers that you could press and record your message. And the voice on the other end said, “Well, I thought you would be interested to know that I’m still alive.” Well, I recognized the voice. Now, let me back up a bit, because that reminds me of something that happened while we were in Seminary.

So when I was in high school, I, through a series of connections, met a man, who was twelve years older than me, and we began to have a sexual relationship. So, I’m in high school, probably 16 [years old], he’s twelve years older—for me, as an adolescent, it was... the sexual experience was pretty extraordinary. And I didn’t know how to navigate the complexities of that. When I went to college, I shut that off, and I didn’t tell anybody about it. I didn’t tell Leigh Anne about it, I didn’t tell anybody. That was part of what I kept compartmentalized, so when in my second year of Seminary, after Leigh Anne and I were married, I got a letter from this person, basically saying “How dare you get married. I loved you.” And it was a threatening letter. So, it had a tone of blackmail in it. If you don’t do this, and this, and this, then I will do this, and this, and this. Well, that tormented me. Leigh Anne could tell there was something distinctively different about how I was going through my days. It led me to feel very disoriented, and disconnected, and no one to talk to. Who do I talk to? You know, how do I... what would I risk in doing so? And over the course of probably the next year, there were a number of letters. And, I decided to write back, I think, after the third one. And, I just, you know, I apologized, I asked forgiveness. And I got back this strange letter that said “Oh, everything is forgiven. I understand. I look forward to meeting your wife.” Well, that was the last thing I wanted to have happen.

In the course of receiving those three letters, we were at home one evening, and my brother called, and he said “Joe, are you okay?” And I said “yeah, why? What’s going on?” And he said “Someone just called the house and said ‘Joe is dead.’” And I knew immediately who it was. It was this same person. So, for about a year—year and a half—I lived with that tension. It was like this thing that I had put over here, was coming back and tormenting me. And, I told Leigh Anne about my high school relationship with this guy. But again, I didn’t give a lot of details.

5:33

EA: How did she take that?

5:36

JC: It was hard.

5:37

EA: It was hard?

5:37

JC: It was hard. I mean she was so grateful that I had shared it. But, she not knowing the complexity of the sexual nature of it, she thought it was more of like an experiment—just testing it out. And, so we didn't really talk in depth about what that might mean for our relationship.

So, moving ahead to the phone call that we got, that happened. And then, we, after four years at this particular church, at the end of that, probably in the fourth year, we learned that she was pregnant, and so we had our first child, Emma. And, then we moved to another community, where I became pastor. It was a larger church, and...

6:28

EA: About what year are we looking at?

6:29

JC: That would have been 1993.

6:33

EA: '93 okay.

6:34

JC: And during that time... our second child, Taylor, was born. And we were only there two years. And were invited to join, I was invited to join the staff of a downtown church in Wichita, Kansas to be an Associate Pastor of a large urban church. And, for us that was kind of thrilling. Wichita is where I grew up, so I had lots of connections there—my parents, some of my siblings. We could be in a chorale that we really loved together. And it was like a fresh start. And, so we moved in [19]95 to Wichita, to start that work. And, I forget... it was shortly after we moved to our new house. I was at home with Taylor, and Leigh Anne was away with Emma. And the phone rang, and it was this guy. So, from my high school years, which would have been [19]78 to '80 or so.

8:01

EA: Yeah.

8:02

JC: Then the letters that came in '85, '86. The phone call that came in '90-something. Then... moving to Wichita in 1995.

8:23

EA: So, we are looking at like two decades of time.

8:25

JC: Two decades of this...

8: 27

EA: ...of this following you, almost stalker-y...

8:29

JC: Yeah, yeah, that's what it felt like. He called, and I said... I was just stunned. And, I said "Hello?" And he said "Well, I...", and I said "How did you reach me?" And he said he had called my brother about something. And I said "What are you calling for?" And he said "Well, I just wanted to call and apologize for all of the... um... harm I've caused you over these last decades. I wanted to apologize and ask your forgiveness," and proceeded to say that he had met somebody. That they had gotten married out in like the continental divide, and wondered if I would come a do a blessing of their marriage, because [same-sex] marriage wasn't legal then. And, I remember writing down his number, and when I was done, I threw the number away. I said, I can't do this, and that was the last time that I've heard anything.

9:50

[At this point voice from surrounding areas are being heard through the recording, and we pause to relocate to another area of the library for better sound quality. This ends part two of the interview. Approximately 15 minutes break.]

Part 3 (39:06 minutes)

0:00

EA: Alright, so we left off with this guy had contacted you and he had asked for a blessing on his marriage and you had kind of come off out of this...

0:11

JC: Yeah, I threw away the number. I said I don't wanna deal with that again. I thought it's over and done with. I felt such a sense of relief that their seemed to be some closure to that. What I didn't realize at the time was that hearing his voice, kind of reliving all of that, brought that thing that I had hidden away into full...

0:38

EA: Swing.

0:39

JC: Full Swing. It was like front and center. You have to deal with this or it's gonna deal with you. Basically. So the next year, the work I had at the church was too much. I can clearly see that now. I was going in too many different directions. I was over functioning. I was not really engaged with my family and it was beginning to show. Part of my work was to direct a singles ministry which had a lot of really unhappy people in it. And when I tried to make some structural changes there were two older men in particular who were very antagonistic and just pointed all their efforts and antagonism toward me to just make my life as miserable as possible. Whatever I did didn't seem to make any difference. So, I became depressed. I felt very unsure of myself. I felt kind of lost at sea. And in 1996, part of my work was to travel with single adults to different conferences and events and... I went to a singles conference and I saw a number of people that I had seen at previous events. One in particular that I saw, and I think I had met before, but I hadn't really noticed before... and I thought this is a beautiful man. So that memory... that recollection I had at ten [years old]... I said this is a beautiful man.

2:39

JC: I feel an attraction here and I fought that attraction the whole time we were there. And the last night we were there I... he and I connected and we shared physical intimacy. That just broke me open and apart at the same time and I thought what have I done? What does this mean? The next day I felt like something had happened that would be transformative for me in a way but also I felt so guilty and so ashamed. Driving home that next day I began just asking myself... What am I gonna do? Who can I tell? Do I tell anybody? Do I just continue to hide this? Analyzing all of that, I went home and decided to not tell anybody. But it was interesting what kind of showed up. Part of the strangeness of this particular thing... in retrospect, it showed how disoriented I was. This singles conference was at the same time as my wedding anniversary. During my wedding anniversary, my wife and kids went to be here in Virginia and I went to a singles conference... as part of my work. Total unawareness.

4:39

JC: I was so lost in it all. So they were coming back and I got some special gifts for the kids which I always did and I got Leigh Anne probably the strangest gift I'd ever given her. I went out and bought her lingerie. When she got home from the trip she opened it and she didn't know what to make of it. It was such a strange thing because it was... not that I hadn't given her

intimate gifts before but this was like... she didn't know where it came from. She didn't like it. It wasn't her. But that was kind of the middle point of me going into an even deeper depression. Because I'd had this experience and wasn't talking with anyone about it, my depression and my workaholicism began to impact her. She was not naturally inclined to be depressed. So, a year later when my world was falling apart and I had reached the point where I couldn't physically function... I remember going to her one night. She was sitting in a rocking chair and she was really struggling and so upset. I was still in pastor mode, not husband mode. Pastor mode... and I said "What can I do to help you?" She through gritted teeth said "You can go see a therapist." She was mad... and rightfully so. She didn't know anything. She didn't know what was going on. So, I went to a therapist and it took me probably, and this was [19]97, it took me probably three sessions to get to the point where I could share with the therapist "I'm struggling with homosexuality." Bless her. The therapist said "I am so honored that you shared your struggle with me." Then we just talked about what it felt like to share that struggle. To this day, when I visit with students who are learning to become counselors and therapists, I tell that story. Because more than anything she created a space for me to tell my truth and then she honored my truth. She didn't judge it. And that's one of the biggest fears that people who are LGBTQ and also people of faith fear. It's that rejection through religion or that rejection through family. Or you just name it. So, after that I agreed to talk to Leigh Anne. And the night I told her we were sitting in our basement on a dark blue couch in a grey room. I don't think any lights were on. It kind of matched the depression that we were both in. I told that I had had an affair on that trip to the conference and that I didn't know whether I was gay or straight. She kind of playfully but seriously hit me on the shoulder. She said "don't you ever do that to me again." We cried and talked some more and she went upstairs to bed and I stayed downstairs in our guest room. The next day when she woke up, she felt what she described as being cut open from her breast to her abdomen. The pain was so intense of what... it caught up with her. And that really began our journey and me coming out and stating my truth and her recognizing some things within herself that she had not been able to ever talk about or deal with. We agreed that as long as I was in therapy, she agreed that we would work on our marriage. So, the course of that next year, this would have been [19]97 to '98, I took a voluntary leave of absence from pastoral ministry. She continued at the church. She was still in a very visible thing and I was over here. She was the only one I was talking to about this and a couple of my colleagues at the church.

10:00

JC: So the congregation... no one else knew what was going on. Why I was depressed. Why I was feeling vulnerable. I saw probably... I finished up with that therapist and then I decided to start seeing a marriage and family therapist because I wanted to look at issues around being male... having these struggles with sexual orientation, what did that mean in terms of this spectrum of sexuality and seeing some of myself as feminine and that tension of feminine and masculine. I guess what we would call now the differentials between gender identity/gender expression and sexual behavior/expression. The next summer, we were both seeing this marriage family therapist and the next summer was our anniversary. We went out to dinner and then we went to Border's which was a music and arts bookstore in Wichita. Leigh Anne went to look at music and I went over to the poetry section and I was reading Emily Dickinson: "hope is the

thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.” While I was reading Emily Dickinson I was leaning against fiction and literature and I was looking down the science fiction and mystery aisle and one of the clerks from the front of the store came walking and he was followed by two young men the last of whom had this gorgeous brown hair. Tufts peeking out from underneath this bandana... red bandana. When he turned the corner he looked at me and winked and smiled. I nearly dropped Emily Dickinson on the floor. I thought “oh, here we go again.” I’m pretty sure I talked about that experience with Leigh Anne later that evening. Within the next two days we had an appointment with the therapist we were both seeing. It was during that session that I said “I’m attracted to men.”

12:42

JC: When I said that it really changed everything because I had reached a level where I could speak another part of my truth. It was probably one of the most terrifying moments of my life... and liberating. It was all of that wrapped up into one. I left the room and Leigh Anne stayed and for years I didn’t know what she and the therapist talked about. It wasn’t until we started writing our book, which I’m sure we’ll get to, that she said that during that conversation the therapist looked at her and said “Leigh Anne, Joe’s homosexuality is your cross to bear.” And she was like “The hell it is” [*laughter*]. She abruptly finished the session and left. We never talked about that other than we both knew that we needed to make plans to do something else. She realized after I had that clarity that she had been keeping this in and hadn’t shared any of it with her support system. So she wrote letters to all of her family members to tell them so that they would all get the same information, what had happened. I, on Labor Day of 1998, called up my parents first thing in the morning and I said “I need to talk with you.” And I went over to mom and dad’s house and they were sitting in the kitchen and I sat down and with everything I had in me I said “Mom and Dad, I had an affair during a trip. I don’t know...” I was still wrestling with my sexuality because I said “I don’t know whether I’m gay or straight... and Leigh Anne and I are separating.” Now, for me that had all been building up. For my parents it was like... it was shocking. Because they thought everything was okay. My dad was very stoic and silent. My mom came over and she sat down next to me and she patted my leg and said “Joe, I don’t have a problem with you being gay. I have a problem with you getting a divorce.” She didn’t want Leigh Anne out of my life or their lives. So I went from telling mom and dad to telling my brother and my youngest sister. And then I called my other sister. On my way home after all of that, the tears were so heavy I could not see driving and I pulled off the road. When I got home I called one of my best friends from college who was a clergy in the area and she came over and she sat with me. We talked through ways that I could get through this. So Leigh Anne and I separated. I ended up moving out and moving in with this friend in an extra room. And over the course of the next nine months Leigh Anne filed for divorce and I was very cooperative in all of that.

16:35

JC: At every stage we kept our communication as open as possible because our children were six and four and they needed to know that we were there for them. That this is an extraordinary change. So, when I decided to move out... we were all together. We had just moved to a new

house that actually our congregation had helped fund the down payment and redecorate the house. So, there was that pressure of going through this separation and transition when we had just moved into this house. When I came over, I sat down with the kids and I told Emma and Taylor, who were six and four, that I was moving out and that I loved them. I tried to explain that... why I was moving out and that mommy and I needed some time apart and that we loved them. I remember asking both of them... If there was something they wanted to bring to me so that I could take it with me to where I was going to be living so that when they came to stay with me or see me they would see something that was familiar to them. Before I asked them to do that Emma disappeared to her room and Leigh Anne went to check on her. When she went in she said Emma was kneeling by her bed praying. So the kids came back out. Taylor was so young he was four. He didn't really know how to make sense of it. But they each brought me something. I think Taylor probably brought me a doll and Emma [laughter] walked over to me and she handed me a piggy bank. She said "Daddy, I want you to have my piggy bank so that you can put money in it for me anytime you want to." [laughter] It was perfect because we all broke open laughing. I probably still have that somewhere or I gave it back to her I don't remember which. Then, in January of that year we decided that I needed to tell the kids more about why we were divorcing. And so I had in my mind this just simple telling that I'm gay, this is what it means to be gay. The day before we were gonna tell the kids, Leigh Anne laid down for a nap and she went into a pretty deep sleep and she had a dream. The dream was this kind of formulated story of how we would tell the kids. She woke up from her dream and she wrote it all out in this little memo book. She shared that with me and so we agreed to read that story in our voices to the children.

20:01

JC: When we sat down to... We all sat down on the couch and we read the story and we all cried. The kids asked a few questions but the gist of the story was that "Daddy was made this way. Mommy was made this way. Daddy realized that he's homosexual. Mommy realized she's heterosexual. Daddy had this deep... because he never talked about it he had this deep hurt in his heart and now he's finally able with the help of professionals to make sense of it. But the one thing we want you to know is that we love you, that will never change. You cannot divorce us even if you want to. And God loves you. We want you to know of that love forever." So that was in January. In May, after Leigh Anne learned she had gotten hired for a job in Blacksburg and was making arrangements to move, the divorce papers came. We sat down probably toward the end of May to sign those papers. We were in the front room. There were boxes everywhere because they were getting ready to move. A realtor was showing the house to a couple who would eventually buy it. The kids were running around. We're on the couch and the coffee table... the divorce papers are spread out on it for me to sign... for both of us. While we were talking the love that we had and still have for each other was so evident that we made a new vow to speak and act in loving ways toward each other and about each other for the sake of our children and for our own health and wholeness. I don't know that we ever wrote those down but because they came from here [the heart], they guided our lives from that moment on and that was the June of 1999. They moved here, and I continued my work in Wichita. So, we began that next stage of the journey.

22:43

EA: What... going through this, obviously there's a lot of emotion in going both through divorce and trying to explain something like that to your kids. What kind of... What kind of fears did you have? What kind of emotions did you have trying to explain something so dear to you to your children?

23:01

JC: Well my fears were... you know initially that I would just be cut off. I had heard horror stories of men coming out to their spouses and then spouses just taking the children and saying you can't ever see them again. I knew based on our relationship and how Leigh Anne was even through the intensity of the whole experience that that would not happen. But it was a traumatic change. It was a huge adjustment and I knew that it would impact all of us because it was taking what felt like home and breaking that apart. So each of us in our own way were having to create a new sense of home and we all worked really hard at that. Being far away, I, for two years, only saw the kids maybe three times a year. I would either come here or we would meet in the middle. Like we would both drive partway and meet in Illinois and the kids would come back with me. We talked often. Wrote often. Shared what was going on. I was continuing to work for an urban ministry. I was on leave, but I decided that I was feeling better. I wanted to take the chance to come off of leave. It made... I took all the steps to do that.

25:00

JC: I knew the risks involved in that because then and even now the United Methodist Church is... you are just one moment away from someone filing a complaint or bringing up charges. So that was a big risk and concern for me. But I went back in. I served a year as an associate pastor at a church outside of Wichita. I had a great experience. Such a wonderful congregation. I had developed a pretty broad circle of friends. Mostly gay men who were just extraordinary people and we loved and supported each other. To back up just a bit... when I was in Wichita [in 1995], I think it was the first couple of weeks I was assigned to that church, and I only learned this later too, but the senior pastor had asked a man who was... a peer, my age, if he would reach out to me and kind of help acclimate me to the life of the church and what was going on. I remember that he and I met for lunch at a Chili's in Wichita. The conversation we had... we had met before, I think, through an experience that had been held at the church before I came there. So I knew him peripherally. But the depth of our conversation was so compelling to me because I rarely had that kind of in-depth conversation about social justice or issues of human sexuality. I remember him asking me how I felt about homosexuality and the struggle the church was having. We had a great talk about that. Well, over the course of those years we became very close friends and at one point he confided in me that the journey I was making—and this was after I had separated and we had divorced—the journey I was going through was similar to the journey he was going through. Because of our closeness as friends, when he was going through the throws of trying to decide whether or not to come out and separate from his wife, his wife ended up filing a complaint against me for manipulating her husband into the homosexual lifestyle. Which was completely inaccurate, but I knew where she was coming from and the

place from which she did this. So there ended up being two complaints filed against me. This all happened in the summer of 2001. During that season of all of that happening, I was emerging... continuing to emerge in my own coming out process but I was still within an institution that encouraged me to be closeted and hidden. So when faced with whether or not to go through a trial, I surrendered my credentials. I made the decision to take the energy that I would have used up in a trial that would have gotten nowhere to fully come out and move closer to my children. So, I surrendered my credentials on July 5th of 2001. [I] was no longer a United Methodist clergy. I had been invited to come and stay with a dear friend who was a United Methodist pastor who was getting married that September. He said "come stay with us in Atlanta. Just take some time to heal and figure out where you want to go with this. That was the September of 2001. And so I did. I began... I wrestled with whether or not to move to Atlanta, which was six hours from the kids or whether to move to Roanoke or somewhere closer. During that time, I was just trying to figure out... I didn't want...

30:00

JC: I wanted to be in a place where I could be fully out and just not have to deal with the tension of not being out. So I really wasn't high on Roanoke. But after I officiated their wedding which was in Washington State, I flew back to Atlanta and arrived back at their house a little before I think it was 6:45 A.M on September 11th, 2001. When I got to their house and turned on the TV, I saw the second airplane fly into the other World Trade Center tower. That whole day was... I was a mess. I thought, I can't be in Atlanta when my kids are six hours away. I need to figure out how to be closer to them. So I drove to be... to spend some time with the kids. Leigh Anne and I were having great conversations and doing everything we could to support the kids. I remember asking Leigh Anne "how close is too close" because there was a house right across the street from them that was for sale [laughter]. I couldn't afford a house, so I don't know what I was thinking. So I ended up moving to Roanoke that fall. While I was checking out Roanoke I learned that a year before there had been a gun violence incident at the Backstreet Café on Salem Avenue where a gunman had open fire, realizing it was a gay bar, had killed one person and injured six and I thought "good gosh, what am I doing moving to Roanoke where this is happening." But I also noticed that the city didn't condone that violence. They rallied and said "this is not acceptable here, this isn't the kind of city we want to be." The night of... the first anniversary of that, when they were having a candlelight vigil I happened to be in Roanoke and went to a Pride auction which was part of the annual Pride festival. It was at the Unitarian [Universalist] church and I had been invited by a friend, and I was sitting in the back so I could watch people as they came in and I looked over and I saw these three handsome men come in, and I thought "well, they're probably friends who knows maybe they're all together." I didn't know. And I kept... through the night one of them kept looking at me. So I looked back. I'd learned how to do the eye dance and not make any commitments [laughter]. And so you know this auction just went on and on and on and finally at the end of it I didn't have anything else to do so I was helping clean up and stack chairs. The man I had been doing the eye dance with came over to me and we introduced ourselves to each other and he said "Hi, I'm James," and I said "Hi, I'm Joe." So original. Right there in the middle of the Unitarian sanctuary. We agreed to meet the next day to get to know each other better at the Pride in the Park festival which at

that time was in Highland Park. Well, I saw him later that night at the candlelight vigil for Backstreet. We met the next day at Pride in the Park and spent the whole afternoon together and had an amazing dinner together. We started dating. I still had not moved to Roanoke, but I decided to move here because I had met someone. I was starting to meet new friends... and my kids were close by. So, in November of 2001 I moved to Roanoke.

34:21

EA: So, I guess we're getting a little bit towards the end of our time, so looking back on all of your life experience and everything... if you had to talk to somebody who was young who was going through kind of coming out and maybe wrestling with the idea of religion and their sexuality, what would be your advice to somebody like that?

34:47

JC: My advice would be to recognize people in your life that have created a safe space for you to dwell in and entrust them with your story. And in doing so, recognize that your story is a gift and that you have a choice for the most part about who you share that story with. So it's important to know that when you're sharing your story that it be with someone who will receive your story as a gift and honor it. From that I would say find your place to call home. Wherever that is. When I moved to Roanoke I was starting over completely. All I had here were my children and I know I couldn't count on them for me to have a social life [*laughter*]. They were 11 and 9, you know, in another community. So in my starting over I just remembered everyday who I am, what gifts I bring to this world... and I showed up and I went into a lot of situations that were uncomfortable for me because as an introvert being in and among people was not my natural thing. But because I had practiced being an extrovert and had been a pastor for so long, I had those essential skills to meet people and build relationships. So I just started to do that. So find those people and places that are supportive. In Roanoke, I found people in this city just loved me and welcomed me and said "you can be at home here and we want you to be at home here." So fast-forwarding to 2017 when I had just finished pastoring the Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge where I'd been pastor for eight years... I wanted to expand my work in social justice. I didn't know what that would look like. I had just been invited to interview for the senior pastor position at the founding church of the Metropolitan Community churches in Los Feliz, Los Angeles, [California]. When I realized after going out there that it wasn't a match for me or my family... James, whom I met at the Unitarian church that night in 2001, we've been together most of those twenty years. We decided to get married that summer of 2017 after it was legal with family and close friends. We had added two children to our family through surrogacy and he's their natural father. Jenny and JJ, who are now 12 and 9. When I came back from that experience and realized that if I were just by myself it would make sense for me to go, but I wasn't. I have my family here. It dawned on me that Roanoke, where I thought I would just live temporarily until my older children finished high school and went on their way and then I would move, had become my home. So what better thing to do than invest my livelihood in this place that had welcomed me. So that's when I decided to run for public office and really work toward social justice for anyone who was in a vulnerable position, anyone who's experienced marginalization. So I had never run

for office before in a formal way. I'd been student government president in college and seminary. So, I put together this kind of grassroots [campaign]... *[audio cuts out]*

Part Four (9:50 total)

0:00

[The recorder began to run out of battery power and had to be switched out. There was a break of approximately ten minutes between Part 3 and Part 4. This begins part 4 of the interview.]

EA: So, starting back up with the grassroots campaign...

0:04

JC: Mhmm.

0:04

EA: ...and going into politics that way.

0:06

JC: Yeah, so in the fall of 2017 I decided to run for office. I announced my campaign in January. And it was really a grassroots, evolving... people saying "yeah, I want to help, let's learn together." I don't think... I had maybe two people on my campaign team that had ever been on a campaign before. So, we just figured it out together. And, I learned very quickly that the keys were just being relatable. People want to know who you are, what you believe in, what you find value in, in terms of local government, how you can work with them to make a difference, because I think most people feel like they can make a difference, too. And, so, I started campaigning in January. I knocked on a lot of doors, put up a lot of yard signs. And the election was... I think it was May first actually, the first Tuesday in May. And, I, my son—my oldest son—drove me around that day to different polling places. And, I really didn't know what to expect. And, when we got to the place that had been designated for us to watch returns, I started pulling them up, and I was like "Oh my gosh, there are a lot of people voting for me." And, by the end of the night I had received the highest number of votes. And one of my colleagues who I had run with was second, and so we, two newbies, were elected along with an incumbent. And because I received the highest number of votes, I also became the Vice-Mayor for the city. So, I started my four-year term on July 1st of 2018, and so I am halfway through. And I am loving being part of City Council. I have a great group of colleagues who are very progressive and forward-looking.... [they] want our city to be a place that is welcoming and inclusive of all

people. And just, modeling that every way that we can. So, in addition to being the Vice-Mayor, I am a chaplain at Hermitage Roanoke, which is a senior living community, ironically owned by the United Methodist Church. And I am also Community Outreach Coordinator for Highland Park Elementary School. So, I, find that between those three jobs I get to meet and interact with people of all ages everyday and find it really pretty extraordinary and exciting.

3:00

EA: What was it like to run for such a public office as an openly gay person? What was...

3:06

JC: It was a little strange. Now, I think most people knew because I had been very vocal, kinda frontline in my pastoral leadership of the church for issues around equality for LGBTQ people. And, I just didn't hide that anymore. And so, everyday I kind of wondered, you know, will that be honored? Will that be questioned? Will people... be slanderous toward me? So, I was always kind of bracing myself for hate mail, strange messages, that sort of thing. And, what really delighted me was that there was very little of that. And most people just wanted to hear what I had to say. And what I believed about our city, and what we could do together. And, even afterwards, you know, I still meet people who have no idea that I'm gay. Just like... and yet it doesn't seem to be a barrier, because they've gotten to know me. And see that I care about them, and there's a mutual respect. Not always the case. I've had a few encounters in the last year that people have done derogatory things toward me because of my sexual orientation. But I am pretty much able to take that in stride. But I know there are a lot of people just emerging and coming out in their own stories for whom that is a very vulnerable place to be. And so, if I can be a source of support and encouragement for them, then that means everything.

4:54

EA: So, I saw that, more recently you were on the Roanoke citizen's panel, and you were interviewing candidates for the new Police Chief..What is it like for... with the history of the LGBTQ community and police interactions... what is like to be sitting there on that council doing those interviews? That has to be a little bit interesting.

5:14

JC: Well, that was, that was several years ago.

5:18

EA: Oh...

5:19

JC: Probably 2016. I think I was still pastor at MCC [Metropolitan Community Church]. That was when Chief Jones was promoted to the Chief.

5:28

EA: Yes.

5:29

JC: And, it was very special to be a part of that process, because I think, you have to look at it from a couple of angles. One is how LGBTQ people have typically been marginalized, and in some places treated poorly by police or law enforcement because there is a lack of sensitivity or understanding. But one of the things that impressed me about Chief Jones was his... clearly, he was knowledgeable about those challenges. And he even conveyed a story that he teaches at Virginia Western [Community College] about encouraging people to consider law enforcement. And he talked about a transgender student coming, and asking "Could I apply for a spot on the police force?" and he explained the process and he said "you can, and we would be glad to welcome you." You know, you have to go through police academy and all of those things. But I was really impressed with that approach. And, while there are challenges... sometimes you get an officer that doesn't have the same sensitivity that someone else does, and, so the encounter might be not what you expected. And we certainly know that people of color experience that... for decades, and still do. But particularly I think for people who are transgender today, there is such a lack of understanding about that process and that journey. And, just... instead of being punitive and judgmental with them, asking and learning what questions to ask. And, it's a process of discovery, and inviting the person who is going through that process to kind of become your mentor in learning what it is like to go through it. Whether it's accessing healthcare, or being pulled over and having to explain to an officer that the name on your I.D. does not match the sex of your birth because you're trans. See what I mean? Those are the kinds of things that we are continuing to learn about. So, I appreciate the openness that I have experienced with public safety officials in the city to work towards a better understanding of that. You can't guarantee that every person feels that way, but if your leadership approaches it that way that means everything.

8:27

EA: That's good. So, looking towards the future, what goals do you have in your future?

8:34

JC: Well, I love public service and I want to continue to do that, as long as it's meaningful for the city that I serve. I don't have aspirations to serve beyond local government. I think that's where it's at. I love the dynamic of that, and the possibilities that are there. I see part of my role as recognizing emerging leaders of all ages, and really encouraging them to get involved. Because I believe that... as important as it is for me to serve, it's equally important for me to identify who will come after me. And to nurture them and nourish those skills within them. Now, again it's up to the electorate. The city has to vote and decide. But if I can play a role in that, and if I can help pave the way for people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity to believe that they can be elected and serve in leadership in the city, fantastic. Then I couldn't be more proud of that kind of a contribution.

9:47

EA: That's great. Thank you so much for your time.

9:48

JC: Thank you all very much.

[END]