

Oral History Interview: Yvette Flunder

Interviewee: Yvette Flunder

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: February 28, 2011

Monique M. All right, so I'm going to let you know I am recording the call. I'm using Coji, a software company that records, so everything we say is being recorded, and that's going to be sent off to LGBTRAN and transcribed. And then they're going to send me the transcription back and I'll clean up any unclear words they couldn't hear, and then I'll send you the transcript to get your okay. Sometimes people look back and they decide they don't want to include a story or maybe they want to elaborate further, so we can add or amend to the original transcript and the original call, if necessary.

Yvette F. All right, then.

Monique M. All right. So I'm going to start, really, at the beginning, and I'm probably going to go in a rapid-fire way because I'm trying to get as many questions in as I can, so please let me know if I need to slow down.

Yvette F. Okay.

Monique M. The first question I want to ask is, just starting at the beginning, to have you talk about growing up in San Francisco.

Yvette F. Well, I was born and raised in San Francisco and attended elementary school, junior high school in the area. My family were all Church of God

in Christ people. My mother and father both came from church founding families, both in the East Bay and in the San Francisco area, and I grew up in the womb of the church. Essentially my whole life, for the most part, was related to church. Other things were sort of ancillary, like school and sports and all of that, but my life was church.

And it was the Pentecostal church, the Church of God in Christ. I also had a real sense of, because we were Pentecostal and fundamentalist, that we were very special inasmuch as we were the, quote, “holiness” people sort of in a sea of other religious people. We thought ourselves, in many ways, set apart from other religions. But we had a powerful community, very supportive, rather insular, but very supportive. We took care of each other.

I would venture to say that I had a safe and good childhood till we reached the point where my mom and dad started to have serious problems and eventually divorced. That left us reasonably vulnerable, financially vulnerable, and emotionally vulnerable, to some degree, because I loved my father a great deal, even though I knew he was a very dysfunctional man and could be violent. I still loved him, my dad. And so when I got to be about 13 years old, I went away from San Francisco and went to school outside of the area, to the Church of God in Christ school in Lexington, Mississippi. So I would say that I had a great childhood in San Francisco.

Monique M. Wow. I did my dissertation on Juanita Bynum, who also went to that school, and I was fascinated to learn the history of how it was created.

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. Yeah, it had a great history.

Monique M. My first job is to say...let me set the interview up correctly first. My name is Monique Moultrie and today is February 28, 2011, and I'm here with Bishop Yvette Flunder, and we're discussing her growing up in San Francisco. I'm going to take us back one step further and to ask about the type of neighborhood you grew up in. Was it predominantly black, multicultural, multi classes?

Yvette F. Well, yes. I grew up in a very multicultural neighborhood. I grew up in what was called the Ingleside neighborhood in San Francisco. Multi family, middle income. And I went to public schools at home and had a lot of Asian and European American friends when I was in school. I was involved in several of the school-related clubs. This is back when schools had money. And I played in the band and I was in the chess club and things like that coming along in school. So yes, I was in a very multicultural neighborhood.

Monique M. What did you play?

Yvette F. I played first chair classical clarinet.

Monique M. Okay. Now, you mentioned growing up with your mother and father. Did you have a large extended family or was your family unit small?

Yvette F. Well, comparatively, yes, we were small. I was principally connected to my grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side, my maternal grandparents. My father's father had passed when I was born, and then his mother and that part of his family, his siblings, my cousins, were not very close to us once my mother and my father broke up. Which, by the way, I was eight and my brother was ten when that happened, so we didn't grow up around those cousins.

We were connected to the people that were connected to our church. That's the best way to describe it. And whatever family members were connected to our church, those were the ones we were connected to. So we were a comparatively small family to several of our friends who had multiple siblings and extended family and such. But we had a big community, so it didn't feel like we were, you know.

Monique M. Yeah. You talk a bit about having your world be pretty much shaped by your activities in the COGIC church. Were there any activities you did within the church for fun or outside of the church for fun or that pursued any other interests?

Yvette F. No. [*Laughs.*] All of my recreation was with church people. When we used to go places – of course, you know, in the Church of God in Christ, like other organizations that are very...that have a culture, essentially, we did things within that culture because there were so many things we couldn't do. We didn't go to dances and we didn't go to movies. We

didn't go to sports games. We had picnics and we had musicals and we had events, and we got together and went to the meetings, to the youth congress and the convocation, and we would fill up buses and charter planes and all of that, because the activities of the national church took up a good portion of our time and our spendable cash. There wasn't much left over to do, you know.

Locally what we would do after church – because we had church all day. It started in the morning about 9:30 and literally went on until there was a midnight broadcast, 11:00 broadcast, radio broadcast. So we went to church all day Sunday, and there were different subsets to that. We would go to Sunday School and then we would go to our morning worship. Then we would break at the end of our morning worship, and then as young people we would have activities.

We'd go to what was then Playland at the beach and to the fun house, but we would all go together, we'd go in a pack. We'd go out to restaurants and things like that, and then we would come back at, say, 6:00 for what was called YPWW, Young Peoples Willing Worker, and that was our service, the young people's service. Then we would go into our night worship, and then after our night worship we would have a late night broadcast, so it was a full day.

Monique M. Yes!

Yvette F. Uh-huh. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. It sounds full and tiring.

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. We said we didn't sin 'cause we didn't have time. That's the only reason. [*Laughs.*] There was no time in the schedule for sin, you know. You barely had enough time to go to the bathroom, you know. [*Laughs.*] So yeah, right.

Monique M. Now, it sounds like a great deal of your value system came from your being a part of COGIC. Were there any specific family values that were big in your household?

Yvette F. Well, you know, we practiced what we really believed. My mother led us in prayer. We talked about God and scripture. Our music was usually religious music. We actively lived at home what we lived at church. My mother was a very strong woman, very powerful and directed and focused, and loved God with all of her heart, loved her children. And she was one of those women that I believe was definitively called to ministry. She was definitely clergy. But she was born and raised in a church where women didn't have the option to have a full charge of ministry, so my mother wasn't ordained to ministry as we understand it. She wasn't allowed to pastor or to serve communion, to, as we say, marry and bury and serve communion. She wasn't allowed to do that because she was a female in a very patriarchal system.

But she, like so many of the other sisters that were part of the church, learned to circumvent those realities and they actually ran things, they just

ran them on the down low, you know. It was more of them, so just in sheer numbers it was always more women. They also did the biggest fund raising for the church. And so the person who rules the purse rules the church, you know. And they definitely did quite a bit of that. Quite a bit. So my mother was very strong. So anyway, go ahead, I'm sorry.

Monique M. I was just going to follow up. You mentioned your mother's faith. Did your father also attend the COGIC church you attended?

Yvette F. Oh, my dad? Oh, yeah. My father, until he left church altogether, which he did do at some point, my father was a jazz singer, and a wonderful jazz singer, and a recording artist. An incredible jazz singer, in fact. In fact, my mother and father both sang. My mother was trained as a pianist and my father was a really great jazz singer. But he didn't launch his career until he left church.

And my mother got married when I was 12, so two years after she and my dad broke up, to my stepfather, who I really look to as my dad. My birth father has passed away, but my stepfather is still living, and he and my mother were together over 40 years, so he was our dad for my brother and I as we were coming up, and he deeply influenced us. And I know that I have a lot of my father, my birth father in me, in my spirit. He was a lighthearted man with a deep wanderlust, and he just couldn't be confined to the strictures of the holiness church. It just wasn't something he could do. And so he and my mom just had a real departure around those issues.

But my stepfather stepped in rather quickly, a couple years later, and married us – that’s the way we say it, ‘cause he got my brother and I with the package, and immediately started being a wonderful provider and taking care of us and helping us throughout my life. And he is still in my life.

Monique M. Wonderful. Now, going back to your time at Saints High, did you end up graduating from there or did you come back to California?

Yvette F. Say that again.

Monique M. Going back to your time at—

Yvette F. At Saints Junior College? Yes. Saints Academy and Junior College I think was the last name that they had for it. I graduated high school in Mississippi at Saints Academy and then I came back to California.

Monique M. And so when you returned to California, what were you interested in doing? What was your first grownup gig?

Yvette F. Well, when I came back to California, what I was very aware of is that... I had had several leadership responsibilities while I was in Mississippi, and in those three years that I was there, I was sort of like the campus coordinator for worship and prayer. And so my life became very oriented toward a deeper spirituality, inner spirituality. And what I realized when I first came home from school is that I was surrounded by a lot of young people who hadn’t had that experience, and they seemed to me to be

terribly frivolous, you know? You know, I just, I have an old spirit anyway, but when I was younger it was much more visible compared to my friends and contemporaries. So when I first came home from school I really realized that I, you know.

So I went to business college, and then on to college. But I remember feeling very different and distant and apart from most of the folks that were contemporary to me in age. I was always thinking very deeply about everything, like everything was a matter of life and death. And which was so conflictual with so many other parts of me, because I was also very aware that I was a same gender loving woman. And it was my secret for a time, particularly when I was very young, but I was aware of it. And I think part of what made me so intently spiritual was to try to beat back those urges. And I remember that time of my life as being sort of a dichotomy, because where on the one hand I was deeply, deeply spiritual and reading the Bible through maybe two or three times by the time I was 21 or 22 years old, but simultaneously having to deal with and figure out how to respond to what it was I was feeling going on in my sexuality.

Monique M. When you mention that was a secret you held, was it at any point voiced to your family, to your parents, to your brother?

Yvette F. Not then. I talked to my brother about it because my brother is gay. But it was later. I had to find words for it. There were no words for it, not in our community. So it took me a little while to identify it and to find words for

it. Now, what I did to sort of “cure” myself – *[laughs]* – is I got married, so I figured that that would do it, you know.

Monique M. Wow, okay.

Yvette F. And I’d get myself all straightened out and this wouldn’t be a part of my reality. And I married a man who was struggling with the same kinds of issues, in his words, and I guess we figured that we would cancel each other out in some way, you know. *[Laughs.]*

Monique M. How long did you y’all continue with that?

Yvette F. *[Laughs.]* We were married about three years. And of course I have a beautiful daughter, and I’m very grateful that, if for nothing else, that when we got married, I have this beautiful child, and that part of it was wonderful. But we had a tough time, and he eventually became HIV positive and died from complications due to AIDS. Now, of course I had to be tested and my daughter also, and we both tested negative, but it was difficult emotionally to have that experience. It was sort of the precursor to my work in HIV, but it was a very difficult time.

Monique M. Oh, certainly.

Yvette F. If you hear me crunching, it’s because I’m eating while we’re talking, okay?

Monique M. Completely okay. I'm trying to keep the trajectory and timeline straight. So you've returned to California, you're returning to San Francisco. Is that where you went to college?

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. I went to college in the San Francisco Bay area, the College of San Mateo, after I finished Heald. I went to business college first, Heald, H-E-A-L-D. Then I went to the College of San Mateo for undergrad and Armstrong, which was connected, and Berkeley, which was over close to the Berkeley campus. It doesn't even exist anymore. And then I left college and didn't go back to college until I went to seminary, which was in the late 1990s, and I got three degrees from seminary. But I wasn't going to go back, because I went to work, had a baby, and I was a single parent. And I went on to work and worked until—

Monique M. In bios that I read of yours, it said that you had a passion for social work, especially in working with the elderly. Was that originally a career trajectory for you or did you always know you'd be in full-time ministry?

Yvette F. Well, I didn't see a difference between the two. I stayed in ministry and I always had a social justice bent. And I started that when I was about 19, before I got married, with helping my cousin to develop a specialized foster group home. And I helped her and I lived there with six young women. And then I got married after the foster group home, and then after I got married, I got...the job that I got involved in was working with seniors, and lots of things with them in terms of housing, meals,

transportation, legal aid to the elderly. Several different kind of programmatic pieces were involved in that. And then from that to HIV, you know what I mean? So it's been from one thing to another.

And I saw the connection between social work and social justice work and faith, but I wasn't able to stay connected in terms of faith and social justice work when I came out, when it became more and more apparent, after me and my former husband broke up, it became more and more apparent that I was a same gender loving woman, at least to myself. And eventually it became conflictual. I had a theological conflict, I had emotional conflicts. I just started having conflicts. And I pulled away from the church. I kept doing the social work, but I pulled away from the church. And I spent six years out there.

Monique M. And so that period of exile, you said it lasted about how many years?

Yvette F. About six years when I didn't go to church at all, anybody's church anywhere.

Monique M. What lessons do you think you learned from that religious exile, that period of healing away from the COGIC church?

Yvette F. Well, I definitely...my heart opened to other theologies other than the Pentecostal/fundamentalist Biblical literalism. And I began to open my heart to other possibilities. Because I never believed myself out of

relationship with God. I just knew that I was out of relationship with the Church of God in Christ.

Monique M. Gotcha.

Yvette F. And of course it made things very distant from my family because that's the punishment that you endure. You leave a fundamentalist church, you have to leave everybody behind. That was hard.

Monique M. I can imagine.

Yvette F. It was a sort of bereavement, you know?

Monique M. Now, in that period, the readings that I have say that at some point you got drawn to Love Center Ministries.

Yvette F. That's true.

Monique M. Talk about that move.

Yvette F. I got a phone call one day and folks wanted me to come and preach for a service when Bishop Hawkins was out of town, and I agreed. Although my mouth said yes, everything in me said no. And in fact I had to go find my Bible. I didn't even know where it was. It was in my house somewhere. And I went and found it and I sat down with it, trying to figure out what I was going to preach from. [*Laughs.*] And I developed a sermon with my Bible in one hand and a bottle of wine – I was drinking the wine from the bottle. I wasn't even pouring it in a glass. Because my

whole inside was just in shock that I had said yes. And that was my first time back in a worship service in about six years. I went to preach for them, and the same Sunday that I preached for them, I joined the church.

Monique M. Wow. Now, when did you start preaching? I think we skipped that part of the narrative.

Yvette F. When I was in Mississippi. And I was sort of a young preaching wonder, you know what I mean? I was a bit of a preaching prodigy from the time I was, like, 16 or 17. And I preached on—

Monique M. Now, within COGIC you were considered just an evangelist?

Yvette F. Yes, they called me an evangelist missionary.

Monique M. And did you primarily minister to youth or were you sort of doing the circuit with everyone?

Yvette F. Well, I could do the circuit as long as I didn't mind standing on the floor. I couldn't stand in the pulpit and I had to defer to the men. I'd learned how to do that. Thanked them very much for giving this humble woman an opportunity. [*Laughs.*] You know, I knew the language in order to get to people, you know. And once I got them, then I could preach, and they didn't have a problem with that. But I couldn't call it preaching and I had to be in a certain place physically in the church. I couldn't be in the pulpit. They invited me like crazy, so that's where I got that.

Monique M. Talk to me about what led you to join Love Center.

Yvette F. Well, for one thing, they had refined the theology of what they then called...let me think...they called it, from Chuck Swindoll's book *The Grace Awakening*, eternal security, which, for all intents and purposes, suggests that our relationship with God, our salvation, essentially is not fragile and you don't lose it and have to get it back every time you make a mistake in life, every time you "sin," quote, unquote. Which was very different from my Pentecostal training, which was that if you sin, you're going to hell. If you die with unrepented sin in your life, you're just going to hell, that's it and that's all. That's the way I was taught, and that was what I came to believe. That's what they told me and I believed it.

Monique M. And so the theological understanding was new to you and intriguing?

Yvette F. Well, it was freeing. What it was that they told me was liberating for me because in my heart of hearts I knew that my relationship with God was not fragile. For heaven's sake, you know, I'd been out of church six years, and I had relationship with God. I just didn't have relationship with religion. And so when they said that, it rang a buzzer in me almost immediately, and I said, you know, that's right, because that's the way I live. [*Laughs.*] So I was able to accept that and receive that, and that's very refreshing. That's like cool water on your soul for a fundamentalist.

Monique M. Beautiful.

Yvette F. Because you can't do anything else but try to get saved all the time. When you're always afraid you're going to lose your salvation, you can't really concentrate on the needs of other people, because every altar is for you. Because inevitably you're going to make a mistake and mess up between church services every single time. [*Laughs.*] So when you come back, you've got to get straightened out every single time, which is just too much work. That's too much work.

Monique M. So at what point did you decide to pursue the gospel music industry? Was that something you had done before going to Love Center or was that something that was an evolution from your participation in the church?

Yvette F. Well, I've been singing all my life, ever since – I think I did my debut at five years old in my grandfather's church, and I did my first solo. And I sang "We Are Soldiers in the Army." I never will forget it. And I was short. They had to stand me up on the offering table so the people could see me. And that was my debut and I remember it. And I've been singing gospel music all my life, just not professionally. My mother was a singer and my father was a singer.

And so when I went to Love Center, I didn't go to have a gospel music career, but shortly after I got there, Bishop Hawkins approached me about singing with the choir, and so I sang on "Love Alive Three," the choir recording, and then after that, he approached me about singing with the Hawkins family on the road, and recording with them. And of course I

was thrilled to be able to do that, and that sort of launched my gospel music recording history. And that's more or less how it began professionally.

Monique M. Do you still record for the gospel music industry?

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. Well, we did one about two years ago with the Fellowship, which was very well received, and we are planning to do it again in the very near future. This time, though, we're pulling together a cadre of out and affirming gospel music artists.

Monique M. Nice.

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. It was a wonderful experience.

Monique M. So talk to me about what led you to your leadership role within Love Center. From what I've read you sort of moved from being a minister there to assistant pastor quite quickly.

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. Well, in many ways I'm trained by church planters and church founders and church organizers and church administrators. That's my family. And so it was sort of natural, when I got to Love Center, that I found a lot of needs that needed to be filled by the things that I was trained and raised to do. And then Bishop Hawkins and I became very good friends, and he talked to me about a lot of things that he felt like the church needed. And it wasn't long before I found myself doing those things. And so it was sort of a natural progression because of the

combination of the fact that I was a preacher and trained in business and had some administrative responsibilities as well that I ended up becoming associate pastor with a great deal of responsibility for church administration.

Monique M. Okay.

Yvette F. Thank God. I'm glad I have this. It's a great combination of business background and a theological background. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. Absolutely. And so how long were you there with Love Center?

Yvette F. Nine and a half years, almost ten years.

Monique M. And at that point you decided to start out on your own?

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. I felt called to plant a church, and I shared it with my pastor and told him what I felt God was saying to me, and that what I felt called to do was very much connected to a liberation for same gender loving people. Love Center was a church that was and is still occupied by a number of people who are gay and lesbian. But the understanding around the theology around that is still rather ambiguous. It's don't ask, don't tell, but it's like don't ask, don't tell light, you know?

Monique M. Were you not out at the church?

Yvette F. Oh, yeah, I was out before I left. But that "out" needs definition. I was out in terms of the people knowing that Shirley and I were a couple, but

not out from the standpoint of talking about it openly and celebrating it openly in front of folks, you know what I mean?

Monique M. Yes.

Yvette F. That was the complicated piece.

Monique M. You mentioned filling needs at the Love Center. What needs were you desiring to fill when you founded City of Refuge?

Yvette F. Well, I certainly wanted to create an environment where we could celebrate our relationships as same gender loving people, and I wanted to create an environment where we could be very focused on justice issues as our primary concern. Love Center's badge in the world is a church that excels in the arts. And it's not that I didn't enjoy it, you know what I mean? But what is really my passion is for social justice and human services, and getting people wrapped around finding ways to fight for their own freedom and for the freedom of anyone who has been marginalized. And it was hard for me to exercise that passion in an arts atmosphere where the principal concern was, again, for music and arts. And I don't say that pejoratively, it's just that I didn't feel that to be my primary call. And the other thing is, as I said before, I wanted to create a situation where same gender loving people could come and be fully who they are, who we are. Very important to me.

Monique M. And so what year did you found?

Yvette F. Nineteen Ninety-nine. Huh-uh, that's wrong – 1991. This is our 20th year, so that's right, 1991. November, 1991 was our first service.

Monique M. And did you start off as sort of a home cell?

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. Started off in Shirley and my family room with about 15 people. When we got up to about maybe 35 or 40, we decided we needed to get those people out of our house, because they started eating our food and wanting to spend the night when they had driven a long way.

Monique M. It's like a New Testament church.

Yvette F. That's right. We realized that these New Testament saints needed a building where they could go, and that's when we made the shift.

Monique M. From what I've been reading, you all have started planting churches, and at some point you became affiliated with UCC. Which came first, and what was the push and desire for both, to plant other Cities of Refuge and to be affiliated with some denomination? Because it seems that you'd come from a large denomination, so what drew you back into denominationalism?

Yvette F. Well, after having been in a denomination, and then having been in an independent church, I was able to kind of make an assessment of the pros and cons of both. And denominationalism is a cover. When I say a cover, I don't mean as in hiding, but I mean something that covers the local church and makes it a part of a greater whole, and it keeps the churches

from becoming so insular, and in some ways, theologically incestuous. We don't have anybody to compare our thoughts and ideas with, which will make things a great deal more...how can I say...a great deal more safe. You know, the abundance of counsel is where there's safety.

So I was of the opinion that denominationalism raised the ceiling. As my people began to be more and more skilled and more and more mature, there are more places that they can go and things that they can do and cross-pollinate with people when there's an organization. Simultaneously, the idea of being an independent church provided congregational autonomy, where a bishop or a prelate of some sort could not come in and remove a pastor without the congregation's support, or take their building, or things like that.

So what we were looking for was sort of a hybrid, and when we went denomination shopping we were looking for a larger organization to connect to, we were looking for someone who really affirmed, and not in words only, the ministries of women and the presence and ministries of same gender loving men and women and trans people, and we were looking for a place that would afford us congregational autonomy. So we did go shopping. And we interviewed folks – [*laughs*] – from different denominations to kind of see where their heads and hearts were about these issues. And when we brought the United Church of Christ folks in and we talked with them, we were deeply moved by what we heard from

the UCC. And that's how we became United Church of Christ. That's what moved us to become United Church of Christ.

Monique M. Okay. And so what moved you to start City of Refuges?

Yvette F. Well, another interesting reality is where, on the one hand – I hope you can hear me, because I'm still eating this, I'm on toast now – when we came to realize that culturally we were “Metho-Bapti-costal” and African American Metho-Bapti-costal, that that is not truly the culture of the United Church of Christ, to say the very least. Where we love the positions that the UCC takes on the important issues like racism, like orientation and sexuality, gender identification, workers' rights, equal rights for women, just all the important issues, the UCC was doing really, really great on all of that, the worship experience could be challenging for my Metho-Bapti-costal people.

Consequently, we realized that we, in some ways, in order to stay connected to this powerful and historically prophetic church, and continue to, with our presence, write the history of this church going forward, essentially, that we had to have some outlets for the kind of worship that we enjoy. And so we started first aligning with churches who were like-minded in the United States, who emerged from the same kind of backgrounds, evolved from the same kind of theologies, and simultaneously had the style and the culture and the sound and the

celebratory worship styles that we all came from. And so that was how we began.

And then before long, we found that some of our ministers from our church and other people that we were related to and associated with wanted to do new churches, so we started intentionally planting churches and new church starts that were the same kind of hybrid. And it was a new phenom for us, because basically what our choices were as affirming and same gender loving and trans African Americans, we usually had to choose. When a church sounded good to us, or sounded culturally appropriate to us, usually the theology was oppressive. If the theology was freeing and liberating, then the worship was oppressive. *[Laughs.]* And so what we had to do is create a hybrid. And then we started planting churches that were other testimonies to that hybrid. And that's the way we began.

Monique M. And the Fellowship came out of that?

Yvette F. Mm-hmm. The Fellowship is a combination of church plants and ministries that affiliate with us, mostly inner city. Most are same gender led, but if they're not, they're definitely affirming. So that's where our sameness is. And most are socially aware and involved in the social justice movement.

Monique M. Okay. And so what do you do in your role as presiding bishop for the Fellowship?

Yvette F. I get very little rest. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. That I can imagine, but I'm trying to help paint your narrative for future generations.

Yvette F. Well, by and large I have oversight. It's not contractual oversight, it's covenantal oversight. It's oversight because the churches and the leaders allow me to have it. I perform the rituals that the churches need, like ordinations, installations, elevations. They call on me to act in that role. We convene conferences twice a year for leadership development, information dissemination and cross-pollination, for worship, for opportunities to showcase gifts and skills, choirs and dancers and artists and preachers, and for the fellowship. For the work of liberation, but yes, indeed, for the fellowship, to be together, to spend time together. Hence the name, the Fellowship.

Monique M. So in your many tiers of religious leadership, has your family been supportive, understanding of your role as pastor and bishop?

Yvette F. Oh, definitely. Shirley and I raised two girls together who are 33 and 34. One is my birth daughter and the other one is her niece, who is the daughter of one of her deceased sisters. And the girls started living together when they were five and six years old, and they are sisters, in many ways. And her siblings and of course my brother, and before my mother passed in 2007, she had become a part of our fellowship. So that was a long road, but we ended up doing work with the same people. And

so my family has been...my immediate family particularly, very supportive. Other parts of my family that are not in agreement with me are not people that I interact with anyway, so I don't feel the loss. But my mother—

Monique M. I read sort of how you won your mother over through conversation, and so I'd like, if you wanted to share any lessons you learned from that experience, that model.

Yvette F. Oh, so my mama? Well, for one thing, I think it's important to value the relationships with family. All of us, on the days when we really feel very sad about the loss of family, we'll say, well, I just don't need them and I've learned how to get along without them, but I think that deep down inside of us, if we had family relationships that we enjoyed as children and we were not being abused and in violent situations, we hunger for those relationships again. Can you pause me for a minute?

Monique M. I sure can.

Yvette F. Okay. Hold on just a moment. I'm sorry. This is my next appointment trying to reach me. Can we put a bookmark right here?

Monique M. We can. I had about three more questions, and so I'm happy to call back and we can finish those whenever.

Yvette F. Give me about an hour and call me back at this number.

Monique M. That will be fine.

Yvette F. All right, honey. That will work.

Monique M. All right, thank you.

Yvette F. Thank you. Bye-bye.

[*Part 2.*]

Yvette F. Yes, the last three questions. Go right ahead.

Monique M. All right, so where we were – I had just asked you about your mother’s conversion experience, as far as her being supportive and understanding of you as a same gender loving woman, and you were talking about family relationships being important and nurturing those, and that’s where we ended, and so want you to pick up there.

Yvette F. Okay. Well, my mother, as I said, was a very strong African American Pentecostal. She was an evangelist in the Church of God in Christ and several other things – a district missionary, an assistant state supervisor, and a real ardent prayer warrior and good preacher, even though she couldn’t call herself that. And my mother became aware that I was a same gender loving woman. We had had certain conversations that didn’t go well in the earlier years, and consequently, as I said, I left the church, left the Church of God in Christ, and my relationship with my mother became very tenuous. We saw each other infrequently, and didn’t talk a lot.

And so after I came to Love Center, which was thought of as an affirming church, in many ways, she was distressed, of course, about that. And I remember that along the way – and I can't tell you exactly what year – but I made a decision about seeking to have relationship with my mother because I felt like I did not want her to pass or me to pass or whatever and we spent all these years without having relationship with one another. So I started to try to devise a plan. Because I'm raised a Pentecostal, I know how hard it is for folks to reach outside of the sphere of their understanding of God's will even for family members.

And so I started calling my mom at the top of the week, almost every week, to check on her and see how she was doing. And at first the conversations were a little tense, terse, and then after a period of time I began to let her tell me, of course, everything that was happening with her life and with the church life that she and my dad were experiencing. And then it also dawned on me that we have other common denominators. If church wasn't a common denominator, certainly my daughter, who she was crazy about, and who looked just like her, was a common denominator.

But also my mother liked to shop, I mean, really liked to shop. So I would call her and I'd say, "So what you doing?" And she'd tell me, "Well, you know, nothing." I'd say, "Well, let's go downtown." "Downtown?" And that was the thing, it was the ticket. And I think that the first learning is you have to find what the commonalities can be outside of the issues of

religion, because when you really are in polar positions around religion, that's not something that you can talk through just by proving your point, 'cause there's so much of religion that's faith. There's so little that you can prove, you know?

Monique M. Right.

Yvette F. So it's not a proving thing. People begin to understand each other's faith paths when they are in relationship with the person, not with the dogma. And so we got connected, my mother and I, around shopping, and so I'd take her shopping. We'd get in the car and I'd drive her all over the place. And my mother was a real shopper, and she would shop and she would shop. And she had this great tendency to find things and then decide that she paid too much money for them, and then we'd have the next week to take them all back or exchange them for something else, so it was a sport for her, you know? *[Laughs.]*

Not that she accumulated everything she bought. She'd just buy it and look at it and like half of it, and then the next thing was to go back and have the arguments with the stores to take the stuff back. That was the, you know. And so we did this regularly, my mother and I. And we developed relationship. We talked and we talked, and we walked and we had lunch together and we chatted together. And then we would chat up on something we couldn't really talk about, and then we'd pass over that and pick up something else, and we would chat and we would chat.

And then pretty soon we reached a certain place theologically – interestingly, we were on an airplane going back south to see one of my mother’s siblings, and while we were talking on the plane my mother turned to me and she said, “Shut up, Yvette.” And so I said, okay. [Laughs.] And a few minutes later I said, “So what was that about?” And she said, “Because you’re starting to make sense.” That’s what she said to me. [Laughs.] And she said, “And if you are right, then that means that I have spent almost 60 years of my life doing some things I didn’t have to do.”

Monique M. Wow.

Yvette F. To which I said, “And I suspect, Mama, that that’s why most people have a hard time with new truths of any kind.” Because you think about how much time in your life you gave to things that you didn’t have to do. And it’s very aggravating, so what you try to do is to justify it, you know? But my mother took the other tack. What she began to do is to begin to make choices about what mattered and what doesn’t matter.

And I knew that she had crossed over the day that she came over to my house and she had on a warm-up suit. [Laughs.] She had on some J-Lo tennis shoes and a warm-up suit and a little cap – [laughs] – and I didn’t hardly know who she was, you know, ‘cause this was very not GOGIC, you know what I mean? And when I saw her, she said, “Well, I figure it doesn’t make any sense to do walking” – ‘cause she walked for exercise –

she said, “To be out here walking in a skirt.” So she went and got her some warm-ups, and she had to come show it to me. She showed up in athletic wear, which I thought was just adorable.

And it was the beginning of some shifts and changes in my mother’s life. And she didn’t fundamentally change her own prescriptions for what she could and couldn’t do, apart and separate from the kinds of things that I just described to you – maybe taking in a movie from time to time or changing her clothing, becoming more generous with her own self in that way. But she became very much less judgmental of other people. That was the real clear indication that something really had happened in my mother’s ideas about religion. She shifted from being the kind of person who was constantly finding fault with other people’s ideas of what was right and wrong for them and sending them to hell, you know, which is what we did in fundamentalist church. We said if you disagreed with us, you can be sure you were going to hell, no ifs, ands and buts about it. And I saw that shift.

And my mother traveled to South Africa and Ghana with me and a bunch of the folks from my church, many of which were same gender loving people, and she just went all over the world with us, and she was perfectly comfortable. And she used to come back and tell people, “You can’t tell me about these folks. These are some of the kindest, most generous people that I’ve ever met in my life.” And she also used to say, “You can fool me about a lot of things” – this was my mother’s quote, she said, “But

you can't fool me about the presence of God." And she said, "And when I go" – she was talking about my church then – she said, "When I go to City of Refuge, I feel the presence of God."

Monique M. Beautiful.

Yvette F. And she said to me one day, "Yvette, the presence of God is your vindication." And I knew exactly what my mother was saying. So it was an incredible transformation to watch my mother, and a real evolution, and she got freer and freer. And then when she passed, she didn't pass with regret. She didn't make any deathbed confessions and apologies for her shift and change. She felt fully confident that what it was that shifted in her life was for the good. And I must say that that was a beautiful thing to see happen in my mother's life.

Monique M. And did that also benefit your brother?

Yvette F. Oh, yeah, it benefited both of us, because Mama was everything. She was the sun and all the rest of us little planets revolved around Mama. Mama was Mama, you know, and she was one powerful little woman. And I must say, I am extremely proud and fortunate to have her DNA.

Monique M. Wonderful.

Yvette F. Indeed.

Monique M. I'm going to steer us to the last two questions. One is to ask you about your DMin and then to also ask you about your book, *Where the Edge Gathers*, and if these two events sort of coincided together or if they were separate entities, to talk a little about each.

Yvette F. Well, the DMin project, which ended up being *Where the Edge Gathers*, was a decision that I made about deciding to go beyond my master's degree and do a Doctor of Ministry degree so that I could have a framework around which to organize my thoughts and experience in terms of working in the AIDS community and for working in the transgender community and working around marriage equality. And I wanted to be able to – and this was, in many ways, in fact it was 2005 when I wrote that book – in many ways an opportunity to do this work before marriage equality became the big whoopdidoo that it is now. It wasn't happening like that when I started writing that book and when I was studying at San Francisco Theological for the DMin program.

But I felt like it was something that needed to be dealt with as a justice issue, actually, to be honest with you, also as a theological issue and a health issue, because of the experience I had working in the African American faith community and how detrimental it has been to our community to live this dichotomy of being told by people that you are promiscuous and substandard and evil and everything for being gay, but also being told that you can't have a monogamous and sane relationship.

There's no way to win that. You're truly damned if you do and damned if you don't. And that lacks justice.

And it's even worse to me among the people who say that we realize that some people are just gay or some people are homosexual, but this is what you have to do to be here with us. You either have to hide it from us, which means we all would rather you be on the down low or be in clandestine, anonymous relationships, or you have to declare yourself celibate, and that's the breaks. And as I have said many times in my conversations with straight people, so what if somebody walked into your life and told you as a man that the only way that you can have relationship is that you have to have it on the down low away from everybody and/or you have to be celibate, or you have to be with somebody, say, if you're a straight man somebody told you you've got to be with somebody, another man, you've got to be gay – God wants you to be gay. And they say, “Well, I just can't imagine it.” I say, “That is what you're trying to get same gender loving people to do.” And imagine what that would be like if somebody prescribed something like that for you and said that God wants you to do it.

And so that was the backdrop for me trying to go to school and develop a framework. And that became incredibly important. So I went to school and wrote it in bits and pieces, in bits and pieces, and then it all came together as a dissertation, and then out of the dissertation, after several edits, it became the book.

Monique M. Excellent. Well, my final question is where I always like to end, just in getting a fuller sense of what brings you joy, peace and fulfillment.

Yvette F. Okay. Oh, wow. What brings me joy, peace and fulfillment. My, my. Let's see. Joy. On a personal level, probably my children and my grandchildren and my partner. I'm as happy as I can possibly be, on a personal level, when we're all crowded up in one place together. I just love them. I love my family, and all of the things that go along with that, drama notwithstanding. [*Laughs.*] I love my family and I love my babies. I have two grandsons, and both of my girls have a boy apiece, and that's great, great joy for me.

And I think that from a spiritual and pastoral place, my great joy is to find people...to see people, to experience people who are finding their way to their own personal freedom in God. There's a scripture that I love. It's in the New Testament, and it says that...Jesus prayed for us, and in his prayer for us he prayed that our faith would not fail. And when I reflect on that passage of scripture, he didn't pray that we would be rich or that we would always have health or that we would always be happy, but rather that our faith would not fail, which is what I love to see happen in the lives of people. And living with hope and confidence that no matter how dark the night, that weeping endures but for a night and joy does come in the morning.

So I love to see marginalized and disenfranchised and abused and torn and ostracized people find their way to full faith and confidence in God, and in a God that is not punitive, in a God that is not angry and dismissive, but in a God that loves us and embraces us and welcomes us and invites us.

When I see that happen, it brings tears to my eyes. And they're not tears of sadness, they're tears of joy. That's a very powerful moment for me.

Monique M. Beautiful. Well, those were my host of questions, unless you want to give anything else. I will happily record it. But otherwise, I want to say thank you on record for this opportunity to interview you.

Yvette F. Well, you're very welcome. I'm glad we could work it out. And I always apologize for the interesting life that I have, to say the least, but as I often also say it's kind of the life of a prophet, of a trailblazer, and it's all over the place simultaneously. And I make an effort to try to tie things down. I don't always do so well, but I'm at it, you know, I'm doing – *[laughs]* – the best I can, given my circumstances. So I'm glad we could pull it off. I hope that the generation that is coming after us will know us to be the trailblazers, and know the personal cost, but also the personal joy that it has been for us, and if nothing else, that we can provide a path for them through this wilderness so that their way will not be nearly as difficult, in many ways, as ours has been. Then I know that our living and our working hasn't been in vain.

Monique M. Yes.

Yvette F. Okay?

Monique M. Well, thank you. You will hear back with the transcript, and I'll ask Vanessa for some pictures that you like included, and before it all goes up on the web, I'll send you the link to our dummy site where you can look at it and see if everything still jives and looks good to you, and then it'll be up.

Yvette F. Very good. You're very welcome.

Monique M. Thank you so much for your time.

Yvette F. You're welcome. We'll keep talking.

Monique M. Have a good afternoon.

Yvette F. All right, honey. Take care now.

Monique M. Bye-bye.

Yvette F. Bye-bye.

[End of recording.]