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Interviewer: So, to being with, just to get us started, I'd love to hear a little bit about your background and perhaps a little bit about your childhood and where you grew up, to begin with. Over to you.

Respondent: Yes, I was born just before the 2nd World War, therefore my early childhood was very much affected by the conditions that we were living under at the time. My father was around, but not always present. He was a conscientious objector and worked in hospital work, so we saw him fairly often, well most of the time really. He was a very anxious person, but a very caring parent. My mother carried a huge burden really because she and my maternal grandfather spent most of their time working very hard at maintaining the family home and running a business. We were brought up as Congregationalists in an independent church, which is one of two in my hometown. My father didn't find it a congenial place all the time because of his stance on pacifism. Some people were very hostile to him. I had a very happy childhood, and we were very much involved in church life, and I appreciated the cultural aspects of this. I was brought up in a musical atmosphere you might say. My aunt was a music teacher, piano teacher, and taught me, and so we grew up listening to a lot of music. My church favoured a rather traditional form of music, and the choir would sing excerpts from oratorios and that sort of thing in the evening service particularly. We heard a lot from lay preachers in church, some of them women, but there was a Minister present most of the time. One of my earliest memories was of the Minister of our church, John Banks, who died after an accident getting out of a train in the dark, and I remember my father telling me about that. So, I think we had, you might say a very religious background, but it wasn't a seriously fundamentalist background, although we did rely a lot on the Bible, as Protestants tend to, for our sources of authority. But much of what I remember of particularly the New Testament, stemmed from Sunday School and church. As far as I can recall, sexuality never entered into this dialogue, although I was aware that there were two women in the congregation who were close friends, and we would now call them partners. But women's sexuality really wasn't ever talked about in those days. Nor was men's for that matter. As far as I knew there was no male gay person in the congregation, but there was in the other church, which was our sort of rival congregation. I think quite early on I recognised that he was a single male, whereas most people were married. Therefore, I grew up with an awareness that not everybody conformed to the norm as it were. But since the issue of homosexuality was never mentioned, there was nothing threatening about anything that I discovered as time went on about my own sexuality. I suppose it was only really when I started to feel anxious about the possibility that if I fancied somebody, they might not reciprocate and they might feel uncomfortable about it. I did know a number of boys in school who I'm sure were gay. One of them was quite well known, he is well known in the media these days, Ian McKellen, so there is no harm in mentioning his name, and I was at primary school with him, and in fact I knew the family slightly. But there was no mention of sexuality in those days, so it wasn't an issue. I think my father recognised that I had a crush on a friend when I got to secondary school, grammar school, and he never seemed to feel uncomfortable about it. He may have been anxious, but he was an anxious person about most things anyway, so the issue was never raised. He did advise me at one point not to worry too much if I couldn't fix my friend Joe's bike, but that is the only thing I can recall. But of course, you were aware that since sexuality was never mentioned, it was not just a taboo subject, it was a taboo activity if you went into that sort of thing, because otherwise it would have been talked about, and it wasn't.

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel, when you were aware that perhaps you were different?

Respondent: I think I just picked up that whatever your feelings were, you didn't talk about them. You kept them to yourself. I think when I got to grammar school, there were occasional uncomfortable moments, but I think on the whole you know you just kept your mouth shut and might have shown interest in people from time to time. Well, my best friends, I felt very comfortable with, and didn't show any unusual affection towards them, I think. One friend that I had at the time, he is still a friend, and he was straight, we'd say, and when he went into the Royal Air Force, we used to correspond weekly, and the letter always ended up with 'love Joe/John'. I think there was a genuine affection, but it wasn't sexual in any sense at all. The one or two people I recognised as what we might have called puffs in those days, didn't attract me at all. I found them very unappealing. So, there was never any question of uncomfortable encounters with them because I just had no interest in them. I suppose the first time the issue might have been raised in a church context was when I went to a conference, a ministry conference. It might have been considered ministry in the church. One of the interviewers, who held a position in the church, I think in the Manchester area, startled me slightly when we were talking about ministry, and he told me he thought that I would make a wonderful Minister, at which point he put his hand on my right knee and grasped it rather firmly, and I thought that was slightly unusual, but I didn't find it offensive. I suppose that was the first time I might have been aware that the church might have had difficulty with the issue.

[0:09:35]

Interviewer: Okay. Had you considered then going into some form of ministry within the church?

Respondent: Well, I was on the point of thinking about it. I wouldn't say I had made a decision, but I wasn't always (inaudible 00:09:49) as a child. I enjoyed church. I thought church was great. There were some very boring sermons I thought, but at the same time I thought it all seemed rather worthwhile. I thought it was a good thing. To that extent I think any form of love between human beings, I would have considered a positive thing.

Interviewer: So, what was it then that you decided not to go into ordained ministry, for want of a better expression?

Respondent: I didn't have a strong feeling of vocation. I had an interest in the subject, but not in the role of Minister. I don't think I ever saw myself in that role, in that light at all.

Interviewer: Were you aware, you mentioned it briefly, were you aware of a growing tension between sort of the gay community, and the church?

Respondent: Not particularly, because as I say the issue was never raised in those days. It was not an issue. Although there was a sort of subtext when any mention of sexuality came into the conversation or public discussion. I think when people talked about marriage for instance, it was quite clear what they were talking about was between a man and a woman, and the rules were fairly strict. You know, divorce was frowned upon, and therefore the possibility of having same sex relationships on any sort of permanent basis was never a real issue.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Respondent: It made me feel that I didn't quite know how I would live my life in the future. It was something that was very much an unknown quantity. And I don't suppose it was until I actually ... well, the initial stages of any sort of sexual relationship are the sense of falling in love, but that in itself didn't necessarily lead to permanent relationships. I suppose one hoped that it would continue, and it was important. So therefore, I think I was very careful not to give any cause for anxiety on the part of the person I was seeing. I can remember on one occasion when I was with my friend, whom I mentioned just now, who wrote to me when he was in the RAF, we went on holiday, there were four

of us and we went off in a very old Ford van and had a trip around the south-east. We camped out, and I remember on one occasion, and I suppose he was trying to ascertain something about my attitude towards him, he got into my sleeping bag, but I was so terrified of doing anything that might upset him, that I didn't reciprocate any feelings he might have shown at all. But I think it showed that he was a kindly, tolerant, and understanding person. So, I think that was an affirmative for me. It wasn't a bad experience, even though as I say, it didn't go any further.

Interviewer: And as time went on did you become more aware? I mean, with the advent of channels like Channel 4 when they were focusing on LGBT issues a lot of the time, and with conversations within the church around sexuality, did you become more aware of the conflict sometimes between the church and society together and human sexuality?

[0:14:12]

Respondent: Yes, it did surface from time to time, usually in the form of a scandal of some sort, a public scandal. Some figure of the public might have been targeted by the media. But it wasn't really until I got to university I got to grips with the thing, and of course until I was 29 years old it was illegal to be gay. But at university I came across people who were obviously very sympathetic and understanding. Particularly one woman whom I still know, who seemed to accept it as perfectly normal. She had a boyfriend who had mixed in circles in London where homosexuality was not considered anything out of the ordinary, so she was very tolerant, well more than tolerant. I think she was in love with me. She met up with somebody else and she fell in love with him. No, he fell in love with her, and I fell in love with him, so it was a very curious triangular situation. But it was very productive and lasted quite a long time. He died some years ago now, but she and I still converse from time to time, although she is very disabled. They had one child who was a female and is now male.

Interviewer: So, we're talking about university and your friendships that you had there?

Respondent: Yes. I met the Anglican Chaplain in the university. Although I was still a Congregationalist, I was feeling I wanted to spread my wings a bit, and through the Student Christian Movement I met more people including Francis, who became a very good friend, and he was one of the first people I met who seemed completely open and willing to befriend me. I didn't have any inhibition about that. There was nothing sexual about it, on the surface anyway, but it became quite clear that he under any circumstances would be very supportive, and I told him about my sexuality. I think that was the first time I had really got to grips with the whole issue in a sort of theological context.

Interviewer: And how old were you then?

Respondent: I would be 20.

Interviewer: And did that kind of journey of self-understanding or acceptance and acknowledgement continue after university? Was there kind of progression in that?

Respondent: Well, I maintained contact with him after I left university. I had already visited the Friary in Alnmouth, Northumberland when they were setting that up, and I felt very much at home there. I realised that for a lot of people the religious life, as it was understood, was the answer, and probably had been throughout the church's history, although it was never publicly acknowledged. And of course, that has continued until the present day, and is still causing problems in some parts of the church, but we are getting to grips with it now.

Interviewer: Is that something you had considered then? Were you considering potentially sort of animistic...?

Respondent: Well, inevitably I thought of the possibility, but I felt fairly certain that I wanted to be free to make relationships apart from any sort of church sponsored institutions. I did develop friendships with a number of people at that time and was very grateful of that. Although I wouldn't have said I had pursued ... the person who first made a beeline for me, who is still a friend actually, didn't appeal to me in that way. So, although he helped me to overcome some inhibitions, it didn't lead to or become a sexual relationship, although he was pretty keen and persistent. But that wasn't a bad thing. It was very good, and he was also sympathetic to my religious point of view, and I in fact met him through Brother Michael. So, you know one thing leads to another, and I became more open and accepting of the possibility of a longstanding relationship. But I still wasn't sure that there was any future in what we regard now as a partnership or a marriage between people of the same sex. I was always interested in the sort of biblical aspect of it and didn't find anything in the Bible that really put me off at all. I mean, one occasionally came across negative views in the New Testament, but they didn't seem to me crucial, and as far as I could see, and I have been brought up to pay most attention to the teaching of the gospels, the recorded words of Jesus, and I found nothing in that to deter me.

Interviewer: Okay, great. Is there anything else sort of in that period, sort of maybe from childhood into university, that I should have asked you about, or that sticks out in your memory?

[0:21:20]

Respondent: I was a fairly private person, and I didn't share my inner thoughts much with other people. I mentioned Brother Michael, I mentioned the Chaplain at university, Graham. He died, well they are both dead now, but Graham's wife Sue was a very close friend of mine, and she was quite a considerable writer, feminist at the time. I am still in touch with her many years later. So, I always felt that there were people around who supported me, but I never felt that I wanted to be particularly militant about it. I would have probably stood up for my beliefs if anybody challenged me. But as I say, there was very little public discussion in those days. I mean, in church circles.

Interviewer: Okay. So then moving perhaps into more recent times, or perhaps when you left university, you are heavily involved in 3F. Do you want to talk a little about that and the journey that you have been on with 3F and how long that has been going on for, and your involvement, and just talk around that perhaps a little bit?

Respondent: Well, 3F came about through LGCM which I joined at the beginning of the organisation. I was there at the first meeting, and that came about really because I moved to London, because I felt that was the only way I could really live the life I wanted to lead, and it coincided with the fact that I had fallen in love with somebody else who wanted to work in the film industry and came to the London Film School, so he spent quite a lot of time in London. I had realised by then that probably the best option for me would be to get well away from my roots and live a life of my own. That is what I did in fact. That was after I had already spent some time teaching in Lancashire, and in fact the experience of teaching made me realise that I wasn't going to shed the sense that if I was going to find anybody to share my life with, like it wasn't going to be a woman, that was for sure. Then I met people whom I became fond of, and in fact I had several casual relationships with people at the time. But the person I mentioned just now with whom I wanted to set up home in London, I met quite by accident as it were, and he was 11 years younger than me. The same age as my younger sister. And I think now that age difference, I would consider to be fairly important, but at the time it was one of those magical moments when you, I want to say throw caution to the wind, but you realise that that became a major factor in my thinking about my future and so on and so forth. So,

eventually as I say we set up home in London. That didn't last, and it was the time of the major AIDS epidemic, and when I recall the course of events that followed, it was a very worrying time, although I was teaching in London and that was my major preoccupation. I was also very nervous about making any contact with anybody, because of the possibility of infection, and so I didn't, except on one or two very rare occasions. After I had been teaching for a time, I realized I needed more qualifications, and I did an advanced course at the Institute of Education in London, and therefore I had been already exposed to, well experienced something of London life, although I was preoccupied and spent most of my time with the course I was doing. It was a one year course and therefore that was the major issue. But I did get around in London and met people, went to different churches. I should have said by the way that when I was at university I became an Anglican, but still maintain to this present day a very independent point of view about things and can be highly critical of the institutional churches way of carrying on in all sorts of ways, liturgically, biblically, and in personal relations too. So, I had a taste of London life. I went back to my job, I met this friend Geoff, and after a year I decided I needed to make a move. So, that was where I stood. When I came to live in London I was already thinking along the lines of, I wouldn't say being militant, but of being freer to express my point of view in church circles, and having found LGCM I felt that that was the thing I should be concerned about. Finding a church where I felt at home was not easy, there weren't any. Every church at that time was pretty careful about expressing a radical view of it. I did meet people from time to time, including clergy, who were quite clearly gay and were prepared to risk their reputations by pursuing a gay relationship. So, that gave me a sort of certain confidence, but the irony of this of course is that subsequently I never in fact made a sort of relationship or found a sort of friendship which would have led to what you might call a permanent partnership. I still felt that the church needed to get its act together about this, so LGCM seemed really important to me, and being in touch with people who were similarly minded was important. And so, through that I met Richard Kirker and became friends with him. Other people, I particularly remember were Malcolm Johnson, who was the Rector of St. Botolph's, and one or two other clergy who were quite clearly gay. As an organist I have gone around quite a number of churches and met clergy who were fairly openly gay amongst people they felt were sympathetic. And so, it seemed as if the church was on the move at least, even though there were still issues. I think one thing that I was determined about, and perhaps this was a bit naïve on my part, was to make this an issue that could be discussed in educational circles, and since I was teaching religious education, it seemed to me that that was a possible line of debate/enquiry and so on. When it came to the freer expression of opinions amongst pupils at the school, and things were changing, there was something at the time called the Gay Liberation Front, which was I thought a bit scary, because these people seemed to be rather ostentatious, and it wasn't my style. They weren't particularly religious, and they seemed to be more interested, you know it wasn't a question of whether you had sex, the issue was how often and how much you could get involved in that side of life. But it didn't appeal to me. I thought I was a bit more mature than that. I think I was a bit scared really. I did invite some of them to come along to school and talk to some of the pupils who used to have a sort of free debate once a week, and one of the tasks I inherited from a predecessor was to arrange for speakers to come and talk on topics of general interest, politics, and so on, and major issues, and that was one of them. It was also a bit of an eye-opener to me to realise that although I mixed with people who were free and easy about things, there were a lot of people around who were very tight-lipped. There were several people came along to speak, and two of them were seen by senior members of staff walking off the school premises holding hands, and this was reported to the headteacher, and he banned them from coming ever again, which made him look rather foolish, because the pupils who hadn't heard the speakers were furious and contacted the local paper, and it became a sort of public issue. I am sure that the head felt he was doing the right thing, but it then became an issue in the public view. It was around the same time that Haringey was getting enough of it in the neck from Maggie Thatcher and they had been accused by The Sun for promoting homosexuality.

They weren't doing anything of the sort. The title always escapes me, it's a children's book about a gay couple who adopted a child, and it was available through the Teacher's Centre, but they implied that it was being forced down the throats of the pupils in Haringey. Haringey didn't have a particular campaign about it, but it was one of the inequality issues that they did recognise at least. So that was, far from frightening me off, I had always been a bit cautious about the issue at school, but perhaps I was a bit bolder than I would have been in Lancashire. This was London, it was recognised as part of human nature. So, it didn't deter me at all, although we didn't ever have a public issue. We didn't have a debate about it in the school after that.

[0:35:06]

Interviewer: So, tell me then, did that run, was it sort of at the same time as ... you mentioned LGCM, getting involved with LGCM, and you doing this in schools. Was this all sort of a similar time, and did 3F come naturally from that?

Respondent: I wasn't very churchy at the time. I was a bit fed up with the church and didn't feel very ... not just on this issue, I wasn't sure what I really thought about God and the church, you know. I think I was much more willing to consider other ways of being. But I always maintained an interest in church, and I suppose one of the things that kept me going was church music. And people always assume that my main interest in the church was through music. It wasn't, but it did help, because worship had always appealed to me, and I had always enjoyed being in church as it were. In the times when I got rather fed up with the church's official attitude on sexuality, I could always remind myself that quite a lot of church musicians were in fact gay, and that I suppose helped me over quite a lot of difficult situations. I think the human contact with individuals who I got to know, helped a lot. Some of them were clergy.

Interviewer: And that is how you sort of stayed, or you got back involved with the church?

Respondent: Yes. And of course LGCM too, that came along. I wouldn't say I became a key soldier for the cause, but at least I felt that having an opinion about it was a worthwhile thing to do. And it was worth being prepared to take risks for the sake of what I considered to be truth.

Interviewer: So, could you tell me a bit about 3F over the last few years, the group, and what you have all been doing?

[0:37:43]

Respondent: Well, I first went along to the meetings that were held at Grosvenor Chapel out of curiosity. I didn't always find gay Christians particularly appealing for various reasons, some because I thought they had a rather toffee-nosed sort of academic approach to the whole thing. I felt a bit out of my depth because I didn't have any formal theological training other than I had been interested in the Bible, and I had done a course at the university, and so on and so forth. At the same time, they didn't seem as attractive as some of the people who claimed not to be religious, not Christians. But at the same time, I wasn't very keen on mixing in the sort of gay venues that some people thought were the major aspect of being gay. When my partner left me, which was quite soon after I had arrived in London, he mixed with a number of people, some of whom I got to know, but he caught the virus and so did a number of other people that I knew. In fact, four ex-partners died of AIDS related conditions, including Geoff, and other people that I knew. So, I think that was a major setback for me. It was the fear of possibly catching the virus that made me think that perhaps the gay life wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and perhaps the best bet was to play safe. I was very nervous about the possibility of my own attraction, of people being attracted to me. I didn't feel that I was particularly attractive. I wasn't a sort of flamboyant out gay in that sense at all ever, and so I was

fairly careful about it, but at the same time I was very determined to continue my association with particularly LGCM, and therefore 3F was the natural way which I maintained my interest. I gradually got to know people better and better at Grosvenor Chapel, and when they finally decided to move from there, it was a rather grim setting actually, it was a sort of basement, it was cold and miserable I thought, and I had made contact with St. Botolph Aldgate by then, and in fact I was appointed the organist there, mainly through the encouragement of Richard Kirker. I said, "Oh, they'll want a proper organist, they won't want me," but I went along, and I interviewed with the staff there, and they said, "Well, perhaps we ought to hear you play. Would you like to play us a hymn?" And I did do, and they said, "Oh, you'll do". And so I was appointed. I already knew St. Botolph's reputation through Malcolm Johnson, and I learnt very quickly that Brian Lee, the Rector there, I suppose my interest in the church, my commitment was reinforced by that experience, and generally the liberal catholic background which I felt sympathetic towards, sort of came to the fore there. And people like Kenneth Leach, who was great in left-wing theology, and very tolerant and understanding, appealed to me, not just because of his attitude towards sexuality, he was not gay himself, but he took a very liberal view about it. And therefore his political views appealed to me as well, and I suppose although I was always a bit nervous of revolutionaries, at the same time I felt that I could never see myself voting Conservative, and therefore I felt inclined towards radical politics at the time. Although I didn't become a member of the Labour Party at the time until some time later, that lasted for some time, but New Labour didn't appeal to me, and the Iraq War finished it for me.

Interviewer: Thank you. Is there anything else in those periods of your life that you think I should have asked you about, or that you would like to share?

Respondent: Being in contact with other people enabled me to think in greater depth about my own background, my roots. Not just about the sort of public aspects of it, which were to do with law and so on and so forth, but the general attitude in society, and I think I have said before that sexuality was not something that was publicly discussed. In some ways it was easier to be gay in those days, because people weren't suspicious. Subsequently, I felt the need for a more overt approach, a more radical view, and this of course has now come to the fore, the law has been changed, there are new issues to do with adoption and things like that. In fact, some friends at church who are a gay couple, adopted children. So, it is a very different story now, it is a very different world we are living in, and in some ways it is a very much happier world. At the same time, I still think there is a long way to go, and I am still very frustrated by the church's attitude, the over-cautious attitude of certain people. When the recent Archbishop's Conference, whatever they call it, on this issue was held, I was disappointed with the outcome. I felt that people should have been more prepared to condemn what I consider the un-Christian attitudes that are expressed by some of the Bishops, particularly the Archbishop of Uganda and others, and the rather careful approach to the whole issue which seemed more concerned with maintaining a sort of Anglican appearance of unity rather than speaking the truth. That is my nonconformance background coming to the fore again.

[0:46:23]

Interviewer: So, that segues really nicely into how perhaps it might be best to finish this time together. Thinking perhaps about your hopes for the future regarding LGBT acceptance, particularly in the church, but also in society, what are you hopeful for, having seen so much change over the last 40 years that LGCM has been around, but longer as well. What are your hopes for the future?

Respondent: Well, the issue of equality is important in a theoretical way. I have never really got too hot under the collar about the possibility of gay marriage as such, because I am never quite sure about marriage as an institution. It doesn't seem to me there is anything

particularly Christian about it. To make it a major sort of bank of Christian belief, as some fundamentalists do, seems to be a mistake, and they need to read their Bibles, I thought. But my hopes are that people who consider themselves to be Evangelical Christians will come to rely more on the words of Jesus, and less on the legalistic aspects of tradition, especially in view of the way in which the New Testament has quite a lot to say on the subject. So, I wish people would read their Bibles more, particularly the people who knock on my door and tell me that the Bible is the word of God, and I say, "Well, how do you know it is the word of God?" and they say, "Because it says so". I find this rather naïve and frustrating. My background is Liberal Protestantism, and I am very grateful for that. I still love the Anglican tradition. I have made friends with Roman Catholics, and now I am getting even more daring and making friends with Muslims, and have had Jewish friends for a long time anyway. I'm coming to realise that while I don't reject the claims that Christianity is, you might say the best bet, I realise that for other people, they have been brought up in other traditions which they value, and I would never want to condemn on the grounds of some sort of biblical quote that humans seem to reject. So, I don't know what that means for my hopes for the church, because I realise that once you reject any claims to uniqueness on the part of any particular tradition, you are not appealing to people who are looking for certainty, and I don't know what that means in the long term. So, I would still say I am a believing Christian, I believe in God, but I am not very keen to try and persuade other people that they are wrong or right or whatever the case may be. When people say, "Well, are you a Christian?" I am a bit wary of saying, "Yes," because I am well aware now that that can mean a variety of different things, and not all the people who claim to be Christians seem to be very Christian.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for your time. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Respondent: Well, I'd like to say thank you to you. I find it encouraging that there is still a strong Christian presence in the gay movement even though things have changed quite a lot, and the role of for instance 3F which we have mentioned, seems maybe to be changing, and most of the people that come to the meetings are well on in years, as indeed I am I realise now. But I still value the input that it has made in Christian thinking by people who have gone through this whole process that we have been talking about today. Yes, I hope that there will still continue to be a religious movement in the church who identify themselves as gay and Christian.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time, John. It has been really great to hear your story.

[End of transcript]