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Interviewer: Thank you very much indeed for agreeing to take part. I know that you wrote an article in the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement Journal number 46, dated November 1988, on an overview of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. Could you, for the purposes of the interview, outline how you became involved with LGBT issues?

Tony: When I was at Oxford, I was reading theology, but I was also interested in crime reform and this involved a society called Crime A Challenge and I became chairman just for a short time. So, I thought that I might end up as a prison chaplain or something like that. And we had Peter Wildeblood, I think that was in 1957, came to speak, and he had just been imprisoned. And that's how I got involved in the Homosexual Law Reform Society.

Interviewer: Gosh, Peter Wildeblood, there's a name for history. Fascinating. And you were ordained?

Tony: I was ordained to be the first Deacon of Coventry Cathedral in May 1959.

Interviewer: May 1959. Congratulations. And you then moved to be vicar of St Luke's, Charlton?

Tony: Oh, that's after, I was a curate in Nuneaton and I moved to Eltham, then Clapham, and I ended up at St Luke's, Charlton in, I'll have to look up to see when I was actually there. Anyway, that was in 72, 73 actually, yeah.

Interviewer: 73. And you were there for 21 years.

Tony: 21 years. I retired at 60 in 94.

Interviewer: Okay. You retired at 60. Was that out of choice or out of a felt inability to move on from a post?

Tony: Well, I had applied for different hospital chaplaincies and looked at parishes around. And at one stage, when I was in the news for having women from overseas celebrating, Liz Canham was ordained by Bishop Jack Spong, and doing gay blessings. I had to undertake at one stage if I moved to another parish, I wouldn't do any gay blessings or have women from overseas celebrating the Eucharist. And I was interested in prisons as I've mentioned. And our parents died and we were able to buy a cottage in Kent and by selling that I was able to retire early and buy a place in Whitstable and do hospital chaplaincy. So, otherwise I could still be right rector of St Luke's Charlton at the age of 81.

Interviewer: So, yes. So, you retired and moved down here because the restrictions on you moving to another parish?

Tony: Yes, and I did apply, I put, the name went out. I was very keen to go to sort of Brixton at one stage. But that was... I never had a conversation with the bishop saying we thought you might go there or that, but it just didn't happen. At the time Roy Williamson was the bishop and he was very supportive. He never asked me to stop doing gay blessings.

Interviewer: But he wasn't prepared to support you in doing them in a new place?

Tony: I don't think so. I never actually spoke about that to him.

Interviewer: So, this wasn't Roy Williamson, this was others around him?

Tony: There are other people, yeah. I think there's other people, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the blessings at Charlton, how did they start?

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Tony: Well, actually it started, I was on the council of Christian Action and Eric James asked me to review a book called, a sort of booklet, Campaign for Reason. And I wrote an article about this and it ended up in the press, "Gay love okay says vicar". And I mentioned about the possibility of a priest blessing gay Christians or allowing people to kiss openly in the street if public opinion changed. And I was approached by two people who lived nearby in Lewisham and it's all been written about actually by my successor, Jeffrey Heskins, in a book called Unheard Voices. It shows how a congregation came to accept a gay couple who moved to the church. It was in the press at the time. But because of that, and I was involved with LGCM, I knew Richard Kirker, and he used to refer blessings to me. And also, the Gay Switchboard. I performed about 31 during my time after. November 1978 was the first blessing. And I anticipated the findings of the Gloucester Report, which asked the church to report and affirm permanent and stable same-sex relationships even at the time, as you know, they have this double standard. It's all right for lay people, but not for clergy.

Interviewer: Right, right. So, the process is actually described in in Unheard Voices by Jeffrey Heskins?

Tony: Yes, it is. The actual how. He did a survey of the church's attitude, those who were against and those who were for. Only about one person left the church and the one former church warden came back. So, I took the church with me and I had the support of the church council. We were a very liberal outward looking church, very keen on the ordination of women and I always thought the ordination, the acceptance it gave relationships were the same, you know, two sides of the same coin.

Interviewer: Okay. Oh, that's fascinating. And how did people come to you for that, for those blessings?

Tony: Well, they either came to join the congregation, not many did, but they came from outside. It's just a pastoral thing that were done. We had the daughter church, it was easier to have it in a daughter church and I had two women who actually did come to me and they wanted nobody else to come, but we had a lovely person called Peggy Denny who had been praying for 20 years for such services to take place. So, we had people there in the congregation, you know. So, it was a wonderful place to be, St Luke's, Charlton. Quite unique. And she came to witness. But they just came and sometimes had a service, sometimes you have an organist and hymns and a number of people came up afterwards to me. This is quoted in a book by Michael (inaudible 0:07:42) on the Church of England saying I wish I'd had a wedding like that with the actual liturgy of the poems. I never said it was a wedding, even though it said, "Vicar marries gays". I always said it was a blessing of a relationship.

Interviewer: So, was the ceremony designed, custom designed for each couple or...?

Tony: First of all, I used Jim Cotter's ones, affirming, you know, his little leaflet. But as time came there were lots of liturgies came. So, there's a bigger book that I've got here. You might mention, and it's lady Catholic. What's her name now?

Interviewer: Oh Elizabeth Stewart.

Tony: Yes, Elizabeth Stewart. Yeah. And there's a whole lot of stuff that people could choose. You know, so what sort of blessing do you want? Exchange of rings? So, they actually made the service and theirs was the input.

Interviewer: Right, okay. Right.

Tony: And Jeff took that further by coming out with a form of service and how to approach it, almost like having, not quite having banns read or saying this is going to happen, but sadly, since he left, there hasn't been any blessing at St Luke's, Charlton. I won't go into that too much at the moment. I think it's...

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Interviewer: That was a, who knows whether the diocesan policy was...

Tony: Well, I think it's a form of suppressing it or the who is there now, a lady, Erica Wolff, feels she can't. I don't know. It wasn't in the job description.

Interviewer: Okay, all right. That's surprising that, I don't know, if that's the case, surprising that Erica doesn't do blessings, but anyway there we go. Okay, so and how did the preparation go then? How did you... did you do marriage preparation sort of or blessing preparation?

Tony: Oh yes, we always had a preparation. I first of all met them and then found out about them and gave them stuff to go away and then they'd come back and then we went through the service and what they wanted with people. Saying poems and hymns, anything they want. So, it was just, it was like a marriage even though I never called it a marriage, even though they may have said it was a marriage.

Interviewer: And did you, when you were marrying heterosexual couples, was there anything more to the marriage preparation in terms of conversation about communication or shared values or...?

Tony: No, exactly the same -  
(Overspeaking)

Interviewer: Exactly the same. Okay.

Tony: In a way I might have spent more time with gay and lesbian couples than I did with heterosexual ones.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And I mean, these days there are all sorts of marriage preparation courses, aren't there, so...

Tony: Yes, we didn't have that at the time, you know.

Interviewer: Okay. So, was it exactly the same? Ah. So, it sounds amazing. I've never been approached to do a wedding. No, that's not true. I have been approached, but the couple themselves never actually got themselves to that point. It was, it didn't quite work. So, how would you see the future for LGBT relationships in the church?

Tony: It's very difficult at the moment, but equal marriage I think that you've got to campaign for equal marriage, but I think it's very sad that parish priests at the moment aren't allowed to bless gay relationships, say in a church. I think it was done in London because there's a Lutheran connection. Did you read about that the other day?

Interviewer: I didn't, no. Is it...?

Tony: Anyway, the chap, it's Charles Fraser went to a church in London where it's possible because of the Lutheran connection, or something like that, to have a blessing in the church, an Anglican church. But that's rare. As the law is at the moment, you have to change things or people might just do it because they feel called to do it and to break rules, as I would, in a way I was breaking rules. I think I always said you don't accept the law. I'm not an acceptor. (Inaudible 0:12:15) you feel something is wrong. So, that's...

Interviewer: Right. And that was the principle that you were...?

Tony: Yes, it was. I think even when I illegally, a woman priest came to celebrate, which was against the law at the time, the PCC was prepared to break the law of the church. And I think if your conscience feels it's an intolerable situation and there's a pastoral need and people come to you, you must respond to their need.

[0:12:44]

Interviewer: Right, right. And what about it, what about in society? Where do you see that LGBT?

Tony: Well, society is ahead of the church. The church has really got to sort of catch up where society is, especially among young people. It's only the older people who don't accept gay relationships, but the whole climate has changed. It's unbelievable. You know, the last two or three years, and that's something which you have to give credit to a Tory government. So, even though I'm not a member of the Tory party. So, you've got to give it to them.

Interviewer: Yes, it's extraordinary, isn't it, that they are the ones that introduced equal marriage. Yes. And did so from a very sort of pro-marriage basis as well and David Cameron was very clear that he was doing this because he believed in marriage. So, and he is a churchman himself, so, it's...

Tony: Yeah. He goes to St Mary's Kennington and his vicar's got a place down in in Whitstable actually.

Interviewer: Oh, right. St Marys, Kenn? I thought he went to St Mary Abbots.

Tony: Yes, he went to St Mary Abbots, but he might retire, the person who is vicar at St Mary Abbots.

Interviewer: Oh, right, might retire down here. Oh right, okay. That would be good. Right, so I think we've covered all of the areas that I was asked to cover. Is there anything else that you want to... what was it about the congregation that enabled you to talk about this issue and bring this issue forward at the point in the early 80s when the rest of the church was obsessed about HIV and AIDS?

Tony: Yes, I think I always put the case for a blessing. This HIV and AIDS gay plague was about the church. If it accepted gay people and was able to bless relationships would actually help to confront HIV if people form permanent, loving relationships. So, and I think people, and I did get involved in funerals because my attitude, the word went round as accepted gay people. And I think because of the pastoral needs that they felt, you know, with this so-called gay plague, we must stand by gay people and encourage permanent and loving relationships against the sort of feeling that all gay and lesbian people were promiscuous. So, it's taking a stand saying I'm prepared to do this and bless relationships in the hopes that it will be loving and permanent and faithful.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. So, you talked about how your initial interest in LGBT issues came about because of your commitment to law reform. Can you say something about how that

developed for you theologically, how that developed with your understanding of the gospel? So, you were at Oxford as doing a law degree. So -

Tony: No, I wasn't doing law. I was doing the theology at the time. Yeah, but I think I, looking ahead, I read so much that there there's a lot of stuff. There was Sherwin about homosexuality in the Western Christian tradition and then towards a Quaker view of sex, looking at the biblical stories and then saying that the law of Sodom is a sin against hospitality and affected by the 60s Honest to God. That's Harry Williams, Norman Pittenger. You know, Time for Consent. So, there's a lot of stuff went on at the time. It was a very exciting period. So, with all these things happening in the 60s, it made me think well, towards a charter, a homosexual rights, that that was campaign for reason before the Gloucester report came out. And then when the Gloucester report came out, which, yeah, they'd done the work. It was just saying yes, amen, to all the things which had happened before. Only again, it's a double standards for clergy.

Interviewer: Right. And then the Gloucester report sort of ran into the sand didn't it, really?

[0:17:40]

Tony: Yes, it did. It had never been properly debated. Yeah.

Interviewer: In that classic way that the Church of. England has.

Tony: I know. Yes. You see, it's all a liberal theology and I got involved in the Palestinian cause in 1970, so that's a former liberal theology. So, it was all gay liberation, Palestinian liberation. And then we had children of our own, we adopted black children, so involved in all sorts of issues. And you know, but my main issue is Palestine comes first. I have lots of issues I've been involved with.

Interviewer: No, no, that's so, it's part of a, it's only one part of a spectrum but all -

Tony: Yeah, racism, the whole lot really, yeah.

Interviewer: All of which bends towards the Kingdom. Okay, right.

Tony: And taking on almost too many causes sometimes but I had the backing of my wife and family. Children got teased at school a bit because this is your dad that marries queers, you know, but they put up with it and you know, so, there's, and I did get beaten up in Charlton Park once, you know. It was costly I wouldn't have changed anything for what I did.

Interviewer: You got beaten up in Charlton Park?

Tony: I did. Yeah. It was the vicar who married queers. It was when it was in the news at the time. Elsa's car was turned upside down and Saxon and Rodney had their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and it got a page of The Sun at the time and the Daily Mail. We had a scene in church. Somebody tried to stop the service. I let them go in the pulpit and then they left. Actually, it was a gay evangelical nurse. But no, this is, but we were in the media a lot. Like what was happening at the time.

Interviewer: Right. Gosh. Gosh, that's amazing.

Tony: And then the Panorama in 1988, that was Rodney and Saxon reaffirmed their vows in Panorama. That that was Tony Hipton's debate and Runcie he was under attack. So, and they, the BBC came to the church and the church wardens acted as witnesses and

Rodney and Saxon reaffirmed their vows. So, that's all in this journal actually, it is reviewed. So that was...

Interviewer: That's an amazing record, an amazing record. And how do you feel that that affected the life of the parish? I mean if you were involved, you were was involved in a spectrum of issues. So, though we're actually talking about LGBT issues, in terms of the life of the parish was this just one amongst many?

Tony: Many, yeah. And the Palestinian court and the Palestinian delegates. He was a Christian, came to preach. And we had lots of Caribbeans and Africans in the congregation. So, it's a very inclusive church in every way and I always said St Luke's is quite unique because the only Prime Minister, Spencer Percival, who was assassinated in 1812, is buried in the crypt. And then you look out on the Thames, the only barrier is the Thames barrier but we had no barriers in the congregation. People to come along and be included.

Interviewer: It sounds amazing. Yeah, that's fascinating. Right so, we've talked about here. So, the theology of the congregation, the nature and life of the congregation. Is there anything else you want to add for the purposes of this interview?

Tony: Not potentially. As a congregation, it went, we used to go to witchcraft(?). We went and they did the Myers Briggs. I don't know if you know?

Interviewer: Oh yeah, yeah. Myers Briggs. Yes. You did that as a congregation?

[0:22:12]

Tony: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: Sort of individually or...?

Tony: Individually, but it came out. ENS. I've just forgot what I was now. More of an extrovert, sensory. Anyway. But if it's more or less outward going in and reflecting me and the congregation.

Interviewer: Sounds amazing. That sounds absolutely amazing.

Tony: I've forgotten the things now.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fascinating. Well, thank you very much indeed.

Tony: Okay, well, thank you for coming all the way to Whitstable.

Interviewer: That's quite all right. So, tell me again. Who was encouraging? You were talking about Eric James?

Tony: Yes, Eric James, I knew him very, very well. So, I was on the council of Christian Action, but when we did the Panorama programme and before that, Eric Abbott, he was Dean of Westminster and he was my father confessor. And so, they were there. He didn't sort of come out publicly to say it's good, but I had people there. And a former Bishop of Horsham, who was. So, they're all these people around which helped a lot.

Interviewer: What, when Eric Kemp was Bishop of Chichester?

Tony: No, not Eric Kemp. Well, not Chichester, no. He was, no, before him. I think we're going back quite a long time now in the 70s really.

Interviewer: So, these were individuals who were personally supportive of, yeah.

Tony: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: And kept you sort of rooted and grounded amongst...

Tony: Yes, it made a lot of difference, yeah.

Interviewer: Because it must have been, I mean, it must be the loneliness of it really is that I think one of the things that strikes me about these people who get married, the Jeremies who've got married, you know, Jeremy Pemberton and Jeremy Davies that...

Tony: Yeah. But he had the support from his bishop as well at the time anyway. But you hear about it afterwards that they're there, but they don't put their heads above the parapet. You know, you get support behind, but they don't sort of come out too much, but they are around, you know.

Interviewer: And then they make, but the internet makes it much more possible to feel rooted in a much larger community.

Tony: Oh, it is now. I think it is, more people are coming out and saying what they feel. The climate has changed, especially as you mentioned just now among young people. Everything is changing and the church has got to catch up.

Interviewer: Yes it does. Yeah, a friend of mine said, he's a diocesan bishop, and he said my children won't come to church. He said his daughter said, "Well, when you've sorted out the women bishops thing and the gay thing, I'll think about it". Well, at least he's 50% there with her hopefully.

[0:25:04]

Tony: Yeah, that's true, yes. Okay.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's grim. All right, thank you.

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