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Interviewer: Could you tell me to begin with a little bit about growing up, when, where, parents, siblings, that kind of thing.

Alison: Yeah, sure. Okay, so, I moved around quite a lot because my dad's a Methodist minister. So, I was born in Rotherham, lived in Leicester, Sheffield, Norfolk. So, all my secondary education was in Norfolk. And one brother. Two years older than me. I went to a rather weird school, which was a co-educational state boarding school. So, it was a day and boarding school, but that was in, it's called Wymondham College and I was a day pupil for the first five years and my dad moved again, so I boarded for the sixth form. And then went to university in Cambridge, theology.

Interviewer: Surprisingly.

(Laughter)

So, do you mind me asking how old you are? Did I miss that at the start?

Alison: Yeah, I'm going to be 50 in January.

Interviewer: Oh okay.

Alison: Yeah.

Interviewer: You're looking good on that.

Alison: (Laughter) Thank you.

Interviewer: So, you had one older brother, father was a Methodist minister.

Alison: Yeah, Mum was a teacher. A primary school teacher.

Interviewer: Okay, what did she teach? Or just general?

Alison: Yeah, just kiddiwinks.

Interviewer: Okay. And church, you went to a Methodist church?

Alison: Yeah.

Interviewer: I don't expect you had a lot of choice in that.

Alison: No, no, I was pretty much forced to go to church. But yeah, it kind of went with the territory really.

Interviewer: Okay. And would you say you believed in what you were taught at church?

Alison: Yeah, I think, when I was about 14, well, no, a bit earlier than that. 12, 13, I had a kind of a religious experience really, which was a bit like the Wesleyan heart strangely warmed. And they're like, yeah, then I suppose then I transferred from being just kind of it being what I was taught to being real for me and that fuelled an interest in religion and theology. I did RE O level and A level. I had a teacher who I fell in love with, who I absolutely adored. And she was just great. I mean so, for four years, she arrived at my

school when I was in the, just about to go into my O level year, so, she taught me for O level and A level and I did... yeah.

So, then I sort of explored, because then at that point I was looking for something a bit more interesting church wise. So, I explored a sort of evangelical church in Norwich that had to use your favourite, they had more people, more young people. But I went to, after about a couple of meetings just thought, it was weird. There was a kind of prayer meeting that I went to and it's that style of sitting around in groups and saying talking to God like God's a sort of bezzie mate. God, we do just ask this and we do just ask that and we do just ask the other. And I kind of thought and I'm not sure about this. I went because there was some famous person doing the rounds at the time. I can't remember his name. A writer that, and I was just reading quite a lot. So, I used to go to the SPCK second-hand bookshop in Norwich and just see what there was and just read stuff because I was just really interested.

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But I went to that church and thought, "No, this isn't for me". It just felt, I think I could feel the authoritarianism and the rigidity even then and my friend, my teacher, who was sort of becoming a friend, she's only eight years older than me, so her first teaching job. When I became a boarder, I got much closer to her and I used to go on Sundays to, she had a best friend in Norwich who went to that church, so... And she became ill with a kind of unidentified illness and the theology that came through then was if your faith isn't strong enough, you're not getting better because your faith isn't strong enough. And at that point, I thought fuck this.

(Laughter)

Interviewer: This was sixth form?

Alison: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, because you were a boarder then. So, you mentioned that you had a pash on your teacher who was female. When were you aware of having a sexual identity? And what...?

Alison: Yeah, well, then I didn't, I mean, I didn't have boyfriends at school really. Well, I had one because it was almost compulsory. It's just the thing, especially in the sixth form, you just sort of, it's what you did.

Interviewer: Write poetry and have a boyfriend.

(Laughter)

Alison: Well, it's just that, I mean, you reach the point where you're supposed to walk around the school campus holding hands with a member of the opposite sex, you know, and that's kind of what you do. So, this boy asked me out. I didn't realise he'd asked me out. It was a school disco and he said, so I thought he said, "Do you want to go outside?"

Interviewer: (Laughter)

Alison: So, I said, "Yeah". And then I suddenly realised I'd been asked out and said yes. Which meant for a while I had to walk around school holding his hand. But I had nothing in common with him. I didn't even know who was till that point. He was in my boarding house. So, I accidentally went out with him and then he chucked me after about two months anyway, so that was quite a relief.

Yeah, there were other boys that I actually liked. There was one boy that I actually liked, but he didn't like me. So, I kind of felt, and I had this, and I'd had, there were other women teachers that I'd had crushes on. And I was very aware that was like kind of probably not normal. I didn't really tell anybody about it. But it was incredibly, I mean, it was incredibly strong what I felt for her.

So, I suppose it occurred to me that I might be a lesbian, but I didn't want to go there in my head. And when I went to university I just decided that I should try out the boyfriend thing so I started going out with someone my year in the November after starting -

[0:06:15]

Interviewer: This was Cambridge?

Alison: Yeah. Selwyn College.

Interviewer: Selwyn College?

Alison: So, a hundred people in each year.

Interviewer: And you're doing theology?

Alison: Yeah. There were six of us doing theology which was quite unusual. But this guy was doing engineering. He was the kind of best looking guy in the year. He looked like Tom Cruise. (Laughter) We got together and stayed together the whole time I was at university, I went out with him. So, I suppose at that point I'd put the lesbian thing away, I suppose.

Then I got close to, I went on a youth exchange after my first year, which was to a Methodist thing, scheme they had which was to... I'd got quite involved in international social justice stuff in Methodist church and other youth stuff. So, I had a power leadership national, almost leadership role in that. And I went on this youth exchange to Burma and North Sumatra for seven weeks. And the guy who organised those, a guy called Neil Whitehouse, came out as gay at around that time. So, I was very friendly with him and I felt like I had to kind of just learn a lot quickly to find out. Because that was 1986.

He subsequently became a bit of a Methodist cause célèbre because he candidated for the Methodist ministry, was rejected and he went to Canada, he's in Canada now.

So, that started me thinking about sexuality a lot more. And when I left I went to live in Birmingham with friends and worked for the Student Christian Movement putting together written resources. And the first thing virtually that I had to do was to coordinate a group of students, half a dozen students who wanted to work on a theological resource book that would help people think through why we thought Clause 28 was a bad idea.

(Laughter)

So, that was called Just Love and I worked with, they were all I think lesbian, gay or bisexual. And through that whole process of all the reading I had to do for that, all the conversations I had with those people, I remember thinking, "So right, next time I have feelings for a woman, I'm going to go with it". So, there was a student, she was involved in that, but she was involved in SCL and I got together with her. So, we were there for about 18 months.

So, yeah, so, that was the sort of transition into coming out.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you identify as lesbian from that point on or...?

Alison: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, you didn't think you were bisexual at any stage or...?

Alison: Not at that point. I just identified as lesbian. And then I met a woman called Elaine Willis who's also been part of this project. She was 14 years older than me. We worked together on a document with LGCM and Stonewall with was a response to something called the Osborne Report, which was a suppressed, slightly liberal, report on sexuality that again was around 1990 I think, 1989, 1990.

[0:09:26]

So, she from Stonewall, she was one of the original 20 Stonewall people, yeah. She from Stonewall and me from LGCM worked on something called a Call to Action. And I kind of fell in love with her in the process of that. And was with her for 11, 12 years. So, yeah. So, then it was pretty much my identity really. I mean, I now identify as gender is not really the determining factor and I don't call myself bisexual because I don't. I don't know. I just don't like the terminology. So, it implies there's only two kinds of sexuality. So, I have my own term, which is GND, gender non-determining.

Interviewer: Yeah, I don't like bisexual because it implies it's all sexual and it's not most of the time.

Alison: I know.

Interviewer: Okay, so, LGCM at this point, when did you become involved with LGCM?

Alison: Well, then really. I became involved when, I was working on the SCM thing, I mean, Richard, yeah, that came out in 89 and we worked on it 88,89. When the booklet came out, I was in touch with Richard a lot, Richard Kirker, because... well, he just had, I mean, SCM was a friendly student organisation to LGCM. So, he was in touch with us on and off and he helped us market that and I got, I don't think I was ever on the LGCM committee, but because it was, the SCM job was two or three years. So, at that point Richard was in the process of setting up the ISCS, Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality. And I remember writing to him and saying, "When I leave SCM I want to come and work for that organisation". And he and I were both quite excited by that prospect. And so, I moved. There was no money. So, I moved to London and thought I'd give it a year to see whether we could raise the money. And then, in those days, you could sign on if you had no work and there was a thing called the Young Enterprise Project or something where they gave you a grand upfront to set up a business and then like £35 a week.

So, I spent the grand on a year's Tube travel ticket. And I got, I think my rent must have been paid for and I had this £35 a week to live on. And I had the best year. It was great because I was doing a lot of stuff with Richard. I was trying to get the ISCS going. And we were working on getting funding. I did lots of media work through, because Richard kind of got me into all of that. I was on the Methodist Sexuality Commission from 88 to 90, so, there was stuff connected with that. And I was just kind of, you know, I was passionate about the theme. I was developing my writing. I was doing a lot of workshops.

And then during that year, we got money from Christian Action to employ me for three years. So, that was kind of the next three years of my life really. And it was great apart from, yeah, so we had... I mean the point of the institute was to say we're not going to make any progress on lesbian and gay liberation in the church until we shift the focus on to everybody else. (Laughter) So everybody else has got the problem. So, it was about looking at sexuality across the board and trying to get, I mean, it's ecumenical, obviously, so, trying to get Christian people to look at themes which are common to everybody. So, we had conferences on ageing and sexuality, on intimacy, on fidelity, on masculinity, heterosexuality, monogamy. We had loads of pornography. You know, it was about three conferences a year and I edited the newsletter and we set, with Liz Stewart, I set up the journal, Theology and Sexuality journal, because the newsletter was too limited. It wasn't, it just kind of felt we need a forum for the thinking people are doing.

So, yeah, it was a really good three years apart from inbuilt in the relationship with LGCM and ISCS was this fatal kind of organisational fuck up which meant that for some reason LGCM couldn't get charitable status at the time, so they set up ISCS to be the charitable arm. But they also made the remit a lot wider. So, inevitably there came a conflict where if I was raising money for ISCS, Richard was wanting to keep it all for LGCM. And I was saying, "No, this is a different organisation". And anyway, it all kind of went horribly wrong really. And there was a lot of bad feeling. And you know, my relationship with Richard was kind of destroyed somewhere along the line more or less. I mean we, I think I went to his 50th birthday party with Elaine because Elaine had known him for 10, 15 years before. So, yeah, I mean apart from that, I think we did a lot for really good work and it was really important. But at the end of the three years, I think there was enough money for a bit to employ me for a bit longer part-time, but I did a gender studies, women's gender studies MA.

[0:15:18]

Interviewer: Okay. Where was that?

Alison: Where? Warwick because I lived in Coventry at the time. So, I did that just after my, because I did the book Found Wanting on women's experience with sexuality because of ISCS and because it soon became clear that LGCM was not really focused on women's issues at all. I mean, it's the old story. I'm sure you've explored that obviously, but...

Interviewer: Well, could you elucidate a little bit more because we not have it on tape from anyone.

Alison: Okay. Well, I think normatively, it was a white Anglican male gay organisation. That was its history. It had expanded to include, to become lesbian and gay. Because of that, I think a lot of women felt marginalised within it. I mean, Elaine was on the committee I can't remember how many years before me, but she left for that reason. There was a sort of repeating history of women getting involved and then leaving. There was a women's caucus that fell out -

(Overspeaking)

Interviewer: This is Elaine?

Alison: Willis.

Interviewer: Willis? Okay.

Alison: Yeah. There was a women's caucus that again at some point in the mid-90s diverged and set up a separate organisation. It was the old thing about LGCM is LGCM. If you

have a special interest, if you're a Methodist, a Catholic, an evangelical, a woman you have to pay twice because you have to pay to be a member of your caucus and pay to be a member of the organisation. And inevitably people thought well, that's not really fair. But Richard was insistent. So, the caucuses kind of came and went. And the women's caucus just split off. It became Ruth's Night Out for a bit, and now there's Left.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are you involved with Left?

Alison: I am, have been in the last three or four years, because I co-lead a, with Janice Price, who's one of the main collective, I co-lead a weekend with her and so I go to their annual things and we just had a 20th anniversary of my book at conference in Birmingham, beginning of November. Which was great actually, really good, so...

Interviewer: I wanted to come to that but it clashed.

Alison: It clashed with a lot of things.

Interviewer: Clashed with a family event that I could not get out of.

Alison: I think there was about five different conferences on 7th November.

Interviewer: Well, we had an LGCM board meeting as well.

Alison: That's right. That was, it was all at the same venue. Yeah.

[0:17:54]

(Overspeaking)

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alison: Has it at the same place.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, and then I can't go to the LGCM carol service because it's my mum's 70th on the same day. I've to send November, December, bad names. No, I am going to the Left meeting in January. So...

Alison: Okay. Yeah. I'll be going to the one in April. I can't go to the one in January because it clashes with something I've got here. But yeah. so, I've kind of got drawn back a bit into that, really through Janice.

So, yeah, so, what was I? I was looking at how Found Wanting fitted in, wasn't I? So, yeah, so it felt like there was a lot of women's experience out there and it wasn't just lesbian experience either because I got, we did some I think pretty pioneering work on sexual abuse as well because I just ended up with so many women that I found out, including all, just about everyone closest to me were survivors and thinking the church does nothing, and the church had no child protection policies in place at that point at all.

So, with a woman called Ros Hunt who's a priest in Cambridge, who was a social worker, and she was kind of and still is the expert on survivor issues in the church. She and I got theologians over from the States to speak. We went to the States, there was a woman called Marie Fortune, and met with her and thought about things we should do here around that issue as well.

So, there was a whole cluster of issues and a whole load of stories that I felt needed to be out there and needed to be told and it was also the point that Liz Stuart's prayerbook was banned.

Interviewer: Yeah, I interviewed Liz.

Alison: Okay. (Laughter)

Interviewer: I'm doing a doctorate at Winchester and she's a Deputy Vice Chancellor so I heard all about that. I mean, I knew vaguely about it, but hearing it firsthand from her was fascinating.

Alison: Yeah, I bet. I mean, I was, she'll remember it a lot better than I will obviously, but because of that, Richard was kind of organising a boycott of SPCK and I happened to be in the office when he was meeting with a guy called Steve Cook from Castle because he was saying if people don't want to publish with SPCK I need to set up, organise, you know, I -

(Overspeaking)

Interviewer: (Inaudible 0:20:13) this job.

Alison: Yeah. And they were just setting up this, I can't remember what it was called now, but it was.... It wasn't queer then. Then I think it was gender...? Anyway, it was a secular gender politics list. And they signed me up to write on women's critique of Christian sexual ethics, integrating women's experience. So, that's where I found (inaudible 0:20:40). So, all those things were happening simultaneously.

Interviewer: Yeah. Was this mid 90s?

Alison: Yeah, the book came out in 95. I had finished working with ISCS then. I think I worked with ISCS from 90 to 94. We launched Theology and Sexuality in 94. (Inaudible 0:21:01) came out just when I started, I'd just started my course. I was doing it part-time. It was so funny. Like I said at the conference I just used to wander into Waterstones and look at the feminist stuff, women's studies shelves and pick, a bit like I used to do with theology in my dad's study and see which were the most attractive books and read them. It was only when I went to, did a sort of course that made me see which strands I'd been reading and which strands I've missed out and the whole thing about feminist methodology and I just, like my methodology essay I did on the use of experiencing. And I thought, "I didn't theorise any of this before I wrote the book". I'm quite glad I didn't because I'd probably never have written it, but yeah, but it was funny having a book come out and then studying what I should have studied before I wrote it. But anyway...

[0:22:00]

Interviewer: What else have you published? I know you've published a number of books.

Alison: I wrote a book on wellbeing in 2002. And then the last one I did was on identity, that's 2009. Which included stuff about sexuality and faith identity. But it was meant to be this, I suppose you'd say it's about intersectionality, really, though I don't think that word was around in 2009. It had only just, I hadn't come across it anyway. So, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, tell me what's happened since publish Found Wanting in 95, done a few more publications. What's your role in the diocese here and what other strings do you have...?

(Laughter)

Alison: Well, what happened really when I finished, I was doing a women's studies MA. I was planning another book. I was planning a book on power differences between women in lesbian relationships with Castle. I had a contract and everything. But I didn't have any money coming in. Once the part-time thing with ISCS had finished. I worked for a bit with friends in Manchester who had a sort of a freelance publications consultancy. They were all doing stuff with SCM. It's called Graft Publications. So, I was doing stuff with them which earned me little bits and pieces. But in about 96 I just had to get a job. No. Yeah, 96, 97. So, also I had to decide whether I wanted to be, carry on just focusing on gender and sexuality, which I'd done for a while. And I remember having a conversation with someone who's very wise, who said, "I don't think you should do that because you'll just become, you'll be in that box and that will be your career".

So, I made a conscious decision to expand again and back into just social justice in general and not just focus on sexuality. So, in a way, I put the sexuality stuff to one side in terms of what I was doing for a job. And the first job that came up was just after the 1997 general election and it was running Christian Socialist Movement. So, I applied for that and got it. Hated it. (Laughter) I hated it.

Interviewer: In what way?

Alison: Oh well, it was in London. Chris Bryant, who's now an MP, was the chair and he was very good. But it was very much, it was very different from what I was used to because it was party politics. And I had no desire to be in party politics. And the job was to run the organisation. But it was to run the organisation for people who are in party politics and the most previous guy also subsequently became a Labour MP, David Cairns, who sadly died very young. But so, it's just all reactive, all the stuff I hated, all short-term, shifting goal posts all the time. You couldn't plan, you couldn't strategise it all had to be, "Oh this issue's very, we need a publication on fox hunting to launch on Boxing Day". This is no life. (Laughter) I can't do this. I only survived it because somebody on the committee, Graham Smith, who's a theologian at is it Chichester now, but he was the publications person voluntarily for CSM. And he and I plotted another journal. He and I set up Political Theology which is now quite big and international really to save my sanity so I could get people who were actually thinking about things.

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So, I quickly, also I was living in Coventry and I was in London three, four days a week and that wasn't really working.

So, after a year, the social responsibility job came up at Worcester Diocese and the Bishop was Peter Selby, who had been a trustee of ISCS, and was very supportive and is very pretty unambiguously pro-gay bishop we've ever had.

So, I got that job starting in 98. And that's the job I do here. So, since 98 I've been working for the Church of England promoting social justice in all the different, so, I just have a really broad remit. And I love it and particularly, Worcester was a small diocese and after four years I got bored. I mean, I wrote Wellbeing while I was there and they were like, it came out just as I was making the move to here.

But I'd split up with Elaine and the next person that I got together with was a man. He was actually just taking over SCM Press. He had when I wrote the Wellbeing book for them. He didn't commission it, but that's how I got to know him. So, he and I got together, married in 2005, divorced in 2010. (Laughter) So, that didn't really work.

(Overspeaking)

We were together ten years but... yeah, because we were together for four or five years before we got married.

Interviewer: Okay, that's quite an interesting twist.

Alison: (Laughter) Yeah, I suppose.

Interviewer: I didn't see that coming in your conversation.

(Laughter)

Alison: Yeah, well, it goes back to the bisexual thing, doesn't it, I guess. I mean, I had... yeah, I've just think I've... it was another almost conscious decision back because I'd got quite into being so radically feminist that I just dismissed all men on principle, and then I've always had in built hatred of fundamentalism, and there was a part I thought, "Actually, I'm just being a fundamentalist all over again and I should..." And because I was, when I was working with Graft, the person I worked most with was a guy called Martin Davies who was a brilliant writer, really good and we had a fantastic working relationship. And he was just great. And he challenged me a lot on it. "You're so lesbian". You know? (Laughter) So, yeah? "Why do you say, 'As a lesbian feminist'. What does it...?" We didn't use phrases like what does that even mean then, but if we had, you know, that's probably what he would have said.

So, I suppose psychologically I just you've got to flex out a bit. So, in that process just ended up, and Alex and I had loads in common. We've done theology together at Cambridge at the same time. We didn't know each other. And we'd been sort of in almost, we found out there was so many conferences we'd both been at and so many we just hadn't ever kind of hooked up. So, when we did it kind of made sense.

Interviewer: And did you have children?

Alison: No. No, we were... I was 39 when we got married. So, kind of, I mean, it wasn't too late, but in effect it was. I kind of, sometimes I wanted children and sometimes I didn't. So, it wasn't really a very strong basis to actually have any.

Interviewer: Yeah.

[0:29:56]

Alison: Yeah. So, and I'm glad we didn't because it would have been a nightmare, even more of a nightmare than it actually was splitting up.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean not that it's relevant to this, but just out of curiosity, what's your situation now? Because I'm not someone who knows everyone in circles.

Alison: No, I'm not in a coupled relationship at the moment. And I live with friends in a kind of, well, I live with a married couple. The man I have known since 2001. He was in my sort of work circle when I worked in Worcester because he's a singer-songwriter, Nigerian born. And I did some, when I did work around racism in Worcester, he helped me with it and we stayed close and I, there's a small charity that I chair that he's the artistic director for. So, we have a close working relationship with another hat. And he's married to an employment lawyer, and they have three children, 12-year-old twins and a five-year-old boy. So, I'm part of the family now and I have a parental role. And so, I've had

the opportunity of being a parent because I've been living with them for five years full-time.

Interviewer: Well, what do they call you? What do the kids...?

Alison: Auntie.

Interviewer: Auntie.

Alison: Auntie. (Laughter) I mean it's an Ibo household even though Jenny's white. So, that's eastern Nigeria. It's very much that culture of extended family. People just get adopted into your household.

Interviewer: Oh, I wish I had someone in my house like that.

(Overspeaking)

Alison: There's a curate here who recently had two children and she said -

(Overspeaking)

So, you do childcare? I said, "Well, yeah, of course". She said, "Oh God, that sounds fantastic". (Laughter)

Yeah, so the reason I was off for two weeks is because, sadly, Ben's mum died back in July and they were doing the burial at the end of November. And they had the date for a while. So, the only way, because he does, he's the primary child carer, so I just said well if I take two weeks off because he was needing a two week trip, at least we know all the school runs will be covered. And then as it happened, (inaudible 0:32:26) was ill for the whole time. So, off school. So, all my plans were going for long walks every day. Completely scuppered. But anyway...

(Overspeaking)

(Laughter)

At least I've caught up with, well, no, the other thing I was going to do, because I'm planning, having done that day in November, it was such a good day in terms of people's contributions and I just sort of thought I'd really love to do a 20 years on revisit. Revisit in the sense of it being driven by people's reflections and experience, women's experience and reflections on sexuality and gender and sort of bring it together with queer theology and queer theory and stuff. So, I'm kind of planning that. I've got a meeting with the publisher tomorrow morning. So, fingers crossed.

Yeah. So, I thought I'd do it, I'm going to catch up on the queer theory I've missed in the last 20 years. I mean, I did the queer theories and cultural studies stuff when I did the MA, even though I never finished it, so, I felt like subsequent to found wanting I did back then in the late 90s, I did a certain amount of theoretical filling in of gaps. But there has been, obviously, some queer theology since.

[0:33:45]

Interviewer: Yeah, Patrick Chen and all that.

Alison: Yeah, I read that book, the last one.

(Laughter)

And there's a womanist one that's just stopped(?). It's not brilliant, but at least it's out there. The book I could not afford was Gerard Laughlin's book.

Interviewer: Yeah, I got that.

Alison: But that's highly academic, isn't it?

Interviewer: I got that from the library but it was quite hard work, I must admit, yeah.

Alison: Because Alex, my ex-husband, commissioned that book because he worked for OUPCUPSBC, got sacked by all the Christians, SCM, SPCK, you know? So, I knew that Gerard have been working on that book for a long time and Alex was always saying, "When are you going to finish that queer theory book, Gerard?" So, when it came out it was on our shelves for a while, but you know, ironically it's no longer on my shelf.

But anyway, someone in Manchester who wanted to borrow Carol because she wants to see the movie, so I said, "Okay, you can borrow Carol if I can borrow Gerard Laughlin".

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, actually I watched that last week.

Alison: Did you?

Interviewer: Yeah, obviously because my namesake.

Alison: Yeah.

Interviewer: And my best friend in New York's called Theresa. So, it's quite -

(Overspeaking)

Alison: Oh really?

(Laughter)

Interviewer: It's all right, I don't transcribe the bits that aren't relevant, don't worry. It's not a verbatim transcription, it's bites because we were never going to get there because I was doing the verbatim transcriptions, I did Jim Cotter's, Sharon Ferguson's was an hour and 40 minutes. It took me absolutely forever. But yeah, no, the film, yeah. It was very true to the book, which I was glad about. But I did find Cate Blanchett a bit off-putting in it.

Alison: That's interesting because somebody said I can't imagine her in that role. I think it was Elaine, actually, because I still see Elaine, we're still great mates. So, she said, "I can't imagine," because I think it was it was Elaine's, because Elaine's middle name's Carol. So, and I think that she'd had it originally, you know, when it first came out, and I hadn't and I think I borrowed it from her and I maybe didn't give it back because it's an old hardback. I mean it's called Carol, it's not called A Taste of Salt. Price of Salt, sorry. Okay. So, anyway, so, I lent that to Michaela and she's sending me Gerard, but I wasn't holding out much hope that, I just thought I'd just better look at it. I looked on Amazon, it was second hand £35. I thought, I'm not paying that". (Laughter)

[0:36:04]

Interviewer: It's like Kindle books are about the same now as well. Yeah. Going back to the church, I am post-church I have to say. Plus, quite bad experiences myself in the Church of England. I can't even sit in a service now. I wonder what you, what are the limitations imposed on your work by the Church of England. What things can you not, what places can you not go to metaphorically?

Alison: Yeah, it's an interesting question. I was post-church. And particularly when I was with Elaine because she'd had really traumatic experiences and never really worked out what to do with her spirituality, really. I was sort of in that place. Once I've done the Sexuality Commission and I'd sort of dropped out of Methodism and dropped into nothing and for years I didn't go near a church. But I still had the interest, theological interest. I didn't really know what my faith identity was. I just couldn't work it out. I knew it was problematic because I used to get very, I had almost this phobia. If I had to be in a worship service, I'd just get completely just a really weird emotional reaction to things. But I couldn't, so I just avoided them. So, if I went on conferences and there was a worship slot I would always miss it. And I was still going, so, I was doing training, I was doing all sorts of things where there was quite often worship slots. And I would just hate, I would dread the fact that I'd be cornered and have to sit through something.

Interviewer: Yeah, I always went to the toilet when they did -
(Laughter)

Interviewer: Random people hugging you.

Alison: So, I kind of knew it was problematic, but I was also, I also quite got into the Sea of Faith Network, which is, I don't know whether...

Interviewer: I don't know.

Alison: Well, so, there's Don Cupitt who is what's known as a non-realist. So, his argument, and I studied under him at Cambridge and I found his thinking really exciting. It's just that whole notion that God is a human creation, you know. It doesn't mean God has no meaning, but there's no objective God outside. And that kind of went with postmodern theory and it kind of fitted with. So, I was quite involved in, it's the network, it's called Sea of Faith because there was the TV programme in the 80s. He was quite famous, Don Cupitt, because of this TV programme, series. So, when I went to Cambridge and he was the kind of first theologian I met, it's kind of, "Oh my God, it's Don Cupitt". (Laughter) So, I read all his books. He was my supervisor for philosophy of religion papers and I just found it a really fascinating perspective. And I stayed with that. So, all the time I worked for SCM, my boss, Tim, used to make fun of me saying, "Oh, she doesn't believe any of this stuff. She's non-realist". But then I kind of found it a bit bankrupt after a while. I thought, "Well, you know, what about transcendence and what about..." And actually interestingly, Don Cupitt got back into that towards, he's still alive. But his books kind of move much more. So, I guess I moved much more towards a sort of mystical kind of contemplative, but not fitting any institutional workings at all. It's just my own private personal stuff.

But then I was working for, suddenly I was working for the Church of England. Still holding those views and perspectives, but having to use a different language. And it was fine for a bit. But then I wanted to explore the whole thing in a book because I feel like if I want to work out what I feel, think about something, I have to write about it. So, I was going to do a whole book on faith identity and just explore, because at the end of Found Wanting I have this thing about I'm a lesbian of Christian heritage. And if somebody says should I stay or should I go, you say well it's a non-question because it's a setup because you're responding to something that you've had no power in setting up and

you're asked to fit, to define yourself by... so, it was just problematising the whole thing about what Christianity actually is before you define whether or not you are one. It's just that. And I thought I can't write this book unless I actually deal with my own stuff. And for eight years probably I had this plan to write about it for a year. I can't remember how many years, but certainly I worked in Worcester for four years. And I knew it had to be somebody who, because I tried friendly faith leaders, bishop here that I was friendly with. But it just didn't work because they're too kind of, you get to a point in the conversation and you think you're not taking this, you know, you're not getting it.

[0:41:15]

So, I found this guy by accident because I was looking for an alternative career at one time. I thought maybe I'll be a therapist. (Laughter) So, I ended up just so, and I wanted to live in Norfolk so and I found this guy in Norwich called Brian Thorne. And when I, because he was the head of person-centred therapy at UEA. And then it transpired that he was a kind of leading theological lay kind of Anglican person. So, I got hold of his books and read them and I wrote to him and said, and sent him Wellbeing and said I'd quite like to meet you. So, he phoned me, like, as I discovered he always does, like on receipt of the communication. And I had lunch with him and that was ten years ago. So, he's been my sort of spiritual accompanist/therapist ever since. So, that's really helped me to just disentangle the emotional stuff and the rejection stuff and what I feel like, who I feel I am, the fact that I love God but I have never fitted in with, even though I've been working for the Church of England, I suppose I value my Methodist heritage. I've never been Anglican. I like the nonconformity that I was brought up with and I would now I go to church sometimes with the kids and I go to the Methodist church in Malvern. But I still find church services pretty uninspiring and not a necessary part of my life. And I still, I suppose I call myself a Christian again but with all of those provisos of what the hell does it mean anyway?

Interviewer: Yeah, it's becoming disreputable almost as an identity. If you say it to people, there's assumptions about the views which is sort of the problem I have. I was like, yeah, you know I'm a lesbian feminist theologian and whatever and with me it's I'm a leftwing Guardian reading Christian. And why am I doing this?

(Laughter)

But it's all about that, yeah.

Alison: Yeah. So, in terms of, just going back to the question of what are the restrictions in terms of my job, I haven't, I think there's one occasion in this job when I have seen Worcester Bishop, Peter Selby was just, I think my first meeting was him calling together the gay clergy in the diocese because it was straight after the Lambeth Conference 98, and apologising to them and saying he'd been there, it felt like the Nuremberg rallies. He was there to support them. Whatever he could do, they should let him know. I'm kind of whoa! (Laughter) I mean, he was amazing. And he still is amazing.

Interviewer: (Inaudible 0:44:16) hidden cameras. (Laughter)

Alison: Yeah. Here, there's nothing like that. I've not, in all the time, I've been 12 years now. I've organised one event that's had anything to do with sexuality and that was a pastoral care event after Geoffrey John was booted out of as Archbishop of Reading. Because that brought the whole thing back up. And at that time, I wrote a couple of articles. And I didn't think twice about writing articles. I wrote one for the Guardian reflecting on what had changed in ten years and it was about postcolonialism and the international scene. And then I wrote a longer version of that for Crucible, which was the sort of national social justice Anglican journal. I don't know whether it still exists. And

one of the bishops here talked to my boss and said why did Alison write that? And she said, oh Bishop Collins is a bit concerned. And I just said, well it's done.

(Laughter)

[0:45:12]

Why shouldn't I? Because to my mind, in my head, Found Wanting as a part of, okay, so I was with Alex when I got this job, I wasn't married, and I was thinking, "Oh for once I won't have to say and by the way I'm in a lesbian relationship. I hope that's not a problem". Or what are you going to do? Support me? With the risk that I wouldn't get the job. In fact, all that happened was they were concerned that I wasn't married.

Interviewer: Okay, cool.

Alison: You mention your partner. Why aren't you married in effect. Well, because we're not. Oh, okay then. I never thought that would be an issue. So, I have so, I still I would be aware because of how things are in this diocese that, and I did organise, the only other thing I've done was I've had to organise back in September this sort of half day thing with the cathedral to replicate something that had been done in Guildford in the context of the shared conversations. It's not the kind of thing I would ever have organised myself. But I was asked to do it, so I pretty much had to do it. I never would have a morning where people have no opportunity to talk to each other where you've got three lectures, one on history, one pro-gay Bible, one anti-gay Bible. No, not the way I do things. But...

So, yeah, and all of that shared conversation stuff I've just kept totally away from because I feel like back in 1990 I was heading up an organisation for which the main philosophy was you can only have constructive conversation about sexuality if you start from a position of saying everybody's sexuality is valid and equal. If you don't start there, it's not fair. The power dynamic is not fair and you're not going to get a good conversation. So, the shared conversations don't start there. They problematise only one kind of sexuality. And we all know which one that is. And they put the spotlight on gay people and then they wonder why it's a damaging process. So, you know, there's no way I'm going anywhere near any of that.

Interviewer: What do you see happening to the Church of England in terms of, to me it seems there cannot be a middle ground for much longer.

Alison: Yeah, I think, I mean, the interesting thing about that event I've just mentioned is that if that had been 20 years ago, the feeling in the room would not have, I mean, it felt to me like the anti-gay bloke had to use shorthand was not, I don't think, I didn't sense anyone in the room was sympathetic to him.

Interviewer: Okay, Okay.

Alison: And this was just about, you know, 70 or 80 middle of the road Anglicans.

Interviewer: What's the age demographic for those people?

Alison: Oh 55 plus.

Interviewer: Okay, that's interesting.

Alison: There were some younger people. There was one youth worker who was saying why did none of these people listen to young people on this? Where's young people's

experience? It was written questions. She wrote her question, but it wasn't asked obviously. So, I just think, as Linda Woodhead says, people's perceptions have changed. Their opinions have changed. They've lived, the church has stopped. It just stopped in about, it stopped change institutionally, didn't it, in about 1992/3? Just put its finger, decided to put its fingers over its ears and go, "No listening". And then gay marriage comes in. It's "Oh shit, what are we going to do now?" with the civil partnership kind of question in the middle, but they got a bit confused because at one point that's what they said they wanted. And then when it came in, they said, "Oh no, we didn't really mean that". And now it's all caught up in what's the definition of marriage? But that's the kind of side joke really. And that's just the way it's portrayed. So, I think at some point the institution will have to catch up with reality.

[0:49:41]

Interviewer: Okay.

Alison: And I don't know how that's going to happen because it's dug itself into so many holes, like the triple bar on doing gay weddings in church. Obviously this is an Anglican dominated perspective because that's what I'm most familiar with. But I'm optimistic in the sense that I do think people have moved on. You can't live in a culture where everything's changed and therefore you know more people and you're familiar with more people and it's the same on transgender stuff because that was nowhere really. It was just emerging. I remember publishing one article by a female to male transsexual as he called himself then. And one article on pastoral questions around a minister who was dealing with someone who was a cross dresser in her congregation. But it was hardly ever spoken about at that point. And now it's like you feel like every other person you meet's transgender.

Interviewer: Well, it's also a staple diet on Channel 4 and Channel 5 every night, you know? My transgender rabbit. Yeah. I mean, the interesting thing for me is the B's still missing nearly the whole time. Which is, you know, my kind of mission really.

Alison: Well, I couldn't believe it. I can't remember which report it was. It was one of those big, thick ones. It was some issues or some more issues.

Interviewer: Yeah, the response to some issues. The original some issues.

Alison: But it had that line that the only mention of bisexuality was bisexuality, by definition, is wrong, because it means having a relationship with a man and a woman at the same time.

(Overspeaking)

Interviewer: Yes, I know.

(Laughter)

(Overspeaking)

Alison: How could you just not even know that's not what the word means.

Interviewer: It's also sort out your personality disorder. So, yeah. Yeah, there's 17 pages on homosexuality in that document and ten lines, one word, one bisexuality so, yeah. No, that's -

(Overspeaking)

Alison: But it is, and it's that complete obsession which remains and that's what's behind the marriage has got to mean one man and one woman about gender polarity by, you know, this, what's the word? Binary. This strict gender binary, which is what I wrote back in 95 about complementarity. And I think we all concluded that that is the rest of society has kind of got on with there being a spectrum of gender and a spectrum of sexuality and change and fluidity and all of that. But that's kind of ooh. It seems like it's new news. (Laughter) Even if it's not to real people in real churches. It is to...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alison: I mean there was a woman at that conference who, and this is where I catch myself. I had two conferences in a week. One was on death, befriending death, and the other one was this one on sexuality. And there was a woman that was on both and she came on both and she was the first person to arrive to the sexuality one. So, I suppose to stereotype she's a kind of mumsy looking older woman, very lovely. obviously with a pastoral care role in her congregation. And she was chatting. She was chatting to the historian, Scott, before anyone else arrived, and then she said something about, "Well, yeah, because my husband's transgender," and I said, "Oh my God". And I thought why should I be surprised that somebody who looks like her would have a transgender husband? And she's been saying this means, you know, the new legislation means that we don't have to get divorced. We can stay married because we would have had to have got divorced when he transitioned. And you think, yeah. That's just an average Anglican in an average church in the diocese. You know? (Laughter) Who comes on my pastoral care courses.

[0:53:55]

Interviewer: That's awesome. But yeah.

Alison: Oh, we had Rachel Mann(?) to speak at a conference on loneliness and someone I know who's on one of my committees, lovely woman, background as a social worker, a newish priest, and she said to me, "Oh yeah, I really want to chat with Rachel because my son's transgender". Wow. So, it's emerging as common and not a big deal. As 20 years ago, lesbian and gay stuff did.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alison: And that's got to have an impact. At some point the leadership has to bow to reality I think.

Interviewer: Before everyone dies off.

(Laughter)

Alison: Everyone being who? You mean before the church dies off?

(Laughter)

Interviewer: The elderly congregations. Well, that's fine. I'll wrap up because I know you've got an appointment and that's fantastic. Thank you very much.

Alison: Okay. I don't want to have to give you any more to transcribe. Wade through.

[End of Transcript]