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Interviewer: Could you tell me a bit about your background?

Cass Howes: My background, do you mean -

Interviewer: Where you're from, where you were born, where you grew up, your childhood.

Cass Howes: I was born in South-East London. I lived in South-East London till I was 30. So, born and bred in South-East London, very close to Brixton, so very interesting area to be part of. And I do remember something - I don't remember an awful lot from my very early childhood, but I have been shown a photograph of myself waving a Union Jack on the pavement at the coronation. So, I don't remember it, I've seen the photographs, so clearly I was there. I also remember, living very close to Brixton, meeting at that time what was probably the first ever married couple where one was white and one was black. So, growing up near Brixton is an education in itself, because of the very, very clear black presence in Brixton and the way that developed the surroundings, and Brixton Market was amazing in those days - it's amazing now, but it was amazing then. But it was also a very troubled area. But I do remember about growing up in South-East London, very close to Brixton, was we had an open house. Everybody was welcome, and it didn't matter what the colour of your skin was, everybody was made welcome. My parents just had anybody in and out. So, I grew up - and I think that's one of the things I've brought obviously into my own life is acceptance of anybody, whoever they are, and also the sheer diversity of - the different people that made up that neighbourhood. Before we moved to the house that I spent a large part of my childhood in, we lived in West Norwood, which is - we lived with my grandparents. So, they lived in the bottom house, we lived in the top of the house. We had a garden, which had an air raid shelter at the bottom of it, which later became my grandfather's shed (laughter). We grew vegetables and flowers in the garden. We had a dog. I can't remember his name, that has escaped me, but I remember, he was a black mongrel type dog. And we had an outside loo, I do remember that, 'cos there was lots of spiders in the outside loo (laughter), and I hated it. And to have a bath - we didn't have a bathroom. To have a bath, it was a tin bath that got taken off the hook and put in the scullery, and that was bath night. So, growing up in the early 1950s, terraced house, West Norwood, that was the kind of environment it was. Very, very different now to the way I lived, but perhaps not so different to the way some people still live.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned your grandparents and your parents. Did you live with anyone else?

Cass Howes: I have a sister, my sister was there, but no, that was our family unit.

Interviewer: Lovely. How did faith come into play in your household?

Cass Howes: As far as I can remember, went to church from day one (laughter). My parents - my father was a salvationist. My mother went to the local Methodist church, so when they married - they met in the army, they married, he started going to the local Methodist church, and I went there, as I say, from earliest of times, brought up in the Sunday school there. Yeah, stayed there - I mean, became a local preacher there, ran the youth club there. So, faith was never not there. It was part of our growing up. So, every Sunday, put on your Sunday best, walk up the hill to the church, walk back down, have Sunday lunch. Yes, I can remember photographs of us all dressed in our posh clothes (laughter).

Interviewer: Excellent. And where did you go to school? And what was school like for you?

Cass Howes: School? I went to Kingswood School, which was just around the corner from where we lived. I think that's why I never ever worked anywhere where I can't get to easily (laughter), came from those days of just being able to walk to school. I first went to the primary school and then to the junior school, which was on the same site. All I remember is a huge playground, which we were all thrown out to at playtimes. What I do remember, and it kind of links in with where I'm working now, is that - we've now just got a forest school, and lots of schoolkids come here to visit the forest school, which is near the back of our university campus. Our school had a park class - 'cos I said, "This is nothing new. You think it's new? I had a park class." And for several months in the best weather, we would go and have our classes in the middle of the park, and that was great, that was fantastic. That was just a brilliant extension of the indoor kind of school stuff, really.

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Interviewer: So, after you left Kingswood School, you went on to a secondary school?

Cass Howes: I went on to a Church of England school. It was the grammar school. It was the local grammar school, St Martin's in the Fields High School, which then had moved out of town and into Tulse Hill. Yes, it was a Church of England school. Clergy would come and visit regularly. I did religious studies. I got the prize for - when I left in sixth form, I got the prize for being the pupil who kind of most applied their religious studies. I failed the A level, but I was actually good at the applied stuff (laughter). So, I guess the faith was always there and it was perhaps reinforced by going to a Church of England school.

Interviewer: Fantastic. And then onto...?

Cass Howes: Then I didn't go to university 'cos I failed (laughter), I failed everything. I went into nursing. Prior to that, I did a year working - a scheme the Methodist church had at the time, whereby you could kind of do work placements and kind of learn about the world of work. So, I actually was sent to a psychiatric hospital, and I worked both for six months with a social worker, as his assistant, and then I worked in the occupational therapy department, and this was all organised by the Methodist church. So, at the end of that year, I then decided to take up training as a psychiatric nurse, and stayed in the same hospital, doing the training course.

Interviewer: Fantastic. And so throughout that, where do relationships and your sexuality come into it?

Cass Howes: Oh gosh, that's an interesting one, yes. I was pondering this a lot last night. I mean, I would have said that I knew I was different at the age of 11. There were two things that I kind of hooked onto at the age of 11 for me. One was knowing I had some sense of vocation - and they both came together, this is what's odd - knowing that I had some sense of vocation, yet at that time women could not become Methodist ministers. You could only become deacons, deaconesses, and I didn't want to be a deaconess (laughter). But also knowing I was different in terms of my sexuality. So, I would say I've known from the age of 11. The fact that I didn't do a lot about it till much later, I think I regret, sad about, but you can't change the clock back. When I was working in a psychiatric hospital, we did actually work with some people who - I would say part of their mental ill health was coming to terms with their sexuality. So, there were people I met, both patients and staff, who did make an impression on me and did make me think. I actually did nothing about it, I confess, at the time, but I did have close relationships with one person, who sadly took her own life at the time, and a couple of - I mean, yes, we did have - there were lesbian couples working in psychiatric hospitals, I mean, as there always are in a sense (laughter) anywhere in any institution, I think. So yes, they did make an impression on me. It's just that I didn't act on it. I didn't do anything about it really.

Interviewer: So, you were working in a psychiatric hospital. At what point did you start pursuing your call to ministry?

Cass Howes: Gosh, from working in a psychiatric hospital, I then went and did my general nurse training for 18 months at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. From there, I went to work in another specialist hospital around the back of Covent Garden. It's a fantastic place to work, the centre of London. And it was while I was there that I pursued my call to ministry. Now, that's kind of interesting, why did that happen at that particular time? I was possibly kind of - I mean, I specialised in operating theatres, so I worked in operating theatres. I was one of the people who did a lot of the early kidney transplants, assisted early kidney transplants. From that hospital, I then went to work at the Brompton Hospital and specialised in heart surgery. Yes, it was sort of around about that time that I started to explore the call to ministry, but it was actually going up to Iona - I belonged to the St Martins in the Field church drama society, and every year on Iona, they have a music and drama week, and we would go as a society for that week, have a wonderful time. Iona is a very strange place, and George Mcloud, the founder of the Iona community, called it a very thin place. Actually, that's true, it is, because it's kind of where things seem to be much thinner between heaven and earth, if you like. And at the beginning of the session - the beginning of the week, you have a session where you welcome each other, say hello to each other, say a bit about yourself, and I found myself strangely saying something like - I can't remember what exactly now. I would have repeated it in my call to ministry when I was candidating, but something like, "I've come to find myself and come to find Jesus." Now, if you know me, that is not the kind of language I use (laughter), but in that very thin space, in that environment, it suddenly felt as if, "Hey, wow, this is kind of a place where things are going to open up," and they did. And years later, I became a member of the Iona community, and in the hallowing service - I don't think we do this now, but in the hallowing service then, you would go up to the front and kneel down on this very ancient carpet. And if you know the history of Iona, it was a Benedictine monastery. One of the things the Benedictines do is prostrate themselves when they become fully fledged into the Benedictine community. And I kind of was kneeling there and I had this image of this monk prostrate. But also you get given a verse from the Bible and I got given John 14, "You did not choose me, I chose you," and that was the point at which, "Okay, I'm going to have to do something about this" (laughter). So, I then came back and eventually started the candidating process. So, Iona features very largely because it's such a thin place, because it's a place where you can be totally yourself and it's not questioned. And there were people there - there's a person who's now a URC minister, who - he and I worked together. We were both abbey guides together, so we spent a lot of time together, cleaning the abbey, sorting stuff out in the abbey, setting out the services, showing guests, giving tours round the abbey. I could probably still do the tour. But we spent a lot of time together and we became very close, but we were able to talk to each other about our sexuality. And I think it was at that time I kind of said, "Well, I'm bisexual, I think I'm bisexual," and that was it. Working where I work here in the university, on the performing arts campus, I mean, I think the way I would describe sexuality now is it's very fluid. So, I think I might go between bisexual and lesbian and I'm quite happy with understanding it in that way. But it was those conversations, often at 3am in the morning, in a very dark abbey (laughter), on a very beautiful island, that kind of enabled me to start to come to terms with who I was. Also, the warden at the time, a wonderful person who's now a university chaplain in Edinburgh, she was somebody I chose to speak to, and her and her husband have done a lot of work around the area of spirituality and sexuality, so that was a good place and a good time really.

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Interviewer: And what year were you ordained in?

Cass Howes: I was ordained in 1983.

Interviewer: 1983. So, at that point, you had had this experience in Iona. You went through training college for the Methodist ministry where?

Cass Howes: I trained at Queen's in Birmingham, the Queen's Foundation.

Interviewer: And was there anything significant about your time in Queen's, or is there any stories about your time there that you'd like to share?

Cass Howes: I mean, one of the significant things was that the year before I went there, there was a big huff and a puff because two women had come out while they were there, and everybody kind of went, "Oh (laughter), what's all this about?" But actually I was married by the time I went there. I had married in 1980, so I was married when I went to theological college, in that background, in that context of knowing that there were two women who'd come out the year before and there were problems about where they would be placed when they left. I guess maybe there might be some problems even now. I don't know what Queen's would do now in that situation. But you can imagine, it was talked about quite a lot (laughter).

Interviewer: Absolutely. So, did you go straight into chapel ministry in the Methodist church or did you do something else?

[0:15:05]

Cass Howes: No (laughter).

Interviewer: What did you do?

Cass Howes: I didn't do anything (laughter).

Interviewer: You didn't do anything?

Cass Howes: Going back to the Iona days, the other thing that I remember very strongly about Iona was standing in a very cold phone box on a windy seafront one night, and ringing LGCM, ringing Richard Kirker in the offices and saying, "I need to talk to somebody" (laughter). And I think - I mean, we often talked about this in those days in LGCM, about how do people break through the barrier of how you actually do ring LGCM, how do you talk to somebody and what do you say. Well, I can tell you, it's very strange (laughter). But Richard was very helpful and I think I probably became a member of LGCM from that kind of phone call really. But going back, we were at college, weren't we, yes? You asked me something about college.

Interviewer: I asked you anything significant about college and what you went on to do next.

Cass Howes: What I went on to do next, that's right, yes. From college, because my then husband and I were one of - we were the first Methodist couple, so if you said to me, what's the characteristic about me, I'm a pioneer. We were the first ever Methodist couple, so there were lots of conversations about what can you do about a couple together, where do you put them. It so happened that I didn't want to go into church ministry. I felt called to be a sector minister, to work, as I called, in the marketplace, so that's what I did. We went to Telford, Newtown. My husband was the minister with probably five or six local churches. I worked as ecumenical youth chaplain for the Telford Newtown and developed work with young people, worked with people who ran church youth clubs right across the denominations. We had some wonderful times. We had fantastic weekends, where all the churches would get together and we'd take young people away for the weekend, have a most fantastic time. And I worked with the local authority. We

set up a hostel for young girls. We set up a hostel for young men. They were good times, yes. So, I was never – I have never been a circuit minister. Don't want to be a circuit minister (laughter). But no, it was genuine calling. I can remember the night before I was ordained, talking to the president of conference, who happened to be my district chair at the time, and saying that I felt called to sector ministry. Now at that time, sector ministry was still kind of frowned upon a bit. You really had to be a circuit minister, otherwise you weren't doing proper ministry. And I think those of us in sector ministry still feel that we're undervalued really. It's just a different style of ministry. And I said, "Look, I feel called to sector ministry and that's it" (laughter).

Interviewer: So, your husband's first church circuit was in Telford. And how long were you in Telford for?

Cass Howes: In Telford for five years.

Interviewer: And then you moved onto...?

Cass Howes: And that's when we split up, and I then moved on to become chaplain at Aston University, and that started my career as a university chaplain.

Interviewer: Fantastic, which you still are and have had –

Cass Howes: I still am for over 30 years, yes.

Interviewer: 30 years later. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share at this point in your studies and in your early life, and in your candidating and anything there?

[0:18:43]

Cass Howes: I don't think so, unless there's anything – I'll come back to it, but...

Interviewer: Fantastic. So, you went on to Aston University, and how did you find chaplaincy at that point then?

Cass Howes: Chaplaincy then, we were a team, which was good. Aston is a very compact university. It's on the same site of some of what used to be Birmingham Polytechnic. As I say, I worked in a team with Anglicans and Catholics. It was a good time. I don't think... I think I started thinking then at the time that I needed to do something about the sexuality stuff, but the life of a chaplain is so busy, it is so easy to – and I can't think what the word is, but to kind of get on with that and not actually – you know, you can forget about yourself or you don't deal with stuff, because actually chaplaincy is very busy, and so busy dealing with other people's problems. Yes (laughter).

Interviewer: And you mentioned in a prior conversation that we had about a conversation with your accompanier in Birmingham.

Cass Howes: Yes, I mean, while I was at – or was it when I moved? I can't remember if it was when I moved to Sheffield that the Methodist accompaniers system had come in, this kind of review. Going back, while I was at Aston, it's interesting, I still think the same today, I would work with a local student union, LGBT society, because my office was just across the way from where they met. So, my office door would be open, and people could always drop in and see me before going onto the meeting, and people would. And I do remember actually saying to one young lad who came and said, "I think I'm gay," etc, etc, I remember saying, "Well, I think that's a beautiful and a wonderful thing," and I would still say that now, if that happened now, that they would get exactly the same answer from me. So, you know, although I wasn't totally out myself, I would be very

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affirming of those who were taking that step and be very supportive of people who were taking that step while they were at university. And of course this is at a time when AIDS was kind of prevalent, and HIV, and people were quite scared, so, you know, there was a whole lot of stuff around safe sex and all of that. But within that, nevertheless affirming the validity of those relationships was important for me. When I moved onto Sheffield and we started doing the accompaniers programme, I had a very good accompanist. I think she probably was a counsellor in kind of other past life, or still carried it on, that kind of stuff, in some kind of way. But it was during that time – it was in Sheffield that I had my first relationship with another woman, so that was kind of a big time in my life (laughter). And I’m just trying to think how it happened and I can’t remember. That’s probably because that broke up and I choose not to remember. But no, there was two people who kind of found each other and knew where they were coming from, and we got together and it was a good relationship. But that broke up, and that then led to me discussing that with the person who was doing my review, because I don’t separate my spirituality and my sexuality. They’re all part and parcel of who I am, so I can’t separate them, so it had to come up in the review, and out of that, it was then about deciding to get involved in stuff, and that’s when I really got involved in LGCM and campaigning, and actually sort of, you know, shouting out really (laughter).

Interviewer: Excellent. And so you were very involved in LGCM. Would you like to tell us anything about your initial involvement and then where it led to, and perhaps what years roughly that was?

Cass Howes: Gosh, that is hard (laughter). I can’t put dates to it, which is terrible really.

Interviewer: That’s okay.

Cass Howes: If I looked at the paperwork, I probably would, ‘cos I eventually became chair of the board. I got elected vice chair. I wasn’t elected chair. I actually became chair because the then current chair had to step down, so I had to step up to the plate almost instantaneously. Part of being chair of the board was to actually supervise and manage the general – they called it general secretary at the time.

Interviewer: Who was...?

[0:23:38]

Cass Howes: Who was Richard Kirken. I like to think I have some people skills, and actually chairing boards, chairing committees is something I’m good at. I like to think I’m good at supervision as well. It wasn’t an easy time, because at that particular time, a lot of people were saying, “Well, we need a woman running it (laughter). We need a woman in the hotseat.” Richard had been in post for a very long time, and all credit to him, yes, I mean, you know, most people wouldn’t have stuck at it I think as long as he had, because he got an awful lot of nasty stuff thrown at him really. But it was a difficult time. I think running a charity is difficult full stop, and you have responsibilities about finance, of running the whole thing. I can remember, one of the things I did was to develop some trustees’ training, and I still do that with groups I’m involved in now is actually, if you’re going to be a trustee, you need to be trained to do the job and you need to know what you’re there for. So, that was something I did. So, I would spend my Saturday mornings in Oxford House, training new trustees. But yes, I suppose it was – and almost concurrently at the same time – and I really wish I can remember the dates, but I can’t (laughter). But concurrently at the same time, I became chair of the Methodist caucus of LGCM, again taking over from somebody, a male who’d been doing that for quite a long time. Often, at meetings, I was the only woman there. It was mainly male at the time. And then out of the Methodist caucus - the Methodist caucus became something called Outcome, which still exists today, and has now – and moved away from LGCM sometime after I stepped down from the chair’s role. So yes, I was involved

in both of those at the same time, so I would feed in Methodist stuff into LGCM. I would also obviously, 'cos I was female, work with the women in LGCM. And I think it's natural that groups form and break off, and eventually the women's caucus actually then broke off and became something now called LEFT, which I'm still part of.

Interviewer: Which stands for...?

Cass Howes: Lesbians Exploring Faith Together. I have to think about that. And one of the issues now about that is that it's not just lesbians. There are women there who are bisexual. There are transgender women. So, like LGCM I think now has to question its title, its name, I think LEFT possibly would have to do the same at some point in the future, because we're much more aware of the diversity - the diversity was probably always there, people just weren't so - like LGCM originally was the Gay Christian Movement, and it became (laughter) - so, there's a progression always, I think. So, I was chair of Outcome, chair of LGCM at the same time. Being a minister in the Methodist church, I then got involved in the pilgrimage of faith, which was a two year exploration of sexuality and spirituality, and where lesbians and gay men fitted really in the church, and came out of the Derby Resolutions.

Interviewer: Which was the, "We will not discriminate," but there were lots of other things.

Cass Howes: Yes, there were six resolutions. The last one said, "We will engage in a pilgrimage of faith with full inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the life of the church," as well as all the other things there that are kind of - yeah (laughter). So, I was involved in that process, and I like to think it moved us on somewhere, although not necessarily where people thought we ought to be, 'cos I think it's a much longer game than people realise.

Interviewer: And realised, I guess.

Cass Howes: Yes.

Interviewer: So, going back a little bit, what was it that drew you initially to LGCM and being involved?

(Audio repeats from "lesbian and gay people in the life of the church..." at 0:28:04)

Cass Howes: If you're a person of faith, if you're in the church, who do you talk to? And you've actually got to find allies and people you can trust. I don't know, how did I hear about LGCM? I don't know, but I remember that phone call to Richard. Maybe somebody told me about it. But certainly, yeah, (inaudible 0:29:12) (laughter). Certainly, you know, it was an organisation where you - someone you could talk to. And I used to do that a lot for people with the Methodist caucus. People would ring me up out of the blue and start talking to me, because I was a voice on the end of the phone they felt they could trust, I was approachable they could tell those things to, and maybe understood some of where they were coming from. So, I think LGCM - at that time, Changing Attitude didn't exist initially. There was only one organisation you could go to and that was it. And it did run a kind of nightline kind of thing, where people could just ring up and get advice. I think that's what it was good at.

[0:30:01]

Interviewer: Excellent, thank you. Was there anything else you wanted to tell me about your time as chair of LGCM before we move onto Pilgrimage of Faith, I guess, and your experiences there?

Cass Howes: Hmm, I mean, it wasn't an easy time, but then, as I say, running a national charity is not an easy thing to do. And because of all the other - I mean, there was HIV and AIDS,

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there would have been Section 28, all of those things were happening, and trying to change the hearts and minds of people (laughter) up top in the churches was never going to be an easy game. This kind of dates it, I was – was I chair? Yes, I was chair when the whole Jeffrey John thing blew up, and I was a synod in York when Peter Tatchell stormed the synod and Rowan Williams walked outside. Never seen anybody look as white as he did that day. So yes, I mean, the interesting thing about it is LGCM is ecumenical, but obviously a lot of the stuff those days was around the CofE, it still is, with the LGBTI mission that's focused on the CofE. And I was a Methodist, and I had to work – so no, I mean, having been brought up in a Church of England school and attending a Church of England church for many years, I kind of knew as much about Anglicanism as I did about Methodism. Some people challenged that and said, "How can a Methodist deal with Anglican stuff?" I said, "Yes, you can," and as far as I'm concerned, I did and I proved it, and I stood alongside my Anglican colleagues and tried to understand where they were, what they were suffering with, where they were coming from. And even now, I mean, Methodism – we're debating the same issues (laughter). So yes, it's possible to do it.

Interviewer: Fantastic, thank you. So, let's think about the Pilgrimage of Faith, which I know was a difficult time for you and for others who were part of it.

Cass Howes: I mean, one of the questions I asked right at the very beginning of the process was that if anybody was affected by what went on during those two years, if they would be allowed – you know, if counsel would be found for them. I don't think we ever tested that out, but I felt I had to ask the question, because people sent in written submissions, which were the most awful things to read. It's one thing to hear somebody say you're an abomination to your face, or to say what they think you do is abhorrent, but when you actually see it written down in black and white, and the vindictiveness of – there was some really nasty stuff that people said in the submissions. As I say, I don't think we ever tested whether or not anybody did want counselling. I mean, I certainly felt, after those two years, that's when I wanted to step down and step back, because it had been a battering experience. We would often have two days' residential meetings. You can't run away from things – well, you can not go into the room, I suppose, but you can't run away from what people are saying, so you have to face it, so you've got to be made – and I would always say that one of my gifts and skills is resilience. That was a time when I needed my resilience, because I had to sit there and listen to people of totally opposing views to myself. So yes, it was quite scary, quite battering. And as I say, I don't think what we produced in the end was where some people wanted us to be, but I don't think we could have ever been where those people wanted us to be, not at that time.

Interviewer: And so that anyone listening who might not understand what Pilgrimage of Faith was, in just a few words, could you explain sort of the process that you went through?

Cass Howes: Well, it was picking up on Section 6 of the Derby Resolutions, which was to enter a pilgrimage of faith towards full inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the life of the church. And we wrote a fairly lengthy paper, which went to conference.

Interviewer: And people were invited to –

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Cass Howes: People were invited to submit reflections to us. There was a whole area about – things have moved on so hugely, but there was a whole area about whether you could bless a same sex relationship, and it comes down to the fact that you can actually bless anything (laughter). And we're still kind of a bit there, because we're now still asking the question, at least we were here in this circuit not so long ago, about, you know, can you bless same sex couples. So, a huge amount in the report was centred around blessing

and the meaning of blessing, 'cos I don't think we could have... I think I realised then that the government would get there before us (laughter), and I did say that. And the church would always say, "Well, we don't follow what the government does," but actually it isn't just about government. It's government understanding where society's going, how things are changing or not changing, because I think maybe actually there were probably same sex relationships and marriages long before the church actually kind of took it over. I suspect that's the case really.

Interviewer: And of course within Methodism, the building blocks of Methodism are around people's experience as well as biblical authority and tradition.

Cass Howes: Mm, exactly, the four - yeah.

Interviewer: Excellent. So, at the end of the Pilgrimage of Faith and the report had been written, you felt it was a time for you to move away from your campaigning, is that correct?

Cass Howes: I mean, that is correct. I'm just trying to think where was I working at that time. I must have been - oh gosh, I don't know... I mean, the actual presentation of the paper at conference was difficult, 'cos I actually had to stand on the platform next door - standing right next to somebody who had completely different views to me (laughter), and in the end I chose not to speak or say anything, and I stood there in silence, and some people said to me afterwards, well, that was the right thing to do and was the best thing I could have done, but other people were quite unhappy with that, and I did get quite a lot of... comments, verbal comments from people on the same side as me. And that's I think where my resilience gave out and said, "Right, I'm stepping back from this," so I stepped back from kind of any campaigning.

Interviewer: And if you don't mind me asking, what do you think those people expected you to do in that situation, or what was the hope from them?

Cass Howes: Well, I think certainly some of us thought that the church would actually say the decisions about same sex blessings would rest with individual churches, that people could make up their minds. That didn't happen. But people also wanted us to be able - yes. We still weren't at the stage where lesbian and gay people were accepted fully into the life of the church, and that's where people wanted us to be, and so there was a lot of anger around, and I got some of the anger 'cos I was the front person at the time. That was totally to be expected. You know, I suppose my answer then is, "Well actually, okay, you could have been in my place, why weren't you there?" (Laughter) And I was there. So yes, it was a time just to step back and to get on with my life, do what I wanted to do.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to say about that period of your life or shall we move on?

Cass Howes: Yeah, move on (laughter).

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's fine.

Cass Howes: I wish I could remember dates.

Interviewer: So, that was the Edinburgh conference, you told me previously.

Cass Howes: The Edinburgh conference, yes.

[0:38:13]

Interviewer: So, then you stepped away, so what was your ministry like and what did you go on to do at this point?

Cass Howes: I actually had an interview for Edinburgh University not long afterwards (laughter), about two years later, and I suddenly realised that – no, it wasn't for Edinburgh, it was at the other university in Edinburgh, whose name escapes me, gosh. And I suddenly walked into this place for this interview and realised where I was, and thought, "Oh my gosh, this is where the conference in Edinburgh took place." And of course it all came flooding back. I messed the interview up, not surprisingly, because suddenly stepping back into that place where that report had been presented and where I had stood in silence actually was kind of – yes, it obviously did things to my psyche, so I messed the interview up, I didn't get that job. Shame (laughter). But then I went to work at the University of the West of England in Bristol. I moved from Sheffield Hallam, where I was, went to work at the University of the West of England in Bristol. I had no problems about being totally out there. Wasn't an issue, and never is – well, it isn't in universities. It can't be an issue because of our equality policies, etc, etc. But universities are places where people can explore who they are. That's exactly what you do (laughter), including the staff. So, I went, and I worked at Sheffield Hallam as a staff chaplain, somebody employed by the university to be a chaplain. That is quite rare. There were only two jobs in the country at the time where that happened. One was Sheffield Hallam, one was the University of the West of England, so I moved from one to the other, 'cos there was nowhere else to move to in that kind of role. So then I went to the University of the West of England. I'm just wondering if I – I was particularly involved in – yes, I worked with the LGBT Society, as I do in any university, and at freshers' fair, I would always go round and make myself known to them, talk to them and say, "Actually, the church is fine, you know, it's alright (laughter). We're okay." And you can see the rainbow flags outside here today 'cos it's LGBT month. So yes, I've never been quiet about it and never been an issue, except when I did a radio broadcast one day. They asked me to go into the studios in Bristol, BBC studios in Bristol, to do a broadcast about – it was lesbians and invitro fertilisation, and I was up against somebody from the Christian Institute, and I didn't mince my words, not knowing that my vice chancellor was listening on the radio. I didn't get told off, but I did get spoken to about it, because the problem is, if you are in university chaplaincy, you carry the name of the university with you. People know me as the chaplain, so therefore – so yes, that was a but I didn't know. How was I to know he listened to Radio whatever-it-was (laughter)? Because I mean, me and this person from the Christian Institute had quite a fiery conversation. So, I used to do – when I was part of LGCM, I did used to do a lot of media stuff, and I stopped doing that as well. I think again there's only so much of that you can do really. And you do have to be careful and you do have to know what you're talking about. So yes, so I tend to shy away from media stuff now (laughter), unless I'm – I've actually done stuff here, but not very much.

Interviewer: So, you moved to UWE in...?

Cass Howes: 2001.

Interviewer: 2001, and then you stayed there until –

Cass Howes: 2008.

Interviewer: 2008, so you were there at the time of the civil partnership legislation that allowed lesbian and gay people to enter into civil partnerships.

Cass Howes: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: Did that point have any impact on your ministry, or did it have any impact on your –

Cass Howes: I mean, people would come and ask me if I would marry them, and I would have to explain that actually you couldn't marry - I couldn't marry people 'cos that wasn't possible then. But I did do blessings. I actually did do several blessings while I was there, very often in pubs actually, strangely enough. And when I thought about it, it's almost like public houses are the hearth of the home. I blessed a couple who actually owned a pub (laughter). That was quite nice. I mean, in those days - and I never asked my district chair. I told my district chair I was doing them (laughter).

[0:43:10]

Interviewer: And their response?

Cass Howes: Hmm, well, yeah, I mean, I never got told I couldn't.

Interviewer: You never got a response (laughter).

Cass Howes: No, I think 'cos I think in the main, a lot of people in the Methodist church are very sympathetic, and that is seeing it from a pastoral perspective as well, you know, that it's ridiculous not to do it. So, I have done blessings. And recently I went to Australia, a couple of years ago, and met up again with somebody I did a blessing for when they were students at the university, so that was lovely.

Interviewer: Lovely.

Cass Howes: So yes, I mean, I would do them, people would ask me to do them. Now of course it's a different story, because, you know, now we're trying to decide whether or not we can change the definition of marriage and whether we can do same sex marriages in church, and so therefore it's a bit more difficult now for me to do that kind of thing until we work out where we are really.

Interviewer: Yes, another long game perhaps.

Cass Howes: Yes, (sighs) hopeless (laughter).

Interviewer: So, you said you were in UWE in 2008, and then you moved from UWE -

Cass Howes: To here. I was unemployed for six months, then I moved here to Bedford.

Interviewer: Fantastic. And have there been any significant stories or moments in your time here that have shaped where you are now perhaps?

Cass Howes: As I say, in my work as a chaplain, I'm always affirming of relationships, of good relationships, whatever they are. I like to think we're open to anybody, that people can come and talk to us. Again, I work with the LGBT Society. We've got a programme here this month, LGBT month, we're showing Pride the film tonight, and working on some other stuff that hopefully will happen before - 'cos we've extended the month here to the end of term (laughter), into March. So, working on some stuff here hopefully. I think probably this chaplaincy has been one of the busiest I've ever worked in, so actually, yes, it's back to the same old kind of, don't deal with your own stuff, deal with everybody else's, which is kind of - well, it's almost - in a sense it's the challenge of vocation against dealing with your own stuff in a way. So, I probably haven't dealt with it. There's very little going on in Bedford in terms of LGBT, so there's nothing - I did actually think about starting an LGCM group here. Quite glad I haven't, 'cos now we're talking about what being an LGCM group means.

Interviewer: Because you're now back -

Cass Howes: I'm now back as a trustee of LGCM, yes. Having stepped down from that, I then decided I would offer, and the offer was accepted last year, to become a trustee again. So, I've kind of come back on the campaigning trail, which is interesting.

Interviewer: What would you say the differences – and I don't expect all of them, 'cos I'm imagining they are huge and many, but what would you say the differences are between LGCM when you were chair and LGCM now? And perhaps the similarities as well?

[0:46:53]

Cass Howes: It's still dealing with some of the same issues. They're still there. The issues have not gone away and – not increasing, but no, the issues are still there. I thought at first it was very different. I don't think it's so very different after all. I think there is an awful lot of work that a charity like LGCM could be doing, and there isn't enough time to do it, and so therefore you have to prioritise, and I think that's got to be the hardest bit of all. So therefore, because you have to prioritise as a board or even as a CEO, people get cross with you because you're not doing what they want. That's always been the case. I don't think – that's never not been the case. Same with Outcome, it's exactly the same, it's not been – if you're not moving fast enough for some people, they get cross and they get angry and say, "Why aren't you doing that?" And, "Have you to prioritise – decide what are the most important things to work on?" So, I think the LGBTI mission is one of the most important things, and I think, although it's directly aimed at the Church of England, I think it can be used ecumenically.

Interviewer: Can you just explain for anyone listening what you mean by the LGBTI mission?

Cass Howes: The LGBTI mission is something started by Stonewall, in order to bring about change in the Church of England, and there are nine priorities, and I can't remember them off the top of my head, but there are nine priorities to do with various issues facing LGBT people in the church. There's obviously some theology as part of the document that's been written. A lot of the stuff that's been produced – and it was launched at the beginning of LGBT month, February 2016. A lot of the stuff, I think and hope can be used ecumenically, because we are facing the same issues, although the Methodist church I think is in a different place, in that we do have ministers who are in civil partnerships. We do have ministers who have converted their civil partnerships to marriage, serving in this current circuit where we are now, so we are in a slightly different place, that – unlike the Church of England, who said you can't carry on doing stuff if you then converted to marriage, we've not done that, so we are in a different place, but some of the issues are the same. The issues over, can you have a naming ceremony or a baptism ceremony for somebody who's changed gender, that's an issue that we've got in common across our two denominations, certainly. People are asking for liturgies to be written for blessings and hopefully in the future marriages, so somebody's got to sit down and write those liturgies, because maybe the current ones don't do the job, and certainly of course they talk about procreation being the purpose of marriage. Well, we know (laughter) that that's not the case and hasn't been for a long time, and certainly isn't the case for some heterosexual couples. So yes, new liturgies need to be written and adopted and used.

Interviewer: What do you think the biggest challenge or one of the main challenges is going to be for charities and organisations like LGCM going forward?

Cass Howes: Surviving, I think (laughter). I think small charities, dependent on their members for their finance often, so therefore you've got to keep the membership up, and people have got to think that the charity or organisation is something worth joining and will offer them something. So, LGCM has to work out what its offer is and how it fulfils that offer. But it can't just be down to the person who runs the organisation or the trustees. You have to find a way of actually encouraging other people to be part of the

organisation and what can they offer. So, I think, for instance, one of the things, when I was chair, that was going on was there was Changing Attitude came into being, which is in the Church of England. Is it now time for LGCM and Changing Attitude to have a conversation about whether it should be one organisation? I'm not sure that is the answer, but the conversation - now is the right time to have the conversation. So, you've got all this falling away, all these groups falling away, is now the time to bring them back together because together we can actually do more and make more change? So, the same thing came up at the recent Outcome residential, what is our link with LGCM? Having broken away, the question is now being asked. Totally appropriate that it's being asked, as I say, because together you can do more.

Interviewer: Because you've come full circle almost.

[0:51:53]

Cass Howes: Yes, come full circle.

Interviewer: And are now back involved in Outcome as well.

Cass Howes: Yes.

Interviewer: And you mentioned recently to me about a conversation you'd had at the Outcome residential, someone you'd met from a former life. Are you happy to share?

Cass Howes: Trying to remember what that was now.

Interviewer: Someone was talking about the transformation in their life, having been -

Cass Howes: Oh yes, I mean, yes, and this is some of the work I did with Outcome. I would talk to people. But we had one residential in Manchester, where somebody who wasn't out in their church, a then elderly man looking after his elderly mother, came along to the meeting and I did the eucharist, and he was - every time he sees me, he will tell me how coming along to that meeting and meeting me changed his life forever. And that's lovely to hear that. You kind of think, "Gosh, what did I do?" But I mean, I can remember celebrating the eucharist. And somebody also wrote a poem for me on that day and sent it to me afterwards, so clearly God was working through me on that occasion. I mean, celebrating the eucharist is powerful enough in itself. And I've always been told I've got a sense of presence in that particular circumstance, but it's the way God channels through you and reaches out to people, and I'm sure - this isn't - the transformation actually wasn't down to me. It was down to God, but I was the means, and that's nice - it's good to think - to feel that God can use you in that kind of way.

Interviewer: Thank you. And you mentioned to me the other day about your experience as an interfaith practitioner. Can you tell me anything about that?

Cass Howes: Oh gosh (laughter). Yes, I mean, I've been an interfaith practitioner as long as I've been a chaplain and minister really.

Interviewer: And what does that mean to start with?

Cass Howes: What does that mean? (Laughter) It means that - you can tell how sensitive I am to this building (laughter).

Interviewer: Doors shutting.

Cass Howes: It means that I believe every faith has something to contribute, and that people have a right to follow the faith they're either born into or they want to follow. But it's about

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looking for the commonalities, the similarities, about the values that are common to all faiths, and working with those. So, I recently got a Community Cohesion Award from the local police for the work I do in the local communities here in Bedford.

Interviewer: Congratulations.

Cass Howes: And that was a total surprise, but that's because of the time and effort I put into working with faith communities. One of the issues there is obviously the topic of sexuality is quite a hot topic, so not necessarily out to all the communities I work with, 'cos it just would be counterproductive sometimes to introduce that into the conversation. Not that I'm not out, I'm just me, and people accept me for who I am. Somebody asked me outright the other night after an interfaith meeting, that was interesting. If somebody asks me outright, they'll get the answer. But it is now - I find now that faith communities are now wanting to look at the question, so we are trying to get a multifaith panel here to answer questions about sexuality and same sex sexualities, because people are becoming more open. They're realising - my Muslim neighbour, when I lived in Sheffield, when I had a female partner living with me, used to say, "Everybody has the right to a companion." And I used to think that was lovely. So yes, interfaith work is fascinating, interesting. You learn a lot about other faiths. You learn a lot about what you have in common. So, our next meeting that we're going to have with faith communities here is about the family, and I have talked to the group about, if we're going to be talking about family, we talk about family in all its different manifestations. So yes, I'm hoping I can get somebody to come in who's in a same sex relationship, who's got children, who will come in and talk about that, and talk about how that relates to their faith. That would be good. But there's much more openness to that now than I think there has been in the past. People realise that life isn't just (laughter) one set of norms.

[0:56:32]

Interviewer: Yeah, thank you. So, I suppose we're coming to the end of our interview. Is there anything you'd like to share about perhaps just reflecting on relationships with all of this? So, not necessarily romantic relationships, but relationships with yourself, with the church, with God and perhaps with others, is there anything you'd like to just pull into that from what you've said, or share anything extra from...?

Cass Howes: I think one of the things that happened here in the six years I've been here, there is - there used to be a Churches Together group for Bedford and that kind of fell apart, nothing to do with me, just fell apart (laughter). But there is still an e-distribution list, and somebody suddenly started some kind of conversation on this list about homosexuality, and I kind of watched the emails and I thought, "Ah, don't like this," and eventually I just said, "Look, can't have this here, sorry. Please do not do this here" (laughter). So in a sense, yes, people know exactly where I'm coming from, and people did stop spreading horrible emails around after that, thank goodness. But it was about, you know, needing to say something, because if somebody didn't say something, it would have just continued, and they were nasty emails about same sex relationships and stuff. So, people know where I'm coming from. They know I'm still a Methodist minister (laughter). So, I don't think... I don't have any untowardness - people aren't rude to me or anything, so I think they kind of accept me for who I am. They might just think, "Oh, she's a university chaplain so therefore she, you know, is a bit strange (laughter), a bit challenging."

Interviewer: And your relationship with God through all of this?

Cass Howes: Still there, I hope (laughter). I mean, for me, God is female, always has been, or more female than male, if you like, so I have a relationship with a goddess or a female god much more than with a male god, although I guess it's a bit of both. We have conversations. But they're not kind of, "Why did you make me like this?" kind of

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conversations. That's never been the case, because, yes, like the LGCM statement of conviction says, your sexuality is God given and I've always believed that. So, my god walks with me and I walk with my god. It is literally the conversation, the walk alongside the whole time. I'm very Celtic in that sense that God is always there. God accepts me as who I am, and if I'm going to venture out back into the campaigning, I expect God to be there holding my hand (laughter). That's where the resilience bit comes from. My resilience comes from that holding God's hand and God walking alongside me. So, I mean, you know, it is very much kind of a companionship thing rather than God up there and me down here. I've never seen that as walking alongside. And that's never been any different. God accepts me for who I am. Never had any problem with that (laughter).

Interviewer: Thank you. This was an interview with Cassandra Howes at the LGCM Christian Voices Coming Out project.

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