

## Oral History Interview: Phil Porter

Interviewee: Phil Porter

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

Date: June 26, 2012

Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It's June 26, 2013, and I'm here at the UCC National Gathering.

Phil P. I think it's only 2012.

Mark B. Thank you. Good start, Mark. Okay, this is June 26, 2012 and I'm here at the UCC National Gathering with Phil Porter. And Phil, thank you for taking the time to have a conversation with me. You might begin just by saying your name and spelling your name for the transcriber.

Phil P. My name is Phil Porter, P-H-I-L P-O-R-T-E-R.

Mark B. We're doing an oral history interview, and so I've just talked a bit with Phil about just beginning at the beginning of his life, his origins, where he came from, his family development and education, so where you would like to start and share, Phil, please proceed.

Phil P. Well, if we think of this in terms of kind of the two stories about faith and church involvement and then also being gay, probably the most important things to know about my upbringing are that I grew up in Bloomington, Indiana. I am the adult child of normal parents. And I was one of those people – I was born in 1953, so I was coming of age in kind of the time of

the sexual revolution, but the part of it that drifted into Bloomington, Indiana in the '70s.

That was a time when...I was on, I think, kind of a cusp. I think if I had been born five years later, the course my sexuality would have taken would have been different than the one that happened, so I was really growing up in a time where you kind of looked for the person that you were to marry, and you did that, and that's kind of what I did. I did get married to a woman and was married for a little over three years.

Later on in my life I was able to look back and see all the signs that I was gay, and at one level or another, I think I knew that throughout. But it was kind of like...and actually, I was just reminded of a word that got invented at one of the National Gatherings, and a group of people who were all describing a similar experience of like the signs going right over your head, and so we came up with this word, the "oblivoids." So it's just like these bits and pieces, but no one's there to kind of say, well, here's how these connect. And so many people, I've heard them say I really knew when I was six or seven or eight or whatever, but there was not really a context for that when I was growing up and where I was growing up.

Mark B. Your parents were?

Phil P. My father was in the administration in the School of Business at Indiana University. My mom would work part-time, but mostly she was a stay-at-home mom.

Mark B. Siblings?

Phil P. I have an older brother who's three years older than I am.

Mark B. Went to public schools in Bloomington?

Phil P. I did, yeah. My first year of college I went to Macalester College in St. Paul. I'd grown up in Bloomington, and I was born in Bloomington, spent my first whatever, 17, 18 years there, and had decided that I didn't... I was in a big high school, so I was looking for the smaller educational liberal arts sort of thing. And there were a group of schools that me and my friends all seemed to be looking at kind of at the same time, and Macalester was the one that came to the top of the list.

I was a really good student. I was like third in my class in high school. If *Time* magazine had an article on the best little boys in the world rather than the sexiest man alive, I probably would have been on one of those, at least on the list. I don't think I would have been on the cover, but I would have been perhaps on the list.

Mark B. You were pursuing a course of study at Macalester? You had something in mind, or...?

Phil P. Well, that's kind of a long story. Do you really want that story?

Mark B. The short version.

Phil P. The short version is that I was interested in joining the Teacher Corps, which is kind of like a Vista, Peace Corps program, but for education. Because I was interested in education, especially with younger kids, and especially the way that...well, I don't know if I was quite aware, at that point, that I was also interested in the way that creativity and education intersected. And one of the things about the Teacher Corps is that they didn't want people from education departments, so I kind of set out to study this area that I was interested in, but to avoid being in the education department.

And Macalester didn't really even...I don't remember how they were organized, but I ended up only spending one year there. I transferred back to IU. I kind of decided that I could find what I needed in Bloomington. Had my chance to kind of break away from Bloomington. The funny part, I think, about it is that part of the reason was, a little bit was financial, and I think the tuition at Macalester at that point was \$3,000 a year, and at IU it was \$1,000 a year. I mean, I look back at those numbers and I just kind of, oh my god.

Mark B. I went to Oberlin and it was like \$4,000, and was one of the most expensive schools in the country.

Phil P. Yeah, yeah. So anyway, I went back to IU and I ended up in the independent learning program, which was one of these places where you could devise your own major, which was perfect for me, and so I put

together a program in education and creativity. And so on one side I was doing child development, sociology, psychology, and on the other side I was doing art stuff. I was dancing, I was taking piano lessons, and I ended up in some classes in textile art, because I had kind of discovered that I was interested in textile art.

Mark B. When did the art stuff start? Elementary school, junior high school?

Phil P. This was another interesting thing. The path of figuring out that I was an artist was similar to the path of figuring out that I was gay. It was one of those things where I didn't quite fit in the categories. I wasn't really a painter or drawer sort of artist, but I did every craft thing that was around, from the time that I was young through whenever. And so I experimented with all sorts of stuff, and spent lots of time doing it, this craft thing and that craft thing, and this model building and that model building, and just anything.

So I was kind of aware of all that art stuff, and in high school I was in plays, and I played clarinet, and sang in choruses and did all that stuff. And that's really kind of where I discovered dancing, was in high school. Got drafted for the high school musical. I was in the chorus, and they drafted all the men to be in the ballroom scene in "My Fair Lady," so that was when I started dancing. And at Macalester I started taking modern dance. That was the first opportunity I kind of had. I knew nothing about that at that time, or very little about it.

And when I came back to IU, I kept dancing in the Phys. Ed. department. At IU they have dance in the Phys. Ed. department, and they have ballet in the School of Music, and the School of Music is huge at IU. I was in kind of the modern dance department, started doing a little performing. I don't think I was choreographing at that point, but doing kind of that art thing. And I think it was probably in high school or just...high school or college. I think I must have still been in high school when I started noticing that I was interested in textiles. For some reason I was attracted to the way that fiber and material worked.

The funny thing was that when I transferred back to IU – and my father was an administrator at IU, and one of his responsibilities was to be at registration. And so one of the things that he – and this was in the days where you would go into the fieldhouse and they would have all the classes kind of lined up, and you would get computer cards. You'd go around and you'd pull your cards. And when you got in was based on both your year in college and those sorts of things.

So one of the things that my father did, was a little bit of privilege, was that he went around and pulled cards for my brother and I. We were both at IU. And I was interested in getting into this textile studio class in the art department, and so my dad got me a card for that, which probably was actually pre-assigned to somebody else. I mean, that never happened, but the first time, when I went to the class, the professor said, "Oh, you've got No. 1," and that was all that happened, but I got myself into this studio

class, art textiles class. A guy named Budd Stalnaker. And so I took classes from him while I was still at IU, and then I kept doing...

When I finished my undergraduate degree, which I did in three years, I moved to Indianapolis. And actually, I think I moved to Indianapolis – I did an internship, which I think was my last semester at IU, and so I moved to Indianapolis to do this internship at a community center that was associated with the Methodist Church.

I grew up as a Methodist. Both my parents were church people. My father was like lay leader in that congregation forever, and I learned a lot from them about just kind of this...I learned steadfastness. That's what I learned from my parents. Not so much about spirituality or God connection or whatever, but they just taught me about showing up and being involved and being a part of that community. And that was a really important part of my religious upbringing. So...

Mark B. So you went to Indianapolis on the internship.

Phil P. I went to Indianapolis to do this internship, and I was engaged at the time. My fiancé was in nursing school—

Mark B. At IU?

Phil P. Yes, in Indianapolis, so that was one of the reasons I wanted to be up there, because she was up there. And so I was doing this internship, and then I graduated, and then she had a couple more years of nursing school.

And I can't remember exactly what happened to the Teacher Corps idea. I followed through on this plan of following this course of study without going through the education department, but at some point I decided that the Teacher Corps wasn't going to be the right thing to do. But I was able to get a job teaching elementary school in a Catholic school because they could have a certain number of teachers who weren't credentialed.

Mark B. Certified.

Phil P. Yeah, certified. And this would have been 1974 or '75, probably '74, and they were looking for men in the lower grades, and so I ended up teaching third grade for two years while my wife was in nursing school. And two things happened during that period of time. I started going to a Mennonite church. I had kind of stopped going to church while I was in college so much.

Macalester was a Presbyterian school, so there was a little bit of that.

Although one thing about Macalester, we had to have humanities classes.

There were very few requirements at Macalester at that point, but I took two religion classes to fulfill that requirement. And as I look back on that I think, oh, well, there's another little sign of something or other.

So I hadn't been going to church, but another guy who was also doing an internship at this community center was a Quaker, but he had found this Mennonite church, and so he took me there. And I really liked it. They were wonderful singers, and even though Mennonites have this no



dancing, no movies, no TV kind of...there are those elements in that tradition, this was a pretty urban congregation, a lot of people in helping professions, but a lot of professionals, so it was just the right combination of kind of...and strong peace, social justice emphasis, so this interesting commitment to community, to spiritual discernment, and also to fairly progressive political point of view, right alongside this conservative social stuff.

The second year I was there, my wife and I ended up becoming part of a...we bought a house with several other Mennonites in a downtown Indianapolis neighborhood, and so I was quite involved in the Mennonite church for a while.

Mark B. It was an intentional community sort of thing?

Phil P. It was. Yeah, it was.

Mark B. And you were there how long?

Phil P. A couple of years. Probably a year and a half by the time we bought the house and moved in, and then I left. When my wife finished her nursing degree, it was time for me to go back to graduate school, and to figure out whether I wanted to follow the education route or the art route. I'd been doing textile artwork for the two years after I graduated.

Mark B. Give me examples. When you say "textile artwork," you were...?

Phil P. Well, at that point I was – well, I was doing a variety of things, but I was doing a lot of fiber dyeing and weaving, and I was also doing some silkscreen printing. I was also doing quite a bit of batik and then sewing in a variety of ways.

Mark B. And in what setting? You were doing that independently or in a studio?

Phil P. Just on my own. I just worked at home and wasn't taking any classes or anything like that. But the other thing that happened at the Mennonite church was that the woman who was the song leader there, she was also the wife of the pastor, and she was also theatre director at Christian Theological Seminary, which is a Disciples seminary in Indianapolis. And she was really interested in worship and the arts, and that's where I started to kind of discover that thing.

And we started collaborating, and I choreographed my first liturgical dance at this Mennonite church. Oh, God, what a joke – what a God joke that was, that that would be the place I would do that. It was actually at a Mennonite music festival in Elkhart, Indiana. Who knew? And we did dance stuff, we did theatre things, we did mime things, we did visual art things, and that was really kind of my introduction or first clue that I was interested in this intersection between theology and art, in particular, worship and art.

Mark B. As you look back over that, how about your consciousness in terms of sexual orientation? How was that visible or invisible through those college and post college years?

Phil P. Well, I think through both...you know, in college I started to, especially in the dance communities, I started to intersect with a few gay people indirectly. It was just kind of sort of on the table, but not completely on the table. And I was either engaged or married at that point, so it wasn't...just kind of wasn't the choice. It wasn't a choice for me at that point.

But there were also things going on, again, these little hints of things happening during that time that I see now as clear indications. And I think it was going to be one of those things that it was going to come to fruition, so to speak, when it was time, and it wasn't time at that point. And so whatever information I was getting, it just wasn't... Either I was...suppressing it, for me, doesn't quite describe my experience. It really was more like I just...there wasn't even a construct so much that this might be something that I could do. I'm quite willing to confess to being in denial about that. *[Laughs.]*

Mark B. Okay. I understand. So you're doing the artwork, thinking about where to go next in terms of graduate school.

Phil P. Right. So Budd Stalnaker is in the hospital in Indianapolis.

Mark B. Can you spell the last name?

Phil P. S-T-A-L-N-A-K-E-R. The name is interesting to me because my mom's maiden name is Showalter, and this would have been another in that kind of whoever, wherever those people came from, it would have been another one of those. But he was in the hospital having back surgery, so I got all of my art stuff, all the stuff I'd been making, put it in a plastic garbage bag and went to the hospital. And I even remember he had shown me that he – someone had given him a pair of duck slippers.

But I literally visited him in the hospital. I dragged my stuff out and he said, "Well, if there's one thing you should do, you should go to UC Berkeley, University of California at Berkeley, and study with Ed Rossbach." And one of the other IU professors had been a graduate of UC Berkeley. And this was in March. I think I went to visit him in March.

Mark B. Do you remember the year?

Phil P. It would have been 1976. So this is March, '76, and he said you should just write to Ed Rossbach and see about going to graduate school. So I did, and Ed wrote back to me and said, "I'm sorry, I'm retiring, this is the last group of students I'm taking." It was past the application deadline. And that was kind of that. I took the letter back to Budd and he said, "Oh, this is great. He doesn't really say no, so you should write him again."

And so I said I'll come out at spring break, really interested in doing this. And he wrote back and said, "Well, I've talked to the graduate division. They'll take your application late. Just send your slides. You don't need to come out." And somewhere I still have that handwritten letter. I mean, it was a handwritten letter from this guy who really was about to finish his teaching career.

And so I applied, I got in, and that was like April, it would have been April or May, and in September I was in Berkeley. I'd been to San Francisco once just briefly on another trip, but I had to look up to see, "Oh, Berkeley. Oh, it's across the bay from San Francisco." That's how much I knew about where I was going.

Mark B. You were married yet?

Phil P. I was still married. She went with me. The other professor at IU who had studied with Ed said, "If you go to Berkeley and there's a gutted building and Ed Rossbach, it would be a worthwhile experience." That was how strong her recommendation was. And that ended up being true. So I moved to California. We moved. We drove.

Mark B. What was Rossbach particularly known for?

Phil P. Well, he was a textile artist. Actually, he was an expert in baskets, both traditional and contemporary baskets. Some of his work was in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He was... a character isn't quite

right, because then you think they're kind of loony, and he wasn't. He was very down to earth, but just this really kind of unique point of view. But he was an older guy. He taught for three more years until our class was done, but he was finishing up.

So when I went to California, just a number of things happened just in the move. One was I ended up in kind of gay Mecca. Within the first year or so, I think, my wife and I figured that I needed to just explore my sexuality. That's kind of the way we framed it. So we ended up kind of separating, and then that was just the time it was going to happen. So that happened.

Mark B. Anything a bigger click around that for you or it was just sort of a gradual opening up?

Phil P. It was that gradual thing. And I think I felt like, at that point in time, that there was a possibility that could happen without being a traumatic event for both of us. I'm sure for her it was really hard.

But the other thing that happened was just kind of coming into being an artist. And then the other thing that happened was that I ended up taking classes in...again in the Phys. Ed. department. At Berkeley they taught dance in the Phys. Ed. department and the theatre department. If you were serious, if you were a dance major, you'd take it in the theatre department, but if you were doing something else, you would just take classes in Phys. Ed. And they taught modern and jazz and ballet.

And the modern teacher there was really interested in choreographing and performing, and so she started organizing concerts – or maybe had been. I don't know where I came in, when I came in, how long she had been there. I'm not sure she'd been there very long. But she would organize these concerts, and she would choreograph, students would choreograph, and the people involved, a lot of them had quite a bit of dance training. But they were doing masters in archeology or doctorates or genetics or whatever, the strangest combination of students.

But because of what she did and because of our investment in it, there was this community of dancers, choreographers who developed, and it was just an amazing – I got excellent dance training. I was dancing two or three times a week. And this was kind of alongside the textile artwork. So I really feel like it was Berkeley where I feel like I both settled into my dance training as well as being a choreographer. And I also would make costumes. I would do textiles that I would incorporate into the pieces, some of the stuff I was doing, so there was also that little bit of intersection.

Mark B. So the school period is about how long, two years, three years? You were master's degree at Berkeley.

Phil P. Yeah, I was doing a master's and I was there for three years. Then the other thing that happened was that at that point Pacific School of Religion was really kind of a Mecca for theology and the arts, especially dance –

Doug Adams. I brought this kind of interest in theology and the arts, and I went to talk – I ended up joining First Congregational Church of Berkeley. Had no UCC connection, but...

Okay, here's another little story. Here's how I ended up at First Church Berkeley. The track coach at Indiana University was the father of – well, he was a friend, but his daughter was in my class, and he had just come from Berkeley. He was now leading the track program at IU. And when he found out that I was going to Berkeley, where he had been a track coach, he said, "Oh, you should look up one of my assistant coaches who still lives there." He was retired, but...

And we knew no one in the Bay Area, and so not too long after we got settled in, we got together with these folks. And my wife and I had been doing a little church shopping, and we talked about that. And Al – the guy's name was Al – and his wife said, "Well, you might want to try FCCB," First Congregational Church of Berkeley. And like I said, I knew nothing about FCCB or the UCC. And this would have been in probably '76, '77. And I also knew nothing about the little tiny steps that the UCC was making around gay issues.

Mark B. Yeah, Bill Johnson, that was all...right.

Phil P. That stuff had happened, but I didn't really know about it. So I didn't know that I was going to find a home in a church that was going to welcome me when I came out. I was still married at that point. But not



too long after I joined the church, my wife and I split up, and I stayed on at the church.

Mark B. Then you talked about connecting with PSR.

Phil P. Right. So I went to see Browne Barr, who was the pastor at FCCB when I first joined, and told him about that, and he said, “Well, you should go talk to Doug Adams at PSR.” And I said, “What’s PSR?” But I did end up going to talk to Doug, and I ended up signing up for class in Indian dance, which was really interesting. And Doug was organizing Sacred Dance Guild events and arts weeks at Pacific School of Religion, and I started to meet other people in the dance community there as well as just having a place to kind of explore that intersection.

And I ended up meeting a woman named Judith Rock, who became a collaborator. And she actually did a...at First Church they have a thing called the McCall Lecture, and one year they invited Judith to come, and this was the first time they invited an artist. And she came and she talked, but she also performed three pieces with two other dancers, so there were three of them. And that was where I kind of first saw her.

But we ended up connecting, and she invited me to be in a piece. And that was kind of the beginning of a company called Body and Soul Dance Company, which really, Judith started. But eventually, over a period of two or three years, it ended up being three of us, so me and Judith and my current colleague, Cynthia Winton-Henry. And that company was a

modern dance company, but with a commitment to using theological themes and images.

We didn't call it liturgical dance because the purpose was not to serve in the worship service, necessarily, although we danced in worship. We really wanted to create choreography that would work in church settings, but would also work in dance settings, and so that's really what we were doing. And that was a major kind of thing for me. And that company lasted for about ten years. And like I said, the last six or seven years it was just the three of us, so it became a very tight collaboration.

Mark B. Was that employment also?

Phil P. We made a little bit of money off of that, but mostly not. The other thing that happened to me in graduate school was that in the... The program that I was in was called the Program in Visual Design. And at that point they were doing textiles, graphic design and photography. And I ended up drifting into graphic design. And that's where I discovered that actually, probably at the root of everything, I was a graphic designer. I was really coming out of a design frame rather than an art frame. So that was really interesting. And so textiles had attracted me because they were such a graphic medium – a lot of color and shape, you know, it usually wasn't representational and that sort of thing.

So at the end of my work, I was really kind of straddled between textiles and graphic design, but I started working as a graphic designer, first in the

college bookstore at Cal, and I worked there for a little bit. But I first started looking for a full-time job in graphic design, because at that point I sort of thought... I think the career path I was imagining was probably teaching at the college level, and in my area a master's would be a terminal degree, but they would be looking for people with three to five years of experience. And so I thought, okay, I'll go out and get my three to five years of experience.

And I started looking for full-time design jobs, and I did that for a while, and I was working part-time at the bookstore, and I was doing a bunch of other things, and I decided I do not want a full-time job. I want to be able to continue with the textiles, I want to be able to continue with dancing, and I want to hold onto the theology and arts part, and I can do graphic design for myself, at least in part in that way. So Body and Soul made some money, I was working as a graphic designer, so I was kind of putting those pieces together, which I've ended up doing my whole life. In the art world, to get employment, you know, it sucks.

Mark B. That's the art world, yeah.

Phil P. In the spirit world, in the church world, getting employment, it sucks. If you're doing both those things, it's like sucks squared. So I've always had to kind of put together several pieces in terms of employment. But I decided to keep those threads, all those threads going.

Mark B. So then how did coming out play in the midst of all those threads?

Phil P. So my wife and I split up. I stayed at FCCB. But after a while I was kind of looking around, and I didn't really see many single people, let alone gay people. I mean, I definitely didn't see any gay people. They might have been around, but not obvious. And it wasn't really even obvious that there were...it turned out there were a number of parents of gay and lesbian people, which I didn't really know about. So after a while I stopped going, and I found that I was getting my support more from the gay community. But the part I noticed was—

Mark B. The gay community in San Francisco, in the East Bay?

Phil P. Mostly in the East Bay, yeah. Pacific Center was a major piece of that. I was going to drop-in groups there. Met my first kind of long-term partner there. But what I noticed was that as my sexuality was kind of released, so was my spirituality, and I realized that I really, I needed a spiritual community, that the gay community wasn't going to be enough for that. And so I decided, okay, I'm going to give First Church one chance. I'll go back on a Sunday. If I have a good experience, if it seems like it's going to be a good place, I will stay. If not, I'll find another place. That seemed only fair. So I went back and walked up to the church—

Mark B. Do you remember around when this was?

Phil P. Well, it would have been probably...it's still '77, '78. It had to be pretty early on in there. I think, actually, a bunch of these events happened fairly quickly, but I don't remember exactly. So I went back to the church,

walked up to it. Literally, before I got into the door, a woman who had joined at the same time as my wife and I came out and saw me and just gave me a big hug. And it was like, you know, what more sign do you need? A sign from God. So I thought, okay, you passed the test. And so I ended up going back to church.

Not long after that I met Mark Belletini, who was my first partner. And Mark was UU. He had just graduated from Starr King, so he was just finishing. And one of the experiences that I had moving to California was that I had some school friends, and I had some church friends, and I had some art friends, but they weren't intersecting. It was really hard to find that integration that really creates the sense of community.

And Mark was one of the first people who had some of those intersections – the sexuality part, and he was also very artistic, and also had the spirit piece. And I think that was one of the things that really drew us together. And when he graduated, he was working at a bank for a while, and then he got a job working as a...he got an interim position at San Francisco Unitarian Church as an associate minister, and then was later called to the Hayward UU Church as their minister. And Mark and I were together for 16, 17 years, and moved in together not too long after we met.

Mark B. Lived in Berkeley, Oakland?

Phil P. Lived in Oakland. When my wife and I first moved to California, it was in August, which was an awful time to find a place to live in Berkeley, so

we ended up in Oakland. And I pretty much lived – three months I lived in Berkeley in the whole time since I've been there. The rest of the time I've mostly lived in kind of North Oakland, or downtown Oakland, where I had easy access to Berkeley and the city.

Mark B. Got it. Yeah, good. So if you want to jump to...there are two things. More about the time at Berkeley. Were you just worshipping at the church?

Phil P. I was.

Mark B. How did you plug into the church? How did you participate?

Phil P. But I also – not too long after I joined, Browne Barr left and a guy named Dave Rees came to be the minister. And while Dave was there, I started doing a lay position in the arts. I think I was program associate for the arts. But it was all outside of worship. I had organized some art shows, and I can't remember what all I was doing, but it was a lay staff position. It was good kind of experimentation in all of that stuff, but it was a little bit... I think I was really interested in worship and didn't have much access to that in that position.

And then Dave left after about five years and a guy named Bill Gregory came in, and I was still in that position for a while when he was there.

And then – this would have been...again, I don't really know the dates, but there was a period of time... I started to meet more gay church people, and some other gay UCC people, and so I was... I don't

remember when Loey [Powell] was ordained, but I was starting to kind of know of her, if I didn't know her directly at that point.

Mark B. It was after she had been ordained?

Phil P. I don't remember. I remember these things being kind of part of my consciousness. But there was this period of time where a bunch of people were looking at questions of getting ordained and getting jobs. And folks were getting ordained, but then there were at least two experiences where people were chosen for positions and then they were voted out by the congregation. One of them was Jim Lowry and one of them was Wendy Taylor.

And again, I don't remember kind of the time of all this, because I think I was also meeting Coalition people, and I can tell you a little bit about how I got involved in that. But it was a challenging period. A lot of pain, because there was this sense of hope, because people were out, they were being out gay people, but there were just a number of points where people couldn't get jobs.

Mark B. Were you feeling some call to more professional ministry at that time?

Phil P. No. And that's another piece that I can get to at some point. And I also might mention that Mark Belletini was, if not the first openly gay person to be ordained in the UUA, he was almost the first. That's another little

story. But he was right up there. So this was also happening in the UUA as well, but he got jobs. He got a couple of jobs.

Mark B. You go to Coalition and your connection there...

Phil P. So I went to my first General Synod, and this morning we did a little bit of kind of retracing those. And I have gotten confused about the years and the places. But if what I'm reconstructing is correct, I went to my first General Synod as part of the UCC Fellowship in the Arts, and so I was very involved in that organization. And that's what took me to General Synod in Rochester, New York. There was an art exhibit that had been put together. There was a guy who was on national staff who kind of organized that, and he invited me to come and help with that.

So I went to Rochester and took part in some pre-Synod things, and then stayed on for Synod. And I'm pretty sure I at least saw Bill Johnson. That's what I remember. But I don't know whether I'm conflating that with the next General Synod. But I think even in Rochester I was vaguely aware that there was some gay stuff going on. I'm not positive.

But Pittsburgh, which would have been the next year, and I think...I thought that Rochester was '79, but I guess it was '81, and then Pittsburgh was '83. And for that General Synod, I had met Pat de Jong, who at that point was the campus minister at San Francisco State. But she was actually ordained at First Church Berkeley. I wasn't at her ordination, but I sort of knew of her. We started to intersect in some theology and art



circles, because at that point she was doing a lot of improvisation, a lot of theatre, street theatre. She had done a lot of street theatre.

And the best story about Pat and I meeting was that we were both at a conference at San Francisco Theological Seminary about theology and the arts, and someone had invited three or four of us to tell a little bit of our stories and do a little bit of our stuff. And so she had done one of these. I did one, she did one, and she talked about street theatre, did some of that stuff, and clowning and miming, and also talked about her experience of having CP, cerebral palsy, which had affected one of her legs. She's a really interesting person, and it was very moving and all that.

And so at lunchtime I just went up to her. I didn't really know her. I just said I really appreciated your presentation. And she grabbed a melon ball from the table that we were standing next to and she dropped it down my sweatshirt. That was our introduction. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. [*Laughs.*]

Phil P. I should have known. I should have run in the other direction. But I didn't, and that's a good thing, because she has played a major role in my life. So Pat and I became friends. I started taking theatre improvisation classes with her and we did some performing together and just became really good friends. And I think we must have hung out together a little bit. I think it was in Rochester that she and I were both at General Synod, and we hung out a little bit at the pool, at the hotel, and kind of bonded for

life. At that point I think we knew each other, but really started to become close.

And then at Pittsburgh, again, if my memory serves me right, one of the things that Pat and I were doing was that we offered to go into the hearings or plenary sessions and do a three-minute improvisation break, just a little thing, just kind of street stuff. So we would go in and we'd do a little bit of improv just to break up the... And some people would let us in and some people wouldn't, you know, blah-blah-blah. So we were messing around together and had kind of planned to do that at Pittsburgh.

And I think it was at that – and I was talking about this this morning – I think it was at that General Synod that on Sunday morning some of that crowd – and Loey and Pat were friends. I think I knew... I can't remember how well I knew Loey at that point, but she also took theatre improv with Pat, so we became close friends through that. But I don't remember how well I knew her at the time.

But anyway, some of the Coalition crowd was going to this church where Steve – what did they say his name was – Stephen Law, I think, who was out and was in a church. So we were going to go to visit his church, and Pat kind of dragged me along. I went willingly. But that was the first thing. And then I think the Coalition people must have been having a gathering, or had one, or whatever.

But anyway, there was going to be this pool party on Saturday afternoon with the sun. And so I went to that, and that's where I first kind of got connected. I think I met Bill. If I hadn't met Bill before, I met him there. I think I might have had a little bit of intersection with him, but that was really where I started to intersect with the Coalition. And then I started going to Gatherings pretty regularly.

Mark B. Do you remember some other folks at that party that you met then? Any of the names or faces come to mind?

Phil P. You know, I don't remember.

Mark B. It's been a long time.

Phil P. I have a feeling that there would be a bunch of people, if I saw the photo, there would be a bunch of people that I recognize, but I don't really remember. I remember Bill being there, and Loey, and Pat.

Mark B. You went to the first Gathering that was not at General Synod? They said that was in '82. You were at that?

Phil P. I have a feeling I must have been, because I think I went to most of them in that...like after that. I think I went to almost every one. But I just don't remember. If I had a location I could probably figure that out.

Mark B. And what kind of role in the Coalition? I'm not sure what all you did in terms of positions and things you did.

Phil P. My involvement in the Coalition has had kind of two big chunks. I don't know how many years it was, but I was going pretty regularly, and then I was elected to the Council, and then the second year I became moderator, and then I was moderator for six years. So I was on the board for seven years and I was moderator for six of those years.

Mark B. Do you remember approximately when that was?

Phil P. Well, we could probably figure it out because one of the things that we did early on, after I became moderator, is we hired Mitzi Eilts. So it was in the transition from Sam and...

Mark B. Jan.

Phil P. From Jan being the co-coordinators. One of the big structural shifts we made was to go to one leader and to try to pay them a little bit more. So the big thing that was happening during that period was that we were trying to create a little bit more staff institutionalizing, just to create more of a sense of continuity so that we knew if a volunteer, rather than a volunteer just dropping off and us not being able to pick it up, that we would have some wherewithal to hire someone to do the work.

So we were working on having an executive director at least part-time – although it was called national coordinator at that time – to have a communications person, young adult person and ONA person. Again, they were very part-time, but that was kind of what we were working on.

So I had a leadership role for a big chunk of time. And then when I went off the Council, I can't remember what my attendance pattern was, but it was spottier for a number of years. And then over the last four or five years I've come back a couple of times, and then was invited to be part of this leadership team, which has brought me back into the middle of things, so I feel like I'm starting kind of another phase, in another transition time.

Mark B. Yeah. Just maybe want to go back and focus more on the time when you were on the Council originally, you were moderator. You talked about the staffing thing. Other things that were going on at the Coalition at that time that you recall, other significant issues or concerns that were unfolding, being articulated? What's your recollection of the vitality of the Coalition at that time? What was driving it?

Phil P. Well, I think clearly the Open and Affirming movement was going, and we were really interested in having that continue. And like I said, we were trying to get some of the things that we thought were important, we still think are important, to get enough financial support so that we could hire people to do those, at least part-time. So the youth and young adult ministry was really important.

And there was always a lot, throughout this there was always a lot of conversation and activity around inclusiveness and racial questions, and trying to get more integration into the organization, which we've done...I'm not even sure how you evaluate how that's gone. But that is

kind of a constant question for us. But I feel like mostly we were working on these kind of structural issues, trying to get things stable and just built a little bit more so that we knew that we'd have some continuity.

Mark B. And some of your key colleagues from the Council were? Who do you remember as other key leaders?

Phil P. Gosh, who else was on the Council? That's a good question. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. If you think of it later, that's okay. So your term was up, you were tired out and left or you—

Phil P. Well, there was a term limit thing, but it also felt like time to go off that. And I don't remember so much about being involved – I mean, I've always been the sort of person that, I'm pretty much an introvert, so much more comfortable when I have an institutional role. But I also have ended up with a whole lot of experience in organizational development and strategy around that, and being able to manage conversations and decision-making about that, which I've been lucky. I mean, it's not kind of at the core of what I do, but it's something that I'm good at, and that's been able to play out in a number of ways, which is why I've got four jobs.

Mark B. You also were somewhat of a – I need the right word to say – spiritual leader, worship leader, artist with the Coalition, too.

Phil P. Right.

Mark B. I mean, you were sort of recognized in that position and often helped lead and create worship experiences.

Phil P. Yes.

Mark B. And that was particularly creative for you? How was that experience?

Phil P. Yeah, it was, yeah. But the main thing – and this is another little piece that I want to kind of loop back and pick up, was that there was a point in this period – we're back in Berkeley and looking kind of at the church affiliation. It was during this period where there was a fair amount of turmoil around gays and lesbians and their position in the church. I mean, at that point we really weren't looking at the bi and the trans part as carefully.

And a group of people had started meeting, a group of gay and lesbian people, to create a church, which became Peace United Church of Christ. And I was invited – Loey Powell was going to be installed as their first...I think they called it coordinator of ministries. They weren't even really quite ready to say they wanted a minister, but she was being hired and being installed, and I was invited to come and take part in that.

Mark B. Was this in East Bay?

Phil P. It was. Yeah, it actually met at Plymouth UCC, which is in Oakland.

Mark B. And this is late '70s yet?

Phil P. No. This probably would have been in the '80s.

Mark B. Ok. Ok. We can look that up.

Phil P. Yeah. Actually, it would have been... It was probably about '84, actually, because I was there for all of Dave Rees' time, which is about five years, and just adding that up. And for a period of probably seven or eight years I was part of Peace Church.

So here's what happened. I went to the installation, and after worship I was talking to the woman who was the moderator, and she said one of the things we're doing right now – up to that point a couple of people would take responsibility for worship each week, and something slightly different would happen. It was kind of up to whoever was leading. And she said one of the things we're working on is we're thinking about trying to create kind of our own liturgy, so something a little bit more regular.

And all the light bulbs went off in my mind about worship and being in on the ground of creating liturgy, and I decided – well, I knew at that point I needed to decide whether I wanted to stay at First Church or go to Peace Church. And kind of the tradeoff for me was that I knew that if I went to Peace Church it would be a more homogenous group, with mostly gay and lesbian people, and that I would miss the diversity of First Church in terms of age and families and all of that stuff. But I did decide to do that, because I had also had the experience of the National Gathering and how powerful it was to worship with a group of gay people.



So I started going there. I ended up being the chair of the worship planning team and preached, and designed worship, and did visual stuff, and started composing things. And that's when I made up the gathering chant. That was for that congregation.

Mark B. We just sang that in Kansas City. Cliff used it in the jazz service. He used a jazz accompaniment to the tune, so it was fun.

Phil P. Oh, that would be fun. I'd like to hear that. So I got this – and at First Church I hadn't really been able to kind of make my way into the worship service, so at Peace Church I was right in the middle of all of it. And so I got seven or eight great years of just experimentation and training in how to incorporate arts stuff into worship, and so I experimented with all sorts of things. It was really fun.

Mark B. Wonderful.

Phil P. And then Peace Church ended in a little church explosion, so it ended. And so I was without a church again. And I had kept my associate member status at First Berkeley. I wasn't sure I wanted to go back there, but I did start going back to visit. And they were in an interim at that point. They were also doing a sexuality series in anticipation of Open and Affirming, doing an Open and Affirming thing, and so I thought, oh, that's interesting. And I ended up going to a men's group, and I was really impressed with how open the men were. So I kept going.

And then, because I knew they were in a search, I started to hear that Pat de Jong was on the list. And I was hearing it from her because she and I were still in touch. She had gone to New York, but I had stayed in touch with her in New York. And then she went to Iowa. I stayed in touch with her while [she] was there. Actually, one of the things we often quote about our relationship is that for Pat I've made a clown costume and a minister's robe and a wedding dress. [*Laughs.*]

Mark B. [*Laughs.*] Wonderful, wonderful.

Phil P. I would visit her in New York and we would do stuff, and visit her in Iowa. And then she started being considered for this position. They had asked for people to put in names, and I had put her name in and someone else had put her name in, but it started rising on the list. And of course I was hearing this from her because the committee couldn't talk about it. But pretty soon she was one of ten, and then one of three, and then she came out for an interview. And I think she stayed with me and my partner while she was interviewing at that point. And then she was chosen, and that kind of sealed the deal for me for going back there.

And then over – really, I think it really probably started in the first year or so that she was there, we started cooking up a kind of artist in residence position. It was very part-time, very little, tiny thing. But in 1994 I did the first kind of doing up of the sanctuary for Advent. So before, it was a little here, a little there, but I came in and – you have a tree here and a tree

there, and four banners, and the whole thing. So that was the beginning of doing that stuff.

Mark B. So most of what you've done has been visual arts? Have you done some music there, too?

Phil P. I do. I do about everything. I mean, we have a music person, a choir director, so I don't have primary responsibility for that, but I just kind of bring to bear whatever artistic gifts are needed, so I've done a variety of things. But I do large-scale installations in the sanctuary, big painted banners, mostly, but some other three-dimensional sorts of things, and it's been fascinating.

Mark B. Good, good.

Phil P. But anyway, there was Pat de Jong again back in my life. One more little story that has to go back. Body and Soul Dance Company, we would travel around, and Pat invited us to come to Riverside when she was at Riverside Church. And so we came to do...I think we did two or three things. We danced in worship and we did an adult ed thing before church. And I remember it was based on – I think Carol Christ does a book called *Diving Deep*. It was either called *Diving Deep* or *Diving Deep & Surfacing*, or something like that. But we were going to talk about that a little bit and then talk about our work, and I think we might have danced a little bit, I don't remember what.

But I just realized there was something – for some reason the issue of integrity, it was like this thing about integrity and being true to yourself. And I realized, oh, I need to come out, or I might need to do that in the process of talking about who I am and what I was doing. And so I did. And it turned out – I didn't know this till later – but it turned out that it created a little kerfuffle or firestorm, depending on how dramatic you are.

Mark B. This was at this adult education event at Riverside?

Phil P. Yeah. And this all happened at – and the issue was that there were kids, teenagers, I think, there. And part of that whatever it was, however you describe it, disagreement or controversy, was one of the things that fueled the Open and Affirming process at the church. I mean, there were other things, but evidently the fact that I did that, which I thought, at that particular point in my life, wasn't a huge thing, but it was, clearly in that setting, it was a deal. So anyway, that's a little story.

Mark B. Good, good. And if you would talk a bit about connecting with Cynthia and beginning InterPlay and how that unfolded, if you could tell a little bit about that.

Phil P. Yeah. Cynthia was invited into Body and Soul Dance Company not too long after I was. Body and Soul Dance Company had been kind of run as a collective. Remember those days?

Mark B. Yes. *[Laughs.]*

Phil P. Remember collectives?

Mark B. It's so California, but still.

Phil P. [*Laughs.*] And so we were kind of...you know, all the people who were dancing. Because that was the original agreement. The three people who were first part of it, Judith and these two others who had danced at First Church, that was kind of the agreement – we'll each choreograph, we'll be in each other's pieces. And so decisions were kind of made together. Almost anyone could choreograph and people would be in each other's pieces.

But Judith was doing a piece with some more people, and I got invited to be a part of that piece. And then not too long after that she redesigned the piece a little bit and invited a couple of new people in who hadn't been in it before, and Cynthia was one of those. And Cynthia came into the company about the time that we were deciding that the collective structure wasn't working very well. Judith was always choreographing pieces with thousands of people in them, and so suddenly we had a dozen, ten, whatever, eight – it doesn't really matter. It was too many. And as people kind of drifted away, we didn't replace them in the decision-making process. So eventually it was just Judith and I. And actually, Cynthia was in for a while, and then she left to go to the Northwest to do an internship.

And over a period of time – and again, it probably wasn't very long – it ended up just [Judith] and I and one other dancer who, at that point, wasn't

dancing a lot because she was having physical problems. But we decided that the next step we wanted to take was just to stay small, because we wanted to be able to move easily, travel easily, and you just couldn't do that with nine people. So Judith kind of agreed not to do giant pieces, mostly, and Judith and I started to teach. We had a couple of trio pieces, and we started teaching the third part to another dancer that we had worked with, and did that for a while.

And at about that time, Cynthia came back to the Bay Area, and we realized, oh, Cynthia is supposed to be the third person in this. And so it wasn't the most comfortable thing. We kind of eased this other woman out and we eased Cynthia in. And that was when this trio really kind of settled into place. So Cynthia, Judith and I, for six or seven years, traveled together, and performed, and choreographed. And it was an incredible experience. Got to travel quite a bit, danced in a variety of situations, mostly church-related, because that was the work we were doing, kind of making that intersection. But also we would do concerts in the theatres in San Francisco and in the East Bay.

In about 1989, I think it was – so Body and Soul went from '79 to '89 – in 1989, Judith's husband got a job – Jay Rock worked for the Presbyterian Church doing interfaith work, and he got a job in New York City, so Judith was going to move to New York. And for a while we kept Body and Soul going. We sometimes...like we would be performing in Kansas

City and we'd all end up there. But the distance eventually...you know, it was impossible to create new stuff, so we were doing old stuff.

And then Cynthia kind of went off to do a church job. She was a Pacific School of Religion graduate and had been doing some other sorts of things, but then she and her husband got a co-pastorate in a job in the Bay Area, and so she went off. So Judith left, Cynthia went off, about that time Pat went to New York, and she and I had still been collaborating. Elaine Kirkland, who I had composed music with, had gone off to New York, so suddenly I was without collaborators for a time.

But not too long after that, I started kind of stalking Cynthia. I just knew that I wanted to be at least accompanying her in whatever she was doing, because I think it was important for her to find her own voice. So we just kind of hung out. She was teaching at PSR, and I would come to PSR. And eventually we decided to start working together again more directly.

We decided we wanted to focus on improvisation as the deal. Body and Soul was already doing a lot of kind of intersection between dance and theatre. There was a lot of story, very character-based. And Cynthia and I decided we wanted to include voice. And we also eventually made a decision to kind of move our stuff gently out of just the church settings. We still have a strong kind of spirit, faith thing going on. A lot of the people in our circles are church people, but we wanted to kind of open that up.

And so we started developing this technique. We had been using some things in our... We discovered that improvisation was a really good teaching technique for mixed groups of people, and that's often the case. We would go in a church, do a performance, do a workshop, dance in worship, and in the workshops we were dealing with some people who had danced a lot and some people who hadn't danced at all. If you're improvising, and you're using your own kind of skill level and ability, a lot of people can do that at the same time, rather than teaching a specific technique. So we had already started to look at that question, and we decided we wanted to focus on that, so slowly started to build this.

And somehow Cynthia and I sort of knew that we were going to do a big thing, that it wasn't just going to be like... We were little empire builders. So we knew it was a longer-term, bigger development, and just kind of incrementally took that step. This fall it will be 23 years. Cynthia and I have collaborated for over 30. It will be 33 years in the fall, which is kind of amazing to me to have this relationship with another person that I'm not married to.

Mark B. I actually saw you – I couldn't figure out when – 20 years ago, maybe 15 years ago. I happened to be in San Francisco for a meeting and all these InterPlay folks from around the country were coming, and you were doing a big performance.

Phil P. Oh, right, right.



Mark B. Was it Fort Mason, perhaps?

Phil P. Yes, it was.

Mark B. It was at Fort Mason.

Phil P. “The Unbelievable Beauty of Being Human.”

Mark B. And I just happened to be in town with a pastor friend.

Phil P. Oh, my gosh.

Mark B. So Bonnie and I came and saw that that night. Our friend Jane was there to be in that.

Phil P. Oh, right.

Mark B. So yeah, so that was one of my experiences of the bigness of what you were doing with InterPlay.

Phil P. Jane Siarny.

Mark B. Jane Siarny, yeah.

Phil P. So you knew her before?

Mark B. Yeah, we were in the same local church. Bonnie Beckonchrist was the pastor of Holy Covenant United Methodist Church in Chicago, and Jane and her family were members there, so all these connections come up.

Phil P. Oh, there you go. That's fun. Yeah, that was a model. That was the first time we did it. But then we did that another eight or nine times in different cities. Kind of the model was we would bring part of our company, which was called Wing It Performance Ensemble, and then we would invite other InterPlayers to come in for a week and kind of do what we call intensives to work on some forms, and also local people who might have been taking a longer class, so we might do several weeks with those folks. And would come together and improvise, do improvised performances. And yeah, we did that a number of places, including Australia. We took a bunch of people to Sydney to do it.

Mark B. There was a question earlier, and I can't remember if you've covered this, about whether you had a call to professional ministry—

Phil P. Oh, that's a good question, yeah.

Mark B. —and how that played out and how you wanted to talk about that.

Phil P. I mean, it was clear, you know, again, probably if you looked back. I mean, I think if you asked my high school friends or whatever, they would say, oh, I'm not surprised at all you ended up in church leadership, blah-blah-blah. What do they know? Ah!

But the point at which it became clear to me that I needed to make a decision about whether I was going to follow that path and go to seminary, I looked around in the field of theology and the arts and I saw lots of

theologians, and I didn't see that many artists that I really respected as artists. I mean, that sounds kind of arrogant, but it was just the truth. There was more of an emphasis on the theology side than there was on the arts side.

And at that point, I was doing the art stuff, and I was doing the technical stuff, and I was dancing, and blah-blah-blah. I had chosen – which, from an artistic point of view, may not have been the best...is not the choice that most people made to not focus, but to continue to move several bodies of work forward at once, I decided I do not need another area of expertise. I had pretty much been claiming my ability to preach and theologize as a layperson, and I thought, I'm just going to keep doing that.

Now, about...oh, it's been a number of years. It may be ten or 11 years ago, I'd been working at First Church pretty much since Pat was called there. I mean, now it's probably been 16 or 17 years that we've both been there – her a little bit longer, on staff. But there was a point at which it made some sense – since this position had sort of been developed by she and I, there was a point at which it made sense for the congregation to do some claiming of the position of my work, and it also made some sense to me, at that point, to pursue commission ministry, because I definitely was using all this stuff in a ministerial context, and that was one way to do it.

So I didn't go to seminary, but eventually I did decide to pursue commission ministry, so I went through that whole process, both with the

church and with the association, the conference. And I think it was a good thing to do. I still am kind of a hybrid. As a commission minister in the UCC, you're still a layperson, you're not clergy. But I pretty much do everything. And I feel like that is just another little step. And it did give the church a chance to say yes, we embrace this and support it.

And the other thing that happened with my job at church was that I had done, at various times, I had done graphic design and stuff for the church, a little bit of advertising stuff, but six or seven years ago – it might even be more by now – there was a little shakeup in the staff, and there was an opportunity to create a communications piece. And we had needed someone to be focusing on communications, and so I took that on as another chunk of work.

So I went from being the minister of liturgical arts to being the minister of art and communication. So I was still doing all the worship and art stuff, but I was also doing communications. So website, advertising, working with the people who did the newsletter. And now we're really working on some major communication pieces for the church, so that's been interesting. So that draws on kind of the other side of the graphic design.

Mark B. You mentioned the association, conference. Have you had official positions or connections in association, conference or the national UCC?

Phil P. Well, early on, with Fellowship in the Arts, I was doing a lot of conference stuff, but mostly it had to do with doing various things at the

annual meeting – so leading worship or dancing or creating visual design, whatever that might be. I've not served on any committees or boards at the conference or association level. But then I started getting involved on the national level. And this happened mostly through the Coalition. I ended up being appointed to Local Church Ministries Board.

Mark B. When was that, roughly? Eighties, '90s?

Phil P. It would have been in the '90s.

Mark B. Okay, so you served a term on the Local Church Ministries Board.

Phil P. Yeah, at least one. And then I was elected from Local Church Ministries to serve on Executive Council. And I've done several kind of community-building pieces at General Synod, so was again some visibility there. At the Hartford General Synod, which was just a few years ago, worked with another – Valerie Tutson, who's another storyteller, and then a couple of musicians. We were kind of the primary hosts, MCs on the main stage during the Hartford one, which was the big 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which was really cool.

Mark B. Yes, yeah, good.

Phil P. And my big claim to fame – I almost told this story last night – my big claim to fame at that was that I was the guy who introduced the guy who introduced the guy on video who was going to introduce the guy who was going to speak. And the guy that I introduced was John Thomas, and the

guy that he introduced on video was...I'm blanking on his name. The guy at Trinity, Jeremiah.

Mark B. Jeremiah Wright.

Phil P. Jeremiah Wright, who was introducing Barack Obama. And actually, there was a water bottle that they put down at the bottom of the podium for Barack, who was not present at that point, and a couple of days later I noticed, oh, that bottle of water is still there, so I grabbed the bottle of water and I took it home with me. It's part of my Barack Obama shrine. He didn't drink it or anything, but it was right there at his feet.

So anyway, so national stuff. I also served on the second and third restructuring teams for the denomination. And that was a fascinating process. Really enjoyed that. It was hard, but it was really good.

Mark B. A couple observations about what you saw happening then?

Phil P. Well, I had heard people describe the experience of the first one as being transformational. People were having those kinds of experiences, things breaking open. And I had that experience with the second one, and it felt like there were some really important conversations that happened, mostly around representation and who's at the table and how we do that, and needing to do that in a different way, letting alone the questions of size of the board and trying to get some more unity and all of that. And just

really honest and open conversations, sometimes hard ones, but really good.

And when the second one didn't quite go through, I was then appointed to the third one, and I came in thinking, okay, I'm going to have to come in here and hold my ground on the progress that we made in the second so we don't slip back. And the first night the ideas that people were putting on the table were going even further. So it was like almost in a minute I had to switch my point of view and my attitude toward it.

Mark B. When you say "going further," what do you mean?

Phil P. Well, it was like there were questions about the number of people on the board. We had been trying to pare it back so there wouldn't be like a million people. And actually, the proposal that eventually came out and that were ratified was to have an even smaller board, to look even more carefully at the question of who had spots at the table and how those got appointed. So it just felt like it was even more manageable in terms of size and more in line with the way that people should be getting on, and just more unity and more a sense of a single vision rather than these silos of power and influence. And that was really fun.

Mark B. And your time on the Executive Council, were there particular issues or concerns that were being grappled with at the Council at that time?

Phil P. No, I don't remember anything in particular. There were always kind of financial deals. I think there was a period of time where there's been more coordination. It's like the restructuring that happened around the turn of the millennium, that took us to a certain point. And then it feels to me like over the last ten years or so we've been taking the next step. It's like taking these disparate elements. They pull them together this far the first time and then in this phase we've pulled them together a little bit closer together, and I think that's all a good thing. But part of it has been financial, too. It's just not having the resources to maintain a larger structure.

Mark B. I was curious, too, not being within the UCC, how did you come to be on the Council? I mean, obviously you're on Local Church Ministries. Did you get there because of your Coalition connections, or it came otherwise from who you were and your other arts work? Do you have a sense of that?

Phil P. I think a lot of it was the Coalition connection. I think I was often the gay—I was one of the gay people.

Mark B. That's what I was wondering, okay.

Phil P. Although, you know, especially on the restructuring committees, there were a bunch of us. But I was...again, no one's kind of said, well, will you be the gay representative, but... And I also served on—



Mark B. Did you feel like that happened sometimes? Did people turn to you on particular issues if there was a question about gay things, or you didn't feel that?

Phil P. Mostly I didn't feel like I needed to do that. As a matter of fact, there were a couple of times when I was advocating for slightly... Like here's one of the things that happened for me in the restructuring stuff. We have what they call historically underrepresented groups, and the Coalition is one of those. The racial groups are one, the youth and young adults, disabilities ministries. And there's a whole big story around that part.

But one of the things I did is I looked around and thought, well, what are the signs that GLBT people do or don't have power in the UCC? We have people on all the boards, we have people on national staff, we have people in conference positions, we have people in local churches. We're kind of all over the place, pretty much. We have access. If there's an issue or concern, we have people that we can go to.

So at times I was kind of saying we're pretty represented. People are holding our issues. The gay people don't have to kind of stand up and do that, mostly, to raise our issues. Perhaps some of the newer ones. And so it was rare that I had to kind of speak as a gay person specifically.

Mark B. Good. Okay.

Phil P. Although I do think that that definitely informed my point of view about a lot of things. I mean, obviously, when you've dealt with those issues of representation and whether your voice is going to be heard, you're sensitive to other ones, I would hope.

Mark B. I know we've gone on for a while, thank you. But maybe just a little bit wrap up with Coalition stuff. You had the period you were moderator of the council, you went off for a while. Did your feelings toward the Coalition shift at that time? You just were otherwise involved so you didn't go to the Gatherings as often? Was there something happening that sort of...?

Phil P. Yeah.

Mark B. And then we'll get to you're asked then to come back on. So that middle period, what was that like?

Phil P. I think some of it was circumstantial. I mean, when I first started in the Coalition, the situation really was that in the church you had to go to the national level to find enough people around to have a crowd. And as time went on, it was much easier to find. I mean, in my church now, we're on the staff, you know, blah-blah-blah, we're all over the place, and so I'm not really looking for that support.

Mark B. So not the same incentive to go to National Gatherings?

Phil P. Right, right. And they got bigger and a little bit more kind of structural. And also, because I didn't usually have a direct role, I was more of an observer, and that just wasn't quite as interesting to me. But I think there were probably other times where I just wasn't able to go because I had other – summer is often a big work time for me with InterPlay stuff. I was still going to most General Synods, and so I think I was usually trying to connect with the Coalition at least part of that time. And so I stayed in touch, and definitely with...

I was on the search committee that called Ruth Garwood, and she and I are also InterPlay friends, and so I stayed in touch with her through that period of time. And then that ended badly. And that happened at a General Synod, and I was at that General Synod. And that was a mess. That was just a big mess. And things kind of went downhill from there, in my opinion. It was just a real kind of leadership vacuum.

Mark B. So then you're asked to be part of this whole reorganization.

Phil P. Yeah.

Mark B. How did that come about? Do you have a sense of who asked you, why you were asked to be part of that?

Phil P. Well, I was asked by Mike Schuenemeyer, and I think... When Ruth was essentially fired by the board at General Synod, there was just a lot of kind of stuff happening. First of all, to do that at General Synod, that wasn't a

very good idea, because we were all around. You know, otherwise we'd have been all over the place, no one would have done anything. But a number of us were just concerned – more than concerned, probably, and so there were meetings, and this and that, and I played a central role in that. Which, you know, I'm not sure it really went very far, but..

And then, after that, I chose to – like I would show up on the board calls, on the Coalition board calls for a little while, because someone had to kind of see what they were doing. So I attended three or four of those on the phone, just as an observer.

Mark B. And those were open to anybody who would choose to participate?

Phil P. They were, yeah. Yeah, at least to listen in. And they were having a lot of...it was a struggle, with people with different points of view and... And I can't remember when I stopped doing that. That didn't go on for very long. I did that for a little bit. But still kind of stayed in touch.

And I remember one – there was one conference phone call when they were choosing – Andy Lang had come on. There had been a couple of other interim directors, at least one, but Andy had come in as the interim executive director, and then the board chose to nominate him as the full-time person, and there was a conference phone call to take that vote, and so I participated in that.

And again, I don't remember all the time, but I think about March of last year I got a call from Mike saying that it looked like the Coalition might have to go into hibernation for a little while because the finances were so bad. And he was developing – or someone, he and I think others were developing this idea of a sabbatical where the Coalition would just pull back and take a good look around and pare back, and blah-blah-blah. And he was looking for a group of people who might provide a little bit of vision around that, or the board was kind of struggling, at that point.

And I think he had, before he even started putting this out, the board had agreed – and again, I don't remember the sequence – but the board had agreed that they would step aside if that was needed, if something more radical, a radical change was needed. So whoever pulled the group of people, and I think Mike was kind of one of the major players in that, but I don't know whom else. But he was the one who called me. And we had a conversation, an initial conversation just about kind of where the Coalition was, and this idea of a sabbatical.

And then later he called back to see if I'd be part of a visioning – I think it was called a visioning team, something like that. And I was intrigued by that, partly because of the other people. I think he had asked some folks that he thought would be both representative, but also would create a sense of confidence in the community, and also some people like me who had some history of where things had been. And that was interesting. And

I'm always interested by groups and the way they form and need to be re-formed, and structure, and I'm also good at that, and so got involved.

Mark B. It's interesting, the combination of the artist and the sort of organizational person. Those are different parts of yourself, are they integrated? How do you talk about...there just seem to be some differences between the creative, artistic part and the sort of managerial part, but you have played both of those roles a lot over the years.

Phil P. I have, yeah.

Mark B. Is that just who you are? Do different parts of you get nurtured by different parts of that?

Phil P. I think ultimately they're related at kind of a lower level. It probably has to do with structure and form. For me, the basic way for me to articulate the connection between theology and the arts is not about content. It's not about songs about Jesus or pictures of Jesus or whatever religious content. It's about the fact that as religious or spiritual or theological artists, we're working with the basic building blocks of creation. So it's color, and movement, and shape, and line and form and space. Those are the basic elements that God used to create the world, or the tools that he gave the rest of us to mess with to make things. And so I think for me kind of the forming thing, how you make things, is probably the thing that connects all of those.

I think also, from when I look around, somehow both sides of my brain were working, and they seem to be working together pretty well. And I don't take any special credit for that, but I do feel particularly grateful that I've ended up in situations where I've gotten to use all those. At church, for example, I'm often on – I'm on long-range planning, I sit with the church council. I've often been in situations where we're looking at longer-term vision and planning, and helping – a couple of times I've played small and large roles in just helping get people to kind of come together to create a bigger thing. So I'm really grateful that I've ended up in spots where I can do that. And the Coalition has been a huge thing, not just to affirm my sexuality, but affirm my artistry, and affirm my organizational ability. It's been huge.

Mark B. Good, good, good. We've talked a long time. Thank you for spending all this time. But we're here for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Coalition, so let's sort of wrap up. You've obviously been thinking about this, getting ready to come here, so I don't know whether... You started to allude – are there some things you want to say about the role the Coalition has played in your life over the last 30 years or so, and/or what you think you've brought to the Coalition that has made that? Any kind of closing reflections, observations, stories you'd like to sort of leave with, as you look just more broadly about Coalition, its history, how you've played roles in that, how it's nurtured and sustained you, and how you've given back?

Phil P. It's a huge thing in terms of affirmation and finding matches in terms of the way that people were leading. Other leaders, I think that was another thing I was looking for, people who were kind of playing at that level.

Mark B. There have been some very gifted people on the Coalition leadership.

Phil P. Yeah. And to be able to collaborate with them and to get to know them.

Mark B. Do you want to name people? Some particular people whom you've found have been significant for you in terms of your recollection of people you've collaborated with?

Phil P. Most of the people that come to mind are people who also play leadership roles, so people like Ann B. Day, and Donna Enberg, and Mitzi Eilts. For some reason, Bentley de Bardelaben's face just came to me. And then there are people who I can picture, but can't necessarily name. There are lots. Margarita Suarez, and Bill, and Loey, and Diane Darling, and Elaine Kirkland. There are like a million of them.

Mark B. I'm sorry, I distracted you from the more general thinking about just the gift of the Coalition.

Phil P. I think it's that wonderful intersection of giving and receiving. I feel like I've been recognized for who I am in kind of my fullness, and also in an integrated way, so it's like all the parts of me get to work, and I feel like that's been seen. And I also feel like I've been able to give that to the organization, so it's been very mutual.



It's interesting, when the shift was happening – I mean, last year at this time the National Gathering was voting to make two big changes. One was to call this leadership team in and to actually have the other board resign, and also to make this bylaw shift where the board was actually going to have decision-making power rather than that being invested in the members, the people at National Gathering. That's a big shift.

And I saw on Facebook some conversation about it, and one person said – one person who I've attended a lot of National Gatherings with, and at that point... The leadership team is quite collaborative. Some of us have taken on roles because we need that for the nonprofit organization. So I'm moderator, and I play some of that role, but we're sharing that responsibility. But I remember someone commenting, well, how can you figure out the new thing when you've got some of the same old people in there? And old not necessarily in age, although we are that, I am that, too.

And I took it personally. I don't know whether he was actually talking about me, but it was just so interesting to reflect on that because part of what I do is to look at what's happening right now, whether I'm looking at people in organizations or I'm looking at the materials, I've got to make something, or what's needed for liturgy or whatever, and to figure out the new thing that's supposed to happen for that.

And so I'm just excited about what's going to come next, and this opportunity to do a new shape. And I'm ready for that, even though as

part of, you know, very much part of the structure that's come up. I'm ready for whatever needs to happen, and I'm hoping it will look quite a bit different than what it is now, so it's exciting.

Mark B. Good, good, good. Anything else? Thank you for your time. Another story, comment? You've given a lot here. Thank you.

Phil P. Yeah. I think we hit the high spots.

Mark B. Good. I think we did very well.

Phil P. But I do think there are – we were talking about this at lunch, this idea of the long arcs of stories. Sometimes we have these short arcs, like I'll do something for five or seven years, or two years or whatever. And I've ended up with a couple of long arcs, and the Coalition is a long arc, and First Congregational Church of Berkeley is a long arc.

Mark B. Those are the two long arcs in your life.

Phil P. I refer to them as arcs of providence. What got me to First Church and into the UCC? You know, this track coach. You know, who knew?

Mark B. Who knew, exactly. Good, good. Thank you.

Phil P. You're welcome. Thank you.

*[End of recording.]*