

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: I just want to begin by asking you about your childhood, your mum, dad, siblings, just basic details about your early years.

Respondent: I was born in Sri Lanka, as I mentioned, or Ceylon as it then was, but came to England when I was two years old with my parents and older sister and brother. My parents had both been teachers at one time or another but for most of the time that I remember, my father was a journalist, my mother a teacher. We settled in London, and that's really been my home city for most of my life.

Interviewer: Okay. Continuation of recording as we have moved seats owing to noise. Savi, you were talking about that you moved over from Sri Lanka to London and started talking about your parents.

Respondent: Yes. My parents were both Christians, committed Anglicans, and I became involved in the church as a young child. Obviously, my understanding of Christianity has developed considerably as I've grown older, but it's always been a part of my life, though obviously I had to make my own choices. And growing up in a fairly diverse city, and having come from a country with a fair amount of cultural diversity, where the majority of people weren't Christians, I have had to decide for myself, you know, in terms of my faith, what my beliefs were and my commitment. But when I was just reaching adolescence I got confirmed and have remained, I suppose, a churchgoer ever since.

Interviewer: Did you have a living faith as a child?

Respondent: Yes, I did. I think as a child, one's experience of God is... it can be quite direct, in a way, but obviously also quite unsophisticated and naïve in other ways. And as one grows older, certainly in my experience, you know, there's a need to have space for asking difficult questions, sometimes for doubt. And there have been times when it's been harder than other times when I suppose God's presence has seemed much more vivid. But I think that's been a core part of my life ever since I can remember, and I suppose has helped to shape who I am, though obviously I fall short of the ideals and so it also remains a constant challenge, the notion of being perfectly loving and seeking perfect justice in a world that's so imperfect and with a self, you know, who also is imperfect remains part of that challenge of Christianity and living out the values of the sermon on the mount.

Interviewer: Indeed. For some of us it's more of a challenge than others.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: So, school, where did you go to school?

Respondent: At first I lived in West London, so that was where I went to primary school in Ealing. Then I moved to North/East London with my family and ended up in Hackney while going to school across the border in Islington. So, I did all my secondary schooling there at what was originally a grammar school which then turned comprehensive.

Interviewer: Okay. And you were involved at church as well during that time?

Respondent: I was, yes. There was quite an active youth group as a result of imaginative leadership by one or two of the clergy. And I think that has been quite important in terms of broadening my horizons around faith, as well as having parents who are people who fought and asked questions and read books and had been involved in a youth fellowship

in Ceylon, as it was, and later were quite active in the life of the church. So, I suppose I was always around the idea that it was okay to ask questions. There wasn't an expectation you were to necessarily have to swallow the bible wholesale, or somebody else's version of the bible, I should say, received wisdom about what the bible says that often is not what the bible actually says but it's just often assumed. That having been said, I also grew up during a time when there were a lot of isms in society, I mean there still are, but racism was probably more overt, and sexism, and there wasn't that much legal protection and attitudes to disabled people were pretty crass a lot of the time and the treatment of LGBT people was appalling. I mean when I was a small child it was illegal for men to have sex in England and, you know, even throughout a lot of my childhood it still was illegal in Scotland and Northern Ireland and so on. There was no employment protection whatever and there was a wide public assumption that it was wrong, that there was something fundamentally wrong with LGBT relationships. It was either sick or sinful or just immature, that in maturity consisted of having a heterosexual relationship and heterosexual feelings, so that was, I suppose, a given the world I grew up and there weren't positive images of LGBT people on TV or in the media; it was a very uniformly heterosexual sort of world, or so it seemed, though there were the beginnings of a gay rights movement and feminist movement that challenged some of that orthodoxy.

[0:06:52]

Interviewer: Yeah. When did you become aware of having a sexual identity?

Respondent: Well, I suppose I became aware that my sexuality was different from that of the other girls at school when I was about 12, and they were raving about the heartthrobs or boy bands of the day, David Cassidy or Donny Osmond or the Bay City Rollers, who you may have heard of.

Interviewer: I have. I even know the little song. (laughs)

Respondent: And so the other girls would be very excited about that sort of thing, or sometimes excited about the schoolboys in the boy's school up the road, and I didn't really get it. And it dawned on me that I was different and, you know, if I was watching Top of the Pops, the singers who I might fancy might be female rather than male, and there was... and this was obviously an awkward thing because there was a kind of expectation that you would fancy boys when you were growing up in that setting, you know, at school and in the world around. I mean likewise in the church at that time, there was an expectation you'd grow up and be a good, Christian girl and marry a nice Christian boy, and if you were very daring you might marry a boy who wasn't Christian, I suppose. (laughs) There was definitely no discussion about would you meet another nice Christian girl or non-Christian girl and go out together, I mean it was just not talked about. So, this was a difficult thing and at first I was very secretive. It took me some time to get my head around it myself. I mean for a bit I thought maybe I was just about attracted enough to boys to make a go of an opposite sex relationship because... I mean I'm not... I can't remember which way the Kinsey scale goes, but I'm not 100%, and I suppose with the...

Interviewer: Zero is 100% straight.

Respondent: Yes, so...

Interviewer: And 7 is raving gay and an X is... I think that's asexual actually, yeah.

Respondent: Yeah, so I suppose I was just at adolescence with hormones raging, I was thinking, "Maybe I'm just about attracted to members of the opposite sex to make a go of acting heterosexual," and then as adolescence died away, I realised this would be not a very

Savi\_Hensman.cdbc4540-876e-4c3d-afc3-a37e18e2c0d0.doc.doc

good idea and it was unlikely to work very well on a sustained basis. So, I realised that I would have to make my future choices on the basis of who I actually was. Now, by this stage there was an increasing amount of information available in libraries and bookshops and so on. It was quite difficult. It required a certain amount of nerve to go into the local library and look up books on sexuality, and there was still the residue of this idea that sexuality could be changed, so there were all these descriptions of fairly drastic attempts to change people's orientation. But there were also one or two more realistic books that I got more of a sense of who I was and the fact that it wasn't such a terrible thing, and I did know one or two adults who were out LGBT people who were involved in political-type activities that my parents were as well, so that was helpful. But it still was... still took me a lot of doing to get to a point where I felt comfortable with who I was. And at first I assumed I would have to spend all my life being celibate. Then, as I did more thinking, I came to change... thinking and reading, I came to change my views and by the time I was in my late teens I had concluded that it was acceptable and could be a way of living a virtuous life, a life lived in companionship with God to move towards having a loving and committed relationship with a member of the same sex.

[0:12:03]

Interviewer: And had you told your parents about your feelings? Did you come out to your parents?

Respondent: I had mentioned my feelings to my parents briefly at one point when I think I was about 14, but it was clear they weren't particularly happy with it, and at that point I was still maybe hoping to turn straight or straight-ish or act straight, so the point was then kind of kicked into the long grass. But then I decided because my parents had got to the point when my mother had taken early retirement or was about to take early retirement and they were going to spend a lot of their lives over the next few years in Sri Lanka, that I really wanted to make sure that their feelings for me would remain unchanged, or basically discuss that with them and find out whether being who I was would result in estrangement. So, I talked to them about it. I think by that stage I was about 18 and had done a fair amount of reading. I was at university, which had given me a newfound freedom, and so I could begin maybe to explore a bit more in terms of going to films or buying books or buying newspapers. And they made it clear at that point that they still thought that it would be better if I could not engage in same-sex partnerships. They were, like many others, people who took part in a journey of change over the years to becoming very supportive, but at first, talking about the end of the '70s, beginning of the 1980s, they still held what was the conventional view. They made it clear that they still loved me and that I wouldn't be rejected, which was a relief.

Interviewer: And did they go back to Sri Lanka?

Respondent: They did, yes. And they spent many of the subsequent years there a lot of the time, though they came back to Britain periodically, Britain having been their home as well for many years, and two of their children and, you know, increasing numbers of their grandchildren living here. So, there I was at university, studying chemical engineering and...

Interviewer: Where was that? Which uni?

Respondent: University College London, which again was quite a good place to stay in London because it was a city, was and is a city with a large number of LGBT people, even then, though not in the engineering faculty. (laughs)

Interviewer: Was it lots of men with black jeans and white trainers? (laughs)

Respondent: It was certainly lots of men but they didn't all wear black jeans and white trainers. (laughs)

Interviewer: Standard dress in engineering at Southampton Uni, which specialises in engineering, so there were lots of these men. So, University College London. You were out as lesbian or...?

Respondent: Not at first. When I started I was still in the closet and still working through my feelings. I came out in the final year. I had been thinking about my situation and I realised that in a course that was about 90% male, I might be only lesbian in my department possibly, statistically, and that it would be probably harder for a man to come out in that setting than for a woman, so if anybody was going to come out, it would probably be me so I might as well go ahead and do it. So, statistically...

Interviewer: You have a very rational view towards all these things. (laughs)

Respondent: (laughs) Yeah, some would say it's a typical engineering approach. So, statistics has a lot to answer for. So, in my final year at university I took the plunge. I mean before that I had mentioned it to my closest friend, one of the guys on the course, and he...

Interviewer: Had he been coming onto you? (laughs)

Respondent: No, no, but he was my study partner. We used to study together.

[0:16:58]

Interviewer: Okay, try to put him off.

Respondent: No, no, it was just that I think he'd... the topic had come up in conversation about, I think, an ex-girlfriend of a friend of his or something, and I wondered whether he knew that... had guessed that I was lesbian, and I didn't want to seem that I had bottled out of saying it, so I came out to him and he was fine about it. So, I thought... and that was encouraging and supportive as well. So, in my final year I took the plunge. I told my course mates in the chemical engineering department and became, I think, the only out LGBT person in the whole of the faculty probably, though I mean there were others around but they weren't exactly open about it. And I joined the Gay Soc, which at that point was mainly arts students, and came out in the Anglican Society, which worked very closely with the Christian Union. It was fairly evangelical, but I was very lucky, partly because there was a chaplain who was quite an open-minded evangelical. And so while people were rather taken aback, I didn't get shunned or any of the very unpleasant experiences that people have sometimes had. It was slightly unnerving but I think there was a discussion about sexuality and, you know, I think at one of those discussions that you have at Christian Union or student Christian societies about one ethical issue or another, and in the course of that I came out. But there were no really negative repercussions, though it certainly gave rise, I think, to probably a few... I mean probably people had to do a bit of thinking about how to respond to that.

Interviewer: Because a real person was gay. (laughs)

Respondent: That's right, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so what happened after university?

Respondent: I then... yes, I then tried to get a job in engineering and failed. I became a lab technician, wasn't very good at it. I did various bits and pieces of work and ended up in the voluntary sector. This is a few years later in 1985. But tracking back to the time when I was finishing university, I had also begun coming out more generally in church circles and did so in my home congregation. I discussed what to do with the rector, who suggested, you know, not simply writing a coming-out article but putting it in another

context. So, I did a review of a report that had been written by a working party headed by the Bishop of Gloucester, a 1979 report, though I did the review in 1982, I think, when I was about 20, which did advise that in certain circumstances it was acceptable, it should be acceptable for people to form committed same-sex relationships. This was too radical a conclusion at the time and so the report got published but not taken further forward. It was the first in... possibly the first in a number of reports that were supportive. There was an earlier report in 1970 that I've never seen because I don't think that was published at all, but there was, by that time, a fairly strong surge towards greater acceptance, though there was also very strong resistance from those opposed. So, anyway, in the course of this review I mentioned the fact that as a homosexual myself, I put in, and carried on with the review, and very nervously waited for the reaction from my congregation. Again, it was surprisingly positive. I think some people were simply disbelieving because they'd known me for several years and, you know...

Interviewer: You appeared to be entirely normal. (laughs).

Respondent: Exactly, yes, I didn't fit the stereotype and I was a real person and, you know, gone to the youth group and taught Sunday school and attended church and seemed enthusiastic about Christianity. But that was an opening up of, I think, more dialogue in my congregation, though there were some people who were more or less known to be gay, I think, it just hadn't been made explicit in quite that way. At that time there was a strong surge towards the belief that, you know, if you were in a position where you could come out, you ought to do that because it would make it easier for other people and help to change public attitudes, and this is something I still think is preferable if people are in a safe enough space to do this. And obviously that's something that people have to think about carefully, also based on their own... on their circumstances, anybody who are their dependents. I mean at that point there was a risk of people losing their children, for instance, in custody cases if they were known to be lesbian, and that happened very often. It was very risky for some people to come out, but for those of us for whom it wasn't so risky, it was a way of opening up that dialogue, so I did.

[0:23:07]

I also joined LGCM at the age of 20, I think, and quite quickly became active in it. I unearthed a copy of, I think, the first article I wrote for the LGCM newsletter or magazine back in 1982 and by that stage apparently I was already representing LGCM on Christian Organisations for Social Political and Economic Change, of which we weren't a full member but where we had observer status. So, I began my volunteering, and over the years I've done various bits and pieces for LGCM, including a certain amount of (inaudible 0:23:58) type work with other groups and later acting as, I suppose, a link with some of the movements for social change going on more widely in society. Okay, so fast-forwarding again to 1985, that was the year that I had responded to an advertisement that intrigued me for the first set of workers to be part of a black lesbian and gay centre project which had got funding from the Greater London Council. I applied and was pleased, if maybe slightly apprehensive, to be appointed as an outreach and development worker for BLGC. It was a pioneering project, working with people of largely African, Asian and Latin American descent in London, and obviously that was quite a few people in a city the size of London, but generally a very, very closeted population because people already felt isolated in many cases or stigmatised or marginalised because of their ethnicity and they didn't want to lose their family support, and attitudes to sexuality generally were still quite negative at that time and discrimination was rife. So, the centre was meant to provide a safe space but also help to change public attitudes.

And I worked at BLGC from 1985 to 1994. I had also become involved in working for change at a local level, trying to get equal opportunities policies introduced through local authorities and became very active in Haringey in particular, which was where

BLGC was based initially. So, I helped to set up a Haringey gay and lesbian unit and a subcommittee to which I was elected and on which I served for some years. This was a time when local government was locked in conflict with the national government that was bent on transforming society in a way that many of us would think quite negative, so it was the era of Thatcherism. There was a strong backlash against the move towards equal opportunities and so in Haringey we found ourselves in the eye of the storm as the backlash gathered momentum. It was chosen as one of the examples of the things that so-called loony lefty councils do. Various statements that didn't have much relation to reality were made about what was going on in the Houses of Parliament and the government moved towards introducing section 28, the notorious clause 28.

Interviewer: So, how did you support yourself through doing all this? Obviously, you were in the voluntary sector for a long time.

Respondent: Yes, and I was a paid worker, part-time worker at BLGC.

Interviewer: Right, okay.

Respondent: It was fairly tight money-wise. We weren't paid at a very high rate and so being paid as part-timers, there wasn't a huge amount of money, but I scraped by. And in 1986, yeah, towards the end of 1986 I had begun a relationship with another voluntary sector worker who later went on to work in local government and who for a while worked for Camden lesbian centre and black lesbian group, Vijayatara, who at that time known as Sharon Smith and who retained that name, Sharon Smith, in her writing subsequently for the rest of her life. And we had a service of blessing in early 1988 in the church hall, so we had the support of quite a number of people in our congregation. My parents were there and quite a lot of family members and her two sisters. And it was... the service was led by a minister of North London Metropolitan Community Church. So, it was, I suppose, a bit of an Anglican fudge in that there was an Anglican presence but it was led by an MCC minister, or we could say it's an ecumenical approach, but it was a really exciting occasion.

[0:29:18]

Interviewer: So, it's an ecumenical fudge. (laughs) Yeah.

Respondent: That was pretty good so...

Interviewer: No, that's quite radical for the time, let's... yeah.

Respondent: Yeah. I think it was also probably regarded as rather odd in lesbian feminist circles in those days because I think there was this idea that monogamous long-term relationships, especially marriage, were a kind of hetero, patriarchal ploy or whatever, yes. But it was a very moving and meaningful ceremony, though later her doubts about Christianity resurfaced. I mean she had been brought up in very evangelical settings, and quite homophobic ones, and she later became a Buddhist, though very supportive of Christianity and with a strong spiritual sense and understanding of the bible.

Interviewer: Okay. How long were you together?

Respondent: We were together for 24 years until she died of cancer in 2011.

Interviewer: That's quite recent.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's a long time.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Respect. We've got our 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next year, no, this year, it's 2016, isn't it?

Respondent: Yes, it is. Oh, congratulations in advance.

Interviewer: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, trying to escape without the three kids will be a challenge but we're going to do it. So, LGCM, that was under Richard, I guess, was it?

Respondent: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Yeah. What was your relationship like with him?

Respondent: Pretty good, I think. I mean Richard doesn't do things... didn't do things by halves.

Interviewer: He appears to be a Marmite person, so you like Marmite. (laughs)

Respondent: Yes. I have a lot of respect for Richard. I mean at times his approach may be blunter than might be, you know, best for achieving results. I mean I haven't always agreed with him on strategy and tactics and so forth, and, you know, maybe on some issues I might have different kinds of approaches. His awareness might be, you know, might be something that I suppose has grown and developed, as with a lot of people. But in a number of ways, he provided an important role model of somebody who had stood up very clearly for his principles and experienced the hardship of having his vocation blocked as a result of being honest and not willing to play the game of the ecclesiastical authorities. That isn't in any way to judge people who felt that their calling was so important to them that they just had to side-step the oppressive situation that existed, but I think it would have been... maybe the history of the church would have been different if a lot more people, including heterosexual people who believed that it was okay to be in same-sex partnerships but wouldn't say so in public and who held high positions in the church, had been upfront about what they actually believed instead of saying behind closed doors that it was alright for a vicar to be gay and, you know, even quite supportive of the relationship but refuse to say any of that in public. And so I think in the church there was a culture that grew up that was quite... could be quite supportive at an individual level but could be quite destructive collectively and undermined aspects of mission and ministry. And Richard took a fairly strong stance against that. As I say, maybe my ways of campaigning have changed and developed over the years, but I am also grateful to him for the opportunities to get involved. I mean there were people who got me involved at quite an early age in more secular campaigning through Islington and Haringey gay group, for instance, and who were willing to allow a fairly young me to take on quite a lot of responsibility, but also within LGCM, you know, I was willing and eager and while I didn't get involved in a lot of office stuff, I suppose I helped to maybe put together one or two LGCM responses to some of the things that were going on, especially in wider society around equality and challenging discrimination and how this was something that Christians should support, even if they had different views on sexuality.

[0:34:12]

Interviewer: Yeah. And what was your take on how women existed within LGCM in the '80s and '90s, because that's come up as a bit of an issue with some people that I've talked to?

Respondent: I think in LGCM, definitely it started off as very male-dominated and that has been an issue over the years and presented something of a challenge. But even though some of

Savi\_Hensman.cdbc4540-876e-4c3d-afc3-a37e18e2c0d0.doc.doc

the men who were most active in LGCM rejected the overt sexism that's present in some gay Christian men, you know, that section of the gay, I suppose, of the gay male community who are quite religious but strongly against women having positions of leadership in the church and who see it as a bit of a kind of all-male sanctuary for themselves but at the expense of women. And I think LGCM at a fairly early stage differentiated itself to some extent, or certainly the office, from that, but maybe not... but that was still an issue in sections of the gay male community, though a lot of those were very closeted as well. They didn't want to rock the boat. It was fine if people in the know guessed that father was not entirely heterosexual but father couldn't possibly be seen to be doing anything that didn't fit in with their sort of respectability, and certainly that was an issue. But I mean certainly within LGCM there was a challenge around women's role.

That having been said, for me in some ways it was perhaps less of a problem because in white feminist circles I wasn't any more... I didn't feel any more central, I felt as marginalised and perhaps more than in a largely white male setting because I think there was that sort of tendency for sections of the women's movement to have this idea that being a kind of a white middle-class woman, especially a white middle-class lesbian, was the most oppressed that anybody could ever be and also gave you a certain kind of aura of sanctity so you could kind of be quite harsh and judgemental and so on. I mean we can all be harsh and judgemental and at that time some of the kinds of ways that people argued were pretty over-the-top and probably quite common in social movements for change. But I suppose the women's, you know, all-women's Christian groups were certainly not a natural setting for me either because that would have been, you know, felt maybe even more detached from who I was. So, I suppose I would be moving in fairly different sets of circles who might have... you know, where I might have felt more or less at home for different reasons.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So, late '80s, I guess if you're working within the BME community, you would have seen the impact of HIV/AIDS.

Respondent: Yes, I mean it was happening by the mid-'80s and it was pretty appalling. I mean so at BLGC some of our members were, you know, including some of our very active members were affected and, you know, I can remember attending funerals. I mean I suppose we also got drawn quite heavily into sharing information. There was also a strong community response to the spread of HIV, and that's, I think, one of the things that was very positive about the LGBT community at that time. Well, I suppose I should say it was largely a gay community and lesbian community. Bisexual people tended to be marginalised and transgender people marginalised more, if not invisible often in those settings, but in what there was of that community, there was a fairly vigorous response a lot of the time. And I think it did save quite a lot of lives probably, you know, that the networks, helplines and so on kicked into action. I can remember if people were coming out, it was one of the things that we would ask of them was whether they knew about safer sex. We just got used to talking to various strangers about safer sex and handing out condoms in clubs or whatever. It was kind of all hands on deck to try to spread awareness, and trying to find ways of doing it in a culturally appropriate way to reach BME communities. And in fact I was seconded or, I suppose, an arrangement was made for me to work my contract with Brent HIV Centre for a while in the early 1990s in terms of awareness-raising in particular. So, that was again an opportunity to take action and maybe learn something about the ways of awareness-raising within minority communities.

[0:40:27]

But it was quite a difficult time because there was so much loss. And I suppose it was also a huge impact then when drugs began to appear that seemed to halt the disease in its tracks or halt the cluster of conditions in their tracks for many people, but in the



initial period it was a time of a lot of hardship, which was made worse by social attitudes that were very judgemental. There was also a certain level of stigmatisation that went on around gay men in particular, but also around black communities, African communities, and so then people react in various ways, like some people in Africa communities trying to distance themselves from gay men or probably vice versa. It didn't always result in a lot of solidarity, but there were instances of solidarity and mutual support as well.

Interviewer: And where were you worshipping at this time?

Respondent: I was worshipping at a... I was worshipping mainly at a local church in Stoke Newington and I also occasionally went to North London Metropolitan Community Church. I think one or two other MCCs, but mainly the North London one every so often, which was also a source of support. Though I suppose my spirituality is more middle-Anglican, if there is such a thing. I was quite active in other Christian settings. I was a member of the Jubilee Group, which was mainly Anglo-Catholic, fairly radical organisation in which Ken Leach was prominent, who preached at the service of Exodus when LGCM got expelled from St Botolph's, Aldgate, as a result of the diocese of London leaders' actions. And Rowan Williams was also involved in the Jubilee Group, which might have been where I first... might have been how I first met him. But it wasn't huge, but it was fairly influential and was one of those gatherings that were generally fairly LGBT-supportive that helped to play a part in changing attitudes and challenging discriminatory views and practices.

Interviewer: Yeah. You do a lot of freelance writing.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: I've Googled you. (laughs) I know you've written bits and pieces for the Guardian, for Church Times, stuff like that.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: When did that start and just tell me a bit about your writing and what you seek to do through your writing?

Respondent: I think I've always done a certain amount of writing, partly because my family was the sort of family where you were encouraged to write if you wanted to. It was a setting whether others wrote as well and, you know, my dad wrote books and then when my mum had retired, both my parents were involved in human rights activism and they wrote things about that and about radical theology. So, my mum wrote sort of Asian feminist theology, and it was... though I suppose I had been involved even earlier as a schoolgirl in writing poetry. The first thing I got published in terms of an actual collection of work was a collection of poems by a local publisher, Centreprise(?), in 1979, when I was 17. So, I'd been involved in writing, I suppose, practically all my life. And I've also had to write a certain amount work-wise, so I've taken opportunities to write in the context of work, so at BLGC we had a newsletter. And after I left that I worked for a council for voluntary service and then for a social enterprise, where I still work part time, largely around user and public involvement in health and social care, and writing has been a part of my work there. I should probably mention that from the mid '90s I've also worshiped... I switched to worshipping most of the time at another Anglican church closer to where my late partner's home was, but I still worship at the church down the road from me some of the time, and both of those are fairly supportive and positive congregations. But I mean writing was... writing for... writing about faith and its implications and so on was something that I... and being published was something that began to happen in the mid to late 2000s on a much greater scale. I

became involved in Ekklesia, which is a sort of radical think tank which has a website and runs events and has begun publishing books.

[0:46:25]

Interviewer: Yes, I've heard you've written a book.

Respondent: Yes, I've written my book, *Sexuality, Struggle and Saintliness, Same-Sex Love in the Church* has just been published. It was launched last night by Ekklesia.

Interviewer: You're not on Graham Norton next week? (laughs)

Respondent: Unfortunately not. I have done the odd radio programme. I think I might have been interviewed by Graham Norton when he was on far more obscure, on BBC5 or something, though I'm not quite sure. I've done odds and ends through campaigning, and I suppose that's helped me to develop my confidence about speaking in public, but certainly writing, you know, expressing myself on important issues, but writing is easy in some ways that it gives you a chance to edit, to get edited, so if you've been over the top or you're not quite sure of your facts and you look at something and you realise you need to fact check, it gives you a bit more time to do that. So, I think around 2007 or perhaps 2008 I also began getting pieces published by Guardian Commentisfree, though that doesn't happen very much these days. It might in fact have been prompted by... I think the first piece might have been prompted by the Lambeth conference and the frustration at the tendency in the Anglican communion so often to focus on worries about churches being too positive about same-sex partnerships while ignoring blatant disregard for the human rights of LGBT people and sometimes murderous violence. So, I started writing in that setting as well. I've also written more generally on human rights issues, so both... I mean sometimes about more domestic-type issues, you know, violence in the home, hate crime, etc., but also about human rights in Sri Lanka and beyond, and some of my writing has been about that and issues of poverty, homelessness and so forth, but I've also written extensively on sexuality. And in fact my writings for Ekklesia have served as the basis for much of the book that has just been published, but these have been pulled together and updated and re-edited and some additional material brought in.

Interviewer: Yeah. Have you got any other projects you're involved in writing-wise? Anything else in the pipeline?

Respondent: I write a range of different things, so it's... there are various things I'd like to get published, but the challenge is sometimes finding a publisher who's willing to take a chance on a book or a concept. And even getting published in the newspapers or online these days can be quite hard. There's quite a lot of competition and it's pitching, and pitching successfully can be difficult, though I have to see what happens and what emerges and what opportunities arise. I mean I do write fiction and occasionally poetry as well as non-fiction, but what's been published in recent years has been mainly non-fiction on various social issues, and very often the relationship of faith to society and issues of justice, peace, compassion and so forth. I suppose what's also prompted me to write sometimes has been reading things and thinking, "That's not the way it was," or, "There's something wrong with this argument," or, "There's an assumption here and I'm not at all sure that that's correct," and then being prompted to look more deeply into that and so that will probably also be one of the things that influences me in years to come in terms of what I write about. So, for instance, part of the prompt for the first section of my book has been this idea that changes in views around sexuality and faith are something that have just happened in very recent years and they go against the grain of the bible and Christian tradition and they are simply a response to changes in culture and society and the church, which is somehow regarded as separate from all of these, has to work out what it thinks about these changes in society. And of course the

church, the Christian community is very much within society and has influenced society as well, even if some church leaders don't seem to recognise that when laypeople and parish clergy or chaplains do things, we also are part of the church; it's not just what comes from the central councils of the Vatican or Lambeth Palace or whatever that is what the church is about.

[0:52:12]

And I think in terms of campaigning, I mean I became... I got on the board of... I was elected onto the board of LGCM I think in the early 2000s and one of the things I've tried to encourage or certainly that I believe and maybe has been an impetus for my actions is that we are the church as well. It's getting people out of that headset that the church is appalling, why should we stay in the church? I mean I understand that feeling sometimes when people are really badly treated in a particular congregation or by a particular leader and they may just feel the need to get out for safety's sake, but we are the church as well. We are as much part of the church as those who would exclude us and I think it's important for us to claim our heritage, claim our birth-right and share the good news if others aren't sharing the good news. I'm not talking about necessarily nobbling people in the street and asking them if they've been saved by the blood of the lamb, which may scare people and put them off more than it attracts them...

Interviewer: It would scare me. (laughs)

Respondent: (laughs) But at least just being a Christian and present so that people know that there are a few that... you know, we are around and we're, you know, fairly ordinary people and we're not all out there trying to stop any shift towards greater acceptance and progress, and maybe that our faith has, you know, help to make us better people than we might otherwise be.

Interviewer: Yeah. What do you see as the future of the Church of England?

Respondent: Yes, I mean the Church of England is facing a challenging time, as with a lot of churches. And it's quite hard to predict what the future will be. Obviously, church membership has been dropping quite heavily, and church attendance in a lot of churches worldwide, and there are some countries where there are quite high attendance numbers, but again it's not quite clear how much that's because the church provides certain kinds of social services, companionship, some protection in places where there are high levels of communal strife and how much it is because people actually feel that this is something they want to affirm and which is spiritually important to them. So, I think it's a challenging time for churches in general, and maybe time for the church to do a certain amount of rediscovery of what it's about, developing a broader view of God's realm, the kingdom of heaven or commonwealth of the divine, however one... whatever terminology one uses. Something that takes into account issues of sexuality and gender and so forth, but also a broader vision of what it is that we think... who we think... what we think our potential is as humans and how we're going to go about it, how we're going to protect our planet and our environment from destruction by the mistakes and misdeeds of our species and how we're going to move to a place where people... more people feel loved and affirmed and able to live out our calling and grow in the likeness of Christ.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. We're on the hour so I'm just going to draw it to a close. Is there anything I've missed out asking you that you think was perhaps something you wanted to mention?

Respondent: I suppose one thing that I might say is that I have been quite heavily influenced in some ways by being not European in origin and though I've spent most of my life here, there has been a movement in some... in churches in many countries to try to disentangle the

essence of Christianity from things that were introduced, for instance, as part of the Europeanisation, yes, the post... the colonial thinking. Now sometimes people who want to challenge homophobia shy away from it if they think they may be upsetting church leaders in Africa or parts of Asia or whatever and they think that that's somehow being anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, whereas in fact, you know, throughout the world homophobia is a problem and in many countries it was institutionalised through conquest. But also I think there's been... there's a more healthy type of decolonisation, of decolonising one's mind and trying to work out which things are really part of Christianity and which are about reinforcing society's relationships of domination and subservience, whatever they are. And so I think that's been of value to me, and I've gained a lot from my parents and others who've been working on those issues in different ways, different places, but just rethinking and not taking for granted what Christianity is, not assuming that, you know, the Holy Spirit only works through people who call ourselves Christians, which I think really goes against the evidence and isn't what's portrayed in the bible, and having the humility to recognise that sometimes people who are not Christians are leading lives we could learn a lot from and that God might be... God's wisdom might be being shared with those people who might sometimes be more open than the churches. So, I think that's something that maybe Christians need to revisit if we're going to, in terms of the Church of England and other churches in the west, moving forward rather than just coming and thinking we're sharing God with others as if God were unable to work without us. We have a very important role to play, but also sometimes that's just spotting where God is at work already and affirming what's good, what's wholesome, challenging what's destructive and undermining of the fullness of life.

Interviewer: Yeah. Fantastic. Okay, thank you for that. Thank you very much for your time. I'm going to draw to a close now.

[End of Transcript]