BELIEF
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Name: Dorothy McRae McMahon

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Place: Annandale

Interviewer: Sue Andersen

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **SA:** **This is Sue Anderson interviewing Dorothy McRae McMahon on the 17th of February 2011 for the City of Sydney's Oral History Project, Belief.**

Thank you, Dorothy – I can call you Dorothy?

DM: Of course.

SA: **Yes. Thank you for doing the interview with me today.**

DM: It's a pleasure.

SA: **I'm wondering whether we can begin by you saying your full name and when and where you were born?**

DM: Yes. My full name is Dorothy _____McRae McMahon. I was born in _____ in Tasmania in 1934.

SA: O.K, in Tassie.

DM: M'mm.

SA: Now, I guess we'll get onto a little bit later about the double Macs in your last name - - -

DM: Oh, yes, yes, that's interesting in itself, yes.

SA: - - - but maybe if you could just talk about your early years and where you went to school.

DM: Yes. My father was a Methodist minister and that meant that in those times you were moved about every three years and so I was only three weeks in Zeehan and – so that's the beginning of my life – and we moved to the Mallee, a place called Beulah in Victoria for four years and then we went back to Hobart, Launceston and then when my father went to the war as a chaplain we lived in Beaconsfield or just outside Beaconsfield on the Tamar River in Tasmania and then when he returned we moved to Ballarat. And by that stage, thankfully, because it was very hard changing schools and finding friends all the time, by that time Methodist ministers could stay for five years and so I spent all my high school years in Ballarat.

SA: Right, O.K. And did you always want to be a minister or what was the inspiration then?

1.58 DM: No, I really wanted to be an art teacher but my mother said that didn't give much to the world. I disagree with that but – and I was very glad when my own son became an artist – but she also thought I wouldn't cope with university and so she said "You're very good with children" – I had four younger siblings and had to look after them a fair bit – "and so go and be a pre-school teacher" and I was very obedient and went and did that, trained in Melbourne and I was a pre-school teacher in Geelong.

SA: Right.

DM: By that stage the family had moved to there and so I was there for a couple of years until I married and lived in Melbourne and taught for a few more years. But then two and a half years after he was born, our eldest son was brain damaged, almost certainly by his polio vaccine because of the allergies we have in our family, and he never spoke again or related to anybody again – beautiful, bright little boy – and I might say there I believe in vaccines very strongly. I'm very thankful that most children can have them; it'd be just good if we had a few more little tests to see that they're safe for people. So really I spent

the next sixteen years caring for him, his twenty four hour care, and I mean I did all sorts of things around the church and so on and during that period, after living on the outskirts of Melbourne in a new housing area we moved to Sydney, so I've really lived for most of my life in Sydney. And, as I say, I spent many years looking after Christopher and his three younger siblings. And then when we decided that he really needed to be placed into twenty four hour care I went back and just did a little bit of helping out in a pre-school but I knew, really, that wasn't what I wanted to do.

4.04 I worked for a while with the New South Wales Ecumenical Council, really running the Christmas Bowl Appeal in New South Wales which was the International Aid Appeal and I did quite a lot of travelling and representing the churches overseas at that point and learning a lot about International Aid and forming my own view of the difference between development aid and charity: I felt charity creates dependencies normally. I mean, sometimes you have to have charity for tsunamis and things like that but fundamentally we worked on a theory of aid that enhanced the lives of people and helped them to be more independent and come off the need of aid, really, and I used to go around the churches, talking with people about that and reflecting on what it really meant to provide the most effective aid. I also found myself being invited to preach – and you could preach as a layperson in Protestant churches and in some others too for that matter – and more and more I found myself being invited to do things that a minister might do. And so I thought "Oh, well, I'll explore this and I'll start studying theology", which I did part time, so I studied it over a period of years part time at the United Theological College out at Parramatta and I really felt a strong sense of vocation but by this stage I'm a very committed feminist and I had friends who said "Oh, you know, you shouldn't really become part of the clergy. That's not a very good idea, it's not a very feminist institution", which it isn't, of course, you know, in the sense that most churches don't allow women ministers but by this stage the Uniting Church was formed in 1977 and we did ordain women.

6.12 **SA: And what year are we talking about here with you that you started doing all this or you started going to college?**

DM: Well, I started going to college in 1976, at the beginning of 1976 and I'm still working for the Ecumenical Council part time and studying part time. I wasn't ordained until the end of 1982.

SA: Right.

DM: Yes, so it was well spread out and partly that was too because I was learning a hard lesson. I had very good friends who were brave enough to say to me "You think you're working for other people". By this stage I'm finding my voice, I'm on many, many church councils nationally and internationally and, you know, I was getting up and

debating and carrying on about all sorts of things, especially women's issues in the church, and my friend sat me down and said "You think you're working for other people. So you are but you are accruing your own power as you do that. All the time you are really getting seduced into developing your own power". Huh, and I found that very challenging and I placed myself under spiritual direction and the first thing my spiritual director said to me, without my really talking much with her at all was "Have you ever reflected on power in your life?" and she helped me think about what was happening to me as a person, my ego, and how I was feeding it by taking my stands on many fronts, as well as other things.

7.54 And so she put me into a process of taking that down and being more aware of that I felt that maybe I shouldn't become a minister because it's a very dangerous occupation being a member of the clergy, you're very tempted to think you're God and, you know, you're up front and blah-de-blah in charge of many things. And so I told the college that I would not proceed to ordination and I told my family and friends and everyone said "Oh, right", the college was a bit surprised. So I just kept on working a bit for the New South Wales Ecumenical Council and sadly thinking what I might do and then one day I decided I would go to the Eucharist at St James Anglican Church in King Street at lunchtime. So I went along and I'm sitting there sadly because I really felt very sad about not proceeding to be ordained and I went - - -

SA: Sorry.

DM: Yes.

SA: You felt that it was too much of a conflict with this?

DM: Yes. I felt it would just feed my own ego and that therefore it would be dangerous for me to do it. Anyway, we came to the point where you go forward to the communion rail to receive the bread and wine and I was served with the bread and then the cup was placed in my hands and - I kid you not, I have a few mystical things around in my life – there was a light around the chalice that the priest put into my hands and when he took it away I'm kneeling there and it stayed in my hands and I just had this sense of a voice within me which said "It's safe to now proceed to ministry, I call you now" and just so this inner voice which gave me permission to proceed, so I did and I've never regretted that. I've always had to be open to the honesty of my friends and family about what it's doing for me and to me and what I'm playing at sometimes but I have no doubt at all that it was my vocation and, yes, I was installed as a minister of Pitt Street Uniting Church.

10.15 **SA: That was your first - - -**

DM: That was my first and only parish, yes, that I was in charge of, yes.

SA: Right.

DM: Because by this time I'm fiftyish, you know, so.

SA: O.K, that's a kind of amazing parish to be your first parish.

DM: Oh, yes, it is, yes, it is, and I was the first woman to be in charge of a parish in central Sydney, actually. But at that stage there were only about seventeen adult members and a few children in a church that seats two thousand people - mind you, most of that's up in the galleries and you don't notice – so we really had to rebuild that congregation and we did, we built it up.

SA: Can I just ask you how many other women have been ordained before you?

DM: Not very many. In the Congregational Church which became part of the Uniting Church they ordained women very early in the century but in all that period I think there were only two or three ever ordained. Then there was a sort of gap and the next church to ordain women was in fact the Uniting Church, which was a combination of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. We'd been speaking out and struggling for the ordination of women in both the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches for some time and getting some very interesting responses. I remember one debate where after some research they got up and made a report on the research and said no, very sorry, they couldn't ordain women because there weren't any women's toilets in the theological colleges, yes.

12.01 Anyway, when we came to the Uniting Church from its beginnings it ordained women. Now, at that point a number of women who had been Presbyterian and Methodist deaconesses who were not really ordained went through to it with a bit more study and did become ordained. So I wouldn't be sure how many but probably were only about four or five ahead of me in the Uniting Church, yes.

SA: And what did your father think about you being ordained?

DM: Oh, he was very proud of that.

SA: Was he?

DM: He was, yes, he was. He was present at my ordination; my mother had died by that stage, she died when she was seventy. She was more conservative and she wasn't sure. She didn't like me being a feminist and she wondered about what would happen to my children if I was ordained but anyway my Dad was there. He laid his hands on

my head as part of the ordination ceremony and I felt very, very thrilled that he was there.

SA: Right. O.K, so it's 1982 and you've just - - -

DM: Beginning of 1983 I started at Pitt Street.

SA: At Pitt Street?

DM: Yes, that's right.

SA: So tell me about, I guess, you know what preceded your history at the Uniting Church because the congregation had run down quite a lot and they were thinking about closing the church.

DM: Yes. It has a very interesting history because, yes, like often happens in churches you get a sort of cycling of age groups and, you know, you have an enthusiastic middle aged or even younger congregation which forms a culture of its own and gets older and older and older and then begins to die out and that was what was beginning to happen in the 1960s and early 1970s. And at that stage, the minister of the church was going to pull that magnificent old building down, one of the oldest – I think it's the second oldest church in Sydney.

13.59 Magnificent bit of architecture inside; it looks plain from the outside but inside it's really stunning. And they were going to pull it down and build an office block and put a little chapel somewhere in it. Anyway, believe it or not Jack Mundey, card carrying atheist, Communist, and the Builders Labourers Federation refused to pull it down; they put a Green Ban on it and, you know, Jack and I often have talked about it over the years and I'd sort of say to him "So, why didn't you want to pull it down, Jack?" and he said "Dorothy, it's part of the soul of the city" and he'd come in sit in there often and there's a plaque now in the foyer of the church honouring the work of the Builders Labourers Federation in keeping it up. Anyway, a small group came, interestingly, from the South Sydney church where I now am, keen to renew that church and about, you know, half a dozen of them, families, came and started the renewal of it and it was fairly steady, without much growth for a while, just before I was there; that was in the - - -

SA: Late '70s?

DM: - - - late '70s and early '80s and, yes, and then we sort of got going but I think, you know, there were all manner of reasons for that. I think, yes, we worked together well and I think it was a time when if you used a bit of imagination - you know, we'd have art exhibitions in there, we arranged the church so that we had a peace chapel in the corner where people could just sit and restfully light a candle or

something in the corner. We started putting up beautiful banners which we made, there was a human rights corner in another spot and things that in a way - because the church was open to the public through the week if people walked in they could see what sort of church it might be because of the things around in it which sort of spoke in their own way about the views, the radical views and the interests of the congregation that was there.

16.20 We also started working on liturgy. I mean, I'd been interested in liturgy for quite a long time; I'd been on the World Council of Churches Committee for the Canberra assembly of the World Council of Churches and I'd also done quite a bit of liturgical work around in the Christian Conference of Asia and I represented the Australian churches on the general committee of the Christian Conference of Asia. And so I was sort of learning a lot about liturgical life, the use of symbols, and written responsive liturgies, contemporary ones, and we started writing those together as a group and thinking about how we would do that.

SA: When you say "we" - - -

DM: Yes.

SA: - - - who do you mean?

DM: The congregation. Yes, the members of the congregation, we would think about the themes that we wanted. We'd, you know, take a passage in the bible and then reflect on it together and think what themes we wanted and how you could image a theme with a symbol of some sort. And so we started really producing liturgy together, which we later formed into what was my second book - I had had a book before but my first book, our first book of liturgy – and that began to attract people. We also were holding, you know, all sorts of things, concerts and choirs and, as I say, art shows and all sorts of things within the church and beginning to express in the community our interests beyond just traditional religion because we believed that the arts were very important gifts for the soul of the people, if you like.

18.10 We also began to be quite socially active in terms of social justice issues and we'd put banners up in front of the church and we'd march in demonstrations, carrying our banner, you know, naming Pitt Street Church and things like that, yes, and that began to attract a certain sort of person.

SA: And was that a very radical kind of approach to a church at that particular time?

DM: I think it probably was to a city church in particular, and of course a city church – well, it's like a cathedral church. You pull people from not just your own suburb like you do in a suburban church but people

come from all over the place, deliberately choosing to come into that church, often people who weren't terribly happy with where they were and were looking for something different and more radical. I mean, the average age of the congregation was in its thirties, which was very unusual in those days.

SA: Was it?

DM: Oh, yes, it was – it still is; it's the missing generation in a way. Yes, so the news went 'round and then wrote letters to editors, you know, and papers and things like that. There were many ways that, you know, you can sort of put out into the community the sort of attitudes that you have and believe in and people began to flow towards the church in that period.

SA: And I know you mentioned it briefly just now but can you tell me about what were your beliefs and attitudes at that time?

DM: Well, I'd always been radical, I was brought up radical. I'd never been a person who believed in the bible as every word is the word of God. I mean, I wasn't brought up like that; most Methodists were not trained like that, I wasn't trained like that at the theological college.

20.05 I was trained to believe that, as the Uniting Church says in its basis of union within the bible is the truth, not the bible is the truth. In other words, that you wrestle with what is there and look at it as an ancient document with people searching to understand their God, sharing their experiences of how they understand that God to be and understandably, you know, if they wrote it a couple of thousand years ago they had a different view of the creation, for example – they didn't even know that the world was round and things like that, they thought it was flat. I mean, there are all sorts of things in there that really, you know, you'd have to challenge today on many fronts. And so, as I say, I believed in wrestling with the bible to find the truth in there and I'd always loved doing that – I still love doing it and I do find great truths in there. And my father had always taught me to say "Well, if you believe that, who does that make God?" and he was saying theology – he had a degree in theology and philosophy – but he'd say "Theology is the search for the nature of God" and so if there's something that you believe – well, I used to sort of have a bit of a hassle when I was a teenager about hell: you know, "How could this God burn people in the flames of hell?" sort of thing. And so he said "So, are you move loving than God, Dorothy?" and I said "Well, yes, I suppose I am because I wouldn't" – he said "Would you like to burn your children in hell?" and I said "No, never. And you wouldn't burn me, would you, Dad?" you know, and he said "Well, O.K, it's the wrong idea about God. You think about that. This is God, the loving parent".

22.02 And so he helped me reflect on what was not consistent with this God who I could respect and revere as a transcendent being and a Christ who had walked with everybody and still walks with everybody and that's what attracts me to the Christian faith, the thought of a God who has entered into the depths of all the things that we go through and all the vulnerabilities and struggles and walks towards them bravely and honestly and goes down, if you like, into the depths of human existence and oppressions and violences and comes through the other side with a life that is stronger than death; I mean, that's my understanding of the journey of Christ and then the spirit who stays with us and inspires us and is the female part of God, the wisdom and the one who gives us encouragement as we go.

SA: So you brought those beliefs into the parish?

DM: Yes, I did, I did. And, I mean, that may sound radical but in fact those beliefs are really very traditional in the mainstream Protestant churches and the training that we are given in our colleges. I think part of the issue is that because the conservatives in all churches speak out, you know, into the public against all manner of things, that's the view of the church that people get, understandably really, and we were trying to speak out with another voice, a voice which in many ways is more traditional and more current than some of the ancient stuff that's still being put out there, yes.

24.02 **SA: And how did that kind of ideal sit with the seventeen people that were in the parish when you first got there?**

DM: Oh, well they were radical people anyway, they were. They already had a radical outlook and so it sat very well with them, yes.

SA: And were they part of the City of Sydney local government area, were they people who lived and worked in the city or what?

DM: Some of them worked in the city, some of them were not far out, some of them lived in places like Waterloo, Redfern, that sort of area or just a little bit further out. Some of them came from further; they just chose to come to a city church and they liked the feel of it. Yes, so they were a mix of where they lived and worked but they were all very committed to building a church in the city. And, oh, we just spun off each other, we had a wonderful time together, and in the next ten years we added close on two hundred and fifty members to that congregation. I mean, there were things we went through which got publicity and which we wouldn't have chosen to get publicity for particularly, when we were being attacked by this neo-Nazi group in the 1980s but that certainly drew attention to the church and its courage and its commitment to social justice. But, I mean, if I could just add – and I sort of talked about what happened I think God is but the foundation of my faith too is that it's not simply a matter of "Believe in Jesus Christ and be saved", it is "To love your neighbour

as yourself" and the way that that's expressed, as far as I'm concerned, is in social justice, to renew the earth, if you like, as a community and do that respectfully and lovingly and justly, yes.

25.56 **SA: So there were quite a few challenges for you over your years that you were at Pitt Street. Can we talk about some of the biggest kind of issues in chronological order, if that's possible?**

DM: Yes. What I perhaps should say as a prelude is that I had had quite strong connections with a number of social justice struggles around the world. I was one of a small group of people who were asked by the Asian churches to get information out of the Philippines during the Marcos struggle and bring it out, you know, meet with the nuns and priests especially – they were mainly nuns and priests in there, the religious leaders in Manila – and to meet with them in Manila and then I'd get the information, come home and spread it around the churches around the world on their behalf. And one experience in particular had a very powerful influence on me. I was at the Christian Conference of Asia Assembly and I was sitting next to a young woman called Jessica Sales. She was twenty three, she was just graduated in social work and she worked with the families of political prisoners in the Philippines at that point. And she was doing a workshop on her work and she went and did her workshop, then she came back and sat beside me and I said "So, how did it go, Jessica?" and she said "Oh, it went really well, Dorothy" and then she said "but I think those words might cost me my life" and I just sort of stood there and she said "but I must live". Well, there was a spy in that conference and she was arrested when she went back - it was in Penang – she went back to Manila, was arrested at the airport and her body was found in a mass grave after being shockingly tortured. But I'll never forget those words: "But I must live" and she lived more in her twenty three years than I will live if I live to be a hundred.

28.03 I learnt from her and I think that it does in the image of Jesus Christ too that to be alive is in fact to live justly and expansively and as bravely as you can. So, going back to Pitt Street, in the mid 1980s you had John Howard saying that he thought we ought to cut back Asian immigration and that gave permission – and, of course, see when respectable people as against extremists say things they do give permission for all sorts of things to arise, attitudes to be validated – and that gave rise to all manner of violence against Asians out in the suburbs, children were bullied in schools and this group called National Action which was a neo-Nazi group began to put up graffiti all over the inner city, saying "Kill an Asian a day". Well, we started to take our stand on that and, you know, we'd put up posters outside and inside the church and so on and we would go and wipe out the graffiti and I got caught doing that on Stanmore railway tunnel once.

SA: Tell me the story – that's quite a funny story.

DM: Yes, it was funny because I'd said there were a three of us, four of us altogether and the youngest was a student at the Conservatorium of Music and we'd said to him "Now, you keep watch and we'll paint over the graffiti". We had respectfully asked the railways to paint it out and they said "Oh, in about six months' time" when their graffiti team came around and we thought "No, we can't leave that up there" so we were engaged in an act of civil disobedience but we didn't particularly want to be caught.

30.01 Anyway, so we're painting away over all the long strip of the pedestrian tunnel in Stanmore and all of a sudden we realised that we were being watched by a whole group of the railway staff and we said "Oh, you know, you were supposed to keep watch" and he said – I've forgotten his name now – he said "Oh, I didn't realise you meant the railway staff". Anyway, so they asked us to come up to the office and they called the railway police and of course they say "Right. Occupation, name?" you know, and they found they had a doctor from the Health Commission, a minister, a music teacher and a music student and they said "Oh, this is a very unusual graffiti team". Anyway, our next thing, the first thing the next morning I had the daily media, mainstream media knocking on the door, wanting to interview me and take photos of me and things like that. So that sort of put us out into the public arena very solidly but also it was the time of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and Desmond Tutu. We wanted to have Desmond Tutu, the archbishop come to Sydney and the diocese of Sydney would not let him speak at the cathedral, they didn't approve of him, he wasn't a conservative Anglican, and so we invited him to Pitt Street. Well, the entire church was filled to overflowing; more than two thousand people gathered in that church to hear him and overflowed into the street, five hundred people.

SA: What year was this?

DM: This would have been I think about 1986 thereabouts, yes, and he was of course a wonderful speaker and from that point on we really stood with the African National Congress and every time one of them were killed they'd come and report it to our church and we'd all sing Africa, the national anthem and, yes, it was a very powerful time in terms of that stand against racism too.

32.09 So were engaged in a stand against racism, we were also moving into being an inclusive church in terms of homosexuality. Now, at that stage I was toying with my own sexuality; I hadn't quite worked it out yet but I was beginning to think about it. Anyway, this group, National Action, on one Sunday marched into our church in jackboots and swastikas and placed a pamphlet on the lectern and pulpit where someone was reading the bible up the front and marched out again and that was their first threat to us – I've forgotten what it was called.

SA: This was in the middle of a service?

DM: Yes, it was, yes. They basically said "Right, you know, be afraid of us" and the pamphlet was quite threatening and from that point on they were throwing sort of all sorts of horrible things over the front of the church, they – well someone was ringing me up in the middle of the night, threatening me. Shortly after that started, I should say, I did decide on my sexuality and I ended my marriage and moved out on my own and, oh, they would ring up in the middle of the night and threaten my life. One of them was stalking me and would sit on the other side of the road in his car and watch me as I walked up from Parramatta Road and there were bricks through windows of Aboriginal people who were members of our congregation. It was really a very frightening time and, well, to cut a long story short that went on for two years.

33.59 And they were doing it to some other people as well, other community leaders, and we went to the Police Minister, a group of us representing the Jewish community and a few others, and the Police Minister just said "Oh, well, I think that's, you know, pretty normal, isn't it?", he didn't do a thing. And the police, you could see as soon as they knew that I was a lesbian you could feel the change and they could have picked them up, they could have. Anyway, finally they lit a fire on my doorstep and burned an effigy of a woman and took a photo of themselves doing it and sent it to the Sydney Morning Herald and it was on the front page, yes. But I should say prior to that we had decided rather than just put up with this we would make a statement so we sent a statement to the Herald before this - - -

SA: "We" as the congregation?

DM: - - - yes, saying "We take our stand on this. We are against racism and the things that you stand for" and made a public statement against National Action, which was printed as a letter to the editor. So they were very hard times.

SA: So you must have been – well, were you terrified?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes. What I had to learn and what I did learn in that was that I could be vulnerable and was allowed to be vulnerable – that took me a while to learn.

SA: So what do you mean?

DM: Well, you know, I'd been heroic. I mean, I have a Scottish background and, yes, I just felt "You pull yourself together and press on" sort of stuff but one time when I was about to preach I just felt I couldn't go on and I just had this sense of, yes, of real vulnerability and the woman who was going to say the liturgy on that Sunday rang me up and said "Are you O.K?" and I said "No, I'm not" and she said "Can I come over?" and she had a talk and at that point I realised that

part of my journey, my spiritual journey was to acknowledge that I too am very human and vulnerable.

36.17 And so I went back the next day to church and wept in front of the congregation and shared with them that I too was vulnerable in all this and afraid and it was about that time that – well, actually I can't quite think of the exact order of events - but after they had lit the fire on my doorstep. And prior to that I should say when they threw faeces and all sorts of things under the door of my house and stuffed my letterbox full of things of vomit and all manner of stuff I did feel free to ring people up in the middle of the night and say "Can you come? I just can't cope" and they'd come and we'd have a coffee and debrief and they'd go off. I just felt really free to do that with members of the congregation which was a huge breakthrough for me. After they lit the fire seven of them were arrested and one of them was found with five hundred prohibited weapons in his house and Jim Saleam, the leader, was by that stage also arrested for the attempted murder of Eddie Funde and he spent some years in prison. So basically at that point it stopped but just around that stage - - -

SA: So this is still around …… …….

DM: - - - yes, around when this is going on I just felt the need to flee the country and I went to Scotland. Hadn't been there before, hadn't really planned to but it's where my clan comes from and I had this amazing experience of moving up onto the west coast of Scotland and as soon as got onto the west coast and felt the light there I thought "Ooh, this is somehow my place" and my family come from the island of Skye and opposite the Kyle of Lochalsh there.

38.08 And I just came upon the old graveyard and I looked around – a very small graveyard on the side of a barren sort of hill – and I stood there and thought "How did they survive here?" and I just felt this energy rush out of the ground into my body and this sense of "We survived here, we'll tell you" and I looked around me and virtually every second tombstone on the graves was Father or Reverend somebody and when I've talked with my friend, John Bell from the Iona community he says "Ooh, yes, Dorothy" – I can't imitate his accent – "the McRaes were always fey and they were the priests and poets of Scotland". Yes, so that was a wonderful experience and one which I treasure all my life.

SA: And that's when you took up the name McRae?

DM: It was; that's when I reclaimed my Scottish name. Yes, I was going to drop the McMahon eventually but then my children had the name McMahon and I liked to keep it and so I just kept it in the end, had both.

SA: A double-barrel.

DM: A bit cumbersome but there we were, yes, an Irish and a Scottish.

SA: Yes. So back at your congregation, you came back to Pitt Street?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, we went on there and for several more years, actually, and the congregation was still growing and we were doing all sorts of things. I should mention that one of the highlights of that period and one of our stands was we had a service called 'The Celebration of Humankind' and we invited people to come.

39.44 And we had this sort of ceremony where we celebrated the unity of humankind in all its diversity and we invited people in the congregation to come forward and say "I offer my Italianness into this community" and the congregation said "And we will receive it" and someone else: "And I offer my Spanishness into this community", "And we will receive it" and we had more than sixty different nationalities come forward and so that and we all said "And we will receive it" and finally an Aboriginal person came and said basically "When justice is done to my people, you will be able to receive my Aboriginality" because we knew it wasn't as simple as simply saying "I'll offer it to you" but the church was full; it was just an amazing service, amazing.

SA: So why did you organise such an event?

DM: Well, it was in a way doing what we and I believed in doing, which was to stand on the ground, you know, of the conflict. In other words, don't romanticise it, don't retreat from it, claim your ground, and it was a point – I mean, the whole issue really was the building of an inclusive community, both in terms of ethnicity, homosexuality and justice generally and so we thought "Right" - we were by this stage getting quite skilled at liturgical work and doing things which had lovely symbolism and music and art and things within it - and so we thought "Right, we will stand our ground and announce that we are going to celebrate the unity of humankind and invite everyone who supports that idea to come and do so" - we had people of different religions there as well.

SA: Did you?

DM: Yes, we did.

SA: So it was a larger congregation, there was other congregations that came?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, that's right, yes, it was people from the community. We invited anybody who wanted to to come, you see; it wasn't just the congregation. The congregation organised it but it was a public event and, yes, it was an amazing service, yes.

42.11 **SA: Can you talk about the congregation around sort of 1985, just sort of mid way through?**

DM: Yes.

SA: So who were these people who made up the congregation?

DM: Well, they were, as I said, mainly between their thirties and forties in age. A lot of them were young parents - we had quite a few children – there were a few of us older people but not very many, mostly young professionals I'd have to say, mostly educated people, a few vulnerable people off the streets. We did do a lot of work with street people, with homeless people, but unlike the mission churches of the Uniting Church we didn't have facilities to offer them. You know, the Wesley Mission for example was the Uniting Church and it has, you know, facilities for homeless people. We didn't have that but we could, you know, be supportive in other ways. Often we had people who'd come off the street and who had guilt in their life and wanted forgiveness and I'd say "So why have you come after all these years to be forgiven?" and they'd say "Oh, we thought a woman might be very forgiving" which was interesting. And so again it was at that point that I began to create rituals for things like forgiveness because in the Protestant tradition you are supposed to just pray to God and say "Please forgive me, God" and receive it directly from God, you don't go to confession as you do in the Catholic tradition, but I could see that people needed more than that, they needed something which marked the moment and the event and with a little bit of support 'round them.

43.52 And so we started offering that to people who came and in other circumstances too; maybe it was grieving that had never been laid down, perhaps, you know, someone had died and they hadn't been able to get to the funeral or they had, you know, all sorts of things in their lives which needed to be ritually honoured so I started producing these rituals and that's been quite the strongest part of my liturgy writing in a way. And in fact my book 'Rituals for Life, Love and Loss' which I wrote for the Australian people – yes, I'll just go back one step – I wrote it after I came out – and I can talk about that a little bit more in a moment – but I came out and when I came out it was as though the whole Australian community rushed towards me and said "Oh, we'll look after you, Dorothy, we won't let the church hurt you". Now, my own church actually had stood by me by a very large vote, percentage vote, majority vote, but it was clear to me and it had become clear to me over the years of ministry in Pitt Street that because of the culture and history of the Christian church in Sydney in particular, as against Melbourne, the church had always been seen as the moral police, you know, the 'Flogging Parson Marsden' and of course the Anglican diocese was one of the most conservative in the world and people were afraid of us. They sort of longed for the rituals

of spirituality that lie in faith but they were afraid to come near to the church and so at that stage, shortly after that I wrote a book called 'Rituals for Life, Love and Loss' which was in spiritual but non-religious language. It also arose out of the fact that when the community rushed towards me so to speak – I think I counted up I was invited to do something like two hundred and fifty launches and lectures and this and that, you know, for all manner of institutions and so on in about the next three years, I was doing them all the time.

46.07 And because I am a liturgist I'd find myself as I finished off, you know, launching something I couldn't help myself draping a cloth and lighting a candle or doing something symbolic, you see. And people started saying "Now, would you come and, you know, open this or launch that or speak at this and could you do something a little bit spiritual?" and I'd say "Oh, what do you mean 'spiritual'?" and they'd say "Oh, well, you know, maybe something like with a candle or something" and I could see that the community outside the church, even though it couldn't cope with us and our judgements still longed for some of that life which imaged things. See, liturgy marks and honours something really, you know, it sort of give you a moment in life – it's like a wedding or a funeral where you don't just say "Oh, we're sorry" or "Yes, we'll be together" or whatever and just sort of flow on, you pause, you honour it, you mark it with something beautiful and special and religion at its best can be like that in many, many way, you know, each week really but certainly around lots of life journeys, moments in one's life journey. Anyway, it's interesting that that book of all the books – and I've written about fifteen now – it's the one that's gone into reprint and it's now being printed in England. People were looking for something that marked their life and I learnt that very deeply at Pitt Street.

SA: So that was something that you learnt at Pitt Street?

47.39 DM: I did learn at Pitt Street because of what people came and asked me to share with them and, you know, were trying hard to believe in. You know, if you said "You're forgiven" they were sort of really trying hard to feel forgiven but what I found was if I created a little ceremony over in our little peace chapel and, you know, they had a couple of friends with them and me we'd share a little wine glass of wine and then at the end after I'd pronounced the forgiveness I'd say "Now, I want to present you with this cup and when you're tempted to think you're less human or more human than the rest of us remember this moment when we shared our humanness with you, we each drank of the cup of humanness. None of us are perfect, we all need forgiveness and so you take that home with you and you keep it as a reminder of this moment". So I began to do things like that and the congregation encouraged me to do things like that too, to mark moments in people's lives.

SA: That's really interesting, isn't it? So the congregation were kind of in a way directing the movement of the church as well?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, they were right behind it and I'd share things with them so that they knew, you know, how we were travelling together and we were all supporting each other, holding onto each other and giving each other ideas, yes.

SA: So, you were saying, we were talking before about the church community at that time when it was really starting to get quite a lot more people - - -

DM: Yes.

SA: - - - so you were saying that there were a lot of gay people as well.

DM: There were some, not a lot. People were – it's interesting – our opponents, you know, say "Oh, well, of course you built, you know, the church expanded when she was the minister because she had all these gay people coming" but actually they were a minority, they were pretty much the same minority as they are in the community itself, you know, at large, but they were there, and I was open about my sexuality. While I hadn't come out publically in the, you know, really public sense because that was later when I was in another position, I wasn't in a parish any longer, nevertheless the whole parish knew, the officials of the church knew that I was in fact homosexual, was a lesbian, yes.

50.07 **SA: And also too the Pitt Street Church, they were involved in the mural, the peace mural?**

DM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, that was quite early on, actually, not long after I came to Pitt Street. The people who painted that – oh, what were their names, dearie me - - -

SA: Public Art Squad.

DM: - - - Public Art Squad, thank you. I should remember because I just met one of them again just a couple of years ago in relation to our newspaper - I'm looking over there because he gave me a little copy of the painting that they did. Yes, they came and asked if they could do something on the side of the building which was next to the church, which was our office block and we had tenants in there and so on - it was sort of an old part of the church which had a theatre in it and all sorts of things. Anyway, so we sat down and talked about themes with them and so even though they designed it we reflected on what the themes should be: peace and freedom and justice. And, yes, so they then designed that beautiful painting.

SA: Because it was very powerful – like I remember arriving in Sydney about that time and always remember, you know, driving through the city, it was just a very powerful symbol.

DM: It was, it was, and it was interesting. If you went upstairs in a lot of buildings around it, you know, you could just look and see this amazing mural there. Yes, yes, it was a wonderful thing. They repainted it not long ago, actually, which was good, you know' because it was wearing a bit the Public Art Squad painted again, painted it over – I mean, renewed it.

SA: Yes.

DM: Yes.

SA: And how is your activism, your activism and also the congregation's activism seen by the larger church?

52.01 DM: Well, the responses to us varied. I mean, the Uniting Church, particularly in those days, was the most radical church and it still is the most radical church in Australia, as were the three churches that formed it, and so it was sort of perceived that the church - the Uniting Church had three city churches: Pitt Street, Wesley Mission and St Stephen's over opposite the Parliament House there in Macquarie Street and each of us played a different role in a way. Because the Wesley Mission has always been more conservative and as a mission church in the sense of, as I say, having facilities for all sorts of needy people and St Stephen's was an older congregation and a more traditional sort of one, very Presbyterian in its style – it had been a Presbyterian church – and, yes, had beautiful music there and all sorts of things but it sort of played a different role so we sort of had the three different churches in the city. But on the whole people were quite admiring of a church that was growing and taking its stand and we did get quite a lot of support and the fact that when I left there after ten years that I was invited to be National Director for Mission for our church said something about the way our ministry there had been perceived by the church at large. Yes, so we really were respected.

SA: And before we switched on the tape you talked about the difference between being a minister in an urban church and - - -

DM: Yes.

SA: - - - and a suburban church. So what is the difference between being a minister in those?

54.02 DM: Yes, good question. I think it's partly that, as I said, a city church people choose to go there for a particular reason, because they like the culture of that church. A suburban church tends to draw from the

suburb; it's a family church, they're family churches usually where, you know, people started off, they went to Sunday school, they got married there, they perhaps lived in the area and kept going and their parents did and they died there and had their funeral there. There was a sort of a culture which was based on the nature of the suburb often, I think, and the style of people in the suburb, you know, sort of all middle class or all working class and just the history of the way things evolved, often with a couple of powerful families who'd been around for a long time and ruled the roost a bit and usually a great Ladies' Aide or Ladies' Guild that did all the washing up and raised the money and stuff like that. Yes, just a different sort of culture. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, it's just that I liked the capacity of a city church to in a way determine its own life more dramatically – well, dramatically – radically and, yes, that could form a culture which wasn't necessarily related to the area in which people were living and saw itself as having another sort of calling, in a way to be a church that people could come off the street and just walk into, whether to talk with the minister – which they can do in a suburban church too, of course – but the church itself open for society to come and sit and just meditate or pray through the week if they wish - and people did all the time – or when we're having a service just to sort of come in and sit on the edges of it and see how they felt.

56.06 It's harder to do in a suburban church because you're much more obvious, you know, people leap upon you a bit - and we had to train ourselves not to leap upon people when we were smaller.

SA: There's a bit of a story around that too.

DM: Oh, yes.

SA: Just tell me some of the things that you used to do.

DM: Oh, well, because when people would first come in, yes, when I first went there they had this habit, the group that had been there before I arrived, of after church sitting around a table and having a cup of tea together and sharing the week and so on and I really had to stop them doing that because as soon as someone new would come in they'd leap upon them "Ooh, good, someone new", sit them down and make them sit down and tell everything, you know, about who they were and rah, rah, around the coffee table. And most people, many people found that quite daunting, you know, and they really just wanted to sort of quietly be there and find their feet and sort of just get the feel of things, rather than have this big, intense sharing of life the first time they entered the church. So we all agreed to stop that and we just had a much more relaxed morning tea afterwards and people just, you know, just lightly sort of said "Oh, hello, lovely to see you" but didn't sort of press in on people and grab them, yes.

SA: So you do think that's fairly particular with an urban church?

DM: Yes, I think it is. I think, yes, because everybody usually knows each other very well over the generations, often, and if someone walks in, yes, you're more likely to – well, you'd be seen as new and sort of grabbed and focused upon and whatnot. I mean, at the end of our services at Pitt Street we always invited anyone to introduce themselves and say where they came from, you know, just as we sat in the pews if they wished, just if they wished. You know, they might say "Oh, I'm from Canada – hello" sort of thing or something like that and you do tend to get more people like that from overseas and so on in a city church than you do in a suburban church.

58.09 But, yes, I'm not in any sense critiquing suburban churches because they vary hugely but I still think a city church has more chance to just do more adventurous things. Well, it's more accessible for the people that pass by because, you know, you can reveal who you are because they're likely to come in and have a look at this great old building.

SA: Right. So the community wasn't necessarily those who necessarily live in the city?

DM: No, no.

SA: They'd come from everywhere?

DM: Very few because, I mean originally when Pitt Street was first – it's a hundred and seventy five years old and when it was first set up, yes, it was of course in the middle of farmlands and things like that and people did live in the city but that rapidly changed as the city became suburban rather than urban.

SA: O.K. Now, just another question about the community, the church community, many Aboriginal people?

DM: There were a couple of families but no, not a lot. I can understand Aboriginal people don't easily trust the church, not with the mission history, but there were a couple of very fine families who were part of our congregation and, yes, they were there and had their children baptised there and stayed there until they retired and moved to the country and, yes, they were just great.

SA: And did you as a church community do lots of interfaith activities or meetings?

59.52 DM: We did some. We were known as a church that respected people of other faiths, yes, and if we had community events we would always invite people of other faiths. I think it was later on in my life, when I was National Director for Mission that I had more engagement directly in discussions with people of other faiths. I mean, these days

Pitt Street Church does have an interfaith service there but I'm - yes, I mean, that's fine and people do what they want to do and I shouldn't critique anyone that comes later than I do. But I guess what I really want to say is I think the most helpful interfaith relationships come when you discuss your differences, not what you have in common, where you really get to the sharp edge of things and you learn a lot of things about each other in doing that. I mean, if you sort of just think "Oh, well, you know, we all believe in a God" or something like that, well, that's fine, I mean it's good to celebrate that too, I'm not putting that down exactly. But I just think I've always had richer interfaith relationships if it's been on another level of discussing, you know, a whole area of something and each putting in your own beliefs about something and grappling with it a bit and even though you don't persuade each other you do learn things often, yes, it's sort of the sharp edge of our differences which is more challenging to us and enriching.

SA: So you left Pitt Street when, in what year?

DM: Yes, end of 1992 after ten years. So, yes, I'd been there from 1983 to the end of 1992.

SA: Yes.

61.43 DM: And then I was invited to be National Director for Mission, which was an overarching position for many areas of work, like the international activities, Aboriginal activities, social justice activities, multicultural activities, evangelism, yes, a whole range of frontier services which of course is Uniting Church where we established all these chaplains and flying doctor services and stuff like that and hospitals out in the outback. Yes, so I had various bodies that I was supervising, basically, at that point, so I had to learn a bit of management.

SA: What was that like, getting out of the parish?

DM: Well, I knew it was time for me to move somewhere because I felt I'd given everything I could give into Pitt Street and it'd be all too easy just to settle down somehow and I didn't want that; I thought it wasn't good for them or for me. You need some fresh life and ideas to come into a parish; I really believe in moving on. Being in a management position was very, very different; I enjoyed a lot of aspects of it. You know, it's such a wide-ranging part of the work of the church and I loved engaging with that and moving around the country and I moved around internationally a good deal then too. I had to learn that good management is not about letting things just drift on. I had to learn courage in looking people in the eye and saying "Look, we really need to talk about this. Have you noticed such and such?" and challenge people who were in management positions that I was supervising to do that honestly with their staff too because it's all too easy to punish people in non-direct ways – you know what I mean – if

you're not happy with their work rather than really face things. And I found that very hard to do because I don't like hurting people and I don't like – yes, I felt terrible.

64.01 **SA: And during your time there, that's where you were in a position where you came out as well.**

DM: Oh, yes. That was after I'd been there five years.

SA: Right.

DM: Yes. I mean, all the staff knew, everyone knew, but by that stage we were discussing sexuality as a church, overall. It was sort of a study thing and we were studying it all around the country and thinking about it and what our church's attitude should be and so when we came to the Perth Assembly in 1997 I knew that I would have to come out for my own integrity. And, yes, so I carefully made a little speech for myself and I had a very moving moment because one of the staff that I'd been supervising, the Reverend John Mavor, was the incoming President of the Uniting Church, which is the national head of our church, and the President is always installed with two people presenting him or her, you know, to the assembly and he asked me if I'd be one of the presenters. And I said "John, I need to tell you that I'm going to come out at the assembly, so go home and think about that, sleep on it" and he came back the next morning and said "Dorothy, I want you to present me". And, I mean, he was head of our Commission on Evangelism and, you know, not highly conservative but in the evangelical part of the church and so it was very brave of him to do that. But, yes, anyway I came out and (tsks) of course everything, yes, sort of went "Ooh", like that all around me with media everywhere and Australian Story and, oh, the whole life blew up, really.

65.52 And a few months after that some of the church leaders talked with me about my ongoing work and I had to think on two fronts: one was did I want to live the rest of my life defending myself there, you know, spending all the energy doing that, focused on that, and also did I want the staff around me to have to do that all the time too, rather than getting on with other things and in the end I retired at that point, sadly. I would have liked to work a few more years but I just thought "No, I don't want to collude with the people who disagree with me by using all my energies forever trying to defend my position - had I been in a parish there wouldn't have been any issue at all.

SA: There wouldn't have been?

DM: No, no. And on one level there wasn't. If I'd decided I wanted to stay, I could've because I had an eighty five per cent vote for me at the Assembly, I got a standing ovation when I came out and the church was upholding my ordination, there was no question of that. It

was just that it was – well, it was 2 I/C in the Uniting Church, it was a very senior position and, really, to sustain me there just at that point before we did more work and so on was very, very hard on all of us, including me. And, as I say, if it had been in a parish it wouldn't have even been an issue and I, you know, retained my ordination and the church sustained me when I was by this stage Moderator of the World Council of Churches Worship Committee internationally. And we were preparing for the Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which is the main ecumenical international body in Harare at that stage and my church stood by me and said "Yes, she is still ordained, she's one of our ministers" and the World Council respected that and stood by me and the International Committee I'd been chairing for the seven years of preparation for the Assembly, it was very interesting going back into the first meeting after I came out in Harare with them - we were by that stage preparing things in Harare itself.

68.08 Yes, having them all sort of – I walked into the room and they all sort of looked at me really carefully and I sort of was sitting there, thinking "Oh". And then they said "Right, Dorothy, so what are we going to do today?", you know, and I thought "Oh, they're just checking" – I could see they were just checking to see I was the same person that they'd known for the last years somehow. One by one they came and talked with me about it afterwards and it was very special actually, I was truly touched and honoured.

SA: Do you think your time at Pitt Street really give you that strength and courage to kind of, I guess, stand in your sexuality?

DM: Oh, yes, undoubtedly, undoubtedly. Oh, yes, and the people that I'd known at Pitt Street and wider, you know, they were holding me, if you like, metaphorically speaking, as I did that. Oh, yes, there's no question but, yes, I mean, there were a couple of things. I mean, when I decided – I mean, the big moment was when I decided to own my sexuality and doing that felt like stepping off a cliff. I mean, everything was at stake for me - my job, my reputation, my parish, my marriage, my children, everything was at stake - but I got to a point where I could do no other and when I did I'll never forget. You know, I wrote things about flying free – I bought myself a brooch with birds on it – I just felt as though I just flew free for the first time in my life, as though I was alive.

69.49 And I'm thankful that my children stood with me, my husband is still my friend – he's remarried, of course, and that's good - and I was just with him this morning, with our son, our intellectually disabled son. And, yes, I just had a gathering of support around me which was really quite astonishing but I don't know why, you know, our opponents – I can never understand why they say "Oh, you know, they're just being naughty sexually, you know, they're just being sinners and having same sex sexual activity" sort of. I mean, why

would you put at stake everything, your career, your reputation, everything, just to have a bit of sex with somebody? I mean, it doesn't make any sense. And, I mean why would people – as I know only too well because I was patron of 2010, an agency for young gay and lesbian people at risk – why would people die? They commit suicide; that's the greatest cause of suicide in this state amongst young people, people dealing with the fact that they're homosexual and why would they kill themselves if it's just, you know, "Oh, they're just being naughty. They just, you know, like a bit of sex and fun and blah, de, blah" or something like that. I mean, come on. And I also, you know, had said to myself "Well, if the worst sin I ever have to confess before my God is that I love the wrong person I think that'll be O.K.". I mean, was very sad to end my marriage in a way and sorry to put people through all these things but in the end it was right for all of us.

SA: Now, Dorothy, you retired in -?

DM: 1997.

SA: 1997?

DM: Yes, yes.

SA: But that wasn't retirement in its traditional sense?

DM: No, no, no.

SA: So you've gone on and went to Waterloo?

71.49 DM: Yes. For a while I sort of wandered around a little bit because as National Director for Mission I used to move around churches so much that I almost didn't have my membership anywhere properly, you know, because I was always going overseas and around the country and all that sort of thing. So I sort of tried a few churches where I knew I had friends, mainly in the suburbs, and, you know, people were very welcoming and nice but I still didn't feel right. And then I was asked by South Sydney Church, which is the one that covers the Redfern/Waterloo area in Raglan Street, I was asked to relieve there for a few weeks while they were waiting for their new minister and as soon as I went in there – even though there only two or three of us there I still thought "Oh, yes, this is my spot", I loved it.

SA: So what was it about it that you really felt at home?

DM: Well, I think a place like that – and particularly when, you know, with gradually growing there too – there's a real rawness about it, a sort of authenticity, you know, and people aren't pious, they just say it like it is and they ask the hard questions of God – which you haven't always got the answers for but, you know, they ask them out loud – they're

so grateful and, you know, we all hold onto each other and laugh and cry together in the middle of services and all sorts of things and I just love the focus of the work there too with the …… people. We're got a community garden with seven chooks in it now too – not allowed to have a rooster but we have seven chooks run by people with HIV/AIDS, a beautiful community garden which has won awards – lovely, with all the veggies and things they grow there. And the hall is used as a shelter for homeless people twice a week – we do that in conjunction with the Cana Community, a Catholic group. Our minister now is very interested in art – we have all sorts of art exhibitions - and we have choirs that train there, we have art classes once a month for kids and adults as well as, you know, our paper, of course, which was started a little bit later.

74.04 Yes, it's just an engagement with the community beyond us and, as I say, just humble, real, raw, ordinary people and I really like that, yes.

SA: So you have quite a strong gay community, church community?

DM: There's a few there, they're not all; there's a percentage, yes; I suppose it's about a third, yes, at the most, yes.

SA: And Aboriginal people?

DM: Some who come and go, yes. Again, they are wary of trusting the church but, you know, we have relationships with them, yes. And it's an interesting mix of young, youngish professional people again - like Pitt Street in a way only it's a different feel from Pitt Street – who've moved into the area. They tend to be people on the whole who live around in the area, you see, and of course the area, the demographic of that area is changing and has been for some time, as you would know, and so you get quite a lot of young professionals living in there and so they form quite a significant part of the congregation as well as very vulnerable people, people who come from the housing blocks, the big public housing blocks, people with various needs, disabilities of various sorts and so on.

SA: Yes, it's a very dynamic area there, isn't it?

DM: Oh, yes.

SA: It's just there is such a cross-section of communities.

DM: It's never dull, never dull. And, I mean, people say "Oh, gosh, you walk all by yourself around there" and you think "For goodness sake, I've never felt safer". You know, there's a bit of petty crime around in there but as the police – then police commander of the area - Catherine Burn who's now Assistant Commissioner, she said the crime rate, especially the more serious crime rate, is much higher in a place like Burwood than it is in Redfern.

76.05 You know, yes, there's a vulnerability and fun and, yes, just authenticity about it. Yes, I love it.

SA: So you're working on a voluntary basis?

DM: Yes, I help the – I mean, it's a very busy task for a minister, of course, they're stretched to the limit because of the complexities of the ministry there.

SA: Because of the makeup of the community?

DM: Yes, the makeup of the community and the availability – you know, we haven't got a Ladies' Aide to do all the things that Ladies' Aides do or a men's group or so on. The professionals, they tend to just come on Sundays on the whole or to particular functions that we hold because they're working full time. You see, it's not like a suburban church where you've got retired people – I'm the oldest one there and there are only about three of us over sixty, I think.

SA: It's really interesting, isn't it?

DM: Very different.

SA: So there's quite a lot more demand on – I guess, if you'd call in professionals and …… within the church?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, indeed, and people need skills in working with very needy people too and our minister, Andrew Collis, is very good at that. He worked for Father Chris Riley in the Catholic agency for quite a while and learnt a lot about relating to all sorts of people. He also has a degree in fine arts and he's a musician and so on, is lovely. We get on very well together but what really keeps us walking on water, almost, is the production of the South Sydney Herald. We started that before Andrew Collis came, when Vladimir Korotkov was our minister. It was around the point in time when the riots occurred in Redfern and, oh, other things were going on too and the mainstream media were focusing very much on the bad news coming out of Redfern.

78.05 **SA: What year was that, sorry?**

DM: It would have been about 2000 and we felt it was time that there was some sort of media coverage of the good stories, the survival stories – not just, you know, mushy sort of stuff but people who'd had tough, interesting lives, people of different cultures and with different life experiences. Also, we wanted to portray the news and interview people in a different sort of way than just the sensational, we wanted to encourage all sorts of discussion on the life in the area through the newspaper and key issues and all that sort of thing. And so we set

up – I've forgotten what we called it first – it wasn't the South Sydney Herald – what was it? Anyway, it doesn't matter but we started off a very modest little sort of fold-over paper which we got going with volunteers and now, to cut a long story short, we have a sixteen, sometimes twenty page tabloid in colour and last year it basically paid for itself in advertising. Our writers are all volunteers; many of them are referred to us by Wendy Bacon at UTS as senior journalist students who want some experience and, you know, we publish them and give them references and things like that.

SA: Four times a year?

DM: No, every month except one; we don't have a January edition but eleven times a year we put it out. So, yes, and it's distributed by volunteers too; some of it's letterboxed all around the old South Sydney area, you know, circling around the city, basically, and some of it's in bundles, you know, here and there in shops and agencies of various sorts that all take a bundle for people to pick up.

SA: So why did you - it wasn't just a money making thing?

80.01 DM: Oh, no, we make no money out of it. We paid, until this year we paid for it out of our parish funds. Fortunately, we've got a few properties that earn us a bit of rent, otherwise we couldn't pay our minister, let alone pay for the paper. No, no, it wasn't about money, it was really about modelling another form of journalism and creating community; that's our mission statement is about creating community. And, oh, you know, we've had such touching things. You know, we got a phone call once from someone at the Redfern Fire Station and a sort of an anxious voice said the other end "I don't suppose your people would be interested in the fact that this is the first time in history that the whole fire station has been staffed by Aboriginal people?" And so we said "Yes!" So I went up and wrote it all up and interviewed him and Ally, my partner, who's our photographer, got them to stand by the fire engine and they all stood there like this, (demonstrates visually) proudly and took a photo of them and I'll never forget that – just, you know, all sorts of really moving and special things where people, you know, celebrate some little thing in their life which is so important and grieve things and, yes. And the politicians take us very seriously. I mean, quite a bit of the advertising's from them and we interview them regularly, we're always hanging around them. We're a bit left wing but we're known for that but that's O.K. We are a bit left wing, I suppose but we try and balance it out, yes.

SA: So is that kind of the position of the church as well?

DM: Left wing? Oh, yes, we are radical, you'd have to say that. Yes, we believe very much in – well, we believe that the formation of good human community is related to care for the creation itself – you know, we're interested in ecology – and as far as possible delivering justice

to all people and vulnerable people especially and, yes, so we are a bit left leaning.

82.01 **SA: So, could a church with other beliefs be as potent as South Sydney Church?**

DM:

SA: In the area …… …….

DM: Yes. We used to work very closely with St Vincent's Church when Ted Kennedy was around but the ethos of that has changed since he died. And the same - we used to work quite a bit with the Anglican Church down at Waterloo when John McIntyre was there but he's now the Bishop of Gippsland and again that's sort of shifted into a more conservative mode. I must say, I think it's pretty unique. I have, you know, a lot of experience in the church and I have never, ever seen anything like this with this paper coming out. Every month we think "Oh" – because I do the overall editing and Andrew, our minister, is the managing editor and we pay a designer and the printer, of course but he helps do the pagination, getting it together or more like supervises that. Trevor Davies is our story person and Trevor's lived in the area for thirty years and is a very well known identity, a member of the Labor Party there and, yes, he does a fair bit of sitting in cafés and people say "Have you heard about this, Trev?" and, you know, he gathers all the story list for us and off we go. But, yes, it's a very fascinating experience.

SA: So how many in the congregation now?

DM: Oh, well, we've probably got about fifty people connected with us; our average attendance is more like around thirty-ish. People will come, you know, once a month or something like that rather than every Sunday sort of thing but, yes, it ebbs and flows but certainly it's a viable little congregation now, yes, yes.

SA: And the future, well, I guess, for the church - - -

84.02 DM: Yes.

SA: - - - and also for yourself?

DM: Well, I will stay there till I die, I think, and then I might be carried off somewhere before that but I won't change parishes. That's the best bit of the church I've ever been in, I just love it, I really love it and I love its people and environment and really believe in what we're doing. So, you know, that's the joy of my life, being there. I guess, you know, I'll probably be able to do less sometimes than I can now. I'm getting – I'm seventy seven in a few weeks' time, so sort of, yes, I'll start to go down a bit, I imagine, and, you know, the cancer last

year reminded me of that but, no, I'll just sort of keep doing what I can do as long as I can and certainly this is my church. I will be literally carried out of Pitt Street; I'll have my funeral there because I just love that beautiful church; it breathes for me and I love the massive organ and things like that.

SA: So tell me why you love it so much. Like because like reading in your notes you have a very, very strong connection to it.

DM: With Pitt Street Church?

SA: Yes.

DM: It was something – I don't know, when I first walked into it, when I heard that they were thinking of calling me as their minister – we call it "calling", inviting me to be the minister – I remember walking into it and standing there and thinking "Oh, it breathes", I just sort of felt some life in it. I believe in that: I think, you know, you can gather in buildings a sense of the spirituality of many generations that have somehow been there. So, I loved it. I love the big organ, I like big music like that, I love the big organ, yes, so.

SA: Because I believe that everyone was quite surprised when the organ was in relatively good condition - - -

DM: Oh, yes.

SA: - - - but everything had been stripped from the church when you came.

85.53 DM: Yes, oh, yes, that's right. They were going to pull it all down, you see. Not the congregation when I was there but prior to that and, I mean, the pews – I've forgotten what it's called – Australian – but it's a particular wood that no longer exists, I mean it's very rare. And the organ, yes, when the Organ Society went to look at it they found – going up behind it they thought "Oh, you know, rats will have got into it and everything". No, because it was all beautifully French polished and everything behind it and all it needed was a bit of tuning and off it went. And, you know, we restored the church, uncovered all sorts of things and restored the plaques and things which were put in there by its original people and, yes, you had John Fairfax [founder of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Fairfax family dynasty], the original John Fairfax was very much part of the building of that church in the very early days, way, way back, you know.

SA: So he was part of the congregation?

DM: Yes, he was. It was called an Independent church in those days, Congregational, and he liked the fact that in an Independent church you could be – you just sort of read the things in the minutes and you

realise they respected him deeply but he was very powerful, no doubt about that, whereas David Jones [founder of the eponymous retailing firm and family dynasty], who was also the original David Jones, also a member, there's a minute when he died and a tribute to him which says "We will always remember his hoary head and his trembling knees"; they *loved* him, they *respected* John Fairfax. So there were very interesting, you know, all sorts of memories built into that church and, you know, when we went back archively and looked at all sorts of things, found bits and pieces underneath the church and in all sorts of places and began to build its history – it's now got a book, whole book written on its history – it's fascinating, just fascinating.

SA: The people that were involved in the church?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, the whole history of it, it had always been a very interesting place for the church.

SA: Had it always been kind of that little bit sort of radical?

88.01 DM: I think so, on the whole. I mean, it probably had little periods here and there where it was more or less but reading the history of it I think it was always leading the way in many ways in terms of a radical stance; Congregationalism did tend to be more radical than the other churches.

SA: It's interesting, isn't it?

DM: Fascinating, yes.

SA: Now, one thing I thought of, a few things I didn't ask you when we were talking about Pitt Street, you also did chaplaincy at Fairfax [newspaper publishing].

DM: I did, I did.

SA: Yes.

DM: That was when the congregation was so small that I sort of didn't have enough to do. That sounds funny now, God, when I think about it. Yes, after a year or two that changed and I was only there for a while, a year or two, but, yes, that was when it was over in the Broadway area there and it was very interesting, actually. Yes, it's just when they were introducing computers into things and, yes, I'd sort of walk around vaguely in amongst it all and staff would sort of say "Who are you?" and I'd say "Oh, I'm the chaplain". "Oh, really, O.K." and some of them'd take me aside and tell me all sorts of things that I, you know, wouldn't believe that they would tell me and that was really quite special. And I'd go down to the presses down below and here are all these industrially deaf old guys down there – they hated wearing the earmuffs and so they were all deaf, with all the papers

rolling off the presses and go up to the other John Fairfax up above on the very top floor, sitting in his massive office, yes.

SA: You went to see him?

DM: Oh, yes, he was the boss at that point and so he'd ask me what was happening down below and things like that.

SA: Was it a bit ….. - it wasn't a very pleasant experience?

90.01 DM: I was just about – can I put this off the record, this bit?

SA: Yes, I'll just pause it …
So what about any other chaplaincy work? Given that you were in the city, did you visit any other workplaces?

DM: No, not really, no. I sort of got to know people around and so on in various workplaces and so on, just because I, you know, had coffees there or whatever I was doing, moving around a bit and we were always hoping even in those days that the City Council would pull down the block in between us and we'd have that nice big town square and I said "We'll hope for that" and we would have had the cathedral there and us opposite. Yes, and we'd sort of take part in a lot of demonstrations but all sorts of functions in the city; we really engaged ourselves with the city a good deal in one way and another but, no, I wasn't doing chaplaincy work at that stage.

SA: Right. O.K, so you did do a lot of kind of outreaching into the community?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes. We'd go to all sorts of community meetings and things at the [Sydney] Town Hall and whatnot to discuss aspects of life in the city and we regarded that as our parish and therefore, you know, we needed to be involved and we'd have all sorts of functions and things on at the church.

SA: And invite various community?

DM: Yes, oh, yes, that's right, oh, yes, and talk with politicians and, you know, community leaders, councillors and so on. Yes, oh, yes, we had a lot to do with them.

SA: And what about shops and restaurants – did you engage with the people?

DM: Oh, only in the sense that, you know, we visited them, having our lunch and stuff and you sort of over the years got to know them a bit and so on but, no, not directly I wouldn't say.

91.54 The people that came off the street tended to be people who worked in the city or else were homeless and people who would sort of walk past and see something which attracted them to come in and sometimes they'd just, as I say, came in and sat down and just meditated there in the peacefulness of that old church or sometimes they'd knock on my door and ask to have a chat about something and very, very moving connections with so many people, yes.

SA: Because there was also you were approached by some Turkish people, by a group of Turkish people about holding a hunger strike on the steps.

DM: Oh, yes, that's right. That's right, I'd forgotten about that. Wow, that was very early in my ministry there and, yes, that was a point where, yes, I had to confess that I was vulnerable because for a start – well, it was really quite funny – that's right, it comes back to me now. Yes, we were just about to celebrate our hundred and fiftieth anniversary as a church and all sorts of celebrities were coming, you know, the Lord Mayor and Jack Mundey and I think we had the Premier there – anyway, lots of community leaders were going to be coming. Oh, that's right, the Governor, of course, the Governor. Anyway, just as we were planning this huge event, this Turkish group came and said could they have a hunger strike to the death on our front steps and I'm thinking "Oh, no". Anyway, I took it to the church council to discuss and we were all sort of saying polite things: "Oh, yes, maybe it's a good cause. Perhaps we should, blah, de, blah" and then all of a sudden one of our people who was always more honest than the rest of us, Bob, said "Well, I don't want them there, dying on our steps when the Governor comes for our hundred and fiftieth anniversary" and we all went "Yes, that's right, we don't want them to come for that reason either".

94.21 So we had the courage to say "No, we can't always meet the needs of everybody. No, not just now, thank you". So we didn't give them permission to do it. And I think it may have been a mistake, although I must say none of us really knew much what they were doing, you know, why they were doing it - we would have explored it more had we given them permission, yes.

SA: But that was not an unusual request?

DM: Oh, no, we had all sorts of things. Mind you, a lot of homeless people used to make their home on the steps and behind the flowerpot in front of my office they used to sleep and I got to know a lot of them as they sat there – they had their territory, you see, usually and they'd sit on the bench, on a seat on our steps and chat away and you'd get to know them, yes.

SA: So you said before that it was difficult for you to help homeless people.

DM: Oh, yes, we'd refer them to various places.

SA: Yes.

DM: It depended what the issues were and we'd help them in the sense of, yes, of directing them and listening carefully to what the situation really was and what the underlying issue was for them, whether it was, you know, mental health or disability or just, you know, messiness or out of work or whatever and we got quite skilled at referring them, you know, for other places, other agencies for help.

SA: And was it a wealthy - - -

DM: No, no, we weren't, no, we just made our ends meet, really. We got rent from Pilgrim House, the building next door, from a whole lot of social justice agencies but we only charged them – you know, like Amnesty International and those sort of people – we only charged them very low rentals because we did believe in what they were doing.

96.04 And a church like Pitt Street is hugely expensive to sustain and particularly during those years it needed a massive amount of restoration. It was a heritage building and made of sandstone which soaks up water everywhere and we had a huge, huge job to actually get that back to any sort of good order. Yes, so we didn't have a lot of money to throw around anywhere; no, we were not a wealthy church, we didn't have other properties and things like that.

SA: O.K. Now, I've kind of come to the end of my questions - - -

DM: I'm sure you have.

SA: - - - bar one. Now, a very significant event that you skipped over - - -

DM: Yes.

SA: - - - or you didn't even touch, actually, of 1988 you were awarded the Human - - -

DM: Oh, the Human Rights Medal.

SA: So, tell me about that.

DM: Well, I think that really was a medal that – and I'd said at the time and when I received the medal I said the same thing – I think it belonged to us all at Pitt Street because it was given to me, awarded to me at the end of those two years of being attacked by National Action and our struggle against racism and for an inclusive church. And, yes, I

was awarded it personally but, as I say, I think really the award should have belonged to the whole church there for the effort that had been made but it was related to that stand that we took and the attacks that followed and our determination to stay there. And I'll tell you a funny thing, just a bit later – or was it earlier? – no, I a bit later, that's right, a bit later in the early '90s.

98.01 I was awarded an honorary doctorate by Macquarie University for work with minorities and contribution to the spiritual life of the community and I at this stage didn't have a degree because when I'd trained for the ministry it was a diploma course. Anyway, so here I was, giving the address at a graduation ceremony at Macquarie University and also being awarded an honorary doctorate and I'm standing there as they bestowed my doctorate and I said in my head "There you are, mother, I have got a degree" – because she's dead – and in my head she said "I'm very proud of you, dear, but it's not a real degree" and I thought "Well, I'll get one" and so every year after that for several years – by this stage the college has got degree status and so I did a subject a year and finally in 1963 [?] I graduated Bachelor of Theology in Sydney University so I said "There you are, mother, I can cope with university".

SA: I'm sure she'd be very proud.

DM: Yes, I'm sure she would too. No, no, I was just more vulnerable than my siblings and they were really, really seriously clever, all of them, you know, like dux of every school and class they were ever in.

SA: And have they gone onto be ministers, any of them?

DM: One has, one has, in Tasmania, yes, John. I had two sisters, one of whom died, was killed in a road accident; the other sister was a physicist. Then John was a minister and he was ordained in the same week as I was, even though we were about seven years' difference in age. And then my youngest brother was a teacher but became an educator at the Melbourne University and now has done for a long time work helping governments with indigenous education.

SA: Right. So very much a social justice angle as well?

DM: Oh, yes, oh, yes, we were - - -

100.01 **SA: That's from your dad?**

DM: Yes, and our Mum too. Our Mum was – even though she was more conservative than he was and she had no education, she left school at twelve, didn't have a chance – both her parents died – but she was very intelligent nevertheless and, yes, she was committed to social justice, just not quite as thought through and as radical as our dad;

she was more hands-on, sort of, rather than political, yes. Yes, so we're still all close.

SA: That's great. Now, is there anything else that – I'm sure that there's loads of things that we've missed out on talking about - - -

DM:

SA: - - - but is there anything else that you think that's important to this particular oral history that's kind of about in the city?

DM: Belief in the city. Yes, I think I'd want to just say that I think one of the critical things for belief in the city; especially a city like the city of Sydney is to have diversity and respect within that diversity, both in terms of types of faith, different faiths, and Christian denominations. I think it's good that we're all there together with differences, giving people options, but also engaging sometimes with each other. We don't do it very creatively these days I don't think but there've been periods when we have, I think. I think it's important too – and I'll tell you this story very quickly because it's a foundation story of the city of Sydney and I heard about it when I was training for the ministry and we had lecturer from Sydney University - and I think this letter is in the archives of the University of Sydney, I think that's where it came from.

101.49 Anyway, the very, very first chaplain to the colony of New South Wales whose name was - I've forgotten; anyway, it doesn't matter – wrote this letter back to his peers in England, saying that the Lord had given him a very splendid guidance on one occasion. What was his name? Anyway, you can add the name in. Both the soldiers who were guarding the convicts and the convicts themselves were required to gather for a service regularly while he preached to them, you see. And so they gathered and he said "The Lord guided me to bring my sermon forward and just as I was getting into it the bugle rang back on the parade ground, sounded back on the parade ground. The soldiers and the convicts all stood up as one and marched off" and they'd obviously set it up so they could avoid listening to his sermon and I thought "That's Sydney", you know, funny, raw, larrikin, right from the start. But the early, early chaplains of the colony were pretty ordinary, they were the dregs. I mean the history now says they were the dregs of the missionary movement, basically they were, yes, very ordinary indeed. And particularly because it was a convict colony it set up, you know, the moral police sort of thing between the church and the community and I think those cultures are very, very hard to change and therefore what I'd want to say is that I think any church in Sydney and particularly in the city of Sydney needs to work out ways of gently connecting with people that are not judgemental.

103.49 And I don't mean laying down standards or anything like that but just encouraging the thought that people of faith are all human together too, you know, and we're human alongside everybody else and that we all stumble along and we believe what we believe but we don't know, we just believe and therefore we can only tell stories of how the sense of connecting with a God around us has enhanced our life, enriched us in some way, but in spite of that we stumble along like everybody else. And, you know, I think particularly in Sydney – and having lived in Melbourne which is a very different church culture – I think particularly in Sydney churches have a lot of work to do even now, after all these centuries of building relationships with the community.

SA: Right.

DM: I really think that. I just think some ways we've hardly started. Yes, it's very sad .

SA: …… ……..

DM: Yes. What is the name of that - - -

SA: I know. I'm …… …… …… ……

DM: I'm shocking with names but anyway you can look it up and add it in, you can prompt me, yes.

SA: Dorothy, thank you so much for your time today. It's been really fascinating and such a privilege to do the interview with you, so thank you.

DM: Well, Sue, thank you for coming and I'm horrified to see how long you've had to stay.

SA: It's been very interesting.

DM: I'm a preacher, you see, I go on and on and on.

SA: Thank you.

DM: Yes, thank you and I wish you well with quite a big project.

SA: Thanks.

DM: My goodness, yes.

Interview ends