Interview with the Venerable Dr. Pamela Nesbit by William W. Cutler, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania Oral History Project, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, August 15, 2014.

WILLIAM CUTLER: Good. Well, we're going to talk today about your career in the church, as well as in your profession. And I'd like to begin, Pam, by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself. Where you were born, when you were born, a little bit about your family?

PAMELA NESBIT: I was born in 1947, in Montebello, California. My parents—my father came to California basically to get out of the Panhandle of Texas. His brother, his older brother, had gone there. My father was one of nine kids, one of the younger. My mother was—my mother's parents were immigrants from Italy. She was born in Canada, and had come to Los Angeles because her father had a fruit stand, fruit store, there. And they met in the context of my dad working in the store where my grandfather had a fruit stand.

So they met then, and married at age 21. Got a house—they were very brave. They got a house up in a very new area of Los Angeles, at a time when Los Angeles, as I now realize, had become a kind of place for people, particularly from the South, to come and find, kind of find a new life. But they both—Mom's family was around there, but Dad had kind of come to California. He lived on a beach for a while. My mother was Catholic, raised us Catholic, my sister and I. I'm the younger sister of two sisters. My father was a kind of Southern Presbyterian agnostic, for whom—music was his love, so when we would go to church—Dad agreed to allow us to be raised Catholic, but he thought it was kind of silly. He never said that but just never got it.

And so we would go off to church, and Dad would sit and listen to Mahalia Jackson records, and just, that was his church. So always growing up, it was my mom and my sister and I who went to church, and my dad stayed home. So I didn't really have the kind of Catholic upbringing that people who are in a Catholic family have.

WC: What was your maiden name?

PN: McAbee.

WC: How do you spell that?

PN: M-C-Capital A-B-E-E.

WC: So you grew up in Los Angeles?

PN: Mm-hm.

WC: Went to school there?

PN: Mm-hm. I grew up in Arcadia, which is pretty near Pasadena. It's in kind of the foothills. In California, the higher up you go, the wealthier. And my parents moved to a kind of upper middle class neighborhood, though that was not—they didn't go to college; that wasn't their background. They wanted that for us. And so the school system was probably the best in the country at that time. The California public schools were wonderful. And, my sister and I never felt like we quite belonged. So it's very funny; I got out of California as a young woman, and my sister moved down the hill, [laughs] in a place she felt more comfortable, which was always—I think my parents found that kind of confusing.

WC: So did you go to college in LA?

PN: No, I started college—this was a point of huge pride for my mother. I was given a scholarship, a state scholarship, to Stanford. My mother really wanted me to go to Stanford. I was a really excellent student; I

always found school easy and fun. But Stanford called me, and they said, "We're not going to let you in, because the town you live in is full of Stanford alumni, and we're letting them in. But we just want you to know. You're really good enough for this school, but we're not going to let you in."

So actually I went across the country, to Lake Erie College, for three years, because I wanted to go to Europe, and Lake Erie spent its junior year in Europe. I wanted to go east, and so I got there, and everybody told me I wasn't east. But I had gone east 2500 miles, so it felt like east to me. And kind of, that was just a whole new world, because most of the people at Lake Erie were from the Northeast. And then my senior year I really didn't want to be in such a small school, so I went to Berkeley for my senior year.

WC: Came back to California?

PN: Mm-hm.

WC: To UC-Berkeley?

PN: Mm-hm, which I could have gone to all along, but I didn't want to, because it was the place I could go. At the time, Berkeley was pretty easy to get into; that's not true anymore.

WC: No.

PN: So I graduated from University of California at Berkeley in 1968, which was a heck of a year to be there. So my great passion was folk dancing, though I was a psychology major. But there were—riots is too strong a word. At the time, they weren't that violent. There were demonstrations all over the place, so you'd be driving down the street, and there was a demonstration, so you had to go another way. So it

was all very—there was a lot going on, most of which I didn't really understand. I was 20, just was really loving folk dancing! [Laughs]

WC: Well, some of the people involved, I think, may not have completely understood what the ramifications of their actions were.

PN: Right.

WC: But yes, Berkeley was certainly a hot place.

RN: Right, right. And I kind of remembered that as fun, in the way of a 20-year old, and I think it was—I certainly knew people who were far more serious, far more committed to what was happening, for whom it was certainly not fun. And then later I met people who had been, you know, middle-aged faculty during those times, for whom it was agonizing, particularly people in places like Columbia, where it got so scary.

But it was a—it was a time when it seemed—how to say this? My cohort, my exact cohort, the people who turned 21 in '68, were right on the edge of a huge amount of change that I think came as a result of the midlife crisis of my parents' generation, the people who grew up in the Depression and fought the war. I think they got into their forties, and they did what everybody does in their forties. It all went kablooie. They stopped being so sure. And my youthful idealism kind of came together. So my particular experience was every time we pushed against a barrier, it fell right down.

So when I started college [laughs], I was given several pairs of white gloves, and little heels, and was prepared to go off to school. I remember one of my friend's mothers had a tea for us, because this is what we're going to be doing in college, in 1964. And my first year

was *in loco parentis*, so you know, you had to go through all kinds of stuff to go out on a date!

By my senior year, there were co-ed dorms. Nobody cared where you were, and who you were sleeping with, or if you were sleeping—they just gave up! And I wore jeans and a pea coat, always, everywhere. That was the uniform of the day, or else my hair down to my waist, and some kind of hippie garb. It just—it just was a function of the fact that we happened to be that age at that time. Then when I went to graduate school at Temple, a couple of years later, I had to promise not to have children in order to be accepted into Temple!

WC: Into the Psychology Department?

PN: In the Psychology Department, because I was going to take a job away from a man. It was that kind of sexist stuff. We were told Dr. Page, who was the chair of the department, didn't like women, so no matter how high my GREs—and they were very high—I wasn't going to get in.

WC: But you did get in?

PN: I did get in. Me and another woman got in. So there were eighteen places in Philadelphia. I got one. Corey, my friend, got two. And then affirmative action somewhere came in there, so that the first year there were—out of eighteen students there were two women. And that was really unusual. And in the second year, they stopped taking gender into account; sixteen of the eighteen were women. And so again, I just had this what I now realize was this very strange sense that all you had to do was push against a barrier, and it was going to fall down, because we just happened to be there when the barriers

were falling down. So I think that my age group, people very close in age to me, had a fairly unrealistic idea of the nature of barriers! [Laughs]

WC: So did you start in the PhD program at Temple in the fall of 1968, or later?

PN: No. I met my first husband at Berkeley. We came to Philadelphia because he was looking for a draft-deferred job. In my year, graduate students were no longer exempt from Vietnam service. A lot of friends of mine went to Canada. Alan did not want to go to Canada, so we came out, and his father got him a job that would get him a draft deferral, so I was just out here. I became a caseworker for Department of Public Welfare, and learned what that was like! [Laughs] That got me right back into graduate school, so I started in the master's program at Temple.

WC: In Psychology?

PN: In Psychology, master's in Psychology, because that, at that time, was the way you got into the doctoral program. And then one year into my master's program, I started to apply for clinical psychology, which is what I wanted.

WC: How did you get from folk dancing to clinical psychology?

PN: I wanted to be a psychologist always. My mother loved—my mother, who did not go to college, loved to learn, so she read all the time. And my mother and I talked all the time; that was just part of our relationship. We just talked about what was interesting to us. And so she was telling me about Ruth Benedict when I was about ten or eleven, and she would just get fascinated, and then we would talk about it. Somewhere around age thirteen, fourteen, I thought I was

going to be a psychiatrist, because that's what I thought was there. I was the person in my dorm room—all the weird people came to my dorm room, [laughing] looking back, some of whom I now realize were pretty seriously sick, you know, because they felt safe. People could pretty much tell me anything. I think that was it. I was just—I don't know why; that was just kind of who I was. And then when I started college and took a psychology course, it was like: Bing! This is it! My first psychology teachers were really good, and so I—

WC: You mentioned Ruth Benedict, who, of course, was not a psychologist. But was she the kind of role model for aspiring women academics, or not?

PN: I didn't want to be a woman academic. I mean, that was why I went in another direction. I wanted to—and as I got older and started thinking it through, I wanted a job that would allow me to have children without having to stop working, which at the time was a fairly difficult choice. I wanted to do a thing that I thought I would get better at as I got older. My mother worked at a time when it was a big deal, and so that choice wasn't a huge one for me, unlike a lot of my friends. I just thought she was interesting. Again, I have this memory of my mother talking about the Dobu, because Ruth Benedict went out in the world, and found out really cool, interesting things about people. That was—that was what was interesting to me.

As a child, we lived in Mexico for two years, when I was twelve and thirteen, so being—especially at that age—out of my cultural—you know, they don't speak English; they don't look like me. My friends were all Mexican, because we lived out where there were not very many Americans. I just got really interested in how

different people experience the world differently. They have filters that just make it a whole different world! And that was hugely fascinating to me. The other thing I thought about being was a translator in the UN. I thought that would be a very cool thing to do. So when I became a psychologist, it seemed to me that I was translating from people's world view, into something that would offer them more choices.

And then later, part of my conversion back to Christianity was when I began to see psychological issues that people were describing as theological issues. It was just two sets of languages for the same set of phenomena, and it just really depends on how you—where you want to go to get in there, and then start looking again for new choices.

WC: You just said something about your conversion back to Christianity. Can you elaborate on that?

PN: Well, my mother, who was obviously very important to me, did not take communion when I was growing up, because she was using birth control; it was against the rules. And her thing was: you don't break the rules. I mean, it wasn't that she thought it was a good rule. She thought if you were going to participate in this thing, you need to go by the rules, which I realize was a fairly interesting, if not weird—I mean, most Catholic women just said, "The Church is full of baloney!" [Laughs] But she couldn't do that.

So again, I grew up in—so when my sister turned sixteen and could drive, my mom stopped going to church, so that I could get there, so my sister could take me. When I turned sixteen, my sister stopped going to church. Both of them just decided, "Priests are liars.

This is baloney; I'm not doing this." And then I started—I, who had a pretty strong sense of the presence of God—I always had that—who was pretty pious in my own little strange way? I loved God, was very unsure about the church, and then by the time I was eighteen, nineteen, and sort of in that generally rebellious mode, I just decided, "This is nonsense," and left. Did not understand myself as a Christian; did a lot of exploration.

When I was in graduate school, everybody was Jewish. And that was a whole new world for me. Somebody bought me a copy of *Yiddish for Yankees*, so that I could understand what people were saying! And I was fascinated by a religion that wanted you think, where thinking for yourself was so highly valued. So I just kind of studied Judaism, just asked a lot of people, and ended up sort of—what I decided is that Jews are born. I mean, there are people who convert to Judaism for sure, but it just seemed to me, basically I wasn't Jewish because I'm not Jewish.

And then, [I] started doing a lot of reading; in my twenties I did a huge amount of reading, of just very eclectic, unorganized, undisciplined reading—in addition to all the psychology stuff, which was most of what I was doing—about other religions. And as many psychologists, I found Buddhism really attractive, because it's so psychological. And I went to Kripalu, a yoga center. I went to the Omega Institute, just because there were so many interesting things going on. I just became a kind of new age seeker, for a long time.

WC: You were not, at that time, part of any particular church or denomination?

PN: Oh, no. No.

WC: So tell me a little bit about what happened after you got your degree. You stayed in the Philadelphia area, or moved somewhere else?

PN: My first—and again, I took much longer than I should have to do my doctorate, because I'm not all that disciplined.

WC: How long was it?

PN: Let me see. I started taking classes—I stopped taking classes in seventy—it was about two years. I mean, it wasn't like ridiculous, but it should have been—

WC: Two years of classes?

PN: No, two years of working on my dissertation, after I finished my classes. Then it was like, get your dissertation done!

WC: Yes.

PN: I futzed around for about two years. So I had my doctoral orals in December of '75, and I got my degree, officially, in May of '76.

WC: That's pretty quick, generally speaking—eight years out of college? Six years or seven years in the department? You shouldn't feel . . .

PN: Yeah. A lot of my cohort were better organized than me. During that time, my first job was down at Virginia Tech. It was, again, I wanted to go someplace interesting, and the Blue Hills of—I mean, the Appalachian world is a really interesting—it's a beautiful place. And I worked there for a year; I was part of the Counseling Center. And that was really interesting.

WC: Were you still married at that point?

PN: I was divorced at that point, and came back partly because my second husband was Ron Baenninger, whom you may know. He was in the Psychology Department, and I had started dating him after I finished

my courses, and we eventually got married, a couple of years after I got back to this area.

WC: He was your first husband?

PN: My second husband.

WC: Your second husband?

PN: Mm-hm. So my journey out of church was really [sighs] a fairly wayward one. I was really having a hard time figuring out who and where—I mean, there were all kinds of reasons for that, which I won't go into, but my first husband, bless his heart—I shouldn't say that. My first husband was gay, and didn't know it. He and I were dancing partners. We had a wonderful time dancing! And if I had been older and more sophisticated, that would have been a clue [laughs], given the nature of male dancers. And you know, he married me because he didn't want to be gay. He was very frightened. I married him because he was a dear friend, and because I was trying to figure out a way to grow up, and wanted to kind of settle things.

So then I started graduate school, and he then—finally the laws changed while I was in graduate school, so he no longer had to be doing a horrific job in order to not be sent to Vietnam. And around that crux point, I realized—it was really me. I realized this isn't a marriage; this is a friendship. And so I split up that marriage, and he was very, very upset, I think because that threw him into figuring out who he was. He is now—where did he go? He got a doctorate—he is a scholar—in Sociology? I think Sociology. He has been married to his male partner now for 35 years. He's an expert on Carolingian coins. [Laughs] So he's gone all over the world, being the world expert on—because he got very interested in the late Middle Ages,

and there's not very many artifacts from that time; coins being one of the few. So that's where he is. And he and his partner live in upstate New York.

WC: Mm-hm. So you were at Virginia Tech, then you went on to Muhlenberg College?

PN: I went to Muhlenberg. I came back. I liked Virginia, I just didn't want to stay down there, because Ron was up here. So I went up to Muhlenberg, and I was at Muhlenberg for four years, during which time Ron and I got married. I liked Muhlenberg. I hated the commute, because I lived in Solebury, and was driving up and down to Allentown every day. I didn't want to move to Allentown, because Ron and I were together at that time, so I partly left because of the commute. I partly left because I knew I didn't want to be an academic. I'm not a researcher, and I just didn't want to do that. And so when I left that, I started private practice.

WC: Where?

PN: In Doylestown. In Doylestown and Philadelphia, so I had two offices for a really long time.

WC: Now at this point in your life, you were still not a practicing Episcopalian?

PN: I wasn't a practicing Christian.

WC: Anything?

PN: No, no, I was reading. At that point I was reading—I fell in love with Dorothy Sayers, just because as a feminist writer, as a writer of English mysteries, which I must have read every one that was every written; I just got into them for years, and just that was my popcorn. But she was writing more interestingly, and her—"The Human, Not

Quite Human," is an essay she wrote about feminism that's brilliant. I got interested in her story.

You know how you read somebody, and then you want to know how they got there? And in the context of her story, I read that she was a devout Christian, and I thought, well, how can that be? Because I still had this kind of Catholic idea that was—that what the church wanted was for you to be stupid. [Laughs] That was pretty much how I was framing it at the time, and so I just got very interested in how she was doing that. So I read everything she wrote, all her Christian writings, and then I read a number of biographies. I went out at one point—there was a Dorothy Sayers Festival at Wheaton College, in—

WC: In Massachusetts?

PN: No, in Illinois.

WC: In Illinois?

PN: Yeah, that Wheaton. And I went! And there were all these really lovely, bright, highly civilized British Christian people there, as well as the kind of world of Wheaton, which is very evangelical. I stayed at somebody's house, and she just was so—she was living a Christian life in every moment, and she understood it. And I was very taken by that. I had a terrific time, met all these people, and then from there learned the name of C. S. Lewis, started madly reading C. S. Lewis. I had long since read Tolkien, because everybody reads Tolkien, because the books, you know, so cool. Didn't really realize Tolkien's whole Christian commitment.

So I realized there was this group of people who were—all kind of knew each other, talked to each other, and were Christian, and were also thinkers. So that was a whole new category of ways of being in

the world. So I read a lot of—again, C. S. Lewis has been called the apostle to the skeptics. He really is. I mean now, there are things about his writings that I'm not so fond of, but he was willing to open up his life and his heart to talk to people about these issues. And so I found him compelling.

So all during this time, I was seeking, but I wasn't—for one thing, my understanding of Christianity, and this was a deal-breaker for me, was that a Christian had to believe that a non-Christian was going to hell, and that was so damaging, so immoral, that I just—I wouldn't go near a church. I just wasn't going to participate in that.

WC: Now, this was the late seventies, or thereabouts?

PN: Yeah. And then, I mean, how much of this is going to be—? I don't know how to tell this without telling the story. So I was married to Ron Baenninger. It wasn't going well, and I didn't know why. It wasn't going well mostly because of my immaturity and my failure to know who the heck I was. So in the course—at some point during that, I had an affair with the man who is now my husband, and in the context of that affair I got pregnant, and everything got terrifyingly bad. And it was five years of figuring that out, working that out - trying to not damage my son more than he was already being damaged by the situation he was in.

And it was in the context of that crisis—and my husband Cliff is an alcoholic. We kind of went into a crisis because of our own sin, you know, misbehavior, but also had a kernel there of really trying to work something out. I mean, some people work things out by behaving very badly, and I was one of them. As that became more and more awful, in that kind of journey down to hell that happens

when you've split yourself off from yourself, when Cliff became—his alcoholism became acute, I just was in hell. [Laughs] And so I remember waking up one night and thinking, I'm done. Not that I was going to kill myself; I just didn't know what to do. It was that kind of done. I wasn't—I wasn't that kind of—I wasn't depressed, I was just in crisis.

So I remembered Father O'Malley's voice from Catechism way back when, saying, "Kneel down and pray." So I got down on my knees and I said the Lord's Prayer, because I really didn't know what else to do. And that sort of got me to the next—got me up that morning, got me moving. So me, who is such a know-it-all, without knowing anything, because I'm the sort of person that the holy spirit has to hit with a two by four, just sort of started moving through my life, as best I could, taking one step after another, and feeling not alone.

You know the Psalm that says, "He rescued me because he delighted in me?" That's my story that I was — I just had created this God-awful situation in which I couldn't talk to my son about who he was. He was being damaged by that. I had tremendously hurt Ron, who did not deserve that. I was clearly being destructive in the life of Cliff, who was—you know, for an alcoholic, lies are lethal. It was just—it was hell! So I don't believe people go to hell after they die; I really don't, but clearly you can get there on this side of the grave! [Laughs]

WC: Yes.

PN: And so I really did have the experience of God simply reaching down in that pit, and pulling me out. So that was my conversion experience.

It was like: I've been there; I've done that. Somewhere in the course of that, I started going to church, because a good friend of mine said, "You might want to sing in the choir," because I love to sing. And I was sufficiently open to the possibility at that point, and scared, that I went. Bill Wood, Father Bill Wood was the priest in that church at that time.

WC: Which was?

PN: Trinity Solebury. I joined the choir. One Easter, I decided to take communion. That was a huge deal. I was expecting thunderbolts, and you know.

WC: Well, if you grew up as I did in the Catholic Church, and the nuns told you that if you bit down on the wafer, blood would flow from your mouth?

PN: [Laughs] Yeah! It wasn't quite—it was, again, I had a mother who didn't take communion because she was using birth control, which on some level suggested communion is a very serious thing. And so the thought that I could decide whether I was—God and I always in conversation, because I've always had the feeling of the presence of God; that was never the issue for me. It was—churches were the issue for me. [Laughs] But I can do this; I can decide to do this without some priest, most of whom were pretty nasty, saying it was okay—that personal kind of taking it on? And then being in communion, taking communion, and feeling fed, and nourished, and Christ in me, and me in Christ, and the beginnings of that experience. It was huge! It was huge.

And then what I experienced at Trinity Solebury was Bill Wood. Bill would do these sermons about—he's just very person to

person—Christ, Jesus, his friend, brother, companion, and the sense of mutual love there. And then I watched him one day being very nice to a really obnoxious woman. [Laughs] You know? So she wasn't terrible, she was just really a pain in the neck woman. And Bill was being kind to her. He was going out of his way to be kind to her. And it seemed to me that his doing that, and what he was preaching about him and Jesus, were part of the same phenomenon, that they were the same thing, that it was a manifestation of that; because of God's love that he was receiving, he then passed it on and behaved in certain ways to this woman.

So I saw a congruity in what he said and what he did that I had never seen before in a priest. The priests that I grew up with were very, very unkind, and I had just never met a priest who was living—I mean, God knows they're there in the Catholic Church; I've met many, many since. But in my experience, I had just never met somebody for whom it was coming in on the one hand, and going out on the other. And I was very attracted to that, and started—clearly, the taking of communion and all that's involved in that, the regular worship, was part of what made it possible to do that. So that was one thing that was going on in my life.

The other—I mean, there were a lot of things going! [Laughs] The other was that because I was reading theology, I was following the kind of Dorothy Sayers' path. Dorothy Sayers' end of her life work was to translate the *Divine Comedy*. She fell madly in love with Dante. So I read the *Divine Comedy*, because I was on this Dorothy Sayers path, and got really interested in how, in purgatory—I still find heaven boring; I can hardly get through it. But anyway, hell, as a

description—so in my office I'm hearing people talk about, and I'm having my own experience of . . . screwing up, of—of not really understanding—of pathology, in the psychological sense of that word, my own, and others.

And at the same time, I'm reading all this stuff, kind of classic theology, about sin. And it became—it's like, "Oh! It's the same thing!" Now, I didn't say that to my clients, because it wouldn't have been helpful to say, "You're a sinner." Because it just wouldn't have been helpful, but it was clear to me that what theology was talking about, about sin: not getting it, going off in wayward directions—was exactly what psychology was talking about, about pathology, and that you could—you could go one way or the other, depending on what's useful for the person.

WC: Self-destructive behaviors?

PN: Self-destructive behavior is self-destructive behavior, and God, far from being this kind of great wet blanket in the sky, is the one who is desperately calling you, just all out, all vulnerable, calling you back to life. So that kind of came to me from two directions over the years of my kind of, you know, falling into a really very painful place, and hurtful place for other people, and then being rescued from that.

WC: Not to mention for yourself.

PN: Yeah. Yes, absolutely.

WC: Now, in the process of this sorting out process, were you attracted to a career in the church? No?

PN: No! [Laughs] No. No, my being a deacon? God's sense of humor at its most antic. No. No, what I did—again, I tend to get involved in

things, so I got involved in the church, having a kind of: this was my place; this was my church home.

WC: At Trinity Solebury?

PN: At Trinity, Solebury. There were—I was divorced for a while there, and then I married Cliff, and we were married there. But for the time there that I was divorced, there were a number of divorced women, and we got together; we kind of formed a group, a support group for each other, there. I was at that point starting to do a lot of feminist reading of the Bible. I discovered Sophia. So I was kind of going in and saying, "Hey!" and kind of teaching them that. I got, again, really interested in the seven deadly sins as psychology, and so I did a thing, an evening thing, on the seven deadly sins.

I did all kinds of—I started taking a Bible study there, which wasn't all that interesting! They really didn't know how to engage—but anyway, so I started getting interested. At some point—I don't know . . . So, in the late eighties, I was sitting in church, listening to a bad sermon, doing what I did when I listened to a bad sermon, which is outlining it. It's like, "These were the points this person is making. How could you make these points better?" Because I was, you know. And I heard a voice behind me say, "You could do that," and turned around, and there was nobody there. That was weird.

I just started thinking, maybe—I talked to Bill, who was about to leave Trinity at that point. But I talked to him, and he said, "I don't know. Maybe you're called to be a priest." And I am not called to be a priest! I know it! Somewhere in the course of—I don't remember quite how I learned that there was such a thing as a deacon—I got interested. There was a woman who lived, at that time, down the

street from me, named Barbara Lewis Venutolo. She was finishing up her diaconal training at that time. She and I went to lunch, and she told me about what a deacon is, and I thought, hmm, that's really interesting. And then I thought, no more credentials. If I'm called to be a Christian, I'll be a Christian. So what I did is I deepened my Christian life. I found out about EFM. I knew nothing about the Bible, zilch! [Laughs] You know, because there was no Sunday school, obviously, in the Catholic Church I grew up in, and we weren't encouraged to learn the Bible. At some point—so I started EFM; that was wonderful. I started getting up every morning and saying, "Tell me what to do," and being pointed to—

WC: Speaking to God?

PN: Speaking to God, yeah. So the Morning Prayer was kind of: "So what do you want me to be doing today? What should I being paying attention to today?" And that really—that kind of thing, through time, makes a huge difference. I went to the Jesuit Center, which I had heard about, to do an eight-day retreat, which I really didn't understand what that was. But that was a really hugely healing thing for me. My spiritual director was a woman, a really lovely Sister of [the] Sacred Heart, I think, who was learning to be a spiritual director, because they—I don't know if you've ever been to Wernersville, but that's what they do there. I loved going silent for eight days; that was wonderful.

And I just—I went in there with a huge chip on my shoulder, and they were just hospitable to me, in the face of my kind of anti-Catholic chip. And after a while, I kind of got over it, [laughs] through just how open they were. Also, they used the Jesuit way,

which again is very psychological, and in many ways very similar to the Buddhist. So I really—I began to pray the way that they tell you to, to kind of go into a scene, and kind of be in the scene, and have an experience of Jesus—have an experience of Jesus, you know, that's very phenomenological, and personal. So all of this—my Christian life got deeper and deeper, because I was doing all of this. I learned about the Meyers-Briggs, and that was great fun.

And then after a year of this kind of deepening, I was in Wernersville, and I had a dream in which Barbara Kelley—this embarrasses her so much; bless her heart—priest in the diocese, came to me in the dream. Barbara had been the interim at Trinity; that's how I knew her. She was the first woman priest that I ever knew well, and I noticed what kind of nonsense she was going through, particularly from the women in the parish! I was just really horrified! [Laughs] I mean, bless her heart. These pioneer priest women just took such grief! And I have a huge respect for her generally. I think she's a wonderful priest.

So she came to me in the dream, and grabbed me by the collar, and shook me back and forth, and said, "You need to get ordained." So I woke up, laughing, and then I went to see Peyton Craighill, who at the time was the head of the diaconal program, under Allen Bartlett, who was the bishop at that time. I talked to Peyton about my call. He said that I was not like a lot of deacon candidates in that I wasn't really involved in the community so much. I was really a lot involved in learning and teaching.

I then became very involved in the Hyacinth Program out here, which was offering support to men with—it was almost all men—gay

men with AIDS. It was young gay men at that time, mostly, late eighties, early nineties. I became the companion of a guy who was dying of AIDS; his name was Gus. And I walked with him through that year and a half. I just always felt called to people who were marginalized by virtue of their sexuality, I think partly because of my own experience; partly because of how the church has always—the Catholic Church—"the church" is always the Catholic Church—but the Christian Church in general dealt with sexuality, which was so pathological, it seemed to me. So that was the direction I went.

And at that time, some people started coming to me here in my practice who had been sexually abused as children, and who hated themselves. Hated themselves, as a result of that, in the way that Gus hated himself! So that way, that particular group of people in pain were very compelling to me, and so I—that was kind of where I found my ministry.

WC: When we talked before, you suggested that your work with people who have been abused, in one way or another, dovetailed with the call that you felt to the diaconate. Do you feel you've explained that relationship sufficiently, or not?

PN: Every deacon that I know—wants to be a deacon in the sense of be a servant-leader, be a leader who calls the church to its diaconal ministry, so that's part of what we do. Again, the ordinal says, "Speak to the Church about the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world." And every deacon that I know feels particularly compelled by, drawn to, some portion of the world's pain, because you can't do it all; it's too generalized. So one of my diaconal students who was just ordained is a single woman, now in her sixties, for whom the

situation of the elderly, particularly the elderly without family, is compelling. Obviously, that's who she is going to be, but also . . . so she now does hospice work in nursing homes, and she advocates on behalf of those folks. So, and the thing that calls you is obviously something to do with your own history, your own wounds, of course. How else? So—

WC: So all these pieces fit together?

PN: Yeah, and the particular piece of the world's pain that just rings bells for me—trying to describe, it's like, woo! Because that was part of what happened with Charles [Bennison], is the way those two overlapped. So I'll get to that. I have a client who was sexually abused by her father, and blamed for it, because that always is part of what happens: "This is your fault. This is your doing. This is what you want me to do," who believes that she was so inherently toxic and bad, and evil, that she was afraid that if she told me her story, I would get cancer. So she literally experiences herself as a toxic element, radioactive, in the world. And I think it's hard to imagine that degree of self-hatred, but that's what's there.

And something in me - obviously having to do with my own issues, of course, but also out into the world - is compelled to take someone like that and say, "God loves you. God loves you. You can't love yourself. You may not believe anybody else loves you. God loves you. It's pouring into you." And that sense that God is in tears, desperately trying, begging that person to take in that love, and God's absolute vulnerability, and openness, and willingness to take anything, in the face of the need to let that person know how loved

she is—that's a kind of a central core of my diaconal ministry, of wanting to kind of join God in that.

WC: So, when did you formally begin the process of becoming a deacon?

PN: I—blah! [Laughs] I became a postulant in '93, so it was like '91, '92 that I was going through—again, having gone through all that stuff with the dream, I went to talk to Peyton, who's just a darling, lovely, sweet—gosh—man. He was a priest in the diocese at the time; he's now retired and lives in South Carolina. And did all the stuff—had the psychological evaluation, wrote all the stuff. Part of the story that I brought was the story of my three marriages, and the circumstances of my son's birth. And I just—I just thought, okay, if this makes me unsuitable to be a deacon, then that's the COM's decision and the bishop's decision.

WC: The COM?

PN: I'm sorry—the Commission on Ministry's decision, because you go before the Commission on Ministry. It was called the COOP—it doesn't matter. The Commission on Ministry's decision. But that was part of what I kind of—the story I brought. Because I really thought, God wants me to do this, I was pretty peaceful. I thought, if I'm not supposed to be doing this, I won't be doing this; he'll say no, and that'll be the end of it. I did think that was going to happen, because God wanted me to do it! And I knew it. Many people have had a very painful experience with the Commission on Ministry. I did not. I had a good time.

WC: That's the diocesan—?

PN: Yes, that's the diocesan committee whose job is to advise the bishop on issues of ordination. It's ultimately the bishop's decision whether

or not a person is ordained, but the bishop, in every diocese, calls some group, which in our diocese is called now the Commission on Ministry, to advise it, and to be part of joint discernment: is this what God is calling this person to do? As well as an assessment of: Is this person suitable? Are there psychological reasons, for example, why this person shouldn't be loosed on the church [laughs] as an ordained person! I was on the Commission on Ministry for fifteen years, later, so I got to know their work.

WC: When you first encountered the Commission on Ministry as an aspiring deacon, had you had any interaction at the diocesan level before?

PN: Yeah.

WC: In other words, was the diocese something that you paid attention to, or was it sort of out of your frame of reference?

PN: It had started to be a part of my frame of reference because I wanted to get involved, and I became this lay leader in Trinity. I became first a delegate to the deanery clericus meetings, and then I became a member of diocesan—

WC: Which deanery?

PN: Bucks.

WC: Bucks Deanery?

PN: Yeah.

WC: So you were a delegate from your church to the Bucks Deanery?

PN: Right. And then I became a delegate from Bucks Deanery to Diocesan Council, pretty quickly. And so I think that went on for maybe two years before I started formation, and then I had to leave. So I got to know a lot of people. That was during the time—it was,

well, ’93 the Church in England finally started ordaining women to the priesthood. I remember that. I was at Diocesan Council, and I remember all the argument about that. In the early nineties, there was still a tremendous amount of argument going on about the ordination of women. At Diocesan Convention, there would be these long lines of people. I remember this—I don’t know if you were there at that time—pro-microphone, con-microphone.

WC: Even though this, of course, was a *fait accompli*?

PN: That’s right.

WC: So they were still hashing it over?

PN: Oh, very much hashing it over, in quite hurtful ways. But there were quite a few women at that point. There was by that time a kind of an “old girls’ system”, old girls’ group, in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, and when I started to go into the process, they talked to me. I was given some advice about some things that was really helpful. So I felt I had a degree of support and sisterhood there that was very, very helpful, and certainly that those first women didn’t have in the same way, though heaven knows, people supported them, too.

WC: So the old girls’ system was composed of women who had been ordained? Is that right?

PN: Women priests.

WC: Women priests. Were there any other people in this?

PN: Well, the women priests were helpful to me about the whole question of being an aspirant, what was called at that time an aspirant, because they had gone through that. So there was a psychologist doing the process at the time, and I got the word that he was really very sexist. So I was pre-warned.

WC: Who were the leaders of this old girls'—?

PN: Oh, the people—oh, come on, Pam. Laurie Hurtt, Joy Mills, were doing a lot of bringing women together to just talk about being women, being women Christians. Not all those women were ordained. And we were getting letters. There was a group that called itself Something Circle, and I remember it might have been—I don't want to say who it was, because I don't know who it was, but somebody, a male priest of the women-can't-be-priests school wrote something, sent something out that said, "Women getting together in circles are called witches." It was—[laughs]. So that whole kind of stuff was going on at that time.

The gathering of women had that kind of defensive quality of feminism to some extent under attack, and women who weren't so, we weren't so sure of ourselves; we were a little scared. So in some ways it was really silly; in other ways it was really nice. And again, Barbara Kelly, I remember, was one of those who called me to warn me about certain things that she was concerned I might have to go through, and I just needed to—she was going to be there for me. I could call her if I needed her. I was deeply grateful for that. Peyton, obviously, is a man, and he was nothing but lovely and supportive to me. There were people, I think, on the COM who were disturbed by my story, because gosh, it was a story of sin.

WC: You had been asked to share that?

PN: Yeah. Part of what happens when you're ordained is that you write your spiritual autobiography, and I can't tell that story without telling that story. I mean, to leave that out would be leaving out a big piece of not only motivation, but in some ways I got dragged into

Christianity kicking and screaming. I didn't want to be a Christian; I just was, ultimately because I'm baptized, and because it was Christ who came to me and pulled me out of the pit. I don't believe that that couldn't have happened to me if I'd been a member of another religion; I know it could have. But that wasn't me, you know. Commitment is not always so easy for me to do, and so God said to me, "Do this and shut up," because that's kind of what you have to say! [Laughs] So that was my story, so I just told that story, without—just, that was my story, so if that was a problem for them, then—

WC: Part of the discernment process is coming clean, so to speak?

PN: Absolutely! Absolutely. And I mean, I couldn't—the other thing that you're told, which I hope is—well, I don't know if it's true or not. It's true among my people, because I'm now doing what Peyton did, and trying very hard to channel his lovingness while doing it, is that you're told that when you're ordained, your file is shredded. So there's a tremendous amount of assessment and discernment going on during the whole, very vulnerable time of being an aspirant, a postulant, and a candidate for holy orders. That's still true.

WC: Now, when you went for formal training, you studied at—?

PN: I went to the Deacon's School. At that time, the Deacon's School met every Saturday from September through June, not December, at Church House. In the morning we would have classes. Our Old Testament class was Hal Taussig, from Lutheran.

WC: That was the teacher?

PN: He was the teacher. He was wonderful! Just wonderful. And there were seven of us in the class, so we had class, academic class in the morning. Then we had lunch together, and then in the afternoon we

would do—we learned the liturgical aspects of being a deacon. We learned a lot about, at the time, what we understand as community organizing, although at the time that was really not what we were doing, in the same way that I understand that now. We learned deacon skills, and we formed a community, which was really an important part of what we were doing. And again, we also learned that you have to find a way to fit this into your life, because none of us were going to stop doing what we were doing [to make a living].

Bob Ritchie, who is now a deacon in diocese, was one of my cohort; he was one of my brothers in that class. At that time he was a cop, a Philadelphia cop, and during our second year he was taking training down at Quantico for something, some kind of continuing education for his cop thing. So we would tape our sessions, and he would play them in his car on the way down to Quantico and back.

So everybody kept doing their work, and was incorporating their work with their diaconal training, and also getting their families used to the fact that they were going to be spending a certain amount of time every week doing deacon stuff. So it was structured that way, and that was called the Deacon's School, which when I started was being run by Peyton Craighill. By the time I ended, it was being run by Liz Colton. Liz at that time was a deacon. She was a deacon for ten years before she became a priest, and she was at that time the head of the deacon school.

WC: So, how long did this training—?

PN: Three years.

WC: Three years. And you finished—?

PN: I was ordained in September 22, 1996.

WC: Now at that point, the leadership of the diocese had changed hands?

PN: No, I was [laughs] ordained in late September. Charles Bennison was elected Bishop on like October 15th.

WC: So about the same time Allen stepped down.

PN: Leaving, right, right.

WC: But the whole process of his discernment had been ongoing.

PN: Correct. Correct.

WC: At some point you were the President of the Association of Episcopal Deacons?

PN: The Association for Episcopal Deacons.

WC: For Episcopal Deacons?

PN: Yeah.

WC: Can you talk a little bit about that.

PN: Yeah. That was much later. I became the President of AED in March of—oh, heavens, okay—2011 through 2013. The way that AED does this is that you're elected vice president; you're vice president for two years, and president-in-waiting. Then you're president for two years, and then you're past president.

WC: Right, not uncommon.

PN: Right, which is still a member of the executive council. So I will end my past president term in March, and then I will not be on the board or the Executive Council of AED.

WC: Is that an important part of your career?

PN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Again, there's a whole story of Charles [Bennison] coming in and destroying the diaconal program, and all that drama. And then at some point, I simply stopped being involved in the diocese, because I determined that it was futile. I stand by that

determination. So I got very involved in my parish, which at that time - the parish I was assigned to was St. Andrews, Yardley. I was there with Daniel Hamby, who is a dear friend.

WC: Yes.

PN: And a great priest. I was there nine years, which is a ridiculous term for a deacon. I was just hiding out and staying—I mean, I was there. I was very much involved there, but—

WC: Doing what?

PN: I was there liturgically. I was leading groups of people to Guatemala—no, El Salvador, sorry. We were doing—we had a mission into El Salvador, building houses. Every year we went there, and I was translating, because I know Spanish. We got very involved in our connection to Aid for Friends. I did a lot of—because there was a man and a woman on staff, there were certain women who were afraid of men for reasons having to do with their history, so they kind of connected to me. It's a good thing, I think, to have a man and a woman on staff in a church, because some people can't really relate to the opposite sex, or their own sex! It's just, there's a choice there for people. I was the deacon there, doing diaconal work.

I wanted desperately to start a diaconal program in this diocese. I couldn't do it; it just wasn't possible because of Charles. So I then—I started being asked to do retreats. I did a retreat for the deacons of Southern Virginia. That was really fun. I was asked to facilitate a meeting of the diaconal program in New Jersey.

So when I was ordained, in '96, there were 33 active deacons in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. There were 40 active deacons in the Diocese of New Jersey. By about three years ago, four years ago,

there were 70 active deacons in the Diocese of New Jersey; there were five in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. So, New Jersey was making it work, even with all their hoo-hah that they went through. So I know a lot of people; I got to know a lot of deacons from all over the country. I got very involved in the diaconal movement, to support deacons, because deacons are really not—

WC: Nationally?

PN: Nationally, Church-wide. I mean, if you went to the Episcopal Church and asked for a list of deacons, by which I mean vocational deacons, you wouldn't get it, because they don't know. Because we're not in the Church pension fund, because we're non-stipendiary. So we have always kept all our own records about the diaconate. I think at some point the Church is going to finally stop doing that. So really, AED, which at that time was called North American Association for the Deaconate—we changed our name; that was one of the things that happened under my presidency—was "it" for deacons. We have annual programs for trainers, archdeacons for training, and so we've been very involved in the training, and doing the training.

Right now there is a canon for deacons, which is for deacons, not transitional deacons. So Title 3, Canon 6 of the Episcopal Church Constitution and Canons is about deacons. That happened in 2003. And it was huge; it was the lever I used to get the Diocese of Pennsylvania to change our diaconal program. When I was ordained to the diaconate, it was under the same canon as transitional deacons, whose job is completely different.

WC: Explain the difference between vocational and transitional deacons.

PN: The best way I can do that is probably to just do the history. So back in the day—we're talking the early Church, Paul's Church, Pauline Church—there were bishops and deacons, shepherds and sheepdogs. [Laughs] So in Rome, for example, there were only seven deacons. So deacons were very high status. Gregory the Great was a deacon before he became a Pope. So that was one model of the Church.

The other model of the Church was a council of presbyters, elders that were the leaders of the synagogues. Initially, when it came together, the bishop was the liturgical leader. It was the bishop who would consecrate the bread for the community, and then often the deacons would take it out. The deacon was the agent of the bishop, who did a lot of things, but one of the jobs they did was to constantly be telling the Church about the widows and orphans, making sure the widows and orphans were taken care of. Did a whole lot of other stuff; often were the trainers, the teachers, of the catechumens, who were coming in to be baptized. And then the elders, the council of presbyters, were the people who took care of the administrative aspects. They were not primarily liturgical leaders. They were administrative leaders.

That went on for about 500 years, during what's now called the Golden Age of the diaconate, because there were deacons all over the place. In the Constantinian Church, suddenly there became more of a hierarchical sense. The Church wasn't all that hierarchical. It was more there were people with areas of responsibility called out, because of their gifts. So as it started to be the *cursus honorum*, the ladder of honor, where the Christian Church and the Roman Empire started speaking the same language, probably literally in the sense of

Latin, but also in terms of culture, that you would start going up ladders of holiness, and would show your worthiness in the lower levels in order to be fit to go in the higher levels, which was absolutely a Roman idea that got planted onto the Church, along with all kinds of other things.

And then between the—leading up to the end of the first millennium, the Church started requiring celibacy, which was ridiculous. Anyway, and so the stakes got higher to be ordained. So it became deacon, priest, bishop. Bishops started taking over more and more of the administrative stuff. Bishops became princes, literally. Priests. Now, there are a lot of churches around; the Church grew so quickly. So they're taking care of congregations, and they're liturgical leaders in congregations. And deacons were sort of: what's a deacon? And then it got to be, so a deacon was a person who was going up the ladder to be a priest. And if you were going to be ordained, and deacons, priests, and bishops had to be celibate, then you might as well go as high as you could. So under those circumstances, the diaconate sort of fell away, except as a testing, probationary period for the priesthood. Francis was a deacon, because the Pope wanted to have some control over him! [Laughs] So he was told he had to be ordained a deacon, and he was.

WC: You're talking about . . .

PN: Saint Francis of Assisi.

WC: Of Assisi, okay.

PN: Yeah. Little Gidding—the poem of T. S. Eliot, the Four Quartets, one of them is called "Little Gidding." There was a community in the 15th century, 16th century, in England, run by Nicholas Farrar, who was a

deacon. So there were a few deacons around, but not that many, because really, the people who would be deacons were people who were trying to be priests, but weren't good enough. In the modern world, in the end of the 19th century into the 20th century, the diaconate started being given to people who were seen as somehow unfit to be priests, but were seen as—wanted that. So the indigenous deacons, that's David Pendleton Oakerhater, the best known of those.

The deaconesses? Women were really . . . The first wave of feminism had to do with women wanting to come out of the home, and serving in the world. And women who, I think, were called to the priesthood were made deaconesses, required to be celibate, required to live in community. And the Church of England argued for ten years about whether to make women in any sense officers of the Church. Those pioneer women, again, were amazing. And then in 1958, at the Lambeth Conference, there was a committee whose job was, should we get rid of this order all together, because it's really stupid? It's an order of people who are somehow not good enough to be in another order. Where's the theology in that?

But again, the Anglican Church isn't going to get rid of an order. So they [laughs] started what were called "permanent deacons." Permanent deacons were men who were ordained under the 1928 rubric,which said if you do well in this ministry, you can go on to the better ministry, this inferior ministry. And they became—in the growing post-war Church, they were the chalice-bearers, the Eucharistic visitors, the Eucharistic ministers, the readers, the guys who somehow couldn't get up on the—yeah. So now those jobs are all taken by the laity.

Some people think that deacons are still permanent deacons, whose job was mainly to be helpers of the priests. There were 350 of them; mostly they're now gone. Then the 1979 *Prayerbook*—I know this is really long, but I don't know how to say this without kind of explaining how it came to be. The 1979 *Prayerbook*, which was intentionally patterned on the early Church, the pre-Medieval Church, and also very much took into account Vatican II, which was intentionally patterned on the ancient Church, came up with two ideas that were really important. One was the baptismal covenant, the thing that the baptized are called to, which is more than just being washed of sin, and you could get out of Limbo kind of nonsense, understanding of baptism. And also a diaconal ordinal that's a call. You are called to speak to the Church about the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.

And once that started happening, there were people who said, "Oh, I'm that!" and got called to it. So the early deacons, Ormonde Plater, Ted Hallenbeck, and others, started a diaconal community, which was the beginning of the North American Association for the Dioconate, that eventually became the Association for Episcopal Deacons, and began to understand who they are a little differently from the deaconesses, and struggled [laughs] with the deaconesses for control of this, an understanding of who this community is. But they also, as people started being called to this ministry, they started doing theology, about what am I, and what am I called to? And what does this mean for the church? And we've been doing that ever since.

So a vocational deacon, which [is] the sort of politically correct way to say that, is that there are deacons and transitional deacons;

that's the language I tend to use. So deacons, vocational deacons, are called to a non-stipendiary ministry, to call the Church out into the world, to understand that we are not only a place that dispenses sacraments. We are a place where you are strengthened to be Christ in the world, in whatever venue you're in—at your work, in your home. We spread out all over the place. We be little "Christs" out in the world! [Laughs] And that the deacon's job is to only talk about that, only concern ourselves with that. Our role in the Eucharist is to show what that [servant ministry] looks like in the context of the Eucharist.

WC: And the transitional deacons?

PN: Transitional deacons—so it is still required, if a person wants to become a priest, they have to be a deacon. They have to go before a bishop and say that they are truly called to the diaconate, which is very disturbing to me, because they're not called to the diaconate at all. They're called to the priesthood. So there's an understanding of the diaconate which makes it kind of a piece of a priest, or a mini-priest, or an almost, not quite priest. And then there's a diaconate that's about people called to that ministry, and that's the tension in the Church right now.

WC: You once referred to the diaconate as an ambivalent order. Is that what you mean?

PN: That's what I mean, yeah. I think people—I think confusing is actually maybe a better word. There is confusion still in the Church about what a deacon is, and I think part of the job of vocational deacons, that is deacons, is to teach and clarify the call. It's not just about turf. It's about the integrity of the call, which then hopefully

speaks to the integrity of the call of the Church to be the servant church in the world. Because the call to kind of be the "Holy Us," who really have a wonderful time, and we love each other, and we love our liturgies, and we love our sacraments—I mean, I don't mean to be snarky about that. I love all that. It's not enough.

And most priests are so busy, especially these days, when the Church is under such pressure, are so busy trying to hold the community together, grow the community, do their pastoral and liturgical job, deal with the boilers and the ceilings of these buildings that are falling down—and they're hired, they're paid by their parishioners. If they decide, "I'm not going to do Eucharist this week, because I'm busy doing some thing in the community," they're going to be called before the vestry, and they're going to get in trouble. But I won't get in trouble for that, because A, the vestry isn't paying me anything [laughs] other than mileage, and B, that's what I'm there for. That's what the bishop sent me there for. So I have a kind of freedom in the parish.

WC: You are ambassador to the world, basically?

PN: A lot of us think of ourselves as bridges. We're a bridge. One foot in the Church, one foot in the world, inviting back and forth, but mostly saying, "If you're going to sit there and take in Christ's love, which you do it, it's there for you? Then somehow you're called to be expressing that in the world." Because if you're not doing that, then you're really not taking it in. Now, it's not that priests don't know that, and preach that; it's that they can't focus only on that. Priests have a heck of a job, especially in this day and age, where they don't have the kind of support that they did back in the day.

WC: Now, you pointed out a few minutes ago that the diaconate has shrunk over the last fifteen or twenty years in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, and you referred to the role of the bishop in that regard. How so? What happened?

PN: Charles—

WC: Charles Bennison.

PN: Bennison, yeah. Charles Bennison. He came into the Church and said there was going to be a deacon in every parish, which is part of why the deacons supported him. This came to be called, somewhat sarcastically, as the "deacon in every pot" theory. [Laughs]

WC: [Laughs]

PN: And he brought the deacons into the liturgies. Again, he did this in many, many venues, so heaven knows it wasn't just us. We were the first. He said, "I'm going to"—at that time, one of the things that happened on the diocesan level was—

WC: At that time, when Charles first came.

PN: Right, when Charles first got there, correlative to that, there was an idea in the diocese that the Deacon's School was too expensive. This wasn't actually true. It had to do with certain things that were being charged to the Deacon's School. But that aside, that was the message, so we had to change the Deacon's School. We looked into, and tried having the deacons go to Lutheran, to get their classes at Lutheran. The problem with that was that Lutheran classes don't happen in order for people—I mean, these are all working people. They can't just give up their life and go to school all the time. So people were taking Theology before they took Old Testament, which doesn't make any sense. I mean, Theology and History are all grounded in scripture, so

if you don't know scripture, you're not going to—so the education got to be problematical. Charles then moved in and said he was now—he moved Liz out.

WC: Liz?

PN: Colton, as head of the program. He said, "I'm going to run the program." He dissolved the program! He put it in pieces. He gave me the task, which I took on gladly, of studying other diaconal programs, and coming up with a proposal, which I did. For two years, I learned everything I could about models of diaconal formation. I wrote a report. I gave it to Charles. Charles took the report, and then said, "So what Pam has concluded is that what we need to do is to make sure that every deacon has twenty units of education at Lutheran Seminary," which is two-thirds of an M. Div., to the tune of about $20 to $25,000. Basically that was it. There was no diaconal formation at all. There were a number of things that Lutheran was doing for their people that the deacons did.

So he came up with a program that was two-thirds of an M. Div., that had no diaconal formation in it, that required people to pay a terrific amount of money, which they weren't going to, for a non-stipendiary ministry, where the cohort, the people they were with in formation, were mostly Lutheran pastors, who were going to go be pastors in the world, and some Episcopal priests in training. A lot of women in the Episcopal Church do most of their M. Div. at Lutheran, and then would go on to spend a year commuting to General Seminary in order to be Anglicized, to kind of get their Anglican training. So those were the people, are the people, at Lutheran. They didn't know anything about being deacons. The ones who went through that

program had a heck of a time being deacons! They didn't know what it was. There was no diaconal training. It just was a stupid program!

And a couple of people—Jim Ley, one of the archdeacons, who went through that program, who has a wonderful diaconal ministry down in Chester, became archdeacon because nobody would do it. I wouldn't do it. Charles asked me to do it. I said no, because if you were doing it, you would have to promote his program, and it was a stupid program! [Laughs] So Jim, who didn't know anything about that, and who had gone through the program, became archdeacon, and sort of began to understand himself as the person whose job it was to protect the bishop from the deacons, who were raising hell. Actually, most deacons just left.

WC: Was it the deacons, or the postulants?

PN: Well, the postulants left. Increasingly there were no postulants.

WC: Because the program was too difficult?

PN: It made no sense. It wasn't so difficult. It was in many ways less difficult than the current program. It just was stupid. It would train someone to be two-thirds of a Lutheran pastor!

WC: So it was irrelevant?

PN: Yes, it was irrelevant, mostly. It was an excellent theological education, Lutheran theologic—you know, Lutheran is an excellent school. It overlapped what deacons need to do by about maybe a fourth. And it was really expensive.

WC: So if I understand you correctly, what you're saying is that the program that Charles implemented, one that was based at least in part on the report that you wrote—

PN: It was not based at all on the report that I wrote.

WC: Well, you wrote the report.

PN: I wrote the report.

WC: And he implemented a program?

PN: Correct.

WC: One followed the other?

PN: Correct.

WC: Whether they had any relationship to each other, or not.

PN: Right. The relationship was this: that Charles put my name on it, and I threw a fit, and he took my name off of it.

WC: So it really wasn't suited to the job?

PN: Yeah. And the last time that Charles met with the deacons as a group, and told us what he was going to do, I remember Liz Colton standing up and saying, "I beg you, Bishop. Please don't do this. This is going to destroy the diaconate." And he did it anyway, and it did.

WC: Did he ever explain why he did it the way he did it?

PN: You know, he said—what Bishop Bennison did, and the thing is, I know he did this in many other places. I saw him do exactly this in many other places, which is why most of the diocesan committees fell apart. He would latch onto—he would do a kind of wide study, and then he would latch onto one piece of it, and he would say, "For this reason, I'm going to do this." What he said was, "If deacons are going to preach, they have to have a theological education. Therefore, they have to go to Lutheran. Therefore they have to blah, blah, blah, blah;" it all followed from that.

And what we kept saying is, "Not all deacons do need to preach. If a deacon's really a lousy preacher, then it's up the rector in whatever parish the deacon is in to decide whether or not the deacon

preaches, to decide what the deacon preaches." I mean, it's not the deacon's pulpit; it's the priest's pulpit. And unlike an associate priest, who must preach, a deacon doesn't have to preach, and not all deacons are called to it. So some deacons, working very hard with their priests, will come up with one quarterly sermon, and deliver that. I preach once a month; I'm a good preacher, but I do it because the priest in the parish I'm at has given me permission to do so. So that's part of it. And he just didn't—besides the fact [that] you don't have to go to seminary to learn to preach. Preaching is part of the current program. And he did that, and then he would just say it over and over and over again. I went to him and spent two hours laying out all of this, and he sat and he nodded, and nothing happened.

WC: And you saw him do this sort of reaction, or take this sort of reaction, not just in the diaconate program, but in other programs? So when you said, "I saw him do this in lots of other places," you weren't referring just to his reaction or his leadership of deacons. You were referring to his leadership—

PN: Correct. Correct.

WC: —in a variety of areas within the diocese? He'd latch onto a particular idea, whether it was supported by those around him or not, and run with it.

PN: My husband, Cliff Nesbit, was on the search that found Charles. He was very excited by Charles, and really wanted to work with him to—to revitalize the diocese. Cliff put together the Visioning Program that went on right after Charles was consecrated. All kinds of people came into Church House, and were given lunch, and there was all kinds of structures around, people putting forth their ideas, and talking

about what they wanted to have happen. And a report came out of that. Charles took that report, ignored it, and substituted his own agenda, and said it was the same thing. So I know that happened, because I watched what my husband went through while it was happening.

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The only reason this didn't go into yet another one of the huge Charles fights that we lived through for so long was because it became clear he was going to have to leave. He got pushed out by the change in the canons. That meant that the House of Bishops was going to pull him out of this diocese.

WC: He, of course, explained to the world that his decision to resign was the result of the Standing Committee's unwillingness to extend his contract, so to speak.

PN: The Standing Committee had no standing, no authority to not extend his contract. I mean, a bishop in the Episcopal Church—and again, Charles Bennison changed the definition of bishop in the Episcopal Church. That was kind of the result of this whole thing. A bishop is a bishop, and a bishop has to resign at age 72, which in Charles Bennison's case would have been like 2015. But they cannot be forced to resign before that. They can be inhibited if there's a presentment. The first presentment that came from the Standing Committee had to do with what he did around money. The second

presentment had to do with what he did around his brother's predation.

WC: Indiscretions, yeah.

PN: Sexual predation—it was predation; she was fourteen.

WC: It's well known. We don't need to—

PN: Yeah. Actually, you know, it's not. The story of what actually happened is—don't get me started on that. This is me, now, the deacon, but it had to do with the way Charles handled that situation.

WC: Right.

PN: And then he was inhibited, and then he was brought back.

WC: Right, because the statute of limitations, it was said, had expired.

PN: Right, right. And the question was whether the statute of limitations applied to a person who was not the abuser. The court that found him guilty said it did not, because it was a case of sexual misconduct. The appeals court said that it did apply. So Charles came back.

WC: This was a couple years ago. It was something that the Standing Committee did about his status, which he then publicly said was his reason to resign. Because he did resign before he had to. In other words, he could have stayed. He wasn't 72.

PN: Yeah.

WC: I forget what that was.

PN: The letter that I received announcing Charles' resignation, which happened in approximately October of 2013—

WC: Right, late fall.

PN: You said it was before the Convention.

WC: Was it 2013 or 2012?

PN: It was 2012. It was 2012. Said that, "I have finished my work here. I feel that I've done my work," which got a lot of laughter, "And I'm choosing to resign." The Standing Committee did not, could not, throw him out. What I think happened in the background was, okay, so the previous July the canon for bishops was changed, so that if a relationship between a bishop and a parish became so bad that they called the National Church in, and the National Church said it was bad, then two-thirds of the House of Bishops could dissolve that relationship. That was new and, as I said, really changed the definition of what a bishop is, because before that a bishop, other than being thrown out for a crime, could not—no matter how bad the relationship was with the diocese—could not be forced to leave. That change in the canons became law on September 1st, which was really unusual, because usually they become law at the beginning of Advent.

At that point, as I understand it, certain people went to Bishop Bennison and started talking to him about resigning, with a clear threat that if he was still Bishop of Pennsylvania the following March, the House of Bishops, who had asked him and begged him to resign, publicly, would dissolve the relationship. And they made it very clear to Charles that they were going to do that. And the issue for Charles was, was he going to fight that, or was he not going to fight that? And conversations that I don't know about were had, and he decided basically that he could either be the first bishop to be publicly thrown out of his diocese by the House of Bishops, which would have happened, or to resign, and we would have a party.

WC: Let's talk about the Diocesan Transition Team, of which you're a member, and as I recall—

PN: Chair.

WC: Yeah, co-chair. How did that get started?

PN: Charles announced he was going to leave. Ledlie Laughlin, who was at that time the president of the Standing Committee, and who in my opinion did an extraordinary job of keeping the diocese together when Charles came back. One of the things Charles did was to play people off against each other, so Ledlie had a regular monthly meeting of all of the diocesan leaders, to which Charles was also invited; it wasn't against him, it was just, "Everybody's going to get together once a month, and we're going to talk about what we're doing, so that everybody knows what everybody else is doing." So it wasn't framed as against Charles; it was framed as opening communication, and it started before Charles came back, but it was very effective in keeping people from being played off against one another.

I also think that the fact that the House of Bishops asked him to resign and he said no, meant that at least among a lot of clergy, that's when they gave up on him, because they were so shocked by that. So, Charles didn't have the same power. Anyway, so Charles was going to leave. Ledlie called together two meetings of diocesan leaders of every kind, and said, "What do we need to do next?" And out of that, and also a lot of conversation with Clay Matthews and the National Church, the decision was made not to go into a search immediately for the next diocesan.

The decision was made to have a provisional bishop. There were several people recommended by the National Church to a subcommittee of the Standing Committee, to do that. They chose Dan Daniel, who had been the chair of the appeals committee that had sent

Charles back, as it happened. And then the following December, Ledlie asked me to be on the Transition Team. So the standing committee decided they needed a team of people under the aegis of the Standing Committee to run this transition. So he asked about twelve people to do that, lay and ordained, including some Standing Committee members. In December we met for the first time, and Ledlie asked me to chair that. So I chaired it; I was the chair of that.

And then in January, Dan Daniel was elected, or made provisional bishop. He didn't really get to the diocese until March of 2013. At that point the bishop and the transition team started meeting together and working with Ki Thoughtbridge, who are consultants. We had spent the winter talking to various consultant organizations, and picked Ki Thoughtbridge to work with. We started going into retreats and very long meetings with Ki Thoughtbridge from March through September. Last summer we were meeting every other week. It was a long, [laughs] hard-working summer!

Out of our particular understanding of the issues that were there in our group, we started thinking of what needs to happen for the diocese, for there to be healing and reconciliation, particularly in the face of the fact that some people think we should just get moving, and stop talking about the past—how to offer things to people who needed them, while at the same time starting to move forward. I got to know Dan Daniel quite well in that context, and I have enormous admiration for him. I think he's done a wonderful job.

And then at the clergy conference in early October of last year, 2013, we presented our plan to the clergy. We then talked about it at the Diocesan Convention. We then did a survey. We had a liturgy.

We started offering workshops, "Re-Membering" workshops for groups of people to come together and kind of tell their stories together, to build community and kind of give people an opportunity to be heard, about what they had gone through. That's all going pretty well now.

The structure—about a year into this, the structure changed, so now there is a leadership team, which consists of me and the bishop and Ledlie, and there's a group who's doing the workshops. There's a group who's doing the liturgies. There's a group who's doing communication, which is a big problem in this diocese. And some time—I don't want to speculate when, but some time, the bishop is going to call for a search, but very much wants to make sure that as few people as possible have the experience of being kind of ignored or dismissed before we go forward.

WC: Tell me a little bit more about the role of history in this whole process, of reconciliation. What role does it play?

PN: I think Ki Thoughtbridge had—this is brilliant idea on their part, remembering—have you been to one?

WC: No.

PN: Okay. The way they work is that you walk in, and there is a timeline, a long timeline along the wall, of the history of the Diocese of Pennsylvania, that goes back to the 17th century.

WC: Right, based in part on *This Far by Faith*.

PN: That's right. That's right. And everybody is asked to write on the timeline when they joined the diocese. So if they were a child, and were baptized in the diocese at the age of one month, that's when they joined the diocese. And then significant events for them in their

diocesan life, so I put when I joined the diocese; I put my date of ordination. And then if they wanted to, they could put significant things that happened in the world that weren't already on there. So people wrote on this thing, kind of where they fit. But what was there to see was the whole history. This is an old diocese! [Laughs] We're now at the 230th, or something, diocesan convention. It's actually very—

WC: 1784.

PN: Yeah. So, yeah. And then, there's some—I don't remember the first part. That's really interesting. It doesn't matter. And then after people had kind of been oriented to the process, and to each other, then they go and sit around the timeline, and starting with the person who came to the diocese first, a person is supposed to stand up and tell their story. Now, we were supposed to do that in three to five minutes; it doesn't happen. So it's like, "I joined the diocese at this point, under these circumstances. This has been my story in this diocese."

And if part of their particular story was mine, about passionately wanting to have a good diaconal program here, and having Charles basically undermine that, and sabotage that, then that's part of my story. The fact that I went before the Convention and told Charles to resign, as a deacon, was a significant part of my story, because deacons are called to obey their bishop. I did that very respectfully, but I did it because of what he did out in Upland.

WC: You're referring to—?

PN: I'm referring to his not stopping his brother from—

WC: In Upland, California?

PN: Yeah, from preying on a teenage girl, and his not getting it. I mean, I had been writing to him and saying, "Do you understand what sexual abuse does to people? It leads people to hate themselves. How could a Christian possibly support this?" And he did what he did. He sent out a thing that says, "Pam Nesbit has now told me the truth, and now I understand it, and now let's not talk about it anymore." And I thought—so I basically said that at convention, and anyway, I'm glad I did. I thought it was important to say.

WC: This diocese has a long history of prickly relationships among parishes and bishops, and between parishes and bishops.

PN: Indeed. Mm-hm.

WC: Or between parishes and bishops, and parishes. So have people, in talking about the timeline, recalled earlier times when this was the case?

PN: Oh, yeah. Some did. Some did. And some—when I did this—the deacons as a group did this, which was wonderful for our community. There were people who came into the diocese, people who were recently ordained, who had very little to do with Charles Bennison, because Bishop Michel, Rodney Michel, was the bishop for deacons up until last March, so the person that they wrote their Ember Day letters to. One of the things that you do when you're in formation is that every Ember Day - which is four times a year - you write a letter to the bishop, saying what's going on with you and your spiritual life. It's part of his discernment, and your relationship with him in your formation time.

And those letters are in your record, and are read by the Commission on Ministry as part of the discernment process. So

people get very close. I mean, I remember that relationship with Allen Bartlett, when I was in formation. It wasn't Charles that they were writing to, it was Bishop Rodney. So these people had very little to do with Charles, partly because Rodney was protecting them from Charles, and Charles had nothing to do with our program. So they had no beef with Charles.

There were people who were coming in from other dioceses, who knew something happened; it was a big deal, it was really painful for some people. I don't know what it is. Does that mean I have no place in this diocese? Folks feeling left out, or not upset. So there was the opportunity in the context of personal history and diocesan history to say, "This is what happened to me." "Oh! This is what happened to me." And at least in the diaconal one, people also talked a great deal about their ministries. So, you know, that's what I'm doing here!

So there was an opportunity for everybody to get inspired by everybody else's ministry, in that sense of, "We're all deacons." Because so many people don't know what a deacon is, you get with a group of deacons, and it's like: "Ah! These people!" I mean, the first time I went to an AED meeting, and I was in a room with 200 other deacons, I thought, I'm not crazy! There's really a thing here. All these different people are like me, in this respect. So that's, for deacons, particularly important. The history is like, okay, that's what happened to me from here to here. Okay, and now it's over, and now we'll move on.

WC: So it's a healing process?

PN: Very much so, I think, and very much a community-building process, because everybody is given the framework of, "Let's all listen to each other's stories." This was done. There were a couple groups of former diocesan leaders, [they] were the people who were invited, just anybody who had a leadership position in the diocese who wasn't part of a group that was already meeting as a group, got together and did this. These were people who had been on the opposite sides of some very angry fights. Gosh, it's 2:56. I have somebody calling at 3:00.

WC: Yes.

PN: And they were able to talk to each other!

WC: I know you have another commitment in a very short time. We've covered a lot of ground. Have we left anything out that you can think of right now that should be tied up before we call this session to a halt?

PN: Not that I can think of. I've been talking a mile a minute! [Laughs]

WC: You've been very candid about a lot of things, obviously. When you read the transcript, you'll probably be surprised about that. So, we'll stop.

PN: Okay.

[End of Interview]