Interview with Nokomis B. Wood by Clark Groome for the Diocese of Pennsylvania Oral History Project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 19, 2014.

CLARK GROOME: Okay, you're originally from New Orleans, right?

NOKOMIS WOOD: New Orleans is my home. Yes, that's correct.

CG: And how long did you live in New Orleans?

NW: I lived in New Orleans all of my life. I left at sixteen to go to college, and returned—

CG: Where?

NW: I went to college in Washington, DC, at Howard University.

CG: Ah!

NW: Got my undergraduate degree there, and returned to New Orleans for two years. Did some graduate work at Tulane, towards a—

CG: What was your undergraduate degree in?

NW: My undergraduate degree was in zoology. I was a pre-med major.

CG: Wow!

NW: And my graduate study was in clinical psychology.

CG: So you got the body and the mind, to take care of both of them, right?

NW: One would think so, yeah.

CG: [Laughs] Okay, so you were at Tulane, and you were back in New Orleans?

NW: In New Orleans for two years.

CG: For two years.

NW: And then came to Philadelphia.

CG: What brought you here?

NW: A job, literally a job. It was the kind of itch that young people get when they imagine that home is not really home. It was supposed to be a two-year stint between going to medical school.

CG: Ah!

NW: If a sense of history serves at all, in 1965 there were very few medical schools that were admitting women, and even fewer that were admitting black women. So my time in Philadelphia was to be a little hiatus, to earn some money for medical school, and to sort of look at my future.

CG: Was the fact that there were a bunch of really good medical schools in Philadelphia part of the reason you came up here?

NW: It had an effect, yes.

CG: I mean, with Penn and Jefferson, and Temple?

NW: Exactly, yeah.

CG: And Hahnemann, I guess, in those days.

NW: And of course, Women's Medical was going, was still operating, so you know, in a sense of fall back language.

CG: Oh, yeah, that was on the—yeah.

NW: Exactly. The job that brought me to Philadelphia was as a caseworker at Episcopal Community Services.

CG: Are you a lifelong Episcopalian?

NW: I am not. I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church as a young teenager, fourteen, and it was—it was ecclesiastical compromise. I was raised in a family—my father is a very devout, very active Roman Catholic layman, in a city where everybody's Roman Catholic, even Baptists.

CG: Of course, in New Orleans. Right, sure.

NW: And my mother is Protestant, a Baptist, Southern Baptist.

CG: So the Church of England was a midpoint?

NW: Exactly, Clark. The Church of England was the compromise. And what attracted me to the Episcopal Church was the liturgy, because it was what made the Roman Church very attractive to me.

CG: So you liked the theatrical—?

NW: I liked the Eucharistic-centered liturgy.

CG: Yeah, yeah.

NW: But—

CG: And the Baptists were a whole different style.

NW: Exactly, yeah.

CG: So you moved here, and you were working for Episcopal Community Services, but you didn't leave after two years?

NW: No, life sort of takes over. I got married, and started raising a family, and looked up, and I'm still here.

CG: And your husband is the son of an Episcopal priest?

NW: My husband is the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Episcopal priests! [Laughs]

CG: How did he escape?

NW: To this day, he's not sure.

CG: [Laughs]

NW: But Dan is the first—first male in five generations of his families, either on his mother's side, or his father's side, which is where the Episcopal priest legacy is a very long one, not to become ordained in the Episcopal Church.

CG: Okay, so you're in Philly, and you were working at ECS. Tell me a little bit about your career before we start talking about your involvement in the church, because obviously they're parallel, but—

NW: They're parallel, and they're not—certainly my career in many ways has informed much of what I know and believe about the Episcopal Church. And working at ECS as a caseworker in the late sixties was a very interesting time. It was an interesting time for the diocese. Am I talking loud enough?

CG: Mm-hm.

NW: And it was an interesting time for Philadelphia in particular, because—

CG: We're talking the mid-, late sixties?

NW: Late sixties. Philadelphia, among other things, was right in the throes of large North Philadelphia race riots, and the Girard College suit was nearing its end.

CG: I'm going to interrupt from time to time as I think of things that are timely.

NW: Okay.

CG: I'm assuming at that point, [Bob] DeWitt was the bishop?

NW: Bishop DeWitt was the bishop, yes.

CG: Okay.

NW: And before we talk about the kind of activism that was a gift of, you know, Bishop DeWitt's episcopacy, I want to stay just a minute with this Girard College suit.

CG: Right. Please do.

NW: And how it impacted ECS. ECS at the time was a very traditional social service agency. They had foster homes; they placed children in

foster homes that were wards of the state, through DPW or one of those entities.

CG: Right, Department of Public Welfare.

NW: Yes. They also, however, had a residential home, orphanage as it were, for girls, in West Philadelphia, on Baltimore Avenue, called Bard House.[1]

CG: B-A-R-D?

NW: B-A-R-D, which is a name of some benefactor notoriety of the Episcopal Church.

CG: Right.

NW: [Burd] House was a residential home for girls, young girls, and it was directly impacted by the Girard College case, because the same contingencies about who could benefit from [Burd] House were those that were the particulars in the Girard College case. [Burd] House was designated to be a home/orphanage for poor white girls, or homeless white girls, or motherless white girls.

CG: And Girard was for homeless white boys.

NW: Homeless white boys, yeah. So fast-forwarding, and during the time I was at ECS, when the Girard College case was resolved in favor of being available for all homeless boys of any color—

CG: But just boys, at that time?

NW: Just boys, the [Burd] School restriction was also toppled at that time.

CG: So the color barrier was down in both places?

NW: The color barrier was down. What ECS had to do, and what the diocese had to do, was to change the name from [Burd School],

[1] It's "Burd House"

because the trustees of that estate would not—would not cooperate with the school maintaining the Bard name. And it was renamed Hart House, H-A-R-T House, after Bishop Hart.

CG: Bishop Oliver Hart, who was the predecessor—

NW: That recently died, yes.

CG: Yeah, and he was the predecessor by one of Bob DeWitt.

NW: Exactly.

CG: Because [Bp. J. Gillespie] Armstrong was only there for half an hour, or something, because he died very quickly after he followed Bishop Hart.

NW: Mm-hm, right.

CG: Okay, so you're obviously, if you're working at ECS—okay, so after ECS, where did you go to work?

NW: After ECS, I went to [laughs] blaze territories that were totally new to me and my experiences. I accepted a job in what I soon came to understand was the equivalent of Philadelphia's tenderloin, at a settlement house, at 22nd and Columbia.

CG: Okay. Yeah, that was the tenderloin.

NW: Yes, the Wharton Center.

CG: Right.

NW: And I'm still quite young, and quite unsophisticated about urban living, and urban issues. So it was a very significant time in my personal and intellectual development.

CG: It was different for a black girl up here than it was in New Orleans, I would assume?

NW: Yes, in many ways.

CG: Was it more dangerous up here for you, do you think, than it was in New Orleans?

NW: Dangerous in what way?

CG: Well, I don't mean dangerous. Was it more difficult? Were you looked on differently here than in New Orleans? Was New Orleans more, even though it was in the Deep South, was it more accepting of—of—was it more heterogeneous, in terms of—?

NW: Yeah. Because of the nature of New Orleans' culture, which is not, in many ways—and certainly not in my lifetime, and historically not really ever—historically Southern.

CG: It's not the same as being in other places?

NW: It's not the same as being in Atlanta, or Savannah, or Charleston.

CG: Right.

NW: It has a characteristic that's much more cosmopolitan. So my social and cultural exposure, growing up in New Orleans, was probably more global in nature, than many African Americans growing up in other parts of the United States, and particularly—

CG: Like the tenderloin in Philly, or something?

NW: Like the tenderloin of Philly, or Boston, or New York, as I've come to understand. The northern black experience and the southern black experience is decidedly different.

CG: Okay. What did you do at this settlement house?

NW: I was a youth worker. I tutored students who were at risk. I worked with senior citizens. I was pretty much a program director and group worker, and when I left there several years later—I left in 1971 to have my first child—I was the executive director of a day care center that they ran for the community. So I did the full range of the kind of

community service, community organization work, that settlement houses did during those decades. And personally, it really was an introduction, in a very immediate and trial-fire way, to urban Philadelphia, and some of the conditions of the urban north.

CG: And as I remember Philadelphia, this was during Mayor Rizzo's time, I would imagine?

NW: I believe so, yeah.

CG: I don't know that, but—

NW: I forget the dates, but it was—

CG: There was—North Philadelphia was not Watts, but it was not also an easy place to be.

NW: Well, and certainly 22nd and Columbia, as I soon came to know, was at the center of what had been the gang wars.

CG: There had been gang wars, and there'd also been race riots up there.

NW: Incredible race riots. And I was able, as a part of my growth arc, witness firsthand brutality of the residents of North Philadelphia at the hand of the Philadelphia Police.

CG: Right.

NW: Very open, very blatant, and it was the young teenage boys that came to the center who were very helpful and instrumental in me understanding that, because they would come and share what their experiences were.

CG: Did you ever feel your life was in danger?

NW: I never felt my life was in danger, partly because I was just too naïve, and partly—

CG: [Laughs] That's probably good!

NW: Which was a good thing, now. But also partly because my personality has never permitted me to allow fear to be a dominant—a dominant player in my life. I think the combination of those things: I was just too young and dumb to be afraid.

CG: Wish you could bottle that, and sell it to me. Okay, so you quit and had a baby?

NW: Quit and had a baby, you know, went back to work five years later.

CG: Where were you living at that point?

NW: Well, when we were married we lived in West Philadelphia, University City. When I moved to Philadelphia, I moved to University City, on the advice of, you know, what's a good place for a young, single woman to live in Philadelphia?

CG: Yeah, that was a good place.

NW: Literally in the shadows of the University of Pennsylvania, where Saint Mary's Hamilton Village became my parish church.

CG: Right.

NW: I was married there, and my early church roots, then, became the University of Pennsylvania, that church, and that community, University City.

CG: Okay. Then when you had your baby?

NW: Moved to Mount Airy.

CG: And you've been there every since?

NW: Been there ever since.

CG: Okay, did you continue to go to Saint Mary's?

NW: Continued to go to Saint Mary's for [laughs]—commuting round trip, twenty miles on Sunday, and often during the week, for close to nine years.

CG: And then where did you go?

NW: Saint Martin-in-the-Fields.

CG: Okay. Back to the job thing—you didn't stay unemployed forever.

NW: I went to work at the Philadelphia Girl Scout Council as their training director. I've had a interesting path of careers, largely being influenced by the professional choice—[did you see it? Thunder and lightning!] Professional choice that would allow me maximum time with my family, with my children. I had some pretty strong demands. I had to have summers off. I had to be able to be home by five o'clock—those sorts of things. So I worked for the Girl Scouts in two different stints, three years at a time, as a training director and as a field director. I taught school at my children's country day school in Conshohocken.

CG: Which one was that?

NW: The Miquon School.

CG: Eventually you ended up at Episcopal Academy?

NW: Eventually I wound up as a teacher at Episcopal Academy in Devon.

CG: When did you start there?

NW: 19—oh, dear! I think 1994.

CG: '94? Not '94.

NW: That's funny. It all runs together.

CG: That late?

NW: No. Yeah, yeah, 1994. I was in business for myself as a consultant to non-profits for a couple of years.

CG: Okay, and what was your role at Episcopal?

NW: The job that I took at Episcopal first was as a teacher, as a classroom teacher.

CG: What grade?

NW: Fourth grade.

CG: Fourth grade in the Devon part of the school?

NW: Yeah, the Devon School.

CG: They had two campuses at that point, just for the sake of the reader.

NW: And I stayed at Devon for eight years, and then moved to the main campus as an administrator, as their director of multicultural affairs.

CG: Right. And you left, then?

NW: I was there until 2005, and I ended my career at Germantown Friends.

CG: You were there, like, two years, as I remember?

NW: Yeah, uh-huh, as their director of multicultural affairs.

CG: Okay. Let's get away from that, and get you involved with the church, and some of the issues that were going on. When you were at Saint Mary's, and then at Saint Martin's, when did you start becoming involved in diocesan affairs, and how did that happen? And what were they?

NW: It's funny, because I'm not sure I remember exactly, but I was swept into diocesan affairs partly by being an employee of ECS.

CG: Sure.

NW: And partly because Saint Mary's Hamilton Village was at the center of the civil rights activity that was going on.

CG: At Penn?

NW: In West Philadelphia. The rector, John Scott, was very involved. The Urban Ministry Coalition that Bishop DeWitt had assembled, which included Saint Mary's Hamilton Village and its leadership, University of Pennsylvania, Powelton Village, and an urban ministry that Bishop DeWitt had brought here from, I think, Michigan. But the focus of

that was centered in West Philadelphia, and primarily out of Saint Mary's Church. Also, the focal point for conscientious objectors in educating, at the time, young men who were interested in understanding how to register as conscientious objectors—the loci of that was Saint Mary's Church.

CG: This was during Vietnam, then?

NW: Mm-hm.

CG: Yeah, okay.

NW: So it was a political time, with all the firsts; all kinds of things were going on.

CG: It was also an interesting time in the church, because it was the time when women were beginning to be a bit—1974 was the special service. We'll talk about that in a second. We were also getting a new Prayer Book. So there were issues in the church that were percolating at the same time as the stuff in outside society were percolating. And I would imagine that at a place like Saint Mary's, all of those were interconnected somehow. Is that correct?

NW: All of those were interconnected. My first—and it's coming back to me. My first real diocesan, strictly church-involved activity was probably through Denby.

CG: Which was a—?

NW: Which was the conference and retreat center that our diocese owned in Lower Merion? Upper Merion, yeah, around Villanova.

CG: Right.

NW: And I was a part of one of the last retreats that was held at Denby, before it was sold by the diocese. Being reasonably vocal, and probably pretty opinionated, I think I was brought to the attention of

people who were in search of lightning rods, and I think that's how I got swept into diocesan involvement. I was offered opportunities to be more involved on the diocesan level by Lyman Ogilby, dear—

CG: Right, who followed—

NW: —who followed Bishop DeWitt after his retirement. I was involved with the Episcopal Church Women very actively, in doing some leadership training for women. It was a time when Episcopal Church Women had a higher profile in the church than they do now, in most places.

CG: Right. Things have changed.

NW: It was a place for women.

CG: Right.

NW: And because I had some level of knowledge, if not expertise, about group training and leadership training, I got involved with the diocese, and then later the province, with a program that the church, the national church, was putting together, around women in power.

CG: Take this a step at a time. I think you told me when we were talking about this that you attended the July 29th, 1974, service at the Advocate, the ordination—the irregular ordination of women. Am I right?

NW: That is correct.

CG: Tell me what your—you were just a member of the congregation?

NW: Just a member of the congregation.

CG: Not that that isn't a big deal, but I mean. Tell me what that was like. Here you were, a woman, and a two-fer in many ways, in the diocese. You represented two somewhat—I guess the word is "somewhat

marginalized" things. You were a woman, and you were black. What was it like being at that service?

NW: To be perfectly honest, the irregular ordination of women in the church was—was not as exhilarating for me as a woman, as a black woman, as it was an opportunity to see how history was arcing through our church, and to see how history was imitating the broader historical arc that was happening in our country. Now, what do I mean by that? What I was observing through my sociologist's lens, if you will, was how the agenda of—of looking at racial parity in our church was eclipsed by the issue of gender parity in our church, which is exactly what was happening in our country. So—

CG: In other words, the women's movement was--?

NW: Was eclipsing the black, the civil rights movement.

CG: Okay.

NW: And so to answer your question directly, as an Episcopalian, it was exciting to see these women ordained, irregularly or not.

CG: It all became real, like two years later.

NW: And it was personal to some extent, because one of the women, Suzanne Hiatt, was a neighbor of mine. She lived directly across the street. So you know, and actually it was the fact that she was a part of that group that influenced me to be there.

CG: You'd go and support your pal?

NW: To go and support my neighbor, and my acquaintance. I followed the [General] Convention in Minneapolis, the convention where the vote was taken.

CG: In '76.

NW: In ’76, followed it with interest. Being someone who was frequently asked, because of my involvement in the church as a laywoman, and still, until it became obvious that age was going to preclude any vocation, often asked, “Well, why aren’t you pursuing ordination?” Because the mindset that the only reason a layperson would become as involved with the church as I had been would be to chart a portfolio for ordination. And it has always been my irreverent pleasure to respond to that question, that I had no desire to give up the privilege of being a laywoman, not to mention that freedom and power that comes with being a laywoman.

CG: Okay, so at the time that that happened, and then women were ultimately allowed—regularized, I think, is the word that they used; terrible English, but it’s a wonderful word—regularized, you continued to be involved in various things. I understand at some point, again, going back to our earlier conversations, at some point you were on the Standing Committee in the diocese, and for a number of General Conventions you were a deputy, or an alternate to General Convention. Tell me about some of that involvement, and what were some of the issues that you were dealing with, both at a diocesan level, and then at a national church level?

NW: Sure. I was nominated to the Standing Committee to fulfill an unexpired term of another black woman, who had to relocate out of state because of her husband’s job. I served on the Standing Committee for eleven-and-a-half years.

CG: That’s a long time.

NW: It’s a very long time, and through many transitions.

CG: Who were your bishops when you were serving on the Standing Committee?

NW: I came on the Standing Committee, and—

CG: Lyman? Allen Bartlett?

NW: Allen Bartlett was bishop. So I served on the Standing Committee under Allen Bartlett. I served on the Standing Committee under Charles Bennicson, as bishop. I was the—before Allen Bartlett was called to this diocese, I represented our diocese at the Metropolitan Christian Council, which was the interdenominational organization in this city that served as ecclesiastical body of the main line denominations. Every adjudicatory: the Lutheran Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist contingencies, the Greek Orthodox Church, had a presence on this Metropolitan Christian Council.

CG: Not Rome?

NW: Not Rome. With their adjudicatory, either their bishop or the individual that served in that capacity, and a lay person. So it's a bi-cameral body in that sense, and they served with equal status. I was elected president of that, and served as president of that, for three years, alongside another bishop from another denomination. We were co-chairs, a lay person and an adjudicatory head. And that was at the privilege of Lyman Ogilby, who appointed me to that position. And when Bishop Bartlett was elected bishop, he appointed someone else. While I was on the Standing Committee, one of the more momentous things that happened was, of course, the conversation around the ordination of gays.

CG: Yeah, which Allen played a big part in.

NW: Bishop Bartlett played a very large part in.

CG: And made a tremendous personal growth.

NW: I think so. I think I witnessed very much his own growth towards embracing that concept, much to the benefit of the diocese, and everyone who was—

CG: Yeah, in my interview with him for this same project, he talked about that, and he said that he—he didn't say it this way, but basically he said he surprised himself that he changed as rapidly as he did, and actually came to a position before the national church did, and that he remembers exactly how it happened, and when it happened, and what the meeting was. And I think from his point of view, that was one of the proudest moments of his episcopacy.

NW: It pleases me to hear that, because that is exactly how I believe, and remember, that I witnessed his transition. And I think I was present at that meeting.

CG: You very well might have been.

NW: Yeah.

CG: He didn't tell me who all the people were, but anyway. Okay, so you're doing the Standing Committee. What other issues—or, let's stick with the gay issue for a moment. That also was a big deal when you were a deputy to General Convention in the election of Gene Robinson as the first openly-partnered gay man to be elected a bishop in the Anglican Community. Some people say he's the first gay bishop in the Anglican Communion. Everybody knows that's nonsense, but he was the first one who said, "I am, and I've got a partner," before he ran for bishop, not after he was already there, or after he was retiring. What do you remember about General

Conventions in general, and the issues, and what it was like being there?

NW: Sure. I was fortunate enough to be elected as deputy to five consecutive General Conventions.

CG: Which ones? Where did you start?

NW: My first was Indianapolis, which was interesting in its own right! [Laughs] And so Indianapolis, and then Philadelphia, where, if my progression is correct, and my memory of the succession is correct, where my former rector was elected.

CG: Elected presiding bishop. He was, indeed.

NW: That certainly was exciting.

CG: Then Denver.

NW: Then Denver.

CG: Then Minneapolis.

NW: Then Minneapolis, and then Ohio.

CG: Columbus.

NW: Exactly.

CG: You made a comment that Indianapolis was interesting. What was interesting about Indianapolis? Did you just learn about the city, or was something going on?

NW: Yeah. What was going on in Indianapolis was learning about the church corporate, up close and personal.

CG: Oh, because this was your first gig with that?

NW: It was my first time at convention, and you know, just navigating it.

CG: I remember that.

NW: And intellectually, knew about the politics, the church body politics, but to be a part of it, and to be swept up in it?

CG: All of a sudden it's a different—?

NW: Was quite an education.

CG: Yeah. I covered four of them as a reporter, and the first one, it was just learning the language, and you know, where the light switches and the bathrooms were. And then the second one, you sort of knew your way around, and you could actually figure out what's going on.

NW: Yeah, yeah. It's exciting, and it's exhausting. If you take it seriously, it's exhausting, because of the time commitment, and the energy commitment. But to see the gifts that the Episcopal Church, in my opinion, brings to the Christian world is an incredible experience.

CG: Tell me what some of those are.

NW: Well, the most outstanding, for me, has been to experience how the Holy Spirit transcends our differences. And certainly, the issues of gay ordination, and churches pulling out, removing themselves from the Anglican community, and women, and a woman presiding bishop being elected—all of those. The Apartheid issue, which played out in Philadelphia, and then played out in our national church stage, around disinvesting—all of those issues. However, when those Conventions, each with their own personalities, came together to worship, it was not ever apparent that worship was not the linchpin that held this denomination together.

CG: One of the things that's interesting to me is that in your, and in the ones that I covered as a reporter, you went from electing—and this is no slap at Bishop Griswold—but you went from electing in Philadelphia in 1997 a rather traditional presiding bishop, in terms of his background and his history, and his relationship to the church, to nine years later electing someone who was anything but a traditional

presiding bishop, in electing the first woman who was a biologist, whatever she was, and late to life into the ministry, and a bishop for only a few years, and the first woman primate in the Anglican Communion. That's quite a journey! You have been part of a church that has taken, going back even further than '97, quite a journey. Were you aware that you were living through history, or were you just living through history?

NW: I was always aware that I was living through history. People of color can't afford not being aware of where they are in history.

CG: Okay, explain that a little bit.

NW: It's an issue of survival, I think. It's an issue of ethnic survival to understand where on the transit of evolution you are, because it's helpful to placing yourself, positioning yourself.

CG: Right.

NW: It also—it certainly has been my experience, it's been helpful to monitor the frustration that comes with being a part of evolutionary change.

CG: Okay, when you got here and took the gig at ECS, in 1965—?

NW: Well, it was '67, actually.

CG: '67, excuse me, 1967, what was—racism has always been a part of the church, even though the Diocese of Pennsylvania was the first diocese to ordain a black priest, back with Absalom Jones. But it took him ten years after he was a deacon to make him a priest! How did racism impact the church and impact you?

NW: Hm.

CG: And how, over the years, as things I assume have gotten somewhat better—how has it gotten better, and what are still the issues being faced by people of color?

NW: Okay, that's a lot of questions.

CG: I know it is.

NW: Okay.

CG: But now I can shut up, and let you talk.

NW: Okay. [Laughs] Since this is about the church, primarily, I'll start my response with racism and the church, and how I fit, how I've experienced it. Our church, the Episcopal Church, because of its history, because of the characteristics that identified much of its membership, is inherently a racially biased institution.

CG: What do you mean by that?

NW: What I mean by that is that the Episcopal Church, being formed, literally being formed in the very same time frame that our country was being formed—

CG: Right, and the constitutions written by the same folks.

NW: —and many of the same people doing parallel work, chasing themselves across one side or the other of Market Street, the drafting of the Episcopal Church's charter in America, and the United States, carry with them parallel issues, issues of imperious natures, issues of entitlement, preserving the rights and privileges of the entitled.

CG: And that was defined, basically, as white men, wasn't it?

NW: Yes.

CG: Back in those days.

NW: Yeah, rich white men.

CG: Yeah, rich white men.

NW: Rich white men. And that has continued to frame the public image, if not the personality, of our Episcopal Church. I certainly do not see that that basic nature has been altered in our church. However, that is not to say I do not recognize the adjustments and the adaptations that our church, through its governance, has made over the years, over the decades, over the centuries, in order to stay alive. I think we carry, as a denomination, all of that baggage. And because religious institutions, sociologically, are at least a hundred years behind contemporary society, we're still playing catch-up. And I think because of my statement before about how I believe that the journey towards more equality along racial lines was supplanted and eclipsed in our church's attention, as we turn to being concerned about equality along gender lines, sexual. I believe it gave our church permission not to be concerned about the racial and the racism that finds comfort in the Episcopal Church.

Now, what do I mean by that? The democracy that frames the Episcopal denomination, and what makes it so attractive to many of its members, is the same democracy that allows incredible diocesan autonomy, and within that, a large degree of congregational autonomy. It's sort of like our states' right, you know. The Southern states argue many of their old arguments around states' rights. The corporate entity of the Episcopal Church, and that what it allows its parishes, within certain dioceses—certainly in Pennsylvania. Every Episcopal Church, if it's an independent Episcopal Church, if I'm not mistaken, is an individual corporation. So the degree of governance that the diocese can assert within a parish that continues to—to exhibit behavior that can be labeled racist, is very limited. And I have seen

that; I have seen, I have witnessed first-hand, in the different roles that I have had in this diocese, parishes that are openly, comfortably open, against issues having to do with racial inclusion, and without apology.

CG: How is it manifested? How does it get manifested in those parishes? Because obviously, your parish is not one of them, and there are lots of them that aren't.

NW: No, Saint Martin-in-the-Fields is a traditional Episcopal parish, liturgically Anglican, socially affluent, for the most part, politically mixed—more conservative than liberal. And at some point, before my coming there as a member—not long before, I suspect, but under Bishop Griswold—positioned itself to be a welcoming parish. It continues to this day to be a welcoming parish. It has only just begun to understand the difference between being a welcoming parish and being an inclusive parish. The growth—

CG: Explain what the difference is, from your point of view.

NW: The Episcopal Church welcomes you. Those signs are all over. Those signs are all over our country, right? Christ welcomes you. What that means is, as I understand it, as it seems to be lived out, is that if you come through the doors of this church, you will be welcome to join our worship; you will be welcome to receive communion. You will be welcome to participate in programs and activities as this parish presents them.

CG: Okay.

NW: Inclusion—and inclusion speaks to one of the primary issues of race work, if you will, and it's understanding that a multicultural society requires growth in everyone that is a part of it. Inclusion means being

willing to take on, and understand, the nature, the culture, the history of those that you welcome, that may not echo yours.

CG: Now, this applies also, then, not just to race, but also issues of human sexuality, I would think?

NW: Yeah.

CG: In a similar way?

NW: Yes, and it embraces, at its very best, the understanding that each person, each community, and each culture, if you will, brings with it elements of value that are worth understanding, and worth celebrating.

CG: And enrich the whole?

NW: And enrich the whole. Being welcoming is being benevolent and charitable. Inclusiveness is open, and live-giving.

CG: Is it better now that in was forty years ago?

NW: In some places.

CG: In the Diocese of Pennsylvania, generally?

NW: I have to tell you that, to speak generally about the Diocese of Pennsylvania, I don't think inclusivity has reached the point that represents what this diocese is capable of.

CG: Okay. One of the events during your tenure, during your period of time here, was in 1988, or whenever it was—I think it was '88—the election of Frank Turner, a black priest, who was here working, I believe, on what we called aided parishes. And he was elected bishop suffragan.

NW: Mm-hm.

CG: First of all, tell me about Bishop Turner, but also tell me what effect his election had on the diocese. Because my memory, as an Episcopalian, and knowing him, is that when Frank was at my church,

or whenever I ran into him, I didn't know whether he was black or white; he was just Frank Turner. And I think that's ultimately, the color-blind thing is a cliché that people probably would like to think is real, but with him it really in many ways was, for a lot of white folks in the diocese that I know. Is that a big deal for the people of color in the diocese? Was he an advocate? Tell me about him, and about how that affected the diocese?

NW: Well, I can tell you how it affected me.

CG: Okay, well that's fair.

NW: And Bishop Frank Turner was a celebration for me personally that certainly eclipses some of the other celebrations you've asked me about. It certainly is much more important in my memory book than the ordination of women. It was a wonderful, I thought, victory for this diocese, yes, because he was an African American man who certainly earned and deserved to be elevated to bishop, but also because of who he was, as I came to know him.

CG: Tell me about that.

NW: And I came to know Frank Turner as a principled man who championed the cause of marginalized people, who understood, and was willing to mediate his own progress, if it meant a long-term advance of the cause. My first exchanges with him was when he presented himself to the Outreach Committee at Saint Martin-in-the-Fields, of which I was chair. And he had made a petition for some funds to our Outreach Committee.

CG: He wanted money? [Laughs]

NW: Yes. And it was seeing how he presented his cause, and I don't remember what particular cause.

CG: Doesn't matter.

NW: But it doesn't really matter. But I was very much aware of his knowledge of what this grant that he was requesting would do, and both the short-term and the long-term impact it would have on the church community. And it was at that moment that, you know, I became, in a sense, hooked.

CG: Yeah. You became a Turner fan.

NW: You got it! And to the day he ceased to be employed by the diocese, I never felt that he had abandoned that sense of clarity between—of how important it was to work in the moment, but to never lose sight of the long range goal.

CG: Was he a good ambassador for inclusion, people of color, to churches where that was resisted some?

NW: I don't know.

CG: Okay.

NW: I don't know, and the reason I don't—

CG: Because you know the diocese pretty well. I didn't know whether you—

NW: I do know the diocese pretty well, but you know, Yankees? Yankees are polite folks. Episcopalians are egregiously polite. [Laughs]

CG: That's kind of a pain, isn't it? [Laughs]

NW: Yes, and it takes a long time, if ever, to get to the point where Pennsylvania Episcopalians are really comfortable about having open and honest conversations about race. And I have been involved in many situations where that could have happened, and it always stopped short. The closest we might have come as a diocese could have been the opportunity that was presented by a young woman in

this diocese who made a film about her own family's journey towards understanding their historic role in racial oppression. That's Katrina Browne's movie, *Traces of the Trade*, which certainly could have been an excellent platform, because she was a home-grown gal from a prominent, affluent family, active in the diocese—all of those monikers that work for one in Philadelphia.

CG: Private school?

NW: Yeah, the pedigree! Wonderful parents! I know her mother very well, and knew her father. Very present in our diocese. And for anyone who's not familiar with that documentary, I would recommend it to them. But the opportunity that Kristina's work owning—owning without apology, I think, that her family was willing to embrace the fact that they had had a share in the legacy of slavery.

CG: Slave trade. That's the way they made a lot of money, didn't it?

NW: And they had benefited financially from it, and to have that conversation. But it was not at all embraced, I don't think, and used to its advantage. There were several attempts that I'm aware—and I was in conversation with Katrina—I said Kristina. I meant Katrina. I was in conversation with her before the film was made, when the idea was generating itself. I have a un-cut copy of her first run of the film, and attended a couple of showings in the diocese of it. And it was the usual suspects that showed up.

CG: Of course.

NW: Yeah.

CG: Preaching to the choir thing?

NW: Yeah, which is so very sad.

CG: Well, it is sad. I mean, I know her mother pretty well. I knew her father slightly, but he's now gone. And of course, she was the daughter of another—I mean, this is the granddaughter of a rector of your former parish! So it's very interesting how small the world is, and yet how large it is, all at the same time. But you talked about Frank's, Frank Turner's election as being a big deal.

NW: Mm-hm.

CG: Just before that, Barbara Harris, again, a two-fer, a black woman, was elected the first black—the first female bishop—not the first black bishop—the first female bishop in the Anglican Communion, not just the Episcopal Church. It was a big deal to a lot of people. Was that—?

NW: It was a big deal. It was—

CG: Not only because Barbara is Barbara, and she is a hoot, and a great lady, but I mean, because of what she represented?

NW: What she represented. There was so much controversy over her, not to mention there was so much controversy being a priest, even. I mean, I was privy to some of those conversations, even in my own family, by marriage, contesting the fact that she hadn't been properly educated, and that she'd read for orders, and she hadn't—you know.

CG: Well, Frank Griswold read for orders, too.

NW: Well, the history of men reading for orders, you know, precedes Barbara Harris's birth!

CG: Of course!

NW: You know, but as we know, now and then, when we are searching for—

CG: A reason.

NW: —a reason, you can find them. I along with many others made the trip to Boston to be there, present.

CG: Wish I had.

NW: And remember just sobbing—sobbing with joy! It was incredible; it was amazing. And it was amazing because of what it represented, the hallmark of what her ordination and consecration meant, but because of who she is. And that's the two-fer, you know.

CG: Well, it's the three-fer. [Laughs]

NW: Yeah, well okay.

CG: I mean, if you don't like Barbara Harris, move out of town. That's my judgment; that's me.

NW: It's not going to—well, I embrace that, but I would say if you meet Barbara Harris, you will either like her, or you won't like her, that there's no middle ground.

CG: Yes. It's a real black and white—pardon the pun, but it's a real black and white situation, as a person. But I don't know anybody that's spent more than about five minutes with her that just isn't—[laughs].

NW: Yeah. And the clarity!

CG: Well, there's no nonsense.

NW: The clarity with which she is present, again, I think is a real gift, and I think personally, for me, those have been the elements that I've looked for in places that I have been attracted to be, or to stay. It was the clarity that we went looking for. I want to go back, because it might be important. The reason we—we being my husband and I, and at that time our two sons—moved our membership from Saint Mary's Hamilton Village to Saint Martin-in-the-Fields, after commuting all

those years back and forth, was because we were in search of a church that had a viable religious education program.

CG: Oh, sure. Okay.

NW: That's what brought us to Saint Martin's. Saint Mary's, because of it being located on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, every year at least one-third of its congregation turned over, and so it always depended on who was in the congregation in any given year as to whether or not the church was able to successfully mount a religious—

CG: So it was the education program that brought you to Saint Martin's?

NW: We were looking for a parish that had—

CG: Plus the music program, I gather, was a big one.

NW: Well, we came for the Sunday school, and we stayed for the music.

CG: Music, right.

NW: You know, both of which—my husband and I met singing in Saint Mary's choir, so liturgical music is very much a part of a tradition that we appreciate.

CG: Let me ask you, again, a personal question, because you were married when?

NW: 1969.

CG: In '69. How did the church respond to, at that time, an interracial marriage?

NW: The church corporate?

CG: Not the church corporate, but the people in your parish? Or was that not an issue at Saint Mary's?

NW: Well, it was a university parish.

CG: That answers the question.

NW: So it wasn't an issue. I mean, if there was going to be a place that was liberal, that had—

CG: If it was going to happen there—

NW: If it was going to happen, that's where it was going to happen.

CG: Okay.

NW: I'm sure we presented ourselves as an anomaly at Saint Martin's. By that time, I was enough of a known entity in the diocese that that was cachet, for me. But I was not unaware that there were people at Saint Martin's who were not quite sure, or were very sure, that they were not comfortable with this anomaly, this family anomaly, that had—

CG: Until they got to know you, and it probably disappears some as you get to know people, which is the way these things progress, isn't it?

NW: I think so. Within a short period of time, I was elected to Saint Martin's vestry.

CG: Well, that answers one question then, yeah.

NW: So, you know.

CG: All right. One more thing, and then what we will do is I will take this and get it transcribed, and we will look at it and see if there's anything we missed, or anything we want to expand on. But I'd like you, in as candid a fashion as possible, to describe the nature of, and the differences among, the various bishops with whom you worked here. You started, and Bob DeWitt was wearing the miter. And then it was Lyman Ogilby, and then it was Allen Bartlett, and then it was Charles Bennison, and they were different, obviously, one from the other. Tell me about them, and the pluses and minuses, as you see them, if there are any.

NW: Mm-hm, okay.

CG: And obviously the most controversial—well, the most controversial were the bookends, because Bob DeWitt was controversial, and Charles Bennison was controversial. I think that Lyman and Allen were less so. But anyway, let me hear your views.

NW: Bob DeWitt, Bishop DeWitt, as I remember him, and he was a part of my being hired, was clearly a rebel. By the time I arrived in Philadelphia, he had already earned that reputation, and his personality was strident. His private demeanor, as I experienced it on a few occasions, was intellectually keen, and very, very compassionate.

CG: I've heard the word "gentle" used about him.

NW: Very gentle man, personally very gentle man.

CG: In spite of what the public persona was?

NW: In spite of the energy that he had to summon up in order to be as effective in the public arena that he was. Personally, he was a very, very gentle man.

CG: A lot of people who disagreed with him violently, clergy and others, apparently, liked him.

NW: Mm-hm, yeah. I can understand that, which was the rub, yeah. And not, some might say, a man ahead of his time, but I'm not sure from my own personal experiences whether or not strident personalities are every accepted well. Lyman Ogilby I adored. One of the monikers that he became known as was [laughs] "the missionary bishop."

CG: That's what he was.

NW: And that—I can understand that. I can understand that. Gentle of voice, gentle of manner, and clear about what he wanted, how he wanted to plot his episcopacy. He told great stories, and preached

wonderful sermons, and afforded me great hospitality. Allen Bartlett I grew to like.

CG: Tell me about the growth, from where to where?

NW: I was suspicious of him, as a Southerner, when he came in.

CG: From Louisville.

NW: From Louisville, and though my lens, I saw him manifesting many of those Southern gentleman characteristics that I do not find attractive. The early years of his being my bishop, I thought he was racist. I felt that he didn't really have an appreciation for women in leadership. As time went on and I got to know him better, and he got to know me—because I also don't think he particularly regarded me with any great fondness in the early days of his episcopacy—I think we became very good friends.

CG: And my impression of him, which is different from yours, obviously a different perspective, because I didn't know him when he was first here very well, is that he is anything but a racist, or anything but anti-women.

NW: I have come to have both of those opinions, happily, in my mind, reversed.

CG: So you've grown together?

NW: I think so.

CG: That's interesting.

NW: Yeah. I know I have.

CG: Okay, now to the controversy.

NW: Charles Bennison's election was not necessarily a gift to this diocese.

CG: Some people say that he was elected, and let me ask you if you agree with this, because the other primary candidate was John Midwood.

They were the two top runners. They were Barack and Hillary. That Midwood was more in personal style like Allen Bartlett, and therefore, that maybe it was time for a change, and that Bennison was more energetic-seeming, and all of those things. Did that play a part in his election, do you think?

NW: I was on the Standing Committee, as you know, when Charles Bennison was elected. I have some strong opinions about his election. First of all, I think it was a rush to judgment. Bishop Bartlett was very anxious to move on.

CG: And get a coadjutor, right.

NW: And the Search Committee responded to that sense of urgency on the part of Bishop Bartlett. I believe, and this is the lens from sitting in the chair of a Standing Committee member, I believe that the search process was not as thorough and as deliberative as it should have been. John Midwood I know well, and have a great deal of affection for, particularly his work in the diocese on behalf of aided congregations, but just as a really decent human being. Please print that. I do not—

CG: Everything gets printed.

NW: —think he would have been the right bishop for this diocese at that time. My impression of Bishop Bennison's ability to be elected was that he courted the right constituency, and perhaps may have been seen as the proper person to be arbiter between the city-suburban split that was going on in this diocese.

CG: What went wrong?

NW: With Charles Bennison's episcopacy?

CG: Yeah, because certainly there were some things that he was very good at. I experienced some of them. He was very good dealing with congregations, individually, when it was in a crisis, and understood people and relationships between. But somehow, the whole thing fell apart, and I don't know why that was. Do you?

NW: I think the politics of Bishop Bennison being diocesan is what undermined his episcopacy.

CG: What do you mean by politics? What politics?

NW: I think that—I believe that Charles Bennison was clearly the suburban choice. I think that those disenchanted parishes, primarily in the suburbs, in the more affluent corridors of our diocese, felt that Charles Bennison was going to correct the course that this diocese appeared to be going, towards more liberalism, more tolerance, than they were comfortable with.

CG: And they read that wrong.

NW: And they read it wrong. And they read it as a betrayal on his part.

CG: Okay.

NW: And many of those people who were his supporters turned against him, and used their political power to make it a very aggressive march towards his—his destruction.

CG: Yeah, and some of it was very nasty, too. But one of the other things that happened, as I understand it, and again, you being part of the Standing Committee and whatnot, would know more about this than those of us looking from the outside, was that he also seemed to piss off, pardon the expression, the aided congregations and the congregations that needed support. And a number of people who became vehemently opposed to his continuing in the episcopacy were

people from parishes that were aided, or in some trouble, like the late Mary Laney, who was of that group, and some others, that they felt that some of the congregations in Mount Airy were very opposed to him because they felt that he was not supportive of congregations that were in financial trouble. Is that accurate—in other words, did he manage, one way or another, to anger everybody?

NW: I don't think he angered everybody. I think he challenged the status quo, and he challenged the status quo for everyone.

CG: Isn't that a good thing for a bishop to do, in many ways?

NW: It could be, but apparently as things played out, it was not—Charles did not have the skills to pull it off.

CG: So it's a good thing to do, but you've got to be able to do it right?

NW: Yeah. It's funny—it's interesting that you mention the aided congregation issue, because in preparing for this conversation, one of the fears that I had about having this conversation was around the issue of the aided congregations, and because I'm aware of how much tension there is in this diocese around conversations and issues related to aided congregations. And I'd like to speak to that, if there's time.

CG: Sure, there's plenty of time.

NW: We talked about the historic nature of this diocese, and the characteristics that adorn that history. One of the legacies of that was many, many monuments to wealth people, some of which—

CG: You mean churches?

NW: Churches, yes.

CG: Buildings.

NW: Buildings.

CG: The edifice complex.

NW: Yeah, monuments that were left for present generations to figure out how to maintain, large, huge monstrosities to people long gone, whose ancestors are no longer around, either, because they had fled the city, or—primarily fled the city, have no interest in those communities, and are left behind, and are functioning as mission churches to poor congregations.

CG: One of the biggest examples of that, I guess, is one of the most famous churches in the diocese, which is the Church of the Advocate, which is a mess!

NW: The city is littered with them—the diocese particularly, and most of them in the city, is littered with these huge, huge edifices for people to take care of who don't have the resources.

CG: Right.

NW: And what has developed? One of the things that's developed as a consequence of that are Episcopal presences in the form of bricks and mortar, and not in the presence of people, and being led by clergy who in many instances found themselves, and still find themselves, to be marginalized. A very close friend of mine, clergy, white, whose name I will not mention, found himself as vicar to one of these urban monstrosities and dwindling congregations, once made a speech at a diocesan gathering about Cadillac clergy and Volkswagen clergy. And the reference was in relationship to the disparity between the salaries of clergy who found themselves being called to parishes that could afford at least a living wage, and clergy that found themselves in a position of serving a congregation that could not begin to provide a contemporary living wage for their priest.

Not all of those congregations were in neighborhoods where the people were marginalized individuals by race. Most of them were congregations that were economically depressed. And many of those clergy were not black clergy. The black clergy that I came to know were stars in their own right. I'm talking about the Tom Logans, the Jesse Andersons, the Charles Poindexters, who were fortunate enough to be called to serve congregations that were African American or Caribbean.

CG: And financially viable.

NW: Financially viable, middle class people who did not feel marginalized. And as I observe them, and observe their churches, they experience a different kind of church relationship, the churches themselves. They may not have been ever listed among the endowed parishes of the diocese, however they always saw themselves capable, as functioning as independent parishes, and their energy was focused on maintaining their leadership. As a person of color, I was called in as consultant to two of those parishes: Saint Luke, which was by this time a merger of Saint Barnabas and Saint Luke's.

CG: In Germantown.

NW: In Germantown, and at another time, Historic Saint Thomas.

CG: The African Church of Whatever it's Called.

NW: Each of those consultations, the vestry was very clear at the beginning that the primary goal of their search was to secure a black priest.

CG: And they both did.

NW: And in their minds, it was not optional to even consider any other candidates. Now, I dare say that any other congregation that was not a congregation of people of color would not have been allowed to

make that assertion openly, although it was always very clear that that's not an option.

CG: That they wanted to have a white priest.

NW: Right. And so it's the mixed tension of—of African American parishes to hold onto their identity within the context of the diocese, as black parishes, and the willingness to assert that up front, in the face of, you know, more liberal arguments. Now, why do I put that out there? I put that out there because much of the—well, I'm going to get back. The displeasure with Bishop Bennison around his effort to begin to look at the viability of aided congregations—

CG: And thus diminish the number of parishes.

NW: The discontent was not with parishes that had black leaders, black clergy. That discontent came from white clergy who found themselves working in—

CG: In a black church.

NW: —in a black church.

CG: And we know one; both of us know one very well, who is no longer alive. So, let me ask you a question. It's complicated. Saint Thomas's, the African Whatever it's Called, and I can never remember it's official title, Church of Saint Thomas, has always been a black church. Saint Luke's, however, was a white church, an integrated church, and now primarily, although there's still a few white members, a black church. Is it different in a church that has made an evolution in its congregation because of the change in the neighborhood? The same is true, I guess, of Grace Epiphany in Mount Airy, that used to be a white parish, and now is—I mean, Jim

Trimble served his curacy at that church, which I didn't know until yesterday.

NW: I didn't know that either.

CG: And it's certainly now mostly—talk about churches that has mixed congregations, that has Asians and blacks and whites. Is it different in a place like Saint Luke's, which started out as white, and is now almost all black, than it was at a historically black church?

NW: I think so.

CG: And how does that manifest in this whole racial mix? Is it gradual enough that people adjust as they go?

NW: Well, you know, the historic African American Saint Thomas is probably the best example of a church being able to maintain its cultural identity, and hold on to the kind of congregation that has characterized it over time. Saint Luke's, when the merger happened with Saint Barnabas, which was an all-black church, that congregation was—Saint Luke's congregation was primarily a white congregation that was holding on, but comfortably holding on. And it was taken—

CG: It was Saint Barnabas that needed the help, right, financially?

NW: Yeah, it was taken over, in the sense of being taken over, by Saint Barnabas' congregation. And the resident population of Saint Luke's, the white population, the white leadership—because the vestry was white.

CG: Right. So was the rector.

NW: Yes—did not survive the merger well, and acquiesced rather than to—to stay and work towards having a blended congregation, if you will.

CG: The blend began to disappear, in other words?

NW: Yeah. It was never a blended congregation.

CG: Okay.

NW: Saint Luke's as it exists now still struggles, I think, to make its mark in the community. It certainly has the caliber of membership. It has the caliber of membership in terms of status and class, and education, that it could be a very prominent player in the diocese. But for some reason, it hasn't happened yet.

CG: Yeah. One of the things that got Bennison into trouble is that with the shrinking of what we call the main line denominations generally, but the Episcopal Church specifically, is that there are a lot more buildings than there are need for buildings. And of course, everybody has their own attachment to their own place. He got into some trouble for doing what everybody realized at an intellectual level was the right thing to do, which was to reduce and merge, and do that kind of thing, and yet at the emotional level was very hard to deal with. Wasn't that part of it, too, do you think?

NW: Yeah.

CG: Or is it all one big stew that he just didn't handle stuff particularly well?

NW: I'm going to give you a response that's totally personal, informed a little bit by my own experience; informed a lot by my own biases, but it's what I got. [Laughs] Okay?

CG: That's why you're here.

NW: I think Charles Bennison, speaking historically, was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now, what do I mean by that? I observed this diocese go from disgruntled over DeWitt, to anger over property decisions that Lyman made, to real discomfort over the church being more open around civil rights, and supportive of women being

ordained, and then gays being accepted, and I watched that anger grow and grow and take momentum. And I believe with all my heart that Bishop Bennison happened to be in the episcopacy when that population of disenchanted Episcopalians had had enough. And he got the full barrage of all of that, all of those decades of built-up discontent about a changing church, because I maintain that if you look at the demographics of that audience, they are the same people. The same people who kicked the pews over Bob DeWitt are the same people who kicked the pews over selling Denby, the same people—and when I say same, I mean demographic profile.

CG: Yeah, I know what you mean.

NW: The same people who were very upset—

CG: The same kind of people.

NW: The same kind of people who were very upset over the increasing—

CG: Women and gays.

NW: Women, men, blacks, and gays. And only in moderate defense of Charles's style, it wasn't about his style; it was the fact that they'd had enough. They've had enough, and he was the person that they were going to—that they laid all of this on, some of which he earned, but a lot of which was not his.

CG: Yeah, but he did earn some of it. I mean, there's the possibility that somebody could have come in, and if they had handled it differently, one of the controversies, of course, is the camp.

NW: Great guy, great personality, incredible preacher, marvelous educator.

CG: One on one.

NW: Not a good manager.

CG: Yeah, okay. All right. Let me get this transcribed, and we'll see where we go from there.

NW: Was that on the level of what you were hoping for?

CG: Everything you do is, Nikki.

NW: Be honest, seriously.

CG: This is so much more than I thought we were going to get to, and it's terrific!

[End of Interview]