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Interview with Orlando Redekopp

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Columbia College Chicago

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Orlando Redekopp: Anti-Apartheid Activist
Transcription of taped interview. (Approx. 82 min.)

TAPE ONE (1)

BP: Ok this is Balin Pagadala recording for the interview for Orlando Redekopp

OR: yeah

BP: ok (l) pay, pay no mind to that I can edit. I can edit

OR: yeah

BP: anything out so,

OR: yeah when I pick my nose and all that (???)

BP: oh yeah I'll edit that out (l). Excellent

OR: alright we got that

BP: alright. So I guess for this (a?) I'll give a little introduction. My name is of course Balin Pagadala, with the oral history dept and your name?

OR: Orlando Redekopp

BP: ok. And, well, well I'm going to have to go through some of this bio

OR: lets do it.

BP: the bio-data, ok.

OR: no, no

BP: sure, great, um you're year of birth

OR: 1946

BP: ok um, your place of birth?

OR: Kansas

BP: ok. The place where you were raised?

OR: I was raised in Canada. Winnipeg, Canada.

47

48 BP: ok

49

50 OR: mmhmm.

51

52 BP: uh, your father's place of birth?

53

54 OR: Uh it was in Russia. Uh Ukraine some area, forgotten. And my mother's the same.

55

56 BP: ok, very cool. Well that takes care of that. And now, on to the interview

57

58 OR: ok

59

60 BP: so, Orlando, what is your earliest memory?

61

62 OR: (pauses) Oh my. My earliest memory. Uh. (pauses) it's uh, it's, I think one of those
63 early memories or the earliest memory is sitting with my grandmother, who was really
64 my father's step-mother. My father's mother died. And hearing stories about coming out
65 of Russia, and particularly in the years just before coming out the, um, kind of gruesome,
66 or scary stories about when the revolution was in process, the Russian revolution. And
67 my, my ancestors lived on farms and uh, it was chaos and there'd be one group after
68 another coming through and she would tell about people coming in for the horses, or for
69 the food, hiding in the barn and stories like that. So I, yeah I remember those uh, yeah
70 those were early, early. I was just a little kid

71

72 BP: ok, ok, I have similar family ancestry

73

74 OR: yeah

75

76 BP: (l)

77

78 OR: And there's always question that I've, we've never quite got answered and as (B
79 right) you get older there are some that you wonder, why don't they talk about this. For
80 example, rape. Rape and war go together, but there was never a word of like, the
81 violation of women in this-

82

83 BP: of course

84

85 OR: troops coming to town and what they violated women, and later on we hear that, sure
86 it happened, but you know, things it's bet- oh, we don't need to live there, lets go on and
87 we don't need to talk about the past. So I don't know any personal stories, but that, that's
88 a kind of dynamic that was always in the telling even that, or something, are all there but
89 kids don't have ways to articulate it.

90

91 BP: right, rad, (l)

92

93 OR: um, but, so I was always aware that, even though I was born in Kansas, that was one
94 year, that we were sort of, we had migrated. We were, we weren't from Winnipeg.
95
96 BP: oh!
97
98 OR: We weren't from here.
99
100 BP: ok, right, right.
101
102 OR: you know, my parents were (?? 2.53.15), and their first language was German, not
103 English.
104
105 BP: ok
106
107 OR: and so, I would always ease a little bit, and then because of our Christian tradition
108 there was always a little added theology too that we're not quite citizens here. There was
109 always a tension.
110
111 BP: right, right
112
113 OR: ok, so
114
115 BP: (l) so, why did your family move?
116
117 OR: oh I think it was because, after the rev, revolution it wasn't clear what the future-
118 I'm out of the group of Mennonites, who lived in more or less, like colonies in Russia
119 and the Ukraine.
120
121 BP: sure
122
123 OR: and they got to Russia from the uh, from um, not Holland, but what was in Prussia,
124 and part of it was because they were promised that they could farm, live peaceful lives,
125 and not have to serve in the military.
126
127 BP: ok
128
129 OR: So when the revolution came, that was all up for grabs, and everything was thrown
130 into chaos in terms of their perspective, and there was some attempt to think ok, how are
131 we going to live a new in the uh, in this new era, once the revolution is finished, but my
132 parents moved in twenty-four to nineteen-twenty-four, nineteen-twenty-five. And I think
133 it was they moved because it was so uncertain and there was an invitation from other
134 Mennonites, in Canada. Come on over here, and it's peaceful and quiet, and so there's
135 one more in a, you might say over generations, one more move.
136
137 BP: right, right. And now why did they move from Kansas to Winnipeg?
138

139 OR: well my father, no, my parents moved to Canada. My father was only studying in
140 Kansas.
141
142 BP: ohhhhh.
143
144 OR: so I came along in the, couple of years of study and then it was back.
145
146 BP: oh ok
147
148 OR: so it was just a, just a short trip for studies for a couple of years (b ok). I came along
149 and went back. So
150
151 BP: yeah. Did, did you have problems with moving back, moving to Winnipeg, or?
152
153 OR: none. The biggest problem I had was in nineteen-sixty- in the draft era, because even
154 though I was born in the U.S. I grew up in Canada. I always thought of myself as a
155 Canadian, therefore, I crossed into the U.S. uh, I forgot, uh in sixty-eight or something,
156 and uh, and it was sixty-seven maybe and it was, where you born? U.S. Where you live?
157 Canada. Have you registered? No. Why not? Because I think I'm a Canadian. So six
158 months later I got a letter you know it's illegal. So that was the only time I ever had to
159 kind of figure out, or start thinking about which side of the border.
160
161 BP: right, right. ok
162
163 OR: those were good times. So until then I was, in my head I was always Canadian.
164
165 BP: mhmm.
166
167 OR: and, there was no other flight plan for life.
168
169 BP: right.
170
171 OR: Canada! (l)
172
173 BP: (l) excellent
174
175 OR: yeah
176
177 BP: so, in Winnipeg as a child, where were your favorite places to go, favorite things to
178 do?
179
180 OR: um, I loved to, I m-, as a child, the Mennonites, kind of continuing this, the model in
181 Russia were sort of living to themselves, religious kind of peaceful and quiet but different
182 than the sort of non-Christian world and in this case that was mixed up between people
183 who spoke English and since my parent's first language (??) time was German, I grew up
184 with English, but, um, it was always a kind of thing. So it was within the Mennonite

185 world, but I're, I, eh, I liked sports and that (????) tension because, then sometimes you
186 have to play on Sunday and then the parents had trouble with that.

187

188 BP: mmm. Right

189

190 OR: so um, boy I, childhood memories would always be within the church my father was
191 a minister and so my social circle was, was the church as well so I grew up with friends
192 uh, in the church. Life was primarily my social circle.

193

194 BP: oh ok

195

196 OR: my father's minister, meaning that there were richer kids in church and I always
197 envied them. But I grew up. (l)

198

199 BP: yeah (l) so did you guys, was your family go on vacation when you were-

200

201 OR: yeah we went on a few vacations not too many. My father's first love was the church
202 so to be honest, for the record, sure my parents are long gone but um, (tsk) there wasn't a
203 lot of vacation time. Usually they were tied in with church events, like they'd be a church
204 conference. So we would go somewhere because it was tied in with the church. Contra-
205 beyond that I don't remember, I remember going to camp as a kid, but that wasn't as a
206 family.

207

208 BP: right

209

210 OR: that was for our ages this, you know

211

212 BP: ok and-

213

214 OR: ages three, four and five and so on. Until high school

215

216 BP: was that a religious camp that you went to

217

218 OR: yup. It was a church camp.

219

220 BP: oh ok

221

222 OR: yeah, yeah it was all, very contained, and it, it, and that wasn't uh, clear interaction
223 so I never knew a divorced person in my life growing up.

224

225 BP: right

226

227 OR: all the way through college. I mean, at least in our church circles that was always,
228 out there.

229

230 BP: right, right

231
232 OR: and that's a sample of the kind of lines.
233
234 BP: ok
235
236 OR: that we grew up with uh, yeah.
237
238 BP: ok, very cool. Um, what was your favorite food as a child?
239
240 OR: oh I don't know sun-, as a child I think my mother's, my mother was a fabulous
241 cook. She made these buns, Srivok. They were good. They were good. Anything she'd
242 bake was good. That was good though. Uh, desserts, she always made rich desserts. Um
243 so, the, the, you know, I think my, in those days we, my mother would mix, I don't know
244 where it came from but would mix peanut butter and honey. And nothing like coming
245 home with these buns, warm and just slathering on this mixture of peanut butter and a
246 glass of milk. So that, that's sort of a, a comfort
247
248 BP: the bread gets crunchy from all the honey
249
250 OR: there you go, yes, yeah, yeah, right, right, that's it. Yeah. Uh I remember that. High
251 school it was Sunday after church dinners. You name it. Chicken and, and, and, rich sort
252 of uh, I talked it they were you know, certain, pastry and then strawberries,
253
254 BP: oh wow
255
256 OR: and then whipped cream on top
257
258 BP: yeah (l)
259
260 OR: you name it, so
261
262 BP: oh that's sounds excellent.
263
264 OR: uh, uh food was good.
265
266 BP: yeah.
267
268 OR: yeah, my parents lived through real rough times in, as children, and therefore my
269 mother I think always thought, there was always more than enough food growing up.
270 The, we were never told, you just take a small portion and that's all you eat. So we could
271 always two, three helpings, while we were told they're, you don't throw any food away
272 so we cleaned off our plates because there's millions starving in China. So it was like a,
273 well it wasn't a tension then, but you know, today we look at it and see, more than you
274 need all that you can. On the other hand you don't throw it away.
275

276 BP: right, of course (l). So now did, did you have, who were your role models when you
277 were growing up?

278
279 OR: (sighs) Well um, realistic role models I guess were church folks, I mean some how.
280 Although you know I was as, as an adolescent, I was clearly not going to go follow my
281 father as a minister. That was clear. So in high school, I had one passion. Basketball.
282 That's all I lived for even though in Canada we were just, you know, we, I don-, we, play
283 any team in the U.S. we got slaughtered, but, but that's all that I lived for even though it
284 wasn't the mo-, hockey was the sport in Canada. I listened to hockey night in Canada,
285 you know I listened on the radio and on T.V. and so on. So um, (tsk) my role models in
286 high school, this is, was uh, what's his name? He retired from the Boston Celtics. Bill,
287 boy it just slipped me now. He played against Will Chamberlain. Bill Russell.

288
289 BP: ok

290
291 OR: and that was my hero. He was my hero. I would, could wax the olive, theological on
292 Bill Russell,

293
294 BP: (l)

295
296 OR: but anyway he was my hero.

297
298 BP: awesome.

299
300 OR: I, I, I didn't really, I had no illusions of going into sports as a, as a lifetime but if I
301 could get a hair cut like Bill Russell, and block like Bill Russell, and play like Bill
302 Russell-

303
304 BP: oh yeah

305
306 OR: that was my life

307
308 BP: oh yeah

309
310 OR: and Will Chamberlain, every time they beat him it was great.

311
312 BP: yeah (l)

313
314 OR: so, even though all those games were, non of them were around, there never was.
315 Saw one on T.V. Well maybe one or two in the year, on television, you know, it was
316 dounce. But that's, that was, to be honest that was my passion. That's all I looked for
317 especially in high school.

318
319 BP: ok, and did you, did you play on a team?

320

321 OR: uh, I went, when I played, yeah. I played uh, I played on junior varsity my uh, I
322 think it was my ninth grade. I was on both the junior varsity and the varsity team.

323

324 BP: oh wow

325

326 OR: and so if I could play six days a week-. I went to a church high school we (??), we're
327 not aloud to play there, like on Saturdays for some silly reason, no playing. But we would
328 take the hinges off the doors and sneak in so we could play.

329

330 BP: oh wow

331

332 OR: yeah, we got caught a few times, and uh, nothing serious, but I mean just- so I
333 would-

334

335 BP: that's passion

336

337 OR: It was the passion. That's all I lived for.

338

339 BP: ok. Um, what schools did you go to?

340

341 OR: Well I went through a couple of elementary schools. We moved when I was
342 finishing fifth grade, so I went, I forgot the name, Princess Margaret School was my first
343 school. Now Princess Margaret was sister to Queen Elizabeth, so the school was named
344 after Queen Elizabeth. This is Canada after all-

345

346 BP: right

347

348 OR: so we still sang the national anthem, God Save Our Gracious Queen. Uh, so that
349 was, and I forgot the name of this one year I was in sixth grade, and then all the way
350 through high school, uh from seventh to twelfth, I went through a Mennonite, a church
351 high schoo-, uh school. All the way, all those years.

352

353 BP: ok

354

355 OR: it was church all the way.

356

357 BP: and did you enjoy that?

358

359 OR: oh, listen. I'm, I, those were tough years because our generation, and our class was a
360 good one. We just resisted all- they were pretty doctrinaire and dogmatic and hard lined,
361 and we tested everything. Now I wasn't way out testing, but I was part of a generation
362 testing. And so we resisted a lot of the rules that were set before us, because none of them
363 made any sense to us.

364

365 BP: right

366

367 OR: so I enjoyed the basketball. I had some good teachers. Uh, and I was bothered by
368 some of the more extreme testing but- so I'd say my high school experience was a good
369 experience, but it was really quite mixed. Quite a mix

370

371 BP: ok, ok.

372

373 OR: uh, yeah.

374

375 BP: and did they change, uh, to the students needs at all or was it kind of this, this, this,
376 hard-

377

378 OR: uh, they, they did change over the years I mean I grew up in a strict sort of, uh, no
379 dancing, no smoking, no card playing, no drinking, none of those. Those kind of rules,
380 and uh, uh, I think, but it was at least ten years before they had school dances and stuff
381 like that. And that, that, uh, that, I don't know broke down, loosened up, another
382 generation comes along, the old defenders aren't there anymore.

383

384 BP: right

385

386 OR: but I grew up with the defenders who said, we are a different people, here are the
387 lines and-

388

389 BP: mmmm

390

391 OR: and we fought them.

392

393 BP: so you had that activism in you kind of

394

395 OR: well yeah you could say that, I think, I think the seeds of my life- I often like to think
396 I'm sophisticated and very cool and all that, but uh, I grew up in a church where, the
397 worship language was German. And in the high school they shifted to English. But it
398 wasn't just the lang- it was the whole cultural uh, change and it had to do with faith and
399 culture, all tied up and so, years later I'm reading about what was going on. I said, that's
400 me. So, those seeds about culture and religion and how they're all tied up with each other
401 um, I grew up with it, and our church was one of those churches that was you know,
402 people were testing the limits and frustrated with the old ways, etcetera so-

403

404 BP: right

405

406 OR: um, that uh, so where I am today, I mean I'd like to say it was all me and my
407 brilliance but really it was set back there.

408

409 BP: ok

410

411 OR: in many ways.

412

413 BP: very cool. Interesting. Um, so let's see now, you answered a lot of these questions
414 and-

415
416 OR: well if I get, if I go off track, you just-

417
418 BP: oh no that's fine, that's fine

419
420 OR: I mean I, I do ramble.

421
422 BP: basically these questions are there for, if you know

423
424 OR: ok

425
426 BP: to go through if you don't have anything to say or you're talking very little, but if, if
427 you know if you keep talking that's great because we're getting out a lot of the questions
428 that I would be asking otherwise

429
430 OR: okay, okay. Alright.

431
432 BP: that's excellent. Um, so, wh, why did you decide to go to the University of
433 Winnipeg?

434
435 OR: 'cause it was a local school. Um, in the Mennonite world uh, in the us, a lot of uh,
436 people go to the church colleges. Where I went we just, it was never a question we would
437 uh, go to the local University, whatever it was. In this case it was University of Winnipeg
438 although, yeah, it was University of Manitoba, then it had a satellite, became independent
439 and that's where I graduated from, but it was like that's where you go, and I lived at
440 home. It wasn't a question of, do you go away to college. No, you just live at home and
441 as a matter of fact you live at home until you're married. That was my mother's
442 understanding.

443
444 BP: ok

445
446 OR: and I didn't live at home until I was married, but uh, I just, that's, that's it and uh, so
447 college uh, cost for less. My parents never charged, you know, I didn't have to pay room
448 and board while I was going to college. Um, now it meant that I was also, my life was
449 still more circumspect, circumscribed-

450
451 BP: ok

452
453 OR: because it was still within the church and I'm off to college and so on, but uh, yeah I
454 did go to uh, it just wasn't a question.

455
456 BP: ok

457
458 OR: I mean, that's where you went.

459
460 BP: right
461
462 OR: I don't know I can't think of any other you know, rational. It, eh, I think other
463 alternatives were, were uh, prohibitive price wise. Except my oldest brother, really
464 flunked his first year. And then, he, now that was the British system so he, he, was really
465 had to repeat his whole year. But if he went down to the U of States and he went to a
466 college a church college in Indiana, Goshen Indiana, I guess I don't know by Notre Dam.
467 Uh he, he could get credit for the couple of courses he passed and he wouldn't have to
468 repeat those, but if he stayed he'd have to repeat everything.
469
470 BP: woah
471
472 OR: yeah, so we had a little bit of a dismal view of going to the U.S. for education
473 because that's, you know if you couldn't quite make it here you went there.
474
475 BP: right
476
477 OR: unfair, but (l)
478
479 BP: (l)
480
481 OR: anyway
482
483 BP: um, now how did uh, going to the University of Winnipeg kind of shape your career
484 goals and aspirations? Or did it?
485
486 OR: that's a good question. I'm not sure. Um, I went in my first year, not knowing what
487 to do. I had don't well in my last year in high school. I had done well in science, and
488 math. I, I did, I got A's there. I think I got A's of course. And, so in my first year I took
489 chemistry, physics and uh, I forgot what it was not statistics, something else- calculus.
490 And then I took German and I forget what else. But I don't know why I took it cuz that,
491 my best grades in high school were there, therefore here. And in my second year I
492 transferred down to the down town campus where I took a course on religion and
493 literature, and that grabbed me. That grabbed me. Now I still majored because I didn't
494 really have a clear goal, in economics, and I minored in statistics. I have yet to use, that
495 basic learning from that
496
497 BP: yeah (l)
498
499 OR: except in a very loose way, but that's where I was. But then I thought, I want to be a,
500 I want to get my PHD and I want to be like Carl Red. Carl Red was my teacher he taught
501 religion and literature. So we would look at religious themes and literature and I loved it.
502
503 BP: oh ok
504

505 OR: and I wanted, I talked to him and he, and I said I want to do this. How do I do it?
506 And he said, well just take your time, I mean he was kind of wise, and you know you
507 don't have to be a PHD because today you feel like one. So, he said, just take your time
508 and think about it see where it leads you. If you want to go fine, but he didn't, he didn't
509 add to my romanticism about this future.

510

511 BP: ok

512

513 OR: he just was a kind of wise teacher who listened and he said, well you just do what
514 you have to do and that's how I remember him

515

516 BP: in turn that probably

517

518 OR: it was good

519

520 BP: helped you

521

522 OR: it was good. Yeah, yeah. It was a little you know. You know you fall in love with
523 some stuff at that age. You're what? Twenty? And you know, you sort of think that's my
524 life, my life trajectory. Well it wasn't.

525

526 BP: ok

527

528 OR: so

529

530 BP: yeah

531

532 OR: so, this is maybe another question, but my last year of college, I went to some church
533 event and they called for people. You want to spend a couple of years in Christian
534 service. Its like a, volunteer position. You can do teaching, and that was for me, I
535 thought. So I signed up. And I was hoping to go to Japan because they had openings
536 there, but they said no, we're inviting you to go to Columbia, South America. And so I
537 said yes. Uh, and uh, I didn't know a word of Spanish when I said yes. And my last year,
538 my last month in may uh, uh, and, or, and June, I was just terrified. I was terrified, and in
539 my own religious thinking I thought, God, can you just do something because I'm too, I
540 could never back out but I'm too scared. Could you just block it? Well nothing
541 happened, nothing got blocked, and my first flight, in my lifetime was from Winnipeg to
542 Vancouver to see my parents who had just moved, spend a week there, and then I was
543 down to- When I got off the plane in Columbia, I did not know a word of Spanish. Not a
544 single word. Um, and, I taught in English and took Spanish classes but that was my first-

545

546 BP: pretty big uh, cultural-

547

548 OR: It's very difficult. Two years, it was two years.

549

550 BP: oh wow.

551
 552 OR: that was pre-email. That was pre-telephone. It was letters and it was uh, I had a
 553 friend we used to send each other these little cassettes. We would record and tell each
 554 other stories. But eh, it was that, that's where my first time, and that of course uh, opened
 555 my world. Didn't, it frustrated me more than that, but it opened my world because the
 556 questions there were, I'm teaching at a, at a, at a upper-class school. Rich kids. And
 557 here's this mass of Columbians, who are poor, who's educational opportunities are
 558 (nothing). Why am I doing that? And I'm thinking, don't we have, out of our faith have
 559 something to say to that and it was, well everybody needs Jesus and that was my answer
 560 and that was not adequate. But I didn't have anyway to articulate it or think about it, it
 561 just was- And I was lonely and afraid and completely lost in this new culture completely.
 562 So I spent two years there pining to get home. Ah, but it op- It said ok, now what do you
 563 do now? So, so, when, when you're back to Winnipeg, I, uh, I was really lost that year. I
 564 taught part time, and I took a course in literature, English literature, because I didn't
 565 know what else to- And then I went to seminary because I said, I've got to figure this
 566 stuff out. I've got to figure this stuff out in terms of like, sort of my theology and my,
 567 world view, this stuff about all this poverty and rich, and where are the U.S. people of
 568 faith living at? So, I'm jumping ahead you maybe have these questions.

569
 570 BP: No, that's-

571
 572 OR: so that my life trajectory and it was that seminary that a lot of things were, were sort
 573 of clarified. Uh, not career, but a lot of things were clarified, um, and I enjoyed it but it
 574 was mostly and academic one yet. It was uh, sort of youth study, theology, and you read
 575 history and you take Greek and you take Hebrew, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

576
 577 BP: ok. So how did you first learn about apartheid?

578
 579 OR: well, I went back after college to Winnipeg. I did two years of prison ministry, I'll
 580 cut it short because that's-

581
 582 BP: (l)

583
 584 OR: This is how- And one of the prison- In my last year at seminary I met wife, and we
 585 uh, uh, one year at prison ministry and then we got married

586
 587 BP: ok

588
 589 OR: and she moved up to Winnipeg, and my prison ministry thing wasn't really, (tsk) it
 590 was great work, but I worked, I had a, a supervisor who was burned out. And it was like,
 591 a good job but he was so burned out that, (sigh), you know I could feel really good one
 592 day and the next day he would be so depressed because, what it was, if you don't have a
 593 good way about thinking about working with prison ministry, you better get out of it,
 594 because these people are not going anywhere,

595
 596 BP: right

597
598 OR: so you're not talking about getting out and a new life. So that kind of- And my wife
599 said, you know I think it's time we went over seas again. Now she had been over seas
600 before we were married, so we both had been elsewhere before. And we, we were going
601 to go through the church, and we did, and we didn't know where to go. We thought, we
602 could go to Nigeria. That's where she had been, but no, that's not fair and- So
603 somewhere, Botswana showed up. South African refugees. And it just seemed right. So
604 what? I mean there wasn't- And when we arrived, we arrived in July, and I forget when
605 Steve Biko was killed in nineteen seventy seven, but we hadn't been there but a month,
606 and Biko was killed. And so we were just there to do a school for refugees, South African
607 refugees. So that's why we were there. But really not too- I read a little bit about
608 Apartheid but not too much. Um, and Biko was killed so there was a memorial service, in
609 the capital of Botswana, Cameroon. So we attended. And that was like, an immersion,
610 because we were in this big auditorium with three, four, hundred South Africans. We
611 were introduced to the freedom singing, toi-toing, fiery speeches, a couple of white
612 people. I mean there were a few more than us but, my memory is my wife and I, we were
613 the only white people in a sea of black faces. They were angry, and wow, this just- It
614 didn't scare us, it was just like wow, this, this is a whole new world and this is like,
615 you've got to get engaged with this. And so that was like a, just, you got to move with
616 this. Something is going on here. I mean, bigger than we'd ever anticipated.

617
618 BP: right okay

619
620 OR: so,

621
622 BP: that's what really-

623
624 OR: that's- It was mostly sort of, arrived with that feet on the ground, that we really, uh,
625 kind of connected. As a child I did remember this apartheid stuff, because Canada was
626 part of the Common-wealth, South Africa had been and there was this sort of vague
627 things, but nothing in a- I had a girlfriend for about a couple of weeks once, uh, and it
628 was, she had, she had moved to Canada from South Africa so there- but nothing, no, no, I
629 wouldn't draw any dots there so much as memories and then, landing there and

630
631 BP: right

632
633 OR: A memorial service for a black nationalist Epiko. That was pretty just-

634
635 BP: yeah

636
637 OR: and it was like, we better get to work.

638
639 BP: yeah?

640

641 OR: I mean, not just doing our job, we ran a school or had to set up a school but we better
 642 get to work to understand what we're in and, so we read and read and read and got the
 643 history and it (???) and so on.

644

645 BP: so how did you start- You were working at the school, how did you start working
 646 with the apartheid movement then?

647

648 OR: well, the school, there was no school.

649

650 BP: ok

651

652 OR: We're supposed to do something. Because all these South African refugees are there.
 653 Refugees are there. Many of them were in somewhere in high school, but it was the
 654 Bantu education so they weren't- So we thought, what are we going to do? So we set up a
 655 correspondence school. So, and my wife would um, I think, if I could tell the story while
 656 we were there, my wife was, is a teacher. Was a teacher, and, so she did the
 657 administration. I kind of did the PR work around town. We rented a couple of buildings,
 658 uh there's- But that was a time when money was flowing into an, into any of, from all
 659 over the world. We're a counsel of churches, other agencies, how much money you
 660 need? The U.N. gave us the money. First year we had, I don't know, eleven thousand.
 661 Half way through the year they said, here's another nine thousand. So there was more
 662 money than we could handle. So we bought books, and, and, then we started this course
 663 once, course- Then we realized that there were a lot of adult South Africans around.
 664 Some of whom had been teachers. And so we started develop- and then we said, we also
 665 need a board, to guide us, because we don't really know what we're doing.

666

667 BP: right

668

669 OR: so, it was in these interactions that the anti-apartheid stuff got into us. Uh,
 670 particularly (sighs), I would call it my religious conversion, but it was particularly the,
 671 the, the skin, the color of the skin opening up issues deep and deeper. Um, we had some
 672 friends visit us, um, they had a son, these friends had a son in Swazi-land. Because of
 673 him, then they came to visit us and they were just tourists. So they were with us and my
 674 wife was interviewing like you and I are talking, and she was interviewing this South
 675 African student. And I was sitting, and this friend was sitting besides this South African
 676 student and I was sitting there and this, you know, this uh, visitor, he sees a photo op. A
 677 photo. So he just reaches down into his- And this students is intently looking at my wife.
 678 And he reaches in and takes it- Slowly pulls out the camera and I just, I'm sitting there
 679 and I see it happening and it's like, this- I've got to stop it, but I couldn't stop it. And he
 680 pulls out his camera and he leans back and this student is so intense he doesn't see
 681 anything and he just clicks. And he- Student just hears the click, and he just snaps. And I
 682 though, we might as well go home, because, we're clearly spies. That's what this is
 683 about. So I said to my friend, our friend, I said, you've got to be- Those were the days of
 684 film you (l) - You've got to pull it out and, and destroy it in front of him, or, or we're
 685 finished. We spend half an hour in a conversation and finally the student said it's okay
 686 you don't need to worry about it. I mean he- You don't have to do that. But it was that

687 sense of- There isn't a single move here that doesn't effect how people relate to each
 688 other, and how deeply anti-aparth- Because we're only twelve miles from South African
 689 border, and there were agents that could be anywhere around. We could be agents, just
 690 cuz- And it was the issue, just because we got white skin, just because we mean well, that
 691 wasn't enough. There had to be a way of earning kind of, trust. And that was early on in
 692 that experience and that was, I would say, one of the root experiences of anti-apart- To be
 693 anti-apartheid uh, there's more here than a couple of years. So when our three years were
 694 up, we were at like a three year term, we, we really want to stay. But there was lots of
 695 other whites that wanted to stay. It was kind of a romantic view of anti- you know,
 696 Because we could go to South Africa and get around easy because we're white.

697
 698 BP: of course

699
 700 OR: and, so, we asked some people, what could we do if we stayed? And we kind of, we
 701 asked the wrong people. We asked the political people who said no, you really ought to
 702 go home and deal with the, with your end of the problem. So that was our message. You
 703 know, you really ought not to stay. You ought to go home, and deal with the dynamics
 704 that support apartheid from your end. That stuck, and we're still here. So that was the
 705 driving force to get involved in the anti-apartheid movement. That was the driving- You
 706 need to go home, and work at, at, at, the, the foundations that support apartheid.
 707 Business, economics, so now we're into- that opens up, okay divestment, and all those
 708 other issues that came later. Uh, but, it's a, that's what- And the church's with their
 709 pension funds, and all this stuff, it just said, that's where you got to go.

710
 711 BP: wow. You're probably thinking that it's, the heart of the problem is hear lets stay and
 712 fix it here

713
 714 OR: well

715
 716 BP: when

717
 718 OR: that's why I said this was a religious conversion. Because I realized that no matter
 719 how good I feel, how righteous I feel I am, and how well meaning I am, there are deeper
 720 issues here, and what, what South Africa did was it focused like a magnifying glass.
 721 Economics, race, um, violence, and I come out of a peace tradition. All this stuff is just
 722 like, focused here. You can just see it all, really close up in your face. Um, and so um,
 723 that was like, I, I, I'm a nice guy I think I am, but uh-uh, there's more work to be done.
 724 So going home, was the challenge. The challenge to deal with the stuff, and I don't think
 725 my wife and I have ever forgotten that. Go home, and do the work there.

726
 727 BP: right

728
 729 OR: It would have been great to stay. And people did stay and god bless them and all that
 730 stuff, but that was not the word we got. And so, uh, my first real act as an anti-apartheid
 731 activist uh, not real act but the one I remembered was when the Harold Washington days.
 732 We had a s- Uh, uh I don't know how I got connected with this group but there of- We

733 used to demonstrate in front of the, uh, consulate. But then I, then somebody approached
 734 me and said there's a bunch, a number of people who are going to be arrested at the sit in
 735 at the consulate. Do you want to join? I said yes I do. So we joined and we sat in and we
 736 were arrested, put in jail overnight. Um, and now, why, I think that was when my
 737 daughter was just a little- We only have one child, just a young girl and she went home
 738 crying that night, because she had heard the bible story about uh, Paul got thrown in jail
 739 and they whipped him. And so she thought that daddy was going to- (l)

740

741 BP: oh. (l)

742

743 OR: anyway but we- So out of that, and when Harold Washington, he kind of sent the
 744 message to the judges. To the judge, or system. Let this go to trial in the kind of, uh, the
 745 Nuremberg argument. We, we had to do, break a small wall to protest a bigger evil. So
 746 that went to court, and uh, I was the only one in- There were about- I'm trying to
 747 remember how many of us there were, actually put on trial. It was, it, I mean, we, sitting.

748

749 BP: right

750

751 OR: you know, there was no major penalty, but it was a public event. It was a great
 752 public, a Dennis Brutus, who was an exiled uh, poet, who taught here at Northwestern.
 753 He spoke in our- So we got in expert witnesses and all that. And without feeling, I mean I
 754 do feel like that was one of my times when I could say I did this, because when we were
 755 in South Africa they told us go home, and do this kind of stuff that is publicized and
 756 agitate against those foundations that support apartheid. And I felt like, I had a really
 757 good argument. And I was genuine, it came right from here and out of my own
 758 experience, so we were acquitted.

759

760 BP: right, okay

761

762 OR: uh, justifiable, I mean, it was a minor thing

763

764 BP: right

765

766 OR: but the argument convinced the jury. We had a jury trial too.

767

768 BP: right. Wow.

769

770 OR: So, that was great.

771

772 BP: now was that the, was that the same time when Prexy was there and Lisa Brach too?
 773 Or no?

774

775 OR: you know I, I can't- I, we first met Prexy in, when we were in Botswana, and he um,
 776 came through working for the program to combat racism with the world consulate
 777 church. We had a loose connection, we, he came over to our place we met, and so on.

778 And then when we came back he was still working with them, so I don't think it was then
779 yet.

780
781 BP: okay

782
783 OR: it was after that, that we started the SAR. It was South African Rugby tour. At
784 least, I think that's where I connected with Lisa first because we had these protests
785 whenever they came with a rugby tours, and that's where the Lisa one was, and when
786 Prexy moved back I don't remember which one it was, but he was obviously, picked up
787 uh, where he left off as it were, because he's from Chicago.

788
789 BP: okay

790
791 OR: And so I don't remember the exact time we hooked up again, but we hooked up
792 when he moved back to Chicago. I think he was still working with the program, uh, to
793 combat racism for the first couple years that we were in Chicago.

794
795 BP: okay

796
797 OR: So

798
799 BP: So, now, who were some of the, some of the influential activists to you? (???) like
800 activists who have really influenced your path?

801
802 OR: well, oh boy, (NAME 1, 36,50,20). Now BD is a uh, now I read about him and
803 learned about him in South Africa. I mean in Botswana and- Now we spent a little time in
804 South Africa too, which was through the little study about forced removal. Simply, black
805 people are living in the wrong spot because it doesn't fit the map, so they're moving.

806
807 BP: right

808
809 OR: uh, but during that, those three years, I, we read a lot about, and heard about, uh,
810 didn't meet Byers Anade. Byers Anade was born in the womb of the apartheid
811 movement. He came out of the Dutch Reform Church, he was a minister, His father was a
812 founder of the Bruder Band, which was the underground brotherhood that basically put
813 their people in place of the power politically, and some where, he had this conversion
814 experience, where he realized this things wrong. He had- I don't know if it was partly
815 related to going to Europe and 've- And it just, and so he became a, he became an- For
816 me he was one of the first kind of models. People who were born in the womb of the
817 oppressive machine.

818
819 BP: right

820
821 OR: and it had religious justification. And believed it. Some how that broke open, and he
822 became a leader for all of South Africa. They banned him. That means they shut him
823 down for five years at a time, he was virtually under house arrest, he could never be with

824 more than two people at one time, so he and his wife could not have a visitor because that
825 would be more than two people.

826

827 BP: right

828

829 OR: they had the secret police watching them all the time. Um, he was basically kicked
830 out of his own church, so he joined the black, Dutch Reform Church, which, in apartheid
831 era were separate bodies. Things like that. He uh, his org- he started a Christian institute
832 which was shut down and uh, that was a model for me. There was somebody and he was
833 tried on refusing to cooperate with some um, some, some, some, uh, investigation and he
834 just said, listen the gospel says you don't hide anything. I refuse to cooperate because
835 you're hiding what you're really about. And he never went to jail, but- And so he was,
836 he was uh, he was um, he was one of the first ones. It was because I think I felt some
837 connection as somebody caught up in the middle of the oppressive system. Advantaged,
838 like me, myself as a white person, male, all that stuff.

839

840 BP: right

841

842 OR: I just felt like wow, this is the- you know, this happens once in a lifetime where you
843 see and so to, observe them. There were other people. Some were black. Any of the black
844 activists um, Frank Giccani, was very important. Um, uh, Tutu was to some extent but he
845 was a little bit, little bit smooth at times. He um. Bika was new to me so I didn't- But he
846 was also a black nationalist. I didn't feel he was quite the model, even though I admired
847 him. And then, there were later on, there were some really strong South Africans in the
848 city when we were doing the anti-apartheid work that really (???). Like Molefi Zeli, who
849 is today, the South African Ambassador, to uh, I think the democratic republic of Congo.

850

851 BP: ok

852

853 OR: Donna Seed, and a colleague of his, Robin Peters, Peterson. These were two PHDs,
854 THDs or theology students here, but they were they, they were tremendously helpful in
855 our anti-apartheid work, because they can analyze stuff. Why the South African
856 government is doing what. What they, what they see is happening. And so they were
857 tremendous advisors to the anti apartheid movement here in Chicago. Really good.

858

859 BP: really? Ok. So I think we're going to have to change up the tape real quick.

860

861 OR: whatever

862

863 BP: uh, if you want to take a little break I have some peanuts, water and orange juice (l)

864

865 OR: you know,

866

867 (END RECORDING OF FIRST (1st) TAPE. WE CONTINUE TO TALK ABOUT HOW
868 HE DOESN'T WANT TO DRINK OUT OF PLASTIC BECAUSE IT IS BAD FOR
869 THE ENVIRONMENT, I AGREE.)

870
871 TAPE TWO (2) BEGIN
872

873 BP: very excellent. Um I think, so yeah, y, you were talking about- Now Chicago, your
874 activism in Chicago. How did that begin? How did uh, you know.
875

876 OR: well I think that uh, I don't remember the first um, the first demonstration, but we
877 would have been part of any that we knew of, and that demonstration at the consulate
878 we're obviously were connected with a few people, so that I could be invited in to the sit-
879 in. uh, then it, then came the rugby tours and my wife and I were very active, and
880 somewhere there (tsk) now so from nine- We, eighty one. Nineteen eighty one to about
881 eighty six, uh we, our activism grew, but towards the end of that, toward eighty five,
882 eighty six, my wife was teaching at an alternative high school, and after about six years
883 she left that. She was teaching English, and she went full time into organizing anti-
884 apartheid work. So because of her work, she was in all of the committees on divestment,
885 or the rugby tour, and um, we were kind of closely connected with it. Uh, so, uh we had
886 a down state tour once on divestment and I remember going, I, I was paired with a uh, a
887 woman who uh, bish- uh not bishop um, Albert Latooli who was the first South African
888 to win a peace prize. Uh he, uh his daughter, she was already in exile in Atlanta, and so
889 she and I were paired when we went all over the state. She and I went uh, I forgot where
890 we went but we went for a couple of days downstate to argue for divestment uh, from
891 um, any institutions. And the rugby tour, my, I'm not so great in memory on some of the
892 details here. Then my, the other thing my wife did was in her anti-apartheid. Now this
893 was about fifteen years because she did it through one organization, and then she moved
894 to the Lutheran, had a Para-church organization called South African Network, where she
895 worked very strongly for another bunch of years, and it was really the same work. And,
896 but she al- organized um, I'm a pastor now, and uh, I'm a pastor in a mixed church but in
897 an African American community in the west side.
898

899 BP: okay
900

901 OR: and partly because of that, and partly because, you know, she thought, you know
902 how do we link up Martin Luther King and South Africa? So every Martin Luther King
903 birthday, January fifteenth, she organized for about seven, eight years, and you know
904 that's cold weather. Sing out against apartheid. So we would invite as many people as we
905 could. We had, we often would bring a little kid's choir, so we would have six, eight, ten
906 little kids, one of our adults would play the, you know I mean it's, it's pretty cold but
907 playing guitar and singing some sort of civil rights song, and a bunch of others so it was
908 all day it was about four, five hours and people would come and go. So that was a, annual
909 thing for a number of years, um, that was, and that connected us and that connected a lot
910 of us to each other in different ways. So the divestment, um, and the pinch fund- there
911 was a season of the SIDA, forget the, the history order there. The sing out, um, any time
912 there was a rally ah, I mean a visiting speaker from South Africa, uh, this Molefitt Zeli
913 and Robin Peterson they helped us a lot in organizing uh, just some sort of up-to-date
914 seminar stuff like that. So more than it, and then, and then our church with- I grew up as a
915 Mennonite I'm not a pastor in that denomination now but they had, because of there work

in Southern Africa, they had, they started a program called Servant Hood Sabbatical, which was church folks, caught up in the middle of the apartheid struggle. It was so intense that they funded a program where they could come to U.S. or Canada for six weeks, to kind of get an R and R, just to relax. So we had one couple with us for six weeks, uh, and we put them on a little local speaking tour, although, the, the point of that was not to have them speak too much because they're supposed to relax. But you know, we always fudged a little.

BP: (l)

OR: did what we could. And we hosted a couple of others, um, that is they were with us for a few days and then they'd go off for six weeks somewhere. They'd come through Chicago, it was a good city. Fly through. Things like that. So we connected, and got to know some new anti, sort of anti-apartheid South Africans who were coming here for a break. And hosted them, we took a couple of the down to uh, to City Hall to see events. We had a Church coalition. Had a big protest. They came there for that. And then we, would include the anti-apartheid component, things like that. And uh, so we, we kind of developed a larger network. Not just Marge and I but through this, with South Africans. Uh, I think that part of hosting the, the people coming through, or connecting with and when they came through was always one that re-energized us, because here we were, doing our thing, but um, we needed that sort of South African presence coming through every now and then. So there'd theology students, or there'd be an ac- this, we also hold a, uh, hosted um, I think his name was Moses Miyakeesle. He was from the, uh, boy, not Soweto. I forgot the name. Alexander township which is the township of (???) Johannesburg. And they had a civic comity, and so he came here for a couple of weeks, and so we, uh, I, so somebody hosted him and he spoke at a number of places. So it was these South Africans coming through and as they talked about the kinds of ways in which they were working, um, knowing always that even when they spoke in public forms, there was always some South African Spy in that room, so that we had to be careful about, they had us be careful but um. Those are the, just the ways in which, uh, oh there's another component. This was really important. This was for us, as church people, because there was an organization called uh, the End Conscription Campaign. ECC. You see, in the South Africa, all white men were required to report for military- military duty for two years, uh, starting at eight-teen or so. That was required. All white men. And, we got to know a couple of people who decided, this was what made up the bulk, the, the, the, the core. The sort of, the certainly the officer core if not more, of the South African Army. This is the military that protects apartheid. So there were a couple of them that started, see it was against the law to council conscientious objection. It was against the law. If you did that, you would be thrown in jail. So one of them, Richard Steel never, he, we met him. He was a Baptist in South Africa. But he had got in touch with this, peace tradition out of our churches, and he realized he couldn't serve in the military. So he was going to become a conscientious obj- And would, he refused to register. And so he, and that campaign become another activity. They, they arrested him. They charged him and tried and sent him to a year in prison. Now, they sentenced him as a military prisoner. So when he got to prison, they gave him his military clothes. They're prison, military clothes, but he said, I'm sorry, I don't wear those. I'm not part of the military.

962 He refused to even, so there he was in shorts in the winter. Well then he was accused of
 963 disobeying a military order and thrown into solitary confinement. So he took there for a
 964 week or two, I don't w-, then he'd come out they'd say, here. No I don't do it, so back
 965 in. So they played with his mind. Now luckily he, he had prepared himself for, like,
 966 solitude and all these things. And his cousin, they were the two. That movement grew,
 967 and that was one we tried to publish, uh publicize here. That is, there were white, young,
 968 young white men who refused, and so the campaign was, not, was always, was always on
 969 that line about not breaking the law, but they counseled against, let's end the constriction
 970 uh, program. That wasn't deemed illegal.

971
 972 BP: right

973
 974 OR: so you had a growing number of people who refused to serve, and it was publicized,
 975 and of course, that was one of the scariest things for the South African Government,
 976 because the white man were the ones who would support this with the guns.

977
 978 BP: right

979
 980 OR: and if they wouldn't, what, what could you? So that grew, and that, there was one
 981 time where they had one hundred and fifty three people, refused to serve. Hundred and
 982 fifty three. Publicly. It was in the papers. And then of course they tried to shut down the
 983 papers but that kind of dynamic, you can see. So we um, we did everything we could to
 984 kind of publicize, especially for church folks, who should have some sort of theological
 985 empathy for this position. They're taking it out of their faith, that they would refuse to
 986 participate in defending apartheid. And they were conscientious objectors, at least in this
 987 case. Maybe not, you know, universal. There might be other cases but not in defending
 988 and supporting apartheid. So there was a Richard, uh Steel. Peter Molek's cousin, and
 989 after that it really grew and became a huge campaign, and of course, it was constantly
 990 under attack by the government. And, many of the were jailed. Richard went in-cognito
 991 for a couple of weeks when they were looking for him and other people. Stuff like that.
 992 But we, that was another component you might say, here that we would publicize,
 993 especially to the church.

994
 995 BP: and what, what was your role in that?

996
 997 OR: I was just a pastor in a little church on the west side supporting anti- I'm not a good
 998 organizer. My wife was the organizer.

999
 1000 BP: ok

1001
 1002 OR: so she would do the organizing and I would do bit pieces. I, I was, I'm a, I'm a two-
 1003 bit player on the organizing piece okay?

1004
 1005 BP: (l)

1006

1007 OR: I know that. But um, uh, we would just be part of, and our little church was, I was
 1008 surprised how supportive were, they never said too much over these years and they never
 1009 resisted it. Never. But they never were really vocal, but they always supported like, I
 1010 went to South Africa, well I sort of snuck in for about a month in eighty-three, and about
 1011 eighty-seven went again, and in nineteen-ninety was there for the elections. I mean uh,
 1012 not ninety. I was there for sabbatical. Ninety-four I was there for elections, and they
 1013 always let me go for a month. Sabbatical was three months. Lectures was five weeks.
 1014 Uh, but the elections, I realized how, I mean the church was just, just sort of goal man,
 1015 goal. We're with you because you know, Mandela, it showed up first when Mandela was
 1016 released. Nineteen-ninety. That, then I, then they, they cheered like we cheered.

1017
 1018 BP: right

1019
 1020 OR: and then I went for elections and they said, go, we bless you, go, and be a monitor,
 1021 so I was one of the religious monitors. You know there were legal monitors labor u-
 1022 Union monitors, everybody's, everybody was there.

1023
 1024 BP: right

1025
 1026 OR: for the elections. Uh,

1027
 1028 BP: ok

1029
 1030 OR: but I was in the, we had religious component. I was under that one. Uh, so that was
 1031 the last, and on the day of elections my wife and a bunch of others had a big, sort of, pray
 1032 in at the consulate. Like this is the day of elections. And so it was like, support the
 1033 elections, and it was a great day. So

1034
 1035 BP: that sounds awesome. Um, so

1036
 1037 OR: I think I got off track there, but anyway.

1038
 1039 BP: no I mean it's, it's all it's, it's, gold what you there. That's awesome. Um, how uh,
 1040 how did you, how did your family support your activism?

1041
 1042 OR: well my wife and daughter were, are, were very supportive. My w-, my daughter, I
 1043 was twenty-one when I first got on an airplane. By the time my daughter hit twenty-one,
 1044 she had been to, I think to Southern Africa maybe just once. Or twice. She's been there
 1045 three times now.

1046
 1047 BP: ok

1048
 1049 OR: so, whatever we did, she didn't wanted to go on this uh, it wasn't really (???) on this
 1050 sabbatical in nineteen-ninety. She would have been about, nineteen-ninety, she was born
 1051 in eighty, so she would have been ten, you know. So she wanted to buy uh, sort of uh, not

1052 quite seventeen, whatever the girls read just below seventeen. That kind of magazine she
 1053 took it on the plane like

1054
 1055 BP: sure

1056
 1057 OR: but you know, um, she has be- (l), she went on a trip two years ago with Prexy to
 1058 Southern Africa.

1059
 1060 BP: ok

1061
 1062 OR: and then she went on another one once. And the sabbatical. She's been to Southern
 1063 Africa three times. Uh, she has embraced this. Now she's not um, uh, yeah she's
 1064 embraced it, and my wife has embra- Ooh she embraced it too. She, so, it was, it became
 1065 that it was more than anti-apartheid for us. It became um, trying to figure out how we can
 1066 live good lives, in opposition to sort of, American Imperialism. So in the Ronald Regan
 1067 era, the uh, she and I both- my daughter was this high when she and my wife stickered
 1068 some stores with uh, for the E.R.A. to pass the equal rights amendment, and so

1069
 1070 BP: (l)

1071
 1072 OR: and I think I've got pictures. (l) And you know, so she was there from the beginning

1073
 1074 BP: oh, ok. Excellent.

1075
 1076 OR: and my wife uh, was arrested once for something on Central America, and uh, and
 1077 my wife, and the judge asked her, well do you, do you do a lot of this demonstration, and
 1078 my wife said, I hope my whole life is a demonstration.

1079
 1080 BP: (l)

1081
 1082 OR: so, it's, it's been a, yeah we're all, we're all in it together.

1083
 1084 BP: ok, um, and now what, what, what conflicts, what hard, what, was hard about being
 1085 activist? What conflicts did you run into?

1086
 1087 OR: uh, I felt uh, one was um, I thought a lot of church people were pretty myopic. They
 1088 didn't see very far beyond their own eyes. That was one thing. So when we did uh,
 1089 divestment we went after, for example, are own church, ah, ah, our own denomination's
 1090 pension funds. Is there anything in there that invests in companies in South Africa? And
 1091 the managers here were pretty resistant. We have a fiduciary responsibility to get the
 1092 highest return. And I thought, give me a break. So we fought that one. So that was a
 1093 disappointment that church folks couldn't quite get it. Uh, and that raised larger issues
 1094 because that probably means that your relationship with people of color in this country
 1095 isn't very good either. I mean, it's not like a neat little category where you don't care
 1096 about one little issue and otherwise. So that, I think that church participation, often at
 1097 these meetings, these planning meanings, I'm not an organizer but I went to a lot of them.

1098 I was the only pastor. I was the only pas- Often. Now some of the big churches, I was, I
 1099 was disappointed in a lot of the big churches. I caught one of them, this isn't to names,
 1100 but I, some of them either did their own thing, and sort of like, we're almost too big to
 1101 bother with you little people. So they didn't get involved in the kind of. For me it was
 1102 like the religious political thing was almost, you know, you just found your way in it.

1103

1104 BP: right

1105

1106 OR: uh, but um, some of them, and so, there was one church that keep on inviting even
 1107 when this big political South African person was already kind of, got a little, kooky. They
 1108 still invited this person over to speak and it was like hold it, hold it, hold it. Pay attention
 1109 to time's change. And others just did their own thing, so it wasn't that they did bad
 1110 things, but I felt like, that churches could have been more involved.

1111

1112 BP: ok

1113

1114 OR: and they were involved, but it was usually the high leadership and sometimes
 1115 national leadership but you know, right at the congregational level. More of that, there
 1116 could have been more.

1117

1118 BP: right

1119

1120 OR: uh, I wouldn't say extremely frustrating but I was a little disappointed.

1121

1122 BP: yeah. So, and now, how did, did you work at the First Church of the Brethren back
 1123 then, when you were an, when you were active?

1124

1125 OR: uh, I, the whole time.

1126

1127 BP: the whole time, okay.

1128

1129 OR: when we came to Chicago, after our Southern Africa experience I was a pastor at a
 1130 little Mennonite church, it took them three months to fire me. The I did little interim work
 1131 for another couple of months, and then I started at the First Church of the Brethren in
 1132 nineteen-eighty-two, in February. I've been there this whole time.

1133

1134 BP: ok

1135

1136 OR: so all this stuff I'm talking about in Chicago, was while I was there.

1137

1138 BP: oh ok. And how did they take on the apartheid iss- apartheid issue? Or did they?

1139

1140 OR: they never challenged me. I don't know um, I do remember one, one of the fir-
 1141 When I got arrested that first time there was one member I overheard this, why would
 1142 you do that? Why would you get arrested? They sort of like, no, no connection.

1143

1144 BP: right

1145

1146 OR: um, but I think the African American members, maybe they weren't that active
1147 politically themselves, but in their spirit they were supportive. I never ever felt that I
1148 was, that I had to fight for this, and that any, uh, uh, nobody was defensive on it like, are
1149 you sure you should be doing this? I just did it, and tried to link it in with local struggles
1150 etcetera, and uh, be a good pastor at the same time. Not abandon them

1151

1152 BP: right

1153

1154 OR: for this and never be around. So I just tried to integrate it and I don't know how I
1155 did, but I didn't feel like there was any strong resistance to it.

1156

1157 BP: that's good. Okay. Um, you got a lot of these questions without even me having to
1158 ask (l). That's awesome. Um, so, now how did the Chicago community treat your group?
1159 Or you know, just you and you know, who you were working with.

1160

1161 OR: well, I, I think it was um, in later years, while in the mid eighties I was involved as
1162 well in a coalition of churches on the west side, and there was a little bit of similarity
1163 between that and the p- anti-apartheid work. Um, it was, it was hard. They just couldn't
1164 see how this could, how, how apartheid could end. They just didn't have handles for it.
1165 Sort of like, aren't you wasting your time? I just, and, and so I, I remember once we had
1166 um, a couple of South African's here uh, one was a real black nationalist, and the other
1167 was an Indian, uh, background um, and they were both in the same page, generally, but
1168 not, one wasn't, the Indian guy wasn't nationalist. And they were just arguing about how
1169 this um, how this uh, how the struggle was to be lead. And, the Indian guy was saying,
1170 well you need these sort of, elites to lead it. Political leaders uh, I mean Mandela but I
1171 think more others, but more than middle class people. The people who got sort of,
1172 education, and that's what he was arguing, and this Black Nationalist he said, you know,
1173 the one thing about the middle class, they're not reliable. I've never forgotten that.

1174

1175 BP: (l)

1176

1177 OR: because they have too much divested interest in the status quo.

1178

1179 BP: true, so

1180

1181 OR: so that, and so I forgot why that story came to mind because that wasn't really your
1182 question, but

1183

1184 BP: that's interesting though

1185

1186 OR: uh, but it was, it's like these, but I think, I think its, people had a hard time seeing, I
1187 think that what I would say like is if you and I are talking and it would, lets say you're
1188 the speaker for tonight, from South Africa. We have ten people in the room, and they just
1189 can't see change. And I would say to them, but look. The kind of, the symbolic

1190 representation of hope is the person right in front of you. The speaker. So if some how
 1191 you can, recognize there are people like you or more like you, who are struggling against,
 1192 that is the place you've got to put your hope. Don't look at a sort of uh, uh macro picture,
 1193 uh with numbers and statistics, because there are some things going on behind the scenes
 1194 that we'll find out later. I mean, now I'm speaking with hindsight now, but we'll find out
 1195 later, so you kind of have to have a deep sort of inner kind of sense that this is the right
 1196 thing, and you're not you know, there'll be set backs but it doesn't mean it's not the right
 1197 thing.

1198
 1199 BP: right

1200
 1201 OR: uh, you don't go with it's the right thing because you succeed but it's the right thing.

1202
 1203 BP: right

1204
 1205 OR: um, and so uh, can I tell you a little story that we learned later but it just fit how I
 1206 felt.

1207
 1208 BP: certainly

1209
 1210 OR: and Alice, boy I forgot his name. Alister Sparks. He's this white editor. Kind of a
 1211 liberal guy. He wrote uh, uh, a journalist, and he wrote about, later after Mandela was
 1212 released with the negotiations that led to his release, and subsequent events. And he said
 1213 that Mandela had been on um, boy on the island forgot the name of the Island where,
 1214 Robin Island. And then he was moved to Cape Town, but in prison. And while I was in
 1215 prison um, there were secret negotiations started by the prime minister, and they were
 1216 trying to see where they could get Mandela. Where he would agree on some stuff. And
 1217 uh, boy I think it was uh, oh boy can't remember his name. Wasn't Declara, but anyway
 1218 the prime minister said that um, ber, ber, Mandela should be brought to his residence and
 1219 they were going to talk about some issues. And the prime minister was um, really
 1220 meticulously dressed and so they get Mandela a brand new suite to go and visit. So
 1221 they'd give him a nice suite and everything, put him in the car, and they drive in, enter
 1222 the residence underground, and you take an elevator up. And when they got
 1223 underground, parked the car, Mandela had been in prison for, now it was what? Twenty-
 1224 six years instead of when he was just soon to be released. And they got out and they
 1225 were going to go to the elevator, the guy that was him was like the foreign minister, Pit
 1226 Bota I think, that's who it was. Bota, before Declara. Bota. Uh, he noticed that
 1227 Mandela's shoe laces were untied. Mandela, you know on the Island when you're a
 1228 prisoner you, so here in the basement, Pik Bota, foreign minister, gets on his knees before
 1229 Mandela and ties his shoe laces, then they go up and talk. Now, if that isn't a symbol of
 1230 who's bowing before whom. The, the captive, the, the, the captor bowing before the
 1231 captive. Before the thing actually becomes a reality.

1232
 1233 BP: right
 1234

1235 OR: that's the stuff we didn't see going on behind. The weakness of the apartheid state
1236 as world wide pressure, but we couldn't see it all, but it's happening and so if you've got
1237 this deep inner conviction that this is the right thing, you don't always see the signals but
1238 there's more than you can see.

1239

1240 BP: right

1241

1242 OR: later on you realize, that eve- (l), even the apartheid regime bowed before Mandela

1243

1244 BP: (l)

1245

1246 OR: while he was still prisoner.

1247

1248 BP: (l) yeah. Wow.

1249

1250 OR: I mean it's just like, you know, if you can hold those with time, you hold those
1251 stories as representatives of doing the right thing, but you got to have a kind of a deep
1252 sense of integrity, that this is the right thing. Then you, then you get kind of a that long
1253 term you know, that commitment. That long term, you can stick with the course you
1254 don't-

1255

1256 BP: right

1257

1258 OR: you don't tire out or quite.

1259

1260 BP: right

1261

1262 OR: um, and that was sort of, just, that was it I just, just felt right and it had to be.

1263

1264 BP: right

1265

1266 OR: and, and, and the South African's who said it were the ones who represented for me,
1267 the reality that this is the right thing. I mean, those like, even Tutu and them and they
1268 just, it just was the right thing.

1269

1270 BP: yeah

1271

1272 OR: and we didn't know when it would, you know, sort of unfold and dismantle and so
1273 on.

1274

1275 BP: right. You feel you're working towards something and it feels good with you.

1276

1277 OR: yeah

1278

1279 BP: yeah

1280

1281 OR: and then you look back and say, man those were good days.

1282

1283 BP: yeah

1284

1285 OR: in spite of all the frustrations. I mean you know, when you would get there on the
1286 picket line and this and that and so on it was

1287

1288 BP: right

1289

1290 OR: uh, it's harder when you have arrived. And the first, I went to South Africa when,
1291 when was it? Ninety? Would have been ninety-four? Yeah ninety-four. I remember
1292 talking with some South Africans. They were, especially the church folks um, they were,
1293 all of them were a little concerned. What's next? Like we fought, and now the door's
1294 open. You're, you know for thirty years you've been banging on the door, now you have
1295 to develop some new techniques. No longer are you banging at the door now you're
1296 sitting at the table.

1297

1298 BP: right

1299

1300 OR: and that was like, what do we do? And so I think the Anti-Apartheid Movement, not
1301 to criticize it because I'm part of it, we, I don't know, I mean, it's over. But there's still
1302 the legacy of apartheid sort of the structure is still there. So we, I think to this day I
1303 haven't quite figured out how to be supportive. People like Prexy still are doing it. I
1304 mean he's got something inside of him that just, just keeps on going.

1305

1306 BP: yeah

1307

1308 OR: and, and others. I think Lisa in her way has that too. Um, but it's, it's, it just, it's a
1309 new reality and so I think that this, the Anti-Apartheid Movement didn't fall apart, I think
1310 it just sort of, sat there, didn't know what to do and then people moved on with their lives
1311 and uh. But uh, We still get together you know. We were, we were here not so long ago
1312 for some event, I forgot what it was. Oh, Miriam Mikeeble. When she died,

1313

1314 BP: ok

1315

1316 OR: there was a big event here, and Jeremiah Wright the former pastor of Trinity spoke
1317 and there was a bunch of South Africans. I had a great time.

1318

1319 BP: yeah, (l)

1320

1321 OR: it was organized by Lisa. I mean, Lisa and other colleagues here at the school.

1322

1323 BP: yeah. Ok, um, so, lets see how much time we have. Ok, we have a little bit of time
1324 left, good, good. Um, what liberation movements did you support in South Africa?

1325

1326 OR: well we have supported uh, this was a good, it's a good question because we,
 1327 coming out of the, we didn't, we don't support armed struggle. We support struggle,
 1328

1329 BP: okay

1330

1331 OR: so that, that was a tricky one. When we were in Botswana we got to know ah, some,
 1332 Zimbabweans who were part of um, um, oh forgot what it's called. It's was uh, Robin
 1333 Mugave's party at that time. Zanu? Zapu. Zanu. So, in nineteen-eighty um, so if seventy-
 1334 seven, seventy-eight we got to know these Zimbabweans, and they were part of the armed
 1335 struggle. I mean they, he was, the man was teaching in uh, in Botswana. He was in exile,
 1336 but they were part of, of the Zapu (???) front and supporting them. And so it was always
 1337 a question like how do, how much are we supporting you to overthrow Ian Smith and that
 1338 one, and then South Africa the same. So we felt that, for us the issue was, what is the
 1339 moral equivalent of the armed struggle, in a peaceful way? So we, so that's where the
 1340 divestment, all of those issues of rugby tours to put them down, public harassment if you
 1341 will. Um all of those factors um, church struggles um, those were all legitimate because
 1342 they were non-violent.

1343

1344 BP: right

1345

1346 OR: so we felt, we couldn't support the ANC by and large. The ANC, you know wasn't,
 1347 wasn't quite the liberation uh, freedom movement, freedom fighters uh although many of
 1348 them there were. They had camps and everything. I'm not naïve. I mean I know they had-
 1349 And they did some terrible things in Angola within their camps. But uh, we supported the
 1350 political struggle, the freedom struggle. We wouldn't necessarily finance the armed
 1351 struggle.

1352

1353 BP: right

1354

1355 OR: so, at, at this end, in this country we can support divestment, sanctions, all those
 1356 things, because they're all non-violent. There all put pressure on them without harming
 1357 life.

1358

1359 BP: sure

1360

1361 OR: uh, that's why we were so glad to support the End Conscription Campaign. Here
 1362 people refuse to take up the gun and defend the system. Those things, but um, it wasn't
 1363 hard to support the ANC in that kind of mold. Uh, and even in the Zimbabwean struggle
 1364 to support them, in that political one. I mean apartheid, Ian Smith's regime, they were
 1365 just morally and politically wrong. Eh, we just felt like we could, we can work in certain
 1366 spheres. But you know if, if soldiers risked their lives in the struggle to overthrow
 1367 apartheid, we ought to be doing something parallel to that, if, if we're not going to take
 1368 up arms. As risky as we might, I mean, whatever that would be. So there, and that's
 1369 where going back to Byers Anada I mean here's a guy who committed himself.
 1370 Everything but the gun. Although I talked to Prexy now he says, you know Prexy, Prexy

1371 was uh, he was a member of the ANC all along. You know, I don't know whether he was
1372 or not.

1373
1374 BP: well he still had that, that non-violence in him so.

1375
1376 OR: yeah he did, and, but uh, but as a political party it wasn't hard to support them and I
1377 could see Byers Anade, and that supporting them politically but, you couldn't do it
1378 openly until after nineteen-ninety.

1379
1380 BP: right, okay

1381
1382 OR: because it was, it was a band organization. But he was an underground member,
1383 that's okay with me.

1384
1385 BP: did you ever feel like you were at risk in South Africa?

1386
1387 OR: no I don't think so. Uh, it was partly skin. We were careful. Um, and when, when I,
1388 when we were in Botswana I went to the South, went into South Africa a number of
1389 times. And I would go in, the ostensible reason was to buy books because they had a
1390 better purchase of books there for our scho- students. Um, correspondence course and
1391 that stuff. But I always stopped at the counsel of churches and got to know them. And
1392 we, and I would talk, I would, and then I would say that I know somebody and they want
1393 to know how this person is doing because know them. But we would walk out in the hall,
1394 and this isn't danger, but uh, uh, careful uh, we don't just speak as if there's no bugs in
1395 the room.

1396
1397 BP: spies

1398
1399 OR: yeah

1400
1401 BP: yeah, yeah. Okay

1402
1403 OR: so we would go to the hall or outside and talk a little bit and I would say, what, this
1404 person is fine. I'm not carrying any messages because that, I, I don't think we were close
1405 enough in that kind of way uh, to the struggle. We were, we never tried to get in, you
1406 know, it, it was, it was romantic in part but we didn't feel like we had to be involved at
1407 that level. That was South Africans. But we could carry messages, yeah, they're okay.
1408 You can tell them other that your son is okay. Stuff like that. Um, and uh, but they
1409 couldn't communicate because if they ever found out they'd beat the mother up or
1410 something. It was really horrible days, um.

1411
1412 BP: yeah

1413
1414 OR: So no I don't think so. We were stopped a couple of times. I drove, I drove in and a
1415 couple of times, you could, I, it was mostly dirt road, you come around a corner and
1416 suddenly there are these, out of the blue, to me, are these three South African police,

1417 armed, and these Jeeps, and they're all armed and stop you, and they look for band
 1418 literature and all that. I had some sometimes, but they never found it. Nothing serious but
 1419 you know,

1420
 1421 BP: right

1422
 1423 OR: um, I think I came back, we left in mid eighty, and then I came back a couple of
 1424 years later and I went to Botswana and I met an, a black nationalist who, who was exiled
 1425 and he had never been part of our, our, our school, either as, but he, I talked to him a lot
 1426 and I think, I, I just, this whole thing about, are you really a front for somebody or are,
 1427 how do we know you're not. Uh, we just respected that people could think that so we
 1428 didn't push. No really trust me (???). Harry Nemukuru, and we remember him sitting
 1429 having coffee with him and he was, He s-, I said, what's happened to our center? I mean
 1430 we had, we left it was still going when we left. He said oh, you did a great job. So, it had
 1431 moved because of the changed political situation, and been moved out of the city, north,
 1432 for Zimbabwe and Amibian refugees. So that was up there, but he said no, you did a great
 1433 job, you. Still going you did the right thing. So those kind of conformations were always
 1434 good to know that you kind of did your best, didn't know everything, or didn't want to
 1435 know everything, because we you know, so um, I don't know how I got on that track.

1436
 1437 BP: (l) um, well we have a couple minutes left I guess I'll rather get to the later questions.
 1438 Uh-

1439
 1440 OR: yeah

1441
 1442 BP: so, how did you feel when apartheid ended?

1443
 1444 OR: oh great. I, in Chicago when, when Mandela was released uh, I remember um, the,
 1445 Molefi Zeli and a few of the other South Africans were here. (???) Molefi was here
 1446 about five, six years studying, you know, so, and they had been our uh, is that the word?
 1447 Interlocutor? Anyway they would you know, they were our, help us make sense of what
 1448 our actions should be because you're South Africans. They weren't very clear. And so, I
 1449 remember going over to his place for the party. It was just fabulous.

1450
 1451 BP: yeah

1452
 1453 OR: just dancing and, and then they had this song, I think uh, what's his name? The
 1454 famous uh, uh, boy it'll just come to me I blanked out. Um, uh, trumpeter. But anyway
 1455 he was exiled. South Africa. He had this song, uh, about Mandela. Come back. And they
 1456 were playing it and it was just eerie. It was beautiful. And it was like, when are you
 1457 coming back? And now he'd been released, and they were playing this song all night.
 1458 And just to dance, oh it was a great time.

1459
 1460 BP: wow

1461

1462 OR: so, that was probably the highlight. The other thing was to go for elections, and I
1463 had a good friend there, who uh, he had, he and his wife had been with us six weeks
1464 earlier in that sabbatical program. (cough) And I tried to be a monitor in his region, but
1465 they wouldn't let us, because they said, you can't know each other, and they said no. So,
1466 when the election time was over I went to, I went to visit him for a week, because he was
1467 just in another part of the country. I spent a week with him and his wife and kids, and it
1468 was just, it was wonderful, because I said to him, Albert, now he was one of these mixed
1469 race backgrounds, Albert. Albert and Rosemary. Whittles. I said Albert, it's just so
1470 good to be here with you because one, it's a, it's a, it's a miracle you're still alive,
1471 because he lead protests and he was at the front, and the government started shooting, and
1472 you know, once that happened, and I think twenty-nine people were killed, and we said,
1473 Albert was in that march, so we better call and find out if he's okay. So the next day we
1474 called, and we talked to him. He said, man I'm glad to hear your voice. Oh, he said those
1475 bullets were flying. So, those kinds of things were really, really uh, kind of a, the heart of
1476 it.

1477
1478 BP: yeah

1479
1480 OR: To talk to people who have been through this struggle, to monitor, to see people
1481 coming to vote. That was

1482
1483 BP: yeah

1484
1485 OR: you know, that was a highlight uh, one of the great highlights. That and the party
1486 when Mandela was released. I would say those two were the, really the quintessential
1487 experiences.

1488
1489 BP: ok

1490
1491 OR: uh

1492
1493 BP: that, that sounds excellent. Yeah. (l)

1494
1495 OR: you, you don't get those, if you get one in a lifetime, treasure them. That's, that's
1496 what I would, that's what I feel.

1497
1498 BP: yeah, oh definitely

1499
1500 OR: yeah

1501
1502 BP: so, what are um, w, w, let me think here. What eh, what are some of your fondest
1503 memories of you active, activism days?

1504
1505 OR: I think, testifying in court. It was great.

1506
1507 BP: yeah?

1508
 1509 OR: yeah, because we were coached not what to say, but how to say it. In other words,
 1510 look at the jury don't look at the lawyer. And I would talk to them and I, I, and the thing
 1511 is I didn't have to make anything up. So that memory is great. That, that I'm speaking
 1512 out of my own experience, what they told me. Go back, and so that's why I went, sat in
 1513 there, spoke to them. So that kind of a thing um, I think the sing out against apartheids
 1514 were always good. But you know, that whole experience was like, in our religious
 1515 language, how long oh lord are we going to do this? You know just, got a little long
 1516 sometimes. How long? Uh, and in the middle of the winter. Um, so they're fond
 1517 memories but, they're tinged with, now they're fonder then they were then. You know?
 1518
 1519 BP: yeah (l)
 1520
 1521 OR: that kind of thing. When I see Lisa, I always have this little story and I, I won't say it
 1522 on here because (l). But one of the first rugby tours, she, she had a little incident with the
 1523 police by (???), completely unrelated. The knife.
 1524
 1525 BP: I heard it. Right, right. (l)
 1526
 1527 OR: and I said, Lisa you still got your knife with you? (l) But it's, it's just a fond memory
 1528 of showing up for a demonstration, and I think, that period of, of, sort of like, eighty-two,
 1529 eighty-three, all the way to about eighty-eight. And eighty-eight, eighty-seven, eighty-
 1530 eight it was really hard times in South Africa. It was dangerous, because Bolta locked up
 1531 thousands
 1532
 1533 BP: right
 1534
 1535 OR: of people. Thousands because it was really, the pressure was building. So all those,
 1536 uh, those uh, demonstrations, and getting together with the people during those times, it
 1537 was, it was, it was rich because it was, there was always some energy going. There was
 1538 always a lot of (???), we, we got to keep doing this. This is, and you know you just feel
 1539 alive. Uh, you feel like purpose and meaning and you know why you're doing what
 1540 you're doing, so um, I don't know how I, I, it's, later it will come to me, one or two
 1541 more specifics. But the party of course was a great time and so on.
 1542
 1543 BP: yeah
 1544
 1545 OR: When Mandela was released. Um, visiting South Africa was always good. A few
 1546 times I did, yeah. It was always a rich experience. So it was more cumulative than, than,
 1547 while there were a couple of good ones, but it was very (???). I feel like, it was, it was a
 1548 great time, but I think it would also make me a better person.
 1549
 1550 BP: yeah
 1551
 1552 OR: it helped me.
 1553

1554 BP: yeah

1555

1556 OR: locally. And, it just you know, like I don't feel like I contributed so much as in being
1557 part of it I got caught up in something bigger than me. And so that's, that's one of the
1558 greatest experiences. It's not just what I did, or any of us did, but it was all of us together
1559 and it's just like, and I, and I miss that. I think I'm feeling a little, it's now fifteen years
1560 but I feel like- We had a coalition on the south, west side that, that self destructed after
1561 we got to success, at one time and I'm, I'm still feeling like, you know, struggle, struggle
1562 is a really important component of being alive. If you got too, if it's too easy, watch out.
1563 And I don't know, that message isn't flying well these days but uh,

1564

1565 BP: well I mean yeah. I mean certainly. I, have you, have you, have you tried to, is there
1566 anything else you've put in place of it at all or?

1567

1568 OR: no. uh, well, uh, the South Af- anti-apartheid and this coalition of churches were the
1569 two main ones. Um, I've tried a couple of times to uh, I've been part of smaller ones but
1570 nothing quite maybe it's when the side, the odds are so great, that's when you're most
1571 alive.

1572

1573 BP: yeah

1574

1575 OR: I can't see the end of this but, we got to go. Um, no I think, I think I feel like, I feel a
1576 little like, I should be, I'd like to find something but you know, I don't think I have. So
1577 we're talking over ten years now. I feel okay, it's not like, but um, maybe we're only
1578 blessed to have a couple of those experiences in life where you,

1579

1580 BP: if any.

1581

1582 OR: yeah, if any. Uh, so I feel like, I don't want to sit back in like a rocking chair, and I
1583 kind of look it, I'm getting close to retirement and I'm trying to think, I want to do
1584 something after retirement. Uh, not, but I don't see it necessarily in that political being,
1585 but I want to, I want to get engaged and energized by something bigger than me.

1586

1587 BP: right

1588

1589 OR: bigger than me. And, Obama was okay. I, I voted for Obama and I'm glad my wife
1590 was just, I, I, I wasn't quite as. But I, I, you know, you get a little bit.

1591

1592 END TAPE TWO (2). CONTINUE TO TALK ABOUT HIS PLANS FOR AFTER
1593 RETIREMENT, ABOUT RON PITTS, AND HIS DOCUMENTARY WORK TRYING
1594 TO SHED LIGHT ON THE EXTORTION OF INNER-CITY CHURCHES.