Voice: Voices of the Oral History Project of GLHSNC

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Interview with Kenneth Wright
Date of Birth: 1951
By Interviewer: Terance Kissack
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GLHS OHP 00-003 - MCC series

1. TK: Are you the youngest?
2. KW: No, my brother's the youngest, I'm next.
3. TK: And when were you born, how old are you?
4. KW: 1951, so I'm 48 years old.
5. TK: And what brought you to San Francisco?
6. KW: No one thing, just I needed a change. I was actually living in Illinois again at that time. I'd come back from the Peace Corps and I planned on spending about six months there. I got a temporary job in the community college and then it became one year and then it became five years and then it became twelve years and then I decided it was time to move.
7. TK: Okay, so you went, you grew up in this small town and then you went out to the Peace Corps? Straight from high school?
8. KW: No, after college.
9. TK: And where'd you go to college?
10. KW: I went to college at Northern Illinois University and I also spent a year in Mexico, the University of the Americas.
11. TK: Is that where you did your Peace Corps?
12. KW: No, Peace Corps was two years after college. I was in Guatemala.
13. TK: Okay, so you came to San Francisco for no particular reason?
14. KW: Yeah, almost eleven years.

1. KW: Yeah, like a lot of reasons, change. I visited here in 1980 and I almost moved out then, but then it would be hard to get a job and find housing. Housing was too expensive. I found a lot of reasons not to come and then through the '80s, I was with a lover and then '88 I was visiting here again, I was single, and I just decided I was going to do it.
2. TK: And when you were growing up, what was your family's religious background?
3. KW: Presbyterian.
4. TK: And were you a practicing family, did you go to church?
5. KW: Yeah. I went to church and Sunday School and all that pretty much into my teenage years.
6. TK: And what about in college?
7. KW: No, after high school, not very much. For a while when I lived in Elgin, Illinois, I went to the Congregationalist Church but I never joined.
8. TK: So when you came to San Francisco, how did you hear about MCC?
9. KW: I've known about MCC for a long time and knew who the founder was and I knew people who I knew in Chicago. And I wanted to try it out. A lot of it was just social too. I came to San Francisco without really knowing people. I wanted to get to know people and get involved, so that was why I came in, I was really attracted to it. I came to the evening service and there was some real good music which I liked. That was one of the main things. I started meeting people and, you know, I liked a lot of aspects of it.
10. TK: And I should explain, MCC is Metropolitan Community Church. And which MCC congregation did you first attend?
11. KW: San Francisco, the one on Eureka Street.
12. TK: Have you ever attended any of the others?
14. TK: But you have gone to some MCC services before moving to San Francisco?
15. KW: I'd gone to a couple in the Chicago area, yeah.
16. TK: So, when you arrived, you went almost immediately to MCC.
17. KW: Yeah, my first weekend here.
18. TK: Your first weekend here? Wow. And you say this was as much for social kind of establishing community and you found nothing?
19. KW: Yeah.
20. TK: So, you've been going there for - you started in 1989.
21. KW: Yeah, almost eleven years.
22. TK: And you said the music really drew you in?
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> Yeah, really the music program. A lot of the old Protestant hymns, but without the guilt and without the sexism that words have been changed to take out sexist and words which inspire guilt in people.</td>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Or it might be a physical problem or just anything you wanted to deal with. A lot of it was focused on AIDS but it wasn't only that.</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> Does it remind you of your childhood?</td>
<td><strong>2.</strong> TK: And you participated in those?</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> The music does, yeah.</td>
<td><strong>5.</strong> TK: I went to them, yeah, I went to them all the time.</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> So you have a connection there. Have you ever sung in the church or participated in the music?</td>
<td><strong>6.</strong> TK: You mentioned the laying of hands, was that something that you remember specifically from those services?</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> You mean in the choir? Not really, well a handful of times, special programs they have, but I've never been a member.</td>
<td><strong>9.</strong> KW: Yeah, and we didn't call it that but it was similar to that, yeah.</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> So when you first began to go to the services, what were they like, what were they structured like?</td>
<td><strong>11.</strong> TK: What are some of the other innovations in services that you've seen come and go, or come and stay?</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> Okay, like I said, a lot of music, that was important. Communion every week, which is unusual in Protestant denominations. Using a lot of different traditions and a lot of acceptance. There's nothing like guilt and there's not a lot of structure, like you have to believe this. That's important. In some churches you say exactly what you have to believe. I remember as a kid being puzzled over, the minister told us we had to believe that the Father and the Son were exactly (inaudible). I said, what a minute, you know, what if the father is like a little bit more than the son? So there was none of that there.</td>
<td><strong>12.</strong> KW: I guess there weren't that many changes in the service itself. In the church a lot of the changes have been the increased social activism in the '90s.</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> But music is an important part of your experience.</td>
<td><strong>13.</strong> In the early to mid '90s, we were so focused on AIDS that was pretty much what we did as far as social activism. AIDS, ministering to people who were sick and in the hospital and memorial and funeral services.</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> Yeah, definitely.</td>
<td><strong>14.</strong> TK: I branched out. We started the feeding program for the homeless people and, of course, the Youth Shelter started recently, needle exchange, that's a few years old.</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> So when you first began to go to the services, what were they like, what were they structured like?</td>
<td><strong>15.</strong> KW: So these all began in the mid '90s? Was there a way, things that we try for a while, then we move to a different way.</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> Okay, in the early '90s, we have the healing service at the height of the AIDS deaths which was a rallying point of the church, especially then. I think once a month we had a healing service, along with the communion and individual prayer. It was kind of like the laying on of hands.</td>
<td><strong>16.</strong> TK: And did that fade away?</td>
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<td><strong>TK:</strong> And did that fade away?</td>
<td><strong>11.</strong> KW: Eventually it did. We do it once in a while on the Wednesday service, but for some reason, it ended up stopping. One thing, it was really heavy because there were so many people sick and dying in the '90s. It just got to be a little much sometimes. That was the big change between then and now, just the overpowering sadness of dealing with all that death.</td>
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<td><strong>KW:</strong> Yeah, eventually it did. We do it once in a while.</td>
<td><strong>17.</strong> TK: Tell me a little more about the healing services. <strong>18.</strong> KW: It was a regular service and it was just a small portion during the communion. You could go for the communion or for the healing prayer. It was any kind of healing you wanted: mind, body, the spirit, if you maybe had a problem with somebody you wanted to help. <strong>19.</strong> TK: Who came to them? <strong>20.</strong> KW: It was a regular service and it was just a small portion during the communion. You could go for the communion or for the healing prayer. It was any kind of healing you wanted: mind, body, the spirit, if you maybe had a problem with somebody you wanted to help.</td>
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<td><strong>18.</strong> KW: It was a regular service and it was just a small portion during the communion. You could go for the communion or for the healing prayer. It was any kind of healing you wanted: mind, body, the spirit, if you maybe had a problem with somebody you wanted to help.</td>
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change in the congregation?
KW: That's one of the big things. The congregation changes very fast. I've been with them eleven years now and I'm one of the probably ten or maybe fifteen people that were going there when I came in '89. For one thing, sometimes people come and they get upset at something and they leave. There are people coming in from all different denominations and belief systems and some people think that we're too liberal. There's always something people are unhappy about but it's also, a lot of times people come, gay people come who have been kicked out of their own churches and told they can't be gay and Christian. And they're dealing with that, they need to get over that, they need the healing. They come to MCC and once they've established that it's okay, then maybe don't need it anymore. Or they come for some problem in their life, a physical problem or just some emotional problem and they get what they need and leave. So that's fine but that's part of the turnover.

TK: And do you think the composition has changed? What was the membership like when you first began? Was it mostly men or mostly women?
KW: It was more men when I came and more white. So that's been a big push to increase diversity. We had

interviews with the press and we talked about it in congregation and I think some kind of discussion groups, especially for the women, since some of them felt that they were blamed for it. So that was one of the big things that I noticed about it that we would face issues instead of hiding from them.

TK: Is that continuing?
KW: I think so. One of the things then, in 1990 something else happened which was a split. A lot of things happened in '90. For one thing we were firebombed in the summer of 1990. Turned out there wasn't too much damage but it was a big issue that somebody would want to do it, although it probably wasn't a homophobic thing. Because that same weekend, several synagogues in the Bay Area had been firebombed. And at the time we were the home of, what's the name, Shahar Zahad, they were meeting at MCC, so it was probably an anti-Semitic thing, I don't think it's even solved.

TK: So Shahar Zahad is the GLBT Jewish congregation.
KW: Yeah, for a brief time they used the building. That was one of the other things of MCC San Francisco, it's kind of a community center. There are a lot of meeting rooms and we rent space, usually very cheaply.

1 at least one woman pastor and that's a call to bring 2 more women in. As far as people of color, there's more than there used to be, but it's still it's predominantly white so that's another issue. I know when I came in '89, the church was in the middle of a big controversy. There was an assistant pastor, her name was Lynn, I don't remember her last name. But it turned out that she was actually not a minister which she claimed she was. And she also claimed that she was attacked in some hate crime and somebody had cut her hair and somebody had written something on her garage. It turned out that maybe some of it was true, but the tact was fake. So it was some of it or all of it was fake. And she was going through some psychotic episode. And in the middle of that, MCC had been behind her and the community, there was a march in support of her against hate crimes. And so it was a big scandal when it turned out that she'd faked the crime and she wasn't even a minister. And I came just in the middle of that, you know, and this was in all the national publications, Advocate, and all the gay magazines nationwide. And one of the things that impressed me is that we faced it. So often with things like that, people try to cover it up and not talk about it, and so Jim Mitulski, the minister, did

to political groups and 12-step groups like AA and (INAUDIBLE) and I don't know, there's a whole bunch of them that meet and sometimes social groups and dance things. So it is kind of a gay community center. But let's see, shall I just keep going? In 1990, one of the people who was instrumental in starting the 7 o'clock service, which is more the gospel service, there's a lot more service.

TK: On what day is this?
KW: It's Sunday. Yeah, 7 o'clock. The morning service at 11 is more traditional Protestant, more sedate, and the 7 o'clock is more singing with a lot of gospel.

The guy who was instrumental in founding this was the music, I think he was music director, Jack St. John. He also was very open about being a recovering drug addict. And somewhere in '90, he went back on drugs and became a public thing. You know, he talked about it publicly. But he was let go from the job as music director because of this happening and saying he would go into a program which he didn't understand. But he was let go. And he started another gay congregation called, "Worship and Praise" or something like that.

1S1:200-299

So he started a congregation and a few people split off from him that wanted to be with him or had felt...
that he'd gotten a bad deal when he was let go. So that affected the congregation for a while, you know, both in attendance and money and some hard feelings but, again, it was something we talked about openly rather than let it go. And eventually that congregation closed down and some time later he came back and he's now working with the music program again.

TK: Oh, so he's back now?

KW: Yeah, he's been back a few years I think.

TK: Is that the only split that you've seen during your?

KW: There's always people going off. Golden Gate MCC split, that was I think in the mid or late '80s, it was a little bit before I came. I believe they wanted to do more social activism than we did but, again, this was before I came so I don't know.

TK: What are the relations like between MCC Golden Gate and MCC San Francisco?

KW: There was a lot of competition. Some time in the mid '90s, Golden Gate hired our assistant pastor to be their minister and, like I say, we wished them well and all that but there was a little competition. Some of the women went with her, some of the people but, you know, more women went with her. Eventually that congregation went down. It's now in the process of closing down and Golden Gate has come back to MCC, to MCC San Francisco so that we've reunited and I think there's going to be more outreach in the Tenderloin. I believe there's doing to be a service, I think, once a week in the Tenderloin but I'm not sure exactly what's happening with that. Anyway they're back together again.

TK: So it sounds like it's like it's a malleable organization, splits and joining.

KW: Oh yeah, always something happening.

TK: And there seems to be, you've mentioned maybe once or twice, that there's some tension between men and women in the congregation. I mean, that's a general. Is that what you experience or?

KW: I don't really feel it, I've heard about it different times and, of course, there's always been the issue of it being dominated by men but we have more women now and we're conscious of having women in leadership roles, you know, balancing the committees and any of the leadership things. And we have some men's programs for the women and others for the men. So we do a lot of things together but we also have stuff that - things.

TK: How do you feel about the turn toward more social activism?

KW: It's positive, I like it, it's important. Sometimes we overreach but most of the time we overreach actually.

TK: What do you mean?

KW: We're always looking to do more. A lot of that's Jim Mitulski and if we have some money, we spend it, and then we come up short. So we take a lot of leaps and fail but for the most part, they work out well.

TK: Have you been active in some of these social programs?

KW: Somewhat, I'm not a leader, I'm not in the inner circle of the church which, in some ways, I think is good. So many people jump in and they become leaders and they're active in everything and then they either get burned out or angry and then they leave. I always go and I volunteer once in a while.

TK: What kind of things do you do? What things have you done?

KW: I have worked a little bit in fund-raising, sometimes supervising. We supervise the gates at street fairs and we get a portion of the money and, let's see, what else have I done? Oh, not a lot, work on the building once in a while.

TK: So the congregation takes kind of an active part in all aspects of the church?

KW: Oh yeah, there's a real active volunteer group there.

TK: But you've kind of had an arm's length relationship to the leadership or to the leadership positions, or am I mischaracterizing it?

KW: I don't know if you could say that, it's just that I'm not real active, I'm just somebody to call and I come once in a while but I'm not always volunteering for all the committees and to speak up and all that. How often do you go to church?

KW: Once a week, that's part of my schedule, Sunday night.

TK: What do you go, the 7 o'clock service?

KW: Yeah.

TK: Is there much interaction between the 7 o'clock service and the 11 o'clock service?

KW: No, that's funny because once in a while, I go to the 11 o'clock service just to see people that I almost never see because people tend to go to one or the other.

TK: How do you see that breaking down? What are the reasons for that?

KW: Well, I don't think it's bad, I think some people like to go in the morning, some in the evening. A lot
1 of it is the style of service you feel comfortable
2 with.
3 TK: I want to talk a little bit more about the social
4 life of the church. You said that was one of the
5 reasons that you kind of joined. Is that true for a
6 lot of people?
7 KW: I think so, yeah. Yeah, a lot of people really get
8 involved, it becomes, you know, a big focus of their
9 life. That really doesn't happen with me, you know, I
t0 don't use it like all my friends, dates or something
11 like that.
12 TK: But it does provide a network?
13 KW: Definitely, yeah.
14 TK: And you mentioned some social programs that the
15 church operates. What kind of things, men's programs
16 and women's programs, are you familiar with those?
17 KW: Sure, I go to them, like last time - we have a
18 midweek prayer service every Wednesday, which I go to
19 once in a while. And often there's some kind of a
20 program after that. Last time it was the author, Peter
21 Allan, talking about his book.
22 1S1:300-399
23 So there's a lot of authors that come in or famous
24 people come in and talk, or political leaders. That
25 often happens on Wednesday night.

1 lot of people who come, you know, some come every week
2 and participate and volunteer and, you know, give time
3 and money and never join. Some people join and then
4 don't come back. Some people are in and out so the
5 numbers are deceiving. I wouldn't know how many, like
6 the count.
7 TK: But in terms of the size of the services, have you
8 seen an increase since you began?
9 KW: Yeah. One of the problems is with the 7 o'clock
10 and, I think, with the 11 o'clock too, it almost fills
11 up which means you're running at capacity which means
12 you can't get that many more people because people
13 don't feel comfortable. So for a long time, we've been
14 talking about a new church building. That has been one
15 of the big issues for probably six or eight years
16 anyway.
17 TK: Is that a conversation that the whole membership
18 takes part of?
19 KW: Yes, off and on, we find something, we talk about
20 it and the Board talks about it and then it falls
21 through and then we find another place and talk about
22 that again.
23 TK: How do you see your relationship between the Board
24 and the leadership, I mean, do you know who the Board
25 members are?
didn't believe we were a church because we were gay. OK? And then they came and visited and they decided we were a church but then we couldn't join them anyway because it would cause dissension with all the homophobic congregations. So we really put it in their face so we applied for the status and we always got turned down which showed them up for being very homophobic 'cause they couldn't give any reasons at all. So even the Muslim organizations were allowed into the Council as observers and we couldn't even come in as that.

TK: So this is a kind of convention of Christian congregations?

KW: Right, that was supposedly accepting any kind of Christians but they won't accept us.

TK: And that continues to this day?

KW: Yeah, it continues to this day. I don't know too much about it. I'm not sure if we continue applying and I'm not sure, but one of the things is if we became a United Church of Christ congregation, then we'd get the respectability and then we'd get, you know, a seat at the table.

TK: And your feelings on that are?

KW: No, we shouldn't, I don't think that we should

TK: What do you think makes him such a compelling figure? Maybe I'm mischaracterizing that. Is he a compelling figure?

KW: Yeah, he is. He's very intelligent, very ambitious, he's an excellent speaker. And what we've noticed in the last few years, he really is a good politician. He has been helped by P.R. people but he knows exactly what to say to get the good sound bite in, in the newspapers and a good shot on TV. He knows just how to choose the words which will be published and get the last word.

TK: It's a good skill.

KW: Oh yeah.

TK: Does he use that persuasive quality in the church within the congregation?

KW: I think so. Yeah. In the last few years we've had so much publicity that, you know, you go in there and you see TV cameras and okay, what happened now, somebody made a statement about AIDS, the Pope said something against us again or the marijuana issue. I'm a teacher and every once in a while one of my students says Mr. Wright, do you go to church? I'm like okay, we've been on TV again. That must be what it is.

TK: Where do you teach?

KW: (inaudible) Middle School, yeah, it's just right down the block, yeah.

TK: 'Cause we're on 17th between Sanchez and Noe. And how does Rev. Mitulski deal with dissension?

KW: That's kind of a problem. Sometimes they get mad and people leave but I can't blame them too much because there's so many different kinds of people and different beliefs and people going through too much. That's one of the big issues of the church that there's such a big turnover. And we talked about ways to slow that down, I mean, you can't stop it. Like I said people leave because, sometimes people move, sometimes people die, sometimes they leave because they've got out of it what they want, so that's fine. But a lot of times people leave angry and it'd be nice to minimize that. I don't think you can stop it, I don't know what we can do actually.

TK: Why do people leave angry? What's angry about them?

KW: Oh, people get angry about how the money was spent or a sermon or a reorganization or something that happened on the board. You know, things that happen in most churches but more here than most think.

TK: How the money was spent. What money, the money that's collected?

KW: Yeah. There might be a social program they don't like or.
I don't know really. Most of the biggest amount goes into salaries, of course, and we provide a lot of things like "go to it" (phonetic) music, we have a full-time "go to it" music which is unusual in a congregation of that size.

What's the name of the director?

Bob Crocker. And he also does the music program at the Harvey Milk Academy which is just a block over. We do a lot of volunteer things at the Harvey Milk School. We give supplies to the kids that are poor, can't afford them. We have volunteers that come in to read to the kids, I think it's once a week, help out with activities and field trips. And one of the things is with the music thing being cut at the elementary schools, now we give them music programs.

So you've stepped into the role of a benefactor?

On an individual level the congregants play along to your role? They go, and then also as an institution?

Right.

Have you ever participated in any of that?

I'm trying to think, I don't think actively. I've donated things, donated money and things.

A busman's holiday, you're a teacher.

statement. It's something else a few people got mad about too. When you do innovative things, people get upset and other people like it.

Is that the opposite of the Champ or what did the Medical Marijuana Advocacy group. Are they MCC?

I don't think so, they could be, a lot of things are. I mean, I don't think the offices are, they probably met there.

What were your feelings on the medical marijuana activism?

Within MCC? I thought it was a good idea, definitely.

And so there's a feeding program which serves who?

Homeless people. I think it's twice a week now. People come in - that's got a lot of opposition, had a lot of opposition from the neighborhood. I think it's kind of calmed down now.

What were the?

Bringing more homeless into the neighborhood, encouraging people to be homeless so they'd get free food, you know. That was stated, not my opinion.

How long has that been going on?

Several years now, maybe three or four years, probably three.

And what are some of the other social programs there?

Well, the Queer Youth Shelter. That was started at Golden Gate MCC. Jim was actually the interim pastor there for the last few months when they didn't have a pastor or before they combined. And they got City funding for a youth shelter in the winter.

And the funding for that ran out and so there was a small scale shelter funded by MCC and volunteer donations, which is going on now.

And where is that located?

It's actually in MCC, in the building.

At Eureka?

Yeah, I think there's six beds now so it's a small scale.

Was MCC San Francisco involved, the congregation now I'm speaking of, in the fight over getting the Queer Youth shelter?

Yeah, a lot of the congregation was in the original fight in getting the youth shelter at MCC Golden Gate. There was a lot of harassment, like people reported tiny code violations like a door knob wasn't right or something, for the shelf wasn't permanent for the shelf that was put in. There was a lot of harassment and a lot of volunteers and
1. (inaudible) speaking for the congregation. When it was
2. moved to MCC, there really wasn't any controversy, any
3. public controversy, because I think it's the number of
4. 6 beds. If you have six beds or under, you don't have to
5. get the permit. And since we weren't asking for any
6. kind of City funding, we just did it.
7. TK: Is it the only time that MCC has gotten City
8. funding that you know of?
9. KW: Oh no, we've gotten City funding. Gosh, there's
10. all kinds of funding. Technically there's MCC church
11. and there's MCC foundation which is currently called
12. that, yeah Metropolitan Community Foundation, which
13. is, you know, legally separate. And with the feeding
14. program we've got federal funds and I believe City
15. funds and there's all kinds of grant money that comes
16. in.
17. TK: So MCC Foundation is the agency, in a sense, that
18. runs these different programs.
19. KW: Right, I believe that's how it is. It's new, I'm
20. not sure exactly, you know, the connection. There's
21. just been a recent thing to kind of separate them out,
22. which is which.
23. TK: Is the congregation involved in the Foundation at
24. all?
25. KW: It's all the same thing, I mean, as far as we're

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| 1 | concerned it's the same thing. |
| 2 | TK: I'd like to maybe talk a little bit more about |
| 3 | your relationship with your family now, in terms of |
| 4 | your membership in MCC. You mentioned a couple times |
| 5 | that people come to MCC because of being thrown out or |
| 6 | a particular congregation or having kinds of burdens |
| 7 | of guilt. Did you come to MCC with that? |
| 8 | KW: No, I didn't really have any of that. Growing up |
| 9 | with my family and from the congregation, I saw some |
| 10 | of the ugly political things in the church, but I |
| 11 | never had any of the, you know, you're going to go to |
| 12 | hell or you're a bad person. I never really had any of |
| 13 | that. We were talking about that at an MCC retreat one |
| 14 | time like how our religion is different from our |
| 15 | parents' or family's, and I basically said mine is |
| 16 | about the same. Nobody in the family was really |
| 17 | dogmatic or into any of the hate stuff. So I didn't |
| 18 | really have, you know, any big adjustments or I didn't |
| 19 | have anything to run from. |
| 20 | TK: Have your parents been to an MCC service? |
| 21 | KW: Well, my dad died right before I joined but my |
| 22 | mom's been several times. And my sister, her husband |
| 23 | and kids have been also. |
| 24 | TK: Do they live near here? |
| 25 | KW: No, they live in Minneapolis so they come when |

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| 1 | congregations in the 17 & 1800's, with the idea of |
| 2 | because of discrimination, it was going to be a |
| 3 | separate church, but it wasn't supposed to be |
| 4 | permanent. It wasn't a denomination for several years |
| 5 | because in the late '60s, early '70s, things, laws and |
| 6 | attitudes were changing and we just assumed it would |
| 7 | be just a few years before we were all accepted and |
| 8 | the anti-gay rules were over and we would have gay |
| 9 | marriages, domestic partnerships. But by the '80s, |
| 10 | that had all changed and most of the congregations |
| 11 | were taken over by the far Right and they made |
| 12 | specific rules against gay, lesbian and bisexual |
| 13 | ministers and congregations. And now, of course, |
| 14 | limiting gay marriage and any kind of gay unions. So |
| 15 | that's a big change. |
| 16 | TK: And how do you think how MCC has reacted to that, |
| 17 | the rise of the Christian right or the radical right? |
| 18 | KW: Well, by example, for one thing, the fact that |
| 19 | we've got our good reaction, we do engage them, often |
| 20 | engage its leaders in conversations and debates, |
| 21 | sometimes on TV and radio. He's been on all kinds of |
| 22 | talk shows, and there are other ministers too. Penny |
| 23 | Nixon, they've been on talk shows. When a congregation |
| 24 | or a religious leader makes a statement like, other |
| 25 | ministers react. A couple weeks ago when the Pope made |

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| 1 | they visit. |
| 2 | TK: And you've taken them to the service with you? |
| 3 | KW: Oh yeah. |
| 4 | TK: That's fun? |
| 5 | KW: That's good. |
| 6 | TK: Have you ever been back to your parents' |
| 7 | congregation when you go visit? Do you go to church |
| 8 | with your mom when you go? |
| 9 | KW: She lives in Iowa and I've found a few times she |
| 10 | goes to a Presbyterian Church and I've gone with her a |
| 11 | handful of times. yeah. |
| 12 | TK: So for you, you don't feel there's much of a sharp |
| 13 | distinction between at least the tradition of |
| 14 | Presbyterianism that you came out of and MCC's |
| 15 | practice. |
| 16 | KW: Oh, for me I don't see any huge schism from what I |
| 17 | came from. In the Presbyterian Church, there was |
| 18 | always kind of a split between the activism and the |
| 19 | conservative. I remember in the late '60s, around |
| 20 | 1970, the Presbyterians gave money for Angela Davis's |
| 21 | political defense and that upset people. But really, |
| 22 | when I was a kid, they weren't into that hate stuff, |
| 23 | homophobia, which they are now. Most of the mainline |
| 24 | congregations are into that. If I can go with this, |
| 25 | MCC was founded as a refuge church like the black |

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| 1 | Page 29 - Page 32 |
1 TK: Representative, more or less, of the makeup of San Francisco or does it seem to draw on any particular communities of color?
2 KW: The switch tended to be more people from the Castro which is more white. I’m not sure who that is anymore but we still have a preponderance of white.
3 TK: And how does that break down in terms of the services if you’ve noticed at all? You say you’ve been to the 11 o’clock, and then the later. Is there a variation you can tell?
4 KW: I haven’t noticed actually.
5 TK: Do you see yourself as a part of a larger MCC church now, equal to the Presbyterians, or do you thing of it as a somewhat different?
6 KW: It’s a little different. We don’t have that much dogma, and each MCC congregation is different. Ours tends to be very Unitarian, you know, not Unitarian but more towards that, more accepting of a lot of traditions. Other MCC congregations in smaller towns and different regions tend to be more traditional.
7 Christian. You bring your bible or you follow, you know, different tradition, the more Catholic, the more Protestant. But it’s more eclectic, again, more like Unitarians. And that’s Jim Mitulski a lot too.
8 TK: Have you visited other congregations?

1 KW: Yeah. Let’s see, which have I been to? Des Moines, that’s where my mom lives there, you know.
2 TK: And was that more of a MCC series Kenneth Wright
3 KW: A lot more traditional I think. It tended to be more people from Des Moines, you know, they don’t move as much so I think they were more rooted in Des Moines.
4 TK: You said earlier that there were increasing numbers of people of color. When do you think this trend started? Has it been a steady increase?
5 KW: It’s been steady but slow. As far as minorities, women, it’s been up and down. Charlotte Sutherland, who was a minister in the early ’90s, made a real effort and brought more women in. Then she left, it went down a little bit. Maggie Tenna has brought more in, and Penny Nixon now. So it’s up and down, it’s just more or less steadily growing.
6 TK: And when you said people of color, you mean African-Americans?
7 KW: African-Americans, Asians, Latino.

1 TK: How long has Penny been in the Church?
2 KW: She’s been there a while, maybe at least five or six years and she was, I think, a Presbyterian minister but she was with us a while, maybe part-time and maybe volunteer, and then she was hired, so five or six years at least.
3 TK: Do you find that there’s many Presbyterians in MCC?
4 KW: I don’t think to ask but, yeah, I guess.
5 TK: So people don’t necessarily identify by what tradition they came out of?
6 KW: No, no, most don’t, I don’t.
7 TK: But there is a kind of syncratic tradition at MCC, there’s a borrowing of practices from other churches?
8 KW: More the leadership I would think.
9 TK: They bring in traditions from the churches they were raised in.
10 KW: Yeah, definitely.
11 TK: You said earlier that there were increasing numbers of women in MCC San Francisco and also increasing numbers of people of color. When do you think it comes from the membership?
12 KW: It’s been steady but slow. As far as minorities, women, it’s been up and down. Charlotte Sutherland, who was a minister in the early ’90s, made a real effort and brought more women in. Then she left, it went down a little bit. Maggie Tenna has brought more in, and Penny Nixon now. So it’s up and down, it’s just more or less steadily growing.
13 TK: And when you said people of color, you mean African-Americans?
1 wagon than a - I mean, they're telling you about the
2 congregation?
3 KW: Right. But there was no pressure saying this is
4 exactly what you have to believe.
5 TK: And tell me a little bit more about this
6 introductory meeting. What was it like? Was it a
7 single day workshop?
8 KW: It was, I think what I did was four days, I'm not
9 sure. It was more than one for a couple hours at a
time. Some of it was about the history of, you know,
10 how MCC got started and some of the things we do and
11 some of the things we believe.
12 TK: Or at least a majority.
13 KW: A majority, right, I mean, it is a Christian
14 denomination but the idea is to embrace the
15 traditional Christian denomination and accept the role
16 in modern society with special ministry to gay and
17 lesbian people.
18 TK: Tell me a little bit about what - you say you go
19 to the service on Sunday at ?? And when you arrive,
20 kind of walk me through if you will. Or what are
21 your favorite parts and what works for you and what
22 doesn’t?
23 KW: Okay, let's see. When I first came out, I'll tell
24 you about that 'cause that was an important time, I
25 have any way to contact people, or you don’t want to
1 call somebody and say hi, how you doing? 'Cause they
2 think that you’re saying why weren’t you in church
3 today? No, I’m not telling you to come to church. One
4 of the real bad things is during the '80s when so many
5 people were getting sick and dying, you just note that
6 somebody wasn’t there. And the reason they weren’t
7 there was they’d gotten sick and you didn’t know that.
8 And so, a lot of times there'd be a notice in the
9 Bulletin, so-and-so died and you didn't know until you
10 saw a picture of who it was. So that’s one of the
11 disadvantages of a congregation. It’s big enough and,
12 like I said, there's enough movement in and out but
13 when you don’t know everybody, it's hard to keep track
14 of people.
15 TK: How was that like when you first arrived, during
16 the. I guess you were saying there were a lot of
17 people passing away?
18 KW: It was hard. I lived for twelve years close to
19 Chicago so AIDS wasn’t new but just living here and
20 with the gay population is more concentrated.
21 TK: And at MCC it was more concentrated yet. Well it’s a
22 gay congregation, of course, and because a lot of
23 gay congregation, of course, and because a lot of
24 people come when they have a need. So that means a lot
25 people come when they have a need. So that means a lot
26 people come when they have a need. So that means a lot
of people come when they get sick, so there was a real
high percentage of people with AIDS. It was hard, it
was really sad, it was also really moving. Like I
mentioned the healing services and people sharing
about the illness, doing community prayer, asking to
pray for somebody who'd died. I was talking to Jim
about this a while ago, about how heavy those days
were, and Jim Mitulski probably gave more funeral and
memorial services for AIDS patients than anybody in
the world. During the early '90s, often there'd be two
or three a week. And we were saying considering it had
done happened, would we have wanted to avoid it? We both
said no. It happened, you know, we didn't, you know,
we wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. But it
was

| 16 | End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 2 |
| 17 | 2S1:000-099 |

18 TK: So we were talking about the memorial services.
19 KW: I was going to say that most memorial services are
during the day. I usually go to MCC at night. And so
for a long time whenever I would go to MCC during the
day, when I would sit down if I were at the 11 o'clock
service or if I were there for a political meeting or
something else, I would feel this real overpowering
sadness because I thought I was at a memorial service

and honesty. This was a 12-step, in was in the AA.
They wanted to acknowledge that which was great
because he'd done fantastic things.

4 TK: Do you remember his name?
5 KW: Yeah, Tony Rioni. Yeah, he was active in
Democratic politics and a lot of AIDS work, you know.
He was in the news a lot, but it was so long and
people kept remembering things. Okay, you made your
point, now it's over.

10 TK: Was he a member?
11 KW: Yes. He joined a few years ago. He came pretty
regularly until he got sick.
12 TK: Is he the only political figure who's been
associated or a member of MCC that you know of?
15 KW: Oh god, no. Let's see, one thing we have a lot of
political figures who come during campaigns or when
some issue's coming up. We usually invite candidates.
18 Jim, obviously, is a political figure now. We have
quite a few people who run for like Central Committee.
20 We have a lot of activists. And I'm trying to think of
like famous politicians or city-wide politicians, I
can't think of any. Well, most of them make an
appearance every now and then.
24 TK: During campaign time?
25 KW: Yeah.

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1 he still came and he took communion. He said that he 2 was going to take his own life and he announced that 3 at the community prayer. And that was so heavy that, 4 you know, it was a lot. I remember kind of laughing 5 because after the community prayer, there's a real sad 6 song, an emotional song. "When at Peace at the River." 7 I thought oh shit, everybody's going to cry when they 8 play that and so he played it real fast. I thought 9 okay, good, good thinking there.

10 TK: Did he take his life?
11 KW: Yeah, he did. Yeah, he was accompanied, he might 12 have been accompanied by somebody from MCC, I'm not 13 sure.

14 TK: And was there a visiting program, you said? There 15 was a visiting program for people who were sick?
16 KW: Yeah, we use to have deacons and one of their jobs 17 was visiting people in the hospital and taking 18 communion to them.

19 TK: You don't have deacons anymore?
20 KW: No, I don't know exactly what happened with that.
21 Also for a while we had an AIDS minister half-time,
22 that was his job. That was eliminated, it just seemed 23 like everybody was working with AIDS so.

24 TK: Was it divided up? The people who left, were there 25 any kind of common, did they share anything in common 26 Page 45

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1 reasons?
2 2S1:100-199
3 You say that when you first arrived, it was social
4 reasons.
5 KW: Well, not all social, but that was one of them.
6 Spiritual reasons and some social and some, I don't
7 know if you'd say political, nah, I guess it's more
8 helping out. But there is a real political aspect to
9 it too.

10 TK: In what sense?
11 KW: Confronting politicians - first of all politicians
12 who are leaders who put down gay people. That's a big
13 thing, or speak against Domestic Partners or Civil
14 Rights protection, or the people who bash the homeless
15 or politicians who try and stop needle distribution or
16 cut funding for AIDS, this type of thing.

17 TK: So you see the political activism is drawing you
18 to MCC?
19 KW: Yeah.

20 TK: And do you think that that's a sentiment shared by
21 a lot of them?
22 KW: Yeah, a lot of people stayed.
23 TK: So you have a core of friends there, people who've
24 been?
25 KW: Yeah.

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1 TK: And you meet these people outside of the church as
2 well?
3 KW: Sometimes, not a lot. I don't have a lot of close
4 friends, but I have a lot of people that I talk to,
5 maybe go to coffee with, get together once in a while.
6 And I have some friends that I've met there that no
7 longer go there too.

8 TK: How important has MCC been in building your
9 network of friends here in San Francisco?
10 KW: Medium. That's kind of a cop-out, but I have a few
11 close friends that I've met there, but I don't count
12 on it. You know, I don't count on it for all my
13 contacts, you know, I don't always go to the activity
14 or the volunteer thing.

15 TK: But you've been there for a long time?
16 KW: Oh yeah.

17 TK: It's your professional life center?
18 KW: Yeah, that's it.

19 TK: Actually I want to go back a little bit, 'cause
20 I'd like, it might be interesting to fill in some of
21 the things we were first began. You left high school and
22 you went to University. You went where?
23 KW: Northern Illinois University in Illinois but I
24 spent my sophomore year in Mexico.
25 TK: And what did you major in?
1 KW: I majored in Spanish and political science.
2 TK: How did you end up in Mexico for the year abroad?
3 KW: I'd always been interested in Spanish. I like to travel. And my roommate in my freshman year was from Mexico and I visited with him and I just decided to go down.
4 TK: Were you out?
5 KW: No.
6 TK: Did you have any gay identity at that time?
7 KW: No, not really, no.
8 TK: So when did you come out?
9 KW: In my early twenties.
10 TK: After you left college.
11 KW: Yeah, at the end of college.
12 TK: You hadn't had any boyfriends or anything in college yet if you weren't out. And when you left, you went into the Peace Corps to Guatemala, but you weren't out.
13 KW: Yeah, I was out to friends by that time, yeah.
14 TK: And how was that like, I mean, in terms in what was the acceptance.
15 KW: What, gay life in Guatemala?
16 TK: No, in the Peace Corps.
17 KW: There was still in the Peace Corps, there was still an executive order saying something like if the director finds out that a volunteer has engaged in sexual perversion, he'll be kicked out. I don't know of any time it was used while I was there, it had been in the past I know.
18 TK: And so you came back to the United States when from Guatemala?
19 KW: I think actually I was in Guatemala and then in Costa Rica. I came back end of '76 and I finished my degree before but I didn't have teaching certification so I went back to my old college, finished that out, and then I got the job in Elgin, Illinois, close to Chicago. That's the one that was supposed to be temporary and then I stayed until twelve years.
20 TK: Was it a small town as well?
21 KW: Kind of, it was like 65,000 but it was close to the city so it was kind of a small town but then it had the effect of Chicago too. I spent a lot of time in the city.
22 TK: And that's when you first went to an MCC congregation is when you were there or in Chicago.
23 KW: I went to one service at MCC. It wasn't in Elgin, it was in a nearby community. I just went once; I didn't like it.
24 TK: What didn't you like about it?
25 KW: It was just a very cliquish unfriendly group.
26 TK: Did you go to other services at the time?
27 KW: MCC?
28 TK: No, were you going to church when you were in Elgin?
29 KW: Well, yeah, I went to the Congregational, which is the United Church of Christ, off and on for several years. I never joined it; I attended for a while.
30 TK: So you were here in '89. Is there anything I'm forgetting to ask you about MCC, something that I'm leaving out?
31 KW: No, I can't think of anything.
32 TK: You're sure?
33 KW: No, I'm not sure.
34 TK: All right then - well
35 End of Side 1, Tape 2 of 2
36 End of Interview.
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</tbody>
</table>