



BELIEF ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Name: Greg Smith

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Place: Petersham

Interviewer: Sue Andersen

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **SA:** This is Sue Anderson interviewing Greg Smith on the 17th of April 2011 for the City of Sydney's Oral History Project, Belief.

O.K, thank you, Greg for doing the interview today. I'm wondering whether we could first begin by you saying your full name and when and where you were born.

GS: Well, my name's Greg Smith and I was born in Sydney and raised in ***** back in the '50s which is, you know, some time ago, and back in the days when ***** was a leafy, green suburb with lots of wide streets and cows and paddocks and people who came around and delivered the groceries and the meat and the milk with horses and carts. So, a very different place to what ***** is today, that's for sure.

SA: Yes. So you went to school in *****?

GS: Yes, I went to ***** Public School and actually our family had a long connection there as my grandmother was in the first ever class at ***** Public School back in 1901 and then from there I went to *****

Boys' High School and then I left ***** Boys' High School and I joined the air force as a communications technician.

SA: Right, O.K.

GS: Yes, so fairly sort of mixed background and my dad was a Methodist minister and so I grew up very strongly in the Methodist church and even to this day I still class myself as a Methodist and a strong believer in Wesleyan principles and all that Methodism stands for.

2.02 **SA: Right, O.K. So it was just part of - - -**

GS: It's part of my life.

SA: Part of your life.

GS: Part of who I am, yes, yes, yes.

SA: And in those early years after school you didn't think about joining the church?

GS: No, not at all, not at all. It was, you know, hey it was the '60s and it was the last thing people did was join churches and I thought joining the air force was going to be a damn sight more fun than church and a little a way of being rebellious. You know, when you grow up in a church family you are fairly sort of restricted at times and sort of, you know, getting out and joining the armed forces was a fairly rebellious sort of thing to do, considering Mum and Dad were very much involved in the peace movement and all of that sort of stuff, yes.

SA: So they were fairly contemporary in their views?

GS: Very progressive in their views, actually and, you know, I was very obviously a gay man back then and Mum and Dad were very supportive and actually that issue led to Dad actually leaving the church at the time because the church wouldn't accept gay people at that time, so they were fairly progressive parents, yes.

SA: So your father ended up by leaving the church?

GS: Yes, yes, yes. Basically the church gave him an ultimatum and they said, you know, "We don't want you son at church any more because, you know, he's a bad influence" and Dad said "Well, O.K, then. You don't have him, you don't have me" which back in that time, around mid '60s was, you know, an almost unheard of progressive attitude for parents. You know, most parents sent their kids off to have electroshock therapy to, you know, shock the homosexuality out of them where mine sort of said "Well, you know, you're our son and we'll support you", so yes.

4.00 **SA: Well, how old were you when this was happening?**

GS: About thirteen when that actually happened, thirteen, fourteen, yes, yes.

SA: Right.

GS: Yes.

SA: That must have been a wonderful affirmation for you to have received at that - - -

GS: Well, it was, looking back on it it was. At the time, of course, there was a lot of turmoil around it, of course, but as I look back on it, you know, in particular it was a fabulous, you know, affirmation and set me up for my life, particularly as a gay man in a way that I could not have asked for better, where I never luckily carried with me the guilt and the confusion that many gay men, you know, carry with them as a result of their early experiences in families and churches and things like that, yes.

SA: Yes. So were you a Christian before that?

GS: I've always been a Christian.

SA: O.K.

GS: Yes, yes, yes, always.

SA: All right, and then that didn't sort of destabilise your faith?

GS: No, no, because my faith was always beyond that. O.K, yes, you know, I quite definitely, you know, joined the armed forces, got into all that, you know, all that the armed forces are about and had a fabulous time, you know, and then when I left the armed forces I definitely got into the gay scene and sex, drugs and rock and roll, the whole thing, and it was the '60s and '70s and everything was there to be embraced but even at those times I never, ever doubted my faith although, you know, I went for a long period where I didn't attend church, you know, but that doesn't mean that your faith stops existing.

SA: And it wasn't difficult to reconcile?

GS: No, no. You know, it really frustrates me at times what churches do to people because basically there is nothing to reconcile. If you are really true to scripture and you're really true to the teachings of Jesus Christ and what the gospel message is about, there should be nothing to reconcile.

6.04 Unfortunately, human beings for all sorts of reasons of their own distort, manipulate and destroy that message and the reconciliation is not between me or you or anyone and God, it really is between those people who manipulate the true message and God, they're the ones that need to reconcile but sadly on the way they destroy many lives, you know.

SA: Right, O.K, well that's a pretty huge event

GS: Well, funny for me it wasn't at the time, it was just that's the way things were but the more I look back and the more I move, as I moved into ministry eventually then, you know, I started to see "Well, wow", what I'd experienced was not the norm, what I experienced was something extraordinary and that the majority of people don't experience that and the majority of people who have faith find themselves having to make choices between the issues of faith and sexuality and faith and who they are as, you know, a human being or they find themselves living in closets or killing themselves, you know, as a result of the turmoil. And so I was fortunate I had two fabulous parents who, you know – I must admit, you know, they were pretty progressive with lots of issues of the times so, yes, it made sense.

SA: So what did your Dad go on to do?

GS: Well, he went back to be – before he was a minister he'd been an accountant, so he went back into accountancy and he became a Druid.

SA: What twists and turns in one's life.

GS: Yes, yes, and he never stepped foot in a Christian church again which is sad. I think for me the saddest thing, you know, was that because he so loved the church but at that time in particular he couldn't reconcile the church and what the church had done to his son and he was the one that really suffered more than I ever did, you know, something that he'd given so much to and that had been so much part of him, yes.

8.20 **SA: O.K, so there was lots of sex, drugs and rock and roll in between you becoming a minister?**

GS: Ooh, yes, the '70s, the 70s were, yes, geez, they were times. And, you know, that was what was happening in the world basically; people were exploring, there was no HIV. The worst you could get back then was a dose of the clap and you went to the doctor and got penicillin. Like, you know, it was an adventurous time, it was a fabulous time to live. You know, I give thanks that I was born when I was because this really has to have been, you know, the most exciting period to grow up from the '50s through to now, you know, and I don't think we'll ever have a period like that again. You know,

so a mixture of freedom and still tradition all woven together in a really beautiful, unique way, yes, yes. But, yes, it was a pretty wild time and I got very involved in the Sydney gay scene and then one day in 1986 a friend of mine who was involved with the Metropolitan Community Church said “How about you come to church with me?” and basically it was a bribe. It was like, well, you know, I said “Well, I’ll come to church with you if you’ll” – I forget what it was – “go for a bike ride with me” or something and so I went to church up at the MCC at Paddington and the meeting at the Village Church in Paddington at the time, the Uniting Church.

SA: You were in the Uniting Church?

GS: Uniting Church at Paddington. And, I don't know, something magical happened and I don't think I've – well, I've never missed an MCC service since if I've been somewhere there's been an MCC in the world, so.

10.02 **SA: Is that right?**

GS: Yes, yes, yes.

SA: So what was it that drew you back, what was it that really - - -

GS: I don't know. In many ways it was a case of walking in and just – it was interesting and what struck me is when I was growing up as a kid in the Methodist church that we grew up in and the Sunday school hall – and I think probably people my age will remember Sunday school halls – they were drab, dreary buildings – but above the stage at one end was the fabulous scripture reading, John 3.16 and it's “And for God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life”. And I walked into MCC that night in 1986 – in July, I think it was – and the pastor at the time was preaching on that particular scripture passage and, I don't know, just something just happened and I just knew instantly that this was the place I had to be. From then, you know, I went and did my theological studies at the Uniting Church Theological College.

SA: So what was the moment that made you want to lead the congregation, I guess?

GS: Well, I suppose it happened – my partner at the time, Tony, and after like months of turmoil after going to – you know, and I just used to go to church as a member of the church, kind of sing the hymns and go home and, you know, one day we were having an argument at home and he just turned at me and he said “For Pete's sake, will you make up your mind. Do you want to be a minister or not?” and I had never thought of it but he'd recognised this sort of inner turmoil. And I just looked at him and said “Yes, that's what the trouble is, that's what the turmoil is”.

SA: Wow.

GS: Yes, and then the next day I went and enrolled at the Uniting Church seminary, yes.

12.06 **SA: That's amazing.**

GS: Yes, yes. It's just, you know – I mean, my life's been like that. You know, I'm just one of these people, you know, things just happen. You know, like just recently I've just returned from Cambodia after six years in Cambodia and I'll never forget. I went with my partner now, he's Cambodian and we'd gone back home to visit his mum and dad and it's the first time that I'd been to Cambodia and he said to me one day, he said "You seem uneasy", after we'd come back and I said "Yes, I think we need to go and live there" and he said "O.K, well, let's go". And so, yes, my life's been a bit like that, you know, sort of opportunities present themselves and I've always been one for saying yes or no, you know, and if someone affirms it, well then do it, you know, it's good.

SA: Yes. So you studied and then - - -

GS: Yes, I studied out of the United Theological College and also did specialist study in the areas of sexuality and scriptures through our own Metropolitan Community Church College which at that time was in Los Angeles in California and then went on and became ordained and then I became the pastor of the church up in Paddington and a few years after that - - -

SA: And what year was that?

GS: Oh, dear. Now, I knew you were going to ask that. That would have been 1989. So then I pastored the church for a while there and then my partner, he was HIV positive and had a dream that he wanted to live in the country. And this is another one of those crazy things, you know, and I just said "Well, you know, let's make it come true".

14.00 And at the time there was a position vacant as the Australian/New Zealand Coordinator of our churches, so I applied for that position and I got that position and then we went to live in Mudgee on a farm and I did the church work from there and travelled around Australia and New Zealand and someone else took over as the pastor of the church.

SA: So you were actually ministering the whole - - -

GS: So I was the – the whole of Australia, New Zealand and I became the Ecumenical Officer for this part of the world for the church because

MCC's a worldwide, you know, organisation, not just one or two churches here in Sydney.

SA: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

GS: Yes, we're actually the world's largest organisation with an Outreach to the gay/lesbian community. Founded in 1968, so, you know, we've been around for quite a while.

SA: Can you just say its full name?

GS: The full name of the denomination is the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. And then each local church is known as Metropolitan Community Church of wherever, so here we're Metropolitan Community Church Sydney. Our church in Granville is called Metropolitan Community Church of the Good Shepherd. So the local churches have to have the words "Metropolitan Community Church" in their name but we're all part of this organisation known as the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

SA: And that was birthed in -?

GS: That was birthed in October 1968 in California, in Los Angeles, yes, yes, by Reverend Troy Perry.

SA: Right.

GS: Yes, he'd been thrown out of his Baptist church because he was gay and then felt called to open a church that was open to everyone, not just gay people. And, interestingly, worldwide more than twenty five per cent of our membership is non-gay, it's people who feel excluded from other churches. We have a policy, you know, that no one is excluded from our churches for any reason whatsoever, it doesn't matter what it is, you know, you're welcome here, you know, even people from other faiths are welcome in MCC.

16.10 **SA: Yes, and it's not surprising by the sounds of it that when it was formed that it grew so widely, so quickly.**

GS: Well, it grew very quickly and people were shocked how quickly it grew and, you know, hence the name, Metropolitan Community Church, it grew in the metropolis of Los Angeles. No one ever dreamed when it started that it would be any more than one church in Los Angeles and within three years we had our first church here in Australia, you know, then churches in England, Great Britain, across Europe, New Zealand, Canada, yes.

SA: So where did it first start in Australia?

GS: Well, there's argument about that. Technically, it first started in Adelaide because that was the one that got its name registered first but in reality it started here in Sydney and it started at the – originally a group of people were meeting called 'Christ Community Church' and they used to meet in the manse of the Paddington Uniting Church and then Reverend Troy Perry came here to visit. He was invited to visit by the Catholic gay group called 'Acceptance' here in Sydney and because when he came they found out that he was a card-carrying Protestant which kind of set the cat amongst the pigeons but anyway as a result of that visit MCC was started and moved from the manse at Paddington to the Quakers Hall in Chalmers Street and met there for many, many years – so, very, very dear friends, the Quakers there who at that time were probably the only place that would accept gays, you know, to use their place.

18.00 And then after years there then the pastor at the Paddington Uniting Church, the Reverend Rex Matthews, who was one of the most wonderful, wonderful men, he invited us to come and use the Paddington Uniting Church for our worship and we stayed there for seventeen years.

SA: Right.

GS: Yes. And it was interesting that from that invitation he was never, ever – when he left that church as the pastor, he never pastored another Uniting Church because he became known as "the person who let the poofers into the Uniting Church", yes, and he chaplained then in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital for the rest of his life but a wonderful, wonderful man who just was so far ahead of his time, yes.

SA: It's quite shocking actually. I mean, I don't know how you feel about it but sitting on the other side of hearing that it's actually quite a shocking story.

GS: Well, it is and there are some stories, you know, and along a similar line and you've got to put these in time and context. You know, this is back in the days when homosexuality was illegal, you know, and we could be sent to gaol for fourteen years here for having gay sex, consensual or otherwise. Bars and clubs were constantly raided by the police. We had, you know, the Askin government (NSW) in place which was probably the most corrupt government this country, let alone this state, has ever seen. I can remember at one stage, you know, working for a sex club in Sydney and, you know, the police coming every Thursday night to get their brown paper bag full of crumpled fivers as payoff so we wouldn't get raided, you know. So it was a time and place; you can kind of understand it, you know, and looking back we laugh at it now, you know, we've come so far, yes.

20.03 **SA: So in those early days when it was, you know, illegal to be a homosexual or to carry out homosexual acts, I mean did you**

have to kind of go out and do a lot of sort of Outreach ministry or was it mainly based in the church?

GS: No, we were very involved with the Law Reform programme and whenever there was anything, you know, to do with law reform, MCC in many cases led the way in that area. Quite often we'd find ourselves chained to the fence of Parliament House and all those sorts of fabulous ways of demonstrating, you know. It's interesting today, just these youngsters today – I was at a meeting at Sydney University not long ago around this marriage equality thing that's going on, you know, and one of the young people – God bless them – said "Oh, well, we'll have a demonstration but we'll have to go and get permission from the police". And I looked at him and I said "Since when do you get permission from the police to do a demonstration?" "Oh, but we'll get into trouble" and I said "Yes, and? Isn't that what we want, you know, that we want to be noticed?" type of thing; once again, how things have changed.

SA: Yes. It wasn't like that back in the '60s, was it?

GS: It wasn't. No, you went out and it was a battle – and it really was a battle and so that's what led to Mardi Gras, you know, it was a battle, you know, we all went crazy one night, just, you know, turned Kings Cross into a riot, and, you know, the church was involved in all of that. We were particularly involved at a level with the people at the time like Fred Nile and the Gordon Moyeses [Christian Democrat Party NSW upper house MPs] and we'd go out and demonstrate outside their churches. And, you know, we had a fabulous demonstration in Parliament House once with Fred Nile where we all infiltrated. We had a friend who worked in Fred's office and was able to sneak us out passes, you know, and so we were able to go into these functions and then harass them and sort of create chaos and, you know, sneak into Parliament, you know, into the Upper House when they were doing their votes with hundreds of whistles and, you know, we were pretty raddy.

We used to, you know, blockade the back of Parliament House, all the church members in the morning, so the members of Parliament couldn't get in and sort of things like that, so just to raise the issues.

SA: Wow.

GS: So, yes, we were very involved in the law reform and we were very, very involved in the early days of HIV/AIDS. I think if you look at the organisations now like Ankali, ACON, Community Support Network, Bobby Goldsmith Foundation were all founded by this church, you know.

SA: Is that right?

GS: Yes, yes, yes.

SA: The members of the church or - - -

GS: Members of the church and the pastors of the church.

SA: Really? I didn't know that.

GS: Yes, yes.

SA: Right.

GS: Yes, not a lot of people do. And interesting, in Australia people don't want to know when churches do stuff like that. You know, they want to knock us but they don't want to acknowledge us when we do do things like this. But it was the pastor of this church at the time, Reverend Jim Dykes, who actually put Bobby Goldsmith – after whom the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation is named - who actually put Bobby Goldsmith into his coffin because the funeral directors wouldn't touch an AIDS body at that time. You know, and it was the members of this church that started Community Support Network who went out to care for people in their homes because no one else would because community care organisations wouldn't go into the homes. Even our opportunity shop that we ran for many years in Newtown was started because a gay man went to a Salvation Army and asked for a bed and he needed a double bed because he got night sweats at night and so if he got a night sweat he needed to be able to move and was told that "We don't give double beds to types like you".

24.11 And then a sign appeared on a wall, "If you're not part of a traditional family unit we cannot help you here". And so, you know, all along the way MCC has, you know, reacted to those sorts of circumstances, you know.

SA: So was that around about the late '90s, late '80s?

GS: Late '80s, yes, yes, yes, yes.

SA: It's interesting because on your website – I was sort of doing a bit of research – it says that you sit within a mainstream Christianity.

GS: Yes, yes.

SA: So, that doesn't sound to me very mainstream.

GS: If you're true to the Christian gospel it's about as mainstream as you can get, it's what the gospel was about, you know. And, you know, if you look at the teachings of Jesus, they were all aimed at the dispossessed, the left out, the forgotten, the abused. You know, so in

our understanding that is the mainstream of Christianity. That statement on our website is a way also of us saying “We are not a cult, that we are part of what Christianity is”, you know, and it’s backed up by statements like, you know, “We follow the Nicene and the apostle creeds as our basis of faith” and that we’re Trinitarian, you know, so we’re not Scientologists or we’re not Christian Scientists, we’re not Mormons, we’re boring old mainstream Protestants. And it’s interesting, you know, having studied at the Uniting Church – and I’ve got some fabulous colleagues in the Uniting Church and, you know, I’ve got to put a plug in for Uniting Church because they really are the hope for Christianity in this country if they can just get their act together.

26.13 But, you know, all of my colleagues, you know, they look at our Statements of Faith and say “Well, that’s us, that’s the same as us, we believe exactly the same thing”, so.

SA: Actually, that’s a really good point to tell me, like what does the church believe, like what are the other beliefs of the MCC?

GS: Well, we’re Trinitarian Christian, so that means that we believe in God and we believe that Jesus Christ was the only begotten child of God, fully human and fully divine and we believe that the Holy Spirit is God working in the world today through people, such that those people may be brought into a relationship with God and live a life of dignity and hope. We believe in particular that Jesus was fully human and then in that full humanity embraces our humanity and fully touches us where we are as human beings. We believe that he died and arose on the third day - as we’re now celebrating and about to celebrate – and that through faith we are justified through God’s grace into a relationship with God, not by good works, simply through faith in Jesus Christ, and that’s fairly mainstream – well, that’s what Luther fought about; that was the great change of the Reformation and we fit pretty smack bang in there. Now then, within that all of our churches have the freedom to be who they are, and for example, this church here in Sydney is very different to our church in Parramatta.

28.05 **SA: Tell me in what way.**

GS: Yes. Well, its pastor is an ex-Catholic priest, so the liturgy of the church, the way the church does worship, is very different, it’s much more structured. You know, here we’re much more free-flowing because I come from a, you know, evangelical - as in the true sense of that word – Methodist background, you know, and we sing Wesleyan hymns and all that stuff here. And then even our services here, this morning service is very traditional, this evening at six thirty the young people will be here and it’s full on contemporary, rock music and whatever, you know, but we all believe the same basic principles of who we are in relationship with God, you know, who Jesus Christ is and how we relate to God through Jesus Christ.

SA: O.K, so the church at Parramatta is more kind of traditional in the classic kind of sense?

GS: Yes, yes, yes, yes, but still with the same beliefs and doctrines, you know, just in their style of worship. We all believe the same thing, you know, we all believe that, you know, everyone is a child of God, created in the image of God and that within every one of us burns the spiritual ember of God's grace, you know, and that doesn't matter whether we've got gay, straight or whatever, you know. As to our sexuality, we believe that our sexuality, whatever that is, is a God-given gift to be nurtured and used wisely in loving, caring relationship with those around us. Now, that could be straight, gay, confused, transgender, bisexual, whatever, but it's about loving, caring, you know, relationships. But how we worship, how we do that, you know, is totally different from church to church, you know.

30.00 **SA: Give me an example of the service or the worship style this morning then.**

GS: Well, I think the biggest thing you'd notice this morning is that I wear my robes, so, yes, the church is decorated in the theme of the calendar. So, you know, we have white today because it's Palm Sunday. Last week we had purple because we were finishing Lent; we follow the Christian calendars. We sing, well, typically what we call the "Four hymn sandwich", you know, we'd sing four or five hymns which might be a mixture of traditional and some more modern hymns. We read the gospel, we read the scripture, we preach on the gospel, we say prayers, we share the peace and we go and have coffee, yes, so. Yet in the evening, you know - and in the morning, it wouldn't be unusual, sometimes we have organ based music, much more traditional based music, music that people from any of the main line, particularly Protestant churches would easily identify with. We serve communion at every service.

SA: You do?

GS: Oh, yes, yes, every MCC service everywhere in the world communion and we do that because for so long the sacrament was denied to gays and lesbians but in MCC we have said that "Whenever we worship we will celebrate the sacrament so that no one will ever, ever feel again that they are denied the access to that sacrament". So even the smallest little worship we will have a simple sacrament or, as this morning, the sacrament this morning was, you know, it's fairly traditional, the Prayers of the Great Thanksgiving and the sung responses and that sort of thing, whereas this evening the sacraments are much more like just a shared meal, so much more laid back and casual. In the evening I don't wear robes, I just wear my jeans and a shirt and that sort of thing, yes.

32.00 **SA:** **And also you talk about the MCC – well, not you but the MCC talks about offering a home to everyone that believes and confesses.**

GS: Yes.

SA: **So you don't do confession though, do you?**

GS: Confession, it's in the Protestant style of confession. So in the Roman Catholic confession is a thing that you do with a priest, so the priest acts as intermediary. Because we're Protestant, we believe that you don't need the intermediary, so the confessions that we make are between us and God and before any sacrament, before the communion, we will ask people to take a time to confess from their hearts the things that they think stand between them and God. So that's got nothing to do with me as a pastor but it's an individual thing. I don't ask – when people come forward to receive the sacrament, they're not asked "Have you confessed?", that's purely something between them and God. But, yes, that confession is a very important part. It says to us that, you know, "You have a responsibility", that this is not a free ride, that, you know, "You have to do something to hopefully move yourself closer to your relationship with God.

SA: **And then how important is the believing part? Do you get people here that are struggling with belief?**

GS: Yep, yes, everywhere, we all do, and I think any Christian who says they're not struggling with their belief really has lost the plot as far as I'm concerned. You know, Christianity is a living faith, right, it's a faith that constantly grows and changes in the world that we live and the relationships we have with people. So I think, you know, Christianity is doomed to be a faith where people struggle all the time.

34.02 You know, it would be wonderful if I could just embrace the faith of the '50s and '60s that I grew up with, you know, but it's irrelevant to today, as irrelevant as St Augustine was for today or, you know, Paul the Apostle. You know, what Paul wrote, you know, 70 years after Christ or fifty years after Christ is very relevant for when he wrote it but it acts only as a guide for us today; we must look at it and say "What does this say to us today?" And that's the big struggle in MCC in particular and other churches like the Uniting Church: they're constantly saying "How do we make this faith thing work for today?" You know, what do you do when you've got the internet, what do you do when you've got so many other options, what do you do when people worship football teams, you know, how do you make faith relevant? So, yes, it's always a struggle, you know, and some struggle more than others and, you know, that doesn't mean that we're not grounded in what our faith is; you know, the struggle is in how do we live it and how do we make it relevant, how do we reach it out to other people and make it relevant for them?

SA: O.K. What I wanted to also ask you before, does the MCC in Australia differ from just say – well, anywhere else in the world or are they all individual, do they all have their own individual little - - -

GS: Yes, no, we differ very much from our American brothers. I think if we were similar to any MCCs it would be the ones in Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand and it depends on the background.

35.51 You see, if we look at our – I like to say here in Australia when you think about it, I mean White Australia was founded when the First Fleet arrived and all the convicts were in chains and it took them two weeks to sober up the parson so that he could have – and it was George Campbell I think his name was – so that they could have the first worship service and everyone was in chains and had to attend. So that sets the scene for church in Australia from day one. In the United States they all got off the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock or whatever it was and they all stood there and gave thanks to God and had their worship service in complete freedom and celebration and hence our two countries went off in totally different directions when it comes to church. You know, we had the very early years here in Australia with the church and the magistracy – you know, Samuel Marsden's a famous example, "The Flogging Parson". You know, he preached the good gospel on Sunday and then flogged people to death on Monday. You know, in America, they had the separation of church and state, so as a result we are very different to our American brothers. And that's always been a struggle for us in MCC because it is an American church in one degree and we're always arguing about, you know, how we do church and, you know, you look at just the numbers. You know, in America on any Sunday something like eighty five per cent of people go to church and here in Australia less than five per cent of people go to church so it makes for a very different church. We're very much more traditional in Australia, those of us that go to church, the churches; apart from the big happy-clappy stuff, Hillsong and that, mainline churches here are fairly conservative compared to America, we're very, very subdued with our expression and you don't get many "Amen's" and "Hallelujah's" screamed out in the worship service here and then when they are I'm shocked but, you know, in America you can't shut them up, you know. So it's very different and so what MCC takes on is the flavour of where it is. You go to our church in the Philippines, you know, and once again it's very different to anywhere else.

37.59 You know, our churches in South Africa are very different, our churches in Russia are very different, you know, are churches in New Zealand are even more boring than we are but that's just the flavour of the culture in which MCC has the flexibility to grow but, you know, when it comes down to the bottom line you can walk into any MCC anywhere in the world and walk in the door and feel at home and

that's what makes us so different. You know, I know it doesn't matter where I am in the world, if I go to an MCC I'll walk in that door and I know I am in my spiritual home, no matter how they worship, no matter where they are, who they are, and that's something very, very special.

SA: Just you've got fifteen minutes because you need to out of here.

GS: Yes, I can probably press it to one if we have to but that would be the absolute latest, yes.

SA: So, do you get people from different, like, backgrounds?

GS: Oh, yes, yes.

SA: So you might get Catholics and - - -

GS: Probably any Sunday our service would be made up of probably forty per cent Catholics, ex-Catholics, and forty per cent Protestants and the rest a bunch of confused, mixed-up people from all over the place. Like, for instance this morning we had three Muslims worshipping with us as well.

SA: And were they gay Muslims?

GS: Yes.

SA: Right. And they come here specifically - - -

GS: They come here because this is somewhere they can come and have a spiritual component in their lives and feel safe, you know. My partner's a Buddhist, you know, and I know we had another three Buddhists here this morning – sorry, four Buddhists this morning. So, you know, it's what we say "Everyone is welcome here", you know. The only time when you have to actually be a card-carrying Christian is to be what we call a "member in good standing", a full member of the church, you have to be a baptised Christian to be a full member of the church.

40.08 **SA: Really?**

GS: And, you know, that means that you're on the membership roll but then we also have what we call "friends of the church" and anyone can be a friend of the church. And we even get people from other Christian faiths too. Their faith won't – like Baptists, they're not allowed to be members of two churches so, you know, one of our dearest friends is Reverend Don Wright from the Baptist Church down at Leichhardt and Don's a friend of us. So, you know, he can be a friend of MCC and still be a Baptist minister, you know.

SA: And how much does sexuality play out in your – do you call it sermon?

GS: Sermons, yes.

SA: Sermons, yes.

GS: No, we preach the gospel.

SA: Right.

GS: O.K. At times we will preach on the issues of sexuality but the prime aim every Sunday here is to preach the gospel and if there are specific issues that need to be addressed, yes, they will be addressed but no more or no less than in any other church, you know. And that's myth. Now, there's a myth out there that MCC, you know, we're all here and we're all having sex on the communion table, you know, and we were once accused years ago - you know, beloved Fred Nile accused us of a pick-up joint on Sunday nights. And I know Fred well and I have a soft spot for Fred and I said to him when I met him once, I said "You know, Fred, my Mum and Dad met in church and got married and had a family". I said "Does that make their church a pick-up joint?" and he looked at me and he said "Yes, I get what you're saying", you know. So, you know, we get condemned because we do what everyone else does, you know.

41.57

So, yes, no, sexuality is an important part of who we are as individuals but the prime objective here is to preach the gospel, to preach the good news, you know, to give people, you know, lessons for life. You know, we had a couple here this morning who've been with us for months now who left their local Uniting Church to come here, a married, retired couple because they found that here they get fed spiritually and it's got nothing to do with being gay, straight or whatever, you know.

SA: And they don't find that confronting?

GS: Not at all, not at all.

SA: So what kind of percentage is your congregation? Is it like half straight, half gay?

GS: Here, this particular congregation probably about twenty per cent non-gay, yes, but we've got like, you know, gay boys and girls who bring their mums and dads to church, you know, so there's families here. You know, yes, it's just like any other church, yes.

SA: Also too we should get back to talking about the history of the MCC Sydney.

GS: Yes.

SA: So you were operating from Paddington

GS: We were operating from Paddington for seventeen years and then the new pastor, Reverend Patton came and he was a really, really sweet and supportive guy as well but then they wanted to start their own evening service and so they asked us if – you know, they gave us a year's notice. And this is where we got really connected with the City of Sydney [Council – local government]. One of our members was living in Burton Street in Darlinghurst and he'd noticed that the Heffron Hall had been locked up for years, so he took it upon himself to ring the council and say "What's happening at Heffron Hall?" and they'd say "Well, we had so much trouble with drug addicts and alcoholics and all that that we found it was better to just lock it up and not make it available".

44.03

And he said, "Well, would you rent it to the church?" You know, and the council at the time – at the time it was South Sydney Council because there hadn't been the amalgamation and Vic Smith was the Mayor of South Sydney and he was a really good man – and he said "O.K, we'll rent it to you on a peppercorn rent of a dollar a week but you have to run it as a community centre". So we did and we renovated the old hall and we used to have church there on Sunday nights and we used to do food for the homeless in the, you know, weekday mornings, we used to do Sunday lunches for people with HIV/AIDS, we used to rent it out to community groups, local choirs and gyms and whatever and for ten year or so, twelve years, we ran that place.

SA: So when did you first go to Heffron Hall?

GS: I've got to work it out. We've been here eleven years, so that's back to 2000, so then ten years before that; it would have been about 1990.

SA: Right.

GS: Yes, yes. And, yes, so that was church and we ran the church there and did lots of Outreach and then as a result of that Outreach then we opened our opportunity shop in Newtown 'Out of the Closet'.

SA: Yes, I've got that written down too – where was that?

GS: That was down in King Street, Newtown, down the bottom end of King Street and it got rave reviews for the best op shop in Sydney at one stage because it was all, you know, it was all ex gay boys' and girls' designer stuff; it was fabulous, yes.

SA: So why did you open it there and not, say, in the hall?

GS: Well, because the hall needed to be versatile, needed to be used for so much things; you couldn't tie it up with a seven day a week shop or six day a week shop. We also wanted somewhere where there were people with lots of money to buy stuff but once again the Council [City of Sydney] came to our aid because it started in Broadway and there was a whole lot of derelict shops along Broadway and once again our member who found Heffron Hall found this derelict shop with squatters in it.

46.13 And so he went to the council and said "Can we have that shop?" and they said "Oh, yes, but you've got to do it up". So we did it up and once again paid peppercorn rent but then when they did up that whole area down around there we moved down to Newtown. And that used to fund our welfare services, particularly to people with HIV/AIDS.

SA: At Heffron Hall?

GS: Well, no, lots of stuff outside of them. We used to provide household furnishings and all sorts of stuff to people with HIV/AIDS. If we got a call from a social worker who would say, you know, "We've got a gay boy who's HIV positive moving into the Department of Housing, has got nothing", we would go out and we would fill his house with furniture and everything he needed to, you know, have a comfortable life and at one stage we had over twelve hundred clients on our books.

SA: So that was all started at Heffron Hall?

GS: Basically, yes, it started at Heffron Hall and in a trailer behind my old Valiant that we used to lug stuff around town, yes.

SA: Gosh.

GS: Yes.

SA: And did the City provide or did the Council of South Sydney at that time but they were - - -

GS: Sydney.

SA: - - - City of Sydney, were you getting funding for that?

GS: No, no.

SA: So that was all - - -

GS: Everything funded by ourselves, yes, yes.

SA: That's an amazing achievement.

GS: Yes, it was at the time, yes, yes. And it was one of those achievements that was right for the time, you know. Now, the shop doesn't exist any more, simply because there are so many op shops now it's become far too trendy and the need for people with HIV/AIDS has changed. Back then people were dying; you know; now people are living and so, you know, it's a very different environment now for HIV people these days, yes.

48.07 **SA: So you would have been in the hall when the City of Sydney took
- - -**

GS: Yes.

SA: - - - when it changed or the amalgamation first - - -

GS: Yes, when the amalgamation happened and then so the City of Sydney then allowed us to continue on. And then at the same time, eleven years ago, we moved here [Petersham] – this used to be the old Mastertouch Piano Roll factory and once again one of the members drove past one day and, you know, one of our members she had a friend who was the estate agent who was the agent selling the building, and she said “Well, I've heard that there's this church for sale. I think we should buy it”. Well, we had no money, you know.

SA: But it wasn't a church, though?

GS: Yes, at the time it was the Mastertouch Piano factory.

SA: Yes.

GS: O.K, originally it was a church, it was built as a Christian Science church.

SA: O.K.

GS: It was the seventh Christian Science church of Sydney but then they turned it into a factory, you know, but they hadn't taken anything out and everything you see is original, you know. So she said “Oh, it's for sale” and so I said “Well, we can't buy that” and she kept harassing us and luckily one thing led to another and we found the deposit and we bought it and brought it back to life.

SA: It's a beautiful space.

GS: And it's the last what they call art deco plain, you know, austere, austere art deco building in the Marrickville Council area now, yes, and we won a Heritage Society Medal for our restoration, all done by volunteers.

SA: So where do you get your funding from?

GS: What people put in the plate on Sunday mornings, on Sunday evenings, from the members, and we do a few fund raising and fund raising dinners, all that boring church stuff, you know, lamington drives and things - many a church has been built on lamingtons. But, yes, we do fundraising and community things and that sort of thing but mainly it's what people give. You know, we rent out part of the building to a karate school, you know, that sort of brings in some funds and that sort of thing.

50.07 **SA: And I guess when you were in Heffron Hall if you were renting out the spaces there as well - - -**

GS: Yes. Well, that funded us for a while, you know, and that was the deal with the council, you know, that we would run it but we would get the funding, you know. Then the other link with Sydney Council, of course, is the Sydney Town Hall and the Gay and Lesbian Christmas Eve service which we've been doing there for the last twelve years.

SA: Tell me about that.

GS: And, once again that started with a member of the church saying "We should do a Christmas Eve service" and so we did our first one in Paddington at the Academy Twin Cinema thirteen years ago now and we packed the place - it only seated four hundred people so it wasn't hard. And then it wasn't available the next year and we thought we'd use Paddington Town Hall and we went up and looked at it and Paddington doesn't have any facilities; like there's no organ and you've got to put your own seating in and your own security and one of our members said "Oh, well, why don't we ask Sydney Town Hall?" and we thought "Oh, God, yes, like a zillion dollars", you know. I said "Right" and we went and they had availability on Christmas Eve - and we didn't think there would be - and the price was good and they threw in the organ and the technicians and the seating and the sound and the lighting and so, yes, eleven years ago we had our first Christmas Eve service there; around a thousand people turned up and it was spectacular. And every year since, except for the last couple of years while it was being renovated, but we had our first one back last year and once again, you know, just over a thousand people turned up and traditional Christmas service with singing carols and preaching the gospel and serving communion and people just coming off the streets and, you know.

SA: So that was a real mixture of - - -

GS: A real mixture of people, yes, but that's become now - well, it's a very big part of the gay community Christmas now and it's, I think, become part of the city of Sydney - it's been going for so long now and I think it'll continue on forever.

52.13 **SA:** You remember how you were talking about, you know, things that are appropriate at particular times in the history?

GS: Yep.

SA: You being based at Heffron Hall, I mean was that an important place for you to actually be located?

GS: Yes. It was important for a couple of reasons. One reason, that it was in the middle of the gay community at the time – not so much now – the other thing it was we'd gone from the Uniting Church where we just would turn up on Sunday night and have church to a place where we had to take responsibility and in a way it was the stepping stone to here at Petersham; it was at Heffron Hall that we really learnt to be church, that we really learnt the lessons of what it meant to be church in a community, you know, with the door open every day. Because Heffron Hall was open every day; even if there was nothing on the pastor was there in the office.

SA: So you weren't there for most of the time?

GS: I was there for a fair bit of the time at Heffron Hall, yes, yes, yes, yes.

SA: And then how has it changed by being here in Marrickville [council area]?

GS: Well, it's actually now this is much more the centre of the gay community as people are moving away, so we actually find that we're attracting more and more people who just weren't willing to take that extra bit of travel into the city; you know, like there's better parking here, all those sorts of things. But what we've become here, interesting, we have become the local parish church and so we're actually attracting local people here, whereas at Heffron Hall people came to it but here people are from around the area as well as coming to it.

54.08 And because we own the building and because we've renovated the building and because we're involved with the building it's made us much more part of the community here and also it's a fabulous space, you know.

SA:

GS: It really is probably one of the nicest church spaces around, you know, which is good, yes.

SA: So did you go off to Cambodia – is that why you left?

GS: Yes, yes, yes, that's why I left, yes, and I went to – well, yes, my partner's Australian/Cambodian, he was a refugee from the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot years. We met here in Australia but his family was still back there and we went for a holiday. I had long service leave and so I went for three months and I fell in love with Cambodia and the people and then I thought "Well, you know, I've got to come back". So I went back and worked with an organisation, looking after orphaned and vulnerable kids as a management adviser and Kim, my partner, he opened our hotel, Phnom Penh's first gay hotel, and it just grew from there. Yes, and so here we are six years later, we've just sold the business and now we're moving back to Mudgee, yes, yes.

SA: So you've kept your place in Mudgee?

GS: No, well, we bought a place a couple of years ago. We sold everything in Mudgee and now we've re-bought, yes.

SA: Yes.

GS: Yes, yes.

SA: And so you're just here for - - -

GS: I'm here for a year. Basically I'm retired but the church got into a bit of strife. Their last pastor left under difficult situations and so they've asked me to come back and help sort things out, get things back on a level keel and get them ready for calling a new pastor. So over the next year we're going to be doing all that's needed to get the church back to somewhere really, really vibrant and then they'll be ready to call a new full time pastor.

56.08 **SA: How do you call a pastor?**

GS: Well, we set up what's called a Pastoral Search Committee and they do lots of research about the type of person that you want and then within the denomination we then put advertising out saying, you know, "This is the person that we're looking for. If you feel you might like, you know, to come and be our pastor", you know, then we do interviews and end up with a shortlist and all that sort of stuff and then finally present a candidate to the congregation and the congregation will vote on whether they want to accept that candidate as the pastor.

SA: So I would imagine it would have to be a pretty specific kind of pastor.

GS: Yes, yes. Well, to start with they've got to be, you know, qualified, ordained Metropolitan Community Church clergy, so that already makes it a very small pool and also a very specific pool but it could be

anyone from anywhere around the world, you know, from any of our churches, you know, Australia, New Zealand or the US, you know.

SA: Because you're very, very well thought of within the MCC. People talk a lot about your services and - - -

GS: Yes.

SA: - - - and how you have this ability to kind of really hold the community.

GS: Yes. Really, I think it's a knack that you have, you know, it's a gift; you know, some people have it, some don't. You know, it's not something which you can actively create, sort of, you know, but it's a special gift that comes along with the position, I suppose, yes.

SA: Now, I'm racing through things now because I'm just aware of your time - - -

58.03 GS: Yes. No, see, I've got a wedding this afternoon, so that's why I've got to - - -

SA: Now, just very quickly, you have quite a few different ministries within MCC, is that right?

GS: In what way, what do you mean?

SA: Well, like you do groups and groups and - - -

GS: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, there's women's ministry, there's men's ministry, there's bible studies, there's social ministry, yes, yes, lots of stuff, but, look, just the same sort of stuff that all churches do. Yes, we're no different, we do all that normal, boring old church stuff, yes, and music groups and we have, you know, sort of prayer groups and, you know, we do go on retreats and no different to any normal church, really.

SA: O.K. And so I guess, you know, where to now for the church? I mean, you've been talking about, you know, that the big aim for you is to get a new pastor for the church.

GS: Yes.

SA: And, I guess, have you got kind of a long term vision?

GS: Yes. I think the vision – we had a vision a long time ago before we bought this place and we talked about being the light on the hill, this symbolism of a welcoming place, you know. Never did we ever dream that we'd actually own the building on the top of the hill - this is actually the highest hill in Sydney.

SA: Really?

GS: Yes. And if you look around this is the highest spot in Sydney and we've got the church on it; there's something really symbolic about that. But, you know, yes, look, our vision is simply to be a safe place for people to come and have the opportunity to develop a relationship with God. You know, and that sounds perhaps old and corny but along with that relationship with God comes relationships with each other. We want to be a place where people can really explore who they are and understand what it means to be in relationship with each other, what it means to, you know, be the servant king.

60.11 You know, we sang this fabulous song called 'The Servant King', you know, that it's not about being the biggest and the best but it's about serving, you know, and it's about how do we serve our community? You know, we look through the law reform times and we served by being leaders in that area, in the HIV/AIDS period we served. You look at the banners on the wall; you know, they're all of our people who died from HIV/AIDS in this church; you know, we served them. Now it's a matter of how do we serve our new community? How do we reach out, for example, to young gay men and women who find that there's no hope in their lives, that they're tied up in drugs and alcohol and sexual addictions and all that sort of thing? So that's our next thing: how do we reach out and say to people that "Your spirituality is as important a part of you as is your physicality", how do we get people to really understand it without some spiritual component in their lives? There's an emptiness. How do we get them to understand that the emptiness they're feeling and that they're searching for with drugs and alcohol is actually an emptiness for a spiritual component? Now, we're not going to say "You have to come here and be Christian" but we want this to be a place where we can say "You can come here and you can explore. If you become a Christian that's fabulous. If you don't, that's O.K, too. Come here and find a safe place where just for a moment you can sit and reflect on who you are, you know, in all of the glory of creation".

SA: And also too are you – I mean, gay marriage, is it really high on the agenda, at the moment being pushed?

62.06 GS: Oh, yes.

SA: Are you lobbying within the

GS: You know, it's a tough one. Yes, MCC has always had from day one what we call "holy union", the spiritual joining together of two people of the same sex, we have always done that, I've done hundreds and hundreds of holy unions, you know, and I totally, totally stand for equal rights in relationships for all people in Australia, gay, straight, whatever. As for using the word "marriage", I'm not sure whether

we're doing ourselves a lot of favours there because I think we're using an emotive word and an emotive concept that's still so wrapped up in conservative Christianity that we're blurring what we're trying to achieve. So I've got mixed feelings on that one but as far as social justice goes, you know – and it's a social justice issue that gay men and lesbians in relationship should have absolutely exactly the same rights as heterosexual men and women in relationship or transgender men and women or whatever; you know, that's the big issue – I think it's got blurred by using the word "marriage", you know.

SA: I think that's a really good place to finish the interview. So, thank you so much, Greg.

GS: It's my pleasure, yes.

SA: It was a lovely interview, thank you.

GS: Yes, yes, yes, yes. O.K, thanks for coming, yes.

Interview ends