

Reverend Susan Leo

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by Jae Ann Atwood & Genevieve Blaettler

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LEO: Susan Leo

JAA: Jae Ann Atwood

GB: Genevieve Blaettler

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Introduction

Susan Leo is the minister at Bridgeport United Church of Christ. She moved to Portland in the 1970's and has been very politically active. During our interview she talked about coming out, working in Nicaragua, becoming a minister and starting Bridgeport.

Session 1
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JAA: This is Jae Ann Atwood.

GB: And Genevieve Blaettler.

JAA: And we're interviewing Reverend Susan Leo of the Bridgeport United Church of Christ.

LEO: And that's me.

JAA: and uh we'll start today by asking when were you born?

LEO: I was born on August 16th, 1951.

JAA: And where were you born?

LEO: I was born in Dallas, Texas.

JAA: Very good. And um when did you come out?

LEO: Well uh let's see, I- that's, these are always - there are never - there are hardly ever any simple questions because you know I was born in Dallas, Texas, we lived in New Mexico, we lived in Illinois, my father being a travelling salesman, but then I raised - I grew up most of my life in Wooster, Ohio a small liberal arts - home of a small liberal arts college in Ohio in the midst of the Amish country agricultural area, so small town. I have known since I was twelve years old that I was a lesbian I remember. But I didn't kiss my first girl until I was twenty. I remember lying in my bed you know on top of my bed

reading a "Seventeen" magazine and they had one of these quizzes about sexuality and I remember reading through these questions and saying very somberly to myself that someday I will have a homosexual experience. But never - I didn't date boys particularly you know a couple of dates. I've always been pretty much just like I am now – not exactly rockin' the guys' worlds'. But just bein' – I had lots of men friends but it wasn't until I moved out to Portland, Oregon in 1972 right after I graduated from college that I kissed my first woman and never looked back.

JAA: What brought you to Portland?

LEO: When I was in college back in Ohio my sophomore year I came out to Portland on an urban studies quarter. Actually worked with Portland State's Summer Sharp in the old Urban Studies department at PSU and fell in love with Portland. It was January through March and it pretty much rained the whole time but it was such an improvement over Ohio, oh my god, where it snowed, snowed, snowed, ice, ice, ice. I was done with that. And you know when you graduate college you've got to go somewhere – you've got to do something. I thought you know there's nothing else I'd rather do than live in Portland, Oregon. So I did.

JAA: How did your coming out affect your relationships with your family members?

LEO: Um (pause) I don't have a lot of family. My father had left us so he was out of the picture. My older brother was still alive – he died shortly after I came out. My younger brother was pretty much gone. My siblings were fairly – were all fine with it. Back in the '70's it was – my older brother was a kind of a Sufi kind of a guy. And so he was very fine, you know whatever. And my kid brother was so wrapped up in his own self that it didn't matter. My sister was fine with it actually – after a while she was able to tell me that she is bisexual. The key person that I'm sort of saving here for last is obviously my mother. I knew that – my mother and I were always really really close. I knew that she

would be upset mostly because grandchildren and personal safety. And I was right. I timed it – I was living briefly back in Washington D.C. I was there for about a year and a half. I ran the Washington D.C. Women's Center back in '74 – '75. I went and talked to her at Thanksgiving and told her. And you know she immediately did that "Oh it's the last thing of your father. . ." You know my parents were divorced when I was young. It's like "Oh Ma you can go through all those things but it's just not true. If that was gonna be true then Kate and Jim and Bill should all be gay too. Come on."

So but by Christmas – you know I was home for Christmas – so by Christmas she had kind of resolved to tolerate it. It took a long –much longer – my mother was a very liberal – a very progressive person. I was going to demonstrations with my mother in the early '60's around civil rights and against the Vietnam War later on in the decade. It took her until I threatened to just literally cut her off out of my life. It's like mom you have a choice of either really opening your arms to my entire life or I will not be able to tell you about any of my life and you will lose out on everything. And that was just a – it was a huge wake-up call to her and three days later I got – I got a note in the mail saying you're right I'm wrong I'll try. And she did.

And once she was able to shift and actually start talking with her friends – 'cause she worked at the college – she worked at the library at the college . . . her best friend - a woman that she'd been best friends with for years - her daughter – one of her daughters is a lesbian. You know one of the art professor's son's is gay. One of the religious – religion professor's son's is gay. It's like once she realized – opened up she's like Wow. We're all – they're all look – they're all fine you know. They're married couples. It was an astounding experience for her and then she really really got behind lesbian and gay rights. She was very active in the Presbyterian Church – the church I grew up in – and was very um when my mother makes up her mind and decides to tell you her opinion there will not be any doubt about the correctness of her position and the possible incorrectness of yours. She was a very um forthright woman. People would

laugh when they – people who know her would laugh when they say she's – she was pretty tenacious - so yeah and outspoken. Once she was there – she adored my partner Diane. She just adored her and was so proud. I should show you this card that she sent us early on in our relationship - it's hanging on the refrigerator. It's just so sweet. Yeah she was – it took her a while to get around – once she did she was totally there.

JAA: What led you to the ministry?

LEO: Okay. Um (pause). That's a long story. Do you want the long story or the shorter story?

JAA: We can take the long story.

GB: How about medium?

LEO: All right. Okay. So like I said I grew up in this very progressive town er home and grew up going to all these different demonstrations, sending kids off down to Montgomery and Birmingham on the buses, and being with – supporting college young-these college students as they're burning their draft cards and all that stuff. And I was very involved in anti-racism work when I was in college. This was you know starting back in 1968. Doing – and did just–anti-war stuff just big all over the place. So I'm going to move out here. I came out – let's see I moved out here in you know June and met Joy my first girlfriend - well even hardly girlfriend but you know. My – the little ditty I have about her is – I came out with Joy you see and out with Joy I came, not so sure with Joy at first but with Joy all the same. That kind of sums that up.

And I got really involved in the women's movement here in Portland as it was just beginning to develop. Played on the Lavender Menace II softball team. There were two lesbian softball teams in Portland – out lesbians. And that was really fun. And the

women's bookstore had just opened – or was just opening and I – we were down – it was down on NE Grand or SE Grand. And I helped build shelves for it and I was part of all that. Quite great fun. And there was another group of radical both straight folks and lesbian/gay folks. We had Mountain Moving Café up on 39th and Belmont. And so there was just lots of – politically there was lots of things going on. In 19 – I also belonged to the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom and was very involved in the freeze – the nuclear freeze movement that was happening in the - what was that? The early 80's? And I was living over in Northeast Portland at the time right on 6th and Shaver. It was the height of Mexican tar heroin. It was really quite a – whew – it was really quite a time.

So I went back to – in 1987 – I went – it was the first national lesbian/gay march on Washington. And it was on the mall there and just hundreds of thousands of queers went. We were – we had this – you lined up for the parade – the march – by state. And there were other affinity groups but there were big state groups too. I was standing there with the Oregon group on the ellipse right behind the White House ready to – waiting for our time to step off – when I had a real epiphany. It occurred to me that I had been at that – virtually that exact same spot a half a dozen other times before in my life in the various and sundry national moratorium marches on Washington to end the Vietnam War. I was in Washington D.C. in August of 1963 when Martin Luther King and the March on Washington happened. And was there not that day but the day after anyway because - when I was twelve or thirteen. 1963 – so I was twelve. I was at ERA marches and Jobs with Justice Marches – all kinds of marches. And it occurred to me as I'm standing there that it's all the same struggle. That it was all the same struggle. And that you know we call it – we call it ending the war or equal rights for African-Americans, people of color, for women's, for queers. We can call it all – anything – but it was all the same struggle. And it was like this – Ding! – and I – on the way home - we had the march and it was great.

And one of the things – one of the most memorable things of that whole activity besides the epiphany moment was listening to some of the speakers. And the one speaker that I remember was a man who – you know I could have – I'm a totally blank on his name – who was the president of the United Church of Christ. And the Reverend James – John Thomas. Who was – and he was speaking and this minister and the head of this entire denomination and that – I remembered that and was very impressed. As impressed as I was when I was there in college during the Vietnam War days when I would see clergy wearing their collars and nuns wearing their religious garb and thinking these are – these are religious people witnessing for what they believe is right for justice and for peace.

So I went back home – flew back to Portland – and on the way home from the airport picked up a copy of the Alliance – which is Portland's progressive little newspaper. It's still in production. And in it was an article about Benjamin Linder. Now Ben Linder was a Portland boy. I knew his mom from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She was a very active member. I knew his father because I was a paramedic at that time and I had gone to OHSU and his father taught forensic medicine up there. So I knew his dad and I knew his mom – they were lovely people. And Ben was – had graduated from the University of Washington studying engineering and he'd gone off to Nicaragua to build small hydro-electric plants up in the mountains to provide people – these little towns – a couple of these little tiny towns up there the first electricity they'd ever had in order to keep – provide some refrigeration for medication for their clinic and also so there'd be light bulbs in the schools so that the adults could study at night when they got off work so they could learn to read and write. That was the goal. I knew Ben was there. I'd actually talked to him on the phone once because I was over at his mom's house one day when he called. I'd talked with him about actually going to Nicaragua. These were – this is the years of the Contra War when we were providing the – we had essentially created an Army to fight against the government that had been chosen by the people. Well – and because they were left of center Ronald Reagan and

Oliver North – Colonel Oliver North – these were big names in those days – worked very hard to destabilize that government.

Well the Contras kidnapped Ben and two of the Nicaraguan workers as they were taking measurements at a stream, tortured them and then killed them. That was in the spring. In Portland we were all in shock that this had happened. He was the only American killed in the Contra War. In the Alliance that I picked up that night there was an article about how the Portland Central America Solidarity Committee was forming a work brigade to go to Corinto which was Portland's sister city down there although it was a tiny port city – the only port city they had on the Pacific Coast – and do repairs on the hospital and stuff. I saw that and I said "That's exactly it" because I'm against – I'm a pacifist, I'm a paramedic, I'm a handy woman, I'm a builder and all this and I have an absolute minimum amount of Spanish to say yeah I can say "Si un poco". So I called them up thinking – I called the number that was in the article thinking I'd just get the answering machine or whatever. Well I got a person and I said I'm interested in the construction brigade and they sent me an application form.

And two weeks later I'd been accepted and been going through all this studying starting this whole process. We were the first construction brigade and we had all this book learning to do and to get to learn about Nicaragua – the revolution and the country and all this stuff. And so there were about a dozen of us who were on the brigade and so we would get together every week and have a study in different areas and get to know each other. That was great.

But nothing that we did prepared me for my experience down there because as good progressive people we don't talk about religion. They didn't say boo about liberation theology. Which is the theological world ground spring that enabled the Nicaraguan people to endure the sufferings of years of dictators – the Somoza family – and enabled them to envision a future in which they could learn to read and write and

have – maybe live past the age of 45 as adults and not have all your children die before the age of four, and that God does have what the liberation theologians would say the preferential option for the poor. That there is not just a love for – if you're rich you're blessed by God but that if you are poor you are cared for and you are carried in God's heart. We didn't hear about any of that.

So when I go down to Nicaragua and within the first couple days I'm noticing these big murals with this obvious Jesus as a teacher or as a cupacino- you know a village worker – or a doctor, or leading the somehow in this valiant form sort of leading this – not the fighting of the revolution but the revolution itself – the revolution of people's hearts and minds. Well I had – I'd met early on a number of – well you have to understand everything back in 1988 which is when I went so – it was February of 1988 – wow yeah exactly right now – there were hundreds of work brigades from all over the world there in Nicaragua. There were brigades from Brazil; there were brigades from Canada and from Germany and from Switzerland and from France and from England and Scotland and just from Italy, from Spain. I early on I met a couple – man and woman – they were there, they'd just graduated from medical school and they were in Nicaragua studying er doing service to the country for two years.

So these brigades were doing everything from picking cotton and coffee to doing construction and all kinds of things. It was just an amazing, very exciting, very romantico time. It was really – sometimes I look back on that and think, god I really got to do that – that was so cool. And so Fabiola was the woman from Spain – and I would - she kind of attached herself to the - with some other Nicaraguan friends - to our brigade and we kind of would sort of just run into them every so often – it was sort of like magic I thought you know but I know that it was coordination of things over here that was happening in much better Spanish than mine. And I – at the end of my – so for two weeks we worked in Corinto and then I traveled for another two weeks after it was over and I met up with Fabiola again in Managua where I was having a brief yet torrid affair with a woman from

Switzerland which was just you know and we would go and we would speak – she would speak – the Swiss you know they speak German, French and Italian also because she was European she would speak pretty good English and Spanish was sort of a low fifth. We'd be speaking in Spanish then we'd be speaking in English, and I also studied French in high school and college so we were like and with all these friends from Germany it was just like this jambalaya of languages. It was just fabulous – my brain would hurt after a while – it was like what language am I – I don't even know anymore.

I'd gone back to Managua and run into Fabiola and she invited me to a demonstration in front of the American Embassy. Because I'd grown up going to demonstrations it was – I haven't met a demonstration I didn't like so of course I'll be coming with you. It was organized by a group called Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs. These are women whose children were killed in either the revolution or in the Contra War. They came into the – well where this is this is the big plaza right in front of the American Embassy with these huge walls – 20 foot walls with the razor wire and all that stuff all over it – guard house in the front. We got there early so we could stand up on a big planter – we were standing on a planter almost the size of this living room – big planter. In – the further south you get or towards the Equator you get the shorter dusk is – I don't know if you're familiar with this but here we have these nice little long lingering twilights but down there it's day, day, day er (slap) dark. At 5 o'clock the demonstration didn't start until people got off work – so at about 5 – 5:30 we're standing there on the planter which is about three feet off the ground and all these people start coming into the square. These little women – they're all just like 5 feet tall – carrying these huge white crosses with the names of their children who had been killed in the war. They come and they're singing and they fill the square and behind them were all these young men on crutches or in wheelchairs because they're legs have been blown off by mines that have been paid for and provided by my government. Behind them were hundreds, thousands more people and they all come into this square and they're singing these songs with words like "El Signor" and "Jesus" and "Deos" and it's getting dark so they're lighting

altar candles and passing them around in order to illuminate it 'cause there's no street lights there. In that moment Fabiola turned to me and in Spanish because she didn't speak English – in Spanish she asked me if I was a Christian.

And it was just like in the movies when the sound gets turned down and the movement stops – and through my head went like these giant pictures on billboard sized pictures on flip cards of all the people who had ever been my heroes, my mentors. People like Martin Luther King and the Kerrigan Brothers and William Sloane Coffin and my mother and my uncle John and Sister Corrita – they were all Christian. And then the next thing that happened also in these giant head-filling billboard flip-packs were all the words I'd ever lived my life by – “Walk the extra mile”, “Turn the other cheek”, “Be Kind One to Another”, “Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do Unto You”, “Love One Another” – they're all Christian. So I turn to her and say “Si. Yo soy una Christiana”. And then the sound comes back up and the movement starts and I'm left there standing there on that planter going “Holy Shit what am I gonna do now?” That is when I'm with my people who speak church I refer to that as my born again moment – I was born again back into the body of Christ. For those who don't speak church I just say it was a major life changing experience.

JAA & GB: (Laughter)

LEO: 'Cause this was the time of – in Nicaragua I'm exposed to seeing how Christianity has strengthened people in their most oppressed days. It has given them hopes and dreams and a real sense of possibility. And at the same time coming from the states it's the time of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker where they're you know they're building amusement parks and air conditioning their dog houses - Where in our country Christianity is about putting on blinders and it's just being about me me me. – And here in this country Christianity is about hope and opening up to the possibilities, seeing the horizon and God inviting you in to - into new life. This made no sense and so I had to

come home and figure out what it was. I mulled and troubled and carried on and I decided that the only thing I could do was to go to seminary and try to figure it out. I was in seminary and I loved it – I really wanted to sleep with my books ‘cause I couldn’t read enough during the day I wanted – I would have loved it if you really could just by osmosis take it all in. It was like candy – I couldn’t ever get enough. But I didn’t know that I was gonna really go into the ministry. I thought I was just going to go and study it. Or maybe you know teach college or do campus ministry or something. But I didn’t you know – I knew that the Presbyterians didn’t – which is the church I pretty much grew up in – I knew that they didn’t ordain lesbian/gay people. And you know that wasn’t my goal. But I – from my internship year I actually won a fellowship from the Fund for Theological Education and they paid me to have an internship year. And I was placed at First Congregational United Church of Christ in downtown San Francisco. In that year discovered that all the things I love in my life and that I do well in my life – everything from public speaking to you know being a paramedic and being an organizer and being a fix-it person – it’s like all those gifts and skills and talents they’re perfectly – exactly what’s needed in churches. I really fell in love with parish ministry and at that point realized that that’s my – that indeed I had a call to the ministry. That believe it or not is the medium version.

JAA & GB: (Laughter)

GB: So then after you realized that was your calling, what were the challenges that you had in fulfilling that, in becoming ordained, or becoming a minister because you were a woman, or because you were a lesbian woman? What were the challenges?

LEO: Right. Well it really – God bless them, the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, is the church I was raised up in, pretty much. And when I started back to seminary I knew I had to be affiliated with a church, and I went to First Pres downtown mostly because they have a really great adult education program. That’s where I really

found out that I could stand the idea of going back to school... that actually the study of Christianity wasn't going to be about brainwashing, you know. Really it was actually about learning and, ya know, that's very exciting. Marcus Borg down from OSU came down and did a series of Adult Ed classes and Marcus is all about, ya know, the historical Jesus. So I was like, "Wow, this is great! I don't have to leave my brain at the door."

So, I joined First Pres and I was baptized in that church at the age of thirty-seven. And I talked it over with the ministers and said, "Look, I'm a lesbian. I don't know what I'm doing here. But I know I have to go to seminary and I know that I need to be affiliated with a church in order to, ya know..." Fortunately the Presbyterian system, that first level, when you begin seminary, is called the "inquirer" stage. Basically you're there because inquiring minds want to know. And the system says, they cannot ask you a lot of personal questions. You're there on faith, they're there to support you on faith. Which was a great thing. And it wasn't until I was doing my internship at First Cong in San Francisco and realized that "Crap... this is really what I'm going to do. This is really a call." I then told the ministers there that I had been working with that "Look, this is it. We're at this point. And I have to come out to everybody." And I had never not been out to anyone in my life, so it's not like.... But I didn't make being a lesbian the focus point. The focus point was me being in seminary to figure out what God has got in mind for me.

And so I came out to my committee, and it was really sweet because my, God bless them, I had a couple. They were my, ya know in the church you had somebody who was your contact person or the point of contact between you and the church. And I had a couple, honest to God, "Mr. and Mrs. Marriage," and they were great. They were so great. I mean people on that committee; they weren't the Peace and Justice Committee people. They were, ya know, people who wanted to nurture people in their faith and their call. So when I sat down and told "Mr. and Mrs. Marriage" that I, ya know (smiles and gestures). They were just.... Mr. Marriage was just like "Well, um, I well... you need to talk to Pat. I'm

not quite so good at this sort of thing. But, ya know, I think you're great and you've got my support."

And the Presbyterian Church went through an incredible assault at that point. They wrestled as best they could with me being a lesbian, and there are various stages the church has to do to endorse you as a candidate to move you forward. They went through and said, "She's got the gifts, she's got the skills, she's got the call" and spent hours and hours of meetings and I had some, there were some really mean people too. They were just like, "do you know where Satan dwells?" I mean, it was just, it was really... there were some people who were really strong allies, and there were some people who just really hated my guts. And most people were just sort of in the middle there, going, "we don't know what to do!" And so it was really quite an astonishing time. Ultimately First Pres said, "She does have all these things going, but we defer to the wisdom of the Presbytery, the larger body."

So I went to the next level in the Presbytery and had meeting after meeting after meeting with people in the Presbytery. And finally in October of 1992, I think it was, at a meeting of the Presbytery, a regional body of the church, I went to the floor and had received questions from the floor about my theology. I don't believe my "style," as they kept insisting on calling it, was open for discussion. But somebody said, "I have a question for you about being a lesbian," or whatever. And somebody tried to say, "you can't do that," and I said, "no, really, I'll answer any questions you have." So it was a very... I did a lot of praying before entering it and it was a very grace filled time, lots of wonderful people got up and spoke. There was a lot of organizing... people calling in, lots of folks who were in specialized ministries to come to that meeting. After I had finished speaking and stating my case, I left the room, and they did not just raise their hands or say, ya know, "Aye" or voiced vote. They actually checked everyone's credentials to make sure they were eligible to vote, and had people stand to vote for or against me. And at the end of the day I was accepted as a candidate for the ministry in the

Presbyterian Church... which was, if not the first, certainly one of the first few, out lesbian gay candidates for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church. And I maintained my candidacy for years. I'd go to meetings and meet with people and have them be mean to me. In the meantime First Pres... their biggest donor was Robert Pamplin of the Tribune, and owns Christian Supply Stores... well, he belonged to First Pres, because I guess it was the church for well-to-do people to belong to, little did I know. Well he left the church, and took with him his million dollar pledge. And someone else stayed but cut his 500 thousand dollar pledge down to 10 thousand.

GB: Was it because you were a lesbian?

LEO: Yes! So the church was really knee-capped. They ended up having to lay off at least two assistant ministers. They had five or six people on staff who were pastors. And then in the presbytery, I was accepted and under care, there were several churches, up in the Dalles, and one that's no longer even in the PCUSA (well several are no longer in the PCUSA because they've left over the last couple of years) Sunset Presbyterian, they withheld their per capita giving. Ya know! You don't just!... (sigh) Thousands of dollars were withheld from the Presbytery because of me. For years. I have no idea if they've ever paid them back. It was... I... I... my heart was... I loved my Presbyterians. It broke my heart that there were these, such conservative, small-minded folks who would withdraw from the body that they had pledged to engage in and support in... ah! It made me crazy. That went on for a long time.

In the meantime I was involved in lots of "Presbyterians for lesbian and gay concerns" and "more like Presbyterians" and just this movement to change the church and to open the ministry with those who had the gifts, the skills, and the call. I was on the National Board of that and spoke a lot and was involved with the Rev Janie Sparr who is a Presbyterian minister, who is a lesbian and who started a program called "That All May Freely Serve" and it's the idea of putting faces on people in the church, lesbian and gay

people. So I have lots of little booklets and little things, I can show you some. Really just involved in that stuff to the nth degree. In the meantime I graduated from seminary in June of 94. I came back to Portland with my partner then, and our son, who was 12 by then. I had to get a job. Ya know, I gotta get a job, and there was nothing, and it's gonna be a while to wait for the Presbyterian church. So I got a job with the ACLU of Oregon (American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon). Incredibly wonderful organization. And they were totally supportive. Really, training to be a minister is training to be a community organizer. So I worked at the ACLU, and I was there for five years, and all along the way... now I'm transitioning into the story about Bridgeport, is that OK?

GB: Yes, great.

LEO: All along the way, people would virtually, if not once a week, seven times in a week, I mean... people would come up to be and say, "So... when you gonna leave the Presbyterian church, when you gonna teach a class, when you gonna preach, when you gonna do, when you gonna do, when you gonna do?..." like one of those little dolls that go "eee-er-eee-er-eee-er!" you know those things? And finally on the way back from a funeral from a Jewish legislator, Shirley Gold, I was traveling with an ACLU volunteer from Powell's who is an Episcopalian, and on the way back Laurie said "So when you gonna..." and I'm actually having lunch with Laurie tomorrow... she's the 100th monkey. I call her the 100th monkey that climbed up on my back. And I said, "Fine! I'll do it! But I can only do it once a month because I work full time."

So I went home and told, at that point... yeah, Diane... my partner of 14 years, we've been together 14 years now... like "OK, we gotta do this" and she was like "OK!" And I called together a group of about twelve people who has said, "eee-er-eee-er, if you're ever going to do this, call me and we'll make it happen." So we called together the twelve people in the livingroom and talked about it. "What are we gonna do?" And one woman sat there and wrote a check for \$1,400 so that, you know, maybe that was the

amount of money in her bank account, I don't know. But \$1,400 dollars. And handed it over and that was a way, like, we're not gonna take an offering, this can't be anything about money, can't look like anything, we're... we're just gonna have church. Yeah, perfect. And we're gonna have music and we're gonna hire somebody to play the piano. That's the first person we paid, was the pianist. Because we believe in good music, right Jae Ann?

JAA: Yes!

LEO: And I sent out letters to about 125 people... from people who were one of the "monkeys" to people who I had known for years here in Portland (because, ya know, I had been here for 20 years by then) who at least hadn't thrown up when I told them I was going to seminary... because frankly it was not exactly the height of lesbian "cool" to go to seminary. And I was thinking, "If there are half a dozen people there, I will be really happy." Ya know, ok... how many bulletins should I print? And Dianne said "You gotta print 25." And that first Sunday, we met at the Portland State campus ministry building right across from, what is it, "White" or something? And that first Sunday there were 40 people there! And then the next month there were another 40 people there... and the people were like, "This is great!" After a couple months people were like "Ya know, we need to do this more than once a month."

So we started in May, and in December, six months later, we started twice a month. And long about that time I had gotten a call at the ACLU from a woman, Ann Duffy, who is a UCC minister here in town, about something... I think she wanted to know about the separation between church and state, I don't know. But I was talking to her. I had somehow known she was a UCC minister, and so I asked her if the UCC had any money... before she hung up I said, "Wait, before you hang up, I have this problem." And I heard her go, "Yes?" (laughs) It's like you could almost hear her putting her little minister hat on. I said, "I've got this problem... I've got this congregation. And they wanna be a

church and they wanna go full time. But I have to work. Does the UCC have any money if a new church starts?" And she said, "Well, as a matter of fact, they do. Here's the number for the conference. Call Hector Lopez." He's one of the conference ministers at the time. So I did. And Hector came over and we talked about what's the United Church of Christ, when I was 12 people, what's the UCC, and a lot of them were Presbyterians and they were like, "Right... you say we can do anything we want to? Ha! I don't believe you! What do you mean? We can call ourselves anything?" "Yep" "We can organize ourselves?" "Yep" "We can do-" "Yep!" "What about-" "Yep!"

I started working with UCC because I was trained in the Presbyterian system, and I studied both Greek and Hebrew, and I passed all my ordination exams (which were just really intense, ya know, really intense), and because I'd done my internship at First Congregational United Church of Christ in San Francisco, they waived the polity requirement, figuring I'd learned a lot about the UCC there (and it was true, I had). I just had to write the paper, and that was it. And so the following June I quit my job... or, at the end of May... so 12 months after our first worship service, I quit my job at the ACLU. I'd been tapering down, using up all my flex time and everything, and helped hire my replacement, and went full time at Bridgeport. The following month I started getting paid. I think I made \$12,000 that year. But I was ordained in July. July 17th. And we were under leadership stipends coming from both the national church and the local congress. And we just grew and grew and grew and grew.

GB: What year was that?

LEO: That was... 12 years ago now. So 1988. And that's been it. We received full standing about four or five years later. And the National Church, the conference, supported us for about five years. You know, building up and then tapering down as the congregational giving went up and down. Then we moved from PSU to the Portland Opera offices. They had a big rehearsal room that had a grand piano and lots of seats,

you know, room for about 50 people. And it had an upper room, which was good... Bathrooms and rooms and places for kids and stuff. And so... Easter!

So the following year during Easter, there were about 50 or 60 people there for Easter. We were out the door! And I was like "OK, now we have to find another place to meet." We actually originally started having a conversation with a Jewish congregation, Penet Or, that is actually now at St. Mark Pres. We has originally talked about getting places together because, it makes sense to double your usage and your space. But we couldn't find... it was one of those things that would have been a perfect match. Well, we were driving around one day. We were driving around Glisan looking at store fronts and all kinds of stuff. Just looking. And all of a sudden, it was like the mighty hand of God on top of this car, for whatever reason we took a left onto 75th. I have no idea. I don't have any idea why. All of a sudden I look over and I see this building. And I said, "take a right here." And so we turned right on Irving and came to the corner and there's this little white clabber church building with chains on the front doors. And I was like, "Oh, that's a Presbyterian church" because that's what they do when they close up the building, they chain the doors.

Well it turns out that across the street from us was a Korean Presbyterian church that had imploded, as Korean Presbyterian churches want to do from time to time. They owned their building and our building and another, and they used our building, this little clabber white church, as their youth facility. Plus it had a lot of parking. Always a big plus for a church. And it was all locked up. And I called up the Presbyterians. And it just so happens... I've never burned a bridge in my life... and there were, on the board, a whole bunch of people I've been to seminary with, and people who had really stood up for me in the old ordination process in the Presbyterian church. They said, "Of course we'll rent to you. How about \$500 a month?" That's great! As long as the sanctuary hasn't been subdivided and it doesn't have orange shag carpeting on the floor. Well, they opened the doors and let me go in and look at it... and the sanctuary had not really been subdivided,

but they did have those folding things on the sides. But ok, those could come out. And the shag carpeting was green, not orange.

GB & JAA: (laughter)

RS: And so we rolled that up and gave it all away! Because Austin Powers had just come out and so we put an ad in the paper and people came and got all of it, so it didn't end up in the landfill at all, which was great. And under the floors were these beautiful red oak floors. And it was built by, it was a branch of the Mormons, who had built that back in the 30's. So the church has wonderful acoustics. It's incredibly solidly built and just has no permanent religious symbolism, like most churches have... crosses etched into the walls and stuff. But not here! Which meant when a new Jewish congregation came over and was looking at it, it was perfect for them as well because we bring out our cross and our baptismal bowl on the table every Sunday, and that way they can bring out their Star of David and roll up their arc... I mean, it's really quite great. I mean, the building, it's just such an incredibly, lovely, peaceful... the word "serene" really comes to mind in that sanctuary. It's just lovely. And the National Church! So, the Presbyterians... we signed the lease and lalala.

Well, no sooner than May... May was a big month for us. We had our first worship service that Sunday... in June. And then by August the Presbyterians called up and said, "the Koreans want their money out of it. So, do you want to buy it? If you don't want to buy it, you have to leave." And so we met as a congregation and said, "Yeah! We want to buy it. We love this little building." We called up the National Church and the guy who was the head of the loan department there actually was from Portland, so he knew about Portland real estate. Presbyterians asked \$200,000 for our church and the property, which was half of a city block. This is... it's the love! Can you feel the love from the Presbyterians over here? It was just... it was... talk about supporting ministry! And supporting me. I'm humbled, truly.... Whenever I tell the story I get verklempt because it

was the kindest... How could they make it happen? Well they put together a quick and dirty capital campaign. I sent out letters. I sort of drew in all the last of my people from the Presbyterian groups... We raised 20 grand in cash. The National Church gave us, lent us, \$90,000 on the building and \$90,000 on the property. On the property it was 0%, on the building it was 4% interest. Our payments were \$1,500 a month. So we're going along, we're paying it off... we still have some money coming in on the capital campaign. Then our brilliant book keeper was sending off these checks every month and what she'd been doing, because we thought we had a... I envisioned it as a balloon payment due after ever few years.

Well, Rhonda had been paying all this money onto the building with the 4% interest. And so, at the end of, whatever it was, three years, we were within \$8,000 of paying off the entire loan on the building. We just did a little rumble-rumble and asked everybody for money. We paid off the building! That was the \$1,000 a month payment, and we were back to still paying on the property, which was \$500 a month. But it was like... the National Church made that happen. It was just... ya know, when things are just right, when they are clicking right along... the doors are opening! It turns out we got the last loans in that format that we had gotten the money in. After that it was different... 473,000 hoops, and proofs of this and that. But no, for us it was just like, click click click click. And we're big givers back to the United Church of Christ, we're very involved in lots of things. But we really owe the UCC our existence as a congregation and we're very aware of our connections there. That's that story!

JAA: Do you want to ask your question?

GB: Oh yeah! So how do people react now when you tell them what you do, that you're a minister, and that you're a lesbian. I mean it's kind of a general question, but...

LEO: Well, on the whole, it's really a lot easier to be a lesbian than it is a Christian. That's a truism. Anywhere. It's just absolutely true. Although, the world is becoming a little more tolerant all the time. Back in the day, in the 80's and early 90's, people were just... lesbians were just flabbergasted when I would say that I was a Christian. And Christians were flabbergasted that I was a lesbian! Yeah, it was... I was ashamed, for the longest time. I had to be trained out of saying "I'm a minister, if you can believe that!" That was like... finally, I was like, stop, just lay it out there! So now people say, "Well what do you do?" and I say, "Well, I'm a minister in the United Church of Christ." And sometimes people... Dianne and I just laugh!... sometimes people are like "Really?! What is that? Is that anything like the Church of Christ?" and they'll engage. And other times people will be like, "Uhh, I think I hear my mother calling..." It's so funny!

And it's like, well, there's a conversation killer! You just have to laugh, because it is absurd sometimes. Especially from the cool artsy types. They really just don't know whether to, I'm sorry I was going to say "shit or go blind"... but really! In response to anything to do with religion. And I just, it makes me so sad. If I had said I was a Sufi dancer, they'd be like, "Ooh, that's really spiritual." But they have no idea what to say. No idea what to say. In the lesbian community it's way better, much easier now, to be a minister and to be a Christian than it was any time in the previous 30 years. There's a lot less, "oh that's just really stupid" and "how can you believe that?" I went through years of people saying "How do you believe that crap?" I just have to raise some consciousness about spirituality. Would you say that to a Jew? Would you say that to a Buddhist? Why do you think it's ok to say that to me? So, it's very interesting. It's been very interesting. Good question.

GB: That was my last question.

JAA: Of course in our class we study a lot about the OCA measures. Did Bridgeport get involved at all in the Faith Marches?

LEO: Yeah, actually, Bridgeport, because we didn't really get going until... what was that, 92?... we definitely came out against it. I'm a frequent signer for ballot measure statements and things like that. And, you know, Bridgeport is about half gay, well, LGBTQ, half straight. And the average adult age now is about 40. We have a young adult class, and there are about 38 people who attend who are in their 20's and 30's. So ya know, we're very young. We call ourselves a progressive political collection, expressing their spiritual faith. We're unapologetically progressive. Being for lesbian and gay rights is not even a question... it's like, move on. Move on. What else? How can we be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. That's the question, not "is it ok to be gay?" For me that is such... that's just such old news! I don't identify my ministry as being a lesbian minister. I am a lesbian, and that's clearly who I am and I celebrate my life and my love and all that. But that's.... I love being in the United Church of Christ because I'm a minister first. I'm not the lesbian who's the pastor, I'm the pastor who's the lesbian.

So yeah, of course we came out about it and got involved. A lot of people got involved in the ballot measures that got passed just last month. So we're like that, but it's not a defining point of our lives as a congregation. When BRO (Basic Right Oregon) calls up and says, "Can we send a speaker?" it's like, their time could be used better elsewhere. They're going to be preaching to the choir, just like I do, so don't worry. Don't worry about us! We're ok. Talk to somebody else. It's an interesting thing to be the congregation that we are. When I was in seminary I thought specifically about, wouldn't it be great to have a church that would minister to and with and for the progressive community in Portland? Because people are doing the good work. As church people, I look at all the great non-profits here in town, whether it's the Cat Rescue, or the group that provides prom dresses for lower income kids, or Big Brothers and Big Sisters. All those folks, they are the ones bringing in the Kingdom of God. That's how it is happening. They may not use those words, they may be doing just good work. But really,

it's ministry that they're doing. And my ministry is about supporting those people in those ministries. So, gay, straight, whoever they are.

JAA: Great. Well thank you so much. This has been wonderful.

LEO: You're welcome! God bless!

[End of Session 1]

[End of Interview]

Keywords

Ben Linder

Bridgeport United Church of Christ

Coming out

Contra War

Demonstrations

Nicaragua

Political activism

Washington D.C.

Women's International League for Peace
and Freedom

Work Brigades