TRANSCRIPT—REV. WANDA FLOYD

Interviewees: Rev. Wanda Floyd

Interviewer: Anne Blankenship

Interview Date: February 22, 2007

Location: Imani MCC office, Durham, NC

Length: 1 disc; approximately 48 minutes

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Anne Blankenship: When did you come out? Did you come out to your family early on?

Wanda Floyd: They still don't know.

AB: They don't? [laughter] Then never mind.

WF: I never officially came out to my family. When I left for college, I came to school and —you know like most kids at college, wow, I'm away from home—I didn't go crazy or anything like that, but I figure it was a place where I began to explore some things. And I did meet a female and we sort of kind of came out, in a sense, together. We were involved in a church and when we told her friend at the church, her friend just went off on us. It was a bad scene and I think if her friend had not reacted the way she did, she would probably be in church today. I think because of the way she responded, she has not walked through a church door since.

AB: That's tough. You'd think knowing you might—

WF: Yeah, it was real, real tough. So my parents found out through the TV. I happened to be on TV for something, it was connected to the MCC church when I was in Raleigh, and somebody called my mom and told my mom she saw me on TV. And she called my brother and he caught it as well. So after that he kind of caught on, but I think the tell-tale sign was when my partner died, my first partner died and that kind of did it. They figured…but we never sat down and had an official, "Mom and Dad, guess what." Nah, they knew. They figured out real early on, I'm sure.

AB: That's probably pretty common. When did you decide that you thought you had pastoral leanings? Was it a call or any distinct experience that brought you to the church?

WF: Well I grew up in the church and stopped going for a while and then realized I wanted to get back into the church. I had heard about MCC and so I wrote the guy who was head of the gay/lesbian group at State. And he wrote back and said their group was predominately male, but there's a church in Raleigh and the pastor was female, so I might go check it out. I went there the Pride weekend of '87. Pride was here in Durham. I just felt like 'wow' this was pretty cool and I had the same sense of peace there that I had growing up back home. I always felt I would be somewhere in the church because it was the one place I felt sanctuary. Growing up wasn't a bad life; we had a mom and dad which was very unheard of on my street. I think only one or two of the families had a mom and dad in the household. Everybody else being raised by a single mom or the grandmother. I was fortunate to have a "nuclear family" so to speak. Coming back, the whole issue of becoming clergy wasn't something that I went after. God sort of kind of came after me. I went three rounds with God and lost all three and gave up after about

the third time. I was like "fine." I remember saying, "Fine. Whatever; I'm tired; I'm tired; I'm tired of running. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do." That was it. That was summer of '95.

AB: And from there you went into the seminary training?

WF: Yep, I started going to the training…

14

AB: I read briefly about starting Imani and how that came to be.

WF: I think the pastor and I had come to a point—and course now, hindsight is 20/20, there were things going on with him that I didn't know about until much later—but we had come to a point in which I began to want more as far as a little bit more responsibility and a little bit more hands on—

AB: And you were an assistant pastor at this point?

WF: Yes, basically. I sensed a change was about to happen, but I didn't know where the change was going to come, so I went to a conference. No, I went to Texas first in October and was approached by then the head of the small group ministry, which was what I did at St. John's. I was there for three years. They asked would you like my job. I said, "Excuse me?" They said, "Well, I'm going back to the secular world. I can't deal with this. I'm from IBM. I can't deal with this, too much. I'm going back." It was familiar to me. They were looking for someone to take the position. I'd done a good job at St. John's and they thought to offer me the job. I said, "Well, let me think about it." So I came back home and the guy of the whole place called me and I said, "Send me some information, what you require and so and so forth." And in the meantime, I went to

a conference in Charlotte, a district conference for our denomination and was at a gathering. While at the gathering, the way my partner describes it, I sort of kind of went into this trance and started crying. She was standing there trying to talk to me and I wasn't hearing a thing she was saying.

AB: Among everyone?

WF: Amongst everyone. It was at a dance, at a party. And we were just jamming and everything and she was watching, standing beside me and she said I just blanked out. And was out for, not long she said, about maybe a minute or two. And all of a sudden the conversation—I guess not knowing that was going on—and really, it had to be God; it couldn't have been anyone else, not where I was anyway. Basically said, something to the effect of, I need you to go back and do something in Durham. Work wasn't done in this area. And the people I was looking at-there was all kinds, there were seventy-five, hundred people in front of me-and basically said something to the effect of, "You know, these are my children and I love them but they're so desensitized to my love, they never hear it if they go to church because all this stuff that the Religious Right and everybody else throws out." And so I came back and called the guy in Texas. My partner was happy because she thought she was going back home to Texas. And I told my pastor and the guy in Texas called me and said—because I hadn't gotten the information from him--and he said, "Well, I got it together; I just forgot to mail it." I said, "Well." And she has not mentioned Texas since. She hasn't said a thing else, nothing else about Texas. So that's how it really started. The church was very good; gave us seed money to start and a couple folks came. I didn't ask anybody to come with me and I told folks, "If you come, you come on your own." The only person who didn't have a choice in coming was my

partner. And those who did come—I don't want you to come because of being upset or anything like that—that wasn't what this is about.

AB: No, it wasn't a split in any way.

WF: No, it was not a split. I said, if you come, I want you to be able to back into that church for any reason at any point in time and be okay. I think about eleven people came. That was it.

21:15

WF: ...There are a few pockets that are open and affirming, but I think that the draw is that when people come in, regardless of how they look, no one stares at them.

AB: They're guaranteed security.

WF: Right. I'm sure the Sunday that you were there, you saw somebody in the back with a suit and tie on. Well if she goes to church somewhere else, they're going to say, "Yes, sir." Well, she's not a sir. That's just how she feels comfortable dressing. So I think that's the biggest piece is that piece of it more than anything else that I can see in looking at other churches around.

AB: Do you think-you were talking about people who have gone back and forth from UCC and MCC because of those similarities--do you think more, maybe it's just the same, people are drawn from more conservative churches or maybe more fundamentalist, charismatic movements that have less of a place, less of an accepted place within their own denomination? Do you think it's more from those groups than a UCC or some other that does have—

WF: Oh, yes, more from those groups. Definitely.

AB: That makes sense.

WF: Yeah, I have a lot of recovering Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals. I mean, I think that if I had to pick one denomination that had the most challenging part of letting go of that old baggage of being Christian and gay is the Pentecostal, charismatic movement. They are the hardest ones. And we've had a few who have come in and couldn't do it and went back out. I couldn't do that; I can't go somewhere and fake it. Because you can't fool God. It's so wrapped up in the "you're going to hell; you're going to hell."

AB: If you can't get over it, it might be too much. Perhaps a moderate denomination...they'd have a place.

WF: Right. I had a person who actually did say he could not come because he could not accept the fact that God loved him for who he was. I think I said, "Are you serious?" He said, "I can't. I just cannot get to that."

AB: That's amazing; that's awful. That does make sense though.

WF: Oh it makes a lot of sense.

AB: If you can't accept that yourself you're certainly not going to be comfortable at a MCC service which is embracing that very difference. That makes a lot of sense. Are there any other differences? Liturgically, I know communion is a little different.

WF: Yes, we have communion every Sunday while other churches have it every once in a while, once a quarter. And again that's mainly because of the affirming peace of it. In that so many people have been turned away from the communion table. We actually have a member, Angel, who is out doing his Soul Force equality rights ride who was told by the pastor who baptized, at the time her, now he—that he was no longer welcome at the church because of his tattoos, his piercings and the fact that he was gay.

So the pastor basically put him out of the church. If he hadn't found Julie Weathers who actually went to school with his mom, I don't think he would be here today. What I mean by that: I think he would have killed himself because he was tormented at school. We had to go to school on his behalf and talk to the teachers and the counselors. They didn't get it.

AB: How old was he when all this happened?

WF: At the time, fifteen. Fifteen, fifteen. They didn't get it so his mom took him out of school and got him into the Walt Whitman School down in Texas, which is where he graduated from. Now he's at school somewhere down in Louisburg. But Imani literally saved his life. If he didn't have somewhere to go, to be who he was and get through the process of transing from—and for his mom to have someone to support her as well—from female to male, he would have done himself in.

AB: The parental support obviously has to play a huge role there too.

WF: Yeah, she really needed that. And also to know that her son now has a place to go that he's loved at. And I think that made the biggest difference for her. When I look at him and see just what has happened in his life because of finding the MCC, finding us, but finding the MCC church is staggering…he wouldn't be here. There's no way. He would not be here today.

30:21

WF: There are only three churches within our denomination that sort of kind of look like us. I mean by that in that we have a higher number of black folks that come.

The other one is in Philadelphia and there's another one in the south side of Atlanta, Georgia. But every other church is all pretty much white.

AB: I actually read that. It was in a text-a book called *Men Like That*. A collection by John Howard, I want to say. It's a collection, mostly about men and gay life in the South. He had one excerpt about an MCC church in, I think, Mississippi that was lily, lily white. I was just thinking, in Mississippi, that's a problem.

WF: Yeah, yeah, and it is. It's in Jackson and it is very white.

AB: Still? The text was from '86 or something so I thought, who knows if this is accurate still.

WF: It probably still is for the most part. And unless you are intentional about it, about doing anything, the demographics would not change. We became very intentional about youth and recognizing that a lot of our parents had kids that were growing up. And so we make sure we have something for the youth every Sunday now. We used to have youth moments, but they got kind of crazy after a while, started testing my nerves and I said, "We ain't doing this no more. Ya'll are crazy."

AB: So much for that.

WF: Yeah, so much for that. That went away real quick fast in a hurry. But we have teachers who work with the kids, so the parents can bring the kids to church. It was something we said we need to do this because it's a need that we have within our congregation. If folks can be intentionally minded within Imani about reaching out to folks then folks will come, but you have to show you care. You can't just say ya'll come.

AB: Of course, that makes sense.

WF: No, it doesn't work that way.

WF: It's interesting, but so I think that's why so many black gay men are so particularly challenged with coming out. To parents and being seen in a place that is openly gay. As a matter of fact, I've had guys who've said they'd love to come to church, they love me as pastor, but they can't take a chance of being seen at an MCC church. And that's still, that's now. So that's very real.

AB: That's so rough. Do you think it's any different in northern states? I think, it seems to be across the board.

WF: I think it's everywhere; it's across the board. If you are a black gay man you have to be very secure in who you are and have a very good support system. And most of the ones that I know that are very secure and are out, really out, are those that, in a sense, can pass.

AB: Which is a different—

WF: Yeah, totally different ballgame. But those who are very effeminate guys, gay guys have a very hard time, so they almost have to overly prove that they're not gay like getting somebody pregnant or something else. But lesbians do that too. They also try to get pregnant and have kids so people don't think they're lesbians.

AB: Well, that's proof, right? [laughter]

WF: Yeah, you don't stop being a lesbian just because you have a baby.

Transcribed: March 4, 2007 by Anne Blankenship