



Making Room for Women Project

Interview with Joan McMurtry

February 1st, 2022



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Oral History Recording Summary

Interviewee: Joan McMurtry
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Transcribed by: Deanna Feuer

Interviewed by: Catherine Atyeo
Location: Zoom call
Auditor of Transcription: Joan McMurtry

Time Log (minutes)	Description of Content
00:00	Beginning of Interview, introduction, permission
00:32	Early life and childhood in the church, family life in Saskatchewan
02:04	Calling to the church, university life, experiences with gender inequality
11:46	Ordination, work in rural Saskatchewan, early work community work in Regina
21:31	Work in Saskatchewan Conference, master's degree at UBC, working in Vancouver and White Rock
32:27	Burnout experiences and clergy work
37:33	Advocating for wage rights, White Rock years, and community work
49:13	Experiences with and thoughts on sexism in the church
53:22	Working in the center of the church with your heart on the edge, survival mode of churches
1:00:41	Thoughts on retirement and moving to Victoria
1:03:52	Final thoughts and thank yous

Joan McMurtry

1:04:36

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

church, congregation, people, presbytery, work, ministry, Joan, community, thought, women, clergy, minister, female, rural Saskatchewan, Regina, years, college, interested, happened

SPEAKERS

Catherine Atyeo, Rev. Joan McMurtry

Catherine Atyeo 00:00

Hi. My name is Catherine Atyeo and it is February 1, 2022. And I'm going to be interviewing Rev. Joan McMurtry. Joan, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 00:16

Yes.

Catherine Atyeo 00:17

Thank you. So, let's start. If you could tell us a bit about your early life, your family, your community, and your early participation in the church.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 00:32

Yeah, I was born and raised in Saskatchewan. My father was a United Church minister, my mother was a nurse, and [I] had three siblings, and [I was] sort of born and raised in the church as well. The church was family to me and was a place of belonging. We lived in several different communities. I ended up finishing high school in Saskatoon and that's where I went on to St. Andrew's College, to do my theological degree as well as my undergraduate degree. And so I had all that, that influence of being, like pretty well settled into both church and family, middle class kind of lifestyle with a lower income budget, as clergy are.

Catherine Atyeo 01:22

I'm sorry to interrupt. But could you tell us where in Saskatchewan you were born and grew up?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 01:29

Yeah, I was born in Bradville. And I lived there for a few years. And then we moved to Wetaskiwin, Alberta for six years. And when I was eight, we moved to Moose Jaw. And I was there till I was 14. And then we moved to Saskatoon. And I finished high school there.

Catherine Atyeo 01:48

So obviously, if you went to theological college or school, can you talk about an early calling you felt to ministry what that calling was like?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 02:04

Well, I didn't really have an early calling. I had no thought of becoming an ordained minister. I didn't know any females who did that, so why would I even think about it? What the early church taught me – because I was involved with explorers and messengers and CGIT – was that I was kind of capable and could belong, [I] had confidence. I was thinking of being a teacher. And that was really my goal all through until grade 12. And then [in] grade 12, I decided I didn't really want to be in the high school, or in the schools all my life. So, then I began to think of social work or something like that. I knew it had to do with people, and caring and serving people, because that was a very high value in our family.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 02:57

And so, I started university with the view to during an undergraduate moving into social work. And it was somewhere in that middle of undergraduate that it occurred to me that actually with my various interests and skills and my deep sense of being in the presence of God, that I thought, "Well, maybe I, maybe I could go to a theological school." And I knew women who were in ministry, they were diaconal, and wonderful people. But at this point, I thought, "Well, I like the idea of worship leadership," and [I] also had a passion for outreach and education, which is what the diaconal ministry did, but I thought, "Well, if I'm gonna go for it, I should go for it."

You have to remember this was in the late '60s, early '70s, the beginning of the women's movement, where all of us are beginning to think outside the box. So, I remember vividly walking over to St. Andrew's College – and I would have been young like 21 or 22 – and talking to the principal there. And asking him about college in the fall and whether I would be accepted. And oh, he was very keen. And I said, "Well, will there be other females there?" And he rubbed his hands and he says, "Well, I hope so." (laughter) And of course, there weren't. So, I was the only female student in 1972, when I went into the college. So, it was quite a challenge. You know, I came with all of my convictions from my home, early church experience that I could be a leader, that I could be valued, that I could work with people. And so, for me, it was a no brainer, but it was a bit of a rude awakening.

Catherine Atyeo 05:02

So, in that class, Joan, you're the only female? What was the total number in the class?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 05:09

Oh, well, in the whole college, I was the only female.

Catherine Atyeo 05:12

So what? Can you give me a rough estimate? How many there were?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 05:16

I think there were six or eight of us in my class.

Catherine Atyeo 05:19

Oh, six or eight? Okay.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 05:22

Smaller college, you know?

Catherine Atyeo 05:24

So, were you aware, did you feel the gender inequality? Was that an early experience with gender inequality? Or, I don't want to place a thought in your head, but how did you feel being the only woman?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 05:42

Well, I certainly felt [like the] odd person out, it got very confusing to me as to when people were going out, like for a beer or whatever, was that the guys going out for a beer or was that students going out for a beer, which would include me. And I think in those days, there was a lot of confusion about how to relate to females. Traditionally, in colleges, there had been women who were female students. But they either were or were characterized as women looking to marry a minister, a male minister, or being in the college purely for academic reasons. So, there was, I think, a general uncertainty [and] newness for everyone around having this young, keen, interested female students. And I ended up getting confused in the midst of it and wondering where the heck I belonged, and how I fit in.

It didn't really take me that long until I realized there's some real issues going on here. And I began to try and sort that out. Fortunately, actually, I was living at home, which was a really safe place for me. And so, I would venture into the college. I was very much appreciated for my participation in the class, and you know, I'm a pretty social person, and all of that. But it was definitely a lonely place. I used to have coffee with the Secretary, Martha, who had been there for years. Because she and I were literally the only people in the building, the only females in the building. And I just kind of gravitated to her. Which was...

Catherine Atyeo 07:37

When you say it was assumed that any woman in there had to be there for either academics or maybe to find a husband, are you implying that there wasn't an acceptance that of course, women could take a charge and be the minister in a church? Is that what you're...

Rev. Joan McMurtry 07:57

Oh, no, of course, everyone would have agreed to that. But what does that really look like in lived relationships? And yeah...

Catherine Atyeo 08:09

Yeah. So then after, do you want to say anything else about that period, Joan? Before we go on to your post college time? Or is there anything else you'd like to reflect on about that period?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 08:30

Well, I guess what I'd like to say is that I've learned to survive by doing several things. One, I got involved in the Student Christian Movement, which gave me another center of community other than the college. And that's an activist Christian organization, we created seminars on campus and did advocacy kind of work. And the second thing I did [was] I got connected during those years with several

other women on campus. One was a sociology prof, another was a, actually, she was a theological prof at the conservative college. And then there was a fourth person, but we bonded together around feminism in the church. And we called ourselves "Western Canadian Women in Religion." And we met on a fairly regular basis, and it was a tremendous support to me and stimulus for me to have these older women sit alongside me, as we began to do all of the reading that was coming out of California. I mean, when I started in '72, there were very few books written about women in the church. And so, we were just beginning to get educated and learn and writers to begin to do the writing and the analysis. And you know, the librarian at the college who was lovely to me, actually, he would come in his kind of Scottish accent, "So McMurtry, I've just seen this article come in from Berkley, just thought you would be interested," and it was like an article on women in the church, on feminism. And he would bring them to me. So, there was this kind of lovely contrast going on.

Catherine Atyeo 10:26

Mm hmm. Yeah.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 10:27

So, I found other ways, and then I fantasized about going to another college for a year where I heard there were women. And so that kind of got me through as well. And then in the middle of it, I did an internship. And to my surprise, people really liked me, and thought I could be even a good minister. And it was a very positive and uplifting time. And I worked with a fellow by the name of Peter Williams, who was kind of a maverick minister at that point, and he was very up with training and educating the laity. And having the laity contribute more significantly in the church. So, it was a very stimulating time for me. And so, it helped me move through that whole period. There were a lot of people who really supported me and kind of undergird my confidence. And so, by the time I was ordained, I felt I could do it. And I felt that I could be received well, actually.

Catherine Atyeo 10:49

And so, after your ordination, what happened next for you, Joan?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 11:46

Well then, I went to rural Saskatchewan and went to a pastoral charge called Kelvington and Lintlaw, which was two [or] three hours east of Saskatoon, and I was there for three years. And I had a really positive time in ministry there. I was new and young, they were open, receptive, tolerant of all my ideas (laughter). And were willing to let me kind of fly and it was generally a really good experience. However, it was very lonely for me as a young woman in rural Saskatchewan. I needed to be back where I had more sense of community.

Catherine Atyeo 12:35

Can you just spell the name of the place where you were? I didn't catch it. Could you just spell the name of that town?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 12:42

Kelvington K-E-L-V-I-N-G-T-O-N.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 12:48

And then the other community is Lintlaw, L-I-N-T-L-A-W.

Catherine Atyeo 12:48

Okay.

Catherine Atyeo 12:53

Okay. Okay. Yeah. So, long loneliness in rural Saskatchewan, I think people can relate to that.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 13:02

Yes, yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 13:03

And so, you were there how long before you moved on? And where did you move on to?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 13:10

I was there for three years. And then I was looking for a place in the city. There weren't many ordained women who are serving city churches. So, it was really a long shot. And I ended up going to the Calgary Pastoral Institute in Calgary. And this was an institute that did training around counseling. And what I realized in rural Saskatchewan is that people were actually coming to me for help. And I just felt I needed better resources than I had. And so, I was interested in doing some training and counseling. So, I did that for a year, then the experience was like being an intern, so I had a study set of clients under supervision. And I, at some point, thought that maybe that would be my direction I would go is in counseling, and actually I did really well with it, and enjoyed the year.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 14:10

But ultimately, I realized that I'm more interested in community. I would meet with a person one on one and they would go off and what I would think is, "They need a place where they can belong, where they can be accepted, where they can be encouraged." And I thought, "Well, isn't that isn't that vocational? Why isn't that the possibility there?" So, I shifted back into looking for a congregation and I was very fortunate to be called to Regina, to St. John's United Church in Regina, and St. John's was in North Central Regina, which is a working-class part of town and the area where a lot of indigenous people were moving in from the reserves. And it was just the kind of outreach community base congregation that I'd always hoped for. So, I felt very fortunate in getting that call. Because as I say, there weren't many of us who were being called into those ministries. So, I was there for seven years. And for six of those I was the only ordained women in in the city.

Catherine Atyeo 15:19

Really?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 15:20

(laughter) It's kind of hard to believe or to think now, but that was the reality.

Catherine Atyeo 15:25

And those years that you were at, I think at St. John's, you said?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 15:31

Yes.

Catherine Atyeo 15:31

What years were those? Was that the '70s? Joan? Or what was...

Rev. Joan McMurtry 15:35

That was 1980-87.

Catherine Atyeo 15:39

Oh, '87. Yeah. And it sounds like, like you say, the ministry was a good fit for you. Now what did you say was the nature of that church's contact with First Nations?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 15:56

Well, we sat in the middle of the neighborhood where they were moving into. And so, this is like a working-class congregation. And I remember at one point, we had a consultant brought in for something and people from the board had to write something down. And he phoned me up the next day and he said, "Joan, did you realize that some of your board members are illiterate?" (laughter) I said, "Oh, well, I didn't think about that," I said, "Well they probably are." And they were all working class people, teachers and plumbers, a variety of things, a terrific board. And so, we were sitting in this neighborhood where all these – we called them native people at that time – were moving in. And we would have conversations about what that was like. And I remember we were sitting around the board, [and] one woman said, "Well, I just don't understand why they don't grow gardens, they're just not... the neighbors have moved in next door that there was a terrific garden there. They're not even gardening. What's that all about?" So, we had this immediate dialogue about what it's like to all of a sudden have people who [we] had little contact before with, and began to wonder what our relationship would be.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 17:22

And so out of those conversations, and one particularly incident where children came along after school and pulled up someone's tulips, and this board member said, "I can't understand why they would do it." And we began to say, "Well, what are they doing after school? What's happening with these kids?" So, we established a latchkey program, which is a program for children to come to our church building. We hired a person to supervise the program, and it was just a drop in place for any kids to come after school and [it] included a food component, because of course the kids are always hungry, a craft component and a play component. And this was able to happen because one of the members of the congregation had given a significant gift of money to be able to finance something in outreach. And it began our connection with Native kids, and became a wonderful program. And gradually, we began to meet their parents, because we'd put on little concerts and little events where we would invite them, and so it was good. And then as a consequence of that, the Regina United Church Native Ministries moved their offices into our building. And so, we began then to host joint programming.

Catherine Atyeo 18:55

That sounds like....

Rev. Joan McMurtry 18:56

A native Sunday school. Yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 19:00

That sounds like a really exciting time for you and really inspiring, Joan.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 19:06

You know, it really was. One of the stories I wanted to tell was – which plays to this reality for me – when I went out on my internship, I had two supervisors, one was Bill Anderson, who was who was the adult educator, and the other was Ben Smiley, who was the social ethics person and, known as kind of an activist, a social justice activist. At the end of my internship, I wrote up all that I did, I had a wonderful time I learned a lot about the church, etc. And Dan's comment to me, it was about half of his whole commentary about my internship, was, "How come I didn't get involved in the community? How come I didn't get to know who the National Farmers Union was? How come I wasn't interacting with some of the elected council members or the service agencies or what did I know about the economy and the challenges of the area." And I was just gob smacked by that. Because I thought it was pretty brilliant that I just survived being able to learn enough about the church. And then I was gob smacked that I didn't think of that. Because those were my roots and origins, and in my early childhood and early life [I] was to be involved in the community and to be a social activist and to engage with people outside the church. So that was a huge marker for me as I entered into ministry, wherever I was, that my work was not merely to work within the church walls and structures, but was to engage in the community at which the church was apart in order, of course, to be more relevant to speak more faithfully about the context and the issues of the day.

Catherine Atyeo 21:03

Yeah.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 21:04

And so, in Regina, I allowed me really fully to do that in quite an exciting way.

Catherine Atyeo 21:12

Yeah, it sounds like your evolution is, "How can we be church in the world? How can we help our virgin world?"

Rev. Joan McMurtry 21:20

Yeah, yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 21:22

So, obviously your time at St. John's in Regina came to an end?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 21:31

Yeah, it did. And during that time, actually, I was president of Saskatchewan Conference. And I was president in 1986, which was the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women. And so, because of that, I was able to organize and host a variety of gatherings around women and women's leadership in the church. So that was quite a neat experience. And, but I was kind of exhausted. And if we had had sabbaticals back then, I probably would have taken a sabbatical and come back because it was a wonderful ministry. [But] I didn't know how to get a break other than resigning. And so, I ended up going to UBC to do another degree, a master's degree, in adult education. And my focus was education as a vehicle of social transformation.

So, I came out here and really kind of cocooned out here; I didn't let anyone know I was around. I was on campus, I was completely anonymous... it was kind of a wonderful moment for me. I remember thinking, there was one week the only thing I had to accomplish was a 12-page essay. And after juggling dozens of things at one time, I thought that was wonderful. And so, I had a really great experience. Most of the people in the adult education program were female, we had a really, really good network of friendship and communication. And most of us were social justice types, just by nature of who we were. And I had a great time. And I learned to reflect, how to think about my experience. My first few papers in adult ed, they say, "Well, this is, sure you have a lot of experience, but what's your framework for understanding it? What's your theory? What's your philosophy behind it?" [And I said,] "Oh, well, I can get at that." So, it was really a deepening time for me of being more confident in my intellectual ability.

Catherine Atyeo 23:38

Can I just ask here, Joan, when you compare –I guess this is the late '80s, early '90s at UBC– did you see a huge change for women in the United Church, say from the '60s, did you feel that change?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 23:56

Yes, yes, of course. Yeah. Yeah. I took a couple of courses at the Vancouver School of Theology that was credited to my master's degree at UBC. And there were other female students, for sure. And yeah. And in the city, I knew that there were women who were serving congregations. Yeah. So [it was a] very stimulating time, and then I wondered what I would do next. And I even thought, with this degree, I would move out of the church structures for a while, because that master's in adult education would give me credibility wherever, unlike a theological degree. However, I got enticed by a congregation in Vancouver called Knox United. And they were in a kind of upper middle-class area, just in between the university and Kerrisdale. And...

Catherine Atyeo 25:00

That's in Dunbar. Right?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 25:01

Yeah, that area. Yeah. And I ended up spending nine years there. And it was quite a different experience for me. But I think it also was a chance for me to offer a variety of my skills. I essentially am an educator. And so, one of the things I did almost every year was I had students from the theological college come for their final practicum with me. And it was really neat, because these would be senior students, they had already done their internship or mission field experience. They knew they were

going out within six months to serve a congregation, and they were very fired up to learn and they knew when they came to me, that they would learn that they could be really challenged and engaged. And so, I really enjoy that. That opportunity happened at Knox, and also, I developed some programs for lay training and lay development. So, I created a course on pastoral care, at some depth, for the lay people doing pastoral care. And the other course I developed was on lay preaching, because we had a service at that time on Wednesday nights, and rather than me doing both Sundays and Wednesday nights, why not have the lay leadership? So, I trained about twelve people in preaching, and they all took their turns and did a marvelous job at creating meaningful worship, and it was a really good part of their own spiritual development to do that.

Catherine Atyeo 26:54

That sounds amazing. You know, I say this with all respect, but having been to a fair number of United Churches in my life, there are ministers who have a tough time letting go of preaching, and it's a credit to you that you did that.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 27:13

Yeah, I followed up on doing it in White Rock as well. And, yeah, my idea is that the best of what I know how to do, I should pass it on to others. That's the adult educator in me. And that's part of the, I guess, the passion and mission that I have is, how do I help support other people to do the work? And to fit their skills and their own calling?

Catherine Atyeo 27:41

It sounds like, you seem to be saying this, that there's something about congregational ministry you find very, very appealing and rewarding.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 27:52

Yes, well, there's diversity. I get to preach, I get to do education, I get one on one pastoral care, I get to be with really old people and really young people. I've always enjoyed having some connection with the younger people, even when there's been maybe other staff who are officially responsible for the children. I always was very connected with the children. Maybe part of that is I don't have children on my own. So, it was a kind of a wholesome experience for me to have this bigger family that I could connect to.

Catherine Atyeo 28:33

So, after Knox, did you feel like you wanted to move on for Knox? I think you went to BC conference next, right?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 28:42

I did, yes. Yeah I... Well, I'm interested in leadership, I'm interested in clergy health, and the personnel position opened up, and I thought, "Well, it'll take me out of congregational life into a little bit different structure and a little bit of a different lifestyle. Maybe I'll have a weekend off on occasion." And also, I was very interested in how to support and encourage other clergy in their work. So that really was my passion and interest in going into personnel. And I was able to do quite a bit of that, I initiated some clergy gatherings or ministry, order of ministry, people gatherings, without laity, just ministry people

being together and talking about how it was going and those were quite well received. I think I provided a bit of a safety factor. I structured it in a way that we had some worship, we had some theme that we reflected on some content piece, some time for people just to interact socially. And this hadn't happened that often to many ministry personnel and they were kind of thrilled to have that opportunity and pleased to have my involvement in it.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 28:42

So, I did some of that one on one with people and other parts of the job was interpreting policy and other parts of it were dealing with problems and crises. And that weighed quite heavily. Also, when I began, we were just putting together the sexual abuse policy within the church. And so, all of a sudden, these cases are coming back from years and decades ago, of situations where clergy had developed sexual relationships with parishioners, oh, my gosh, so there was a quite a bit of really difficult work that had no happy solutions or, and dealt with a lot of pain. Then that's really why I probably left the job is that I just got kind of soul weary from that. And I realized that I'm better at mentoring [and] coaching than the back end of that [which] is picking up pieces. Well, that was a really important insight for me and I often think parish congregational ministry is about visioning, coaching, mentoring, moving either the organization, the group forward or individuals forward into new places. So, I then realized, I did a process of reflection and evaluation that helped me to see what gave me life what gave me energy, and it put me right back into congregational ministry. And so, I left there feeling I've done a pretty okay job. And I initiated some really good things, I think around clergy care. But I was ready to go back in the congregation and First United in White Rock, their profiles said they were looking for someone like me. So, it became a good fit, and was a really good fit. And it reminded me more of my days in in Regina.

Catherine Atyeo 32:27

Can I jump in here? Because obviously you care deeply about clergy. And it sounds like you've experienced burnout. Do you think, how do you feel about how the United Church has supported clergy? And does there still need to be a lot more work to support clergy in their in their ministry and at church?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 32:53

That's a big question. Yeah, I think there are a variety of ways it can happen. Structurally, that role of Personnel Minister got a bit complicated, because on the one hand, we were to be support, and the other hand, we got involved in the middle of conflicts, and on the other hand, we were interpreting policies, so it became kind of convoluted sometimes. There are more staff around I think, these days, who perhaps can do more one-on-one time. I probably am in the minority here, but I always believed that presbytery had the capability of supporting clergy and lay leadership. And so, when I came to White Rock, I put a lot of energy into Fraser Presbytery looking to make it as a place of support of stimulation of encouragement. And I really don't know, I can't imagine being in the ministry now with no presbytery and no structure, really, other than this big regional church. So, I ask my colleagues who are still in ministry, "Well do you ever get together with anyone? Or, how do you connect?" And I think people are taking their own initiatives. So, I really, I mean, I would be interested in hearing more from them about what is happening now.

Catherine Atyeo 34:51

Yeah, because through the years, the United Church Observer, now part of Broadview magazine, you read stories about clergy burnout, and even clergy abuse by congregation members. And that's why I asked you that question about... because I think some people don't realize that I've had this experience in congregations, how difficult a job being a minister can be.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 35:24

For sure. Yes, yes. Yeah, I think we've worked pretty hard. And I did personally around income, making sure they have a decent income. I have memories as a child of waiting, I can visualize it in the hallway, waiting for my dad to come back from a wedding where he would get like, \$5 or whatever, for my mom to go out and get groceries. I just thought, "Well, that's just," at the time, I just thought that was normal. But as I became an adult in ministry, I thought, "No, we should be paid enough that we don't rely on those handouts."

Catherine Atyeo 35:27

Yeah.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 35:29

And I did a lot of advocacy around – in Regina – around secretaries and getting at least a minimum wage for them. There was a group of us, we called ourselves the United Church Union, we made buttons and wore them, it was the provocative thing we did. But we started out with the secretaries. And we did a survey of the secretaries in Regina to find out what their actual wages were, those of us who would tell, and then put a little package together and let it be known. And, man did that cause a stir. But it did cause some action for people to begin to think that, "Well, these women who are secretaries aren't just there, because they really want to just be volunteers. Some of them actually really need the income. And even if they don't need the income, they're actually doing work, and you need to abide by the laws of the province."

Catherine Atyeo 37:12

Yeah. And that brings up a question for you. When you started out in congregational ministry in Saskatchewan, were you assured that, at that time in history, you were making the same salary as male ministers, Joan?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 37:28

Yes. Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah. There's a basic salary. Yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 37:32

That's what I thought, yeah.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 37:33

That happened in, gosh, I think the late '50s [or] '60s. So, everyone had to be paid a certain amount. Where – we did a bit of research on this – where the inequality happens is when you move to different churches, and which churches hire women and which churches hire men, and what are the salaries? So, I'm aware in Regina, but because I was working in [a] working class community, so I was in a low-income kind of congregation, I was paid, essentially, minimum wage. I was the lowest paid minister in

that presbytery, or in that city. And I knew that and I thought to myself later, "Well, how come I do not advocate for myself?" And I realized, well, first of all, I had to advocate for the secretary in our congregation who wasn't even being paid minimum wage. So, a lot of my work within my congregation was around other staff people and being sure that they got paid appropriately before I would advocate for myself, and then I never kind of got around to it. So, there is a reason for me being the lowest paid in Regina. And but it wasn't right, because there were other low-income congregations where the clergy were being paid more than me.

Catherine Atyeo 39:01

Yeah. And what do you think about women in congregation? Because, of course, my mother and probably yours, grew up in the era of the UCW, and the women were expected to make these gigantic meals served in the church hall. And there were probably way fewer women on the board, let alone heading the border committees. When did you see – because I assume you think that has changed – What decade did you see that start to change?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 39:39

Oh, I'd say probably the early '80s, mid '80s. Yeah. The women's movement had a lot of impact on us all and things changed from outside to inside. People got educated and conscientious outside and they brought it into the church. It wasn't the church who necessarily initiated it (laughter). Oh, my goodness.

Catherine Atyeo 40:17

Yeah. So, getting back to your trajectory. So, you were in White Rock, it looks like twelve years?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 40:26

Yes. Yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 40:27

So, what was that, like? It sounds like you felt it was a good fit for you?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 40:34

Yeah, it was a good fit. It was a dynamic congregation. They said they wanted to get more involved in the community. They were pretty receptive to some innovations that I brought in. They had kind of a core history of being involved in the community that we built on, and they've had a series of strong ministry, strong clergy leadership over the years. And that holds the congregation quite well to be willing to take some risks. And probably the event that marked that congregations' shift to care for the community, was when we volunteered to take on the extreme weather shelter program. And this is the program that allows for homeless people to come into our hall and sleep overnight. We provide a hot meal at about nine or ten at night, they sleep overnight, and they leave about seven or eight in the morning. And this is a provincially funded program to deal with the lack of beds in the homeless shelters, and at times when it's extremely cold. And so that was a real marker for the congregation, to take in these folks who are on the extreme margins of our community and to deal with all the implications, what that would mean, both in terms of, "Oh, we need volunteers. Oh, our facilities are being used. Oh, they might hang around our neighborhood. Oh, what's all this about?" And we did it

very thoughtfully and carefully with a local not for profit organization, who had staffing to support us and a bit of funding. That really put us on the map in White Rock as being a place of care and compassion.

Catherine Atyeo 43:00

Because I think a lot of people – I don't know White Rock well, I've been there a few times – but a lot of people probably see White Rock as quite a prosperous community. And maybe some people think, "Oh, well, they wouldn't have homeless people in White Rock."

Rev. Joan McMurtry 43:17

Yes, that's true. And that's what we worked against constantly. I talk about the underbelly of White Rock. And when you actually see the statistics, you see the numbers of people who are living below poverty line. And so, it really was a twelve-year journey of me constantly talking to the community about the truth of poverty in the area. And I was part of an organization then that included other churches, other agencies, individuals, all who were dedicated to developing a permanent shelter for the homeless. So, that went on most of the years I was there. And I also was significantly connected with women's place which was an advocacy center for women, and did a lot of partnering and church ended up doing partnering with them. The church also had a long history of serving a Christmas Day dinner that served about 200 people. And this wasn't particularly for people who were poor, but it was for people who had nowhere else to go on Christmas Day and years ago, the minister of the church initiated it with a community member after there had been two suicides at Christmas. So that was a real marker for the congregation as well. So, we built on all of those programs and experiences.

Catherine Atyeo 44:50

Yeah, sounds like a really rewarding time.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 44:54

Mhmm. Yeah, yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 44:56

Before I move to some final questions... Feel free to... I mean, maybe I can ask you this question, when you look back on your long career and work in the church, including outside congregational ministry, what are you most proud of Joan, in terms of what you did and what you achieved?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 45:28

Well, one is – both in Regina and White Rock – is working with a congregation to deepen and intensify their connection with the community. That happened in Regina, with the native ministry, it happened in White Rock through the shelter, the community dinners, etc. And I think that's a significant move. That's very much the heart of who I am. But it also was the heart of who those people wanted to be as well. And I feel that there was a significant shift that happened there. When I retired, I got a commendation from the local MLA, who spoke of my work in bringing the church into service into the community. So, he read, it was about me, but it was about how I assisted the congregation to move into it. That's what he really was affirming.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 46:33

So that's one, another, I really enjoyed the entrance when I was in Knox in Vancouver, I feel I had some impact on them in their kind of final years. The third area, I would say, I co-chaired the National Worship Committee for a number of years, and we introduced a program called "Worship Matters," where we held large gatherings across the country of learning and growing in worship, where we had musicians and worship leaders, both lay and ordered ministry, present to look at creative worship and worshipping together and deepening and expanding our worship in the country. And that was the first time that particular focus that happened, and I think we made [a] significant impact. And then the fourth area – I wrote these out – the fourth area is in Fraser Presbytery. I really worked with the presbytery to look at how we could assist the local congregations to be more visionary and transformative. As we looked into the next decade. We'd had a report done that really basically showed the level of decline that was going to happen in the next 10 years. And that really shook us up. And so, we created a culture and an atmosphere within presbytery whereby we were wanting and looking to create change to become different kinds of churches so that that trajectory of decline wouldn't necessarily occur. And so, there was a period of a number of years there where I think presbytery became like an interesting place to go, it was a place where you got stimulated, where you got some affirmation, where you got some ideas. And I was really happy for that to happen.

Catherine Atyeo 48:35

Yeah, before I ask you to reflect on the future of the church, do you feel that being a woman, when you reflect on your whole career, Joan, that within the United Church you weren't really held back just because you were a woman? What are your thoughts on that? That you could go far, notwithstanding any gender inequality?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 49:13

I guess I'd say that I did get called into bigger churches I did get asked to be on committees or whatever. But I got whacked around a lot. You know, it wasn't an easy road.

Catherine Atyeo 49:29

What do you mean, it wasn't an easy road? Can you explain that?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 49:33

(Pauses to think) Well, I think there were individuals who were very nice to me. There were pockets in every congregation I was in who didn't particularly want me, or me as female, that made life more difficult. Those experiences, in the early years, in community, people [say], "What do you do?" Then I say, "Oh, I'm a United Church minister," [then people say], "Oh, [you're] female," just having to deal with that constantly. You know, being a kind of a front runner and explaining and being the consciousness razor, that's hard work. That's very worrisome.

Catherine Atyeo 50:41

Yeah. And, the other thing I've observed – and as you noted you don't have children – a female minister, who has a family – I observed this firsthand, I won't mention any names – but I think, and you probably agree, is really potentially prone to serious burnout.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 51:07

Mm-hmm.

Catherine Atyeo 51:07

And I don't know what your feelings are on how, let's keep it at today, how adaptable and understanding congregations are if a female minister who's married with children, or maybe a single mum with children, how understanding they are, for that woman's position. I don't know whether you have thoughts on that.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 51:32

You know, only really from other people's stories. I think as a single person, the big thing is that, historically, traditionally, the minister would come with a wife, and the wife was a kind of an assistant, often, and there were huge levels of expectations of that partner. And particularly when I came to Regina, they really were thrown off, both because of me being female and male, or female and single. But the previous minister, like he and his wife did lots of things together. And she probably spent up to 15-20 hours a week doing ministry in the church. So, their experience was having these two people pretty readily accessible, and all of a sudden, they've only got me. So, it was a hard lesson for me to understand what was going on with that until I realized, "Oh, yeah, like they..." And if they ever wanted to know where he was, they could just hold her and she would tell them. And I remember in my first couple of months, I kept getting [people saying], "Oh, well, where were you? What were you doing?" And I thought, "Well, I've never been accountable like this before, why are you asking me this?" And it was because of the familiarity of that. What I see as an old model now, that actually was a burden on ministers' wives. I saw that with my mother. You know what it was like to be the minister's wife in the 60s? She had a role to play I tell you.

Catherine Atyeo 53:13

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Difficult to separate a private life from, you know, the job your husband had.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 53:22

Yeah, yeah. I have another item I for sure wanted to say. And it's how I kind of understood myself in the church, that it goes a little bit to this issue of like burnout or dynamics that go on. I always worked at the center of the church. So being a parish minister, I'm right in the middle of the church, being president of conference or chairing presbytery or being on committees like that's being right in the thick of it. However, my heart was always on the edges, that comes from being female in the church. That I learned in my early days that, I was right in the center, my heart and my commitment was to gender and equality. And that sensitized me to all those other people who are on the edges, and has been always a really important marker for me. So, when you work at the center, but your heart is at the margins, there's always tension,

Catherine Atyeo 54:32

(softly) Right.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 54:33

And because, at some level, you're always trying to do transformation, you're always trying to make change. You're always trying to crack open space for others, and make the institution or the

organization with a group more malleable, more just, more equitable. And so that puts me not so much at the center of love and affection from whole lots of people, but sometimes as perhaps a kind of a cantankerous person or a person always with an agenda.

Catherine Atyeo 55:19

And do you think in the United Church today, it's easier to be the kind of individual you are working at the edges? Is it easier to be that kind of person in today's United Church, Joan, do you think?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 55:36

Um, I don't think so.

Catherine Atyeo 55:39

No?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 55:40

No.

Catherine Atyeo 55:42

And why is that? Is it...

Rev. Joan McMurtry 55:44

Well, I think, because we're so much into survival, like, who wants to be edgy, when oh, my God, you don't want anyone else to leave? Right?

Catherine Atyeo 55:52

Yeah.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 55:54

You're just trying to hold things together. I just think that's a huge challenge for ministry these days, that the lay leaders and the order of ministry leaders hold things together. Gosh, better not stray too much outside, even though the kind of passion and calling might be to do that. I think there's some initiatives going, but I think the energy for being on the edges is very minimal.

Catherine Atyeo 56:28

I don't want to be ageist, but we all know that the demographics of a lot of United Churches are older people. And do you think that's an, and again, I don't want to be ageist, I'm asking this as an open question. Do you think some of that is on demographics? Like, seniors, just... it's the United Church of old and they don't want to be pushed into sort of what they would consider more adventurous areas?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 57:01

I think there's some truth in that. But man, oh, man, I'd say some of the most progressive, thoughtful risk-taking people in my congregations were senior citizens. Absolutely. Yeah. It is a mixture. But I think the trauma of the church now, where we're survival is kind of the norm. I think it's harder to take risks. I sat on a committee for the last 10 years from Fraser Presbytery, to give out money through the

provision fund of the of the regional church, and we had like a million dollars to give out over the last 10 years. And our condition, that we put on it in Fraser Presbytery, was that it had to go to transformational ministry. And we gave out, I think it was \$680,000, to a variety of congregations who had different initiatives. And it was very exciting to be part of this program and to be part of the letting out of the money. But we didn't give it all out, and part of that we said at the end, is maybe there isn't the energy, or the capacity, for us to do the transformation that's required in the churches anymore.

Catherine Atyeo 58:28

That's an interesting thought. We don't have the energy and the capacity.

Rev. Joan McMurtry 58:33

Yeah. Yeah. And that would be as wearing to the ministry personnel as anything. You were asking earlier about burnout, I don't think it's about volume of work or hours. I think it's about the agenda that we have before us, I think it's very, must be very over[whelming]. I've been out of it for seven years and I'm kind of relieved and happy to be retired. But these folks who are in it, and are dealing with the decline, I just think it can be very soul wearing.

Catherine Atyeo 59:09

Is part of it, can you make the link between what's happening in the churches now to theological schools? Are we graduating enough ministers? And are we graduating enough ministers who feel inspired and who have the fire in their bellies to take us forward, Joan? Can you comment on that?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 59:38

You know, it's my question as well, and I literally don't know. I'm not as close to any of the colleges to know the kind of people who are coming out. Yeah, but that's my question. Because what we need is innovators. What we need is risks-takers. What we need is people with those kind of leadership qualities. Sure, they need to be pastoral and care and compassion, but what's called upon now is people who can think about, and who can have the skills to assist us as to how we want to be church in community.

Catherine Atyeo 1:00:25

Yeah. So, I guess finally, and you can add any final thoughts too, what is important in your life now?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 1:00:41

Well, I guess when I retired, I really wanted to have more time with friends and family. I never felt like I got enough of that. And so that's been really wonderful to be able to do, and to be available to people close to me when they're sick, or when they need an extra hand. And so, I've been able to do that. I've also traveled the world. I've just moved to Victoria in the pandemic, and I'm kind of hunkering in like everyone else. I'm interested in getting involved in some way with homelessness, either in a practical way, or an organizing way. And I've also done some teaching in English as a second language, and done one on one coaching mentoring with immigrant women. And that's another kind of passion that I have. I'm also okay with not having to do really hard stuff anymore.

Catherine Atyeo 1:01:43

Yeah. Did you move to Victoria for sort of a life reason?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 1:01:51

Well, there were a variety of things. I was a pretty public figure in White Rock, both in the community and in the congregation. Our congregation amalgamated with two others, and so lots of changes happened. And I just thought, I'd like to be a little bit more anonymous. And there's pressure in being a public person and I felt like a lot of my work had been done there. I also have family and friends over here and I was interested in downsizing, a little bit of a different lifestyle. I have an apartment here that's a 10-minute walk to the harbor downtown. And so, I can walk everywhere. [!] just got a puppy for companionship. And yeah, so there was a variety of reasons to come but it was yeah, a shift in lifestyle, I guess. Yeah.

Catherine Atyeo 1:02:52

So finally, Joan, any final thoughts about your life or the church?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 1:03:09

Well, I guess I feel very grateful for the life I've had and the opportunities I've had. The kind of work I've been able to do, the people who have gone to bat for me to be able to help me to be the person I am. Lots of kind of mentors out there and friends and family who looked after me and put up with some of my frustrations. And I have huge networks of acquaintances and friends to do stuff with and I just feel very, very grateful.

Catherine Atyeo 1:03:55

Okay, well, if there's nothing else you want to talk about, I'll stop the recording and then say a few things to you offline, but is that it for what you'd like to say on the recording?

Rev. Joan McMurtry 1:04:15

Yeah, I think so. Looking at a few of my notes here and things I wanted to bring up. Yeah. It was good, interesting questions. And thank you for your facilitating.

Catherine Atyeo 1:04:31

Well, thank you, Joan. I'll just turn it off, now.