

Marilyn Murray White
Narrator

Bonnie Wagner
Interviewer

April 11, 1985
Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Marilyn Murray White's Home
Moorhead, Minnesota

BW: This interview is with Marilyn White, who is a member of the First Congregational United Church of Christ. Marilyn has been a resident of Moorhead since 1926. This interview was held at Marilyn's home at 1014 Thirteenth Street South in Moorhead on April 11, 1985. The interviewer is Bonnie Wagner, representing the Heritage Education Commission.

Moorhead has a large number of churches of various denominations, sizes, and ages. Many changes have come about in the churches during the past fifty years, many of these reflecting the economic and sociological changes of the times. Marilyn, when did you become a member of your church and why?

MMW: Well, Bonnie, I can say that I almost date back past the fifty-year mark that we're talking about in Moorhead, because I became first associated with the church at the time my folks joined in 1926, when they moved here from Missouri. Hmmm, I might say that I guess it was a...well, kind of a combination choice for them in churches, because my dad was of Presbyterian background and my mother from a Methodist background. And upon visiting the churches in town, they decided that this one was most compatible for both of them and joined it. So hmmm, they found that to be now a church...I grew up in that church, and stayed with it, with the exception of eight years when I lived away from Moorhead.

[Recording interruption?]

MMW: I grew up then in the church, and also went to college in Moorhead at Moorhead State University, and in 1949 married a church member, fellow church member, Norm Feay, who had just gotten back from World War II service.

[Recording interruption?]

MMW: My husband I were active in the church for the next twenty-two years, and during that course of time had five children. The oldest four children were baptized and confirmed to membership in the Moorhead church. Then in 1971, my husband and I were divorced, and I had left Moorhead to...hmmm...have...take a teaching job in Lisbon, North Dakota. When I moved

there, I joined the Presbyterian church, and my youngest two children were with me then. And hmmm...the youngest was confirmed in the Lisbon Presbyterian church. At that time, then I spent four years there.

And in 1977 moved to Waconia, Minnesota, where I took another teaching job, and for the next four years was a member of the Excelsior Congregational Church. Hmmm. Bonnie was still with me then. And in 1980, I was remarried to Leland White and moved back to Moorhead, at which time, hmmm, we both joined the Congregational Church, me for the second time, and Lee transferring from the Methodist church in Moorhead.

[Recording interruption?]

BW: Marilyn, can you tell us a little bit about the organization of your congregation in Moorhead?

MMW: Yes. Hmmm. Actually, the congregation began in 1894, and there are several families in the church today whose ancestors go back to those early years. And hmmm...the first minister was the then president of Fargo College [R.A. Beard], which is no longer in existence now. In the sanctuary, the older front portion of the church building was dedicated in 1901, built on lots purchased by the Ladies Union, and made possible in part by a three thousand dollar grant from our State Conference. A parsonage was built to the south of the church in 1913, which no longer exists. That building was torn down many years ago. In 1952, an extensive remodeling project was completed during the latter years of Reverend Newton Cruise's[sp?] ministry here, designed by Emil Foss, Jr., this remodeling shifted and enlarged the chancel, added the lounge, offices, and classrooms on the upper level.

[Recording interruption]

MMW: And on the upper...on the lower level, tripled the size of the fellowship hall and kitchen space as well as made...added classrooms there. More recently, hmmm, a parsonage was built, and in recent years now that has been sold and a kind of a new...hmmm...premise that many churches are doing, anyway, the minister is allowed to...and has a housing allowance. And so, hmmm, the church no longer owns a residence.

BW: I know that education has always been an important part of your life. Ah, when you were first attending religious classes in those early years...ah...can you tell us a little bit about that, and then perhaps how things have changed over the years?

MMW: Yes, Bonnie. Hmmm, I guess one of my earlier reminiscences about church education is the fact that we were a smaller church, and so on, and facility, and the earliest classes that we had were just what you'd call bumper to bumper. In other words, we had little round tables in the basement, and each class was about three feet from another class. [Chuckles]

BW: [Chuckles]

MMW: And hmmm, then we were even into the little balcony over the sanctuary, and even the tower room where there's a church bell and so on. I remember every nook and cranny was occupied, and I don't...didn't think of it as being super-distracting in those days, but I realize it really was as far as the teaching situation was concerned. Now we have, of course, you know, much better classroom situations.

And, hmmm...I was growing up in the days when the Congregational Church didn't traditionally have a long confirmation program, such as many of our Lutheran churches in town have and so on. So when I was growing up, they began to think they should have such a thing, and I was in one of the very beginning classes. Where in the early...the late 1930s, early 1940s, where the confirmation training was about six weeks long. Since then it has evolved into, you know, at least a year-long program and sometimes two years, hmmm, in the junior high ages.

But, hmmm...though the church growth kind of paralleled that of Moorhead in a way, I suppose. But it was a small town when I was growing up. And then in the immediate post-war years, expanded and...the church population did also, which I explained before, that they accommodated in the building project in 1952, where they gained a lot in the way of education rooms, particularly.

And I also remember in the early day that...had some of the first church camp experiences. Ah, we usually rented some other church facilities, such as the Northern Pines Camp that the Methodists own over at Park Rapids. Our groups went there in the summers. And then subsequently in the nineteen...right about 1960, I think, the State Conference of the Congregational Church bought Pilgrim Point at Alexandria, Minnesota, so since that time have operated their own camp.

[Recording interruption?]

BW: In going back to your description of your crowded conditions when Sunday School was going on a long time ago. I suppose that you have noticed, too, that there is a great deal of difference in the materials that were used. For instance, the books, and the teacher's aids, and helps for the students. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

MMW: Oh, yes, I guess I could respond there. The church publishing house or, you know, companies have always put out some materials. But they were really quite limited in the books that they had. And today, you know, we have quite a few things in the audiovisual department. And really, today, hmmm...or it's quite longstanding now that the materials are pretty ecumenical, because the joint publishing house puts out material for the Congregational, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, so that actually, we have quite a wide variety and wealth of materials compared to we used to have to operate with.

I...hmmm...I guess I was thinking that when I was telling about my growing up in the church, I didn't mention my folks' involvement, too. And my dad was superintendent of the Sunday School, and a long time involved with that area also. And then in the education line, I wanted to mention that for a long period into the 1950s, the churches in Fargo-Moorhead had an

organization that sponsored inter-church leadership training. And this was held in the wintertime, and they alternated going from one church to another, and involved the staffs of many of the churches. That not only involved, for instance, just the...what we call the liberal Protestant groups, but even the Jewish community, and others who would contribute as leaders and resource people to run that school.

And it was really...I'd call a predecessor to the present Communiversity, because that finally developed out of this kind of thing that...and this is now held in February every year at Concordia College. Another aspect of religious training in those days was released time school. From the time I was in grade school, I do remember going to these. We all, at that time, cooperated with the Methodist and Presbyterian churches in released time classes.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And so various grades went to different churches during some years. And then it...that changed as the church population grew, and we had it in our own church. And now, today, I believe it's just down to being used for confirmation classes. Our own church, I think, even has completely gotten out of released time school as, you know, we have...getting the children in...Hmmm...I guess I might move from there to the establishment of how the education department is organized in church. Ah, I think that the...the minister, and probably secretary, and superintendent of the Sunday School ran the education when I first remember it.

But, hmmm...and a religious education board was established with a three-member, you know, a body, sometime during the 1950s. And it has now grown to a board of nine members. And they started out with just maybe a volunteer person kind of directing the efforts, and worked toward getting a paid director of Christian education. There was...hmmm, the first one was Mary Maxson[sp?], who served the church, and for a good many years as a volunteer, and then finally twelve years as paid religious education director. And hmmm, that was also half time until quite recent times, and, hmmm, she was the first full time person for the last several years of her tenure. Ah, this became my job upon her leaving in 1967, and mine was a part time venture first and became full time.

Following my years in 1972, the three Congregational churches in Fargo-Moorhead decided to hire one full time person, and hired Reverend Jim Bowler[sp?] to do that for the three churches. And this existed that way for four years. In 1976, this changed again, because the population of the Sunday Schools were...began to decrease, and so did the budgeting for that kind of an item. So we went back to part time religious education director. Linda Rice[sp?] was the...our most recent director, and now we're back to the part time involvement again.

Hmmm. Then, changing from that to some of the organization life of the church, ah, we mentioned earlier that the women's organization was originally called Ladies Union, and then during the years that I was growing up, became...gradually changed...I think they had another name before Women's Fellowship, but that's what it's called today.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: In between those years. And, hmmm, I think that they women's and the men's clubs were strong...ah...or stronger than they are today, during the years of my growing up, see, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. And hmmm...now the Men's Club, as such, is not even active in our church.

BW: Mmmm.

MMW: And during many years they were pretty active in putting on several events for the church and doing some things. But the women have at least held together as an organization.

BW: [Unclear]. Right. Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: They...ah...always had at least monthly meetings, and then they had circle groups of women who met monthly, as well as the Fellowship group, too. But in recent years, the Fellowship now just meets, oh, two or...hmmm...well, once a quarter, or as special events come along, they do meet.

Some of my fond memories about some of the things we did. In, well, some retreats and the special meetings that we had, following the guidelines of the state organization, were some meetings that we planned to do. And one was held in the Oak Mound church, a rural church north of Moorhead. I guess we haven't mentioned that in the development stage, but ah, this congregation dates back almost as far as...as ours, and has...was at one time yoked to the First Congregational Church of Moorhead.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Now they are a separate entity, but they have only a part time minister. It was formed surrounding that rural school; there was an Oak Mound school and community, and a small church there, primarily of farm families. And in those days, I suppose, nine miles away from Moorhead was really far out.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But the ministers in my growing up years began to serve that church also as a yoked parish. And, hmmm, anyway, we have...they have a lovely building out there, and we held both our retreat now and then at their church in the fall. And in the summer we have tried...had even some Vacation Bible School that we took out to their country church, because we thought it was kind of a nice setting for our children, a little different from the Moorhead setting for such a thing.

Hmmm, the women, in the years that I can remember, both growing up and as a young married person, undertook such large ventures as far as dinners are concerned. [Chuckles] We regularly used to do dinners for five or six hundred people. And they rarely do such a thing now. But, hmmm, they were projects that involved everyone in the church, of course, and they were big

money raisers. They have done, over the years, many things along to raise money for projects, and for missions, and so on, including such things as style shows and oh, entertainments of...let's see. Oh, variety show type of things, and even to some dramas about the...hmmm, you know, history of the church and so on. And they have done many things, and still do occasionally now, the father-son banquets, mother-daughter banquets for the church. Hmmm. I guess...can you think of anything then [unclear] thinking of?

BW: Well, I...do you suppose that that is why the women perhaps still have a stronger organization or a knit group, is because of the variety of activities they can do as perhaps opposed to the...what the men do? You said that your women's groups have...seem to stay stronger than the groups that the men belong to.

MMW: I suppose so. Traditionally, the...ah...then we've seen a big change, of course, sociologically. Now the...hmmm...women, though they hold onto the groups and so on, I think the reason that they're not meeting as often and then they aren't undertaking those big projects there, is that so many of them are in the workforce.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And so that that has changed their way of thinking.

BW: And there are a lot of other things that they've become involved in.

MMW: Yes.

BW: Both the men and the women.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm.

BW: And perhaps don't have as much time to devote to the...

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. The church has always encouraged, of course, community involvement, and felt that that's very important. As much as our giving to the church, that we should be involved in the community organizations. And I suppose that's a big overlap, too, in that many people have served in those other capacities in education, and community service, health groups, and so on.

I guess, hmmm, then on...speaking about the groups, this is not directly related to education, but types of groups that are going on during the years that...Hmmm...in the 1940s, they were quite active. Hmmm, married couples groups. And in recent years now it's called the Ones and Twos, hmmm, to take it...you know, to kind of take note of the fact that we aren't all, you know, then a total family unit, and to include singles.

BW: Mmmm. I see.

MMW: As well as couples into their planning.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: So that's definitely something that's happened in recent years. Hmmm. Youth fellowships were called, traditionally, Pilgrim Fellowship in the Congregational Church, and still is. But in, hmmm, the great days of my growing up, they were organized both locally, and state, and national, and there still is that connection. Hmmm. But during the years that our children were growing up, my husband and I served as junior and senior high youth advisors, and I can remember many experiences of overnight retreats and, you know, doing all kinds of activities and work projects with the children. I guess one memorable thing that I remember about taking a group one wintertime...hmmm, we were going to spend an overnight in the Detroit Lakes area, and had contacted a camp about using their facilities. And they assured us that they were winterized.

BW: Mmmm.

MMW: Well, we got there. [Chuckles] Somebody was new to the...hmmm...well, you know, this...to the area, evidently. Because what they meant by winterized was that there was a fireplace! [Laughs]

BW: Oh, my goodness!

MMW: In the cabin.

BW: How cold was it? [Laughs]

MMW: [Laughs] And night was down to below freezing, I know.

BW: Oh...

MMW: And...we got in there and tried to build fires, but there were...you know, there were just...it wasn't even insulated. You could...you know, wind whistled through the chinks. And then many of the boys were hardy souls, and thought they could manage with their sleeping bags and whatnot, but we had to give up and drive into the...the Detroit Lakes, and their church took us in overnight.

BW: Oh...! Is that right?

MMW: And we slept in the pews and the...whatnot. [Chuckles] So we had quite an experience. But...

BW: A lot different than turning up the thermostat at some of the camp buildings now.

MMW: Right. Ah...now, many...you know, in subsequent years I was in part of, you know, confirmation retreats in the winter where we did go to a winterized facility, and that's really quite nice. But, hmmm, I thought about some of those experiences earlier where it wasn't. And that...I guess that brings to mind the fact that I don't know whether our church was unique, but in the days before the...oh, before the 1960s even, our church really took a summer vacation. Sunday School was out for the summer. And still, you know, we...they have...they still are, and from that time...but even church gave its minister a month's vacation, and we didn't have church.

BW: No one filled in.

MMW: [Chuckles] We often, because there were two Congregational churches in Fargo, they would cover for each other, or had a three-way proposition where one minister covered...went from one church to another, and maybe did several services, you know, a Sunday, or else just invited them to come to the other one if you were in town.

BW: I see. Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And I think because...well, so many people were in the habit of going away and spending time at their lake places, and vacation, and so on. That kind of shows even today, in that we aren't as full in attendance in the summer as we are in the wintertime.

BW: Ah, when you were talking about going with your young people to these camps, do you think that there is as much family participation, especially in youth activities now, as there was back at the time that you were probably working when your family was that age?

MMW: I think it's not quite as much as it used to be, although I think that the...like the state camping board and so on...and they have planned some very unique things. They would be exotic as far as we were concerned, considering what they did in the early days. You know, they have such things as canoe camps, and backpacking camps to Colorado and, hmmm, you know, all kinds of very interesting work experiences.

BW: Now...ah...chaperones go with the young people when they do this, or do the whole families go, several sets of parents?

MMW: Oh. Hmmm. Probably more of just the youth themselves.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: With a leader, you know, rather than the total family then.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Hmmm, really, I...I guess the church doesn't cover the whole family in that way as they used to. They do have family camps, but I don't think they're as well attended.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: At least by members of our church. Hmmm...they have had...I do remember some all-church events just from our Moorhead church, which, you know, we spent a day or overnight at the state church camp, and planned meetings, you know, to plan the following...the year's events and so on.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm. How about overnights at your local church here?

MMW: Oh, yes, we've had some of those, and we were with them. [Chuckles]

BW: [Chuckles] That was...yeah, have come inl and everyone has slept there?

MMW: We haven't had the total families sleep in.

BW: You haven't. Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But we have had, you know, various ages of kids, with parents, you know, some of them.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Or mainly the leaders as parents.

BW: Then are the children given some responsibilities, too, like helping prepare the food, and maybe programs and...?

MMW: Oh, yes. Mmmm-hmmm. Food and programs. You know, many times the leaders will have planned a program for them and so on. And typically, of course, we try to really fill [chuckles] the night so that there isn't...you know, they...we know they're not going to sleep for a while. [Chuckles]

BW: They're not going to...

MMW: Much. So things are planned to make them wear themselves out, because they...they don't do as much as the adults.

BW: Do you try to have a wide age range when you do that?

MMW: No, I think pretty typically it's been...

BW: Just the...yeah.

MMW: You know, say, like a junior high one.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Or senior high, or lower down. They've had, hmmm, oh, even music camps and various types of things that have been interesting. Hmmm. I guess I might have mentioned it in a later time, but, hmmm, one interesting involvement was a dance choir, which the...hmmm...one of the music leaders directed. That hmmm, you know, kind of movement type things that they would perform during worship services.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm. Interpretive.

MMW: Interpretive dance, I guess they call it.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And I...I really, hmmm, like it might come under music, but they have had junior choirs or children's choirs for a good many years. I mean, during the time that my children were growing up, they were...had a chance to belong to those youth choirs from early grades on up.

BW: So, actually, there are a lot of opportunities for the whole family to participate.

MMW: To participate, yes, I feel that's so.

BW: In one way or another.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. Ah...that's changed over the years, but the youth have participated in many of the worship services, for example, and particularly have always done the Easter Sunrise Service, and Youth Sunday Services, things like that. Hmmm. And which have been a wide variety of presentation from drama to all kinds of things.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Some of the people were rather shocked, I think, to see contemporary music and things like that being used.

BW: [Chuckles]

MMW: [Chuckles] Because in the days...then I can remember back to the time of my wedding in 1949, for example, that...hmmm...only certain songs could be used, and certain organ pieces, and so on. We wouldn't have thought of...ah, I mean, we asked, but we wouldn't have been allowed to have had the secular, and some of the, you know, choices that people have now in the church for music.

BW: That has changed a lot. Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. Right.

BW: Did you involve the youth in other activities in the church such as ushering on various Sundays, have they been brought in?

MMW: Yes, hmmm, as a matter of fact, of course, they do even presently serve as ushers where they wish to...you know, or at least from confirmation age up. Ah, I was just trying to think about...hmmm...oh, their involvement. They do have...have had youth members on some of the boards, such as religious education, and to the church council.

BW: To get good input from their point of view.

MMW: To view...but and then there's a...hmmm...a board comprised of...hmmm...have a task force for the youth activities, have youth membership, and have adult membership, so that they are consulted in, you know, planning their activities.

BW: Do they have their own officers for their own youth groups then, too, then?

MMW: Yes. Mmmm-hmmm. They do.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Our...because the children or the numbers have dropped in recent years, I suppose there are not, you know, as many...there aren't as many participating as there used to be. And I guess the increased competition for the children's time in various school and other things has reduced the amount of time that they...or the...oh, probably their commitment to church groups [unclear] that I saw in the...say, the 1940s to 1960s.

One item I didn't mention under the education was kind of interesting. As I look back on our church history, I noticed that...and I do remember it really, at the time in the 1930s, that the migrant workers began to come to the Moorhead area. And...our Reverend Clues[sp?] was very interested in the situation, or the plight of the children that were...came along with them, and offered a pilot project, really, of migrant education in our...invited them into our church then for a couple of summers, before the Catholic church really took on that program. And since then, of course, the church...the Catholic church took it over, and now there's quite a complete migrant education through the public schools even. So that that is held now in Edison School every summer.

BW: Was that for full days then? How...?

MMW: They took them in, I believe, for most of the day, because...

BW: Five days a week then?

MMW: Because the parents, of course, were out working the total day.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But it was quite an undertaking, and I...and hmmm...oh, I don't know, looked on with mixed feelings, I think. Some people thought...wondered why on earth we would do that. But...

BW: A lot of the youngsters, I suppose, didn't speak English, and so it must have been difficult.

MMW: Very true. The...more so in those days.

BW: Yes.

MMW: Yeah, than today. Uh huh.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And of course there weren't the great numbers in those days either. People came, but they were...unfortunately, you know, they weren't allowed into schools in many places. At most places that they went...and this is a matter of record, Minnesota was the first to ever allow migrants to enter schools.

BW: That's interesting. And it was started through the churches then, too.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm.

BW: [Unclear].

MMW: They helped them out here. Mmmm-hmmm.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: Hmmm, and I don't know if we're at the kind of end of the topic here or...? We were talking a little bit about things in the worship experience, I think, next, weren't we?

BW: Yes.

MMW: Hmmm. I was going to go on to say something about that. Hmmm, there has evolved over the years, I think, more lay participation. Because growing up, I remember that it was rare when a lay person really said anything from the pulpit, or...or took part, really. They might have made an announcement or two, but...hmmm...gradually, we've used and we do use today lay leaders along with the minister to present things every Sunday or most Sundays. And regularly, stewardship committees and others, you know, participate in our presentations in church. Or even have...of course, they do have [unclear] occasions of Lay Sundays, and Youth Sundays, and so on, in which the minister might not even take part.

BW: Ah, when they would serve Communion long ago, did they...? Was it just the minister that would participate also at that time? Or were lay people part of the...?

MMW: Oh. You...when you mentioned it, I think that...that he did do the total thing.

BW: It seemed to be sacred ground.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm.

BW: The...with the area of the pulpit and...

MMW: Right. Women prepared the elements, I think, in those days.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But they didn't serve it. And now, I think people were somewhat shocked even when we have now men and women ushers, for example, in recent years. And that, you know, both men and women help serve Communion and so on.

Hmmm. I guess I was also thinking in the area of church music. Hmmm. My husband I were longtime members of the choir, and enjoyed that association. And I think one time when I was in high school, before the church was remodeled, the choir sat at an angle and faced...faced the congregation directly. And, hmmm, it was so crowded at times up there that we wondered if people would get by without some catastrophe.

BW: [Chuckles]

MMW: [Chuckles] I think it was a Sunday where it was, you know, those big participations, something like Palm Sunday. They had brought up the offerings and so on, and set them on the table between the choir members, and the whole table with all the money dumped on the floor! [Chuckles]

BW: [Chuckles] Oh, my goodness!

MMW: And I think that was a big impetus toward, you know, the...it convinced some people that we'd better, you know, renovate and remodel the sanctuary. [Chuckles]

BW: [Chuckles]

MMW: It just seemed to bring matters to a head! [Chuckles]

BW: Oh. [Chuckles]

MMW: But, hmmm, anyway, and speaking about the changes in music. Hmmm. They...the choir has always, I guess, been open to many kinds of music. But I think that they've used a lot

of different instruments than they used to. But one thing unique to our church was, hmmm, we had an older couple, T.I. and Bessie Lewis, where he was a founding member, and she was, I think, church organist for, oh, something like forty years at least. But the old organ that she played was a little reed foot pump organ. And for years that...hmmm...after we got the pipe organ in church, that was pushed around from place to place in church and so on. But and just...hmmm...three years ago, a committee decided that that was really well worth refurbishing, and so they undertook to completely redo it. And it's now in the lounge area in church, and it's used on occasion, you know, and is really in mint condition.

BW: Was that something that could be done locally?

MMW: Ah, I think that they had a local man work...Lance Johnson, I know, worked on our organ.

BW: Oh...yes.

MMW: But I'm not so sure just who...who actually did the work.

BW: Who actually, yeah. Uh huh.

MMW: On the reed organ.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But it was interesting, because I remember that old couple, long after the years when she did play it, on occasion they would bring that little organ up to the chancel and have her play. And he sang in the choir into his eighties and so on, and they were quite a remarkable situation.

BW: Are there very many people that can play that reed organ?

MMW: Well, it isn't so very hard to play, you know.

BW: It isn't. Okay.

MMW: It just...you know. Ah, to play it well, that's another matter, but...you know, you can pump with your feet and play, you know, a merry little tune.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And it has many stops, and you...you know, you know how...

BW: That's easy to...hmmm...

MMW: If you know how to work those, or...or you...

BW: Yeah.

MMW: That's where the skill comes in. [Chuckles]

BW: That's what I was...that's what I was thinking, to keep the pumping, and working the little dealies.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. Working those little stops.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm. I know that there was a very special pet project that you enjoyed so much. Perhaps you could tell us about that?

MMW: I guess this was in the realm of the ecumenical efforts, Bonnie. But one of my fondest experiences was in 1969-70, beginning to talk with some of my cohorts in the other churches about religious education and the things we had in common. So it culminated in a couple of years experiences in the summer of doing [unclear] church cooperation on a summer vacation school. And we titled our one in 1970, "Kids Neighborhood Groups." And hmmm, that was rather a unique experience, because the people on the steering committee represented those churches, and there were about...there was an involvement of, say, fifty or more leaders and teachers from Fargo....

[Recording interruption]

MMW: We trained together and then spent several sessions in writing and organizing the effort. Basically, we...the premise lent itself to ecumenical work because of the theme itself. And we had the groups, which met in different neighborhoods around town, taught by groups from...I mean, leadership of various churches, and invited in people that were from...to register. But anybody else could come in, too, to discover what was unique about their own neighborhoods that they were located in, and to even interview people and decide what things they could do to help somebody in the neighborhood, and kind of broaden their scope a little bit, and ending with a final project of meeting together for a family picnic, and, hmmm, you know, kind of a survey of the things that have gone on during the week.

We followed this up the following year by having the same...a somewhat similar experience, but doing this all at Gooseberry Park in Moorhead. And instead of locating in neighborhoods, the groups were dispersed all through the park by different kinds of titles of areas. For example, some people stood on the Indian contribution to religion and some things about the out of doors, and then they could switch activities, and participate in several during the day. And this also was interesting from the standpoint of putting together music and joint singing.

In the first effort, we had traveling bands of high school age children who went about carrying out the music in the different groups that were assembled in the neighborhoods and so on. I don't know why I haven't really heard about this kind of effort since that time. Hmmm. And though it was quite a bit of work, it was very satisfying to see how much we really had in common, working together on a project like this.

BW: About how many young people do you think that you got involved in that period of time that you had these groups?

MMW: Ah...well, I believe that the story in the paper said that there were nearly four hundred who participated in the neighborhood group one, and I think as...as many the next year.

BW: And that age range would be what?

MMW: The age range was really, hmmm, about five years old through sixth grade, in the teaching part.

BW: Oh, I bet they would really miss it if it didn't continue.

MMW: Ah, as far as I know, it didn't continue.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: But I'm sure other churches are doing some novel things, and carrying on that sort of work. Hmmm. I think that in these youth events, I know our churches have talked together over various years. But in my memory, we carried on some group discussions and events with other church groups in Moorhead and Fargo, and notably I remember some with the Presbyterian and Methodist here in Moorhead, where our youth got together at the various church settings, and at some programs and retreats. Hmmm, then traditionally, the churches have combined for Good Friday Services in Moorhead. The...hmmm...I'm trying to think of the name of the group that...hmmm...oh, you know, Church Women United.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And so those organizations have helped to, you know, cross the boundaries of churches, because they have had interesting programs. I don't know whether they're really as active right now. And in Moorhead they disbanded for a while, didn't they?

BW: Ah, I...there...there are groups meeting, but not on a regular basis, as far as I know.

MMW: Because they used to regularly rotate going to the many churches in town.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: And do still on occasion, I think, have [unclear].

BW: Yes. Yes.

MMW: And some of those have still carried on.

BW: Yes. Which includes all of the various religions then.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. Right. Ah, Thanksgiving Services are rather special to the Congregational Church in that...we kind of base our background when we were in America on the pilgrim tradition, and of which the Congregational Church was founded, so we have kind of made more of that in recent years, and have, hmmm, the three churches in town. And the United Church has gotten together for that kind of a celebration at Thanksgiving time.

And hmmm...I believe, you know, it's kind of interesting over the years; because I can remember when I was growing up, when memberships were not very big in many of the churches in Moorhead, much talk about going together, because in the Depression years, they were all struggling. So and then each...many of the churches, you know, blossomed and grew in membership in the 1950s and 1960s. And I think now the memberships are struggling a little bit more to keep up than what they were. And there has been considerable talk about joining forces. And there is always a faction that does not want to go for this. But I think many of the lay people involved are rather interested in this.

And I guess it's been interesting to me to see developments along that line, that I was interested to hear about the churches, like at West Fargo now who...where big Catholic and Lutheran churches have joined in the same building, side by side. And it seems to me to make sense. And I know in many communities where churches have built and then shared facilities with more than one denomination. And that...would see that maybe being a trend of the future in the Congregational Church in Moorhead. Membership has...well, made a rather slow but steady growth until rather a bloom in the 1950s, and it reached a top of seven hundred members. And gradually has gone down until it's just a little under five hundred right now. I sense that it'll probably level off, maybe making slight gains.

In the 1950s or almost...ah, shortly after we expanded our own church, there was talk of building a second church. And they almost bought property in the south of Moorhead to...oh, trying to make a decision whether they should leave the present building, because it was getting old, or build a new church, and maybe even make a second church. And in retrospect, I guess it's a good thing they didn't, the way membership went. But, hmmm, they decided instead to really update and restore our building. And it's in the survey of the historic buildings in town, has been put on that register. It is not the state historical society property like the Episcopal church on Eighth Street in Moorhead, but it is kind of unique of its time, I guess. And now has been at least restored to pretty good condition, and refurbished, you know.

BW: But you mentioned that the...hmmm...they liked to utilize the church building itself as much as possible. Now I know a lot of the churches are using their building for community events, because they feel that the building should be used more than just for religious purposes.

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm. Yes.

BW: Such as the Boy Scout meetings.

MMW: Yes.

BW: And...do you have that sort of thing at your church?

MMW: Quite a bit. We at least like to encourage that. There's a unit of League of Women Voters who meet at...regularly in our church.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: The beginning of the Volunteers for Community Service was in our...I mean, their office was in our church for several years. And now at present I know that we do the...the preschool hearing and vision tests are done in the church facilities for Moorhead Schools. And the others that...a group of the Alcoholics Anonymous that meets weekly in the church building.

BW: Mmmm-hmmm.

MMW: We do like to encourage other groups to make use of the facility. Hmmm...I'm trying to think if there are any others.

BW: It makes sense when the building is...is heated and there and a room is available to...

MMW: Mmmm-hmmm.

BW: This open...more open door policy with the churches has brought about more community participation.

MMW: Yes. Hmmm. I guess I would like to talk a little bit about some involvement that I had in the area and state lay life committees. It involved my participation, you know, on a little lighter level than just Moorhead. But one event that we did, in the course of this time, was a retreat in a Holiday Inn for families or groups from the churches in our area of the Congregational denomination. And this was kind of...I guess kind of a departure. I think it's rather a common thing now, but we chose a wintertime meeting, and the setting there brought people in there to both enjoy the facility, and to meet together out of their usual church setting, to see that they could...ah...enjoy that also.

[Recording interruption]

BW: This concludes the interview with Marilyn. And I sure thank you for taking the time to give this information on your experiences during your religious life in Moorhead. Thank you so much.

[End of interview]