

Mary Wilson

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SPEAKERS

Mary Wilson, Tiffany Puett

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- T** Tiffany Puett 00:10
It's August 26, 2020. This is Tiffany Puett and I'm interviewing Mary Wilson for the Religions Texas Oral History Project. Hi, Mary.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:21
Hi.
- T** Tiffany Puett 00:22
To start out, tell me about yourself. Tell me about the formative experiences that you've had in your life, you can even start from the beginning, the things that have made you who you are today?
- M** Mary Wilson 00:39
That's a big question, isn't it? I grew up in the St. Louis area, [I am] first generation off the farm. My parents grew up on farms in rural southern Missouri, in the midst of the depression and I think that influenced a lot of the way that I was raised.
- M** Mary Wilson 01:05

I'm the middle child of five and we all went to college. Some of us have advanced degrees, but [we] all had professional careers, and our parents strongly encouraged us to excel in school, and to get as much education as we possibly could, something they clearly valued. They worked very hard to make sure that that could happen. So, I give a lot of credit to my parents, in terms of wanting and providing for their children in ways that were a dream to them, and they made it happen.

M

Mary Wilson 01:48

Experiences when I was a little girl going to visit my grandparents on their farms [were] also formative because I could see - in hindsight, real poverty in those areas, a great deal of integrity - the person's value is not based on how much wealth they have, it's based on who they are and their own sense of self dignity. I think that those kinds of things really helped shape me. I couldn't articulate that at the time, but just looking back on things, I think that [that is] really important.

M

Mary Wilson 02:32

I grew up in a very conservative religious tradition. That is something that is not my tradition now, not something I identify with, but it was also very formative because I think it insert in my life a value for faith and for seeking and for questioning.

M

Mary Wilson 02:58

Even though some of that seeking and questioning led me in a different direction, it all stemmed from that tradition, which I was raised. I went to Oklahoma Baptist University. Part of the reason I went there as to say, Wake Forest, or Baylor or something like that, was [that] my dad wanted me to be within a day's drive of St. Louis. OBU was about the furthest that I could go that met that criteria. At the time, in high school, I was committed, and really only interested in going to a religious affiliated school. Part of that is just the way I was raised and the tradition in which I was raised.

M

Mary Wilson 03:45

I went to OB in the middle of Oklahoma, a small college and I came from a large high school in the St. Louis area, so, it was a very different experience for me to go to a small college and a relatively small town. I met someone there, got married very young, at 19, [and] later got divorced in my early 30s. He and I had two children together and now grandchildren and have relationships still to this day.

M

Mary Wilson 04:19

When I was in college, I worked in the emergency room at the local hospital. I was a CT checking people in and we were sort of the last dropping off point before Oklahoma City. What we got were a lot of trauma cases coming in, and I worked there for over a year and a half.

M

Mary Wilson 04:42

I think seeing death firsthand, from any age, for any number of reasons, multiple reasons, was also very formative in allowing me to become the minister that I became because I was not afraid of those situations. I understood, I think a little bit more what was happening. I've had students that I've supervised before, where you go on a hospital visit and it's their first time to see somebody in an ICU or see somebody who is dying - it can be very traumatic for them - but to have had that experience in the past made it easier for me to be a minister, when I became one.

M

Mary Wilson 05:29

My first vocation was in teaching mathematics and I started off at a junior high in a small town in Oklahoma, [later] moved to St. Louis, and taught at a junior high there as well, [and then] wound up in Austin for a couple of years and taught at Leander High School before Leander exploded in population. The high school was still relatively small. My spouse, at the time, and I moved to New York, and that's where my children were born, in Poughkeepsie, New York. I got my master's degree in math there and then we wound up moving back to Austin. I eventually [ended up] getting a job as part of the full time faculty at Austin Community College and taught there for over a dozen years, 15-16 years and really enjoyed it.

M

Mary Wilson 06:23

I love community colleges because they really are part of the community and they give people opportunities that a place like [The] University of Texas doesn't really give to students who have been floundering and not really sure what education means in their life. A place like ACC allows students to just go away from school for a while, and then come back with a clearer focus. If they didn't do well in high school, grade-wise, they can come back and reprove themselves, and then transfer to a four year school.

M

Mary Wilson 07:01

I found teaching at ACC, to be an incredibly rewarding experience. I had students from 18 to 70 years of age, and from all walks of life, our classes were genuinely small, 30 or under, for some of the more remedial classes even less than 15. So, we give students more attention.

M

Mary Wilson 07:24

It was a great environment, I really enjoyed teaching at ACC, and I taught anything from our basic math skills class to our advanced calculus classes, and I got to choose more, by and large, which courses I taught from semester to semester, in conjunction with the other faculty. We kind of rotated things around, so everybody could teach what they prefer to teach. I got to choose to be with different types of students, whether it was a calculus class or a basic skills class or, "Here I need a three or four hour credit class for my degree, but I don't need to major in math, so what's the class that I can take for that?"

M

Mary Wilson 08:12

I got to have a nice variety, but having said that, as much as I enjoyed it, throughout my life, I had always wanted to attend seminary. I always wanted to have a vocation related to exploring faith and what it meant to live out faith convictions.

M

Mary Wilson 08:38

Talk about formative - I went through a divorce that was very difficult and painful for, not just me, but for my children. Life was certainly thrown up in the air for a while as to what it would look like after all the dust settled. Part of the divorce was dealing with past life issues, but also included in that was [that] I [was] coming to grips with my sexual identity. I came out and got involved in a new relationship with my current spouse, and we've been together 27 years now. All this happened in the early mid-90s.

M

Mary Wilson 09:35

After all of that, I said to Betty that I've always wanted to go to seminary and her response was, "Well, how can we make that happen?" I signed up for my first class [at] the awesome Presbyterian Seminary [Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary]. [It was] sometime in the mid-90s, [I was] just a special student, not even a degree student and it was Intro to World Religions. That's kind of where it started, and eventually, I got a degree from there. One of the last classes I took as a Master of Arts in theological studies was Intro to Preaching. They [had] us practice preaching in the seminary chapel and Betty came to hear my very first sermon that I did for that class, just kind of snuck in the back.

She told me later that when she heard me preach, she [thought], That's what you need to be doing."

M

Mary Wilson 10:37

[That wasn't a required class] for the Master of Arts in my theological studies degree, I had taken that as an elective. After that, I was still teaching full time at ACC, but I was getting some opportunities to preach and guest preach at different places, and so on. Then Church of the Savior had an opening. They were looking for an interim pastor. One of my former ministers, from the church I attended here in Austin, said that he would do that with them, if he could do it with me. They asked me if I would serve as a co-interim. This was back in spring of early part of 2002, and of course, I was divided. I never expected, as an openly gay woman, to have a pastorate. I just didn't think that that would be an option. I thought that I could have like guest preaching opportunities. I thought [that] maybe I could help lead workshops. I thought maybe I could be a guest teacher, like maybe in Sunday schools, or Wednesday night, kind of special education events, and that sort of thing. So I thought, "This is a great opportunity because I loved John, the minister, who had brought my name into the conversation. I loved the work." I thought, "He's my favorite preacher, I'll get to work with him, I get to have this experience. This is a wonderful, small congregation that has gone through a very difficult time, and we can give them some stability."

M

Mary Wilson 12:19

What happened is that John and I did give them some stability. I noticed after about three or four months, that their search committee wasn't searching. I had a couple people approach me in the summer of 2002 and say, "Would you apply for our job?"

M

Mary Wilson 12:41

Again, it didn't occur to me that [that] could be an option because while I'm an interim, and interims don't become the permanent pastor, this was a actually pretty unique situation at the time because they really had struggled, they had nearly closed. The church started in 1985 and the founding pastor had grown it up to a small congregation and then he moved to another church in Kentucky, and they got another pastor and she just wasn't a good fit for the congregation. She wound up staying there for about three years, but the congregation went through a lot of turmoil and a lot of loss of membership.

M

Mary Wilson 13:47

By the time that John and I got there, they had to ask the question whether they should really continue or not, and for the people that were left, there was a lot of discouragement at the time. So, John and I gave them some stability. I think that for them it was the only way they could hire a pastor. They couldn't do some of the traditional things of having a search committee - go identify somebody who's a complete stranger, come meet this person and vote on them, after meeting them, and hearing them preach for one Sunday one time. No, they needed somebody that they felt like they could trust and somebody that they could get to know, and that turned out to be me.

M

Mary Wilson 14:27

I agreed to do that. In November of 2002, I became the permanent pastor. I hesitate to use senior pastor because when you're the only one, what's the title? I was just the pastor and I started off just as part time. Then as the years went by, we increased my hours. It was very, very early on [that] I resigned from ACC so that I could just focus on the task of being the pastor of Church of the Savior.

M

Mary Wilson 15:01

April of this year, I stepped down from that. My last Sunday was April 19th, in the midst of the pandemic. It's not how we had planned for me to go out. Last year, about this time, in 2019, I sat down with the chair of our church council and said, "It's time for me to step down. Let's talk about what that looks like. I don't have a timeframe necessarily that I feel like we have to implement, but I want to do what works for the church and what works for me. So, let's start exploring what that's going to look like for me to step down."

M

Mary Wilson 15:42

We had these plans for how to make that happen and the pandemic blew them all up. After being at the church [for] 18 years, I got to say goodbye via Zoom, which was not completely satisfying for any of us, but it was something that I needed to do. My father was very ill, and at the end of life. I simply couldn't manage both things. My last Sunday was April 19th and three days later, Betty and I drove to St. Louis to spend whatever time my dad had left, helping to care for him. He passed away in May.

M

Mary Wilson 16:28

I knew that once I left for St. Louis, that my attention would be totally on my parents and my dad's care, that there [was] no way I could continue, even [on] Zoom, trying to also care for the church. There had to be a hard stop date. Fortunately, they had identified a successor and the church has done well since then.



Mary Wilson 16:56

My father passed away and I was also working on my doctorate ministry degree at Bright and I finished that in June. I've done childcare for my grandsons this summer and now, I'm at a place of exploring, "What am I? What am I going to do next?"



Mary Wilson 17:17

I think that's beginning to present, [a] sort of, summary of life experiences that are fairly significant. Any questions about that?



Tiffany Puett 17:34

Since you started talking about your retirement, kind of coinciding unexpectedly, with the pandemic, tell me more about how the pandemic has affected [you]. I know you've been in this kind of transition period - what has that meant for your evolving ministry context, pastoral care, the kind of work that you're doing? How is the pandemic impacted you and what has it meant for you?



Mary Wilson 18:08

Going back to my dad, one of the things that it's impacted the most were decisions that my siblings and I, and my mom had to make about my dad's care. He was in a care facility [and] required a great deal of care. He needed a family member there 24/7. I had been flying back and forth to St. Louis, for a week or so at a time, for the past year and a half, every couple months, anyway. Then when he needed to be in a care facility, he still needed a family member there 24/7 with him - just part of his care was related to effects of dementia. He did not do well without someone there, either one of my siblings or my mom [needed to be] at the care facility. Then the pandemic hit.



Mary Wilson 19:14

I had been there with him the first week of March and a fair number of residents at that time in his wing, say about 15-16 residents and staff had come down with respiratory illness. A week after I got home from being there, I also got sick. [I] woke up one morning with a sore throat, fever and a cough. I was one of the first people tested in March for the pandemic and it [was] related to my exposure [from] my dad's care facility. I [was] 60 at the time, so between symptoms, age and potential exposure, I was actually one of the first

people tested for COVID in the area. Now, it came back negative. I just had a basic bronchitis.

M

Mary Wilson 20:13

I was sick for most of the month of March and also trying to figure out with my siblings what to do with my dad, and how to retire, when meeting in person was now no longer an option, and we had these plans. March was a time of extraordinary upheaval and uncertainty - personally, professionally, physically.

M

Mary Wilson 20:49

It's hard to put it into words, just how uncertain everything felt. I mean, I was sick, we made the decision to bring my dad back home, but I couldn't go there to help until I got well. I was trying to figure out how to retire, when we could no longer say goodbye in the traditional way and with the plans that we'd had. The timing of my stepping down was changing. I actually wound up staying [at the church] a couple weeks longer than our original timeframe - just to help the church shift to Zoom and to help bridge the timeframe between when I left and when the new minister was going to be able to start - to try to give the church at least some sense of stability in the midst of that and to give them some sense of [that] there [was] still is a pastor [there] that will take care of things if we have any issues come up.

M

Mary Wilson 22:09

It was exhausting, mentally and physically, spiritually, every which way. By the time I got back from St. Louis in May after my dad had passed, I don't know if burnout is the right word, but I would say my tank was depleted. This summer has just been trying to recoup, recover, and feel like I have some energy to put towards things that I really want to do and that are interesting to me.

M

Mary Wilson 22:59

I'm very, very happy with the way things are for the church and the new minister. I'm going to go see my mom here in a couple weeks, but she seems to be doing well. That's still something on my mind. My mom and dad were married for 67 years and my mom never wanted to let him go, not ever. There's been a lot of changes in the last few months and it's been a lot to process.



Tiffany Puett 23:50

That's definitely a lot. As you've been processing, do you see any kind of bits of insight? Do you feel like you've been able to glean any kinds of learning moments or takeaways - that you could say - that this is something that's come out of this, anything transformative or insightful?



Mary Wilson 24:25

To be a pastor of 18 years [to] one congregation, I think it's important to have good self care practices. I know that's a word that gets bandied about, [but] sometimes what the congregation needs and what you need, as an individual person, are not always the same. Sometimes, as minister, we have to make choices about, "Okay, the church needs this for me, and this is really important right now, and I'm going to need this and how am I going to balance it?"



Mary Wilson 25:01

I think over the years, I did a pretty reasonable job of making those decisions, but boy, the past year, and really even longer than that - but over the past year and a half, there is no amount of self care that I could do that - just to continue use that analogy - that helped fill my tank. The best I could do was get a little bit and then deplete it again.



Mary Wilson 25:38

In October of 2017, we had a fire at our condo complex that displaced us for 14 months, I also happened to be running for congress at the time, which was a whole [other] kind of experience - fabulous experience, exhausting experience- because turns [out] it's 24/7. Anyway, I had a little bit of success in that area - in that I made a runoff for the seat that I was running for.



Mary Wilson 26:09

In the midst of the run off, I was involved in a nasty car wreck and got a concussion in the middle. That was in March of 2018. I spent the rest of the year recovering from injuries from that - the basic sore neck and something in my side that was just soft tissue irritated and the concussion - some days throughout the summer and fall of 2018 you know - just made [it to where], I didn't feel very good some days - and I have a bad concussion history. I had one in June of 2010 that took me six and a half years to recover from. So, getting another one in 2018 was not good, not a good thing for me and my overall health.

[While] struggling with that, I was trying to deal with a campaign, and I lost the run off.

M

Mary Wilson 27:14

As the saying is, "It is what it is." Then, I was recovering from the injuries, just the exhaustion from that, and not living at home because we were displaced from our condo, then my dad's health cratered. He'd had dementia for quite some time, a decade. But then in the fall of 2018, his health deteriorated rapidly. He was in the hospital, he had sepsis, we honestly didn't think he would survive, but he did and then that started the ball rolling with a number of decisions.

M

Mary Wilson 27:53

I would say from October of 2017, with the fire, the car wreck that I was in in March, the displacement from the fire, my dad's health, my mother in law, Betty's mom passed away in January of 2019, Betty was diagnosed with a brain tumor in March of 2019 and had surgery in April of 2019, I was still flying back and forth to St. Louis to deal with my dad, I was still trying to be a minister - honestly, there was no amount of self care that could keep me running.

M

Mary Wilson 28:35

At this place, this time in my life, I'm being very choosy about what I say yes to. I'm just trying to figure out what it feels like again to have energy and passion and the ability to say yes, after the past three years. The [past] two and a half to three years have been, one monumental event after another, any one of which would have been enough in and of itself. On the plus side, in the midst of all that, I've had various grandchildren born, which is fabulous. I love the grandma gig. I love these kids dearly.

M

Mary Wilson 29:30

It's not without its pluses for sure, but I can't think of another - well, in the early to mid-90s, when I was going through the divorce and coming out - that was probably the worst time of my life. Honestly, the hardest time in my life. When I had a concussion in June of 2010 and dealing with the recovery of that, that was very difficult - three to four years and then it took six and a half years total to recover. The first three to four were, physically, the most difficult.

M

Mary Wilson 30:12

Oftentimes I wondered if I could continue in my job [of] my own physical health and some days just how bad I felt. Then this stretch from October 2017, through my dad's death, here in 2020, has also been a very difficult stretch in life. They're all very different from one another.

M

Mary Wilson 30:37

This one, it's been more than a preponderance of things that have been so significant. It's not even so much my own health - although, between the car wreck and then having bronchitis earlier this year, I did have my own health issues - but it's been more about my spouse and my parents and obviously caring for my children as they had children, and then my congregation. It's been more of this expenditure outwardly, that has been draining. The pandemic hitting is like, "Of course. I mean, of course, why not?" "How are things going?" Well, other than the pandemic, fine. That's kind of the way things have been.

M

Mary Wilson 31:37

My ministry context is completely different because I have retired. I am in touch with the person who's succeeding me in case there are questions because we haven't had the ability to do that kind of handoff, or in person kind of thing, or even where I could walk around the church with her and say, "Hey, by the way, this is here, and this is here" - just little things, we haven't been able to do that. I think it would be really interesting to hear from her what it's like to start a church, starting as a new minister in a church during the pandemic and I know people are doing that.

M

Mary Wilson 32:19

I see it and other churches around town, or, like one of my colleagues has left and moved to the Lake of the Ozarks, become a pastor of a church there. His church here is going through a transition now, and it's happening, but it's not ideal. I'm kind of glad I'm the one leaving as opposed to the one coming. It would be really hard to establish new relationships during this time. It's really, really hard, and you can't be a pastor without having relationships. Having said that, I have, in some ways, lost a lot of relationships. When you're a minister, and you leave a church, you need to step back and let the new minister build those relationships. I lost my father, and so there's some significant losses in my life right now, too.



Tiffany Puett 33:28

I hear this the story of the challenges and adversity that you faced in different ways over the years - how do you think that's shaped your understanding of pastoral care, or social justice?



Mary Wilson 33:59

Let me go back to 2010 when I got this concussion, it was surprisingly a bad one, obviously, since it took me so long to recover. I did a lot of therapy and that sort of thing, but this is where the church was really fantastic. I initially missed a month after I got hurt. I came back to one of our church council meetings and the council chair at the time, and my church council said to me, "Do you need more time off? You were supposed to take a vacation in June, which is when the injury happened, and you were out, but that wasn't a vacation. So, when are you going to reschedule your vacation? And is your insurance covering your medical bills sufficiently?"



Mary Wilson 34:50

Now, I tell that story to other ministers, and they're like, "Who is this? Who are these people and where is this church because that's where I want to be." Being the pastor of Church of the Savior is extraordinary, it's just a wonderful place to be. It's a wonderful group of folks. They understand the humanity of the minister, and that we too have health issues and family needs and hopes and dreams.



Mary Wilson 35:25

Being a pastor of a congregation like that, I think is different. I've been in churches where its sort of been the goal of some people in the church to see if they can chew up and spit out the pastor and how fast they can make that happen, to see, "How tough are they are?"



Mary Wilson 35:44

Being in this very loving congregation, I got to experience care from them and they allowed me to heal, so that I could come back and then care for them in return. The ending here for me was more about [the fact that] I really believed that my time as their minister had come to a close. Despite the feelings of exhaustion that I felt. Despite all the other events around me, my decision to leave the congregation was based upon my belief that my call had ended to be the pastor of that church.



Mary Wilson 36:35

From a lot of perspectives, one could say, "Mary, you were so exhausted, of course you had to leave, how could you continue?" That wasn't it because I know that this church would have allowed me the space to recover, rejuvenate because they've done it before. It was really about - it's time for a new person to be their pastor, after 18 years, it's time. What I have learned from this congregation about pastoral care, is one, to be good to myself, to be patient with them, and with me and to simply trust each other's humanity, whether good or bad - but trust that in our humanity, even when we're not at our best, we are still able to care for one another in a loving way.



Mary Wilson 37:43

I think that's not always everyone's experience as a minister or a congregant, but I think this particular church - even though it's a small congregation, and remained relatively small my entire tenure there - it is a true group of loving, caring, "Let's see how we can care for one another," group of folks. I've said to others, that there have been times where I stood in front of that congregation, and knew how much I was loved. I thought that everyone in their life needs to feel that, if only for a moment. I had many moments like that. Everyone needs to know they are love, and that's my takeaway. What's important to me about pastoral care is this - make sure people know they're loved.



Tiffany Puett 38:52

That's really beautiful.



Mary Wilson 38:53

Thank you.



Tiffany Puett 38:58

How do you think the pandemic plays this role in being able to make people feel loved, if people probably need it now more than ever, right?



Mary Wilson 39:15

Right, because the pandemic makes it difficult. I completely understand why some ministers have tried to figure out ways to get people to be in the same space. I think there's a lot of questions about whether churches should meet in person or not and some

people have answered that differently than others. My congregation is not going to do that until certain criteria have been met, but I do understand the drive to try to figure out ways to make that happen because we are social creatures and churches. I think we thrive on being in community and Zoom is not a substitute for that.

M

Mary Wilson 40:10

Zoom is not a substitute for being with somebody in person and we can see a certain amount of body language on a Zoom call, but we can't see the whole person, we can't see in-person preaching on Zoom, we can't see the response of the congregation. I very much fed on that. I was ahead in my preaching experience [because] I would write, my preparation included all the research, background, thought and time. Rather than writing up manuscripts, I had evolved to writing down notes and outlines and putting down ideas [like], "I want to cover this, or I want to include this," but part of what I was able to do, as a minister, was also be responsive to what I saw going on in my congregation, in the midst of a sermon.

M

Mary Wilson 41:03

In my congregation, we had a very informal setup. If I ask a question, it wasn't necessarily a rhetorical one, I might get responses back. Sometimes, I would want to have the flexibility to play off of those responses. Boy, you just can't do that on Zoom, in the same way, you just can't, it doesn't allow for that. It doesn't allow for that sense of community in the same way as being together in person does.

M

Mary Wilson 41:29

I feel for ministers trying to figure out how to make their communities feel like their community right now because, my goodness, we need to be in the same spaces in order for that to happen at times, at least a little bit. Right now, it's not particularly safe. The demographics of people who are older, more vulnerable, and churches having an aging population, how do you ask people to be present, when that could cost them their lives? You can't, that's not the responsible thing to do. But how do you ask people to be alone when they need each other? There [are] some really difficult, impossible questions. I don't know exactly how I would be answering them, if decisions were up to me. I've seen some pretty creative things, drive by kind of things - outdoor, drive-in sermons, where [there is a] sound system up and people stay in their cars. I've seen some ministers say, "Well, the church building is going to be open, if you just want to come and be in the space," which I think could be a valuable experience.

M

Mary Wilson 42:55

When I was working in the office at the Church of the Savior, maybe working on a sermon, or just thinking about, "I need to talk to this person, this person, or this person," sometimes I would just go out in the sanctuary, and just sit in the space because it was a really peaceful, comforting space. I could essentially have my prayer meditation time and have a sense of the community by being in that space. So, I wonder if opening the doors for people to have time to just come be in the space might be worth it. It seems like that might be a safe thing.

M

Mary Wilson 43:33

I'm not the one making those kinds of decisions, but there's a lot of open questions. I know people are being incredibly creative in the ways they are trying to do their services and [in] trying to reach out. I think for a minister right now - exhaustion, keeps being the word I continue to use - but I think it's got to just be mentally draining and exhausting to try to figure out how to keep your communities together. I don't envy them at this particular moment and I don't think that I could have done it.

M

Mary Wilson 44:15

I think, based on what I was sharing about the last three years of my life, I just don't think I would have had the mental fortitude to carry on. Not that I wouldn't have loved the people in the congregation, I just don't think that I would have been the right person to do that. I just don't think I had it in me anymore to try to make all that happen. I think the pandemic, for me, would have just been that one thing too many, after already having experienced too many things in a very short period of time. I'm thankful that I was able to step away, so that somebody new could come in with a fresh perspective because I think the church probably needs that right now. I think it was absolutely the right thing to do. I think it's a hard time to be a minister.

T

Tiffany Puett 45:17

Thank you. I want to sort of back up a little bit or go in a slightly different direction from talking about the pandemic. You mentioned running for congress and I'm interested because you've talked a lot about love and care, and also experiences with adversity, and I know you have this sense of justice. I'm curious to know, how all of that led you to run for congress and the kind of vision you had for Texas in that endeavor?

M

Mary Wilson 46:03

Yeah. One of the big issues, of course, is how does a minister who believes in separation of church and state run for a political office, while continuing to serve as a pastor of a congregation? The way it work[ed] for me, [was] that my congregation is not in the same district for the congressional office that I ran for. The members of my congregation also live in a different district, so that when I was out campaigning, I was not encountering my congregation, I was encountering a different group of people. Although there were maybe, I think I counted four or five people from my congregation that did live in my congressional district, that was it. I had a conversation with the church, before I ran. I did some exploratory kind of things to see if this was something I was interested in doing. We had a congregational meeting about it, discussed it. My position with them was [that] "If you think, as a congregation that this is too much of a conflict, then I won't do it." Their approach was, "We think it's really important that you pursue this."

M

Mary Wilson 47:27

Because of the social justice stances that I take, I had done a fair amount of lobbying and even testified at different hearings on an assortment of issues - LGBTQ issues, on education issues, and encouraged other members of my congregation to speak on behalf of things that are important to them, whether it be on immigration rights, or various other things. So, they were very supportive of me doing this.

M

Mary Wilson 47:59

I think the only way that I could make it work was the fact that it really was, when I was a pastor, I was pastor. When I was out running for office, it was a different group of people in a different area, and the two really did not overlap.

M

Mary Wilson 48:14

What I was able to do, as a candidate, was speak literally to thousands of people that I would never have been able to talk to before. I was able to talk about the sense of social justice that arises from a faith conviction. I could say things at a political forum or whatever, that many of us share similar faith stories, and faith backgrounds, many of us rely on that for making decisions about what we value and how we vote.

M

Mary Wilson 48:49

For me, there are things like love your neighbor, that I think is a really important value that many of us share from a multitude of faith traditions. Even if you don't claim any faith

tradition, it's probably still something that is valued. I was able to go from there saying, "And if we're going to love our neighbor, that actually has implications for legislation. If we love our neighbor, we will care that the elderly person down the street can't pay her health care bills, or that the family that are friends of our children are going bankrupt because of medical care expenses, and that shouldn't be happening in our country. We will care about what happens to immigrants that are crossing our border and why they are there because they are fleeing violence or poverty and looking for a way to better their eyes. Loving our neighbor expands into policy." So, I was able to articulate policies based upon, in many ways, just that simple core.

M

Mary Wilson 50:03

"Loving our neighbor means we care about the kid across town who we don't know, but we care about whether they have a good local school to attend. That that school provides them the opportunities they need to become a thriving adult later in life. That we will simply attend to one another, out of a sense of love for one another, and that will make our community, make our society, make our country a better place, and make Texas a better place."

M

Mary Wilson 50:33

I was able to get into immigration issues. I took a stance that, quite frankly, not everybody always approved of. I was in gatherings at times that were bipartisan gatherings and suggesting that, "When you recognize that our immigration policies are so onerous that it takes anywhere from 15 to 20 years for someone to navigate them, not to mention the cost involved. If you know that it takes that long to immigrate here, 'the right way,' as people like to say - then what are you going to do when your child is confronted with hunger? Or your child is confronted with poverty? Or your child is confronted with no ability to get an education to improve their lives? Or your child is confronted with violence, and gangs that either they join or they die? What are you going to do as a parent? Well, I'm a parent, you know what I would do, I would do anything to protect them to make their life better. [If that] meant crossing this arbitrary line in the sand or an arbitrary river boundary between one country and another. [If] by crossing that my child's life is finally changed for the better, I would do it in a heartbeat."

M

Mary Wilson 52:05

A little bit of empathy about conditions and what people are trying to achieve, I think is really important. That did not always go over well, with certain audiences. I tried to express it in ways of connecting, as one parent to another, as a person of faith, who

believes in kindness and compassion. There was one place where I got a lot of pushback, and in negative ways, but there was another place where a gentleman got up and he said to one of the other candidates, "I agree with your position, 90% of the time, but Mary has a point here about caring for people, immigrants, legal, illegal or not, because that's what we're supposed to do, aren't we?" [I felt like], "Okay, I made a difference in that moment." I [also] had other people literally come up to me in tears saying, "I have never heard a minister speak the way you do." Like, wow, then you need to find another church. I mean, then what are you hearing if this is not what you're hearing?

M

Mary Wilson 53:16

It was [an] absolutely fabulous experience from that perspective, that I was able to share my understanding of what the gospel is to thousands of people that I would never have reached before, that would never been part of my congregation, whose lives from here to San Antonio to the whole country. I made friends that have remained friends. I still have some political capital, I think. I have people asking me this summer for endorsements for X, Y, or Z kind of positions. So, there may be some more politics in my future. I'm not completely sure.

M

Mary Wilson 53:57

But it was a good thing to do, and my congregation was right, it was the right thing to do. I was able to speak to a sense of social justice. There seemed to be a voice that was missing. I realized, in the course of the primary [that] we started off with like eight or nine candidates running for this one office and eventually got down to four of us who actually filed and were on the ballot. As I saw that people made decisions to step away and say, "No, I'm not going to do this," I kept evaluating whether it was something I should continue to do.

M

Mary Wilson 54:44

But I realized that as one openly lesbian, minister, mathematician, mom, and grandma, that I had a voice that was a unique voice in my particular primary. It was not one that was being heard in the areas where this congressional district outline was. So, I decided, "No, I'm gonna stay." Even after my condo burned down, it was like, "I'm gonna keep plugging away and I'm just gonna let this take me wherever it takes me." It was the right thing to do.

T

Tiffany Puett 55:28

Well thank you for your voice and for your story. Is there anything else, as we've kind of moved through this conversation? Is there anything that's come back to you, anything else that you want to kind of share, say related to your story, your ministry context, thinking about the the pandemic?

M

Mary Wilson 55:56

Ah, you know, I don't? I don't think so, we've covered a lot. Like I said, I'm 61 years old and I've had some times in my life that were extraordinarily difficult, especially in the early mid-90s, when I was getting divorced, I had a pretty severe bout of depression in the midst of all that, as one might imagine.

M

Mary Wilson 56:27

I didn't become a pastor until my early 40s [and] I think if I had tried to become one prior to that, that I would not have been very good because I think I would have had less empathy and compassion for people going through difficult times. I think I had to have my own experiences of just not knowing what I had in store. I remember early on in my pastorate saying to someone who was in a difficult spot, "You know, I've been to hell and back and we may be there. We may have gotten there for different reasons, but I do know that we can get out of it. I do know there's a path out." I think that made me a better pastor.

M

Mary Wilson 57:23

Other ministers can just jump right in, in their 20s, but even though I always had the sense of vocation calling to ministry in some capacity, if I had done it that early in my life, I wouldn't have been any good at it, and probably would have lasted five years and done a lot of damage. So, it was all in its right time. I would not wish my experiences at that time on anyone else because it was so difficult and painful, but it did make me a better minister when I finally became a pastor.

T

Tiffany Puett 58:08

Thank you, Mary. Thanks so much and really great interview. It's been great hearing your story.

M

Mary Wilson 58:16

Oh, well thanks. I hope it is helpful.

