

Interview with Joanna and John Lehman

Interviewer: Marilyn Klaus

March 25, 1996

Q: Have either of you ever lived in any other communities besides Reba Place?

John: No. We've been here since the beginning of Reba and been here ever since.

Q: When was the beginning?

John: September of 1957.

Q: Then my professor was right, that's when he thought it started in 1957. That this is one of the earlier ones. Where did it start? In this ... BLOCK ... or in Iowa City?

Joanna: 1707 Reba Place was the original house, which is why it is called Reba Place Fellowship, from the location.

Q: And it is still active as an ... INTENTION ... of community and church?

Joanna: We are an Intentional Community within the church.

Q: Has it always been that way? From the beginning that you could be a member of the church but not the community or?

John: No that was a change that happened years after its beginning but I don't know what year it was. Pastor Reed gave me this book that has the history in it. It would be easier to get that information from that book.

Q: Do you have a place where I could get that book, cause I've been looking. Several people have referred to that history of Reba Place. Is it sold somewhere?

John: Oh, I think it's sold here. I think we have some extra copies. At least they offered them to us. I don't know.

Q: What was the ideology or the purpose that was here from the beginning? Why do we have Reba Place?

Joanna: John may want to start out on that one and I'll add anything.

John: Well the word used today is the Church of ... It just renders ideas of the Anabaptist vision was obviously ... This an attempt to bring community to the city. The Society of Brothers thought that was crazy. They just didn't believe we could do that. Our point was to see if life together could happen...

Q: Recovering the Anabaptist vision.

John: ...

Q: And you were living here at the time or you moved here to Evanston. You chose Evanston.

Joanna: ... We chose Evanston for this reason.

Q: With how many others?

John: There was John and Louis Miller and their children, Joanna and I, and Ted Merkensaw.

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Q: So five adults. And were you all living in the same geographical area somewhere else and got this idea. Or you?

John: We were at Eastern Mennonite College and the rest of it began as you can read in the history of the group. I met John at Eastern Mennonite. That's what Paul Peachy there was talking about and what John was talking about ... It sounded like a good idea.

Q: So he did not go to Japan?

John: Paul Peachy went to Japan. Paul was my favorite professor at Eastern Mennonite.

Joanna: But he and John Miller were friends and that's how we got connected with John Miller.

Q: So those are the five founders of that town. The five adults.

Joanna: Yea, we were the initial members.

Q: And it was named after, did you buy the house then at 7?

John: 727 Reba?

Q: And you all lived there?

John: We lived in that house, it's a big house.

Q: We'll get back to some more of those particulars, but how soon after you moved here did you begin taking the new members then.

John: At Christmas, in a few months. Some other people knew about Reba and had been part of it actually at ... Al ... Who else?

Joanna: The others didn't come until summer ... and Albert Stienert.

Q: The summer of 1958 then?

Joanna: But there some ... folks from the metropolitan area who came and

Q: So did you soon then begin to geographically expand while doing these?

John: After the summer of '58 when the rest came we bought 742 Reba. Miller house on that same lot. In more years there were other houses on the same block.

Q: What kind of growth was there the first few years?

Joanna: Probably in the 30s by the 3rd year.

John: Now just a piece of first years history. Before the summer of '58 John Miller and I went to visit Holthaus to what was there intention. I guess we got there ... Hispanic Church. He asked Mario where is the worst part of Chicago and Mario said that three blocks over ... That next summer Sara Albert and Conrad ... He didn't have any idea being more than a few people ... We ... That was the beginning of our relationship with ... and the Westside Christian Church.

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Q: So did people from Reba Place then do work down in that area. Or that was the kind of beginning of that kind of work that...

John: Well, Julius began a church there ... and with the Westside Christian Parish. And we were back and forth a lot...

Joanna: Eventually some of our folks moved down to help...

Q: Was that part of the kind of vision of Reba Place that not only would you define that you could have urban communities but this urban community would change and work in the neighborhoods to improve things. Kind of a missionary, ministry.

John: No we didn't have anything...

Q: that fancy.

John: Just adapting to urban life, but we get moving to Reba, going to south ... was intentional because supposedly racial change was to happen in South Evanston.

Q: Is this ... Reba

John: ... It was to happen along the ... coming north out of Chicago. And ... that didn't happen that way but South Evanston eventually did change and because of some violence in Hide Park a lot of the inter-racial marriages moved to South Evanston because of Reba. And it didn't really have anything to do with ... just that we were inter-racial and they must have felt safe about that. And later when open housing became an issue the city felt that the 200 people would appear at city hall and fuss about this. We were Reba's organization but we actually didn't even know the other people that came from South Evanston and we didn't bother to them that we didn't know them because we were...

Q: So Reba's reputation kind of went ... or caught on or went beyond.

John: Well, it was just ... Julius was much more socially active at Pioree Street. Where Julius used to be is now covered by the University of Illinois ... That put an end to that whole area.

Joanna: Like John said we didn't begin Reba with a plan. But because we really were concerned about quality and justice...

Q: People came to you

Joanna: and social issues, we got involved with people and with situations that ... Civil rights or whatever.

Q: And being in Chicago in the late 50s and early 60s would certainly given you plenty of opportunities.

John: ... you really had to really be resistant to social issues to not get engaged in.

Q: Take on everything

John: That's another point, not the same you had to be dead ... concern and not be engaged or a peace movement.

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Q: So were most of Reba's members then involved in them in one way or another at that time?

John: When something would happen, we weren't part of the organizing, but when something would happen we would participate in that...

Q: You were there.

John: Often the peace movement was so ... so crazy ... openly involved in drugs or something ... The Catholic work of Karl Meyer had ... was an influence in the city and the founder a local Catholic worker and we would usually call Karl and say we would like to be a part of your contingent of peace marchers, which identified us as Christians. Jack Spiegel was the leader of the peace movement, a Jewish man, and he was a good person. He was an organizer. I was personally involved with him at that time. That's...

Q: There wasn't a hard Reba Place constitution ... it was a part of the people who made up Reba Place as they were committed. I'm sure we'll get back to some of that too and you probably will have answered some of the questions along down the line, but I'm interested to know too, on this next question, when you think back on it, do you think you were predisposed to join a community or why did this appeal to you or why ... what made you think about it?

John: Well, something needed to happen. Joanna didn't want me to get into this but I'm going to anyway. I personally, needed something better than what existed in the Mennonite Church or it probably would have been a more interesting spiritual life ... I was just not finding that, that was satisfactory.

Q: Did you grow up in the general conference?

John: No. I grew up in Jonestown, Pennsylvania and that would be a piece of the puzzle. That place was pretty bad news. My father was a pastor. I knew a lot about church politics and I knew it was church politics ... I knew that wasn't what I understood spiritual life to be. Or what I wanted for myself. I ... in the process gave me, what book was it ... Charles, some book on ... just right on the subject of documenting how political most churches were. And that didn't help my ... it didn't free me from the questions I had. In the middle of college I decided, you know maybe this is a child's point of view, and we went to a ... conference meeting, that was in Pennsylvania, I worked for my dad in the summer on the farm. And without using any names or being very specific I saw plenty of politics happen right under my nose. I mean I was ... I mean they were ... They knew who I was and ... feeling and it was a hard decision ... It reassured me that I wanted something different.

Q: And you were ... at that point.

John: That's true.

Q: And is that where you met?

Joanna: Yes, and I was a local from Harrisonburg. But we were in college.

Q: Did you have some of the same kind of...

Joanna: I think he was the one that kind of led the thinking and I kind of moved along...

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Q: though that was O.K.

Joanna: I think on my own I probably wouldn't have gone that track. But it wasn't difficult for me to get on board.

Q: But why intentional community, particularly?

John: Well that in some ways was an accident but not all together. ... group, we're talking about that and reading Hutterite stuff. I put together what division came. ... division. A lot of that was brewing. Paul Peachy was asking ... Paul Peachy and John and John ... which were raising basic questions about what made ... in the ... in the church. So what Paul Peachy was raising to me and others at EMC was the same box of questions ... something was happening and we were ready for something to happen. We joined it and on your question of predisposed, I have an interesting historical event that is almost at the level of accident but not really. When H. S. Bender was dying, nobody knew he was dying, but he was in Chicago for a medical evaluation of his diabetes and my dad was a friend of his or my mother as a gift of hospitality said there was no church leader I didn't know from our living room. ... and H. S. was H. S. instead of Dr. Bender because that's the way I always heard ... Well, anyway he was in the hospital and my dad happened to be visiting and I said H. S. is in town and in the hospital, do you want to go see him? And it was interesting to stand there and listen. H. S. was this ... government ... professor in my dad was a ... patient ... and it was actually a class advisor, I think. As they talked, I realized that what H. S. taught my dad ... the ... H. S.' points of Anna-Baptist vision but it was more ... it was a lot of specifics about that, that they were reminiscing about old days and isn't this something that ... it was so critical ... What H.S. was for, at the moment he was concerned about seminary and other points ... He was concerned about, he raised questions about that. That also had...

Q: You want me to turn this off?

John: I would say that ... You know I can't say what ... because I was ... there was an obvious friendship between my dad and him and the tension between ... That the ... He didn't expect that, he wasn't going to talk about that ... Anyway.

Q: So H.S. wasn't exactly sure, but he wasn't exactly sure ... what he was saying is Reba Place took its vision from him but H. S. wasn't exactly sure that he was...

John: ...

Joanna: John, Ed wants to talk to you.

John: Who?

Q: Well, we can talk.

Joanna: I'm not sure if John finished ... Actually the vision for community really came through his dad by way of H. S. Bender, that he realized later when he looked back that the face of his father stood for were the same concerns that....

Q: that brought you here

Joanna: that brought us here. They weren't ... in terms of communal living but the concerns for brotherhood, the church. We really shared one another's burden and I think this was sort of recapturing

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the whole spirit of brotherhood within the church was what and the form ... Barn raisings and all those kind of things. So what attracted us to the idea of trying communal living in the city was the idea that would be a way to adapt those same principals. Sharing and caring within the urban areas. We witnessed the church becoming more and more educated and more and more to urban areas ... Individualism, each man for himself. You know just of the general society. So this ... a form that could involve you or recapture.

Q: Well put. So John Miller was studying the Hutterites, like to look at the principles, like what's making them stop flourishing. What would that, what would a Hutterite community quote unquote be in the city? What would be the equivalent?

John: Well he wasn't studying current Hutterites. He was studying the Jacob Hutter stuff.

Q: The original stuff. Right.

John: They were reading that. And I mean, I don't know, we rarely went visiting. John had visited the Society of Brothers and they really advised him against trying to start an urban...

Q: Is that the Bruderhof?

John: Bruderhof.

Q: O.K. Alright. In New York or Pennsylvania or...

John: It was New York, I think. We visited in Pennsylvania. But when we visited right before we came here they really gave us strong admonition not to come. John was on the wrong track, the project could not survive.

Q: Community in the urban setting in the United States.

John: It's a part of church history and other archives. But H.S. asked John to leave the seminary as a professor because of the tension. He told him if you're so smart you go do it and then tell us.

Q: John Miller.

John: So it was a large amount of tension over what he was thinking and saying.

Q: And that's what he apologized for?

John: That's what he apologized for.

Q: How awful. Did John leave the seminary? Is that when he went to ...

John: That's when he came here.

Q: He came here and then he returned to ... That's right. Of course he would have come here first.

John: But my thought was or my hypothesis was that H.S. talked to my dad, in reminiscing, about Ana-Baptist movement and all the church ... and dad was in the board of education and everything. But anyway they're reminiscing with me standing there was a sea of tension without talking about it. But a result of that, before H.S. died actually...

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Q: ... Now were you at the seminary with John or was this when you were still at EMC or?

John: Now this would be after Reba started.

Q: O.K. After.

John: H.S. died a few years later, I don't know when ... One of the other things that exposed me to something more drastic was a summer of, oh it was my sophomore year, I was in Chicago ... interns ... studying labor relations. And at that time, two years in college and the big ... I ... was ... a Bible major at that point. I was being told ... that the ... Ana-Baptist vision is outdated. And the seminary was saying ... But we were being told, and I was being told in class that this...what we used to do is outdated and we need a vision. Not having more than farm experience in Pennsylvania I didn't have a whole lot of respect for them and I had a question about politics, but that was more internal. That summer I found out from who were participating in the labor union in the institution or the factory work and got to know those people. And found at that a Brotherhood in the urban life was active and ... When somebody was sick for a long time they supported him. I thought what in the earth?

Q: It sounds Biblical doesn't it?

John: Well at first I thought this was outrageous ... And here I find it alive and well.

Q: In a labor union.

John: And I thought well, well, I see the Bible teachers are not ... instruction. And that's when I changed to sociology ... Because ... well the other part of that was the teacher who told me, and I won't mention the name, who lectured on this had been pastor of Home Mission here in Chicago with the Mennonites ... for one hundred years or eighty years or whatever it was before the North/South ... But we had a good summer because before I was disillusioned. I had major questions. I went to that church Sunday morning and there were a dozen people and I was puzzled at that. Eighty years or so ... that is ... God gave me a chance for that they were on vacation or there was a big retreat or you know ... And I thought maybe they come better in the evening and in the afternoon I went to Gene ... church which was forty years old and had one hundred people and that evening there was about five people there. But labor union success was the church's obvious lack of success ... he had just been the pastor for three years. I decided I needed another ...? church. That was crucial to my, Paul Peachy was actually in the city that summer, he was at U of C. Doing some extra graduate study. He had finished his Ph.D. in Europe. He came back here and ... I don't remember those details. He was at U of C and I saw him that summer, but he wasn't ... Anyway by the end of the summer I changed my major and wasn't quite sure what all that would mean. Paul Peachy was crucial to me just to ... he allowed me to ask questions and Paul... he encouraged us to ask questions ... tell you himself ... It's possible to be a church leader and have integrity. And he was an example.

Q: That sort of off set your experience with your church politics a bit. Gave you a different role model.

John: He was a different role model.

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Q: What was your major? What were you studying?

Joanna: I started out at Junior College Bible then I just switched to a regular junior college program. So I have actually had only completed two years of college. We had a freshman year and then I was working and ... And took something here after we were married for a year. And I took a couple of courses, but....

Q: Got married and moved to the city.

Joanna: I picked up on my education later when I was in my forties.

Q: Yea, I think I learned the most in my forties too. O.K. At any time you can say anything we don't have to be stuck to these but it kind of keeps us on the agenda. Do you remember books? You mentioned...I don't know if you mentioned the book. I mean you mentioned H.S. Bender, The Ana-Baptist Vision, but any other kind of

John: ...

Q: yea, that wasn't for you. What kind of books influenced you here, gave you guidance or kind of filled your spirit after you began this experiment at Reba?

Joanna: Baunhoffer's all-togetherness

Q: O.K. Baunhoffer's

John: ... John was reading and shared with us George Foss' journals and Wesley's journals...

Joanna: And John Gretsky and....

Q: Any books that they read in community? I mean you said John Miller had looked at the Hutterites ... but the original Hutterites the Jacob Hutter vision.

John: ... We weren't really ... But one...I lost my train of thought...

Q: We were talking about books and literature and things that influenced you.

John: ... We're really ... community was a way to accomplish ... a task or the test ... and I know what I was thinking it was in the book. John used to describe in the beginning that this is a life-time volunteer service ...? So people new what BS was like ... and gave a lot and you didn't ... So that was the model that we used as a way to explain us and Hutterites.

Q: The community facilitated that rather than having your first concern with that.

John: We never spent much time talking about...

Q: But did you share a common purse and did you have meetings and try to decide how that was going to be? Did you bring all your assets into this? What was kind of the initial set up?

John: Lehmans brought some college debts, not a lot.

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Q: Well good.

John: Well ...Ted ... I don't remember he probably had some to. He had just finished seminary ... and resources ... His father.

Q: His father.

Joanna: We got our beginning as a ... service unit.

Q: Oh, O.K. MBS.

Joanna: ...

Q: So you lived on the allowance?

Joanna: Yea we lived on the allowance and anything that we made. Yea...

John: John was showing that this was just to demonstrate...

Joanna: So then after two years, it was clear we were becoming a church then you adopt ... umbrella...

Q: And that's when the real common purse that you were bringing the money in by things that you were doing. What were the sources of income after you worked?

John: Probably just what we were doing before...

Q: What did you do?

John: Well the first two years I was doing alternative military service and I was ... And John was teaching ... at the hospital. And ... worked in public aid in mental health...

Joanna: Other people became teachers or nurses.

Q: That's right because you had...

John: ... self-sufficient ... had money to share.

Joanna: ... sort of managed the...

Q: So did you ... did each ... well we'll get into that. What was daily life like when you first ... when you lived communally? Or when you were kind of in full swing. Yea, how did you just manage general life together?

Joanna: When we all lived in 17-7 that contained all of us. Which would have been the first year. People went off to work to their different jobs and Ruth and I and of course a few children stayed at home and just shared the housework and the meal preparation. And the other folks pitched in with dishes and with maintenance.

Q: And that was sort of informal.

Joanna: ...

Q: Uh-huh sure.

John: It was an extended...

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Q: Right. Right. Then after you started growing how did....

Joanna: Then after we started growing and we had more than one house then we our main life together would be our main eaten meals. And we all ... together.

Q: Everybody, from every household?

Joanna: Yes

Q: In one common?

Joanna: In one common and we would take turns. The women ... We had meetings. One Sunday evening meeting and Sunday morning meeting.

John: ...

Joanna: Where we made decisions.

Q: By consensus?

John: Yes.

Joanna: As we got larger and larger that got more complicated then we began tearing down the number of meals we had together. It got to be...

Q: You mean the community meals.

Joanna: The community meals.

Q: Then there was more emphasis placed on the household?

John: Households didn't come until much later...

Joanna: We started out as a household ... But then 20 years ... family apartments ... two or three family apartments.

Q: So basically at the beginning people lived more some extended households but mostly nuclear families started out.

Joanna: Started out, then it became more nuclear families or ... a few people here and there...

Q: Then did it go back to extended households after that or basically ...

John: In the early 70s it did. But from the beginning there was clarity about nuclear family that transfer responsibility of their own children and nobody else disciplined those children unless they were designated to do that. Like a specific reason, like babysitting or the parents had to be out of sight for that. So there was a respect for and strengthening of nuclear family at any time.

Q: That would be different from the Hutterites because they did a lot more communal kind of thing, in other communities where the children were separated.

Joanna: The Society of Brothers...

Q: Did the children then go to public schools...

Joanna: Yes.

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Q: when they got old enough to do that. And you had two children

Joanna: Three.

Q: There they are.

Joanna: My oldest son, John and his wife, and Ted. And my second son, Karl, and his wife. And then our daughter, Emily and their family. They live in Newton, Kansas.

Q: Newton. That's right you had told me. Did you ... We'll get back ... I think some other questions a little later on the nitty-gritty of daily life as well. Did you immediately begin having worship service on Sunday morning as a community?

John: No because of these 150 ... There was a normal church then that was supposed to be a resource for these people, but mainly ... After a couple of years we began something more of our own.

Q: On the premises with the members?

John: On Sunday morning.

Q: When did Reba Place become a Mennonite of your church then?

John: ...

Q: In the 70s.

Joanna: In the 70s.

John: Late 70s probably. We were very connected with ... and the Mennonite Mission Board traveled ... Where ever we connected with the home mission ... Never really stayed connected with us. Originally it was MCC and the Elkhart Conference. Because we intended to be a church we had connections. At that early state when we were trying to relate to all the Mennonites in the conference. Their concern for ... and their lack of concern for peace was a interesting conflict for us. It's a ... that's still a problem because through Vietnam and they weren't clear on this kind of peace. And that was an important issue for us.

Q: So you continued to meet as a fellowship with a somewhat Ana-Baptist, not a somewhat a very Ana-Baptist Church in the fellowship.

Joanna: ...

Q: Were most of the early members Mennonites?

John: Well, the original five were. Al was. Conrad went to various ... when he was up here...

Joanna: Ted church was...

John: That's right. What was his background, I think he was Mennonite. Oh but from there on there were people...

Q: And is that basically where its...

Joanna: Less than that.

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John: Oh it's probably 10 percent...

Q: But it is... is it dual conference or tri-....

John: Yes.

Q: Dual conference. GC and...

John: Oh, no. Were Mennonite and Church of the Brethren.

Q: OH! Is that MC?

Joanna: MC is the Mennonite Church.

Q: And did you do any kind of rituals or ceremonies here before you became affiliated with the Mennonite Church as a church. Like did you do your own weddings, baptisms.

Joanna: Yes.

Q: Was there an ordained pastor or...

Joanna: John was ordained...

Q: Did they begin to take leadership in the church as a pastor or how was...

John: Well John did in the beginning and John and I together were leadership from early on. When you have five you don't talk a whole lot about leadership.

Q: This is true.

John: John was fairly respected as the original leader person. As we grew there was more need for that. But there was never any greatness about leadership.

Q: It was pretty clear that John was...

John: Oh for that the reason would have been ... It depends on what you're talking about. The issue of delegating, we observed that community after community came to crisis ... over stupid decisions...

John: Because of that and counseling with him about that we became clear quite immediately that there were a lot of decisions that did not have to be made by everybody. We could decide if we wanted to paint the living room and the two people who had ... about colors or decorating should make the decisions and tell us what to do. Where to put the paint and the ... That was wisdom, that was important. I don't know, do you know about Russ Harris? He's a member of your, he's a PhD dissertation on communities. He actually studied Reba and evaluated that before he ever moved here. That was part of his dissertation and he had some opinions about communities that failed and communities that survived.

Q: I'd like to... yea. A dissertation on where and when?

John: Michigan ... You could call him.

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Q: Hos Harris?

John: Russell Harris.

Q: That's my husbands name. It's a good name. I like it. O.K. Now he has a question on here about how people related to each other. And the way I've been using that is that, you use the term brother. Do you use the term brother/sister to refer to the people that your in community with or how do you see one's relationship to one another. Pretty vague question.

Joanna: I would say yea, we don't say brother so-and-so, sister so-and-so

Q: Like the Bruderhauf does that.

Joanna: But that's what we consider each other brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ would be the defining part of our relationship. That's fairly...

Q: Yea, that's how one would see.

Joanna: And when you think about how people relate to one another very early on. It's very important, it's something that we stress, was trying to be open and honest with one another. Following the 1918 instructions that if you had a problem with a brother or sister you didn't gossip to somebody else about it. You were permitted to go to that person and talk it over with them and if the two of you couldn't come together on it then you could bring in someone else to help. That was a very important part of our commitment in relationship from the beginning.

Q: That's an important point. From the beginning when you began pooling resources or having a common purse. Was it a struggle or were you able to maintain the level, I mean I know you had to focus on simple life-style. Describe what simple life-style meant. I think that's another thing I interpret as, what was the food like, what kind of, was there lot's of beans and rice for a while. Or what was kind of the general?

Joanna: ... We decided to adopt the Illinois welfare budget. For food and personal items. So our personal allowance was based on the welfare allowance

Q: ... You didn't decide to have a vegetarian diet?

Joanna: No.

Q: Often times the...

Joanna: We just learned to be creative.

Q: Right.

Joanna: And economical.

Q: And you did that by living units, like was a living unit given a certain budget or?

Joanna: Well each family, it was structured as the welfare structure, in other words what we received had to do with how many people were in the family, and what age.

John: By that time it was all spelled out ... it's harder to...

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Joanna: As the years have gone by we don't do it as strictly within that budget as we did. But it is still a guiding factor. Over the years we've had a few increases in our allowance kind of to keep pace....

Q: Which the welfare budget hasn't actually.

John: At one time we were ... That was our graduate schools. The state director of public welfare was a teacher ... And he would actually because of our communal life ask information about how we survived and ... Because he ... we'd like to know what you guys are seeing.

Q: What the reality is. People that are doing it.

John: And we were concerned with discussing ... bigger questions with him and...

Q: Did you get an MSW

John: At Loyola.

Q: At Loyola. You talked earlier when you first moved in the chores and the cooking and stuff were done. It was kind of divided on who had the time and the space and the access and things like that. Was there ever a time when that was more regulated or you just, you basically decided that by the people that you were living with in the household.

Joanna: Yes. And then when most of us lived as individual families, of course ... then the years when most of us were in extended households each household worked out their own life and their own life pattern. There wasn't a uniform way of doing things, across the fellowship.

Q: Did it tend to break down on gender, pretty traditional gender lines, you think?

Joanna: No.

Q: There was a lot of kind of mixing across the...

John: ... In the extended household

Joanna: Extended household.

John: It would not have been true for earlier...

Joanna: Not in earlier, but in household days.

Q: But that also would have been a choice I mean people when they got together decided who was going and who wanted to do what.

Joanna: ...

John: There were no policies.

Joanna: There were some guys that like to cook and they cooked. And others were better doing something else. Everybody was involved in cleaning and repairs.

Interview with Joanna and John Lehman

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Q: So it was kind of necessity was the mother of intervention. Did Reba place ever have any ... cottage ... industries? As far as, I know at one time, New Creation had a construction crew that people could hire that also brought income into the.

John: We had a construction crew. A few other unsuccessful ... industries that ah ... construction was the main one.

Q: What didn't ... What are you calling unsuccessful?

John: Oh, I don't know.

Joanna: That picture making.

John: That was one project. Making silk screen pictures.

Joanna: We had an artist who made a couple of master copies.

John: Oh,..

Q: But the construction crew...

John: Well the construction crew did a lot of things and was around our buildings ... Like the meeting house had a massive remodeling job...

Q: And did they hire out as Reba Place Construction.

John: ...

Joanna: ... began a day nursery and that continued to this day. It's now a part of...

Q: How many are actually still in the common purse at this point.

John: I think it's fifty some.

Q: Fifty some, that's ... and they all live in this vicinity?

Joanna: ...

John: That's true and also ... there's half a dozen

Q: And do you continue to have an all community meeting of members and do you have a communal meal periodically?

John: No.

Q: That part has...

John: ... that's all been centralized.

Joanna: Actually we're divided into two separate communities...

Q: And the money that's held in common is still of the members in the common purse brought in by what they earn out there and put into a common pot. Then is there a committee or a board that decides how that money is allotted back out to the members? You were talking earlier, you were given an allowance.

Joanna: We still have our monthly allowance ... that covers their food and personal expenses. Then housing, transportation, medical expenses are paid by common purse. But everybody is, every

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fellowship member is part of a ...?deserving crew ... that joins together in making major decisions ... you need to make decisions about, job change or ... going back to school, university, elective surgeries, major decisions. Each person has a...

Q: A small group that can help make these decisions.

Joanna: And major expenses would be recommended to a financial committee ... Financial committee for major things and be recommended from your deserving crew to the finance committee and they would have to...

Q: And is it the Reba Place Corporations that owns the land and owns the buildings? That's how, that's the land ownership. That can borrow money or make the payments or whatever that would be necessary.

John: Right.

Q: Is there now a formal government, or what is the formal governing structure. You mentioned a financial committee but is there... What would the map look like that governs life together.

John: For finances or...

Q: No, for the community. Is there like a board of deacons or a board of elders or...

John: Well there's a legal structure of president, vice-president, and secretary. When the two committees at Reba have their own leadership structure. I don't know how, I can't speak much for any other ... David Jansen is the leader of the political community.

Q: And that's the one with...

John: That's the one with ... Then one or two representatives of each of those smaller deserving units meets every other week for planning and ... Something like that.

Q: But they're not called elders?

Joanna: No, that's church structure.

Q: O.K. Not communal structure.

John: Our communal structure is very lean. We don't spend much time with...

Q: much time with that. O.K. You said David Jansen is a leader, was he elected that or did you have community wide consensus and he emerged? Or how would a leader be chosen?

John: I was asked that Saturday afternoon at a meeting, I was supposed to present something there and ... wanted to know about community and I can't remember how they got to that place. I just don't know. Do you? We probably all agreed he should do it. I mean I...

Joanna: ... We affirmed him as...

Interview with Joanna and John Lehman

Interviewer: Marilyn Klaus

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Q: Yea, and what does that mean? What does David do?

Joanna: The meetings. Our carrying a vision of where we're going. Making sure that there is necessary structure to keep things going. What would you say?

Q: Was he also the pastor of the church? Or... No, that's somebody else. Do the members attend Reba Place Church or Reba Place Fellowship?

John: Yes. Church.

Q: Church. Who is the pastor? Is there....

John: Virgil is the senior pastor and then there's four of us ... Much bigger structure about 500 people.

Q: Where does that meet?

John: ...

Q: And is that a church building?

John: ...

Q: Oh that that crew. Yea, O.K.

Joanna: ...

John: ... 600 spaces. The church has two worshipping...

Q: Reba Place Church. And is that the official name? Reba Place Church?

Joanna: At the point at which we emerged a membership to incorporate ... to be a part of the community. Then we replaced fellowship with communal part, church...

Q: The larger community. You say that you probably have around 50 adult members?

Is that both female

John: ...

Q: And living...

John: ...

Q: 60. Is that? Has there been more? Has there ... What would you say the peak might have been?

Joanna: 150.

John: No it's 100 and it's just a little over 100, 110 I think...

Q: And was that in the '80s?

John: ...

Q: O.K. Did you garden or farm or—?

Joanna: A group of our families at one point in our history, um, began a farming community...

Interview with Joanna and John Lehman

Interviewer: Marilyn Klaus

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Q: O.K. Alright. Plow Creek. Yes, I'm going there on Thursday.

Joanna: ... about four families from here.

Q: That's how that started. Was one of them your sister? (Laughing) I'm going to be talking with her on Thursday.

Joanna: Maybe you'll find a few similarities.

Q: So, Plow Creek then was it an intentional community that was—

Joanna: Born from—

Q: Born from Reba Place. O.K.

John: It was always every spring a group of people...

Q: ... your country cousins, or in your case your country sister. Um, you renovated buildings, did you build any new buildings for this—but you spent a lot of time, like making livable or making ... of the buildings that were already here. Um, what about energy kinds of things, I know that New Creation experimented with solar. Was there any, this is wonderful the...

John: We did um, a little bit ... at the point where energy is being conserved, um ... and Matthew ... both gave considerable attention to not creating energy but saving energy. So ... downsized for instance ... New Creation has, Kansas has more sun, so...had two solar units, but that's all.

Q: O.K. What was the process of becoming a member? (Silence) Was it like, did you have a screening process or a trial?

Joanna: We had what we called, and it's still I guess, we use the same name for the same principle, um, a time of which you would be an intentional neighbor. Which that's a term that we used which means that you were here deliberately to seek out whether you wanted to become a full member. And so ... experience. That time, that time frame—

Q: Depended on the person.

Joanna: It depended on the person.

Q: Did they, they lived in community? And, and within the guidelines of the budget and those kinds of things, or—?

John: At the point where they were serious about it they would ... to live in the budget...

Joanna: But they didn't turn in, they didn't turn in their money or assets—

Q: Until they actually—

Joanna: Until they actually became a member.

Q: And was there a ceremony to mark that, or kind of a ritual, that when you took members in—

John: Well for many years...joining a church

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Q: Yeah that's true.

John: ... church membership...

Q: When people, then, who had been community members left, was there kind of a standard material whatever that they left with—a car, or a certain amount of clothes or allowance?

Joanna: We just had to work it out with each family.

Q: There wasn't a set policy—other than 'We will help you get started.'

Joanna: No, I mean usually they had a car usually...

John: You had to evaluate what the situation was...reach out and ... clothes and all that stuff....personal items.

Q: So there was a level of personal property. Like, for instance, if a person had come in and they had owned a farm. Was that land deeded over to the community, or—?

John: Uh, it would have been sold.

Q: Prior to joining the community.

John: And, one of the rules for... was that it was not useful to bring your car or your property, to get rid of your car and your property. Because that was a source of tension. Nobody could take care of your car as good as you could, and nobody—anyway if you didn't watch out ... were given away.

Joanna: ... to expect certain privileges...

Q: Sure, sure.

John: You have to keep equality about...

Q: That I think proves true towards a marriage, too. I'd get a little possessive of things that I owned before we joined. (Laughing) O.K. you talked about the living arrangements, you've talked about the nuclear family households. You did go to a more extended model in the seventies, you said?

Joanna: About, around '72 or '71 or something like that.

John: It was, that was part of the charismatic experience...

Q: Do you want to say a little more about that?

John: Well, Church of the Redeemer in Texas—Houston—was ... um, and they were active in extended households and told us about that. So they had a lot of influence and you can read the books that...

Q: What was the original connection? A member here was there, somebody had been here—

Joanna: ... we sent folks down there to visit—

Q: So they were also an intentional community.

John: Yes. (Name indistinguishable) spoke in Michigan on, um, something—it might have been some kind of meeting, we were going to that, and then went to Houston and that's how we met John...

Interview with Joanna and John Lehman

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Q: And when you say charismatic is that um, is that the kind of traditional sense of the word—speaking in tongues and the kind of formal worship service or what exactly what do you mean by that?

John: Oh, it was a time that um, that for the congregation in general we um, it was an important renewal of our life. The gifts of the spirit, freedom of worship. Um...

Q: And did you notice the worship begin to change?

Joanna: Oh, yes. It became just a very joyful dynamic, free expression, and it was at that point that people began to flock.

Q: So that you also experienced a real growth into the—

Joanna: Yes—

Q: Into the community.

Joanna: Yes a dramatic (talking all at once)

Q: It was still ... community.

John: Over our first year we doubled in size, the second year almost the same thing.

Q: In the common ... because you hadn't gone to the two separate—

Joanna: Right.

Q: Um, yeah because I can remember the world conference. Dance, interpretive dance?

Joanna: Oh, yes.

Q: That was sort of my first, well I was fellowship of Hope during seminary but wasn't real familiar with Reba Place. But I remember that, um, it was communion service I believe, or something, that Reba Place was very involved in at that point. And that was what, '70—?

Joanna: That was in seventy...

Q: Because I was in Kansas, it must have been '78, because I moved to Kansas in '77. It was right soon after I moved.

John: It might have been...

Q: Um-hum, Um-hum.

John: ... That was a very important part of our life, and uh ... to say about that but, um.

Q: And that's, is that pretty much characteristic of the church at this point?

Joanna: I would say...probably an expression of our ... maybe toned down somewhat. Probably because a lot of people have continued to come who have been less a part—

Q: Uh, huh. I can understand that, sure.

Joanna: It still is very much ... not expressed as fully as--

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John: One of the other issues is that three years ago we made a—we as a church—made a decision that actually ... the life of the community, seriously ... we brought to the church our concerns about ritual ... and the last few years in the church that ... and that process then has to be sensitive to...

Q: Is Reba Church, Reba Place church, pretty diverse then? Has that, I mean, as more community people have come in—not community, communal persons, but I mean this whole neighborhood, are there—is Reba Place as far as the Mennonite Church goes have a higher percentage of minorities? What would the membership look like?

Joanna: We have (John and Joanna talking at the same time).

John: We have ... take that seriously.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

John: And one of the four singers is a black ... we have two black...

Joanna: ... say when we used to maybe have three black members, um—

Q: As part of the community?

Joanna: As part of the community. Um, I'd say church. I'm talking about the church now.

Q: Church? O.K.

Joanna: Let's see it was three ... the community. But the church as a whole there may have at one time have about three, now I'd say somewhere more near fifteen or as much as twenty five.

Q: Oh.

John: There is, I've checked with at times this pattern, and probably 10% of our Sunday morning worship were a minority.

Q: Well, I'd say that was above the average. Even urban Mennonite churches.

Joanna: More than used to be here.

Q: Sure, sure. So then were minorities a part of the common purse or are they still?

Joanna: (With John, in unison) Still are.

Joanna: The newer minorities, aren't—but then most of our new members aren't...

John: We have a, the new members, we have 10% growth of younger adults that become new members ... last half a dozen, anyway, they're younger adults.

Q: So the communal property—the intensive community part—is still going, vibrant, adding new members. Well it's, you were founded in 1957 I would say you have gone beyond—far beyond the average life expectancy of a community. So you must—

Joanna: Something's working right.

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Q: Something is working, you're doing something right. Um, what about dress? I know that at Bruderhof (?) the women wear a certain kind of clothing and the men, you know. Was there—

Joanna: Oh, we just. We want our folks to be modest.

Q: Modest, yes. But there wasn't any—

Joanna: No dress code.

Q: In fact, one of the things about joining the church initially was whether the women would wear head coverings in church, so you were—at that point at least—intent on not having that part of the definition of the church.

Joanna: It wasn't part of the definition of the church.

Q: Yeah, right.

Joanna: I mean if someone came in...

John: Leadership...

Q: Right, right.

John: The next ... came back from the Illinois conference ... got rid of the coverings so—

Q: (Laughing) So here we are. Um, O.K. Did you ever have any problems in the early years or now with neighbors being threatened by community living, or thinking you were these hippie radicals, or misinterpreting or anything like that?

John: Well there is a part of history that, uh, that has caused us trouble for awhile and it's a joke (?).

But uh, this is early on in our life. There were a few Bishops--a few leaders at least, I forgot if they were Baptist--they weren't Mennonite. Um ... came to the United States, MCC sponsored a trip, and uh, (name indistinguishable) was leading them, taking them around the United States ... visit the church.

And after they were here—they were here for six weeks—and after they were here three weeks they said 'This is enough we want to go home.' It's...

Q: In the states, yeah. Yeah.

John: They said this is—we'd rather be persecuted than belong to this business let's go, this is a waste of our time.

Q: Amazing! Yeah.

John: So, uh, and they didn't know what to do. We just knew that they were serious. They just said that the church life was so ... that they couldn't stand it anymore. And he said well one ... John Miller was teaching at Bethel at that moment, Bethel College, and one of his students was a writer ... and he thought 'well ... said 'Run! we have got true (?).Communists.' (Laughing) We never got over that one, that got published...

Q: Did that cause a little flack (?) in Evanston?

John: We were under surveillance for the next twenty years.

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Joanna: We were on the chief of police's black list....

Q: As being Communists?

Joanna: Yeah.

John: It was in the paper...

Q: Yeah? Oh, really?

John: I didn't know I...

Q: Well Seymour Kraus (?) told us at seminarian class one time that never being called a Communist that questioned your Christianity, so there.

John: So anyway, it was years later that our ... who was super conservative, he was a very conservative republican. Oh, I needed to see him about some practical business. He said 'John, tell me what Reba stands for.' And I said, 'Well, I mean we're a church,' and he said 'Church?!' and I said 'Yes.' and he said 'I don't understand this because ... church ... and, um, I said 'Yeah, Herschel just did a 3 part series article for Christianity—was that it? ... magazine. I can give you that if you'd like to see it ... He called me up within twenty minutes and said 'John, come over here I want to talk to you.'

Q: This is the ...

John: Yes, this is the ... And he said 'Can I copy this?' and I said 'Sure.' And ... of that. I said 'I don't understand, Jim. Tell me what's going on.' He said 'Do you know how much money...

Q: (Gasps)

John: And I said 'This is a joke' I said 'What's this about?' He said 'Well, you know that you were in the paper as being Communists.' I said 'We were in the paper as being Communists? and he said 'Well, sure last—' he knew exactly when. He had ... he really believed we were Communists ... actually other Russian visitors.

Q: ... with these visits? In the sixties?

John: It was the time of the ... repeatedly we had Russian leaders because they told the other guys ... so we always had these guys.

Q: Yes, O.K. It just seems—

John: I mean if there were a German (?) here...

Q: Sure.

John: And the federal government was notified that these Communists had come...

Q: Here's this little enclave in Chicago with all these Russians coming over, of course!

John: ... point. And, I mean, there were crazy people at ... point, so you know, they'd believe it. And we knew it was misunderstood but the FBI filmed everybody ... but anyway that was a problem—not a real significant—the extended household ... they also knew that we took care of the property and, uh, the

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neighbors that, uh—at about the same time, I never even knew this but uh, Russ (?) a friend of ours, he testified for ... hearings. According to ... our neighborhood was the most stable interracial neighborhood in the United States, so. That's a little bit ... neighborhood relationships. When some people ... we were glad they were here. Other people...

Q: Did you get blamed for them feeling comfortable enough to move out here?

Joanna: Actually, we um, the attitude of the (?) community has been one of gratefulness that we are here because we kept things stable. A number of homeowners in the area said 'Well, because we have Reba Place, when we, uh ,.. moving into our neighborhood we can stay because we know Reba Place is staying' and we were substantial enough landowners you know, in the neighborhood ... we stayed (speaking again as the voice of the community) 'Then it will be integrated and not become a ghetto. So we can stay too' So we had really been responsible for stabilizing.

Q: And for making a successful interracial neighborhood possible.

Joanna: I think so.

John: Well, we're still working on that.

Q: Still working—well, yeah.

John: That's always...

Q: So, very quickly because I know you have to go here, John. Are the communes that you've been in contact with—well you're directly responsible for Plow Creek—but you also had closer relations with New Creation and Fellowship of Hope when it still—and the Church of the Redeemer. Any other—?

John: Oh we had connections with ... and every once in a while ... but Austin and Chicago ... and Grain of Wheat in Winnipeg...

Q: Is Austin and Grain of Wheat still?

John: Grain of Wheat still exists, Austin doesn't.

Q: Austin doesn't. O.K. Um, let me see—

John: We have connections ... the bigger circles were the Church of the Redeemer ... were people that later became Sojourners...

Q: Oh, Post (?) American Sojourners. You were, at Reba's?

John: No. (Joanna and John both speaking at once)

Q: In Chicago.

Joanna: It was Post (?) American Sojourners in Chicago.

John: I'm saying the larger circles, I can't remember the names of them, Sojourners in Washington, lots of other churches...

Joanna: Had a lot of connections...

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Q: (Repeating Joanna's last phrase, indistinguishable)

John: And the other circles we were, um, renewal...

Q: We've talked about, some of what the people are like, probably not as much as I'd like—child rearing, how the children were educated in public schools. You talked earlier about an artist being present, a silk screener. Does Reba Place, as a community, what is the attitude towards nurturing the artist? Or was that seen as uh, was there a place for that?

John: There was always a place for that. Um, Jim Kroger (?) you know his music, Jim was a musician.

Q: Um, yeah, right. Yeah.

John: He's from here. And, we ... supported him. And he's not a communal member anymore, but uh ... our community wouldn't support him but the church—

Q: Financially, right.

John: Oh, (?) Jackson ... books ever written.

Q: Were they members here?

John: They still are.

Q: They still are, O.K.

John: Of the church, not the community.

Q: Were they a part of the common purse?

Joanna: They were. The Kroger's and the Jacksons were part of the community and they did not leave the community—the communal part—because they were disgruntled but because somebody needed to give leadership ... create ... part of the church. And so they both got called to do that, so that's why. But music was a very important part of life here. We have people with artistic gifts who make banners and hangings and uh—

John: ... (inaudible)

Joanna: Well, for a number of years, especially during the civil rights years we had a coffee house going which—one of our fellows who was very gifted in music—was sort of the ... leadership efforts behind it.

Q: Was that coffee house here in Evanston?

Joanna: It was in the basement of one of ... houses. And of course a lot of folks had the chance to come in and perform and play their instruments and so forth...

Q: Yeah, I know that one. Let me jot down, John if you would before you left, if you could just summarize the best and worst things about this. You haven't left—so you don't have to answer that question about why you decided to leave. And maybe the success or failure—have you always been glad you did this—that kind of more personal question. And then, we'll let you go. (Laughing)

John: Well most of the days I am happy to do it. Um, it doesn't take up much of my time at this point, I'm not part of the leadership. Well, yes I am, I'm part of the ... so ... but, uh ... the community still has a

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disproportionately large part in the ministry and is ... shows disproportionately on the budget ... so really it's important, um, I think it's about right ... and um, I'm glad for it. I think a description of the community now is more like Catholic order and relationship to the church, that's the easiest way to see it, as a-- something supporting the church, supporting--existing ... mission not ... church--

Joanna: Really serving the church

John: Older Catholic orders ... things. That was a difficult, I mean I saw the community as the church when we came and it was like that for many years and that was a significant transition, I knew it was right but emotionally it took a pretty long time to adjust to it.

Q: Was that adjustment made, sort of, as a concession to wanting Reba Place to have a bigger impact and this was the way--by not making everybody who came also a part of the community or--

John: We were on an extended retreat ... Anyway, it was an important retreat and we did this regularly ... people raising the question as to whether it was right--uh, scripturally right to have community ... people who belong to the church. Although this wasn't really a hindrance to ... that was a really hard few days...

Joanna: And the practical part also was that there were quite a few people who wanted to be a part of our church, who considered the church home, who came regularly Sunday mornings, but could not become members because they just really didn't feel called...

Q: Yeah, sure. So--

John: You've got a whole mess of questions, what else?

Q: Well, you've lived almost your entire adult life in community. So I'm assuming that if you hadn't felt that it was successful you would not have done this, would not have dedicated your life to it. Were there ever those days when you wondered though?

Joanna: I've never been--I've been thankful many, many times that John and I, we both as we entered adulthood our concept of what we would do with our lives was to serve the church. And to think of being a loving pastor and wife out in the Rocky Mountains somewhere or something like that, trying to be in charge of a church--I just thank the Lord over and over and over again ... leadership and...

John: ... about the church--

Q: It's hard to separate it.

John: Hard to separate it and this mix is a good one. I'm not ... time to time been upset about something ... basically that's not the question.

Q: So H.S. (?) would have been proud, or is proud. Is proud in the good sense of what--of what he came to see, or his vision that you've carried out--

John: ... To me at this point in my life, the ... community ... happening in the church is, uh, is...

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Q: But, could that—I don't want to put words in your mouth—but could that be happening in the church, is there hadn't been Reba Place Fellowship.

John: Well, I don't know if it's good or not, I'm just glad to have both. And, you know, I might try to figure that out ... (Klaus laughing) ... I'm glad for the combination. The community takes very little time for anybody to run.

Q: That's interesting, because other people I've talked to talked about how much hard work it was and they were putting so much effort into keeping the community going that the rest of their lives were just sort of like—you know, where is this? Where's the time for the rest of this? And you're saying the opposite—that community enables the rest of your life.

John: Well, that's always been so. I mean there could be times when ... that's always been so, it's been a minimal investment, we've been blessed...

Joanna: I know the time when we changed—opened the membership—was the evaluation time for many of us. And, uh, John and I were involved doing ... community ... and you know made the decision 'Yes we did.' And I think the primary reasons are because we continued to realize that living in community freed up resources for the church and ... in the best way that we knew to do. This was the best way we knew to do that, because we didn't have to have a lot of car insurances, and all this kind stuff—sharing cars and we still—it was the best way that we knew to free up as many resources as possible for the church.

John: Do you know about this television series that Reba was part of?

Q: No.

John: This is—

Q: The book called Religious America he's handing to me over the tape recorder here.
(Reading) To Elmwood household—

John: That's where we...

Q: Well, did you—

John: ... but um, do you have anything else you....

Q: Oh, I could talk for the rest of the afternoon!

John: (Referring to book) ... children, oh that was a family, we were family centered ... maintained the ... some did a good job and some did a pretty bad job.

Joanna: And some asked for help and some didn't want help, so, you know.

Q: So your children grew up their whole lives within the community.

John: Our oldest was the first child here.

Q: Oh really!

Joanna: First child born here.

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Q: Born here, right. Because John, John Miller, had two—

John: Our son Carl and his wife live here now.

Q: Are they members of—

John: Of the church.

Q: Of the church, yeah. Who did Carl marry?

John: Oh, he's married to Charlotte...

Q: Did he meet her at Bethel?

John: No. He was married to ... Peters, then he, they're divorced.

Q: ... Peters, no, I don't know her. (Laughing)

John: Were you at Bethel when Carl was there?

Q: I think so, what years—because I know his name—what years—I moved, I was the pastor at the church from '77-'81 but I lived there after that. Let me turn this off.