

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Linda Higgins

INCITE

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Linda Higgins conducted by Whitney Dow on December 16th, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Linda Higgins

Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: December 16th, 2017

Q: [Unclear] Here we go. So, can you tell me your name, where you're from, and a little about yourself?

Higgins: [09:22:38] I'm Linda Higgins. I am the pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ here in Richmond, Virginia, and live here in Richmond.

Q: And how long have you been a pastor?

Higgins: [00:00:41] I have been ordained for—will be thirty-five years this year.

Q: And what originally brought you to the ministry?

Higgins: [09:22:52] My sense of call came in 1976—well, before '76, which was before the vote in the Episcopal Church. And I was in a women's in history class, and somebody asked who was going to go into a field that was not open for women and found my hand up and I didn't know why. And what came out of my mouth was, "I am going to become a pastor, a minister." And as I say, that was pre-the vote, and I was Episcopalian, at that time. And so I realized, and then within the next two weeks had that affirmed by a number of people, that they already knew I was

going to go into ministry. So, I went right to college and then from college directly into seminary. That was a no-no in the Episcopal Church, you were supposed to take three years off and live in the real world, [laughs] whatever that means. [laughs] And had already worked for the UCC [United Church of Christ] in my senior year of college, and kind of knew that my vision of ministry was probably more formed on Martin Luther King [Jr.] and Jesse Jackson than on the local pastorate. And so was very—so that social justice vision was part of my call, and the UCC vision was much more open to that than the Episcopal Church.

Q: Let's talk about—can you tell me about where you grew up, the community—what was the community like that you grew up, and where it was?

Higgins: [09:25:38] I grew up across the street from the United Nations building, in New York City. And went to private prep schools, so was very, very much part of the gifted life, as far as that goes. But on the other hand, my family did not necessarily have parenting 101, 102, and 103 down. The result of that was that I was raised, part of my being raised, was by the homeless folks on the street, spent a lot of time taking care of me, as well as the community. In fact, at one point my joke with folks was that Hillary [Rodham] Clinton might have written the book that it takes a village to raise a child, I was the child the village raised. [laughs]

Q: Can you tell me a little—that's intriguing. What—in what way did the homeless people raise you? How did you—how did they—how would you say it's a village? How was that, how did that manifest itself?

Higgins: [09:26:48] So my mother had the vision that you sent the children out in the morning and had them come back on when the street lights came on at night. And she didn't really see that as changing just because she lived in a city. So she very nicely put us out early in the morning and sent us away. And the homeless guys understood that maybe a two-year-old running around the city needed a little bit more structure [laughs] than that. And provided that for me. So on the one hand, I was one of the children who lived upstairs, so, you know, if they took me into toilet, they could use the toilets, too, because we did have public toilets in the bottom of the buildings. Or if they, one of the things that would happen is that they would—I always had, I often had a baby carriage with me. And I would take my baby carriage and they would give me the money and I would walk into one of the restaurants with their list of what they wanted in the way of food, and people were much happier to have a young child walk in than one of the homeless people. So they got served and I understood from a very young age that certain people got served and certain people didn't.

Q: And so, literally, at two years old, she would put you out on the street.

Higgins: [09:28:22] Yes. [laughs] And I lived in a community where, I mean, she had illusions that I stayed within the community and the doormen watched me and the—yes. She lived in her illusion. And because we were wealthy, nobody was going to challenge that. Like, if somebody had done that in a different community, they would have lost their kids. But because we were in an upper class, wealthy community, nobody was going to challenge that.

Q: And how do you think this experience, being raised that way, shaped your view of the world and yourself?

Higgins: [09:29:10] It shaped my view of the world because I understood from a very early age that my life was not everybody's life—and both the good and the bad of that. But I also came to understand that you can't judge people by their cover. And that everybody has huge stories that are really important.

Q: And do you—when do you remember first thinking or being aware of your own race?

Higgins: [09:29:52] So I would say it was probably when I was in junior high. Like all good prep schools, my prep school brought in a few people of color so that they could be diverse and help us white people have diversity. And I understood, by the time I was in middle school—I mean, I understood in middle school that those students were not there for them. I mean, it was very nice that they were getting an education, but that was not why they were there. They were there to provide an experience of diversity for those of us who were white.

Q: And were these homeless people that took care of you, were they mostly white, were they different colors?

Higgins: [09:30:39] They were all white. They would not have been able to be in our community, probably if they were people of color and homeless, that probably would have created a situation where they would not have been able to safely be in our community.

Q: And was race or your sense of your own race, in this time, during middle school, can you tell me some of the arc of how you start to think about race when you were young?

Higgins: [09:31:13] So, part of the arc for me, of course, has to do with being involved with the United Nations all through my life. The UN [United Nations] was my indoor playground. So people of other colors often, when I was a child, were ambassador-type people. They were higher on the social-economic scale than I was. [laughs] So most people of color in my world were people who I had to be careful around, in certain ways. I mean, they were, you know, staff.

And then I had people—and so, for me, the understanding of race and so forth, part of that came in terms of seeing the difference between African Americans and African diplomatic corps. And the diplomatic corps, of course, were even worse on African Americans, in some ways, than white Americans were, or the part of white America that I lived in. I lived in a community where, therefore, if somebody was a person of color, you assumed they were the same class or a higher class than you were. And other than if they were help, and they're—i.e., a doorman, working in one of the buildings. So I didn't have a class-race—I didn't put class and race together in the same way that many people do as a child.

But on the same note, I mean, you know, the rules in my family, as I said, I was fairly allowed to run loose in New York [City], but I had this rule that you never went above 96th Street. So, you know, there were these rubrics that really had to do with keeping me out of black neighborhoods. And there was one day when I fell asleep on the subway—I went to school in Brooklyn

Heights—and I fell asleep on the subway and I remember waking up at 125th Street, or as we were pulling into 125th Street. And I was on the Lexington Avenue Line, so 125th Street on the Lexington Avenue Line, when you get out of the train there's no way to get to the other side without going out of the train station, okay. And there is no way to get right back in, because they don't have—you have to have a token. And I had a bus pass. So here was this very innocent-looking young lady, who clearly did not know the world she was in. [laughs] And, you know, they would—somebody took one look at me and just gave me a token and got me back on the train, because they figured I did not belong where I was. So, you know, there were those kind of moments. But I lived in a—though there were people of color in it, I still lived in a very white world.

Q: And did you stay in New York to go to college? Or did you leave New York?

Higgins: [09:35:22] I left New York, I went to Easton, Pennsylvania, to Lafayette College, is where I went to college. And I was there for four years. And for most of my life the issues around feminism were much more real to me than the issues around race.

Q: Let's talk a little about that. Do you feel that your race or your gender has had a bigger impact on your life?

Higgins: [09:35:53] Both. I don't think you can say one or the other. I think that as a white woman the thing that has been a stopping point, the thing that has meant that I have faced discrimination, is my gender. I would say that in some ways, white women and black men

understand each other better than white men and black women. Because we each have one place we face discrimination, versus two or none. So I think that sometimes it's easier to have the discussion with black men than any other group.

Q: How often do you think about your own race?

Higgins: [09:36:59] Not a whole lot. Though I am part of Coming to the Table, which is a discussion group around—an intentional discussion group around race. And am trying to—I feel like I am naive around race issues, and that I am just beginning to try to learn what all is involved.

Q: And what precipitated that interest in learning?

Higgins: [09:37:03] I would say, so, in the United Church of Christ we had a curriculum around race that was written by our new general minister and some other people. And we participated in doing it and felt at the end that we had just touched a surface and so found Coming to the Table as a way to continue that education. For me, part of it was, in fact, coming down to Richmond. Race is different here than it was for me in the North. I'm not saying it's better or worse, but it is different. It is more visual, I think, here.

My first year I was here I lived in a housing project—in an apartment complex. Everybody who worked in the office at the apartment complex was white, almost all the residents were white and young, actually, so did not have either age or ethnic diversity. But everybody who were in the

workman category were black. My church had a black sexton, when I got here, who was not treated as a—he technically was a contracted person, but not necessarily treated with the respect of somebody who owned his own business. And so I have worked on that with this congregation. You know, he owns his own business. Just like a landscaper, if you're going to pay him that way, if he's not an employee, if you're not going to pay his benefits, then you can't set his times, whenever he cleans the church is when he chooses to clean the church. And that's been a learning curve. [laughs]

Q: So, tell me what brought you to Richmond. Were you assigned here, or did you ask to come here? And what was it like, coming into this community, and where did you come from?

Higgins: [09:40:17] So, the United Church of Christ is an open resume system. So you just apply. And there are search committees, and the search committees—we are a congregationally-based denomination, so the congregation calls you. So I applied for this church. It is the Southernmost church in the Central Atlantic Conference, which goes all the way up to New Jersey. And so I had worked in the New Jersey part of the conference previously, between which we had moved to Connecticut, and I had worked in Pennsylvania before I came back down here. Penn Northeast, we had Penn Southeast. So I have been in that Philly to kind of the end of Connecticut corridor my whole life until I came down here. So I enjoy—and I came here because this church was known for being very progressive. And it's an open and affirming church, and so we are intentionally progressive in many ways.

Q: And how does that manifest itself?

Higgins: [09:41:46] When I came to this church, I asked them how they would self-define themselves. One of their responses is, “We are the gay-friendly church you can bring grandma to.” [laughter] And by that, what they meant was that their worship service looked traditional, but that they were gay-friendly.

Q: And what about racially? Is the church much—is there much diversity in the church?

Higgins: [09:42:13] There is some diversity in the church, not enough, for sure. We are only a congregation—so, if you were to look at our list in our diversity, it would look one way. If you were to look at who’s in the seats in our diversity, it would look different. Because, quite honestly, the more diverse part of our church comes more regularly. So they help us look better. [laughs] So we have two Hispanic people who come regularly, we have one, two, three, four people who would identify themselves as African American who come regularly. We have three Asians who come regularly. Now, that doesn’t sound like a lot, but of course we’re only a congregation of forty. [laughs] You know, as I say, the diversity looks better when you’re that small. Now, if you were to take the whole 150 on the list, it looks a lot worse, right? So, you know, that is our reality. We are, since we worship with very European-sounding music, you are only going to attract a certain percentage of people. I mean, the music has a lot to do with it.

Q: Are you happy that you’re white?

Higgins: [09:44:05] It makes my life easier. If I was a woman of color, my opportunities would have been much more limited.

Q: And is that a new thought, or based on this work, or is that something you've thought about a lot, or—

Higgins: [09:44:30] Oh, I was aware, certainly, all the way through seminary, that the women of color at Yale [University] with me, opportunities were going to be very limited. If they were truly outstanding they might have an opportunity at some point, but it was going to be a struggle in a whole different way.

Q: And even in the liberal parts of the Episcopal Church?

Higgins: [09:45:08] Yes, because the liberal parts of the church tend to be very white. I mean, when people want a person who looks—I mean. The first place for people to get in is often somebody who looks like me. I mean, that's—in fact, one of my best friends in seminary, who won the preaching prize, who was, I mean, she was one of the tops of the class at Yale, her only opportunity came through going into the military and becoming a military chaplain. Another woman who I was very close to, her opportunities came through really becoming the bishop's right hand. She had to have a very friendly bishop who, because the black church couldn't pay her, so even though she was Yale-educated, and I think had a PhD in the end and everything else, most of her paycheck came from the bishop's office.

Q: Why do you think that it is that the part of the church that is progressive, the part of the church that is interested in social justice, is also, has such a hard time, with race?

Higgins: [09:46:53] I think that because historically the most segregated time of the week is ten and eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. I mean, people have segregated so totally, and in the midst of that segregation has come a truly different way of worshipping and different music, that makes it very hard to cross that path. And my example of that is I worked with three churches in the Union-Irvington New Jersey area. They were all dying churches. One of the three churches had a huge building: the big congregational church, in the center of Irvington, New Jersey. And they knew they really wanted to turn the building over to the community that lived there then. They understood that Irvington had become a black community, that this little white church—that this white congregation sitting in the middle of Irvington was not serving anybody at this point. And they wanted to sort of turn the building over to the community. And with some significant work, and some significant time that they spent on it, they decided that their only hope to get enough, literally, black people into the church to be able to turn the church over to them, was to figure out how to make their music sound appealing to the black community.

But this is a group of people who knew the Pilgrim Hymnbook [Pilgrim Hymnal]. Which, has, you know, its own history. [Laughs] So, they found this wonderful musician, who literally drove down from Bridgeport, Connecticut every Sunday, and he would take the Pilgrim Hymnal hymns and give them a beat. So that they sounded a little bit more culturally inclusive. And it worked. He also, of course, brought in a choir that was black, that would do anthems and so forth, in a very black style. We used to laugh, he was the only organist who ever asked me to be part of the

choir, and that was only because he said I knew how to move. I didn't have to open my mouth, I could just move up there, and that would be fine. [Laughs] "Mouth it, don't sing! We know that you can't sing the anthem. Just move with us." [Laughs] But that's really—I mean, I do think that's a huge—the preaching styles are different. There's a real stylistic difference that is—so it's not just, are you open and affirming? And is everybody welcome? But: what does welcome look like? And how do you make it a church that the form of worship is welcome to both?

Q: Well, the fact that it is segregated, was that hour, ten or eleven Sundays, the most segregated out of the week, is worshipping in segregated congregations a de facto problem or a negative?

Higgins: [09:51:02] I think that it—I don't. I don't know that it's terrible. Okay, I think it's kind of like denominationalism.

Q: Can you put my question in—

Higgins: [09:51:14] Oh, I'm sorry. So, I don't know that—I mean, I would much prefer that my community was more diverse than it is, but on the other hand I kind of see the racial segregation of ten o'clock in the morning on Sundays as being kind of like denominationalism. We all want to worship in the way we want to worship. So those who want a much more ceremonial worship service, a much more liturgical worship service, want to worship like Episcopalians worship. Those who want to worship in a more free church tradition, want to worship in a free church tradition, is that necessarily bad that denominations create the ability for you to be able to shorthand figure out what the worship experience will look like? Maybe, maybe not. I think in

this day in age that's really what denominationalism is. There may have been years previous that you were born an Episcopalian and you died an Episcopalian because you thought it had something to do with something else. But I think, today, really, the denominational piece on a sign tells you more about the form of worship than anything else. So, you know, when people see UCC, they expect the service to include social justice, and a social justice call. When people see Episcopalian, they assume that the service will include communion. Those are just, you know, when I have friends who intentionally worship in black churches because they like the worship, they like that form of preaching. I think that's not necessarily terrible. If we can grow to the next generation where people literally see them accordingly. Like, this is what this form looks like. I think we may be in the process of growing in formation.

Q: How does your understanding of God interact with your understanding of your race?

Higgins: [09:54:11] Well, I think that all people are made and born in God's image. And that diversity is one of God's gifts to us. And that diversity comes in all different formations. it comes in gender, in the way we live out our gender, it comes in race, it comes in the different racial understanding that would come from somebody who grew up in Africa and Haiti versus somebody who grew up in America, with a different racial skin. So I think the diversity of creation is one of the gifts of God. Now, the problem is that we, as humans, also have this piece in us that is tribal. That tries to constantly figure out who our tribe is. And there are good parts of that and bad parts of that. I mean, you know, having a community that surrounds you, that is part of your life, is an important thing for everybody. But when that tribe is—when part of how some of us define our tribe is the color of the skin of those people, then we have a problem.

Q: And how do you square your work in the church with the history of the church being used to perpetuate racial hierarchies and division?

Higgins: [09:55:54] I think that, for me, as I say, I grew up in the sixties, okay. For me, the largest version of church that I saw, as a child, was Martin Luther King, was Jesse Jackson. They were my role models, of what I wanted to be when I grew up. [Laughs] So, on the other hand I went to a church that was clearly racist. I went to St. Bartholomew's [Episcopal Church] in New York City, which had literally asked Thurber [phonetic] to come and preach, not recognizing the color of his skin. And he was supposed to come and do a Lenten week, that they would have guest preachers in. And when he arrived, they refused to let him have the pulpit. And that happened around when I was a very young child. But I remember growing up with that story.

So I understood the racism of the congregation that I worshipped in when I was young, but I also thought that the people who had it right were those people I saw on TV. Which was Martin Luther King, was Jesse Jackson, was—my first experience of real violence, I lived, my apartment was literally, over where the demonstrations for the UN occurred. I mean, literally, the Isaiah saying is what's above, right below, my bedroom window. So my first real experience of seeing real violence was when the police attacked the demonstrators on 7th Avenue. Those scenes that you see on old news feed. When I got up in the morning and went outside, you know, it was the '60s. I listened to the music and decided whether to go to the demonstration or the park. [Laughs] So I grew up in that, in a different way than maybe other people did. And to me

that was all church and community. I don't know that separated the institutional church from church as I experienced it on the street.

Q: But it's interesting that all the ministers that you referenced, they're not Episcopal ministers. They're Baptist ministers. And so why were you not attracted to the Baptist church? If those were your models, why did you take the path, the religious path that you took?

Higgins: [09:59:22] So, I grew up going to the church that was, you know, the church that my family had picked. They were part of St. Bartholomew's. My brother, actually, was the more active member. My brother was actually confirmed before my parents. Again, it was a safe place for us as children. I went to an episcopal grammar school, I went to Grace Church [in New York City] on 10th and 4th. But in terms of Episcopal role models, Mike Allen, who was the pastor at St. Mark's on the Bowery, was the father of my best friend in third grade. And I literally was at their house for breakfast every morning. And Mike and Sarah [phonetic], they got kicked out of St. Mark's because he let the homeless people sleep in the church, I mean, that's what he got kicked out of the church for.

So, you know, one of the stories would be that these homeless folks who were taking care of me, at one point, something happened and they moved down toward the Bowery. And Mike had just begun to let the guys sleep in the church, and they suddenly realized that I was in Mike's house for breakfast all the time. And so they asked Mike why I didn't get to come have breakfast with them. [laughs] And so when his daughter would oversleep, I'd go have breakfast with the guys. And so, I think more than I saw color at that point, I saw classism. For me, color and class have

always been—I think that I’ve always put the color issues under class. That I don’t know that as a person I saw color as being the big issue, but rather poverty. And I think that I tended to see poverty as a bigger issue than color.

Q: You and I sitting here is like white Americans in 2017. How are we connected to the past? Do we have a responsibility because of the racist history of this country, or is that something that’s in the past, that’s something that we’re living with now? What’s our relationship to that?

Higgins: [10:02:45] I think that we have a corrective necessity. For me, personally, I would see that primarily through education. The fact that the schools that our black youth go to are so much worse is, I think, where I would put my energy, in terms of trying to rectify that issue. I think that the fact that we have a school-to-prison pipeline, you know, those are, I think, where I would see the places to step in first. To try to rectify, is in terms of putting a lot more money into those schools and to try to fix the educational experience. And you know, instead of creating the poverty, I mean, we’ve created so many of the cities have, just like Richmond, have the counties around it to take—with the idea that the poverty will be contained in the city, and thus the people of color. [laughs] We won’t have any bus systems that let people get to the jobs outside of the city. So it’s transportation, I think it’s educations, I think we have to fix some of the systemic issues that shut the world from people of color. You know, making sure that people have opportunity.

Q: What compelled you to get involved in this project?

Higgins: [10:05:23] It came over my computer, and, as I said, the UCC has been working on these kinds of issues and trying to figure out where we really are, and trying to learn the stories of who we really are and where we really are. And so I thought it was important to begin to be part of that.

Q: And how has been the experience of doing the surveys and the interviews and stuff like that?

Higgins: [10:05:51] Some of it felt repetitive. [Laughs, claps] But other than that, you know, as I said, I have a daughter who's in film, so when somebody says they're doing a project like this, I take pity.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you think is important to be said in this context, in a conversation like this?

Higgins: [10:06:22] I guess, for me, I think that this moment in time is a time when some really poorly bandaged wounds are having to be taken—we have to take off those bandages and really try to do some healing.

Q: Just one other question. How do you talk to your family about race?

Higgins: Ah.

Q: Or do you?

Higgins: [10:07:08] I was going to say, I don't know that I really do, but that may have to do with how much I talk to my family. [Laughs] To my kids, it's very clear that all people are to be treated equally, and I could care less what the nationality, color, et cetera of who you bring home is. I mean, in those kind of terms, that has been clear all the way through. My children have known that. As has my brother, and my mother is ninety-four, and she doesn't talk at all anymore, so, you know, talking to her about anything at this point is useless. [Laughs] She's in a nursing home, and my father has been dead for years.

But as a child, I mean, this was, we had arguments, my father was very clear that he would never sit at a table with a black man or a person of color. And as you might guess from my childhood, I had a number of friends who might have been of color. And when I was going to be confirmed, there was a man who was one of the guards at the Ford Foundation who was kind of the person who listened to me every day as I came home from school to find out how my day was. And I wanted him at my confirmation and was told I had to pick between my father being there and his being there. And my mother told me that that wasn't really a choice, because she realized what I was going to say. [Laughs] She did have to go on and say, "And by the way, this is not a choice." But I mean, the fact that I did not stand where my family did on most things was not a great surprise to anybody.

Where my grandparents lived was—we had a farm, we were all farmers. I was on the farm six months—a good part of the year. And that was an area where diversity was whether you were Jewish or Christian, not whether you were black or white. So color—there was nobody of color.

And I think that that's one of those interesting things, I mean, I hear that in my church, too, because a lot of the people in my church come from parts of the country where there really was nobody of another race around. And so it's a different question. They are the first generation looking at diversity.

Q: This is clearly an important issue to you, clearly you're focusing on it now, you focus on it in your church, you've thought a lot about it over the course of your life. What are you prepared to give up to achieve a level of social justice you'd be happy with? Or racial justice?

Higgins: [10:10:55] I don't know the answer to that. I really don't know what I will be called to give up. I have already been called in my life to give up jobs. I worked at Riverside [Church] doing Christian education, applied for the job to be the Christian educator, and they decided, this was a number of years ago, that they wanted a person of color in that job, and then asked me to come on board to help them learn the politics of Riverside. So, I didn't get the job, and then was asked to come on and train the person. [laughs] Which I did. And then applied for the youth position, when that came out, and again was told that the color of my skin was wrong. So, I have had moments like that, where jobs were not open to me because of the color of my skin, and I understand that that is painful, and I understand that it is painful from the other side as well. That when they are not taken seriously as a candidate for a church because of the color of their skin.

[END OF INTERVIEW]