

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

R. Vincent Lavieri

INCITE

Columbia University

2017

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with R. Vincent Lavieri conducted by Whitney Dow on 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.

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: R. Vincent Lavieri

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 30th, 2017

Lavieri: [01:40:44] So, how many of these are you doing?

Q: I think we did about twenty last weekend. We're doing about twenty, twenty-five this weekend. So, we're doing nine today.

Lavieri: [01:40:49] Makes for a full day.

Q: It is definitely a full day so, but it's interesting and it's really nice to come in and just talk to people. It's not like a bad way to pass the day.

Lavieri: Yes.

Q: There are worse ways, right? So, it's pretty nice. Speeding?.

Cameraman (Todd): Speeding.

Q: So, can you just tell me your name, where you're from, what you do, a little about yourself?

Lavieri: [01:40:59] My name is Vince Lavieri. I live in Kalamazoo, originally from Chicago. I am a pastor in the United Church of Christ, currently working as a chaplain resident at Bronson Hospital, Kalamazoo.

Q: And what do you do in your role as a chaplain?

Lavieri: [01:41:06] I have a couple units that I'm assigned to, as well as sometimes there's eight-hour, twelve-hour coverage of the whole hospital.

Q: And does the church approve of tattoos, especially [laughter] sports-related tattoos?

Lavieri: [01:41:13] I don't think the church has any right to have any opinion on that whatsoever. [laughter]

Q: Okay. Why were you interested in participating in this project?

Lavieri: [01:41:18] I've been trying to think—how I'm interested in this project. I was trying to remember how I first got involved with this, and I don't really remember. Probably something—I saw something on Facebook or somebody must have sent something to me. Especially in these days in which we're living, exploring white ethnicity, and [unclear] goes right into racism, is a good thing to do. I mean, it defines one's whole life and it's just good to look at it, especially now.

Q: In what ways has it defined your life?

Lavieri: [01:41:34] How has race, ethnicity defined my life? I grew up in Chicago, on the northwest side, which was a white area then, probably mostly still is. When I was growing up, it was mostly first, second, third-generation Europeans. And we thought we were very diverse because we had such a wide range of European ethnicities there. Same years I was growing up is the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam peace movement, all—just many things. It just is a part of who one is, and everything that's been going on.

Q: And when you say you're white, what is it that makes you white?

Lavieri: [01:41:55] [laughs] What makes me white? That's a very interesting question. About a year ago, I did one of those DNA studies, and turns out I'm, like ninety-nine point nine percent European, which surprised me—I was quite that white. But I think it was a matter of the racial group you feel assigned to at birth, and there you are. I can't be anything else than what I am.

Q: And so, is it something that—do you feel your white identity, and do you feel your white identity on a day-to-day basis? How often do you think about being white?

Lavieri: [01:42:15] Oh, I think—how often does one feel white identity? I think you feel it every day. It's not that I wake up and think I want to think about it, but it—we live in a world that you can't get away from it. And I guess my perspective on it is—comes from Frank Zappa, in the

'60s, when he wrote, "I'm not black, but there's a whole lot of times I sure wish I could say I wasn't white." And it just is how I feel.

Q: He said a lot of good things. Frank Zappa. [laughter] Yes, yes, I—

Lavieri: [01:42:32] From the song "Trouble Every Day" on the *Freak Out!* Album.

Q: [Interruption] I want to talk to you about your faith. Can you tell me your journey, and how you became a chaplain? Now, is that—are you a chaplain? Are you also a minister, or—

Lavieri: [01:42:41] I'm a full-time chaplain right now.

Q: Yes.

Lavieri: [01:42:42] I've served congregations, I've served other chaplain positions in the past.

Q: So, can you tell me your journey? How did you come to having a life of faith, and how was it—was it something you—from an early point? Is this always a part of your life or something that came later in life?

Lavieri: [01:42:48] It's pretty much always been a part of my life. My extended family are all—on my mother's side were all churchgoers. My father's side of the family were also churchgoers. They were Catholic. I was raised, however, on the Protestant side of the family, and in a very

conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical congregation, which I found myself parting ways with who they were when I was about fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. And it was a journey of a number of years. Or maybe not that many. When Kent State happened, and I figure—reflecting on this because of the Ken Burns documentary, which is—watched this last two weeks. I was attending a small liberal arts Christian college in Chicago, North Park. And I was not going there for religious reasons. It just happened to be—it was a private school that didn't have R.O.T.C. [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] and did not require the S.A.T. [Scholastic Aptitude Test]. I had a good A.C.T. [American College Testing] score, so I went.

When Kent State happened, the school went on strike and, with many other schools across the country, and they did that as a religious response to the war and to the shootings at Kent State, to the widening of the war in Cambodia. And it just – I was very glad I was there at that time, because it helped me wrestle with issues of where do I stand, in terms of—I'd been wrestling with that before, but it really was probably the peak time of thinking about peace issues, justice issues, what does one do in the world? And my faith requires me, the Book of Amos, to seek justice, love, mercy. Walk humbly with your God. To love all people, and to establish equity. And I find that very interesting. I've been thinking about that the last couple weeks, that the Bible talks about, especially in the psalms, talks about equity. And the prophets talk about equity. Never says equality. It says equity. And that is something I'm reflecting on a lot in this time.

Q: Can you tell me some of your reflections and difference between equity and equality and how it relates to your life and your community? And your faith?

Lavieri: [01:43:54] Equity, equality, how does this—how do I reflect on that? I just got one thing right off the top of my head. In the chaplaincy program, they talk about equity and they show a picture of three children standing on a wooden box—look over a fence at baseball game, and one child is tall, one's medium size, and one's small. And of course, the smallest kid can't see over the top of the fence because he's small. The tallest kid has a great view. That's equality. Equity is moving some of those wooden boxes around so that the smallest kid can also see the field. And the picture probably says it better than I just described it.

But, Black Lives Matter movement, I relate to that in part because my only first cousin on the one side of the family was an L.A. [Los Angeles] deputy sheriff who was killed in the line of duty in '83. So, I certainly have a lot of concern for the safety of officers out there doing their job.

However, we cannot escape the incredible racism that results in black children, black adults, being shot and killed. And there's no repercussions, whether it's Michael Brown who walking down the street, however one wants to interpret that, to any of the—Tamir Rice in Cleveland, a child who pulls out a toy gun and gets gunned down instantly. And it's all excused because they're black. And so, lifting up Black Lives Matter I think is something very important to do, and right away you get somebody's going to say, "Well, all lives matter." Well, all lives matter, but that's not what we need to lift up. White people aren't being gunned down the same way as African Americans are. And as a matter of justice, as a matter of equity, we need to raise these

issues, and we cannot be silent when people are being slaughtered because of their race or their ethnicity.

Q: How do you square your life in the church and your belief in scriptures to guide you in this area with the history of the church perpetuating—

Lavieri: Mhm.

Q: —inequity, genocides. I'm not anti-religion, I just it's the same way I think about white people, just trying to talk about things directly.

Lavieri: [01:45:00] Oh, that's a question one always has to reflect upon. I'm a—have been, pretty much, in my adult life—student of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was killed by the Nazis during World War II for being a part of the resistance. In light of the Holocaust I mean, that also has changed how we look at—how we understand ourselves. Certainly, the church has been either silent or involved many times, complicit in genocide, in ethnic cleansing, in Holocaust, and that cannot be denied. And we look through, I mean, you look at any generation in history, you'll find something. The church has also been sometimes, as it was in Nazi Germany in the '30s, there was the Confessing Church. It was just a small group of people—has been people who've lifted up the voice and said that these things are unacceptable.

And I also don't know that I identify it with the church. Now, there are anti-Semitic writings in the scriptures, and there've been anti-Semitic writings—some of the theologians I value most, such as Martin Luther. But right now—well, let me go back for a moment. When I was—in the early '60s, there was a Kingston Trio song, “There's rioting in Africa, they're starving in Spain. There's hurricanes in Texas, Mexico needs,” however it went, that everybody hates everybody somewhere. And we live right now, we have all of the Islamic refugees from Burma, Myanmar [the Rohingya people], who are fleeing ethnic cleansing, genocide, fleeing into Bangladesh, and being massacred by nationalist Buddhists. And we've always identified Buddhism as being a religion of peace, as opposed to Christianity. But I think that's a part of the human condition. Whatever religious veneer we put on it sometimes, or whatever religious façade we put on it, human nature is such that sin, violence, hate can reign amongst us, and we just use our religion to justify it.

Q: Well that's a heavy load to carry as a chaplain, though. [laughter]

Lavieri: [01:46:00] It's a heavy load to carry as a Christian, as a member of—a professional member of the church, may I say. But we have to grapple with it. We have to deal with it. If theologically, we can't deal with the reality of evil, then our theology is nothing. We cannot escape the complicity of where we have been. And the call is to repent, the call is to recognize what we have done so that you can repent, and to try ever more closely to seek justice. And what does justice mean for us in the world today? What does it mean for us right now? I had another thought in mind and I lost it, but it'll probably come back to me.

Q: When you think of God, what do you see in your mind's eye?

Lavieri: [01:46:26] At this point in my life, I have no image, no picture of God when I think of God. God is [laughs] again, I don't—on one hand I would answer by simply saying I would define the faith or how I think of God in the terms of the great Creeds of the church, the Apostles' and Nicene: "I believe in God, the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. I believe in the Holy Spirit." So, I can be very orthodox in my beliefs there. Beyond that, who or what is God for us? You can take Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*—that we need to believe in something greater than ourselves and we probably all do. And in this state on any given weekend, you'll have 110,000 people in Ann Arbor, you can have 70,000 in East Lansing, you can have 60,000 in Detroit for football games, and football's taken very seriously. And we can identify with something larger than ourselves. I'm a Michigan fan. That says something about who I am too. But that doesn't talk to our ultimate sense of who we are. And maybe our struggle to understand, ultimately, who we are involves our connection with God. I can't define God better than that, other than I think the motivating force of justice, love, forgiveness, mercy, which we desperately need as human beings—to live day by day in any situation, let alone the cultural context in which we live.

Q: Why do you think that—[interruption]. Why do you think that the church has been an animating force in civil rights, the church has been an animating force for people who fought, who've fought for workers' rights? There's—the church has been an animating force for helping the poor. The church has been an animating force for many people we've spoken to over these last two weekends—talk about the church as some place that helped them awake to this idea of

racial justice and trying to examine their own race as white people. And yet it's also one of the most segregated set of institutions in—the corny old saw of the most segregated hour. Why is it this thing that can both awaken this idea of justice, awaken this idea of love and the “love the fellow man as you love yourself?” Why is it also the animating force that creates these artificial divisions between races?

Lavieri: [01:47:39] Why is it a motivating force? I think, and some people would disagree with this answer, because they say they do this also—how seriously do we take the scriptures, both in the—and I'll refer to it as the Common Covenant, what some people call the Old Testament, because both Judaism and Christianity shares that. And in the Christian Covenant, New Testament. There's strong voices for justice, strong voices for peace, and some of us respond to that more. Others, and I still—having grown up in a very conservative, fundamentalist world—I mean, racism once was almost a byword of the church. And I don't think they took seriously the implications of what the scriptures were saying, and what's called upon to be a follower of God. It's not just about *my* personal salvation, as if all of history is about whether *I* have a relationship with God, or if *I'm* going to get to Heaven, like it's some sort of cosmic insurance policy.

The church that I grew up in, was the northwest side of Chicago. The Civil Rights Movement was happening then, and the parts along the way that you—that one picks up on is a—as a kid. One of my earliest memories in life was the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi. I would have been three. We would have moved into the house that I grew up in. My bedroom wasn't that far away from the television. Emmett Till was from Chicago. So, there was a lot of coverage. And it's just—one begins to pick up on—I don't recall a time I wasn't aware of that. Why was he

killed? Because he was black? I mean, that makes absolutely no sense in any – when I was a kid, *Saturday Night at the Movies* on NBC [National Broadcasting Company], was something I watched every weekend. And I remember seeing *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and I just wondered why would—why was somebody killed because they were Jewish? It just makes no rational sense. But I didn't hear the questions being asked in the church I grew up in. In fact, they—there was tracts and pamphlets available which would have supported all of the racism of that day, of this day. That African Americans, blacks, were inferior because they were supposedly some sort of descendant of somebody in Noah's family, this, that, the other thing. That I had to reject because it was just wrong, it was evil. And it made no sense.

But the animating force, I—again, I wasn't sure for a few years if I was going to believe in anything relating to organized religion or any faith. I looked at various faith movements that I had available to me in Chicago: Bahá'í, Judaism, other things. But it came back to me that, for me, I have—I am—I know God best as a Christian, having grown up in this as I have. And that's how God and I connect to each other. And if I understand anything about faith, anything about scriptures, it's that I can't be silent when others are suffering. Our humanity is tied up with the humanity of the whole world in Jesus Christ. And I'm very thankful for voices like Dr. Martin Luther King and others along the way. The church was there, lifting these issues up, and giving us some framework in which to think.

I'm not surprised that you heard a lot about religion if you're in western Michigan for a couple weeks, because this is a very religious area, I think more so than some other places in the world.

Q: You think it's more so than New York City, where I'm from? Manhattan?

Lavieri: [01:49:34] Okay, I'll—let me rephrase that. Not necessarily more religious. Yet identity out in western Michigan, which is a place I have chosen to live, has a—by the nature of the European immigrants who settled here, has a very strong religious, Christian nature. I value, having grown up in Chicago – I know this is a part of an answer to your question about religiousness – I was very aware at an early age that many people, other than Christians, possess strong, spiritual, strong religious natures. One of the first weddings I remember going to was a Shinto wedding. My father had a coworker who was getting married. She was Japanese, and I valued that. The recognition that other people, besides just us, have values and beliefs that are very important, very spiritual, very religious. Western Michigan tends to be a bit more—a bit less diverse. And it's this self-image, this self-image out here.

Q: Go back to the question I asked before is that this is—I didn't mean to say that the churches aren't just. [unclear], some of the churches that I've—people have talked of their churches as being really committed to social justice, and really committed to building racial equity and really, and yet, the congregations are mostly white. And so, they're not integrated congregations. And that's what I was trying to get at, is that you have this view that people like you, like a lot of people I speak to who care about it, make it part of their religious practice, and yet—and I—this isn't like a criticism. This is a question—

Lavieri: I understand.

Q: Yes. This is a question—

Lavieri: I understand.

Q: —and I see it on—with black Christians that I know who care deeply about social justice, yet their churches are all black. That why, even if they're these shared values, shared belief systems, and—why aren't Christian churches more integrated? And I'm not talking about the—

Lavieri: Yes.

Q: —you know, people who build racism into their church, into their belief system. I'm talking about people who care deeply about social justice, care deeply about their fellow human beings, and believe we're all children of God. Why still are the—what is keeping people from creating common community?

Lavieri: [01:50:41] Oh, boy, if I had the answer to that question. There are—I know, for myself, I live in a community intentionally because of its diverse nature. Not as diverse as I wish it would be, but it's as diverse as I'm probably going to find. I enjoy working in places where I'm working with—again, with diversity, with people who are not just like me. When it comes to church, when it comes to the worship services, is it a family thing? Are there some cultural—I mean, there are cultural differences, I think, between the way white people worship, and African Americans worship, and Hispanics worship—is that we see family there and we're still operating out of that, that we haven't progressed as far as we'd like. I know most of the white— having

preached to both white and black congregations, I prefer preaching to black congregations.

People are much more involved. But a lot of my white brothers and sisters couldn't connect with that. They want it more brief. They don't want the personal involvement that you have in the service, I don't know. And I wish I knew. I wish I knew.

Q: The brief piece is interesting those people who aren't used to going to African churches. [unclear] you've got to settle in, [unclear] people come and go. They go on and the collection plate goes around three or four times. [laughter] It's very different than the churches that I grew up in. So, I want to move onto some more—so, when did you start becoming aware of your own race and the impact that it had on your life?

Lavieri: [01:51:38] I probably can't say when. It's like I always remember a time when I knew about Emmett Till. That would be because he was black, we were white. Chicago was a very polarized, divided city. We were the North Side. We were white. South Side was black. People define themselves in many ways with that. But it was a white identity. And because of the Civil Rights Movement, when these issues are being lifted up and raised—and it just always was the definition that was always around me. We identified—I don't know, did we identify more as being white at that time? So, we certainly did, but also with our various ethnic backgrounds. I think most of us, where I grew up, would've defined ourselves precisely by the ethnicity, what country our forebears in Europe came from. But it was also—I mean, it was the—it's the ongoing struggle at the time. White power in Chicago. Who has power in government anywhere? And some people saw themselves as being members of competing blocs. I had a lot of problems with that identity.

I can tell you some specific times with that. I think we just passed the anniversary of when the Sunday school—when a church was blown up and that four children were killed by people who proclaimed themselves protecting white identity. And the killing black children—I'll tell you a very specific time. I was—would have been '67. I wasn't—no, '68. It would have been somewhere, this fall, winter of '67 or going into '68, I was a junior in high school then. And there was a couple, two schools in Chicago, on the West Side, which is African American, black public schools—I'll never forget their names, Spencer and May. And their schools were very overcrowded, and Chicago Public School System proposed busing children from those overcrowded schools. And they were terribly overcrowded, into schools in—would have been the school district next to mine. It was actually the school district my father had—it was Chicago school but it was a different high school district, the one that my father had gone to. It was just a few miles down from us. And they had—meeting with the board of education, representatives met with the people of that community, that neighborhood to talk about why they were bringing these kids in.

And I remember going in there with this generalized idea like everybody had in the neighborhood that we shouldn't be busing kids, et cetera. But I remember sitting there in that auditorium, which is absolutely jam-packed. Maybe 1,500 white adults, virulently screaming at, expressing their hatred, expressing hostility, screaming insults at anybody who spoke in favor of busing these children. It wasn't for racial reasons. It was because some schools were overcrowded and there were empty places in schools in the northwest side, so that we had the room. The grammar school I went to, we had a whole floor that was empty. So, there were rooms

in the northwest high schools, but the—and I remember just sitting there and being—how can people hate like this? Just feeling those waves of hate. They eventually did bring those children. They did bus those children. And when the kids got off the bus, they were met with adults throwing rocks, bricks, swearing at, cussing out children. And because they were black, and because the children were black, and they were white. And I've seen that replayed so many times in so many ways. I don't know how—why that became acceptable, how it ever was acceptable. But it always has been acceptable.

Who wrote the book *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*? I cannot remember the author's name [John Dollard] at the moment who posited that maybe white racism was in part because you wanted to look down on somebody. But wherever one looks in history, there are always those people that we look down upon. And you have a white community that wanted to keep its power. In '83, when Harold Washington was the nominee for mayor of Chicago, I was living in—I was a committed Michigander at that point, but it's still my hometown, and politics is what we follow in Chicago. Follow it like sports. The Republican candidate ran, Bernie Epton ran with a slogan, "Before it's too late." Before it's too late for what? But every white person in Chicago knew what that meant, because *they* would be in power. And Bernie Epton got some, I don't know, some huge percentage of the vote that a Republican never gets in Chicago, because—was coming primarily from the white ethnic wards. There were enough of the what we call then the white lakefront liberals who joined with the coalition of African Americans in Chicago to elect Washington. And the city didn't do anything for the next four years because the white aldermen who had the majority wouldn't—they called the Council Wars, Beirut-on-the-Lake. They're in total opposition to anything Washington proposed. And it's like this struggle that we always

have and the dog whistles we always have. And this is a very tough time for me to live, because it's like the election last year negated everything I've ever believed in in my entire life, and everything I've ever worked for.

In '80, 1980, Ronald Reagan began his post-convention—the fall presidential campaign with giving a rally in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Why would you pick Philadelphia, Mississippi? Who would go to Philadelphia, Mississippi unless you knew that that's where the three civil rights workers had been killed? [James] Chaney, [Michael] Schwerner, and [Andrew] Goodman. That was a great message to give to the white community, that we're going to be in a place that civil rights workers were killed. And this Trump campaign began with insulting Mexicans and it's been dog whistles. Well, his whole career has been one long dog whistle of racism. But yes, it's like—we keep repeating this, and I—and it's so discouraging, so discouraging. Cause are we ever going to get past it?

Q: Are you happy you're white?

Lavieri: [01:54:49] Again, according to Frank Zappa, I'm not black but there's a whole bunch of times I wish I could say I wasn't white. I'm not—no. I don't think I've ever thought about that particular question before, but no, I'm not happy I'm white. You can't ever escape white privilege. There are certain things you can't shed, it's so visible. And when you live in a society—I just follow—I think that every society has been organized along some lines like that. You can't ever escape it. You can't ever escape it.

Q: If you could leave this interview right now, there are two doors, and you walked through one, you emerge as you are. If you walk through the other, there'd be a random fifty percent chance that you might emerge as a black person. Which door would you—not make a decision? Would you make a conscious decision? Which door would you walk through?

Lavieri: [01:55:20] If I could change to being black, would I? Would any white person? I threw that particular question on Twitter at a baseball player who I've long admired, was a fan of, who's been ripping into those who are kneeling during the National Anthem. He was, for some reason, he decided on Twitter, that he had to engage with me in this conversation, because I had tweeted a reply to him that I was just disappointed he was saying that sort of thing. And he wanted to engage me, and all of the things I heard—so, that's a question I threw back. You want to deny that there's white privilege? You want to deny all those things, but yet, would you become black? And if I were to say no, because also other parts of my identity are important to me—I'm Polish, German, Bohemian, Italian, and those are important to me. And I would lose something of my identity in that sense.

So, whether I would choose to be black, I would probably say no, but not—but because of who my identity is, tied up with other things. It's what I'm used to looking at when I look in the mirror, I guess, too. But boy, if I could change society, if I could change that so that was simply a matter of—boy, it's fun to be Italian and Italian festivals, it's fun to be—eat Polish food, it's these other things had meaning to it. But if we could make it all just about something that was kind of interesting and fun rather than being a defining principle in which our society seems to be always divided, God, I'd love to see that.

Q: You seem really conflicted, in pain about this. One of the things that I also think a lot about this is that I think really engaging this as a white person is also about the process of engaging with loss, that you have to lose something. Have you thought about that at all, about how you navigate, if you're really going to engage white privilege, is there loss there? Is there something that you have to give up? And when you talk about your own identity, the idea of having a relationship with a—identity that you're also very conflicted with. You're conflicted with what that identity means. So, how do you navigate that?

Lavieri: [01:39:53] Navigating white privilege. I mean – yeah, I'm conflicted about it. I know I benefited from it. I know that I—things have happened for me that were able to happen because I was white and not anything other than white. So, you lose—yeah. You lose, and I think—and that's—I think that's got to be an animating force for a lot of the racism we see going on right now. People are afraid of losing whatever they think that they have that—their status, their place in the world, their sense of superiority or whatever. I'd love to give it all up, if I could. And it's not going to happen. Want to say something else about the identity. You know, in a way it—and then I'm going to go back to growing up in Chicago. There are two baseball teams in Chicago. I grew up in the northwest side, so by all rights, I should have been a Cubs fan. I could never be a Cubs fan. I instinctively felt that as a kid, even though I knew players for the Cubs and their families, who I loved. But Chicago Cubs have a history going back into the 1800s, of racism, of opposition to black baseball players. I can't recall the name of the player offhand now. Cap Anson, the Cub player who was probably more responsible than anybody else for putting the

color ban in baseball, just because the Chicago Cubs refused to play any team with an African American player.

The Chicago White Sox on the South Side, who we were supposed to be—on the northwest side, we were not supposed to be for—all through the '30s, '40s, Negro Leagues were playing there. The Negro League World Championships were being played at Comiskey Park, the White Sox were the team of African Americans, of liberals, the people who were open to—who didn't certainly identify with the racism that the color ban had identified with. I could never be a Cubs fan. I'm still surprised, if I watch a baseball game on TV and it's in Wrigley Field, and I see black people in the stands with Cubs gear on. Because that's not the way it was when I grew up.

But I mean, that's a part of our identity. I'm a Sox fan. Why? It's tied into everything. As something as simple as, or as complex as, a reflection of our culture as baseball, wherever. The University of Michigan is celebrating its two hundredth anniversary this year. Friend of mine is very involved in the bicentennial activities. And being football season, they've been—the university has been reflecting on its role in when Michigan agreed to not let the black players play in the '30s, when they played Southern teams, and one day finally said no, we're not going to do it. The friend whose house I go to every week, every home game—people I go to the games with—this is the guy who's on the bicentennial committee. On his desk, he has a study from the University of Michigan about how they were—weren't going to let black women live in the dorms for women students and the women who defied that ban. It's just so much a part of everything of who we are. I'm glad it's being examined, I'm glad it's being lifted up. But I think, by the very fact of doing that, that there are those who feel that they're going to lose something

that's precious to them. And for me personally, I'd love to lose it. I'd love to lose it. That's not going to happen.

Q: Is this a conversation that western Michigan is ready for? Clearly, you think it needs it. But is it ready for it?

Lavieri: [01:58:39] And where in western Michigan are you—yes, I—there are certain places where this conversation is taking place. Where we are being engaged, where the conversation is happening. And there are places where it's not. One of the things I value about living in Kalamazoo and western Michigan is that—because I can feel comfortable with who I am, and very conflicted about these things and raising these issues, because as I have enough other people who are also doing that. There is some comfort there not being alone. And that's important to me. Two thousand nine to 2015, I was working in Ohio. And I'll always say I was working in Ohio, I will never say I lived in Ohio (and that may be a Michigan/Ohio State thing). But I was in—the economy was so bad in Michigan, I had to—that you have to go somewhere to work. And so, I ended up in northwest Ohio, in the Lima area. And I thought how different could western, northwestern Ohio be from western Michigan? Turns out to be a lot. I'd be sitting—the racism was so—it's so much more overt there.

I remember one afternoon, I was sitting at the Buffalo Wild Wings in Lima. It was a snowy day in winter, and there was nothing that'd be happening, so I was going to stop and get some wings, which I love to get, and play the trivia game they have. Just being by myself, and quiet afternoon. And there were some other people that—I sat at the bar, because that's where I can

play that trivia game the easiest, and I get the fastest service. There were some people sitting around the corner of the bar, couple white guys. Three or four white guys talking. They were talking with the bartender, and they were saying some of the most incredible racist things. I'm sitting there thinking, am I back in Chicago in the '60s? What time warp have I gone through, to hear people saying these things in public? And they tried to engage me in the conversation. I was just sitting and thinking God does not want me in northwest Ohio to get into a bar fight. So, they assumed that I was white, that I would agree with them. And I was thinking boy, if I get into this thing with them, what happens if they know somebody from the congregation? Well, it turned out that they knew members of the congregation, were good friends with so, I'm glad I—in that sense I didn't say anything.

The ongoing—I had kids in my confirmation class who came in one day, week, telling me that Obama is Muslim. And of course, Muslim was a code word for being an enemy, being black, or just another dog whistle out there. And I said, “No, he's not. I mean, we're United Church of Christ. President Obama was a member of U.C.C. Congregation in Chicago.” I said, “He's U.C.C. just like we are.” “No, he's Muslim.” “Well, how do you know he's Muslim?” “Because at my grandpa's house, that's what they said on TV.” So, the following week, I played a DVD of the U.C.C. General Synod in 2007, and then Senator Obama spoke at that, as a member of a U.C.C. congregation. And so, that—when I showed the DVD of the highlights of that general synod, of course, there were some good clips of Obama speaking there, who said some very good things. And the kids were astounded. “What's he doing at a U.C.C. thing?” I said, “Because he's U.C.C. He's Christian like we are.” “No!” They couldn't accept it. But they come back the

following week, and these kids tell me they'd figured it out. Obama was one of those "U.C.C. Muslims." I did not know the U.C.C. had Muslims. But that was their way they rationalized it.

So, I thought I'm going to show this to the church council, that same DVD. The same shock. "Why is Obama at a U.C.C. meeting?" "Because he's U.C.C. like we are." "No, he's not." That inability—recognize reality, I mean, we're not talking interpretations here. We're talking straight-up facts. But boy, there are people—and I left that congregation—was serving a senior citizen community, and there are people that I dearly loved who would say the most racist things. And it was heartbreaking. And you can't get in a fight with everybody you serve. I mean, how do you lift consciousness? How do you deal with these things? And there were things that I would say that—and Sundays in the sermons—the Sunday after Dylann Roof killed the nine parishioners in Charleston. There's no way in the world I'm not going to deal with that. And people seemed to be okay with that. And I don't know whether they didn't always hear what I was saying, that it had come across okay because I was passionate about it? I think some people liked that I was passionate about it, and they didn't necessarily get what I was saying. Never changed anything. Nobody ever had a conversion experience. But I couldn't deal with the—all the racism that was present there. And I came back to Michigan for many reasons, but one of them was to—and I came to Kalamazoo, because I knew it was a progressive community where there were going to be people who I would feel comfortable with after living—after working in an area for six, seven years where I wasn't comfortable at all with the attitudes of most of the people.

Q: What role can the church have in this discussion, this conversation?

Lavieri: [02:01:18] I struggle with that. What role can the church have in discussion of race?

Q: Or a discussion of whiteness?

Lavieri: [02:01:23] Whiteness. [laughs] That is – I wish I knew how to answer that question. Yeah, I've been ordained forty years, and I just passed the fortieth anniversary. So, I'm kind of looking back at everything. I said the election of last November was like a rejection of everything I'd ever worked for my whole life. We certainly have talked about matters—I was originally in the Lutheran Church in America, which is now the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America]. Issues were raised there, the church talked about it. They talked about it—Bible studies, talked about it in the sermons, at the national church bodies, the regional church bodies. Said things. You hoped people listened and learned, and I don't know that anybody's listened and learned anything. Now I'm in the United Church of Christ, which takes a very progressive stand on these issues. The general minister of the U.C.C. is very involved in raising issues of white privilege and justice.

And yet, we're not any, necessarily anyplace that's, where I can say that people have totally, somewhat changed [unclear]—I don't know. I don't know how people can hear what—how is it that we hear anything? Why can somebody kneel to protest injustice in America and some of us respond, “Yes, we need to protest injustice. Yes, we're glad for this public witness against”—and then other people, “Oh, this is an attack on the flag! It's an attack on the anthem.” How is it that we see the same thing and we see things so differently? I wish I knew how we could bridge those

gaps. I wish I knew how we could really have that conversation. I'm also—I'm a—you know, involved in—Democratic Party, not that I think that—well, I'm not going to say that. I think it's important that if, in the next election, I don't think the next election—2018 or in 2020—that we are going to win by converting people anymore. I used to think that forty years ago, fifty years ago. I thought we could all come together and, what was that song in the '60s? By Friend and Lover? "Reach out in the darkness and you may find a friend." We were all going to make the world a better place. Country Joe and the Fish at Woodstock saying, "How can you stop the war if you can't sing any better than that?" People really thought if they sang loud enough they'd stop the war and we'd have this huge convergence of hearts and minds.

Well, that never happened. Our answer at the next elections is not going to convert anybody. It's going to make sure we get our voters out and we outvote the other people. I don't know how the church plays a role. I don't know how – we'll continue to talk about it in Bible study. I'll continue to preach about it. I'm kind of glad that I'm not preaching regularly right now. I'm doing pulpit supply. I can raise these issues as a guest preacher, but the thing is, too, there, that you always have to pull your punches. Because you know people are going to get really upset if you really say everything that you think needs to be said. And it's a struggle when you're preaching, because it's very much not supposed to be, "this is my opinion." It's supposed to be, "what is God saying to us, to these people who are gathered here this day?" And you can say things, if you really preach passionately from where you feel at—you can lose people. They'll get offended right off the bat and they won't hear a word you're saying, and we have no more conversation. So, just even getting up there on Sundays or how—what you say in a Bible study and what you say in conversation and—everyday conversation with people.

I don't know what we can say that's going to make the world different, make the world better. That we don't see whiteness as our primary identity, that we see our faith, perhaps, as a primary identity. That we see the scriptures, that we see what it means to follow Christ as a primary identity. And, of course, that has its problems, too, because if we—going to elevate following Jesus Christ, what does that say about those who don't follow Christ? Are we putting them down, then? Are we teaching some other form of exceptionalism? So, how do we lift up that with—while affirming the value of all human beings? It's a minefield that one walks through, and so one often pulls their punches.

A person who I worked with at a senior retirement community and who I've loved and valued in terms of, a valued and wonderful coworker, as an assistant with what I was doing as chaplain there. Just, she knew that Barack Obama was a Muslim and everything that that statement meant. You couldn't convince her otherwise. And when I heard other people ask her why—and I'd be so taken aback, I didn't know what to say the first time I heard her say that. And she just knew. She said, "I heard him talking on TV, and he said something, and I just knew." You know, what do you do with that? Now, do we go back to *Saturday Night Live* and say, "Jane, you ignorant slut"? [laughs] And if we did, would that do anything? No, it wouldn't.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't touch on or talk about that you think is important to say?

Lavieri: [02:03:59] Oh, boy. I will answer that question better by the time I've driven home, and I will have thought all the things that I felt that I should've said or should've said better or that I

should've raised. Yes, I—there's one thing I will say. Two of my grandfathers were born in Europe. Two of my grandfathers. My two grandfathers were born in Europe. Sometimes, I think of more than two grandfathers because now, with my own grandchildren and blended families, we have more than two grandfathers out there. But my two grandfathers, one was born in Italy, one was born in Germany. My Bohemian grandmother was born in the time shortly after they came over to this country, and my Polish grandmother was born—I think the family had been here a little longer. She might be my longest connection, ancestor in this country in terms of family. Just in there, I've never been able to affirm that I'm German. Is it because I learned at an early age about Anne Frank, and I think that my—maybe I had cousins over in Europe who were Nazis? We had family members, or my grandfather had family members who were—so, sometimes, even within our own ethnicity, our own—a friend of mine who was born in Germany, once we were talking about this and he said, “Maybe it's because we're afraid we're—afraid of the Josef Mengele in all of us.” And I think that's probably the best explanation I'll ever have in this life.

We can be afraid of what's inside of us, out of what our heritage is, of what our ethnicity is, of what we value, that—we're so afraid that we just refuse to look at it. Most people who know me will tell you that I'm Italian and Polish because they've heard me talk about that. I never talk about the German or Bohemian. Bohemia's so close to Germany, part of Austria now, it's Czech Republic. Are we afraid of that which is inside of us, so we pretend it doesn't exist? Or we go on a day-by-day basis operating as if it doesn't exist? And I think we do that, too. And I think maybe that's why some people are so uncomfortable talking about race. And one of the things you'll hear is, well, that problem was solved, that we solved that long ago, so don't talk about it

now. Or they'll blame Obama, as if racism had never occurred in this country until Obama was president. "Well, he's divided the country." We don't want to talk about what has happened in the past. We don't want to talk about the road that we have been on and the things that have happened in the name of our ethnicity, of our racial heritage, of our country, of our faith, our church body, whatever. We don't want to talk about that, because it makes us uncomfortable. So, we end up not talking about it, and the things continue to persist.

And at this point, I just—I'm sadly aware that I'm never going to find that solution that's going to change anything. I do the best I can. I'm proud that my children and my grandchildren have a very different mindset on, from what, you know. And my values, at least, have been passed onto them. And I'm very, very comfortable with who they are and where they fit into the world. But I don't know how to do much beyond that. And yeah, I'm conflicted, and I was eager to do this because of everything that's happening now. I was eager to engage in this conversation here. Maybe it's because I just want to scream out loud, "God, I'm so sick and tired of all this." [Cries] I'm so sick and tired, of the hate. And I'm a chaplain at the hospital, and I also work at Walgreen's to pick up a little extra money. And after the election, I wanted to say to every black person that came in the store, "I didn't vote for him!" Whenever something happens, you want to say, "I didn't—I'm not a part of that. That's not who I am!" And, God, I just wish it would end. And it's hard to find an identity that you can be comfortable with it.

Maybe this is some other psychological problem, that—after the election, Progressive Kalamazoo was formed spontaneously to be a gathering of people who were in—going to stand against everything that Trumpism is for. Very valuable to be part of that, some wonderful people

there. And I think the first couple meetings were all still pouring out our grief. And so, we were going around the room in one of the groups, talking about why we were there, Progressive Kalamazoo. And I give my wonderful answer, “Oh, it’s because I’m a person of faith and we need to stand against injustice, and we need to stand against racism and all these other things.” And when I realized that when I said I’m a person of faith, there were two women who were sitting there, who had spoken before me, and they were a couple. And they were, they had spoken of how they were there because they had been treated so badly by people of faith. So, even my affirmation of “I’m a person of faith” has a different meaning to somebody else who’s been hurt by that. And I can’t deny that they’ve been hurt by that. We can’t deny that at all, the oppression against lesbian, gays, bi, trans, queer, intersex people. We can’t deny—but so, what identity do we lift up that we can value that doesn’t maybe—that doesn’t hurt somebody else – not maybe hurt somebody else, that will hurt somebody else, because in some way, we’ve all stood on the side of the oppressor. At some place, we all have been on the side of the oppressor, and we can’t change that. And so, we have to live that out.

And so, I got a t-shirt recently that said “Black Lives Matter”. I have other t-shirts that say—that speak about things, and that’s—you’re going to change the world by wearing a t-shirt? No, nobody’s going to see me walking a street and read my t-shirt and think—have this wonderful conversion experience about some issue of the day. But sometimes, I wear them because I just want to scream out, “I don’t want to be a part of the oppressive system. I don’t want to be a part of the injustice. I’m not with them, with what—I’m not with them. I’m with you.” And short of walking up to every person you see on the street and saying, “I’m with you, I’m not with them”

[cries]—you do what you can. I do what I can, and I wish I could do more. But that’s all I can do.

Q: Thank you so much for coming in and speaking with us. We really appreciate it. We want to take a few stills with you just now, so if you just sit, we’re going to take a couple stills—with the —just relax your face. No, you don’t have to smile, nothing, just sit with us.

Lavieri: [02:07:23] I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you guys to be doing this and listening to these conversations.

Q: It’s a real blessing, honestly.

Lavieri: What’s that?

Q: It’s a blessing. I mean, to have the opportunity to speak to people that I have no relationship with, we have no relationship with—and come and talk to them about something very personal like this is really—it’s a really—even people who are very—we talk to people of all, across political spectrums, so, we’re just going to—hold it one second.

Lavieri: [02:07:38] You know, I was just—yes, one can—

Q: Hold—don’t talk for one second [unclear]

Lavieri: Okay, sorry.

[Interruption]

Q: All right, thank you so much—because I saw—I used to go see Frank Zappa every Halloween at the Palladium in New York City, right? Three years in a row, and—

Lavieri: Yes.

Q: —it was just like the most incredible concert. He would do this just like insane concert. This was probably the late '70s.

Lavieri: [02:08:03] And I never saw him—the two groups that I have seen the most would be—see that you'd never put together. You know who the Punch Brothers are? Chris Thile—

Q: Who?

Lavieri: [02:08:07] Punch Brothers. I just saw them for the eighth time.

Q: Wow.

Lavieri: [02:08:09] Love them.

Q: Yes.

Lavieri: [02:08:10] And the other group—the one—first—the artist who've seen the next most times, seven times, is Eminem. [laughter]

Q: That's [unclear]

Lavieri: [02:08:13] The Venn diagram of who has been to both is probably very small and, like

—

Q: I'm sure it is! I've never seen Eminem. I would love to see Eminem. He's amazing.

Lavieri: [02:08:16] Oh, it's an incredible show. Is an incredible show. And it's amazing the stuff that people give you when you go to an Eminem concert.

Q: So, want to grab the microphone?

M: Yeah.

Q: Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]