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Date: 14 January 2014

Interviewer: Helen Hughes

Respondent: Isabel Smyth

This is Tuesday 14th January 2014 Helen Hughes interviewing Isabel Smyth. Isabel could you spell your name please?

Yes, I-s-a-b-e-l S-m-y-t-h.

Thanks. We are in your home in Woodlands Glasgow for the Stepping in to Diversity Project. Isabel can you tell me where and when you were born.

I was born in 1943 in Anderson, which is actually very near here just down the road in my grandmother's house in [s.l. Argyll 0:00:40:5] street the house of course is no longer there now I think it's the Kingstone Bridge ... or, well, underneath the Kingston Bridge.

So now you live in Woodlands I am sure you have lived lots of different places can you tell me a little bit about your upbringing and what you have been doing?

Sure. I was born in Anderson. I was born during the war at a time when unmarried women were to be called up and so my parents got married at Christmas. At Christmas time in order to avoid my mother being called up and a lot of my friends when I was growing up their parent had all got married around the same time for the same reason. And we lived at my grandmother's in Anderson for a bit then we moved very quickly, well not very quickly we moved to Pennerly and then out to Knightswood because my mother had a sister in Knightswood and always wanted to come out to this part.

They did an exchange in those days people who lived in I suppose council houses or local authority houses could organise the exchange for themselves. We came out to Knightswood and I was brought up in Knightswood and lived there really all my life, well not really all my life by I liked there until I went to college to become a teacher for three years and that was residential. And after that entered and became a nun joined the Sisters of Notre Dame did two and a half years training in Sussex down south.

Then came back to Scotland did some teaching in primary education in both [0:02:36:6] and Helensborough. Then went to Lancaster to university and after that came back to teach in St Andrew's College, Notre Dame College it was then it became St Andrew's College and taught there for 20 years. That was in [0:02:55:7].

Right that was a long career in teaching. What were you teaching at St Andrews?



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I was, St Andrew College was a teachers training college so I taught there it is the training of teachers; I trained teacher for the Catholic school system of Scotland and taught ... in particular, I was responsible I suppose for the world religions element of the curriculum. That must have been about the 1970s and at that time religious education had changed so that it was to become education and not in any way prothletising or confessional and world religions had to be taught by law. Even in Catholic schools and so I was responsible for that element of the curriculum.

A few things to follow up there. I think [0:03:50:0] that was your first introduction to learning about work because obviously you have to learn before teaching.

Well I studied at Lancaster and when I went to Lancaster it was very well know at that time for Ninian Smart who was the professor I presume for religious education but certainly he had started an organisation called the Sharp Working Party on religions of the world of education. He had pushed religious to include world religions and he had started the department at Lancaster and so when I was there I studied education, I studied world religion as well as scripture and Catholic theology. I was qualified to do it and that was actually how I got the job and why I did it. Just as I was finishing my education it became important that world religious be taught in schools.

And you also said that you became a nun, you went to the Order of Sister of Notre Dame. That was a very big step for a young women. Can you tell me a bit about how that felt?

Well I don't think it is such a big step for Catholics we think it sounds more of a big step for other people. But growing up in the Catholic church and I had a very Catholic upbringing. It's just an option that was there. I think not so much now but when I was growing up it was always an option and I always felt very attracted to it and I felt it was an idea I had to get out of my mind. I had to do something about it and I had to go to the convent in order to see whether this was what I wanted to do and ought to be doing.

So I think when you are that age and I was 21 when I joined I think you are so intent on your own journey that it doesn't seem a bit step. It was difficult because when you left home you were never allowed back again unless one of your parents was dying. It has all changed now of course and very different now. In those days you definitely left home. In the gospel it said left everything to follow Jesus we definitely left everything to follow Jesus in those early days. I mean they weren't early days, they were just my early days.

So your family could visit you but...

They could visit you once a month.

But you couldn't.

You couldn't come home no. It changed within three or four years.

How did it feel at first?

Again because it changed quite quickly after I entered after I joined the order. It was difficult, it was difficult definitely was difficult there is no doubt about it. But you are



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young and it's a new way of life for you and you are making your own way in life, you have to be a bit selfish actually when you are young and you are making these kind of life decisions. I am sure it is something in our DNA that gets us up and moves out of the family home or else you would be staying at home and never going or doing anything.

So you went to university and then you were teaching. Were you living in a community with other sisters while you were doing...?

When I was at university I lived on the university campus for three years and I went back to the convent at weekends and that was wonderful. I really loved that and it was about the first time probably I ever lived in a secular environment because all my upbringing was quite Catholic and even though I did know some so called Protestants you know children I would have played with growing up because there was nobody really religious in the street where I lived. Certainly a lot of my life was in the Catholic community all my friends would have been in the Catholic community.

Now you are living on your own how does that feel?

Fine great I must be here for about 15 years maybe and no quite happy living on my own. It has its advantages, it has its disadvantages to living on your own and I am sure I will go back to living in the community quite soon I don't know. I have enjoyed it I have enjoyed being here.

You studied at university about world religions at that time did you meet people of other faiths?

I did indeed when I was there I studied world religions meet people of different faiths and that was a great challenge to my own faith because I suppose I had grown up believing certain things. Actually I thought they were the truth I just thought they were reality and then I came to understand that other faiths had very similar concepts to ours and so in Hinduism in Egyptian religion we have a God that dies and rises again. You have with Hinduism the three fold aspect of God the Trimurti. So things that were very...I thought you unique to Christianity I understood that there are underlying concepts in other religions that are very similar and I also came to understand that there were very good people who followed other religions and obviously they are living a good life because of their religion. And so what does that say about all the things I had been taught about Christianity being the only way to God and Jesus being the way the truth and the life.

So that was a real learning experience for you and you say it helped you grow in your own faith. As well as learning about other people faiths. You can to the Woodlands were you still teaching then.

No I had given up well I had to job share. I had started to job share and when I was job sharing and then did another degree a Master's degree at Lancaster, going up and down once a week for classes. I think when I came to live here I probably did...in educational establishment once you retire and you leave they also buy you back but maybe I had retired by the time I came. I can't remember to be honest.

When I came here I was still doing a wee bit of job sharing in fact I had given up and came to live here but was brought back and went back for a short while to do one of two courses for them. But also by that time I was doing some teaching up at Glasgow



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University because by that time St Andrews College was then some sort of merger with the university and I taught Hinduism up in the theology department for them for a couple of years. So my memory of teaching while I was living in the Woodlands area was at university but I do know I went back and forward to [0:11:27:5] for a wee bit I can't remember how long.

Now what particularly drew you to live in the Woodlands area of the city?

Well after I had been at Lancaster I recognised that at Lancaster I had lived in this very...had had a very good upbringing but I did realise it had given me a rather a closed identity. I did know a thing about any other faiths what so ever and when I came back from Lancaster I was going to live in a convent, I was going to teach teachers for the Catholic school system. Teach in Catholic college I then...I felt I didn't want to be caught up in that kind of that closed identity again and I must have seen a poster for something call the presentation of faiths and it was being organised by the International Flat and I went to this at the International Flat and involved in interfaith work.

And I did that all while I was teaching but then when I started to job share and eventually give up, I knew I wanted to do much more interfaith work and I knew this place because International Flat Woodlands area and I knew there were places of worship around about. And it was a sort of multi faith area that I knew and so I wanted to come and live here. I lived in the convent in the college campus while I was teaching there because a lot of my work and a lot of my extracurricular work was done with student in a sense I had moved from that. So that was why I don't I realised how much my university campus in the Woodlands area was at that time or has become in those years that was why I came here.

What do you mean by that the Woodlands becoming...

Just I think there are more students around and whereas there would be a point at which there would be a lot of ethnic minorities' families here. Have possibly started here and now moved out to other areas but a lot of the properties here have been brought her by parents for their children at university.

So you have seen quite a lot of change here?

Yes not as much as people who have lived here longer but yes I think there have been changes.

You mention International Flat could you tell me a bit about that?

Well the International Flat was set up by a women called Stella Reekie. She was employed as a community worker for the Asian community in Glasgow, well I suppose the West End of Glasgow. I felt this would be about the 60s 70s at the time there was a lot of immigration, particularly from Asia into Glasgow. She was a community worker I think I heard she got the job because she spoke Urdu I also heard she spoke very bad Urdu but she could communicate with the people she was working with.

I think now days you wouldn't have a white woman doing that job you would have an Asian woman. She lived in Belmont Street first of all that was her home but then she obviously had a vision for having a centre. A kind of drop in centre for people of different



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cultures and different faiths and she then got this flat in 20 Glasgow Street which was owned by the Church of Scotland how she managed to persuade them to buy it I don't know. Owned by the Church of Scotland managed by the YWC.

She lived there and worked out of there as a community worker for the Asian community. All sorts of things went on in the flat, there was cooking lessons, English language lesson and because it was her home she would have dinners. It was always a very busy place and sometimes thought that Stella Reekie who ran it was afraid of being on her own sometimes because she was either always writing to people or she was always inviting people in.

She was very connected to people and obviously wanted people to be around a lot and she had an organisation began an organisation called the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths. That brought together people of different faiths once a month. There was a committee and it met once a month to plan public meeting and there would be a public meeting once a month, which someone from a particular faith would give a talk. Then there would be something to eat connected to their culture and there would be a discussion group.

There was a lot of interaction and it was a very important thing the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths because it started at a time when world religions were just being taught in schools and so I became a member of the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths my first memory of Stella was going to the International Flat knocking the door. This woman this tall woman with grey hair and a grey suit welcoming me in and saying you will be on my committee won't you.

So she was always on the lookout for people to be on her committee and I was on her committee to a certain extent I am still on her committee. But I use to take teacher to the International Flat to these public meeting because it was a way for them to learn about other people's faiths from the people of faith themselves. Took them to visit places of worship that was also organised through the International Flat. Teacher would come to these public meetings because there were very few resources for the teaching of world religions at that time, plenty now. The International Flat and the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths was very important for religious education at that time.

Can you tell me a little bit more about Stella what kind of person she was?

An amazing person really. She herself had been at the liberation of Belsen. She had worked as a red cross nurse and was there in Belsen and had worked in Germany and she had worked with...she had a little nursery in Belsen as somebody who was in the army. I remember see a photograph of her in an army uniform and seeing her in her Red Cross nurses uniform working with children in those very early days just after the war.

And then I don't quite know what moved her but she became a missionary with the Church of Scotland trained at St Colm's and then spent a good number of years in Pakistan. Well she worked there in Pakistan as a missionary came back to Scotland and to Glasgow and was then commissioned as a Deaconess of the Church of Scotland.

Then she began to do her work with Asians in Glasgow and set up this International Flat she was quite a demanding woman in a way, come in welcome will you be in my committee it was just like it. She had this great big expectation that people would rally to



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her cause and would help her at a drop of a hat. Sometimes she would get you to do the most, well not unexpected things but things you might never have chosen to do.

But every year there was this presentation of faiths where each faith would have a little stand and be present in order to meet members of the public and talk to them about their faith. In the evening there would be a concert of something and Stella would just come and say you go and introduce the concert be like the compare. Suddenly you find yourself doing it because A she was not going to do it. She would not put herself forward but she would just get other people and shove them forward. You find yourself doing all sorts of things. She was sometimes unrealistic I think in her expectations of people.

I can remember once her phoning me up and asking me to her at Balmore at a centre in Balmore. She was going to visit it with some women she was really annoyed when I didn't go but I was working. She didn't seem to understand that A I was working and B I was employed and C I had a contract to fulfil those contractual obligations. Whereas her life revolved around the International Flat and her service to people in the area so she took it for granted that she would get...and people were very loyal to her.

I could remember people who were members of the Sharing of Faiths Mr Chadder. I was at his 100th birthday and invited to give a wee talk at his 100th birthday and the thing that I could get over is that when I knew him originally when I joined the Sharing of Faith he was 70 years of age. What work he did between 70 and 100 and Judith and what was her name Henry Tankle - wonderful people - who rallied to Stella's cause and Mr [ph. Sagu 0:21:30:2] who I think who didn't just love her - I think he was in love with Stella. these people were all very loyal to her got involved in interfaith because of Stella. I think they have all died now but wonderful people. Made a wonderful contribution to social relations and social cohesion here and in interfaith relations here in the Woodlands area.

The Flat has closed for some years now but you are still very involved. Can you tell me about the ways you are involved now in interfaith?

Right well Stella began the first interfaith group in the country now there is something like 14 interfaith groups and as well as that there is now a National Interfaith Group. At the moment I am the Chair of the Board at that national group, it is call Interfaith Scotland. I did a wee bit of research originally to see whether we should have a national group and work with others to set it up. So I have been part of its journey really since the very beginning.

It now exists to bring people of faith together and to encourage interfaith groups and also brings the religious leaders of Scotland together. Responsible for the Holocaust Memorial Day that is just about to be at the end of this month. So there is a very strong national theme and it is financed by the government and I think the government now realises how important interfaith relations are particularly in the light of 911 and the kind of fear of terrorism. And we now know what faiths can do to one another so I am involved in that I am still involved in their local group to a certain extent. In that the Glasgow Sharing of Faith nominally is still in existence. There is a bank account we keep a £100 in it and I am one of the signatures but Interfaith in Glasgow it survives Stella and it continued as long as the International Flat continued. But when the International Flat closed it kind of dipped and so of the people who were involved in the Glasgow worked to set up the national organisation Interfaith Scotland.



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So it kind of dipped but a year and a half ago or two years ago Interfaith got Scotland, got money for a project to see if we could resurrect Interfaith Glasgow as it is called. The project is called Interfaith Glasgow to see if we could resurrect interfaith work in Glasgow. That is going very well and I'm involved a little bit in that because of my work with Interfaith Scotland. But as well as that there are little pockets of interfaith in Glasgow. There is a young women in the mosque just along the road from here in Carrington Street, has set up and organised now for about two years a meeting of women of faith that meet once a month. And there are other things like that on the go and there are all sorts of opportunities and initiatives really to bring faiths together. So there is a lot and Stella set in progress a whole moment of interfaith that is happening all over the country now.

You see a lot of that as part of her legacy?

Definitely and I think the Church of Scotland who at the moment doesn't have an interfaith officer and at the moment it is not in the forefront of interfaith. I think should recognise the good that Stella did and to recognise the value they have given to interfaith relations in Scotland. I do believe there is going to be a report at the General Assembly this coming May about interfaith relations and something will happen but they have never been totally at ease with interfaith.

And I suspect that also happened in Stella's time because I would sometimes go to the flat and Stella had been at a meeting at 121 George Street and she was wiped out. Some of it was about money, the money to continue she worried about money I know. She didn't tell me a lot about it but I mean they might have worried about Stella as well because I could never remember Stella running good accounts, an account of how she spent her money. But I know sometimes I would take from the convent a big tin of coffee of something just to help out so they should be very pleased with the legacy of Stella and of the church through Stella and its contribution really to interfaith relations in Scotland.

The other thing I am also involved with which has happened although the Church of Scotland is not very involved in it the Scottish Episcopal Church has had a committee for interfaith relations for many years. The Catholic Church has had one for the last six or seven years and when the ACT the Action of Churches Together – the [0:27:19:5] body was set up in Scotland. They set up an interfaith group called the Churches Agency for Interfaith Relation in Scotland, it tries to promote good interfaith relation in the churches so all of that has stemmed from the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths and Stella's vision.

How do you see that being lived-out in your local communities in the Woodlands area?

Well there is that women's group that meet across the road in the mosque and St Marys Episcopal Cathedral they now have a connection with the mosque. We did have for a time we tried to bring the religious leaders here in the West End and they met in my house. But that – och, it was mainly the Christian leaders and two of them have now moved on and it was difficult getting the religious leaders – the other faith religious leaders to come together. So that's kind of died a death although there is now this relationship between St Marys Episcopal Cathedral and the mosque. And I would like to see if I could set up and similar connection with St Aloysius and the synagogue because that is just along the road from them. If they could do something about it and then



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WSRE which is the West of Scotland Region Equality Council is here in the West End and it has done a couple of things really to bring faith communities together and it is responsible for the Stepping in to Diversity project. Part of which is training young people to do tours, little pilgrims of faith around the West End.

How do you find living here have you got to know neighbours from different ethnic backgrounds and faiths?

Well kind of at the beginning I used to go and teach English to the priest at the Hindu temple and I know him and his family very well. I use to teach English to a Muslim women around the road I don't do that. I know people in all the different places of worship a lot of the people that I now know have actually moved out of the area. And so some of the people I know connected to the place of worship live elsewhere be coming here to worship and so I do know neighbours yes of course I do. But on the whole the people I know are either from other churches or are kind of connected to university and students. There is not such a lot of diversity I think of faith communities in the area anymore the ones that I know or gotten to know.

And do you have a connection with a particular Catholic Church community in this area?

Yes and no I am a member of St Aloysius parish but it has a kind of city centre feel to it there is not actual church in the Woodlands area. Although there is the university chapel up the road, there is St Patricks down the road. There is St Aloysius, there is St Columbus Mary Hill and when I came here I decided that I did not want to get involved in a Parish community in a sense of doing extra work and things like that I would... my church involvement if you like would be ecumenically and so there is a West End (0:31:19.5) group; a group in the West End where individuals from the different churches come together. I go to that and have got to know lots of different Christians in the area that don't necessarily live in the area.

A bit more about Stella - what kind of relationship did you have with her?

Oh I think I had a good relationship with her; I mean she liked anybody that would do things for her I think [laughs] but we got on well together. I certainly would be very faithful to going to the International Flat. She was always inviting you to other things sometime I would go to the dinners that she would have on a Saturday night or the people she would have in to talk on a Sunday afternoon. The International Flat and the people involved in it became very much part of my life and I don't think I knew Stella quite as well as some other people knew her. But I certainly knew her because of the Flat she was a terrible women at one level you would go to a meeting a sharing of faith meeting. If Stella didn't like it she would do her up most change whatever had been decided and a least on one occasion I know she turned up at my house at ten or half ten at night with David Lawson to say I don't like what happened at that meeting and you know. I don't know how she changed it but anyway she got...she always got her own way that is the thing about Stella.

I only once ever saw her angry and that was because of these slides that she used to use, because she went around Women's Guild talking about the flat and I would...these slides show and I would borrow it to show it to the students. She always warned you not to touch the slides some of them fell out and I put them back and I obviously put them



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back in the wrong order or back to front and I am sure Stella was in the middle of a presentations and it all went wrong. Probably wouldn't know how to sort them herself – that's the feeling I had while she was raging at me – absolutely raging at me that I had done this to her. But she was a wonderful women it was a great loss it was like a light going out when she died and people loved her in the little book of life there is this story of Mr [ph. Sagu] - and I tell this story whenever I talk about Stella - and how he said you know "you people think Stella Reekie was a Christian but water only takes the shape of the vessel into which it was poured and for me Sikhism is about service and love and justice and what have you. For me Stella Reekie was a Sikh and I never understood what you people meant when you said 'Jesus died for us' but I now understand what you mean because Miss Reekie ..." he always called her Miss Reekie, "... Miss Reekie died for us".

So she was somebody who was a of great service but I don't think I was very intermit with really. I think I valued her the work she did and valued the fact that she introduced me to interfaith in fact for years I used to say she would sit on my right should whispering in my ear, don't give up, don't give up keep on with interfaith work. I don't think she does that now but that is maybe because interfaith work is much more established in society in the world really and certainly in Scotland. I remember once her coming to my house and kind of touching...kind of withdrawing I am sure she was in pain it wasn't that long before she died. She would never have complained about it and certainly never told me that she was dying. Although what somebody who was also a member of Sharing of Faith said to me that she had said to Stella...on one occasion Stella how are you, you have not been well and she said I am going home to my father soon isn't it wonderful. So she knew she was dying but she talk to me about that and I wasn't that kind of relationship with her.

Any other stories you would like to share?

I can't think of any other stories about the flat and about Stella but she certainly enriched my life and widened my horizon and gave me connection with a lot of people in the area – there's no doubt at all about it. She was just very, very sociable and the Flat was a great centre and I think a great miss; it's interesting whenever we talk about interfaith the idea of having a focus, having a centre always come up. I think having a place really helped a place where people could feel at home. I know she did a lot of walking she was a great walker and I was never involved in that. I know on one occasion she got together a wee group and they were supposed to walk to Iona, now whether they walked all the way to Iona or not - I don't know. She went on a pilgrimage.

But she would get you to do all sorts of things I mean through Stella I went and did a workshop on prayer at a [0:37:21:5] that the Iona community were organising my very first meeting with John Bell with Ron Ferguson.

My first visit to Iona and Iona became quite special to me in my life because I went for about 20 years I would be taking students to Iona I would be part of the programme I would be doing things on Iona. At the moment I'm on the board the Church of Scotland board for Iona community. And members of the Iona community have really enriched my life and so Stella would get you to do things like that. She got me to go and talk to a West of Scotland deaconesses' meeting and prayer, and I was only young these days and I sure I didn't do public speaking so I'm sure it was a great effort to do it. It was difficult but Stella would take no for an answer you find yourself doing those kinds of things so I'm really grateful to her she is a wonderful women a great impact and still making a



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great impact. About five years ago we decided on the 25 anniversary of her death we would hold an event and we decided we would have a meal. 90 people turned up, if 90 people remember me 25 minutes after I'm dead never mind 25 years it would be something.

One of the things I do quite often is I'm on the circuit for the Women's Guild and the talk that I give – and that they ask to give – is why did I become a nun? So I tell about religious life and how it has changed. I always tell them about my work and meeting Stella and I've never yet been to a meeting where somebody doesn't know her or hasn't heard of her or what have you. So her memory is alive in the folk memory of the Church of Scotland and I just hope it is in ... But I think it is in 121 because recently they've done a wee bit of research and they certainly made...they are going have a report about the Church of Scotland. And I was interviewed for that and also wrote a wee bit for them about Stella Reekie and said to them you ought to be proud of this women you ought to realise how important the Church of Scotland was for interfaith relations and you are the national church you could be taking a lead instead of actually not seeming to be too interested in it.

You yourself have obviously been from what I gather. Have made a huge contribution yourself in interfaith relationships and I believe that was recognise in an honours.

OBE [laughter] you know what they say about OBE other bees efforts. I don't know if an OBE is all that, well it is it is an honour and I think I was pleased to have the honour and as far as I know it was the first honour to be given for interfaith relations. So in that sense it was good to have interfaith relations recognised and I think it was because of the work for Interfaith Scotland in setting up Interfaith Scotland you know.

Thank you very much Isabel for all you have shared about your own life and the story of Stella as well. Thank you very much indeed.

You are welcome.

Transcript ends 0:40:57.0