

Loren Webb Interviewing Ralph Clingan
of
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Faith Represented: Presbyterian

Date of Interview: October 18, 2022

Participants: Ralph Clingan
Loren Webb

Webb: Okay. Welcome to the Washington County Historical Society's Oral History Interview Program. Today will be our fourth interview in the series. My name is Loren Webb, and I'm President of the Washington County Historical Society, and today we will be interviewing Ralph Clingan with the Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church here in St. George. So tell us again what is your name, and tell us the day and the, the year of this interview.

Clingan: Reverend Doctor Ralph Clingan, October 18, 2022.

Webb: Thank you. And this is in the Community Education Channel's studios on the campus of Utah Tech University. Where and when were you born?

Clingan: I was born in Yuma, Arizona, January 19, 1957.

Webb: Okay. And can you tell us the names of your parents and any brothers and sisters?

Clingan: My father was Reverend Robert L. Clingan. My mother was Marjorie Ruth Clingan; older sister, Ruth Agnes Clingan; and my brother, Fay Clingan.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: I am the youngest.

Webb: Okay. And so you're continuing in the, the tradition, then.

Clingan: I am.

Webb: That's really cool. Tell us a little bit about that.

Clingan: Well, interesting enough, I'm basically third generation. My grandfather was an American Baptist pastor for half his life, and then became a farmer out in California—

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: Where my father was raised. And my father, in turn, started out as an American Baptist pastor, serving churches in Kansas, New York, and a mission in Arizona, which is where I was born.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: However, they left there when I was one year of age, so I have no memory of that. But I was raised in a Pres—my father after that point changed from American Baptist to Presbyterian, so out of my family, I'm the only one who was raised Presbyterian.

Webb: Okay. Tell us a little bit about your growing-up years, anything specifically, and maybe you can tell us a little bit about your, your elementary, middle school, or junior high or high school that you attended and the locations of those schools.

Clingan: All three located in Canisteo, New York, which is a small rural community in the southern tier of New York State, upstate New York.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And I graduated with a class of one hundred members.

Webb: Oh, a hundred members, so fairly small.

Clingan: Fairly small.

Webb: Okay. What experience did you have in public school or private school that would have helped you know, shape your character and help make you the kind of person that you are today?

Clingan: As I said, you know, my father being the pastor since, er, I've been involved with the church, and part, you know, being a minister's family, you're part of that ministry, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not.

Webb: Right.

Clingan: And we had in the church in Canisteo that I grew up, which was the First Presbyterian Church, which dated back to 1832, when it was incorporated. But I had a very active youth group, and throughout my high school career I was very much a part of that youth group which was very active and had a strong influence in terms of our involvement with the church and the community.

Webb: Okay. Tell us a little bit about if you attended college and if so, what was the name of the college or university that you attended, and the years.

Clingan: Okay. I attended Westminster College, which is not the one up in Salt Lake. This one is in western Pennsylvania, about an hour north of Pittsburgh. And I was a student there from 1975 to 1979.

Webb: Okay. And what was your major or minor?

Clingan: Religion was my major; minor, history.

Webb: Okay. That's great. So did you also attend any kind of a divinity school?

Clingan: Yes.

Webb: If so, where and when?

Clingan: I attended Colgate Rochester Divinity School which was predominately American Baptist Theological Seminary located in Rochester, New York. It was also ecumenical in terms of several denominations had their students attend there. I was there from 1981 to 1983.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And, of course, my, I graduated with a Master's of Divinity in Religion.

Webb: In your social life, who did you marry, and when and where did you get married? Any children, and names of where they were located?

Clingan: My first wife was Donna. I met her in Florida, interesting enough, between college and seminary.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And we married when I was in my senior year at theological seminary, and it was during that senior year that my first child, Sarah Elizabeth, was born in Rochester, and then being called to a church thirty miles away from Rochester, my second child Addie was born, and then called to another community another thirty miles on the other side of Rochester, my youngest, Jeff, Jefferson, was born.

Webb: Okay. Any, you said your first wife, so did she pass away, or?

Clingan; No, we were divorced.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: In 2000.

Webb: Okay. So occupation-wise, what were some of the full-time jobs or vocations that you did before becoming pastor of the Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church?

Clingan: Well, really, I would say the only full-time job that I had in between seminary and college was I was a steel building construction worker in Florida—

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: For one summer, and then I was a Firestone mechanic for a short period of time, and a Pizza Hut cook for a short period of time in between education. Once I entered into, once I entered into divinity school, my full-time job has been ministry, and it has been ever since.

Webb: Okay. When, when did you become pastor or reverend of the Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, and where is the church located?

Clingan: I became pastor at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in 2005, in fact, November 1st of 2005, so coming up on my anniversary. And it's located at 611 North 2450 East in St. George.

Webb: Okay. Did it ever start at another location and then move to the 2450 East location?

Clingan: No. This church did not. This church originated there, but it is not the first Presbyterian congregation or building in this area.

Webb: Okay. So I want to, I want to get back to that. We'll come back to that question in just a minute. But how many members of the church were there at the time you started in 2005?

Clingan: About 200, 230. We're now about 250.

Webb: Okay. And do you have, what's the square footage of the church building, and how many people did the main assembly hall seat?

Clingan: Well, the whole, whole facility, I mean the whole property, is approximately about, I think, four acres. And the church building itself, the main church building, is about 8,000 square feet. Our sanctuary, I couldn't tell you how many feet it is, but it holds approximately 300.

Webb: Okay. And is there, is it, like is there a kitchen or other multi-purpose rooms there, any other special-use rooms?

Clingan: Yes, there is a, there is a kitchen, and, of course, in Presbytery tradition the main, the main sanctuary, we, the main build—the main worship area we refer to as a sanctuary.

Webb: Okay. And that's the main building?

Clingan: That's the main building. Of course just off that sanctuary we have a much smaller room that is referred to as the chapel.

Webb: Is that, oh, okay, in the chapel.

Clingan: It's the chapel. Of course, then we have the fellowship hall, which is connected to the kitchen.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And the fellowship hall is named after the, one of the first missionaries to this community, Sarah Louisa Conklin.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And then the next building—

Webb: Is the annex, right?

Clingan: No, Christian Education.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: We refer to it as the CE building, and in that building we have our Christian Education rooms as well as our church offices.

Webb: Okay. What are the basic beliefs or tenets of the church?

Clingan: Well, we are part of the reformed Protestant tradition that would refer to ourselves as being Calvinists, so to speak. Pretty much straight-line Christianity, the basics. Without going into a whole lot of detail, you know, what, some of the aspects of it in terms of our beliefs, and that is, you know, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, those basic tenets of the Christian faith. One of the things that kind of makes us a little different, a two-fold difference, and that would be that we do not consider ourselves to be the "true faith." We consider ourselves to be merely a branch on the tree of Christianity.

Webb: Okay. Um, any particular editions of the, of the Bible that you believe in or subscribe to, like for instance the King James Version, or does it matter?

Clingan: Presbyterians are free to use whatever version they choose.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: My personal favorite is New American Standard Bible.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: What we use in Worship is New Revised Bible.

Webb: Okay. And any other sacred writings that your church subscribes to?

Clingan: No.

Webb: Okay. So if your church is a world denomination, where is your church headquartered?

Clingan: Louisville, Kentucky.

Webb: Okay. And how is the leadership of your church structured?

Clingan: We are very much a constitutional form of government. It, it's kind of interesting that the Presbyterian Church structure is very much similar to the structure of the United States government in terms of representation and voting and election of officers and so forth. Our headquarters is in Louisville, Kentucky, and that would be what we call the headquarters of the General Assembly. And those who work there are hired for the church and so forth, but don't have what you might call in some churches ecclesiastical authority. It's very much an organized structure.

Webb: Okay. And they send out various publications or things to the other—

Clingan: Yes.

Webb: Other—

Clingan: Yes. And basically General Assembly meets once every two years with representation from all the Presbyteries. Each Presbytery, regardless of size, sends a pastor and a lay person, commissioner.

Webb: Okay. What are your duties as pastor of the church, and is this a part-time or a full-time position?

Clingan: This is a full-time position. I am the chief bottle-washer and cook. CEO, I guess, might be a good way to put it.

Webb: So tell us a little bit about your duties.

Clingan: My duty—

Webb: Your responsibilities.

Clingan: Basically is the organization of the church and maintain its organization. My other duty is to maintain a divine worship and make sure that what takes place on Sunday morning “goes well.”

Webb: Yeah.

Clingan: In terms of, you know, the preaching, the music, and is coordinated. Of course I’m also in charge of making sure the pastoral care is taking place. And also as a Presbyterian I have responsibilities to the upper bodies which would be in our area the Presbytery of Utah.

Webb: Okay. Um, what are the physical boundaries of your church, if any? Do you have any physical boundaries, like in the LDS church they have wards and stakes, and in the Catholic Church they have diocese?

Clingan: Basically, we have what’s called a Presbytery. And our Presbytery runs from a very small church just over the border in Idaho down to here.

Webb: Oh, okay, so pretty much the State of Utah.

Clingan: State.

Webb: The State of Utah. Okay. Um, do you have a regular amount of visitors from outside of St. George who attend your services?

Clingan: We do. We have, generally speaking, we have about maybe three or four visitors every Sunday.

Webb: Okay. And are people of other, of other faiths welcome into your congregation?

Clingan: Absolutely.

Webb: Okay. Um, during this time have you been asked by representatives of, of other organizations such as clubs, other faiths, or government bodies to serve in any community capacities?

Clingan: I was recently the President of the Red Rock Rotary Club and served in that facility. I’ve also served as President of the Interfaith Council here in St. George.

Webb: Okay. Um, how and when did you become affiliated with the St. George Interfaith Council?

Clingan: Well, that’s a kind of interesting story. Probably about maybe 13 years ago, we as a body were doing a, what was called a Stations of the Cross.

Webb: Um-hm.

Clingan: And doing the Stations of the Cross afforded us the opportunity to have conversation among ourselves, and Tim Martin, who is, what at that time was one of the missionaries at the Tabernacle, began a conversation asking if there might be an interest and how we might do that, and by the end of that walk, we had pretty much come up with a plan on how we were going to do it. We simply sent out a letter to the, everybody we could think of—churches, organizations, and so forth—and said we're going to have a meeting, and if you're interested, please come. And we had great attendance, and basically we were off and rolling after that.

Webb: When and where is, are the Stations of the Cross held?

Clingan: It starts at Diagonal Park, basically, and it starts on Good Friday, and it begins at 11 o'clock, and in the Roman Catholic traditions you hit twelve Stations of the Cross representing Christ's walk to the cross.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And it concludes at the Roman Catholic Church.

Webb: Okay. Um, what experiences could you relate for us that have come out of your membership in that council—anything else besides the Stations of the Cross?

Clingan: Well, we do a Prayer Over the City on January first which gathers individuals from our churches. Each one offers a prayer over the city. This now takes place in the Tabernacle. And our meetings very often will have speakers from various representations in the community. And very often we're invited to participate, whether in praying with the area's leadership councils in the communities of St. George, Washington City, Santa Clara, have often invited us to come on a regular basis and offer the opening prayer. I know that you want to talk a little bit later on about a Crop Walk. That also pretty much came out of that Interfaith Council, which I'm in charge of the Crop Walk.

Webb: Let's talk about that, then. How did you, you, that's something that you started, correct?

Clingan: Well, in St. George.

Webb: Okay, in St. George.

Clingan: In St. George.

Webb: In St. George. Is it a national or an international program?

Clingan: It is. It is very much a national program. The Crop Walk was started by Church World, so actually the World Council of Churches shortly after World War II when there was

huge issues of famine and so forth because of the War. And what developed was like an annual event where people would get sponsors to support them and then walk a distance to raise money for local and international hunger projects. Since that time it's become Church World Service, and I probably, well, I would have to say that in the Eastern part of the country Crop Walks are much more common than they have been to the West of the country, for whatever reason I can't tell you. So I had done in my two previous calls either participant or leading Crop Walk, the Church World Service Crop Walks there in those communities.

Webb: Um-hm.

Clingan: And then shortly after my arrival here in St. George became aware that there was not only no Crop Walk on the schedule, but hardly anyone knew what a Crop Walk was.

Webb: Right.

Clingan: Which, you know, kind of, you know, shocked me, so to speak. And at that time I was having weekly coffees with the pastors of the Lutheran and the Methodist church. And Church World Service had approached the pastor of the Church at that time asking him if he would do it, and he was very reluctant to do so and mentioned at our meeting, and I said, "Well, if you support me, I'll do it."

Webb: Good for you.

Clingan: And so ever since then.

Webb: So what does that entail, and when is it held?

Clingan: Well, it's, in this community, it's always the second Saturday in November, in the morning.

Webb: So it's coming up.

Clingan: It's coming up. And we have a leadership team, and each one of the leadership team has a responsibility—publication, recruitment, physical arrangements, and treasurer, so to speak. And what we do is begin to organize the walk and distribute packets that have people, it gives them the opportunity to sign up and volunteer or to sponsor. And it goes out to the various organizations and the churches. And then Saturday morning on that second Saturday in November we gather at Larkspur Park.

Webb: At which park?

Clingan: Larkspur.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: Larkspur Park. And we have been very strongly supported by St. George City Council and Washington City Council who we, I expect this year we'll have both mayors there for what we call the firing off of the starting prayer.

Webb: So how does the general public, how can they find out about this?

Clingan: You're going to see advertisements in the news media through it and on the radio stations, and if your congregation or organization is a part of the Interfaith Council there is a good possibility you will see it published in their church's organization facilities, there are posters everywhere, and so forth. This is our thirteenth Crop Walk, and we have raised probably around in the areas of \$80,000.

Webb: Oh, my gosh, okay.

Clingan: And a good share of that we've used to support the area soup kitchen and Solomon's Porch feast.

Webb: Okay. Can you tell us how the Presbyterian Church first came to Washington County and who were the principal leaders or pastors over the years.

Clingan: Well, there's, two names come to mind, and there are others. But two names come to mind, and literally the first Presbyterians began to arrive here, missionaries, probably in the 1880s, 18, mid to late 1880s. One name comes to mind, and that is Clayton Rice, who came here as a missionary to start basically the church here, a mission, as well as a school. And he wrote after being here, a book called *Ambassador to the Saints*, where he records his experiences. He literally came here in a wagon, a horse-drawn wagon, and had difficulty finding a place to live because at that time it was kind of a closed community to others, especially others of other faiths.

Webb: Okay. And he tells the time of he had difficulty finding help for some of his teachers in Toquerville, as I understand.

Clingan: Yes, that's correct.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And, you know, worked hard to do that. And he took a very positive approach to being a member of the community. He was a well regarded member of the area baseball team, taught tennis, and violin. And when he left here the local bishop gave him a ring of fond memories that he treasured greatly.

Webb: Okay. What's the name of the book that he wrote, and how can—

Clingan: *Ambassador to the Saints*.

Webb: *Ambassador to the Saints*.

Clingan: And you'll have to get it through Ebay or Amazon because it's definitely out of print.

Webb: Okay. But it's an interesting read, because I've, I've read parts of it, too.

Clingan: Um-hm.

Webb: Okay. So tell us about Sarah Louisa Conklin and her influence of the Presbyterian faith on the residents of southern Utah.

Clingan: Sarah Louisa was a Presbyterian missionary who served missions both before coming here. She grew up, actually, in New York State, New York City area, and she served missions in both Cuba and Arizona before coming here. She arrived here about 1889 as a teacher, and at that time all that existed in terms of a church building was a small Presbyterian mission which presently is the site of the Roman Catholic Church.

Webb: Which is at approximately 100 or 200 West, right?

Clingan: Yes [200 West].

Webb: Just north of St. George Boulevard.

Clingan: Correct.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: Correct. In fact, as an aside, if you drive by the Roman Catholic Church today, right in the front of their parking lot is this brick wall, and that's all that remains of the original mission that was constructed. Sarah Louisa, as I said, came here in 1889, and when, even when the State began to offer public education because prior to that time, a lot of the schools were all either produced by the Methodist or Presbyterian denominations. So basically the State took over, and she began to work as a kindergarten teacher here in town for the new public school. And in the afternoon, she would read Bible stories to the children on their ways, on the way home. She became very active in the Relief Society that was here, who referred to her as an angel of mercy. There are some interesting articles that you can find if you, if you look at the Latter-day Saints genealogy site that they do, you can look her up, and there's articles about their having a birthday party for her and her work here, giving gifts to the kids at children's time, and so forth, and to this day I am told there are adults who are probably up in their years now but remember her with great fondness.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: She died. Actually, the Presbyterian Church, she was there, like I said, from 1889 to 1949.

Webb: So a long time.

Clingan: A long time. She retired here, and she stayed here. And my guess is that for a period of time, she was the only Presbyterian in town. And the presbytery kept the mission open because she was still alive and living there. But once she died in 1849 [1949] they sold the build—they closed the mission and sold it to the Roman Catholics.

Webb: Okay, because the building was standing, and, and, but it's been since torn down, is that correct?

Clingan: Correct.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: It was torn down, I think, in the 1980s.

Webb: Okay. Tell us any other experiences, let's see, I guess from, from Sarah Louisa Conklin and Clayton Rice, any particular legacy that they left here, and, and are there other local Presbyterian leaders who have also left any impact on Washington County or southern Utah?

Clingan: Well, the organizing pastor for the church that I serve right now is John, was Reverend John Mahon. John Mahon was called here in the 1980s, approximately 1987, when a group of new retirees wanted a church of their own, a Presbyterian Church of their own, and working with the Presbytery of Utah began that process and called John as the organizing pastor.

Webb: Okay. So there was about a 30-year period of kind of a gap?

Clingan: Correct.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: Correct. And John, John, along with a few others, were instrumental in beginning what was the opening of the Care and Share.

Webb: The Dixie Care and Share.

Clingan: The Dixie Care and Share.

Webb: Okay, which was located down [unclear simultaneous talking], yeah, which was located downtown.

Clingan: Yep.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And now today that has been changed over now.

Webb: To Southpoint, or what do they call it?

Clingan: Switchpoint.

Webb: Switchpoint, yeah

Clingan: Switchpoint.

Webb: Okay. What goals do you have for your faith in Washington County?

Clingan: Primarily to continue to welcome all, especially new residents to our community who share our faith, and to make a very positive impact on the life of the community in any way we possibly can.

Webb: Okay. So it, when you look back over your life, what lessons have you learned, and what advice would you like to share with others?

Clingan: I would say the greatest lesson that I have learned and am continuing to learn is patience. And, and to be, to take a very positive approach and outlook to life and ministry. If, if you can't laugh, then you have a problem.

Webb: Right. Um, so it's our understanding that your wife is LDS, and so what are some fun ways both of you have navigated your maybe differences in belief?

Clingan: Well, it, that's an interesting question. I've been asked that before, and for my responses, we have a list of things we don't discuss.

Webb: Okay.

Clingan: And that's one of the things. However, we're very much mutually supportive of each other's faith. I support her going to her ward, she participates in the life of my congregation. She sings in the choir, and when there is not a conflict of what's going one place to the other, she's with us, and if, if there's a possibility, I will attend with her.

Webb: Okay. Um, is there anything that you would like to add that we have not asked you, that I have not asked you?

Clingan: I can't think of a thing that you haven't asked me.

Webb: Okay. Well, we sure appreciate you being here today for this interview, and we again want to thank those of you who might be listening or listen to this broadcast in the future, and, again, we appreciate the opportunity and the College for their, their

gracious, graciousness in providing these studios for us to do this interview. So thank you so much, and that concludes our interview.