Ronn Frantz
Narrator

Felix B. Oke
Loyola University Chicago
Interviewer

Ronn Frantz: RF
Felix B. Oke: FO

Interviewed 11 April 2023

Abstract: This interview was conducted as part of the Gathering Places Project where my team and I researched on the Living Water Community Church. In this oral interview, I had a session with Ronn Frantz, one of the founding members of the Living Water Community Church. In a bid to understand the congregation, I asked questions about the history, growth, culture and structure of the congregation. Also, some personal demographics were asked to connect the individual member with his immediate community and congregation. These questions extend to how the community, Rogers Park, has shaped the congregation and how it has been shaped by it. It is exciting to know that congregation moves in time and space as the case of Living Water Community Church is and that this movement has brought about cohesion and community centered strategies in responding to one another's needs. The approximate length of the interview is around 43 minutes. The setting was in Ronn's living room with Ronn sitting on an armchair and I on a mid-back swivel chair. "The interview took place as part of the *Gathering Places* project at the Loyola University Chicago. For more information, see https://beta.gatheringplaceschicago.com/

Felix Oke (FO): Today is April 11th 2023. This is an interview with Mr Ronn. What would you want me to call your name?

Ronn Frantz (RF): Ronn is fine.

FO: Oh, this is an interview with Ronn of Living Water Community Church. My name is Felix Oke, a graduate student of Loyola University Chicago, and I'll be conducting this interview for *The Gathering Places*. Can you please introduce yourself?

RF: Yes, my name is Ronn Frantz, and I live here in this home with my wife and also another friend. We were all born the same year in 1957 within a mile of each other on the west side of Chicago and Garfield Park. And here, we've just ended up here once again, and we've been living together in this home for the last seven or eight years.

FO: Cool

FO: Thank you for the introduction. In this interview, you can choose to answer all the questions or maybe not. But I would like to know if you want to give your consent to take this interview with you.

RF: Yes, I agree. Thank you.

FO: By the end of the interview, I would like to transcribe or send you a copy so that you can check if the information is appropriately stated, or you want to redact it.

RF: So, would it be fine for you?

FO: Yes. Thank you very much.

FO: So, let's start. I'm aware you are one of the founding members of Living Water Community Church. What can you say about that?

RF: Yes, that's correct. My wife and I were both founding members. We were part of a group of about 12 Young people back in the 1980s, who were all members of Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois. And most of us had just been finishing up college studies or seminary studies. And we were interested in starting a new group in the City of Chicago, a little bit more ethnically and economically diverse than southeast Evanston. We investigated a number of neighborhoods, including Brighton Park and Austin neighborhoods in Chicago, but ended up deciding on Rogers Park.

FO: Oh, that's a lot of information for me to grab. Since then, how has this transition or the growth of the church been?

RF: Well, we began about 1988, with different ones of that original group of 10 or 12 folks moving into the neighborhood individually, my wife and I moved into Rogers Park in August of 1988. We started on Glenwood, we were renting there, and then we moved to Bosworth, and now Ashland. So, we've stayed on the 6700 block that whole time, and we're just gradually moving west. But we've lived here for the last 25 years or so in this home.

FO: Can you chime a little bit about your connection with Reba Place

RF: Reba Place church is part of the Mennonite Church, USA, as is Living Water Community Church. Reba was our starting congregation, as we say, and we began first of all meeting down here in Rogers Park as a small group of Reba Place Church. And then, after a few years, we began worshiping together in the fellowship hall of the United Church on the corner of Morse and Ashland. So, we worship there for 10 years. Then in 2005, we were able, with the help of Reba Place Fellowship, to buy the building where we are now at Pratt and Ashland, and we moved in there in

January of 2006. And that has been our meeting house since. So, we've had an ongoing relationship with Reba Place Church in Evanston over the years. And slowly, we became a separate congregation, about 2010, I believe. So, we are both recognized as individual congregations at this point.

FO: Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about the congregation?

RF: Well, at this point, in Some ways, we're still finding out who we are after the pandemic right now. A lot of churches changed over the pandemic and ours did as well. So, prior to the pandemic, we actually had two worship services on Sunday, we had a morning service that had a number of different national constituents. And then we had an afternoon service that was primarily in the Bhutanese and Nepalese language. So, our congregation is made up of folks from over a dozen different countries or so. We have a large Cambodian contingent who has been here since the late 1980s. We have then an East African contingent largely from Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as Burundi, Tanzania, and Rwanda. And then we also have a large number of Nepalese and Bhutanese members who are part of our congregation, as well as European Americans from all sorts of different national backgrounds.

FO: That's great. With reference to Living Water Community Church first service, what date was that?

RF: our first service? January 2006.

FO: Yes

RF: Well, we also have a number of Hispanic and Spanish speaking members in our congregation, and as well as a number of African Americans in the congregation. So, at this point now, after the pandemic, we only have one service on Sunday mornings. It is led by different ones of our different ethnic communities on Sunday morning. In terms of our worship time, we all come together at 9:30 usually open with some scripture and with singing and prayer. And then we have a time of sharing announcements and greeting each other in our different languages, passing the peace of Christ to one another in our different languages. And then we break into language groups for teaching. The children go off to their Sunday school classes, and Cambodia and then the Bhutanese groups go off and have teachings in their languages. And usually, the East Africans and the European Americans stay in the same service. Although this next month, the East Africans will be having their own Swahili and Kiswahili service. And the English speakers will be leaving the building and going to various homes here in the neighborhood for various classes.

FO: Interesting. Can you say a little bit about the different activities going on at the Living Water Community Church?

RF: Yeah, well, in some ways, I often say that we don't have a lot of programs, as part of Living Water Community Church, just given our ethnic and language, diversity, , it's all that we can do just to love each other and keep trying to find ways of talking with each other and staying in touch with each other and communicating. But there are a number of ministries that have grown up in connection with the congregation that have been started by people in the church. One of those is called Living Works Ministry. That involves an after-school program that has been going on for about 20 or 30 years now doing after school tutoring, largely with students from Kilmer Elementary School, which is right here in the neighborhood. A new addition to that ministry is something called Music Works. A number of the musicians in our congregation are giving music lessons to people in the community as well as people within the congregation and so forth. We have also been involved in a lot of neighborhood organizations during the pandemic, a lot of our people were involved with what's called the Rogers Park Freestore, and other efforts just to make sure that all of our neighbors during the pandemic had connections with people. We're trying to share physical goods and food and other things with them. We have also had a Black Lives Matter group that has been a part of our congregation for the last seven years or so and has sought to engage with others in the community and other efforts. We've been involved in a number of demonstrations and so forth over the years regarding responses to violence against African Americans and other minorities and ethnic minorities here. So, in addition, we support our larger church, the Mennonite Church, USA in terms of its various missions, camping programs and service programs.

FO: That's great. When you say, in connection with Rogers Park generally, how has the community I mean, Rogers Park impacted Living Water Community Church?

RF: We're at the place where we are now, our meeting house now, because several years before we bought that property, there was a murder of a young man on that corner. In response to that, our teenagers actually initiated a weekly prayer service there. for several years, we were meeting there every Sunday night and praying on that corner for our neighborhood, praying for peace, praying for protection for everybody that passed through the intersection, interacting with people that were coming and going to the laundromat and those who were walking on the sidewalks and so forth. So, the past few years, that prayer service on Sunday evenings has been revived here with a focus on Black Lives Matters. Early on, when those of us who first moved in this neighborhood gathered here, we were regularly, just going out on prayer walks throughout the neighborhood. That was a really good opportunity to meet our neighbors and gave us a way of talking with people on the streets. You know, from those efforts, a lot of first worshippers joined us when we were meeting at the United Church of Rogers Park. And then in our new meeting house as well. I mentioned our involvement with Kilmer school. Over the years, a number of our members have participated on the field school council. Most of our members have been involved with various ministries throughout the area. At one point, we had quite a few of our members who were employed by various refugee resettlement organizations, forming relationships with folks that were just moving into the neighborhood, led a lot of those folks coming to our church and joining our church, very much

impacting our congregation and changing the shape, flavor, language, celebration, and food of our congregation.

FO: Interesting. Oh, what would the founders of the gathering place think about the community today?

RF: The founders of the church? You know, one of our members asked me, a while back, about how I felt about how things had developed. She and her husband had spent 15 years working, serving and living in Cambodia, and she came back. And I'm just delighted, I feel like the things that, you know, some of us hope for and could imagine, have largely come to pass, by God's grace and mercy. We continue to struggle to know how to relate to our African American neighbors, especially how to engage with the people that live on the block here. But it's just something that we keep working on and seeking relationships as we find them, and as they're given.

FO: Thank you. What do you think that really holds the community together?

RF: Well, that's easy, is Jesus. Jesus is the only reason that we come together, and Jesus is who holds us together. I think because Jesus has brought us together over time, we have found ways to love, support and care for each other, despite, the language obstacles and so forth. Part of that has just been getting to know each other, forming personal relationships with each other, kind of giving tangible assistance to each other. One of the things that our church is known for is moving, helping people move from one location to another. Somebody in the church moves, it's often the case that 20 or 30 of us will come together and will form a line from their apartment, down the stairs, or down the elevator and into the truck and across the street and back into their new home here. It is a real tangible way that we've been able to love and serve one another here. Yeah, certainly, in terms of our ministries, we've also had a number of youth ministers that have been very involved with our families, and who have been very good at kind of connecting with youth, especially those who have just moved here, and helping them to acclimate and find their way here in this culture and this neighborhood.

FO: Interesting. What keeps you coming to Living Water Community Church?

RF: Well, you know, I've often said that, in a lot of ways, Living Water Community Church is not an easy or a comfortable place to worship. And what I mean by that is, we're so different. We come from so many different backgrounds, not just ethnically but theological backgrounds as well, that on any given Sunday in any service, there's something that's always going to rub you have the wrong way. I think for me, who grew up in the American church and a white homogenous church, Living Water is what I've been looking for in my life. It has been church that feels more like normal, everyday life. And that includes the variety of all of God's people. And so, in one sense, I haven't come to Living Water to be comfortable, as much as to be challenged, and to have the opportunity to develop relationships with people that are different than me. And hopefully, because of that, be

able to hear God's voice more clearly. And sense God's direction for my life, more clearly than if I didn't have that richness that was surrounded me and challenged me week by week.

FO: Cool. What makes you proud to be a member of this church?

RF: [*laughs*] Well, Mennonites are famous for being proud about their humility [*laughs*]. I don't know that I'm proud as much. I'm just grateful, our church certainly has had struggles. And, you know, there's been numerous people that have come and left, because we haven't been able to meet their needs, and to care for them in the ways that they needed and wanted. That's very humbling. And I'm just grateful that, God has been faithful to us, and has given us what we've needed year by year, has enabled us to buy this building and to use that for both our own selves and for ministry to the neighborhood. And, yeah, I'm just grateful for the strong and long relationships that have developed here and for whatever modest witness and service that we've been able to be within the neighborhood.

FO: If you would like to share with me when or what exactly makes you feel comfortable in the church, I mean, feel welcome or feel supported by the community of the church?

RF: [*sighs*] Well, for me, personally, a lot of that has to do with the support that my wife and I experienced raising our family here. I had mentioned, we have three daughters, all grown now and all married and they're living one in St. Louis, one in Atlanta, and one in Kinshasa. Our community, the church, was just so important in terms of other people, that we formed relationships with the three of them growing up, both youth peers, but also adults, and knew what was going on in our family, knew what was going on in our home. You know, they were praying for us, were cheering us on here. And our oldest daughter actually lived for several years during her high school years with another family in the church. That was a hard period for our family. But it was such a blessing that other sisters and brothers were available and willing to open their home and provide some of the support for our daughter that we couldn't provide at that point.

FO: Yeah, that's awesome. If you could preserve one story, from your time at Living Water, what would that be?

RF: [*sighs deeply for seconds*] Yeah, that's a hard one. You know, I think that what's most satisfying is that we've had people in the congregation that have really been present with each other in hard times. Every family in our congregation has gone through hard times at one time or another, separations, divorce, illness, loss of family members, and so forth. That's all common to all people and all groups of people, but I'm just very grateful for the ways that members have stood up and stood with each other. We've often failed each other. But yeah, we haven't shied away or turned away from people just because they were experiencing hard things and going through difficulties in their life. And we've tried to love people as best that we could and pray that God would provide what we could not provide.

FO: Amen, so what has been the biggest change in the church or in the community? I mean, that relates to your life.

RF: Well, the neighborhood has changed quite a bit. During the time that we've been here, when we first moved into this immediate neighborhood, the Beachton Courts building here, the tall building on the corner, was quite rundown and had quite a bit of police visits and calls to that neighborhood. The building that we bought then converted into our meeting house, there's questionable activity going on in that building. Other building that is now a coop, on the northeast corner of Pratt Ashland intersection, was empty and burnt out. We've seen a lot of changes in just the development here in the neighborhood, the improvement of the housing. We are grateful that Rogers Park in general has been a pretty supportive community for a very diverse group of people. And that includes economic diversity, as well as other types of diversity. So, we have certainly seen some changes in the population. Rogers Park has always been a place where people come into the city. And I can't tell you how many people I meet from across the city and even outside the city, says oh, Rogers Park was the first neighborhood I lived in, so that is still the same. You know, our group, our church, has had different leadership over the years. And with that different leadership, we've had different populations of members. When we were worshipping at the fellowship hall of the United Church, we had many more African American members at that time from the neighborhood. But one of our pastors was African American at that time, and that made a difference. Another season of life, we had many more Hispanic members than we do now. We had strong leadership families in the church at that time, who were Hispanic. We've seen those kinds of changes over time. We've been blessed often by a lot of young students who have come with a lot of energy and creativity, and then graduate from their studies and move on. So, we've gotten used to the way that things change over time, and, come to recognize that it's just normal life.

FO: Exactly. I'm kind of interested in the COVID era, especially post COVID. What would you like to say about the church, as well as the community? How has COVID impacted your relationship or your connection with the church as well as the connection with the community?

RF: Well, we certainly have been affected. A large group of our Bhutanese members moved away during the COVID pandemic. We started meeting entirely by virtually, in that first year of the pandemic, Some people just disappeared. And that was sad and an unfortunate thing. So, we have one combined service now with separate teaching times for our different language groups here. So, we've responded that way. I think the pandemic was disorienting to all of us. But there were a lot of efforts in that first year of the pandemic, not only to care for our own members and stay in touch with each other, but also to be a part of networks within the larger Rogers Park community that were looking out for the elderly and others who are shut in and trying to provide services and companionship here during that first year. For a couple of years of the pandemic, we were actually hosting the Rogers Park Freestore in our building. We weren't using the building for Sunday school classes at that point, we were able to make one of our rooms available to them. So, it was at least a

year and a half, two years that we worshiped only virtually. And then it's been a year and a half or so since we've been worshiping in person again.

FO: Now, I'm interested in culture, I mean, the structure of the church. What is the favorite part of the culture, as well as the structure of the church?

RF: [*laughs*] Well, our worship, certainly, but our potlucks as well. So, we have delicious potlucks, with food from around the world here. So that's a highlight. But the singing and the dancing in our worship services are much livelier than anything I grew up with, in my white homogenous church. So, that's something I really enjoy. And I think we as a congregation enjoy and keep experimenting with. How can we honor each other? How can we serve one another, in our worship, and in our life together?

FO: Thank you, how has the community impacted your personal religious life?

RF: Well, I spoke earlier about the kind of worship service we experience and not being comfortable. That means that I have to keep growing in my spiritual life, and in my emotional life, and keep looking for how God is showing up even if it's the ways that I'm not familiar with or comfortable with, necessarily. So, I feel like I've been encouraged to continue growing in my own spiritual life greatly because of being a part of this church. one of the characteristics of our church life that I haven't mentioned is small groups. We encourage all of our members to participate in a small group, which meets at some other time of the week other than Sunday. My wife and I have been a part of the same small group here of church members for the last 20 years. That's more than anything else, it has probably really nurtured my spiritual life and my walking with the Lord. Just being closely connected with other sisters and brothers that are trying to live the same life and really know one another and know our stories and know our families and know our feelings and know our successes and have loved us through all of that. That's really been a major part of my religious life. And experiencing that connection with other sisters and brothers, so thoroughly, and so completely. One of the things that we set out to do when we moved down here to begin this church was, we talked about a parish model, we deliberately tried to move all within the same neighborhood. We were in walking distance, not only of the church building, but of each other, so that we're seeing each other, throughout the week, not just on Sundays, and we know where each other live, and we walk into each other's homes, share cars with each other, and some of our members have bought homes together. We both have access to each other. But we're also sharing the same neighbors and seeing the same things going on around us and kind of asking, how can we respond? How can we support those around us? So, that decision to what we call a parish model of church, where we all are living, close to one another, certainly has been a major part of our experience as a church and as my own growth and development as a follower of Jesus.

FO: I love that. What do you see as the future of your congregation? By this I mean, what do you imagine as the greatest challenge or opportunity?

RF: Oh, very aware of the greatest challenges that our whole world faces, right, economic changes, or environmental changes. Just the growth of polarism, fear and distrust among us, as citizens and as members of the society poses very real challenges for all of us. And so that's the case. It's also true that the church as an institution is just changing greatly. We don't know what the future will bring. And we don't know, whether the way that we're sharing life and worshipping now will be the same way that we're doing that and, you know, 10 years or 15 or 20 years but, I am confident that, it's a basic human need of humans to come together and to be known by one another and to seek each other out in need. We need affection, we need companionship, and whether we recognize it or not, and we all have been created in God's image, and there's part of us that really crave to be in intimate relationship with God. I'm hoping that we can continue to find ways of talking about that in ways that attract others, rather than repel people and make people want to run away. And that the way that we live our lives will be attractive to people as well.

FO: That makes sense. What do you think people outside your congregation would like to know? One thing you feel people outside living Water Community Church should know, or you will want them to be aware of?

RF: [*laughs*] Well, my housemate would say, we want people outside the Living Water Community Church to know we're there. A lot of people see our church building, and they don't recognize it as a church building. That's part of our tradition and faith heritage. We don't spend a lot of money on buildings and don't put up big steeples and that sort of thing. So, we keep trying to find ways of letting people know that we're here that the doors are open, that people are welcome to join us. And we keep trying to find ways that we can create space in our own lives to interact with our neighbors more closely and intensely and do so in a way that, again, it's attractive and people feel respected, our neighbors feel respected and cared for and loved.

FO: Thank you. A couple of questions before we go. Why did you say yes to this interview?

RF: Well, I was asked, and so part of me seeks to say yes when requests are made of me. I was interested in the project. And the description that I heard about it seemed like it was very worthwhile. And we have not had a lot of interaction with Loyola University over the years, but it's certainly a very big presence in our neighborhood and contributes a lot to our neighborhood. This is a way to support the work in the education of the university and students and glad to be a part of that.

FO: That exciting, and I think I love that. I'm going to ask one or two questions now to kind of wrap up. If you consider changing congregation, what do you think?

RF: [*laughs*] You know, part of me says, that's a question that I ask every so often. And for most believers, I think that it's important to have the freedom both within and without, to ask that question. Here in the United States, religion is voluntary. We need the freedom within ourselves, to be able to ask, the question, is this where God wants me to be at the moment? So, I can just say, I've asked that question from time to time over the years. And each time I've asked a question, God's made it clear that this is where he wants us to continue to be. So, I'm here until God sends me someplace else.

FO: Thank you. I want to connect this community, Living Water Community Church, with other communities around. What is your relationship as a church to other churches or religious worship centers within Rogers Park?

RF: In some ways, we don't have a lot of formal relationships. Our pastors over the years have participated in the local ecumenical pastors gathering here in East Rogers Park. And so that has put us in touch with other congregations and occasionally we have done special services together. What are the places where we come together with other churches have been when there have been incidents of violence here in the neighborhood, especially against minorities. I don't know, 15 years ago or so there were a number of Jewish neighbors who were shot during a shooting spree here by somebody driving through Rogers Park, up into Evanston, and Skokie. There was a real coming together of the churches, and the religious communities in the neighborhood at that point to stand with our Jewish sisters and brothers. I can remember at least one other service like that, where there was violence against Muslim neighbors. There is a mosque on Broadway near here. Religious leaders in our congregation have been a part of those times of gathering together to be able to support each other's congregations and each other's members here, when they've experienced violence and harm. There are a few other efforts that we have made over the years, especially in terms of connecting with other Christians in the north at Howard area. Good News Community Church up there, a number of us have tried to relate to over the years, as well as any number of faith-based organizations up in the Northeast Howard area that our members have been volunteers with and have participated in or have been employed by. So that's another part of our neighborhood that we have tried to bridge. One of our members of our church, one of our elders, has actually been very active in terms of reaching out to young people on the streets and working with the police and with some of our religious leaders in the north of Howard area, trying to intervene where there has been violence and the possible retribution because of violence. Those are some of the ways that we have tried to connect with other Christians and faith communities here in Rogers Park.

FO: Can you chime a little bit about Living Water affiliation? Do you have an organization like a denomination that you are affiliated with?

RF: Living Water Community Church is part of the Illinois Mennonite Conference, which is an area organization that is affiliated with the larger Mennonite Church USA. All of those groups come out of what we call the Anabaptist Faith Tradition, which began in Europe in the 1500s. And we're actually coming up on our 500th anniversary in 2025. there are many very diverse groups within the Anabaptist tradition here in the United States and Canada, and around the world. Actually, there are

more Mennonites in the Democratic Republic of Congo than there are in North America here. We are more and more urban, and more and more diverse in our ethnic backgrounds. And so that's a good thing. That's a gift from God.

FO: I know it. So, in terms of contribution, do you have some responsibility to the larger organization? Or there's an autonomy of worship or coming together or whatsoever?

RF: I mean, the Mennonite Church tends to give a lot of autonomy to local congregations to decide things of their own, and then to the conferences in terms of issues of membership and also ordination of leaders and so forth. It's also true that the Mennonite faith traditions have spawned a lot of different service organizations. I'm actually very involved in an organization called Mennonite Disaster Service, which responds to natural disasters and other disasters, sometimes with helping with cleanup, but bringing volunteers together more often in terms of making repairs and rebuilding after homes have been damaged and destroyed by disasters. We work in the United States and Canada. And I actually volunteer quite a bit of my time with that organization, I have some administrative responsibilities here in the Midwest. I'm involved with the board of directors of that national organization as well.

FO: Thank you. What is the last thing you would like to tell me about Living Water Community Church?

RF: Well, the last thing, I'm sorry that you were here on Palm Sunday and not Easter Sunday, we had quite a celebration here this past Sunday. And it was quite joyous and wonderful as our Easter celebrations are. So, the last thing I would say is that something I posted on Facebook a couple of years ago, and that is that I go to church to dance.

FO: Thank you for the time, I'm going to take 30 seconds to just record the ambience in this building.

[30 seconds ambience recording]