

July 29th, 2015 – Sister Margaret Peg Maher speaking with Professor Mary Ellen Lennon at the Convent of the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana.

Abbreviations

SMPM: Sister Margaret Peg Maher

MEL: Mary Ellen Lennon

MEL: Today is July 29, 2015 and I am Mary Ellen Lennon here with Sister Peg Maher at the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana.

Thank you, Sister. Would you like to introduce yourself and tell us about your beginnings?

SMPM: Well, I was the only child of two older parents. They were married ten years before I was born and I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, but I was raised in Saint Bernard and otherwise known as the Holy City and we, Saint Bernard is a very small town, it's probably, at its height it had maybe eight to ten thousand people in it and it was, grew up around a Procter & Gamble plant and most of the people who lived in Saint Bernard or at least quite a few of them worked at Procter & Gamble so, because they could walk to work. My mother was also born in Saint Bernard and so after she and my dad got married they came there because my dad did not work for P&G, but he worked for another company that was located in Saint Bernard and he didn't want to have to drive too far to work, so they, they settled in Saint Bernard and so I was raised there and the only reason I'm making a point of this is that my entire life I was surrounded by Franciscans.

The grade school was taught by our sisters. The high school, the Catholic High School was taught by our sisters and the Catholic boys high school was taught by the Franciscan Friars and the parish that I belong to which was Saint Clement was also staffed by the Franciscan Friars, so for the first probably fourteen, fifteen years of my life, I did not know that there were other religious communities and I didn't actually know that there were diocesan priests. I just assumed that all sisters were Oldenburg'ers and that all priests were Franciscan Friars.

And it, it is a question that somebody posed to me and I guess I didn't realize it, but there was, that somebody posed that question to me when I was teaching at Roger Bacon and they said to me, well what's the difference between Catholicism and Franciscan Catholicism? And I said, I don't know.

Because I had never been raised in anything except that Franciscan tradition and my mother had two older sisters who were members of this community and so Aunt Rose and Aunt Emma were just ordinary people to me. They were, I just was raised with this and so there was not a big change in my life. I think at this point in time I probably have been out of a Franciscan parish or influence probably about two or three years.

I have never and the, by that time I was already in the community so I, I can't, I could of said, I to this gentleman, I can't answer your question because I don't know and so that's one of the things that was there. My Aunt Rose was the principal of the grade school that I went to and she was, she was there probably from kindergarten until I was maybe second

or third grade something like that and so, I was just real comfortable around sisters and priests for that matter because it was just an ordinary thing.

MEL: Did you think about them being nuns or they were just your aunts.

SMPM: They were my aunts, but I knew that they were members of the of the community, I mean that was, the one story that Aunt Rose always told me was right after I was born as soon as my mother could get out at that time, they brought me up to the convent and of course I they were sitting in the front parlor and I of course was taken to the community room so that everybody could ooh and aah over me.

And at that point, Aunt Rose took me to chapel and she said, "This one belongs to you" and so I don't think I had a choice (laughter).

So you know I think this is a natural choice for me to be part of this community and to be part of just the whole Franciscan movement, which is important to me. I went to, I came to the community when I was about three weeks past my 18th birthday and so I have been here fifty-two years and never regretted a moment of it and have had opportunities that probably would not have existed if I weren't here.

I taught two years in grade school because at that time Mother Marie thought you should experience children as they grow so I taught second grade believe that or not and then I moved up to sixth and eighth and then I went to high school and so after two years of grade school I taught 36 years of high school and I just absolutely loved every minute of it.

I enjoyed the kids, I enjoyed what they did, we had great fun. I taught ten years at Hamilton Badin which is the big Catholic school in Hamilton, Ohio. And we used to do all kinds of things. We put on hootenannies and variety shows and all the rest of this kind of stuff and the kids were just great, I could you know I can regale you with kids stories forever.

And then I took two years away and I did two years of parish work at Good Shepherd in Cincinnati and chalk dust rose in my blood and so I went back to school and then I taught four years at Our Lady of Angels in Saint Bernard and then at that time we as a community decided to close Our Lady of Angels and we closed the school and the Friars said that they would take the girls at that point, so Roger Bacon became co-educational. So I went to Roger Bacon then with the girls and so I stayed 22 more years at Roger Bacon.

One of the Friars who was later one of their provincials said to me, "So Peg how long are you going to stay here at Bacon?" And I said, "Well, Fred I'll give you five years or until they put a pad lock on the door, whichever comes first." And so 22 years later I left (laughs) and again it was, I never regretted a moment of it they were, I enjoy teaching co-ed. I always taught too, had except four years at Our Lady of Angels and that has always been something that has been special to me to teach both boys and girls because I really do like them.

MEL: I would love to hear about your classroom or even just a day in your classroom or a memory of your classroom.

SMPM: Let's just say I never ran it a totally democratic classroom. I always told them you know we will have some choices, but the choices will be this or that, you know and my goal was always I told them at the beginning of the year, you, while you are here you're going to learn many things, one of the things that you will learn is that your work will be on time, you know, that's a life lesson. If your mom and dad don't pay the CG&E bill on time they're penalized. If you don't have your lessons done on time you will be penalized. You know, you will learn that everybody has something to say and that's important and you will listen respectfully and there will be no laughing and there will be no, no matter how silly the question is there will be no laughing. And in some cases you will help me answer that question.

And I talked about the fact that they will learn to read because and I said, "Now I know you're all sophomores in high school and you know how to read, you think, but you will learn to read and you will learn to write and that is a big deal because you have to know those skills in order to go to college and somewhere along the line you're going to learn so much biology that your head is going to be pear shaped by the time you leave here with the expansion on the top. You know, so we used to do many, many things. We would do labs and we would do all kinds of projects and one of my favorite things I used to do with them is we would have a "build a bug" contest and I would teach them the basic anatomy of insects you know and so then they had to design an imaginary insect that had to be anatomically correct and it had to have a habitat and had to have a purpose because everything has a purpose and it had to be able, they had to be able to tell that story in order to do it and so they would bring in many of these wonderful "build a bug" things that they had and one of our teachers at Roger Bacon was a very wonderful gentleman, but he was just a little eccentric, and one of them built a bug that was him and we had a grand time with that, we had a wonderful time with that one and so one of them whose mother was a dental hygienist had, she built, his, the legs were out of toothbrushes and they had out of dental floss and I mean she had the whole story and his job the bugs job was to live in the medicine cabinet and keep it clean and his body was a toothpaste tube that was rolled up and this type of thing.

So it was one of the wonderful things that we used to do we used to do that a couple of times, well, every year I would do it once and then there were some other things we worked with the English department to learn how to write term papers and we would, we would do, one of the favorite ones I used to do is we would break down in groups and they would take a controversial issue and one had to take the positives of it and the other had to take the negatives of it and then they had to argue their case in front of the class and see which one would win the case and one little boy, well not little boy, but one boy came in one time and he was doing the genetics, altering the genetics of strawberries to make them frost resistant. So he came in and he said, "Before I start can I go out in the hall for a couple of minutes?" And I said, "Is something wrong and he said, "No, you'll see when I come back." And I said, "Okay." So he went out and he was out maybe two minutes and came back in all dressed as a farmer and so he gave his presentation as a farmer. So kids got a big bang out of doing that.

We ran trials. Sometimes, you know, I had a student teacher who was studying law and so he did a project and they had to argue a case in front of a jury and to see if they could,

could win. We used to do, I was always big on microbiology and so they got to see the first thing that they always saw was pond water and, and got to chase the little no-see-ums in the pond water and one of the mothers told me one day I always told the story of Arachne and Minerva whenever we did spiders and tell the story about how that's how the spider got its name and her son came home and he said to his mother, Do you think she really believes that? You know, so we used to do wonderful things.

When I was teaching in Hamilton part of the kids were farm kids at that point and one of the boys whose father owned a huge dairy farm was, we were doing genetics and he was trying to explain how he knew the genetics of this particular calf that he was going to take to 4-H and the kid in back of him who was right from the center of town said to him, "Can he bring his calf to school so we all can see it?" I said, "I think he's going to have a hard time getting it up steps." I, you know, he didn't bring it.

But and my other favorite story was the same, same group of kids and I was doing genetics with them at that point and the one young man said, "I, I understand what you're doing, but what would happen if you would cross a brown cow with a white cow?" And so I picked up the chalk and you know drew out the square and all that and I said, "Well if you have a brown cow and you have a white bull, this is what you would get." And he nodded. And I said, "Okay?" And he said, "Mm-hmm." "Well, it's not okay because I can still see the question mark on your nose." And he said, "Well I got that, but what do you get when you cross a brown cow with a white cow?" And I said, "All right if you have a brown bull and you have a white cow this is what you would get." He nodded and I said, "Okay?" and I said, "Yeah?" and he said, "I still don't get it." And I said, "But then, what's the problem? I don't understand what you don't understand." And he said, "I just want to know, what do you get if you cross a brown cow with a white cow?" And all of a sudden it dawned on me and I said, "Nothing." And he said, "What?" and kid next to him grabbed him by the arm and yanked him over and whispered something in his ear, to this day I don't know what he said to him and he went, "Ohh." So we had all, I mean I could go on and on and on, but those are the kinds of things that happened in my classroom (laughs) that we're always interesting and always something to talk about. You know, so—

MEL: Your class sounds so vibrant and creative and may I ask you how you felt at graduation?

SMPM: Oh, I cried through most graduations, I mean it was just, you know, there was just, you see them grow up because I would have them as sophomores and then sometimes I would have him again as seniors when I taught anatomy and physiology, but most of them you know just went on to chemistry and physics and that was it and so you know they would just, it was just like seeing a whole different group of kids leaving you know and sometimes you would go wow this is going to be a great experience for them and then some students you go, wow, we're really turning them loose on the world (laughs), you know, but they were, they, I just really enjoyed the kids they were they were just great in every possible way and they, we would do a lot of fun things, but they worked hard and that was one of the things that I always liked is, is that they were always willing to work hard and to learn something in the process and so they, but it was just a great experience for me to be in the classroom all those years.

I knew toward the end that I was going to have to leave because it was beginning to get to my legs because no matter when you do a lab the kid who needs help in the first row is never, the next kid is never the kid next to him. It's always the kid in the back of the row and I always used to say my classrooms were Olympic events because they were carrying backpacks so you were climbing over backpacks and climbing over stools and so it was an Olympic event to get around the room you know and the other thing is that often labs are built on cement or terrazzo and so, it gets to your legs after a while and so I knew that at some point I was going to have to just stop because it was beginning to affect my abilities to get around you know and, but God took care of that one, you know, so, I remember saying to someone who is in charge of ongoing activities, I said, You know I'm really gonna have to come in and talk to you, we have to find something else for me to do because I'm gonna have to leave the classroom and she said, Well how long do you think you got and I said, Oh I can go another three four years I'm sure of that and so well we went another three and then I was elected to Council so that kind of took care of itself in the process.

MEL: But your calling was being a teacher?

SMPM: Yeah, I love it. I have no desire to go back again, I mean I'm, I'm done. I understand why teaching is for the younger, younger generation because I found that as you age you are less tolerant of some of the nonsense that goes on in class that has to go on in order to make it interesting and to make them want to be there, but you get less and less tolerant of it. I was talking to a couple of the people that I retired with from Bacon and they were saying the same thing, it's like you know it's, it's not that you don't like the kids anymore it's just your tolerance goes down and or it goes up or something I don't know what it does, but you know I think there's a there's a reason why the public schools do the thirty and out you know because it's the tolerance levels do have a tendency to get less and less as you teach and—

MEL: But your heart was open to a new path?

SMPM: Right, you know, it was you know I, I didn't expect that that was going to be the upshot of my deciding to leave the classroom that was the furthest thing from my mind, but it's, it's the thing that got me out, so, without having to do a lot of other discerning and that kind of thing, but not that you don't discern for that, but, but it's the thing that I move, it would have had to be something spectacular for me to move out of the classroom I think I would have just continued anyway and, and just enjoyed it, you know so, but it was, it was fun and you know I, grateful to the Friars for the opportunity to teach at Bacon because it's, by the time I left I was the only sister in the building and when we went over, we took I think eight of us went over and by the time I left I was the only sister in the building and it's, so we had a few Friars maybe two or three, but—

MEL: That must have been a change.

SMPM: Yes, yeah, it was, and it was interesting, but you know I met a lot of wonderful people and as one of the gentlemen wrote an article for the, it's the quarterly thing that comes out from Bacon, I don't even remember what the name of it is, it's got some catchy little name and he said, You know one of the things that he always liked is to come into the faculty room and he said, I would come in and I would see her sitting there and I knew it

was going to be okay, you know, and it, it was, you know so I think that it was a good thing for me to be there because it was a sounding board for some of the people that needed somebody to talk to periodically, so it was—

MEL: Multiple, you had multiple roles at the school?

SMPM: Right, yeah and you know it was like I said, I, I enjoyed every minute of it I wouldn't trade any of it for anything else, but I know that I would not go back and do it again, you know, so—

MEL: I really appreciate hearing you talk about being a teacher, I don't think we talk enough about the work that teachers do and that joy of the classroom, but would you like to talk about leadership, or perhaps something else, sister, anything.

SMPM: You know, again, leadership was something that I did not expect, did not particularly even want, you know. I could see that when we were in the process I, I could kind of sense that this was coming, you know and wound up saying to the person who was elected to the Congregational minister, "Are you ready for this?" And she said, "I guess so, but she said, you have to be as ready as I am." So, and I said, "Well, I still think you're going to be the Congregational minister." And she said, "Maybe not." Well, she was and that was great, I was happy that that she wound up in that position.

I would honestly say that in the six years that I was in leadership, I never had a bad day. I never had a day that I thought to myself, Why did I say yes to this? You know we had days that were long, we had days that were hard, we had days that you know you think what else could go wrong today you know but I never had a bad day it was, I was with a tremendously wonderful group of women that could not have been better for me and I think that their presence and their understanding of what was going on was a phenomenal help to all of us and it was I mean I can't tell you how much I appreciate being part of that particular team because it is, it was a wonderful group of women. They are still wonderful women, but you know, but—

MEL: Would you describe maybe for someone who is not a member of a community what it means to be in leadership for a community of women religious, what the role was and, and, how one thought of their place in the community and what you were challenged to do?

SMPM: I think leadership in a community like this is really twofold. You have to be concerned with the welfare of the sisters and their growth and their development both physically and spiritually and emotionally and so you spend part of the time being concerned about the individual issues of the sisters and what they need, what they want, what you can provide for them and, and the other part of it is, we are also a corporation and so you have to have a foot in the business part of it and how does that corporation function because we are, you know, 501(c)(3)'s and so you have to be aware of how all of that plays against all the decisions that you make and we are also owners of Marian University, the Academy, and we own Michaela Farm, and we own Oldenburg, Franciscan Center and while the University and the Academy are self-sufficient and can operate on their own without any difficulty, the Farm and the Center need attention and so you have to be aware of the corporate needs of that, so you have to run a balance between the two and you can't

in my opinion, you cannot take one over the other, you have to, you have to be aware of both of those things.

It is, in the corporation part of it, you have to be aware of all the finances and all the rest of it that goes along with it and that for me was a learning experience because I have no background in finances at all. I used to kid the treasurer all the time, I'd say, "Margaret, how can I be out of money, I still have checks?" You know, and she would just groan, but it would be, I think there's a balance that has to be struck there and when you have a community that has a large number of older people in it who have, many of them having special needs, you have to be aware of how you're going to get those things for those sisters who have special needs and just be attuned to what the aging process does for them and with them and in them and so be able to bring that back to what needs to be done and then in addition to those two pieces you also have to be attuned to what are the spiritual needs of the sisters and how do you help to provide for their growth, their continued growth, until they die and what are their needs, what do you need to be able to say to them and do for them and do with them so that they understand that they're not alone in that process and you know and thankfully we have someone who is in charge of ongoing formation, but, you still have a foot in that camp also, so I guess you're up to three feet at this point, but it's those are the things that you, you normally have to deal with.

And I was on a group who believed very strongly in team and it wasn't me doing something or you doing something, it was the five of us doing something and we, team is never as easy as it sounds because you have to get everybody at least to the point where they can say, I can, even if I can't support it, I can live with it. And so that took a lot of talking and it's not the most time efficient way to get something done, but I think it is the most effective way of getting something done and we also, as a team, believed that we were not making decisions that we had to involve the entire community in making those decisions and so that even took more time because you had to do the groundwork that needed to be done to make the presentations to get the group to see the pros and the cons and say, now what do you want to do, and trying to get 250 women to agree on anything is next to impossible, so you know, but you, you do what you can in order to get that to work.

MEL: When you were in the thick of, of one of these issues where you were debating it with the whole community, do you remember how you felt, or how, what you, what you thought during the process?

SMPM: Well I would always start out, when we went to these community meetings, I would always start out and I would always have, we always started approximately, well, 9 o'clock on the dot, about three minutes to nine, I would say, "I need my two minutes of panic right now" and so, you know, so we would have you know I would, ahh, you know is this going to work and all the rest of this kind of stuff and then you know the, the bells would go off, of course across the street and it was 9 o'clock and we started and I could just feel myself calm down at that point.

I truly believe that in, in our religious community I can't speak to everybody's but in ours when we assemble, I do believe that the Spirit is with us and I believe that the Spirit speaks strongly in the group and, and in looking at that group of women out there because you're facing them obviously, you could see them weighing the decisions, you could see them talking to each other, you could see them looking for what is the best way that we

should solve this problem and in doing that it was kind of like how can this go wrong? Now you know did some of it go wrong? Well of course, but you know it's, but I strongly believe that when you have that many women, religious women in a crowd you do have the Spirit operating and as a result your decisions for the most part come out to be the best because everybody is willing to say, well I may not be able to do all this, but I can move this far and, and that's what's important as far as I was concerned, is, is to get everybody to buy into whatever the decision was or at least be able to buy in partially and once you have the buy-in, then it, it works because you have this group of women who are now in charge of, or have ownership, of this particular decision and this is a powerful group of women and, and so as a result you know things just move in, in the directions that they're supposed to move in. I truly believe that there was always the Spirit working with us.

I mean, I can still see the decision that we called for was, well called for a number of them, but one of the ones was, was, should the Carmelites come and live in Theresa Hall? And we presented this to the community and said, you know, here is the issues, here is what's going on, here is what needs to be done, you know, we have this facility, we can do this, we can make this work if we do it this way, you know, what do you think? And let's take 15 minutes of just silence you pray over it and let's see what we get to. At the end of 15 minutes, let's take 15 minutes of, you know, you discuss it with the people around you and at the end of 15 minutes it was kind of like, what do you think? Shall we allow the Carmelites to move into Theresa Hall and I remember Barb did the presentation and I remember standing up so that I could see because we were going to take a hand count vote and I remember standing up so that I could see and I stood up and turned so I could face the congregation and there were no hands down. I mean and we had some people with two hands up, you know, and so I mean it was just, you knew that this was going to be a positive experience and it has turned out to be the most wonderful experience and it's, I think there's a great power in getting everyone to come together and come on board and see how all of that works.

I know I said to many of our sisters as we would do things they would say something and I'd say, No, we are not deciding, we are deciding, all of us are deciding, it, you know, and it's not just the five of us, it's all of us will make this decision. And I think that's, I mean, I just believe that that's the way to go.

SMPM: Oh, my goodness, yes, I mean it was, it was just like you cannot do the job unless you are convinced that God is with you, you cannot do it because there's no possible way that you could look at all of this and make the work load even reasonable for that. You know, I, we were a group that prayed together, we were a group that did days of reflection together, I mean, we got to know each other very well through those kinds of experiences and you know I think there's a there's the reality that the Spirit lives in all of us and we have to recognize that Spirit and your Spirit needs to get in—the Spirit of God in you needs to get into touch into the Spirit of God in me and it's and I think that is one of the things that I've learned, that God is with us regardless, you know, we have a sign in our living room at home that says, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present here" and it is one of those things that I really do believe works for us and I believe that everybody in this community has an intense prayer life that will allow them to be able to get in touch with the God in whomever

they come in contact with and so that's a that's just my personal belief and so it's one of the ways that I see that working.

There is a—as you step away from it you wind up saying to yourself I cannot believe that I am with such a group of women as this and sometimes when you're in the midst of it you know you get caught with some of the idiosyncrasies and those kinds of things, but as you step away from that and you begin to look back on it you know you wind up going wow this is a tremendously powerful group of women who have made the church much stronger than ever thought possible and you know and it gives you a totally different picture of the community in general and individuals in the community, it's a picture that you don't get unless you are called into that particular position for a time being and it it's awe-inspiring, you know, to be able to see that and to see how God works in everybody and it's and you, you just—I don't know, I can't even put words around it some days you know that it's, it's a tremendously positive experience. Are there negatives of course, but you know by far and large it's one of the most powerful experiences that you could possibly have and it's um.

MEL: I'm hearing positive and powerful and I appreciate that, it's one of those things that you're in it, that you can understand it, but if you could. I was just struck by your words, the fact that the church is stronger because of this. Could you talk a little more about that?

SMPM: I think the women in the church because we are not in hierarchical positions for the most part have a unique position to be able to get things to happen and also to be helpful to people to be helpful to them to the church which is basically people and because we are not hierarchical and because we don't have to be concerned about certain aspects of what we say and do, you know, particularly when you're not in a position to speak you can I think be more understanding and more helpful and allow people to see what church can be rather than what it has to be because this is the way the hierarchy wants it to be, now I guess I'm choosing my words carefully here, but you know but it's um I think sometimes the clergy get caught in a trap. They would like to do something different but they can't where we can come in and while we have to be somewhat careful we don't need, we're not as visible, so to speak, and because we are not as visible I, I think we can be more helpful to the church in general, particularly in areas where women need to be supported. I don't think that the men always get it and some of the unique problems that women have and I think that allows us to be able to step in to some of those roles and be more understanding of the situation and because the men don't have to deal with some of the same issues and you know and not that they can't I mean I can name you priests to do excellent jobs on everything, but I think it allows us to be able to function to, to be more of service and more servant orientated and to be more understanding of some needs that are out there.

MEL: And more compassionate?

SMPM: Maybe that's the word I'm looking for and it just wasn't coming and you know, but it's uh, I'm convinced that there is and will always be a need for religious women in the church. We may not be as many as we have in the past and I don't know that that's necessarily bad, but I don't know it's necessarily good, either, but, you know, but I don't know that that's necessarily bad and but I think it allows us to develop a unique role in the church that is probably emerging and we just don't know exactly where it's going yet you know because I think that role as we become smaller and we become less of the work force

of the church I think that emerging role is going to, to come out more strongly, where that's going to land? I mean, I'm not a futurist here, but, but I think it is, is something that will evolve from what is happening now with the lessening of numbers and the development of various ministries in the church.

MEL: Sister that is so interesting because often what we hear is, it becomes sort of a tragic story of people being sad there are fewer and fewer numbers of women religious, but what you're describing is again that in this place new avenues might emerge or new roles might emerge. I'm just more interested in what you are saying because I find that fascinating.

SMPM: I just, I think that, that we over the years I think that sometimes we have been looked at as the workforce, I mean, we are the teachers we are the nurses we are the whatever you name the place, but we can no longer do that because of our age and because of our reduced numbers and I know as a community I think we have always looked at it as we are a success if we can work ourselves out the job and allow it to go to somebody else, but then that poses the question, what is the ministry then because there must be in my, again this is only my opinion, but in my opinion there must be a ministry, there must be a reason for us to be and the ministry has to be what is being carried out and so what is that and you know that role as teacher is pretty much gone and we, certainly that role as nurse is pretty much gone, I mean those have gone by the way side and I'm not saying that's bad, but then it causes us to step back and say then what is our ministry? And, How are we going to carry that out? And that needs to emerge from the group.

One of the things that I feel very strongly about is this whole emerging thing of care of creation or care of the earth and its very Franciscan I mean if anybody was involved in this this was Francis and I am really very strong on the fact that if we are going to continue as a world, period, we cannot continue to do some of the things that we have been doing, which is poison our water and poison our air and poison our land and do all the rest of this kind of thing and look at all of the diseases that are suddenly popping up and while I'm not a research scientist, I still believe that there is something with all the chemicals that we are encountering day in and day out and you know one of the things that I see that we can do as a group is to try and talk in terms of and model how can we take care of these gifts of creation that we have been given? Because there is not an endless source of water and air and Earth and struck me the other day well that she said this to me about a year ago, one of our sisters who is now deceased said to me, You know Peg, we are the only group of people meaning, I guess, Americans, we are the only group of people who call Earth, "dirt" and I thought, Whoa, you know and I have really tried hard to renovate that word out of my vocabulary except when I want to really talk about the dirt on the floor you know or something like that you know and it just struck me as, you know, we don't really look at some of this as being gifts we're just looking at it is something that's utilitarian and so, you know, we're going to run out of some of this stuff if we if we don't start taking care of it. There is no more water except what we've got and we can't continue this pollution, you know, there is no more air than what we've got and you're not going to manufacture it and, and I think that's one of the things that I see religious communities being able to model. I know we try to and I know we at the farm try to model that in the sense of you know, no harsh chemical fertilizers, no harsh chemical products that you know kill off the weeds and as I used to say to the kids, you know, what's a weed? And they would just look at me and I said, "A weed is simply a plant out of the place that's all." So the rosebush in the onion field

is the weed you know and so, what we have to do is look at it as what can we do and how can we model this for people and even at the farm it's how can we model a method of farming that will be productive, but at the same time gentle on the earth and is it the most economical way of doing it? No it's not, you know, is it the most time efficient way? It's not that either, you know, so what we have to be able to do is to prove that it may not be economical and may not be time economical, but it is going to give us a product that is healthy that is nutritionally dense and that is healthy for the organisms themselves as they grow.

MEL: I'm struck by your description of the farm and your democratic meetings with the sisters of the community where they're both, they take a long time, but the product is worth it. And it's for the soul, both are for the soul.

SMPM: Absolutely, I mean I left leadership and I asked to go to the farm and I did go to the farm, now, you know I'm not a farmer, I was raised in the middle of the city. I do have a biology background, which is helpful and as I've said to our farm manager a couple of times, you know, you want to talk about the science of farming I'm your person, you want to talk about how to get that crop in the field and back out, don't talk to me about it because I don't know how to do that and he said, Well you just don't know the practicum and I said, "No I don't" and in, so but, I think that that just knowing the scientific bent to it has helped me to understand what they are trying to do there and I need, there's the old saw of you know if you learn something you can go home, you know, I said, I usually arrive at quarter of 8 in the morning and I could be on my way home by 8 o'clock you know because I'm always learning something, I mean, Chris comes in and just says, well we're gonna do this and so and this is why we're going to do it and this is how we're going to do it and I'm you know okay mark that one down, ah, you know it just is fascinating to me on how all of this works and how we can make all of this a healthy alternative to mass production of food and I guess I look at it and say, well, you know, why would you want your animals raised on a food feedlot? I mean that's cruelty, at its best. So, you know, so it takes us another year to get this animal up to market weight, but we're running ninety two percent fat free without doing anything except putting them out to graze, you know, and I just, I mean, just even to balance that out with all the stuff that we do.

We run a CSA on Tuesday night and people come in and they said we can't believe all the stuff that we're getting you know and the stuff is absolutely gorgeous you know and that's not me that's Marie and the gardeners and those kinds of things, you know, but I think it's, that is in my estimation is an emerging ministry to how do we make that work and I know Chris said to me one day when he first went down to the farm he said, "How am I gonna know if I'm successful?" Because he took over in 2008 and I said, "Chris the day some of these old farmers around in this area are standing around down at the gas station and say, 'Let's go over to Michaela Farm and see what that Merkel guy is doing that's really working,' you're successful." And he went, "Oh, okay, I can live with that."

But I think there has to be alternatives to this and that is one of the things that I see as an alternative is as an alternative ministry I should say and if there is no ministry then we have no reason to be. It's the ministry that that is what brings us here and I mean otherwise we're just a group of people who have come together to do what? I don't know you know and it's so I'm just I'm just really big on that one, as you can tell (laughs).

MEL: I would be interested in hearing a little more about your work at Michaela Farm and the day to day or what you did when you first took the job?

SMPM: Well I my work is basically the office work at this point you know, I do the books, take care of the finances, you know, make the bank runs, you know, that type of thing answer the phone. I will do some of—listen to Chris, sometimes I think that's one of the biggest things is listen to him and give him a sounding board that he can say and then ask him questions because I always wind up, and I learned this with the kids, I would never give the kids a direct answer on something I would always asked them until they could come to that conclusion and I do the same thing with him. I just keep asking him you know and then until he—

MEL: Would you describe, could you introduce Chris?

SMPM: Oh Chris is our operations manager, he's the farm manager and Chris is a man who worked for us now for about 25 years. He spent 20 years in maintenance on this side of the property and in 2008 we noticed that there was some difficulties on the farm and I remember saying, I think we need a professional farmer to be able to run the place. Not that the sisters weren't trying and not that they didn't do the best that they could do, but they were not professional farmers and I said I think we need a professional farmer to make a turnaround in the farm and Chris, along with almost every one of our maintenance men farmed on the side. They would work during the day and then they would leave and they would go home to their farms and farm on the side and I remember talking to several of the men and asking their opinions of what do you think needs to be done at the farm and how would you do it and that kind of thing and they all came to basically the same conclusions on these are the things that need to be done. It was, Chris was the one who had the most investment in the natural way of doing it. We don't use the word "organic" we use the word "natural" and so the natural way of doing it and was most open to, I will learn what I don't know and so Chris went down in January of 2008 to make a turnaround on the farm and to his credit he took a herd of 26 or 28 animals, we now have 74 and we have, we cannot keep beef in the freezer. We have people who when they know the beef is being returned from the processing area are waiting to buy the stuff. Marie has done a wonderful job, she's one of our sisters, Marie's done a wonderful job laying out the gardens but, we have a lead gardener that works with her and Emma has done a phenomenal job of getting this done and working and we've taken on chickens since that time and so we run about somewhere in the neighborhood 160 180 chickens so we run about fourteen dozen eggs a day and all of them are based on organic feed and that type of thing. Actually they follow the herd, there's a part of them that follow the herd out in the field and there's a part back in the chicken house too.

But I think that that we have made some real strides, you know, are we where we need to be? No. You, know, are there things that we need to do yet? Yes. But I think that one of the things that I can do most is to take the office work off of Chris, which allows him to be able to do the field work that needs to be done along with another farm hand and they do most of the dealing with the herd and the plowing and those kinds of things. We are basically a grass farm because we raised hay and we run about through to 2 and 2 and 1/2 acres of truck garden and the gardeners do that, but Chris and Josh take care of the herd and all of the hay and all that type of thing that needs to be done over there and they are committed

to a natural way of doing this and keeping it as clean as possible so that people don't have to be concerned about chemicals and those kinds of things when we need to do any fertilizing we use natural fertilizers or organic fertilizers, which turn out to be you know like fish emulsions and those kinds of things and so or, manure, so you know, so, but the cows take care of that for us so you know, but we have a really good group over there that works together and I see that as an emerging ministry that that we need to continue to work to better what is going on over there and because you know we, we certainly have our down areas that need help, doesn't everything? You know, but it's a—

MEL: I'm struck by the emerging ministry and also how you would judge success if other farmers in the area were inspired and would learn from that. Do you think, how do you think that can be realized?

SMPM: I think part of it is, we partner with the Franklin County Extension Department, which is working out of Purdue and we sponsor, co-sponsor workshops for the local folks in a lot of things I mean the last one that they did was, had something to do with grass lands and those kinds of things we will get thirty, thirty-five people coming from this area of the state you know to these things. We work with the Department of Natural Resources on our woods and they just did a program for studying the woods because in our contemplation woods we have all of the various stages of growth. We start from you know the seed all the way up to mature growth and they like to use those and we had about 30 people the last time we did something like this. We partner with the East Indiana Health Education Associates, which brought sixth, seventh, and eighth graders to the farm to learn something about farming and also about health education and so we partnered with the Academy who helped to provide some space with Marian, who sent down some visiting professors to do comparative anatomy with the kids with the center who provided the place for them for lunch and then they come back to the farm. They start at the farm and they end at the farm, so we bring the children through you know and you know those are just a few of the groups that we have.

We have some of our local people who will come and just you know just say to Chris, how do you do this particular thing? And he'll take them out and show them, I mean we are big on—there are no secrets, I mean, it's, you want to know how we do it, we'll take you out and show you how to do it. And you know, I think there's a lot of that that goes on, something just ran through my head, and I just wanted to say and it's gone right now, but it'll probably come back you know, I just think there's a lot of information that gets out there that is because we're educators we have always been educators and so if we know it, we're going to tell you how we did it and it works in that direction too—

MEL: In emerging ministry?

SMPM: Emerging ministry, you know, we're looking at how, high tunnels now do we want to put high tunnels up? High tunnels are like I call them hoop barns, you've seen them that they are just big hoops and those are high tunnels and you can, they're built out of this stuff, like aluminum rods and then they're covered with a greenhouse grade plastic and when you close them off in the fall you can grow then through the winter and you can put low tunnels inside of your high tunnels we have low tunnels already but the low tunnels you have to crawl through in order to make them work, but we were looking at the possibility of putting some high tunnels out so that we could continue to grow later into the winters particularly with the cool type of vegetables like your spinach and lettuce and that kind of thing.

So I mean we do try things and see if we can get them to work and then if we do then, generally, Franklin County will call over, Ann Marrow will call over and say, you know we heard, ladadadada, can I bring over a group of people to see it? Sure come on over and it's that's one of the ways that we kind of hope to be able to continue that educational type of thing there too.

MEL: May I ask, did your, just like your prayer life changed when you became in leadership, did it change when you went to the farm?

SMPM: I think so I think I'm, I've always been someone who prayed in nature that is some something that is always spoken to me, but even now, it's even more so now, I mean because I'm, I'm living it in it all day long. So it still has a tendency just to be the place that I go. I have to be able to see outside and that kind of thing when I pray because I you put me in a little room that's closed in and I'm no good, you know it's kind of like, okay I got ten more minutes, let's get out of here. But I need to see outside and so it is definitely done that. I think I, even the things that I read like one of the things that I just sent for, it's supposed to be in the mail today is the Pope's new encyclical on creation and I want to make sure that I've read that because I write an article monthly for our community news and that's what I want to use for the coming year is that, so I need to get that read so that I can see what I can do with, with that, you know, so I think even my whole thinking patterns have, you know, one of the things that I have found too is I am really inspired by Thomas Berry's work. Now he is, he's since deceased, but, the first, I read his, I don't think it's his first book, but one of his books probably about twenty years ago and that was and I still have that book somewhere that I keep going back to, you know, he is just a, he's a philosopher and he's is, I don't think he's a Jesuit, but he's an order priest of some kind and he is also an ecologist and so he merges all that together and I can feel myself moving more and more toward that kind of spirituality and is the creation, not creationism, but you know the care of creation type.

MEL: Very different.

SMPM: Very different, very different (laughs), so, but you know I think there's a lot we can still do over on the farm and I think there's a lot that we can still learn, you know, there's many things that are going on that I think we need to continue to push forward in those areas because I do think that is probably one of the works in the future that we need to deal with.

MEL: Thank you, Sister, so much. I'm enjoying speaking to you so much, but I'm cognizant of your time, is there anything we haven't addressed you'd like to talk about?

SMPM: Oh I don't think so I think I probably bent your ear long enough.

MEL: Thank you very much.

SMPM: You're welcome.