

Merlin L Miller 2024 04 09

- Alan: This has become almost a full-time job, but it's been interesting, especially now that I'm getting down to the point where I think I can kind of start writing a history, to getting different viewpoints on things and stuff that I didn't know, and I think I've interviewed over 40 people now, a couple of times, and so I'm way behind on transcribing those, but on putting the pictures up, there were 6,000 of them up now, and there's a thousand in the process.
- Merlin: And then you're going to, what, publish a book or something?
- Alan: A history of the... what I want to do is write a history of the community.
- I started out just the church, but had discovered that for a small congregation, they had their fingers in all kinds of missions and things that affected it, so it's kind of gotten a little bit bigger now to bring some of that stuff in. Which is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you, one, to get your story, and second, to hear some of the history that affects, especially some of the aspects that you were involved in. Were your folks living next door [at 925 Maxwell St] when you were born?
- Merlin: They moved in there when I was five years old. We lived... actually, I was born in Aunt Nettie's, Nettie Buckwalter's house there on Wenger Road.
- Alan: Oh, they lived there for a while?
- Merlin: They lived there when they were first married. Well, I say, they actually lived... remember the little white house beside Olin [Slabaugh] years ago?
- Alan: Fred Yoder's...
- Merlin: William Sawyer's wife's parents lived there. But before that, when Mom and Dad got married, they lived there.
- Alan: And before them, the Culpeppers lived there.
- Merlin: Okay, so there's been a number of families there over the years.
- Alan: The story I heard was that Clarence [Miller] built it because the Culpeppers were his relatives, his wife's family. King descendants. Carrie was a King.
- Merlin: My parents didn't live there long, from Nettie's house to there. And then they built that house that Carson, your Uncle Carson [Hochstetler] had across the road. [2337 Mt Pleasant Rd] And they moved back here from there when I was five years old.
- Alan: And one of my first memories is standing there and thinking, Carolyn was awfully cute when they were doing the bricks. We were probably five years old. Because it was up for just tar paper for a while, wasn't it? Didn't they

build the house and y'all lived there for a while before they put the brick on?

Merlin: Oh, here? Well, yeah, it was about two... yeah, they did it in stages. Grandpa [Ira] Miller built the house, so you can imagine how long that time took. So, they built the house and then they covered it with tar paper or felt. And it sat like that for, I don't know, maybe two years or something like that. And then Harold Buckholder and Abe put the brick on it. It wasn't real long, but we actually moved in there before it was finished downstairs. And we lived upstairs for about six months. Yeah. Yeah, Carol and I still talk about having to take the little red pitcher downstairs to get water. But that would certainly be a no-no today.

Alan: No, you could do a lot of things and you couldn't do now. What's your earliest memory? What's your first memory?

Merlin: Yeah, I would say probably living down in that house that Carson then bought from my parents. And just playing outside. I remember Ernest [Miller] had the farm across the field from us, diagonally across the field. And he had heifer's ...cattle he was milking at that time. And I remember the heifers being out there in the field. And then us kids would go over there. And you know how cows are. They get inquisitive and they run toward you. We'd think we were being attacked.

But also, Carol Heraring lived backed up to us. So we were back and forth just across the field. It was just about as far as from here to mom and dad's house from their back door.

Alan: The house that was later the Gregory's house?

Merlin: The one...not Swartz's house. The one next to it.

Alan: The one next to it. Okay, yeah, that was later the Gregory's house.

Merlin: Yeah, okay. And so we were back and forth. Of course, like I say, I would have been pretty young then. Carol and I both would have been pretty young. But we were old enough to remember that and everything.

He had a brother, Jonathan, that was killed doing the bulldozer work.

Alan: What happened? A tree fall on him?

Merlin: A tree or a tree limb or something. He was pushing stuff with a bulldozer.

Alan: Yeah, Carol's a source of some community history from time to time. Let's see. they'd already built a new school when you started school. But they just had the two rooms then, right?

Merlin: Yeah, I didn't attend the school there at the end of Carter Road. That was already gone by then. Yeah, that was, they had already moved up to where it is now.

Alan: When you were drafted, the guys before you, a lot of them went to Williamsburg and then Merv, not Merv, but Phillip [Miller] and Ed [Yoder] and some others went to Cleveland. You went to Columbus, right?

Merlin: I went to Columbus.

Alan: How come Columbus rather than the other areas?

Merlin: Well, Olin, I went up there with Olin. And Kenny Kurtz also went to Columbus. And I'm not sure exactly how it all happened, but Jerry Kephart also went to Columbus. So the three of us were there at the same time, or very close to the same time.

Alan: I didn't realize that he had gone into 1W Service. But I guess I was probably gone about the same time. How did you meet Linda?

Merlin: Well, it was through that and going with Olin [Slabaugh]. Olin had relatives in Columbus, in Plain City. And he was going back and forth. He was actually in Cleveland.

Alan: Right, I knew he was.

Merlin: But he would come down to Columbus. And then he would come down here, and I went a couple of times with him. He'd say, do you want to go to Plain City with me? Oh, yeah, you know.

Well, I was at EMC at that time, and you know, during the holidays, you know, Christmas break and things like that. So that's when I met Linda.

Alan: What did you do in 1W?

Merlin: I was operating room orderly. And it was very, I still think that was one of the best things that happened to me. I mean, because it was at Ohio State, and Ohio State is, of course, Ohio State Hospital is a teaching hospital.

So they got all of the worst cases from all over the state of Ohio. And they had 14 operating rooms in there. And they would average, I would say they probably averaged three to four operations a day in each room.

Alan: And you were in the rooms with the operations?

Merlin: I was in the rooms in and out. You know, I couldn't get right up at the table, but I could get close enough to see a lot of the things, you know, brain surgery and heart surgery and all of that stuff.

And that was at the beginning of bypass surgery. In fact, they did the first triple bypass operation there at Ohio State while I was there. But unfortunately, the gentleman didn't make it but for about three days. He passed away. But I can still see their heart and lung machine down on the

floor.

And it's got two cylinders going like that. And as they turned, it would pull the blood while they were operating on it.

Alan: That would have been fantastic. My 1W was in Richmond at MCV, which was also a teaching hospital, but I was in the business office. You didn't see much interesting.

Merlin: What you did was probably a little more practical for life than what I did.

Alan: What I did was... I was a collection guy, so I sued people who owed the hospital money, and went to court, that's all I did. Well, like your hospital, as a state institution, it got all the poor people who couldn't pay for it. And probably 70% of them were pregnancies by young ladies who were not married and couldn't pay the bill. And we'd sue their parents, and it was just sad. I did a thing up there that I shouldn't have done at the time, but one of the people we sued without knowing it was Laura Shaddtenger and her husband.

And she came in and wanted to make a deal to make small payments because they were farmers, not making any money, poor, just kind of desperate. So we had a fund we could apply to for relief, and my partner and I, who had the other half the alphabet, wore the thing out in about a month so there wasn't any money left there. So I told her, "well, don't worry about it." And I got all the records destroyed. She no longer owned the hospital. I just, oh, that was really...I shouldn't have done that. Somebody's going to catch me. But it was before the days of computers, I mean, we had one at the time, but it didn't do much. And so, well, all these other people aren't paying the hospital. There's no point in dragging down some good people who are just having a hard time here. Anyway.

And when you got back, did y'all ever consider living in Ohio, or did you plan to come back here?

Merlin: Well, we had planned to come back here. Yeah. Actually, I stayed for a year after we were married. Well, let's see. Yeah, about a year after we were married. While I was finishing up my 1W, I was looking for something for a career, something to do. And I looked into computers, took a course at ECPI, and got a job with Nationwide Insurance, their world headquarters, or main headquarters, whatever, is in Columbus.

And I got a job there, and I was a computer operator for about two years. And then that's when we moved back down here.

Alan: So you all stayed there a couple years after your 1W service..

Merlin: Yeah, yeah.. Yeah, it wasn't real long. It was like maybe three and a half years, something like that, that all told that I was up there. Yeah.

Alan: And then when you got down here, you went to work with, was it Smith

Douglas?

Merlin: No. My first job was with Colonial Stores. Out at Ingleside, that long warehouse there, right there on the corner. I don't know what it is now. It was Colonial Stores grocery warehouse. So I was doing the same thing, a computer operator there. And then I wasn't there very long, and I was looking for something else.

And Nationwide had NCR computers. And there was a NCR branch there on Virginia Beach Boulevard. I remember it. And so I went there, and they couldn't believe that somebody... because NCR wasn't... IBM was so big. And they couldn't believe that somebody came in that had some operating experience. So I was kind of hired on the spot. So I worked there for five, six years, I guess, something like that, as a computer operator. And we had a room full of computers that didn't have as much power. As that does [indicating a desktop computer]

Alan: Now, when you all had moved back down here and settled down, how did you make the transition from just being a member of the laity and a member of Mount Pleasant to moving into the ministry? What was the process?

Merlin: I... It was about... '78, '79. I kind of made a rededication to the Lord. And James Bergey came to me one night at church and wanted to know if I would go to the jail, wanted to go along to the jail with them. So I said, yeah, I'll go along. So I went, thinking it would be a one, two, or three-time event, and it ended up being 12 years. So I went to the jail every Sunday morning from...all through the 80s.

Alan: So that was your first step into the ministry.

Merlin: That was the first step into the ministry.

Alan: I just posted a picture of you and Menno Yoder standing outside the jail.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. Menno and early on it was Francis [B. Miller], James, myself, with Jerry Silsley for a while. And anyway, there was a few others off and on, but Menno and James were the two main ones while I was going there. And then in the late '80s, '88, '89, I was put up for deacon at Mount Pleasant. And I served as the deacon for two years. And that was when Phil and Robert were going through their transition. Phil was transitioning....Robert was still pretty much involved, very much. But you know Robert, he's always planning out ahead. And Phil was kind of moving off. So that's when...

So Adona Nissley came in. They brought Adona Nisly in and Harold Bergey was assistant pastor.

Alan: Okay. Now, this is when Phil first started having his mental decline?

Merlin: No. No, he was... No, Phil didn't have his mental problems until...what was that, years run together. It was... '98, '99. It was quite a bit later, but he was

retiring. And Harold came on, and they felt like they needed someone else. I'm trying to think where Robert was at that time.

Alan: He had a mental breakdown at one point.

Merlin: Well, he did. He did. And...All I remember now is that Harold was brought on as assistant. And I guess Robert wanted time off or time away or whatever. So that's when they brought Adona in. They brought somebody in for a year. And I was still a deacon at that time. Well, it was about... It was in '91 then that Adona was going back. Harold was brought on as the lead pastor. And then I came on as assistant pastor at that time. And then I served about six years at Mount Pleasant as an assistant along with Harold.

Alan: How tough was that to be a pastor in a church you grew up in and knew everybody? Was it an advantage or a disadvantage?

Merlin: That's a good question. Because I've experienced it both ways, you know, later on at Landstown and everything. I think it was probably good to begin with. It was nice knowing everybody in the congregation. I don't see it as being particularly difficult. Of course, I wasn't the lead pastor either. But... I mean, it was kind of what I was used to because I'd been attending there since I was born.

Alan: So, after the six years, where did you go then, to Landstown?

Merlin: No. Actually, Daniel Bergey and I wanted to do a church plant.

Alan: Okay. Was this just from you all or was the Mennonite... I've gotten some inklings in some folks I've talked to that the Virginia Conference was very much pushing church plants in this period.

Merlin: Well, they were. They were. Yeah. They were, but I just... I felt like I wanted to reach out beyond the church that I'd grown up in. And I had a heart for ...particularly down-and-out people. And Daniel had just graduated from Bible school at Harrisonburg. Cornerstone. He went to Cornerstone.

Alan: Let me ask you another question, just a little bit off topic here. How much influence do you think Cornerstone had on the Virginia Mennonite Conference beginning to push planting new churches? I mean, they had been successful when typically the Mennonite experience was we lose members, we don't gain them. We gain them when the Amish trickle down.

Merlin: Yeah. It's a little hard for me to say. Cornerstone and Virginia Conference were in Harrisonburg. And I know there was some friction. Yeah, between the... I don't know... I mean, Virginia Conference had a lot of missionaries, so they were not opposed to reaching out. I think probably Cornerstone for some of the Virginia Conference people was a little bit too charismatic. And there was a little tension there. But they were supportive of church plants and mission work and that type of thing.

Alan: So you and Daniel had the church sanctioned for this or you all just decided...

Merlin: Well, we did. Robert was always supportive of me and was an encourager. And I've told people in the past, I wouldn't say that Mount Pleasant really got behind us. They gave it, grudgingly, gave their approval, is kind of what it was. But James and Mary [Bergey] were also a part of that. So that gave us a little credibility too with the older people. And the Cale, Bob and Alice. You remember Bob Cale? He was real good friends with Daniel.

Alan: No. That was actually from about 78 to 2005 or so. We were Methodists We were not there. Didn't really know what was going on internally at the church.

Merlin: Yeah. Anyway, so that sort of made up the core of the church plant. Also Darlene Miller, Eugene Miller, that would be... Roy's? Roy [Miller's] Roy's oldest son. But he got into a lot of trouble and they were separated. He and Darlene were separated, but they had... Oh gracious, how many did they have? Six maybe kids? And they were all through that. The youngest was about four maybe and the oldest was a mid-teenager. So they had all these kids that needed a lot of attention. So they were part of it too for quite a while. But of course they were... James and Mary were Uncle and Aunt to them.

Alan: So how did that work? Did you all... Because I'm not familiar. I just know that there was a separate church. I didn't realize you were involved with it. I knew that Daniel had started a church. So what happened? Where'd you meet?

Merlin: Well, we did it for about two years. And we had a lot of good ministry and things. We rented the school up here for a while. There again, they grudgingly rented it to us. And so we met there. And then we met... I was involved with pastors groups here in Great Bridge and so on. And the Lutheran Church, got to be real good friends, John Dudley. He was a pastor at the Lutheran Church right behind... You know where Mr. Jim's is? Go up Johnstown Road and right off to the right, immediately off to the right, there's a Lutheran church there. And so we met there for maybe a year or so.

So we met a couple different places. And then finally, what happened was that we weren't seeing much growth or anything and everything. And of course, I was friends with Dave Zook from over in Landstown. And I knew a couple of other people from over there, the elder group over there. I knew them, Jim Sullivan and Stan Geter. And they kind of got word of what we were doing and so on. And they're very mission minded and everything. And they said, hey, "why don't you come on to Lansdown, bring your group to Landstown, and sort of come in here. And then after a year or two, we'll send you back out, try to plant another church from out of Landstown.

And at that point, I was starting to get a little bit burned out, felt like we're kind of treading water. And I thought it was a great idea.

And Daniel did too at first. And we went over there for a Sunday or two. And pretty soon, Daniel started backing up. Because Daniel, I know all along, he had visions of having his own church and everything. And it became pretty

obvious that he was starting to pull back and didn't really want to continue on. So then at that point, when I realized that, then I said, look, I said, why don't we just, Linda and I are just going to go over to Lansdowne.

We feel like that was a real opportunity. But if you want to continue on with Dove Fellowship, you have our blessings, just go ahead. James and Mary were still there and others and so on. So that's what they did. And it became, it ended up being a blessing for both us and Daniel. Because Daniel soon got connected with the New Life Church. And he ended up getting a church down at Moyock where he's been for, what, 20 years now.

Alan: So what happened to the Dove Congregation? Did they just meld into one?

Merlin: Yeah, then finally, as Daniel and James and Mary, they kept it going for maybe six months or so. And then they decided..I don't know quite what the process was with them, but they got connected with New Life. And that, oh, then we withdrew from Virginia Conference. We didn't withdraw from the conference, We just told them that we were no longer functioning.

Alan: This is the Dove Fellowship?

Merlin: We went through the process because they had commissioned us. Virginia Conference had commissioned us. So we were really just standing, Dove Fellowship...and that was kind of the end of that.

But then Linda and I were going to Landstown and we weren't there but a month or two. And see, that was when Sam,...Noah Stoltzfuss, he was the pastor there.

Alan: Okay, first was Harold [Buckwalter], right?

Merlin: Yes.

Alan: How come they asked Harold to leave there?

Merlin: You know, that's a touchy...

Alan: I know, it's very touchy.

Merlin: Yeah, and I don't know. I think the congregation...nearest I can understand is that they felt like the church wasn't going to grow. They needed new leadership. It wasn't going to grow under Harold's leadership.

Alan: So this came, actually, more from the will of the congregation than from somewhere on high.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. It came from the... and I think that was what was so hurtful to Harold and Twyla. It was the fact that it came...well, see that was at the same time... see Phil was very much involved with that. And so he was giving counsel to these others and he was a part of Harold being moved on. And that

caused real heartburn for Harold and Twyla. They kind of felt like they had been undercut.

Alan: One of the stories that I seem to remember, is that when Harold went through this and went to work for Dave Zook and then decided no, he's going back to the sea ministry, that there were men in the congregation, including your dad and mine, who privately supported Harold. Did that happen? Or is my memory...

Merlin: No, I think that's correct. I mean, I know my parents, they couldn't understand. We didn't talk about it much, but the little that I did, they couldn't understand Phil's motivation in moving Harold out of that position. And I'm sure your dad was probably the same way.

Alan: Yeah, sort of. But at the same time, I remember him talking to Mama once or twice, that he thought Harold was mismatched, it didn't fit his talents, that he was not an evangelizing, outgoing, dynamic type person. And he thought that the sea mission was probably more of his low-key, one-on-one talents and gifts than being a dynamic leader. Now, when he left, did they offer it to Sam [Scaggs] immediately?

Merlin: No. TSo they brought in Noah Stoltzfus.

Alan: Okay, did he come through Cornerstone too?

Merlin: No. He was from New York. Upper New York. And I'm not sure how they got in touch with him, but I do know, I think when they were talking about bringing someone else in, that they wanted to bring someone in younger and more, well, a younger person. And that was another thing, I can hear my mom saying, when she saw Noah, "well, he's not any younger than Harold is."

Alan: But I talked to Sam at length about this, and he claims that while he was going to school, he and Harold were constantly in touch, and that their plans were that when he graduated or finished, he was going to come back here and be Harold's assistant, which probably might not have been a bad idea, because he's, you know, the dynamic evangelistic guy.

Merlin: Right, right.

Alan: But they neglected to tell anybody. And nobody knew it except them. It was their plan. They didn't discuss it with anybody else. They didn't ask if it was feasible. They just didn't do it. And then when Harold was dismissed, Sam said they came to him to ask him, and he said, I can't do it because of family dynamics. It will not work. Can't do it. And so he stayed up as a cornerstone.

Merlin: Yeah. I hadn't thought about it, but that makes sense. But anyway, Noah came down and was, I don't know how long Noah was here. Maybe 10 years. He was here for quite a while, maybe 10 years or so? And then they were having..., I don't know all the dynamics that were going on there at the time, but they were having a lot of problems. And Noah left. Or they asked him to

leave. Again, I don't know all the dynamics. But that's when Sam came on. That was after Noah. And they didn't have a pastor. I mean, they didn't have anybody in mind. The elders were holding the church together.

Alan: Okay. That fits what Dave [Zook] said.

Merlin: But along about that time, Sam was moving back to the area. So they approached Sam. And they actually...I remember the night that he was voted in. Sam and Beverly were there. And they asked them to step out.

And there was just a pent-up...they really wanted a pastor, but they didn't know where one was going to come from. But it was unanimous when they stepped out and they voted. It was unanimous. I mean, there was just a big applause. I remember now, it was just like a release. We've got our pastor now.

But...you know how Sam is. He's here one day and he's over here another day. Anyway, he started out. And right soon after, he was making a lot of changes in the congregation and everything. And for the good. But there were a number of families, some families that left and so on.

(Begin tape 2)

But he wasn't there too long before he came to me and wanted to know if I wanted to go with him to Indonesia. He had a trip planned over there by himself. Wanted to know if I wanted to go along. This would have been '99. And I said, yeah, I'd like to go. So just he and I went to Indonesia for three weeks. We went to Indonesia. We had a stop in Singapore and in Japan. And he knew people at each one of those places.

And it was, I remember that to this day. I mean, it was an awesome, awesome time. I just really thoroughly enjoyed it.

Alan: What made it so good? Seeing what other people were doing?

Merlin: Yeah, just being, finally being exposed to international culture and everything. And Sam was such a people person. Everywhere he went, he had all these friends. You know, I was a celebrity because I was with Sam.

Alan: Reflected glory.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. And I mean, he was preaching to big crowds. I mean, there'd be 400 or 500 people in the church services. I remember one night they had a baptism where they had a huge baptistry. And they were just, people were lined up. I think there was something like 300 people baptized that night.

Alan: That would be inspiring.

Merlin: Oh, it was. It was tremendous. And I saw, I saw... I'm not sure how this fits into my theology, but I saw people in line. There was about, not many, but I

think there was about three of them. When they got ready to go into the baptistry, that they fell out on the floor and were just, exactly what you would think of a demon possessed person. And it didn't faze them at all, the workers. They just got a hold of them and took them down in there and dumped them down in. And when they came up, they were just as normal as you are. They walked out right out, walked right up the thing, and walked right on out.

Alan: Really? That would make an impression.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. It was an amazing, amazing experience. So anyway, but it was on that trip, the reason I brought that trip up is because on that trip he said, look, he said, I've got James Allen, another guy, he's my assistant pastor, but he said, I'd like to bring you, when we get back home, I'd like to bring you on as assistant pastor. And it would be the three of us. And I thought to myself, I said, you know, this sounds pretty good.

I said, you know, Sam will be the lead pastor. I've got James Allen and myself. And I said, it didn't take me long to say, yeah, I'll do that. Well, when we got back, he did. He brought me on as assistant pastor, and it was less than a month after that that he came to me. He said, I need to talk to you.

I said, what's that? He says, I've been offered a job at, I don't know if he told me where, but it was New Life. And he said, I'm going to be stepping down.

Alan: So he already had the job at New Life when you left?

Merlin: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And he didn't know, I'm sure he didn't know that when he told me that, when he asked me if I would come on. He didn't know that. But he was running into a little bit of opposition there at Landstown, and he told me, he said, I just don't think I'm going to be a good fit here.

So anyway, so I thought to myself, I says, well, I guess that leaves James Allen and myself then. Well, about a week or two later, James comes to me and says, hey, I need to tell you something. He says, I feel like the Lord's telling me to go back to school, and I'm going to Regent, and I'm going to be stepping down.

I thought to myself, now this is getting a little serious here. So anyway, of course, you know, the elders, we had three great elders, Dave Zook and these other two gentlemen, Jim Sullivan. He was high up in the Navy, but a wonderful, wonderful Christian man that has a real heart for missions and so on. And Stan Jeter, and he was head of Christian World News on CBN. He was the one that started that years ago. So we had three really strong men.

And so anyway, it was shortly after that they came to me and said, hey, would you be interested in coming on as a pastor here at Landstown? And I said, well, I'll do what I can. And so anyway, so I was installed as pastor there.

And they had some.. this was part of Sam's problems. Sam told me, he says, I've got somebody guarding every ministry in the church. The Sunday schools

have got somebody that I can't make any suggestions to. The worship team is the same way. Every place...the way Sam stated it, there's a guardian at every door. And he says, I'm not going to do this.

So anyway, and when I came on board, that's exactly what I found. And we worked with it for a while. And finally, I began putting my foot down. And I said, this is not going to work. I said, you all are going to have to work together. We're not going to have this thing of all these little groups here and there. There was cliques within the church. And of course, Linda was a perfect helper for me in that regard. Because she wasn't going to let anyone, you know, you don't like me, that's tough. I'll give you a hug anyway. And we began breaking down walls in there.

And we had a Sunday school particularly. The lady that was running the Sunday school, the children's Sunday school, just, I mean, you couldn't get through that. I mean, there was no talking to her. She was going to run it her way or whatever. And I finally decided, I said, look, I pulled her into the office one day. I said, I'm sorry. I said, you're going to have to make a decision. Either you're going to have to step down or we're going to have to, you're going to have to open up or you're going to have to step down. Well, she stepped down.

And then along with her went a friend of hers that also left the church. But it began to break down a lot of walls. And we were only there, I was pastor there for seven years. Yeah, it was a little while, six to seven years. I started in the spring of 2001.

Alan: Were you there when they left the Virginia [Mennonite] Conference or did that come afterwards?

Merlin: No, I was there.

Alan: What happened with that? What was the..

Merlin: Well, the elders, the four of us, the three elders and myself, we felt like we were kind of being in a military area, half the congregation was military people. Knowing the stance of Virginia Conference, we felt like we were being a little bit two-faced. We were trying to minister to these people and the conference was always sending us information on peace and reconciliation and all of that.

And so we began looking around and thinking about who we might affiliate with. And we thought about New Life and a couple of other organizations, but nothing seemed to quite fit. But we decided that we would withdraw.

We talked to others. We weren't trying to hide anything, Phil and Robert and others. And we felt like we needed to withdraw from the Virginia Conference just because of what we were trying to do and knowing the beliefs of the conference and all of that.

Alan: In an earlier era, you wouldn't have had to withdraw. They'd have kicked you out.

Merlin: Yeah, right, right. So we did that. We went through that. That wasn't a real pleasant thing to do. But Virginia Conference accepted it on one condition. They said, we will accept your resignation if you will come under the umbrella of another organization. In other words, we don't want you being...I mean, I don't know what they would have done. That's what we would have done. But that was the counsel we got from them.

That you will have our blessing if you will come under the umbrella of another. So it was long about that time then that we had connections with Cornerstone. And so we talked to Gerald Martin about the possibility of coming in and being our covering.

And that was about the time... I was getting a little... Again, I talk about Sam running from one thing to another. That's kind of what I do.

Alan: Seven years is a pretty long time.

Merlin: Anyway... I kind of lost my train of thought there now. And that was about the time that I was thinking about doing something else.

I tell you, being a lead pastor in a church, it is draining on you. Well, just to give you a little bit of an idea, about two years into my time, our worship leader, Gary Hanvey, a great guy, very talented. In fact, he was offered to go with the Gaithers at one point. But he had depression, severe depression. And a lot of things contributed to that. He was in a motor vehicle accident soon after he was married. Well, they had two children. And in the accident, his wife and his daughter were killed. So that gives you a little bit of a background of why he might have some depression and so on. So anyway, he was going through depression.

And I got involved with that. And for almost a year, I was talking to him. Not every day, but four days out of a week. And I was trying to do everything I could to help him. And his wife wasn't making it any easier. She was going out. I don't know what all she was doing, but he did not have a good marriage situation. But he was a worship leader in the church. And we finally... I finally, at one point, I said, I said, I'm going to...There's a Midworth-Myer Clinic up in Fairfax, Virginia. A counseling place up there. I said, I'm going to...Will you go up there if I take you up there? So he agreed. I had to come up with some money, but... his wife actually paid me back later on for that. But anyway, I took him up there and left him up there. But he was continually talking about taking his life, killing himself.

Well, to make a long story short, he did. There was one day that he didn't show up for work, and I thought to myself, uh-oh. About three or four days went by, and they found his car somewhere.

Alan: Was he working for you?

Merlin: No, no, he was still in the church. No, he didn't show up for...He was working at Regent. He was a graduate of Regent. He was working at Regent, so they were the ones that contacted me and said, Gary hasn't showed up for work. We don't know where he is. I told him, I said, I fear. Anyway, so I had to lead the congregation through that.

And one of the things that I did the day that we found... We found out what had happened. I got the directory out. Linda and I sat down, and we called every single person in the church and told them what had happened. Because I said, I told every one of them, I don't want anyone coming in here on Sunday morning and doesn't know what had happened to Gary. And we were able to do that. We called every single one. There was a couple of families that we said, look, will you let your family know? But for the most part, we called everyone who came in Sunday and everybody already knew what was going on. And I got up and talked to the congregation. And it was a difficult thing. But Gary was so involved at Regent, so that story keeps bringing up all kinds of memories.

Gary's family, he was from Arkansas. And he was a schoolmate of [Mke] Huckabee.

Alan: Oh, really?

Merlin: Yeah. And so his family... Of course, I was in contact with his parents. And they had a pretty good idea, too, that this does not sound good. And so I was the one that had to call them and tell them that they had found him. But anyway, they wanted me to come down and do service down there.

So Linda and I flew down to Arkansas and had service in the Baptist church down there. And [Mike] Huckabee came to the service. He was governor at the time. And at the end of the service, after I sat down, they led him out before they dismissed the rest of the congregation. And he came over to me and shook my hand and said, thank you for everything that you've done for Gary and everything. So that's kind of my claim to fame now.

Alan: That's a good one. Is it, in your opinion, more difficult to lead a younger church than an established church? The reason I ask that, Donnie Wheeler for a while, entertained the idea of becoming a minister and had in-home meetings with the idea that he would grow into a church.

But he said he found it too crushing that everybody that came to him came because they had problems. Whereas in an established church, you don't attract many new members, but you've already got a stable body there that they've worked the problems out already. And he said he just couldn't handle the pressure from all the needy people.

Merlin: I would say in an established church, you have so many things that are set in concrete. I can give you an example of a church that we're going to now, Bayside Baptist. That's a long-established church. And their pastor is relatively young. He's in his mid-upper 40s.

And he's always... I'm on a deacon board over there, so I hear him. And he's always talking about people that are picking at little things that don't make any difference at all. They get so ingrained and set in their ways that this is the way it's been for 50 years. Why are we changing this? And he's got a pretty thick skin because whatever he decides to do, he just does it. But he's lost some people, too, because of that.

Alan: So why did you all leave Landstown then? What was...

Merlin: Oh... When I was at Lansdowne, we had a gentleman come in who lived here at Virginia Beach that was doing orphanage work over in Ukraine. And as he called, he wanted to know if he could come and give a little talk. So he did. And he came, and it was around Christmas. And he asked if we would do an angel tree for kids over in Ukraine.

So I said, yeah, that would be fine. So one of the other members of the church came to me and said, look, rather than sending that money over there, why don't you and I just go over there and check it out and see what's going on over there and we can personally deliver it. I said, well, that sounds great. So we did. And I began meeting people over there. And I decided to go back.

And first thing I knew, I got connected with the church over there, got to be real good friends with people over there. And we were going into the orphanage. And so through the ministry of Lansdowne, I got connected with the ministry in Odessa, in Ukraine, going to all these orphanages and everything.

So I was doing that along with, of course, still pastoring at Lansdowne. But as I'd been there for seven years, and again, I was starting to get, you know. And I just decided, and talking over with them and everything, I said, look, I'd just like to do more missions work.

Well, in the meantime, you remember when the tsunami hit down there in Sri Lanka and Indonesia back 2004? Debbie Bergy, Ray and Debbie Berge, who were attending Lansdowne, were connected with a group called Mercy Works. They were on the Mercy Ships.

Well, Mercy Works is sort of a sister organization that does ministry on land. You know, they go to all different places, wherever there's catastrophes or anything. So Debbie asked Linda and I, I said, look, he said, there's a group going from Mercy Works to Sri Lanka. She said, she was a nurse. She says, I'm going with them. Do you all want to come with us? And so we said, yeah, we'll go. So we went down there to Sri Lanka. It's been about two months after the tsunami. And that was a very impactful trip too, just like the trip to Indonesia. And so I got to know the people at Mercy Works.

So after we came back from that, I kept in contact and they went to China. They had some big earthquakes in China in 2008. And so I offered to go along on that. And they would take me along as pastoral support. These were primarily medical teams. And so I would go as pastoral support and went to

China.

And then Jeremy and I went to Sudan, South Sudan with them. And you see, Jeremy could go as a paramedic. So he could do all kinds of stuff. And so I was, again, the pastoral support.

Alan: That's a risky place, isn't it?

Merlin: Well, at that point, it was calm. North Sudan was really where all the... There's been fighting in South Sudan since then. But North Sudan was really where all the Muslims were and a lot of danger and everything. But South Sudan at that time was pretty stable. But we were, again, connected with an orphanage there. And they were expanding.

They had one orphanage and they were building another one. And we went out to the place where they were building the new orphanage. And we lived in tents for three weeks and ate beans and rice, three meals a day. That's what we had for every single meal for three weeks. And I like to kid people. We had two meals, beans and rice and rice and beans.

Alan: I'd bet that McDonald's hamburger looked good when you got back.

Merlin: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. It really did.

Alan: So you just wanted to spend more time working in the mission field?

Merlin: Yeah, and when you asked me why I kind of... Yeah, and I wanted to spend more time in mission work, overseas mission work. And then I really got connected in Ukraine. So I was going over there twice a year. I was going sometimes... There was one point where I went five times in a 12-month period. So I was going very regularly over there. And the reason I could do that is because I was using the credit card to pay lumber bills here in the business.

Alan: Frequent flyer miles.

Merlin: Frequent flyer miles. It cost me \$60 to fly over. Airport taxes. I could afford that. Yeah, and so it just seemed like the Lord kind of opened up the door. And as time went on, we kind of got away a little bit from the orphanages, and I got connected with churches over there. And I'm very close to a pastor over there right now. He's in Odessa. And everybody's going through a really tough time. Yeah. But when the war broke out, I had people coming to me regularly here knowing that I had connections over there and said, we'd like to send money over there, but we don't know where to send it to. I said, I can take care of that. I said, I know. I trust this guy. I know what they're doing. He sends me pictures, photos every day. They were going out, sending trucks out, going over to Romania, bordering countries, buying food and medicines and bringing them back and distributing them.

And they've been doing that ever since the war has started. I got connected

with the pastor over at Beach Fellowship on General Booth Boulevard, and they have a good bit of money. And between us, the money that I collected and the money that they were sending, we sent something like \$50,000 over there.

Alan: Wow. That was a help.

Merlin: Yeah. We were sending a lot of money over there.

Alan: Did you ever go to Albania on your trips?

Merlin: Yeah. I was in Albania.

Alan: The Shahini's?

Merlin: Yeah. I've been there three times, I think. I was actually there for about four months back in 2014. And worked in the school over there with them and helped out in the church and so on. And while I was over there, then I would make trips over to Ukraine. It wasn't very far, 600 miles over there. So I went over there a couple of times. Way back in, let's see, this was in 2014.

And they had an uprising. There was a bunch of thugs from Russia came in and started a bunch of problems there in Odessa. Throwing, I mean, they were really...I don't know if... There was some gunshots shot, but it was mainly throwing bricks and just creating havoc over there. And that was when I was in Albania.

I said, I'm going over there. I'm going to see what's going on. Dini said, you better not go over there right now. I said, yeah, I know people over there. I said, don't worry, I won't have any problem. I got a hotel room.

And so this happened in the middle of the week, Tuesday, Wednesday. And that weekend they put a curfew on the city. Didn't want anybody out on the streets. And so anyway, so I was staying in a hotel downtown, but I couldn't stay in a hotel. So I went out and was walking. It was really an eerie feeling because there was no one around anywhere in the city. They told them because they were afraid these thugs were going to come back out. But I wasn't too worried because I could see if anybody would approach me. I'd been back in the hotel room.

But it was really interesting because there was a young man that was killed. And there was a lady there at the end of the street. There was flowers all around there where this young man was killed. And she was singing. She was playing a musical instrument and singing and just standing there. And she saw me and wasn't anybody else around.

And I said, I kind of motioned for her. I said, is it okay if I take your picture? And she said, yeah. So I took her picture and I've got her picture on my phone right now. I had a lot of interesting experiences over there.

Alan: When are you going to write your book?

Merlin: I don't know. I can talk about it better than I can write it.

Alan: So you're at the Baptist Church now. I assume you stayed at Landstown after you resigned the ministry or did you leave then?

Merlin: We were kind of back and forth. We came to Mount Pleasant for a while. And then we went back to Landstown. We actually stayed at Landstown for almost a year. We had a lot of people that had really connected with Linda and I. And we knew it made it uneasy for the pastor that was there when we stepped down.

Alan: That is a difficult situation.

Merlin: Yeah, it is. And you really have to be careful. We knew they were a little uncomfortable with it. Although they said that we could stay. So we stayed there for a while. Then we came back to Mount Pleasant for a little while. We were kind of back and forth. Jeremy actually invited us to come with them to Bayside because they live out there.

That's the only problem. It's a long ways from here. So it was nice being in the same church that they were.

Alan: Is he a part-time pastor now?

Merlin: Yeah. Well, he doesn't really have a position. He does preach from time to time there. But he's also involved in what is called Kairos Ministry. It's a ministry to inmates in prison. And he's involved with that. And you have to be a pastor to be a spiritual director in that ministry. So he got his degree from Liberty.

Alan: Speaking of prison, where is the Chesapeake Jail Ministry now? Is the Mennonite Church still involved in it?

Merlin: I don't know. I know they have a chaplain out there.

Alan: I know it's a line item in the budget, but I don't think anybody goes anymore.

Merlin: I don't know of anyone that's gone.

Alan: Why did Harold resign? Harold Bergey.

Merlin: I don't know. I know that... You know, Sam came on as overseer. Sam Scaggs. Sam Scaggs was overseer. **NOTE: This is incorrect. Sam was not named then or later as Overseer.**

Alan: I didn't know that.

Merlin: And I know that he...Sam and Harold, they didn't mesh real good. I don't want

to speak for Harold, but I know if it was along about that time that they wanted to remodel the store and start... I don't know if that was an excuse for Harold or whether he really... I think it was some of both. I think Harold was probably a little... What did he serve? He probably served, what, 10, 11 years or so? Yeah. And I think maybe he was ready for something a little different.

Alan: The reason he gives... I've interviewed Harold twice, is that he had kind of set his heart on consolidating the church up at the school, to have one campus there for the church and the school. And they were working toward that. And then when it was defeated or voted against, which he says now is probably a good thing, it kind of took the wind out of his sails. And he said, "I just felt like the church wasn't following me." And then at the same time, when Leonard lost the farm, he said his parents were dependent upon that income. And so in order to get paid rent, they had to do something, and that's what he went back and...

Merlin: What side of the issue would Harold have...Did Harold...

Alan: Wanted to move it.

Merlin: He wanted to move it... I mean, I didn't really know one way or the other. I know there was friction, and I know Phil Miller was a... Philip was a big proponent of moving up there.

Alan: I wasn't at the church at that time, but I know my brother Eric was involved in that somehow. It was the old died in the wool. "No, we're not gonna change our...and they voted it down, so far as I know. I haven't delved into that part yet.

When Harold resigned, was Keith already there?

Merlin: Keith came along when I left.

Alan: Oh, he did. Okay. So he came along as Harold's assistant?

Well, then how did they arrive that Sam would come in? Harold said that Sam and Keith came to the church together, offering Sam as the lead minister and Keith as his assistant.

Merlin: I don't really know.

Alan: I haven't talked to Keith yet.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. He would definitely know.

Alan: I also need to read some of the minutes.

Merlin: Oh, oh. Well, Sam was pastor there for a little while.

Alan: Just by himself?

Merlin: Well, he and Keith. Sam and Keith.

And a little bit the same thing happened at Landstown. Sam wanted to change a lot of things, bring more up-to-date, just like he did over at Landstown, and he experienced a pushback. Well, Sam will put up with that for a little while, but then he'll get discouraged or whatever, and then he'll move on.

Because that's pretty much... I hadn't even really thought about that, but that's pretty much what happened at both Landstown and Mount Pleasant.

Alan: That is one of the stories I'm planning to tell, offering both sides of it. And my perception is one of the problems that Sam had..well, it was twofold. One was his personality. He's an evangelist, not a pastor, or his gifts are more to the evangelist than the pastor.

Merlin: Right, right.

Alan: But the other thing was, he was at New Life for seven years, and one of Maggie's friends, because Maggie sort of goes to The Bridge, got married here a year or so ago. And so we went to the wedding reception, and they put us at the old people's table, who just happened to be the deacons and the ministers' wife from The Bridge.

So I took the opportunity to ask, you know, how are you structured? What is your membership? Just to find out, how do you work? And discovered that it's unlike any church..I guess there are churches like that...my experience is limited, but it was basically, he said, "we don't have members. We do not have a membership role. You come, you enjoy it. That's what we're doing it. [So I asked]. How about decisions? [His reply} We have the deacon board, or whatever they call it, leadership committee, I think, and the preacher. They make the decisions.

And when a deacon leaves, the deacon board replaces him, or whatever they call it. And the same thing with the preacher. It's all done within this group of eight or less people. The rest of them have no say whatsoever. Period. Done.

I thought, it's really unique, and it explains to me a little bit of Sam's...if Sam lived in that environment, and from other people I've talked to, Gerald Martin apparently was somewhat that way in Cornerstone, that he ran things and was jealous of usurpers who might come along and want to do something different.

Merlin: Yeah.

Alan: Whereas when he hit Mount Pleasant, and here you've got people who have roots going back five generations. They're not easily swayed in their opinions.

And so it was, in fact, he had enough insight, because I think Sam does lack a little empathy sometimes, but he said when he talked about coming here, that

Beverly had told him, “don't do it, don't do it, don't do it. I know those people. I know you. It will not work. Do not do it. And he said, she was adamant. “Don't do it”. He said, I did it anyway.

And he said, in the middle of some of the troubles along the way, he said, I was laying in bed one night, and I was telling Bev about it, and she said, “I told you, I told you.” Hello.

Merlin: Yeah, yeah. You know, Bev, she's a great lady, and I know she's been through it. She's caught in the middle of Sam and all these congregations.

Alan: Yeah, and he does know, Sam knows people all over the place. He gets things done, but, you know, even the story of the Shihini's, he said, and hearing his message and so forth.

You know, one thing that really amazes me about that is the fact that, you know, we were over there for a week last year. And Dini said, you know, when they asked him, he said, the question wasn't, “do you want to give your heart to Christ, it was, do you want to change your life?”

And he said, I've just been laid off because my job disappeared in all the turmoil of getting rid of the communists. And he said, I got a wife and kids. Yeah, I want to change my life. He said, that's all I volunteered for. And then after the thing, they got them all together, those who raised their hands, they gave them Bibles and told them to have meetings. He said, they gave me this book, I thought it was a novel. I'd never heard of the Bible. I had no idea what it was. And he said, so they started holding home meetings to study the Bible.

So they'd get together and they'd just start page one. And among themselves, try to figure out what it meant. Because he said, the visitors from outside the country came once every three months or once a month, you know, they were on their own, period. And all they had was the Bible. And they came so close. I mean, they are evangelical Christian faith and beliefs, with nothing but the Bible. I just found that incredible. That they didn't develop some kind of weird off-the-wall stuff. But other than non-resistance, they're perfect Mennonites.

Merlin: Yeah, that's an amazing story.

Alan: Just incredible. So, where was I now? At the end of Sam's term, I know the climax was really because the church voted 50-50. And then the overseer, I forget his name., upon advice from a higher-up, determined to hold the meeting that kind of blew everything up. But Sam said he had already decided that he was not going to renew his contract. He said it would be impossible to lead a church that divided about whether he should stay or not. And in fact, he said they wanted him to be at the meeting, but he had already planned something else and he knew he was going to resign anyway, so he didn't bother, so there was no point in it. It was probably a good thing he wasn't there.

But had Keith left before Sam resigned, or after? Do you know?

Merlin: Keith left?

Alan: Yeah, or resigned.

Merlin: I think it was along about the same time.

Alan: It was, but I can't remember if it was before Sam resigned or after Sam resigned.

Merlin: I think it was a little after.

Alan: I'm glad he's coming back. It was amazing to me how many people left the church. I was really surprised. I didn't expect that at all.

So what are your hopes and dreams for the next 20 years?

Merlin: Stay alive. I think going over to Ukraine on a regular basis if it wasn't for this war going on. And there's no way, and it's not as much the war as it is the way of getting in there. The only way I could get to Odessa would be to go to Warsaw and take a train down to Odessa, but that's about 600 miles. It's about a 15-hour, 18-hour train ride. And the thought of doing that and then getting ready to come back home and have to go 18 hours back up to Warsaw, it's just too much.

Alan: Especially if you can do good right from where you are.

Merlin: Well, yeah, yeah.

Alan: What do you think is going to happen now? What do you think the ultimate outcome will be?

Merlin: I don't know. I had no idea this thing would last that long. Had no idea. I did go to, after the war broke out, I went to Warsaw. They were bringing all those refugees into Warsaw. And there's Mercy Works that I told you about earlier that I went to China and these different places with.

They were sending teams over to Warsaw where they were housing these refugees. So I volunteered to go over there. It had been June, the June after the war broke out. And I was really glad. It was as near as I could get to getting into Ukraine. But they had all these refugees. We were there for about a week, helping. And I was very impressed with the Polish people. They really treated those people with dignity, with respect.

They had a huge, huge, like a conference center. And they had that thing all divided off with partitions of about 12 foot square. And the various families there, most of it was laid women and children. Some few men there, but most of them were women and children. And everybody had a space. And it was very clean.

There was, you know, a lot of times like that you get a lot of odors and things

like that. But they had a huge laundromat area where people could wash their clothes. Everybody was just like you and I. And they were well protected. Women with little babies had a special room to themselves. You could only get in there if you had the right credentials.

And they had police outside directing traffic, making sure the right people got in. And the ones that weren't supposed to be there didn't. But they had about 2,000 people there.

And we helped serve meals and interacted with the people. But it was very interesting to me because I knew enough Russian that I could at least get a conversation kind of started.

Alan: Do you speak both Russian and Ukrainian?

Merlin: No. Well, the words I know are Russian, but Odessa is a Russian speaking area.

Alan: Oh, really?

Merlin: So I had very little interaction with Ukrainia. People tell me that they can understand each other, Russian and Ukrainian. But they're two different languages, obviously. But I would go in there and I would ask them where they were from.

And, you know, it just really struck me. You remember Maripol was a big thing on the news when the war first broke out. You know, somebody would tell you, I'm from Maripol. Or I'm from one of these other cities. I'm from Kiev or whatever, you know. And then I found out that all I had to do was ask them, do you have family back there?

And for the next 20 minutes, they'd be telling you about their family. They'd go pull out a drawer, a picture album, and one of them said, these are my grandkids. You know, it's very meaningful and yet very sad, too, what these people were having to go through.

Alan: What's going to happen in Israel?

Merlin: Well, I tell you, I'm really upset that the United States seems to be backing away from any support. I don't know. I think Netanyahu has pretty much given the finger to the world and says we're going to do what we need to do. This is our war and not yours.

Alan: And if they want to survive long term, I think they have to.

Merlin: Yeah, they know that.

Alan: Just seeing this and experiencing it, it gives some credence to the Lord's command when they first came into the land to destroy everything and everybody in it. It saves the future conflict.

Merlin: Because the Lord really got aggravated when they would just leave a little something.

Alan: Come back and bite you, I told you.

Merlin: Yeah, that's a good point. I hadn't even really thought about that.

Alan: It's an interesting time we live in. Of course, I guess all times have been interesting. I know I spent a lot of time studying early Mennonite and early Christian history. I learned a lot of stuff I didn't know. There are no times that haven't been interesting.

Merlin: No. You know what? I have taught people, you know, as people are sort of down right now, oh, what's going to happen to the world? What's going to happen? I say go back to the Civil War. What do you think that was like? Go back to that plague in 1918. When they lost a larger percentage of people than we did in COVID. Then there was World War I, II. I mean, you got it all.

Alan: And it won't stop.

Merlin: It won't stop. It will keep on going..

Alan: Yeah. It's interesting To me, I mean, I just find other people's stories fascinating. Just like you being there in Ukraine and hearing the story. Yeah.

Merlin: Yeah. So much of it, you know, it's one thing to read it in the newspaper, but it's something else to see it in person. I know when I was there in 2014, that's when I was telling you about that little uprising and everything. And these Russian guys, thugs, came in there and created all kinds of problems. I don't know if you remember, but there was a bunch of them. They were holed up in a huge office building, about a five-story office building.

Anyway, the thing caught fire and killed a whole bunch of them. And, oh, they had boarded, these guys, these thugs had gone in there and boarded up the doors so that people from the outside couldn't get into them. And the thing caught on fire. And so they were stuck inside. And, you know, the Ukrainian people were trying to free those doors to get them out of there. And they got some out, but it was a bunch of them that were killed.

But anyway, the reason I bring it up is I was over there a year later, or it wasn't that long, three months later or so. And I was riding in a taxi. And I asked the taxi driver, well, I had my interpreter with me. And I asked her, I said, where was that building where those people were killed? And she said, "well, we're going pretty close to it". So she told the taxi driver. And he said, "do you want to go there?" I said, well, yeah. I said, I'd like to see it. It's a newsworthy thing. So we went. And he was evidently well-known there. The taxi driver took me right in the building. And we went right in upstairs. And they still had all the, they had, obviously, all the bodies and stuff were removed. But there was shoes. There was ropes tied to the window where they were trying to let themselves down. Melted tennis shoes. Doors that were

broke where they were trying to break their way out.

Alan: No repairs or anything?

Merlin: Nothing. They had... other than taking the bodies out, they hadn't done a thing to them, just like it was when it happened.

Alan: Have you visited any of the American territory in Ukraine?

Merlin: No, I haven't. I probably would have been through it. A few years back, the pastor over there took me...we went all over Ukraine..He wanted me to meet and to speak in the different churches that he was aware of. So he took me to a conference where I spoke at a conference. And went to Kiev, to an Arab church there, Christian church, and several other cities that he took me around. We put, I think I figured 1,100 miles on it in about four days.

Alan: You did some riding then. Saw some country there.

Merlin: I did. I saw a lot of the country there. Yeah, I've got pictures. That conference I was at, that was amazing. There was probably, I would say probably 300 people there. And the Ukrainian people are not very expressive for the most part. They're pretty subdued and everything. But, I mean, these people were really into it. Worship, praise, and the music was just awesome. And it's just, it gives me goose bumps when I go in those places and they break out in a song in a foreign language, in Russian. That's a song just like we sing right here. You know, "How Great Thou Art". And they break out in Russian, "How Great Thou Art." You know, it just, and a lot of the contemporary songs that we sing also are very well known.

Alan: When we were in Albania, they took us... well actually, she was invited to speak. It was an anniversary of a church south of Lezha. And they had people who had helped set the church up. So there were Germans, there were some Dutch folks there. There were people from all over Europe. And we got there early, so we got to meet a lot of the people. There was one from England who were involved in the church. And you were....boy, you know, when they started, you had to cry. You have to know, we got all these people from all these places singing, oh, I think it was "How Great Thou Art" is what we sing. Didn't know the words, but I knew the music.

Merlin: Yeah, it's just something that just brings you together.

Alan: Well, I appreciate your time, Merlin. You give me one more project, I'm behind on.

Merlin: You brought back a lot of memories for me here. I kind of put on the back burner of my mind.

Alan: Yeah, it's funny how things will come out of the woodwork when you start thinking about them.