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Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp.

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Oral Memoirs
of
Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp.

An Interview
Conducted by
Megan DeFries
April 14, 2016

Collection: Oral History Initiative

Project: Spiritan

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Legal Status

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Interview History

The recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) were processed in the offices of the Oral History Initiative (OHI) and University Archives, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: Megan DeFries

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Project Detail

The purpose of the Spiritan Oral History Project is to document the lives of Spiritan priests, brothers, and Lay Spiritan Associates in their own words in order to preserve the history of the Spiritan congregation.

Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp. [b. 1943] was ordained in 1967. He attended the University of Edinburgh from 1968-72 and received a doctorate in Social Anthropology in 1977. Fr. Gittins was a missionary to the Mende people in Sierra Leone from 1972-80. He went on to serve as a professor at the Missionary Institute and as Formation Director in London from 1980-84. He is the Emeritus Professor of Theology and Culture at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois, where he began teaching in 1984. Fr. Gittins has spent over thirty years ministering to homeless women and those leaving prostitution in Chicago, and is the author of several books.

Megan DeFries is the oral historian for the OHI.

Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp.
Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Megan DeFries
April 14, 2016
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Collection: Oral History Initiative
Project: Spiritan

DeFries: My name is Megan DeFries. I am interviewing Fr. Anthony Gittins. This is our first interview for the Spiritan Oral History Project. It is Thursday, April 14, 2016 and we are in the Gumberg Library [Duquesne University]. Hello Father, how are you?

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Hello, how are you? (laughs) I'm fine, thanks.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) (laughs) Thank you for meeting with me today.

Gittins: All right.

DeFries: So, I—I appreciate you taking the time while you're here doing the talk for your most recent book [*Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*]. I thought we'd begin—just give me a brief overview of your family, childhood, where you were born, where you grew up—things of that nature.

[00:00:33]

Gittins: Okay, I was born in Manchester, England, 1943. Second of seven children, (papers rustling) and I grew up through—into what, in England, is secondary school in Manchester. Very Catholic family, very—I would say—devoted, traditional family. We thought Protestants were, you know, kind of dangerous to be close to. We knew that you didn't marry those people and so on and so forth. We weren't racist or religionist, so much as fearful because we lived right across the street from a Jewish Talmudical college, a very, very strict Jewish rabbinical college and we had absolutely no difficulty with that because Jews were somehow other and to be respected, but Protestants were dangerous and—and they could contaminate you. So we always had a certain explicit awareness of the fact that you treat them with great respect, but you don't marry them because you'd lose the faith if you did that. Given that our—our context as a—as a religious family was not—I don't think—honestly, I don't think it was bigoted. I think there were a lot of rules and regulations, and I realized in later life asking my own siblings about how they were brought up and they were—they felt the restrictions of the—of the rules and regulations. I can't say I felt that much in the way of restrictions and I had known two Spiritans from as far back as I can remember. I—I met them when I was four or five years of age. They were—they were missionaries

from West Africa and I think I already knew then that I wanted to be like them. I found them very happy people, very engaged people, and so I went to junior seminary at the age of fourteen.

DeFries: Now, in your area, you said obviously that you feared—feared Protestants, but did you feel any anti-Catholic sentiment towards—

Gittins: No, not really. And I say feared and I don't mean really being afraid of, I mean, I think being aware of the danger of getting too close to them because of theological reasons and doctrinal reasons.

DeFries: Okay. So how did you know these two Spiritans that were missionaries from the time you were young?

[00:02:59]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, that's a long story, but my aunt—one of my aunts—was an unmarried woman and a benefactress and she did a lot of work for the mission of these two priests in Sierra Leone and therefore when they came on leave they would visit her and I would see them when they'd visit.

DeFries: Did that later influence your—your wanting to go—

Gittins: Oh from the beginning, from the beginning. I already—as soon as I met them those were the people I wanted to be like. I didn't want to be a fireman, I didn't want to fly a plane, I didn't want to be a bus driver, I wanted to be one of those people. And I had no—no real understanding of what it entailed, but I wanted to be like them.

DeFries: Is that why you wanted to go to Sierra Leone though too?

Gittins: Well, Sierra Leone was the original thing, yeah, because of those two and I—as—as I grew up and as I went through theology and so on, it became less and less likely that I would ever go to Sierra Leone. The irony of it was that in the end, I actually did, but that was by a strange certain set of circumstances that we can talk about later.

DeFries: Okay. Can you please tell me your—some of your experiences with primary school and secondary school at the Junior Seminary at Castlehead [England]—you said that's where—

[00:04:14]

Gittins: Castlehead, yeah. In primary school—this was after World War II and you could start school whenever you were able, and I started school in the fives, as we called them. We were the fives and the sixes—five year olds and six year olds—and then standard one and two. I started in the fives at the age of three and three-quarters, and the consequence was that quite soon I—I also skipped a class because you could do all kinds of things like that. You just went, you know, where the stream was and then there was a national exam at the age of eleven and I was still ten when I took that exam, but it got me into a secondary school, a streamed school, where I would be able to learn physics and chemistry and biology and Latin and Greek and all those kinds of things. And so it was—it was a test of—of the better students and the other students

stayed at school until the minimum of fifteen, but the—the streamed students from the age of eleven to eighteen went to a grammar school. From then, you would go to university.

When I went to the grammar school, I was the youngest in my class and within about three years, I had dropped to pretty well [to] the bottom of the class. The bottom third, anyway, because I think I was just fancy free, careless, immature, and I sensed that the boys in the rest of the class were older than me and I wasn't going to get anywhere. Then in—in the middle of that school between the ages of eleven and eighteen I said to my father and my mother that I really wanted to go away and be a priest. I think I was thirteen at the time. My father told me in no—no uncertain terms that they didn't need priests who weren't trying, so I was made to repeat a year at school. And that year really was the beginnings of something very important. I began to achieve, I began to think I could actually understand things. Prior to that for three years, I really hadn't—I drifted. So when I went to Castlehead at the age of fourteen, I was simply transferring from one school to another except that the Castlehead experience was the junior seminary with all of the exclusions and all of the rules and regulations. The classes were also smaller. I found myself kind of rising to the top of the class. I found myself beginning to thoroughly enjoy learning and by the time I got to the age of eighteen I—I really enjoyed scholarship. Then I went to France as a novice.

DeFries: And is that where—is that the only novitiate that was available to—

[00:06:53]

Gittins: Well the—the congregation, the Spiritans, was, at that time, more than four thousand, close to five thousand members. It's now three thousand and it was a foundation from France, so the natural place to go would be France. The most accessible geographical place to go would be Ireland, but the English and the Irish had never really—you know the history of the English and the Irish were such that we—we didn't naturally think of going to Ireland, but the history of the congregation and the missionary requirement was such that we needed to get a second or third language. So it was always a natural thing that we would—English novices would go to France and there might be—there were, in my case, fifty-five novices that year, 1961, of which five or six were English.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: So we learned French in the course of that year.

DeFries: Can you tell me a little bit more about your experiences in the novitiate, and the way of life, and the things you learned?

[00:07:52]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, the thing about the novitiate was—was that you spend most of your time in silence imbibing knowledge of the congregation, knowledge of religious life. That's where I began to understand what—what I was getting into up to the age of about eighteen. You knew it was the missionary life, you knew priests didn't get married, you knew it was a community, but you didn't really understand the details of it. In the novitiate, you began to understand the details, the implications, the applications, the aspirations, and then you began to say, "No I don't

want this,” if that was the case or, “Yes I would like this,” if—if this is the case, but it was—there was a lot of the interior life, the development of prayer, contemplation, and the development of an understanding of the Spiritan ethos, that was the essence of it. To understand who the Spiritans were.

DeFries: And so from there you went from the novitiate to Upton College [sic, Hall] [Nottinghamshire, England]?

[00:08:42]

Gittins: From there I went to Upton [Hall] which—which was where we did the rest of our studies up to ordination which consisted of two years of philosophy and four years of theology. So after the novitiate you were going to do six years, but you were going to get ordained at the end of the fifth, and then you were going to stay in the seminary through that sixth year practicing being a baby priest, going out at weekends, saying mass and that kind of thing, but returning because you still had a bit more theology to do. So that—that was the—the Upton, the scholastic experience. But by the time, we’d done the two years of philosophy we’d moved to another place, which was called Wellsborough, which is a much bigger place, and I continued doing all of my theology in—in Wellsborough because we’d sold Upton House [Hall] in 1964.

DeFries: Okay, and during this time did you do prefecting or—

[00:09:40]

Gittins: No, we never did anything of that kind, we—we stayed with—very much in almost a monastic environment. Although it was 1964 and although Vatican II was still on, you might have thought that you were living in the desert. We had really no experience of—of Vatican II, we had very little access to any reading material. We had no television. We had restrictions, we—we didn’t go out, we didn’t have any money, we—we were living a real kind of monastic type life even though we didn’t know it. So we were—we were really shut off from the world and—and in that period, the pre-Vatican II period that was—that was quite explicit. You were shut off from the world. So later on it became a huge question, how on earth are we ever going to learn about the kind of people that we’re supposed to be going to when we have no experience? And that came later as things developed.

DeFries: So if you—if this was while Vatican II was going on and you were living a monastic life, as you said, did—were you still learning the traditional Latin mass, and—or were you learning the new traditions of mass, the—

Gittins: I was ordained in 1967.

DeFries: Mm-hm.

Gittins: The year I was ordained, you had to say mass with your back to the people in Latin. The following year, you could say mass in Latin or in English, but with still your back to the people. And the third year after I was ordained, you could no longer say mass in English—in Latin—you could no longer have your back to the people, you had to face the people, and you had to speak in English. It happened in the first three years. We went from all Latin to no Latin.

DeFries: Was it difficult to orient yourself to that as a—as a new priest?

[00:11:14]

Gittins: I think by the time I got to be ordained, I knew pretty well what I wanted to do, but I was a very, very high introvert, not in the sense we use the word now, which was somebody with an interior life, but in the sense of a—a frightened person essentially. And when I pretty well cleared up everything that I needed to clear up about whether or not I wanted to be ordained, the one thing that was my major inhibition was the idea of facing people and looking at people and—and I almost never got ordained because I thought I'll never ever be able to stand up in—in front of people, I'll never be able to speak to people. I was terrified. And so within those first two years we moved from back to the people—I was comfortable having my back to the people and speaking a language they didn't understand, but I was very uncomfortable speaking toward them in English. So that was—for me—that was a major, major issue.

DeFries: How did you overcome that?

Gittins: I have no idea how I overcame it, I think it was the grace of God because I could never ever imagine and—and one of the reasons I wanted to go to Africa was because I wouldn't have to—I don't know—I wouldn't have to prove myself in any kind of way in the—in the forum of British life or certainly in the forum of academic life. I'll get to the story of how I became an anthropologist later, but I thought I could just pretty well disappear into the African bush.

DeFries: So it was almost a way of hiding in a sense?

Gittins: Implicitly it was. I didn't want to hide, I just knew I had no social skills.

DeFries: Can you tell me a little bit more about the ordination, the experience of being ordained and—and who was there? And was it a large experience?

[00:13:02]

Gittins: (exhales) Well, it was—it was a—a pivotal experience, in the sense that you had spent what seemed like an age. I mean, I went to it at the age of fourteen; I'm now twenty-four, so that's ten years. When your life is only fourteen, it's nearly the whole of your life. So we'd reached the age of twenty-four and I was going to get ordained and that was going to be the springboard to—to the missionary life. The problem for me at that time was that my superior had told me two years previously that I was to go to Rome [Italy] to do canon law and that filled me with all kinds of dread, primarily because I thought canon law is a dead, awful, legalistic, narrow, constraining, dogmatic doctrinaire thing. It gave me the heebie-jeebies and I—and I thought I'll never ever be able to be a canon lawyer and it won't do me any good and it certainly won't do anybody else any good. So my—my provincial superior had actually put me under the vow of obedience, in other words, he said to me, "I want you to say yes. You have a year. Go away, think about it; change your mind. Bow your—bend your will and come back to me and say, 'Yes Father, I will do it.'"

So I went away and this is before I'm ordained and I had a lot of difficulty with this, but the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience were the vows that I said I—I mean, I'd already taken permanent vows by that time (DeFries clears throat) and I said that I—I respected them. So with great difficulty and great paroxysms, I spent that year trying to reorient my mentality. And then I went back to him the following year ready to say, "Yes Father, I will obey," and as I began to say, "Yes Father, I'll do it," he said, "What? What's it? What are we talking about?" and he'd completely forgotten the question. Added to which, by that time—in that year—twelve year period—Rome had stopped teaching canon law because Vatican II—this is 1965, 1966, Vatican II had just finished and—and canon law was going to be completely revised, so there was no canon law being taught in Rome and he told me this. I didn't realize this and I breathed an enormous sigh of relief and I said, "Thank—I mean—can I go to Africa?" and he said, "No, you can't go to Africa," and I said, "Why not?" and he said, "Because we want you to do some further studies." And then he said to me a question that he'd never asked me previously, "What would you like to do?" Now I don't believe I had ever uttered the word anthropology in my life before and somehow out of my mouth came the word anthropology, and I said, "I'd like to do anthropology," and he said, "Why?" "Well," I said, "Because I don't know anything about Africa and I don't know anything about the African people and if I'm going to do anything that's pastoral or ministerial, I need to know something," and he said, "Good, I would never ask anybody to do that unless they had a particular bent for it," to which I said, "Well I don't have a bent for canon law and you asked me to do that," and then he just said, "Okay, go away and apply." So I had no idea what to do. I had to go and apply to universities for anthropology. I didn't really know what it was, so that became the way, the major parting of the ways, or the shift, from one kind of expectation to another and I had certainly hoped that if I wasn't going to do canon law, I would simply be able to go straight to Africa, but I—when he—when he told me he wanted me to do further studies, first of all I was—I was happy in the sense that I thought I probably would be able to do that, whereas if he'd have asked me fifteen, ten years, five years earlier, I'd have said, "No, I can't do anything like that. It's too difficult." So I was—I was gratified that he asked me to do it, but I was also aware that it was going to take a while. So I wasn't going to go to Africa immediately, which I'd spent ten years looking forward—forward to doing.

[00:17:06]

So that was it. And I went to the University of Edinburgh [Scotland] in 1968, which was the year of freedom and sex and rock and roll and drugs and I was the only student—newly ordained priest—living in a—a highly secularized environment about which I had no experience, and I had to really struggle to focus. It was easy enough to focus on the academics, it was much more difficult to—focus away from all of the—the distractions that were typical of 1968, 1970 when people were just into all kinds of experimentation. You know, it was probably the most—the most volatile couple of years in the—in the century. I mean everybody still talks about 1968 as the turning point, everything—everything shifted from—from the repressive fifties to the swinging sixties. That was the swinging sixties. And I was caught—and I lived in—in halls of residence and there was a room up here and a room down there and a room here and a room here and a room here and a room here [points in different directions] and on a Saturday night they were rocking (DeFries laughs) and it was a struggle. It was a struggle.

DeFries: Can you—can you tell me a little more about, as you—as you are right now, tell me a little bit more about the campus life and the things you saw because I know in the United States, a lot of our experience was tied to the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, and so what was going on in England at that time, what was the—the zeitgeist that caused the swinging sixties? (laughs)

[00:18:39]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, well, yeah it was—it was the Beatles. I mean, culturally, it was the era of the Beatles. Rock and roll, skiffle [ed. note: A genre of music played on improvised instruments, developed in the early twentieth century in the United States and popularized again in Great Britain in the fifties], opening up of—of closed systems, not least of which was the religious system. People were much more readily getting married to Protestants, getting married outside the church, living together, taking their time to do all kinds of things outside of the—what I understood to be—the essence of university life, but I found myself just plunged deeply into—into an academic world, which I found exciting beyond words.

And so my—my intention was to do anthropology, but in my first year I had to do two outside courses. The system in—this is Scotland—Edinburgh, Scotland—the system is you do an honors degree. So you’ve got four years and you—you spend the base time, 50 percent of your time in the first and second year doing anthropology and a 100 percent of your time in the third and fourth year doing anthropology. So in my first year, I spent 50 percent of my time doing anthropology and then I had to do two outside courses, one of which I did was moral philosophy and the other one of which I did was theoretical linguistics, and I did linguistics because I thought anthropology is about knowing about people and linguistics is about knowing how they communicate, so I think that makes kind of sense. I did moral philosophy because in the seminary I felt I’d not got any philosophy at all and the teaching had been dreadfully poor, which was standard because we were taught in house by our own men and many of them were not—not officially qualified. So that was that.

And then in my second year, I had to do fifty—no I had to do, yes, fifty—75 percent anthropology and 25 percent repeating one of the two courses I’d done in my first year, moral philosophy or theoretical linguistics. The people in the linguistics department came to me and they said to me, Are you doing your four years in linguistics? I said, “No, I’m only doing one year in linguistics because my degree will be in anthropology,” and they said, We would like you to consider doing theoretical linguistics, and I said, “I can’t do theoretical linguistics, I’m doing an honors course in anthropology and it’s 100 percent of the time.” To cut a long story short, I did another honors course in linguistics for 100 percent of the time, so I did two courses simultaneously for 100 percent of the time each.

DeFries: Wow.

[00:21:30]

Gittins: So at the end of four years I had a full honors MA [Master of Arts] in theoretical linguistics and another full honors MA in anthropology. I was on the top of the world, I was thoroughly engrossed in it and I was ready for Africa. And the Nigerian civil war [ed. note: Biafran War] broke out and I couldn’t go to Africa because we [Gittins note:

the English Province members] were all supposed to be going to Nigeria at this point because for the last thirty years or so, the English were going to Nigeria while the Irish, primarily, were in Sierra Leone and I was English and therefore I was going to go to Nigeria. So I couldn't go to Nigeria. So the Nigerian civil war meant that I couldn't go to Nigeria and I sat on my hands for about six months and my provincial was a different provincial from the previous one and wasn't very helpful and he said to me, "Well, you just have to wait until there's a visa," and I said, "I've been waiting now for fourteen years. Can't I go somewhere else?" And he said, "Well where do you want to go?" I said, "I'd like to go to Sierra Leone." "Well," he said, "We don't go there anymore." I said, "But we do have missionaries there, even though they are Irish missionaries," so I said, "If I can't get a visa by", I think, "August thirty-first, can I go to Sierra Leone?" And he brushed me off and said, "Okay you can go." So on the thirty-first of August I wrote him a letter and I said, "Can I go?" and he had to honor his promise. So I went to Sierra Leone. (laughs)

DeFries: How—I'm—I'm interested though—a little—I just want to hear a little bit more about—though you are—are a priest and you're immersed in a religious life, how does—it's just interesting that the Irish are still seen as somehow over here and the British are over here [gestures to opposite sides of the room] and—was there any communication? I understand the history between the Irish and British was not a great one, (laughs) but—

[00:23:25]

Gittins: We were better than our history within the community, but it was still—there was still some—some—yeah, some standoffishness. The—the natural affinity for the English province was the French mother province, so the natural affinity was not for the Irish province and there was still a—you know, a certain element of—of roughness, or rubbing against, or otherness between the English and Irish, mutually. So on an individual basis you got on fine, but on a general basis you tended to think, Well, the Irish are like the Germans or the Italians, they're not us, really. So I mean, it was—it was modest but—but sometimes there was—there was an edge to it because the—a lot of English Catholics are Irish because they came over mostly in the famine in the middle of the nineteenth century and—and a lot of them felt the—the repression of Oliver Cromwell going back to the seventeenth century was such that—that the English and the Irish were always going to be opposed. So you broke through on an individual basis, but you still had that residual sense that we were—we were enemies. What we had together was our Catholic faith; otherwise, we were separated by culture and history.

DeFries: I'm sorry, I just lost my train of thought for a second. Okay so you were then going to be sent to Sierra Leone upon the completion of your degree—

Gittins: No, no, no I finished my degree.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) Or no you—or, I'm sorry, you finished your degree and after six months they had said—

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) I wasn't going to go—I wasn't going to do anymore academic work—

DeFries: They had said they were—yeah—

Gittins: —I had finished that completely—

DeFries: That's right.

Gittins: I was going to the bush—

DeFries: You had six months—(laughs)

Gittins: —and I was going to die in the bush. That was all. Yeah. Yeah.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) That's right, okay. So when they did decide to send you to Sierra Leone it was 1972, correct?

Gittins: Nineteen seventy-two, yeah.

DeFries: Okay, so tell me about your initial experience arriving there.

[00:25:19]

Gittins: I went on the boat from Southampton. It took two weeks. It was a very gradual kind of introduction to Sierra Leone. I remember the morning we arrived and you could see the mountain lion, *Sierra Lyoa* is from the Portuguese meaning "Lion Mountain," not mountain lion, but Lion Mountain and the contour of the profile of the hills behind Freetown, Sierra Leone was that of a lion, Kushon. So I saw that and that evoked for me memories going way back to these two priests that I'd known as a child and one— one Holy Ghost father, one Spiritan in fact, was an artist and he had done a series of stamps, postage stamps, for Sierra Leone, about ten stamps; absolutely beautiful, beautiful things, with all kinds of things including the Lion Mountain so I was familiar with this—this profile and then I saw it this morning. And then I was met by a priest, an Irish priest who's still a good friend of mine, and he met me on the key. It was all hustle and bustle; we were in Freetown. It was a bit of a— a scene. We went down to the beach on the Atlantic [Ocean] and that was very idyllic. It was very tropical. I had no experience with the tropics, but then within three days, I was going up country and I went to one of the remotest missions that we had. I had a letter from the bishop, and the bishop was an Irishman and it said, "Dear Father Gittins, I believe you are something of an anthropologist. Therefore I am sending you as far away as possible from human civilization," or something of that kind. I mean, the man was not the most intelligent and not the most sensitive to local—local people, but he thought he was doing me a favor by sending me essentially into an area that was miles and miles and miles away from the nearest white face, which suited me fine. (both laugh)

DeFries: It was a little bit what you were looking for? Is that—?

Gittins: Yeah, yeah, but I was also—I had a bit of anthropology behind me now and I felt I could actually make some kind of inroads into understanding what was going on.

DeFries: So what specific area or location was that in Sierra Leone? Was there a village?

[00:27:36]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, it was upcountry. Everything was upcountry. It was beyond the roads, so you were over rutted tracks for twenty-two miles from the nearest road and a little village called Njala Komboya. When I say a little village, it was actually a chieftain village, which means to say that the paramount chief lived there. So there might have been a thousand people there, but it was essentially mud huts, tin roofs if people had a bit of money, but mud—mud buildings and that was to be my—my center. And I had—I—when I began to count it and work out, there were about two hundred villages within the area which was nominally my area and so I had to strategize and figure out what—what might I do. How far might I go? Within a fairly short time I had—I had another priest and then within three years I was moved across the rivers, only about ten miles as the crow flies, so it was very much in the same area and then I had another priest there. So I had—I wasn't alone. So we had—we had two priests, but we would go in opposite directions.

DeFries: About ten miles apart?

Gittins: Yeah, yeah, doing the ministry.

DeFries: So, in—when you were at—I'm going to say this wrong—Edinburgh University, did you study Sierra Leone specifically there or the Mende culture or—or language?

[00:29:01]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, the terrible, terrible irony was the professor of anthropology had done his anthropology in Sierra Leone among the Mende. He was the most boring lecturer I had ever heard and his work on the Mende used to put me to sleep. I still wasn't thinking of going to Sierra Leone, I was thinking of Nigeria and the consequence was I didn't—I didn't pay very much attention at all to what he was saying and I was kind of glad that I wasn't ever going to be going among these so-called traditional people because I—he made me—he really began to turn me off. Once I got there, then I was turned on completely because I was ready for them and they were real people, they weren't something out of his lectures. So yeah, that was a great irony that—that the professor who almost put me off for life was the one who'd lived with the Mende for three or four years. Yeah.

DeFries: So you didn't go there speaking the language or you had some element of—

[00:29:58]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) No, no, no, no. The language is an unwritten language, like most of the world's languages. I—my linguistics was going to be the biggest help I had there because I was going to find a local native speaker. [Gittins note: He wanted to find a Mende person who spoke English well so they could teach Gittins to speak Mende.] There was a little Catholic school and all of the teachers in Catholic schools had English and school was nominally in English, although in the first couple of grades it was in the local language, so that there were always people in the—in the vicinity, some of whom had enough English to be interpreters and I—and I got one of them to be my teacher.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: So I had—I had him for an hour a day working on the Mende, but again the—the tools we had were very rudimentary. There’s—there was a linguistic grammar and a linguistic grammar is the kind of grammar that you can only read if you are a linguist because it’s all in phonetics, it’s all in—in technical language, but I had that. That was okay, but you couldn’t—I couldn’t—I couldn’t share it with the guy who was teaching me because he couldn’t make any sense out of it. It was very technical stuff. So the kinds of questions I was asking him were, “How do I say this?” and da da da da. And why—when I tried to get, “Why? What’s the past tense of ‘give’?” He had—he didn’t know what the past tense of give was. So I had to say, “Okay, how do you say ‘I gave’?” and then I could slowly, slowly pick it up and do it phonetically and—and generate enough of the language to be able to speak it in a rudimentary fashion, but the fact was I—I had to come back three years later because of the PhD [Doctor of Philosophy] which I’ll get to later. So I was out for nearly a year and then I hadn’t even done eight full years when I was called back to England, so I was just on the cusp of being able to dream and think it intuitively and I never got to the point of it being able to be absolutely fluent in the language, which was—which was a great, great sadness to me because I knew I was on the cusp of it because I knew I was beginning to dream in the local language and that’s the edge of it. And I knew—I’d known that from France. I’d already had French when I went to France, but I didn’t have speaking French. By the time I’d finished the novitiate, I was dreaming and thinking in French and I’m fluent in French. Not very good at it, but fluent in it, and I was never fluent in Mende. People thought I was, people used to say, “Oh, Tony speaks Mende all the time.” No, I didn’t, (DeFries laughs) no.

DeFries: Not when you compare yourself to the local culture, you were not.

Gittins: Oh, right, no, no.

DeFries: Okay, so can you describe your initial feelings or experience of meeting the local people and your—your relation—building a relationship with them?

[00:32:45]

Gittins: Yeah, I—I found out, by intuition and—and by guess and by mistakes, that the best way to learn a language, especially if it’s an unwritten language, is to find the old people and the young kids. And the old women, I could find very easily. The men, if they were—I mean the women too—if they were physically able, they were doing rice and chopping trees down and working in—in the fields in this stuff, but the old women were—were at home as it were, and I could always find a group of old women. And we had a—we had a very kind of, almost a ceremony and ritual kind of thing. I would spend time asking them for things and they would give me things and then the quid pro quo was they would—they would tell me to say certain words and I knew, within a very short time, they were very rude words (DeFries laughs) and they would ask me to say these words and I would then say them and they would laugh, and then I would write them down in phonetics and then I would ask them what they meant and they’d say, Oh, we can’t tell you, and then they would tell me, and so I got to know all kinds of anatomical words and—and verbs from these old ladies because they were entertained by my saying these things. And—and I knew exactly how it was working and they knew exactly how it was working, but it gave me a great access to the language. And then the kids, of course, because the kids were learning the language

too, so the kids were very tolerant because you—they don't mind you making mistakes. Adults, you know, it's difficult with adults, but—but the kids have got massive patience. So the kids taught me and the old ladies taught me and, in fact, I was only there a month and I got my teacher—I wrote out a little Christmas—it was November when I got there—I wrote out a little Christmas homily. I wrote it all in phonetics. The biggest problem for me was that it's a tone language and tone languages are notoriously difficult, but I—I wrote the whole thing out in phonetics and in the tones and rehearsed it with him and stood up on Christmas Eve and gave this homily in the local language. I didn't understand two words of it, but the people were absolutely enthralled. I never reached that—that dizzying high again on my own, but that first, it was—it was magic.

[00:35:10]

And then the people knew that I was interested in the language and they knew that, generally speaking, few missionaries were interested in the language because there'd been a major shift in the sixties—in the fifties and sixties from the bush to the schools. And so what had happened was, there were missionaries who were called bush missionaries, and there were other missionaries who were called school missionaries, and going back to my early childhood and these two priests, they were bush missionaries and they were in the bush with the people for thirty years, but by the time you get to the fifties and the sixties and the schools and the education is coming in—the school missionaries were Irish missionaries. So you again had this polarization between the English in the bush who were looked down on or made to feel that they were inferior, but they knew the language, and the school missionaries who were regarded as superior because they were teaching the next generation, but they didn't know the language. So I came and I—we had a little school there and I taught in the school too, but they knew that I was a bush missionary. They knew that I was trying to learn the language and they—they knew I was an anthropologist because I was forever with a notepad asking them questions like this [gestures to DeFries's notepad] all the time—and I had one of them [gestures to the digital recorder].

DeFries: Did you?

Gittins: Well it was a wheel to wheel—a reel to reel, to start off with. It was very cumbersome, but yeah for years.

DeFries: Hm. So what kind of—so you were—you were kind of a blend of the bush missionary and school missionary in that you taught in the school, but were learning the language.

[00:36:45]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) But I was living in a very rural area and my—most of my time was spent going to the local villages by foot and so teaching was—I would maybe teach two days a week and then go out into the villages and stay in the villages and—and there was the evangelization. That's what I was—I was trying to create little Christian communities in areas where the faith had not spread and I would simply start—I would start off and I would send messages and say if I could find a dozen people in the village who are interested in Christianity, I'll come and talk to them, and I found that more and more difficult to do and I went down to the point where I said if I could find six people in that village, then I'll start and within about two or three

years, I had a circuit of thirty villages out of about 240 total villages and I would do one of those villages every month. I mean, I'd do those thirty villages every month and then come back again and it was tedious work, and after eight years I had a baptized a total of eleven people, and they told me—my Irish missionaries told me—I was the worst missionary they'd ever encountered (both laugh) because they were in the schools and they were baptizing people, you know, with hose pipes. (DeFries laughs) So it was a very different kind of evangelization and I—I relished it, I liked it because I thought I'm not baptizing people who don't want to be baptized and I'm not baptizing people who—who don't have a little bit of—of the faith that might take. So my primary concern was not to baptize people. My primary concern was to try and give them some understanding of what difference Christianity might make and—and try to help them in whatever way I could to be of moral support. That was my major, major intention.

[00:38:31]

Apart from the fact that I wanted to find as much as possible as I—that I could of the language and the culture of the people because what had happened was I was there in Njala Komboya no more than three or four months with no intention whatsoever of doing anymore postgraduate studies and I got a letter from my—my professor in Edinburgh, who was not the man who had been among the Mende. It was the subsequent professor, who I got on very well with, and he said to me, “Did you ever think of doing a doctorate?” and I wrote back and said, “No!” and he wrote back and he said, “Well, I've got sixty applications on my desk. If you would like the scholarship, you can have it.” So I thought, Why would I want to do that? Then I thought, well I'd want to do it because it would give me a much greater access to a focused dissertation on the religious belief system of the Mende. So I talked to a couple of the Spiritans and—and they were not particularly helpful, but then that's part of Spiritan ethos. We get used to that over a period of time. We kind of live together separately. So I didn't get a lot of support; I didn't get a lot of negativity either. So I wrote back to the professor in Edinburgh and I said yes, whereupon I got a four year scholarship that paid everything for four years, including two international trips, all of my dissertation costs, and enough left over, not only for me to live on, but to build a small mission house. So that's why I did a PhD. (DeFries laughs)

DeFries: What—what was the local dialect you were speaking?

Gittins: Well, it's not a dialect, it's a language.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) A language, okay.

[00:40:20]

Gittins: You know, and it's always important to say that because a lot of people, no disrespect to you, but a lot of people talk about Africa as full of dialects. There are—Sierra Leone is smaller than Ireland. It's a very, very tiny country and there are twenty-two languages. There are at least 1,000 languages in Africa. In Nigeria, there are 200 languages and these are unrelated. And the thing about West Africa is that they, the languages, are really, really unrelated. I mean, if you look at the romance languages, you can talk about Spanish, English, French—sorry, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Latin, and—and what's the other one? Anyway, those are all interrelated so that when

you learn one and you try to learn another, you've got a common ground. West African languages are unbelievably disparate and they are simply called West Atlantic Congeries [Gittins note: a family of languages] or conglomeration and there is—there is virtually no relationship between them. So the language I was learning was Mende, *me* and *nde* are the two constitutive words. *Me* means “to hear” or “to listen,” and *nde* means “to speak.” So the Mende are the people who listen first and speak second, and they used to remind me of that every day.

DeFries: I guess, I didn't explain myself well. Yeah, I—I understand that there's different languages, I just didn't know if there were different dialects within the same language group?

Gittins: Well, there are within—within Mende.

DeFries: Within Mende.

Gittins: But Mende itself is not a dialect.

DeFries: Right.

Gittins: Mende is a language.

DeFries: Right.

Gittins: Yeah.

DeFries: Okay, so was there a specific dialect within the language you were learning or you just—

Gittins: Well, it was a dominant one. It's like saying do British English people all speak the same language and the answer is yes or no depending how pernickety you want to be. So, so yes, we—they all spoke Mende and I was in the area with the dominant thing, but I mean the mutual intelligibility among dialects is probably 85 percent. It's just an occasional word or verb that's different. So, yeah, I was speaking the lingua franca, I mean, most—technically it's not true, but I was speaking the dominant language.

DeFries: Can you tell me about how their local—or how their religion or local religion was structured? Is it as diverse as the languages? Are there—does it vary from village to village or—

[00:42:39]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) No, I mean, again, you—for fifty, a hundred years now people have been talking about African traditional religion or African traditional religions and it's a sore point with me because—because I say there is no more African traditional religion than there is Africa. You know, there are multiple Africas and there are multiple manifestations of African traditional religion, but what you can say is—is that it is structured in a—in a very similar kind of way, which means to say it has got the Supreme Being who is either very remote or not so remote, but a phalanx of intermediary spirits and then people. And there is the question of causality, many things are believed to be caused by these intermediary spirits. There is a way of getting

to some of these intermediary spirits. The dead become ancestors and they are part of the intermediary and then witchcraft is a kind of a negative experience of the abuse of spiritual power. So—so the overall structure of African traditional religions is the same, but the manifestations are as wide as the manifestations of different languages.

DeFries: I meant specifically for the Mende, among who you were living.

Gittins: Oh no, the Mende themselves generally, like—with the, like—with the language that I was speaking, you could talk about Mende traditional religion. Yes, you could—you could do that quite easily.

DeFries: Okay, but that's what I was asking, like what—what was their traditional religion that you were—

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, like I've said, you know, that's the structure.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) That's the same? Yeah? Okay, okay.

Gittins: I—I would have said, I did say, that—that for the Mende the Supreme Being, God, was a remote god. I heard a very distinguished African scholar in Chicago [Illinois] last week talking about African traditional religion and maintaining that God is not a remote person. Well, he was from Nigeria and I'm saying, "Okay fine. For you, that's fine. I'm not going to change my idea that from the Mende's point of view, God is very remote." One of the great novelties that I was trying to bring in was the fact that Christianity says God is no longer remote and a lot of people found that enormously liberating.

DeFries: Really?

Gittins: Yeah, yeah.

DeFries: What—what did you—how—what was your approach in relating Christianity to the community?

[00:45:11]

Gittins: Well it was very rudimentary. I mean, I—I didn't try to go for dogmatic truths. I tried to go for a kind of an overall ethos, and an overall ethic. An idea of, how do we treat each other? How do we treat enemies? What difference does Jesus make? And the biggest single—and this is a universal truth—the biggest single social problem in Africa is still witchcraft. Now, I was there forty years ago and—and the witchcraft was more ingrained there and then, and in a different kind of way, than it has been since, but it's still a huge, huge problem. So for me, on a day to day basis my major engagement, both as an anthropologist and as a pastor, was trying to help people to deal with witchcraft because they—they—in the face of witchcraft, they became fatalists. They—they began to feel there was absolutely nothing you could do and so I was deep in the middle of a very, very serious witchcraft cleansing movement and the fact that I would kind of be with the people and—and be in solidarity with the people was very encouraging to them. It also alienated me, to a degree, from some of the Irish missionaries. (laughs)

DeFries: Were you their first—in some cases, were you the first experience of a missionary that they had had?

Gittins: In most cases I was.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: And certainly, the first that they had of a missionary that asked the kind of questions and was interested in the kind of things that I was.

DeFries: You've written about mission in reverse and is this where you—was this something you were thinking about at the time? Or—

[00:46:53]

Gittins: No, I think—well again, the way things fell out, I finished up in academia and in academia for thirty years, you pick up lingo, and the lingo was mission in reverse, which at that time meant two things and now—now we—we distinguish those two things as mission in reverse and reverse mission. And I'm still not sure which is which because—because on one day of the week it is this, one day—so reverse mission and mission in reverse. One of them, is how is the missionary, him or herself, to be converted by the people to whom he or she goes, rather than to be the agent of conversion? And the other one is what you see here with the Africans. They're coming from Africa to the United States rather than going from the United States to Africa. So you've got two facets of mission in reverse and I always knew this one, the question who will convert the missionary? I mean, I always—was always concerned about that. And not only who will convert the missionary, but how will I be converted by the culture and to the culture in which I'm living. It's like a fish in water. If you can't swim in the medium in which you are locked, then you're going to drown. So I needed to find out how I could live as a Christian in this particular cultural thing and in order to do that I had to understand that it would change the way I was a Christian because my world was different, everything was different.

DeFries: So what did that mean in a practical sense?

[00:48:27]

Gittins: Well, I mean, I've written about it extensively. It meant a conversion to culture, a conversion to people, a conversion to ways of seeing God differently from my own little tin pot ways of seeing God. You know, everybody who has an idea of God is—is in some kind of stable relationship with that idea, but if you—and we tend to do this—if you take your idea of God to be God, that is, strictly speaking, idolatry, okay, because my idea of God is only my idea of God, it isn't God. My idea of that bottle [points to a water bottle] is my idea, it isn't that bottle. So most Christians, I think, have an idea of God and they think that's God and they worship and pray to their idea. So when you go to another culture, you experience many different images and ideas of God. So you've got to adjust the way you think about God and about your ideas of God and you discover in so doing that you have come close to idolatry in worshipping your own idea of God in your own culture because you've never thought about it before.

DeFries: That is a really interesting concept. (laughs)

Gittins: It's a major—it's a major concept.

DeFries: Yes.

Gittins: Yeah and we're all idolaters in a certain sense because we're limited by our ideas and we're—we are confused. My idea of justice is not justice. My idea of love is not love. It's my idea and it needs to be changed.

DeFries: Hmm—that's—I'm going to have to sit with that one for a while. (laughs)

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) It's mind blowing, it's mind blowing. It really is mind blowing.

DeFries: That—that really is.

Gittins: So the advantage of living in another culture, if you are not trying to convert that culture to your way of thinking and your ideas of God, is that mission in reverse will shake—shake you, and it will change you, and it may very well destabilize you to the point where you go a little bit off and some people do.

DeFries: So what did the—what did that idea, mission in reverse, do for—how did it change you? How did it—

Gittins: Well, it made me know absolutely, unquestionably that it's not, "I'm right and you're wrong." It's not, "I'm right and I know I'm right, and you're wrong and I know you're wrong, and therefore I'm going to put you right." That cannot be the way of mission. The way of mission has to be, I have my ideas of what is true and right. You have your ideas of what is true or right and I have to try and figure out where the absolutes are, if there are any absolutes. And part of what I have to try and figure out is why I never realized that a lot of what you are thinking is a whole lot better than a lot of what I'm thinking. In other words, the very simplest way to identify this is, that in every single culture there is sin and grace. The danger with mission is to think that all the grace is in my culture and all the sin is in yours. And the danger of missionaries is to compare the grace in my culture with the sin in yours or the grace in me with the sin in you. So if I'm to bring an anthropological perspective and a real Christian perspective, I've got to admit that for every bit of grace I see in my culture, I have to acknowledge a bit of grace in yours, and if I want to see any sin in your culture, I have got to see some sin in mine because I cannot compare like with unlike, I can only compare like with like. But missionaries have a struggle with that because they tend to think that all truth resides with them and all falsehood resides with the other. So that's—that's the great breakthrough for any missionary, but particularly a missionary with the privilege of an anthropological perspective.

DeFries: Do you feel that—that the fellow missionaries that were there, the Irish missionaries, were they thinking and behaving differently towards the local communities than—than you were? Were you the only one with this approach?

[00:52:29]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, I think, yeah—I think that's not just true of Irish missionaries, I think it's true of all of us until we are in some sense converted or redeemed by whatever. You know, in my case to a significant degree it was anthropology and linguistics, but that's only part of it. You've got to ultimately be converted to God and to the people. It's just that anthropology and linguistics can help you in your access, both to God and to other people. So yeah, I mean, I think—I think the danger with—with dogmatic religions or religions of the book or religions of the scripture—so we're talking about Islam, we're talking about Christianity, and we're talking about Judaism—is that they want to hit other people with their books over the head and to say we've got it and we're right, and either you're wrong and we're going to put you right, or we are so kindhearted that we're going to be gentle, but we're still going to put you right. And that ultimately is proselytism and proselytism implies force, fear, or manipulation and therefore proselytism is always, always sinful. And we've only come to that realization in the last thirty years. In missiology today, all of us in missiology, which means right across the—right across the spectrum of the Christian churches, all of us have repudiated the word and the concept proselytism, but it's still used by a lot of people. But it is universally acknowledged now to be unacceptable. This is—we're talking about the year 2000 before this is even kind of shared.

DeFries: Why do you think it took so long to come to a different understanding?

[00:54:09]

Gittins: Because we had competition—competitiveness rather than collaboration from the—from particularly—from the Reformation. Christians of every denomination have been out to prove each other wrong and that's how mission is run. But we started in Chicago in—thirty years ago, we started an ecumenical preparation for missionaries and it started with the Lutherans. I started to teach the Lutherans and after two or three years, we included the Presbyterians and then we included the Episcopalians and then we included the reform church and I did it for twenty-five years. And every single Christian missionary going from the United States to overseas had had an orientation course, which was an ecumenical orientation course led by myself. At first they were saying, But he's a Catholic! And then they were saying, But worse than that, he's a priest! And afterward they were saying, This is the only way to go, this is the only way to go. And we pledged we would never ever again do separately what we could do together and we can do mission preparation together because ecumenism is about collaboration, but prior to that it was always about—it was always about competition. So that's a breakthrough, a huge breakthrough in—in missiology.

DeFries: Absolutely. How do you think it's—so how do you think that's being experienced now in mission? As far as, like what—what are they doing differently? In general, you've been talking about general themes, how things have changed—

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well, I used to go to villages and—and people had church cards—church members cards, little tiny cards, and they had their name on it and they had the name of the church that they were affiliated with and they had some kind of token monthly dues, two—two cents—they didn't—they didn't pay the two cents, but they held onto their card as if it was gold because that card ensured that when they died they would get a burial, a Christian burial. Now there were very few missionaries, uncountryside, and there were relatively few people with a card, but people wanted a card.

So if I went to a village, I would say does anybody have a card and there may be one or two people who had a card and I might just sign it. Then there would be one or two people who say, I have a card too, and I would look at it and one of them would have a Lutheran card. And without any compunction, I would tear it up and give them a Catholic card. Meanwhile, over the hill, ten miles away, the Lutherans are taking the Catholic cards and tearing them up and giving them a Lutheran card. That's what we were doing in the 1960s and the 1970s. That's what mission was. It was about adding people to your community, your group. Not Christians, but Methodists, Protestants, Catholics, Lutherans.

DeFries: Their understanding of God.

Gittins: Yeah, yeah. Nowadays there is much, much more of a—a ready kind of collaboration with the single exception of—well actually the double exception—some extremist or extreme-ish Pentecostals and Evangelicals because some of them are very dogmatic and fundamental and they don't—they won't—engage in this, but the general mainstream of ecumenism is solid, very solid. And now, I mean the—the American Society of Missiology is essentially ecumenical. We meet every year and it's right across the board ecumenical, but it has been now for years, forty years.

DeFries: That's definitely a positive change. (laughs)

Gittins: Oh yeah, it's huge, it's huge. But then there is another side to this and this is the—the erosion of the idea that you need to be baptized and saved and that's undergone a major theological shift from—from the extreme Catholic position outside the church no salvation and that's what justifies you in baptizing everything that moves, to the idea that, Oh no, other people who are also baptized—one Lord, one faith, one baptism. That's ecumenism. It's a different denomination we're talking about, but we all have one Lord, we all have one faith, and we all have one baptism. And so now we—we've come to struggle with the question of, okay, so how—how critical to salvation—whatever that is—how critical is baptism? And one of the consequences is positively that we get a lot of collaboration. Another consequence is that there's not the same urgency to baptize. I never had an urgency to baptize because I never believed that outside the church there was no salvation and I always believed that baptizing people peremptorily was pure superstition and if the missionary was accusing the local people of being superstitious and going around baptizing people and putting rosary beads around their necks, that was every bit as superstitious as any other form of superstition that the missionary was excoriating. So I mean, I had a very practical, hardheaded attitude towards things. I used to just say, "This makes no sense," common sense, and therefore I—if it made no common sense, it made no theological sense.

DeFries: (clears throat) Switching gears, just a little bit, as you collected information about the Mende while being a missionary—and obviously you used that for your doctorate—

Gittins: Right.

DeFries: —in social anthropology, what, as you were—as you were collecting information, though, in the beginning, did you—was that eventually to have the goal of getting a doctorate or why—why were you collecting this information, other than just to relate to the community?

Gittins: No, as I said, right from that first three months when my professor wrote to me and I said, “Yes, I’ll do the doctorate,” I essentially was continuing to do exactly what I was doing, except in a more formal way.

DeFries: I apologize, I missed the first three months part. (laughs)

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) That’s all right, yeah.

DeFries: Okay.

[01:00:19]

Gittins: That’s all I was doing. Beforehand, perhaps I didn’t have a note—a notebook everywhere I went. Afterwards, I did have a notebook everywhere I went, yeah. And—and what I was doing was trying to systematize Mende traditional religion, that was the thesis—that was—that was the dissertation. And as I did so, I found a coherence that—that was wonderful to me to find. I mean, I always knew there was a coherence. There’s a coherence in everything in nature, if you can only find it. There’s a coherence in crystals, there’s a coherence in constellations, but you’ve got to know what you’re looking for in order to be able to find it and—and the old idea was that African traditional religion was mere superstition and it was a conglomeration of all kinds of things that didn’t cohere and I was trying to find out that that was not true.

DeFries: What did—so as you explained it to me, is that the coherence you found—that there is a remote God and that—

Gittins: And that—and that things—I mean the thing about—once you—once you accept that in every culture there is sin and grace, then you can accept that in every religious system there is sin and grace. And once you accept that, you don’t have to pretend that there’s no bad stuff. You know, Catholics tended for thousand—hundreds of years to pretend that there was no bad stuff. There is a lot of bad stuff because it’s religion and religion everywhere is a human creation. Revelation is the divine; religion is the human. So once you accept that, then you can say, Okay, here is a coherent system in Mende religion and there are anomalies, there are sin, there is brokenness, there is antisocial behavior, there is immorality, but that’s still within a system, and that was okay. And I could do the same with Christianity or Judaism.

DeFries: That’s very interesting. (laughs)

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I’ve been trying to teach this to Africans and Asians for the last thirty-five years because Chicago is a place where we have students from forty different nationalities coming to Chicago to do theology and then going to the far flung corners of the world to carry it. So I finished up, ironically, working with more Africans in Chicago than I ever worked with in the bush at my—in Sierra Leone.

DeFries: That’s interesting.

Gittins: I’ve taught eight bishops from fledgling, never done any theology, and now there’s eight of those bishops all over the place. So that’s how my anthropology has weeviled through my life and—and so it’s—it’s not been an academic pursuit. It’s been an

essential pastoral pursuit. And I did the same for years when I was working with the streets—women on the streets, homeless people. The same kind of thing. I did a book once on—about homeless women, with all of these things [gestures to the recorder], interviews, with their stories, which was an anthropological pastoral thing. It wasn't just anthropological and it wasn't just airy pastoral stuff, it was—it was engaged and integrated anthropological theology.

DeFries: Well, it has been about an hour. Do you mind if we just take a short break?

Gittins: No, that's fine, that's fine.

DeFries: And then we'll come back in a few minutes and continue?

Gittins: Yeah, I think I should be more superficial in the future though because I'm getting into some stuff that's probably—it's probably unnecessary.

DeFries: Oh, no, actually, I think it's fantastic, (laughs) so—but thank you. Okay, so we'll take a short break and we'll come back in a few minutes.

Gittins: Okay, fine, I'm ready anytime. I'll take a wander around or I'll stay here.

DeFries: Okay.

pause in recording

DeFries: Okay, so we're back. (laughs)

Gittins: All right.

DeFries: So while you were in Sierra Leone, when you were upcountry, did you experience or have any awareness—or did the local community have any awareness—of the political shifts or violence, perhaps, that was going on with the government? I understand (papers rustling) that they were declared a republic in 1971, there had been some coups, and that by 1978 they had been declared a one-party state.

[01:04:32]

Gittins: Yes, that's true and I left in 1980. I'd say to all intents and purposes the government could've been on another planet. There was absolutely no contact. I often wondered whether there were any taxes, for example. There was no road for twenty-two miles, as I said. So no, we heard things, but—but they—they were irrelevant—largely irrelevant. The most important things—were kids able to go to school? Were they able to get an education? And how do you deal with this enormously problematic infant mortality rate? Terrible; there was no healthcare, there was nothing. It was awful.

DeFries: What was the primary cause of the infant mortality? Was it disease? Was it complications?

[01:05:16]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) The primary cause, sadly enough, was that (sighs) years before, the Holy Rosary Sisters, who were the medical people, largely, had found out that when the midwives cut the cord of the baby with a piece of bamboo and then wrapped it in a cloth and used it again time and time and time, they were just causing septicemia and the baby died. The mothers would die of all kinds of other things, but the sisters took the women in a group and they said, Look, we've got—we've got to do something about this, and they said, What you are doing is actually killing the baby. So they gave them razor blades and they told them to use a razor blade to cut the cord and then discard the razor blade and—and very carefully they—they taught the women—the midwives—and the midwives understood. And about six months later the infant mortality rate was just the same as it had been and the sisters didn't know why. And then they discovered that if you give five or ten razor blades to a woman in a subsistence economy and tell them—tell her to use them once and throw them away, you might—stupid. So they'd keep the razor blade and they'd wrap it in a cloth and they'd use the razor blade in the cloth, instead of the bamboo, and so it continued. And that's the story for—in many different ways that you're trying to reeducate people, but you're not getting the cause of the problem, you're just changing their behavior without changing their underlying understanding. So—so it was that and then one of the common—commonly attributed causes of infant mortality was, in fact, witchcraft. And I can't go into that because it would take weeks to try to kind of get that, but I—I've written of it and if anybody's interested they can find it in my scholarly stuff.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: All right.

DeFries: Okay, practically, how are you getting from village to village? We're you just going on foot? Boat?

[01:07:21]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) As the Africans say, on feet.

DeFries: On feet. (laughs)

Gittins: And I'd say, "Well, that's a good idea because it is on feet." We say on foot.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) It's actually correct. (laughs)

Gittins: So yes, on feet definitely.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: Yeah. I had a—I had a car that I—a four wheel drive—that I could go, in extreme emergencies, to get—get provisions so I could go over this non-road for twenty-two miles to the road and then I could get stuff. So yes, I had an escape, if I needed it, but going to the villages it was always canoe and foot.

DeFries: Did someone go with you or were you on your own?

Gittins: Well, I—I would never know where the villages were so I would always have to take with me a couple of schoolboys. Plus I would be taking [a] camp bed and some food and stuff like that—a mass kit and so on. So, yeah, I would always be with somebody and when—when we got there, we would be fed and the schoolboys would get a decent meal, so that was one of the reasons they wanted to go. Many of them who took me to local villages actually came from the villages, so I never had any problem in finding somebody to take me. So—

DeFries: How did you communicate with your fellow missionaries back home in—in the UK [United Kingdom]? How did you communicate with your family or didn't—was there not a lot of communication?

[01:08:34]

Gittins: No telephone calls, no—no internet, no nothing.

DeFries: Right.

Gittins: I never made a phone call. It was all writing letters that took forever to get there.

DeFries: So if you had news it was weeks later.

Gittins: Oh yes, yes, yes.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: Yeah.

DeFries: Were there any customs among the Mende that you found—like you had spoken about witchcraft and things—that you found difficult to relate to or challenging as a missionary—like was—was genital mutilation a practice? Things of that nature.

[01:09:12]

Gittins: The problem I always found was that if I found something that was objectionable to me I had to find out, first of all, whether it was morally objectionable in a universal kind of sense, and secondly, whether I had any authority to barge in and try and do anything about anything. As far as genital mutilation was concerned, I can't believe my naïveté because the girls, they would go into the bush in—in cohorts of about four years. So the idea would [be] that they would go before they started menstruating, but if there were girls from nine or ten or eleven or twelve, they would go in as a cohort. And the idea of—of initiation is that you go through a fundamental transformation of social status. In other words, what goes into the bush is little girls and what comes out of the bush is women and you've got three months or four months in the course of which, that, like a novice, you become a novice and then you become somebody who knows. When the girls came out they were very, very colorful. They were—they were covered in white—white chalk or white clay, they were dressed in yellow garments, they had these bizarre umbrellas, yellow umbrellas, and—and they were—they were carried around like princesses seated on—on planks with their legs out and—and because they had their faces white with chalk, they weren't to smile. I must've known that the reason that they were sitting like that was because their legs were bound, that

they were probably still bleeding, that they had been mutilated, and they weren't smiling because they couldn't because to show that you were a woman meant to show that you were impervious to that. On the one hand, I should've—I must've known that this was what it was, but—but didn't acknowledge it and on the other hand, as I began to be conscious of what was happening, I—I simply found myself without any moral authority to interfere because they—first of all, they would've lynched me and secondly, this was a cultural thing that had been centuries in the making and they would have literally said, Who do you think you are? We are doing this—it was the women who was doing it to the girls.

In later years, as I—as—after I left, I became somewhat involved in this and—and I reviewed a number of books by Africans either defending this or justifying it in some way and what had happened between the time I left in 1980 and the time that it became very, very much in the public eye was that the very women themselves, having been educated by the missionaries, became the protagonists of stopping this genital mutilation and that was always the way in which it had to happen. That it had to come from the inside. Anything from the outside will change behavior, but it won't change beliefs. So it'll go clandestine, it'll go underground. That's why witchcraft is so powerful. So I became conscious of that and—and now genital mutilation is a major universal opposed thing, but the people who are opposing it are not the white citizens from the United States. It's the black women and the black men from Africa and that's—that's the way it should be. And you—you can accept, I can accept, that there are certain things that you would like desperately to see changed, but you—you can't do them yourself because you're a nobody, you're an outsider. I used to decry things like the way the children were treated sometimes, smacked around, but then treated—when I was a kid I was smacked around. It's an evolutionary thing here and it's always sadly the case, as I said before, that I can see the beam in your eye—or the—the splinter in your eye without being able to see the beam in my own eye. And so, yes, as an anthropologist, as a priest, as a missionary, there will inevitably be situations where you'll find yourself in tension, but you've still then got to say okay, “Is there anything I can do? Is there anything I can do legitimately?” And the answer sometimes is a very frustrating, “No, there's really very little I can do.” It's a very moral—big moral dilemma sometimes.

DeFries: How do you deal with that spiritually when you realize that this is not something I can change on my own, but it's something I—I don't agree with or it upsets me? How do you—how do you deal with that?

[01:13:49]

Gittins: I give it back to God on the grounds that throughout the history of Christianity, we've done some terrible things and then over centuries, we've—we've changed our minds. Things like, Saint Bernard wrote a very, very impressive letter in defense of the Fourth Crusade and he rallied people—good Christians, go and kill as many Muslims as you can because it will be glorifying God. It won't be—it won't be homicide, he said, it will be malicide. Malicide meaning killing an evil person, therefore, it's a good thing. Now—and we've got all through that, we've got usury, we've got—we've got slavery, we've got women obeying their husbands, and—and to the point where they're really kind of held down and gradually we begin to change this. There's still lots and lots of stuff in the church that needs to be changed. If you're in the church, you have some authority to try and change it, but if it's in another culture and you are a stranger or a

visitor, you don't have the same kind of moral clout and you—you're going to finish up being very frustrated. I could be very frustrated with my church, but then I can do something about it or acknowledge my frustration. In another culture, it's a different—it's a different reality and you have to—you have to live with it or leave. You've got some options. You can leave, but if you leave, you're abandoning people. Is it better to stay with people who are enslaved or abused than to abandon them? You know, it's a moral dilemma.

DeFries: What precipitated—when—when you left, was it a choice? Were you called to do something else?

[01:15:24]

Gittins: My provincial—new provincial at the time—came out and without any discussion with me told me to go back to England and to take charge of the students of whom Fr. Ray French was one.

DeFries: Really?

Gittins: Yes.

DeFries: And this is when you were the formation director—

Gittins: That's the formation director.

DeFries: —at the Missionary Institute in London?

Gittins: Well, I wasn't at the Missionary Institute. The Missionary Institute was something that I was asked to do and did just to retain some semblance of sanity because in 1980 the students were in disarray and it was a very difficult time, the 1980s and—and as a—

DeFries: Why is that?

Gittins: —in the course of my four years I pretty well asked them all to leave with the exception of Father Ray.

DeFries: What—what was going on at the time?

[01:16:10]

Gittins: It was a—it was a very transitional period. People wanting to be missionaries, but being either more steeped in the prevailing culture or somehow thinking that the acceptance of the prevailing culture was compatible with religious life or missionary life or being desperately immature. Desperately immature. And not—I mean I could see what the missionary life was. From the time I went to Edinburgh in the sixties, I knew you had to have a sense of who you were, otherwise you were going to be seduced by everything. And in the 1980s, these young fellows, they didn't have—most of them—they didn't have the mental stability or the moral stability to be able to live as integrated, happy, useful missionaries. They were much, much better off finding who they were in a different context. And some of them I advised, "Go and find a good woman. What you need is a good woman," and they would look at me as if I was a

kind of a Martian or something. And years later I was in—I was in Cambridge, I had a year in a sabbatical in Cambridge and on Saturday night I went to the Saturday evening liturgy and I turned round to do the sign of peace, and shook hands with one of the guys I told to go and find a good woman and it was with his good wife, and they'd been married ten years.

DeFries: So you were correct? (laughs)

Gittins: (laughs) Yeah.

DeFries: So what—what kind of—well, I just want to back up a little. What was it like to leave Sierra Leone? Were you—what was—

[01:17:48]

Gittins: Awful. Awful. I mean it was—it was—there was no—there was no time. I mean, didn't—people didn't talk at that time about, taking time to disengage and all of the language we had. It was just vroom and you were gone and then I was behind a desk in London, boom. With no preparation, no transition, no—no education to be a formation director or a leader in that—in that situation. So it was—it was entirely wrong.

DeFries: Was that a feeling of loss or sadness or—

Gittins: Yeah, deep sadness.

DeFries: —confusion?

Gittins: And frustration because I had—I had assumed, and I was led to believe, that my entire life would be for and among the Mendes and I had no other plan B. And I had no expertise—I had no—I had no capacity to be formation director and the one thing that saved me—I—I had a nervous breakdown in the course of it—but the one thing that saved me was being able to teach at the Mission Institute. That was the first time I'd ever taught in my life, first time I'd ever enjoyed teaching, the first time I'd ever discovered that I actually could teach and that was the preamble to coming to Chicago. So from 1980 to now, I've been in academia, but before 1980 I hadn't the faintest intention or desire to be in academia, so it's turned out to be half my life.

DeFries: Did you seek out the teaching or did they come to you and say we'd like you to teach?

[01:19:13]

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) It was a combination. They—they wanted to do a little bit of mission—missiology and anthropology at the institute and I had the qualifications and I had the time because being a formation director isn't a twenty-four hour job, and so it was a combination of them begging me and me begging them. And so I taught some courses and I found that I enjoyed it. And I found that I was able to—to do the kinds of things that we've been talking about for the last hour and a half for the next generation of students who were going to go out as naïve as I would have been. I was already very naïve, but at least I had some academic structures behind me that these guys were never going to have, so I was able to infiltrate that in the classroom and then come to Chicago and do the same thing for the next thirty years.

DeFries: Did you ever plan on eventually returning to Africa or trying to return?

Gittins: Yeah.

DeFries: You did.

[01:20:04]

Gittins: I came to—I came to—to here—to Duquesne in 1984, after I'd finished four years of formation and I was on the way back to Africa and I was just kind of in transition, but I'd been asked—I'd been invited—to go to Chicago for one year as a visiting professor and I'd come here and they wanted me to do an administrative job and I said, "Look, I am not an administrator. I cannot do an administrative job. I'm a pastor. I think I might be a teacher, but I'm a pastor." So I was—I was kind of blessed and sent on my way to—to CTU [Catholic Theological Union] to do this one year teaching and then go back to Africa, but I started working with homeless people on the streets and I got hepatitis the first month and by the time that year was over I was destroyed health wise so I couldn't go back to Africa. And they gave me tenure and they gave me a job at CTU and that again was pure happenstance; that was not in the plan. I was to go back to Sierra Leone in 1985 and still be there now if I wasn't dead. So all of that was totally unexpected and I had never written anything. Actually, I think I'd written one article while I was in London, but again I had no—I had no record, no desire and I finished up as tenured faculty at CTU with a faculty that was—was writing all the textbooks on theology and mission and I found myself drawn into that and started doing that and—and again discovered much to my surprise that I really enjoyed it. So that's—that was the way I got into that. That was not part of any kind of rational plan.

DeFries: What did you start teaching at CTU for the one year? What was the plan to teach for that year?

Gittins: Well, I would just basically teach the same kind of thing I'd been teaching at the Missionary Institute rather than generating new courses, so it would be mission and culture. It would be anthropological tips for missionaries, that kind of very 101 type stuff, really. And I—I really didn't teach—I think I taught two courses in the whole year because I was strapped, absolutely strapped.

DeFries: So I understand that—so you began the work with the homeless, was that on your own or you asked to do that or did you do that as a type of service or—

[01:22:29]

Gittins: No, no, I don't know if you know the name Edwina Gateley.

DeFries: Yes.

Gittins: Okay, Edwina had been a friend of mine in England. She—she and I were raised in the same area, but I didn't know her very well until I went back to London in 1980. She had just started the Volunteer Missionary Movement, which physically was in the same parish. So I would go over there and do their orientations for their lay missionaries and then they would come over to us and do some liturgies with us. So

just before I came to Chicago in 1984, Edwina had come to Chicago to do a—an MA and she was finishing as I arrived in Chicago. So as soon as I arrived in Chicago I called her and said, “Look, I’ve got a year here. I do not want to get caught in a academic classroom for the sake of the year. I want to go back to Africa, but I want to keep up my kind of pastoral antenna,” and she’d been—she was just about to start Genesis House which is for women getting out of prostitution, so she said, “Fine, I’ll find something for you.” So we went for a walk in Chicago. We went to a shelter. I started working in the shelter and then she asked me to work the Genesis House. So for seven years I lived at Genesis House, with the women for half the week. There was myself—myself and a—and a Franciscan and Edwina rightly said, “Look, the biggest problem for these women is that they have been alienated from and by men. If we rehabilitate them with no men in the picture, they’ll just go out and they’ll just be as angry with the men as they always were.” So she said, “Look, we need a man in this house who can be tolerated and respected and trusted.” So DePaul, who was a Franciscan, and myself we would alternate three or four nights a week for seven years. So I lived there for a long time while I was still in the community with Fr. Vince Stegman down on the South Side of Chicago, but during that time while I was—while I was staying overnights at Genesis House, I was also going to a shelter for homeless women and that’s where I got hepatitis.

DeFries: From cutlery? That’s what I—I read an article that—

Gittins: I had terrible psoriasis, so I had open lesions. They had closed spaces, warmth, aspirations, cutlery, you name it.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: It was just a breeding ground, a breeding ground.

DeFries: What—what was your initial reaction to getting involved with working with homeless women and women leaving prostitution? Was that a different changing of gears for you?

Gittins: No.

DeFries: No?

Gittins: No, it was—it was just entirely consistent with what I thought I wanted to do and be or what I thought what I was called to do and be. To be a moral support for people who needed it and if it was in Sierra Leone among the Mende—witchcraft obsessed or losing babies—or if it was within Chicago with—they were girls, they were girls. Some of them were hardened at the age of twenty-three, twenty-four and I adopted one, or she adopted me. I’ve got an adopted daughter; she’s fifty. And I’ve got grandchildren and I’ve got great-grandchildren, but that’s another piece of the—of the thing, so yeah, yeah.

DeFries: How did you start by relating to these women who had experienced, I’m sure, abuse and all kinds of experiences at a very young age, living such a difficult life? How did you relate to them being a religious person and a male?

[01:26:02]

Gittins: I think—I think—yeah, I think I didn't. Basically, when they saw me or if they saw me, I was peeling potatoes or I was making a meal, I was washing—washing the pots or something like that and they'd say, Who's that guy? And that's how it started. And we would—we would gather together periodically downstairs for anybody who wanted to for a little kind of prayer session and so they would gradually get to know [me] and then as a new woman or a new girl came in, she would say, "Who's that guy?" and they'd say, It's okay, it's only Father Tony. It's only Father Tony. So they would—they would have me come in and gradually they would—they would get to know that I was not—not a problem. And then one of them said to me after two years—and I, frankly, hadn't even noticed her because there was a fair turnover—she came to me one day and she sat me down and she said, "I need a father and it's got to be you," and I said, "No, I can't possibly do it," I said, "It's not—I'm a religious, I belong to a community. It's just impossible." She said, "It's supposed to be possible. You're supposed to do this kind of thing." So, again, I took it to my community and my community kind of went [shrugs shoulders]—and so I took that to be a positive sign so I said yes, but meanwhile she'd gone to another person in the house, Judy, who she—and she'd sat Judy down and she'd said, "I need a mother and it's to be you," but she'd never asked Judy and me about how we felt in relation to each other and so the fait accompli was done; and Susie then had a father and a mother and this was 1986. So it's thirty years.

DeFries: How old is she—was she, at the time?

Gittins: She's fifty.

DeFries: So she was twenty—

Gittins: She was twenty.

DeFries: —at the time. What—so did you legally adopt her? As a father?

Gittins: No, because she was twenty you see, she couldn't—she didn't need it.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) Oh, that's true yes, thank you. (laughs) Should've put that together.

Gittins: She didn't need it, but she was the instigator. She was the one who said, "I need this," and so finally I went to my community and I said, "Look, I need to take this seriously and what it means to say is she is a young woman with no standing, no credit rating, no nothing. I need to support this young woman financially," and so I did for twenty, twenty-five years, but I don't want to go into that because it takes us away from something that would go another three weeks of explanation and there's no end to it, so let's just move on to something else.

DeFries: Okay, sure. How long did the women generally stay at the Genesis House?

Gittins: Either they would leave, or get arrested, or they would stay about three or four months.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: So they couldn't be there full-term. It was—it wasn't a resident—well, it was residential, but it was transitory. Transit—transient, transitory—so three or four months, maybe.

DeFries: So what programs were provided to them or what was the goal for when they did eventually leave?

Gittins: Nothing much, nothing much—

DeFries: Oh okay.

Gittins: —in a formal way. They—they would go to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings, they would go to stuff. Basically, it was a safe house and we had an arrangement with the police that the police would never come in and the police would always ring the bell and if we said, “No, you can't cross this threshold,” they wouldn't and that was the arrangement.

DeFries: Was there any way to keep track of them when they left or do you know how many made it out of prostitution?

Gittins: Yeah, I mean Susie adopted me or I adopted Susie, but several other people—Edwina adopted somebody; she's got a twenty-two year old now. Other people adopted people. Other people died, committed suicide, or were murdered. All of the above, and I know people who were murdered and committed suicide.

DeFries: How did you deal with that?

Gittins: Just very sad. I mean—I—you get used to it. If you've lived in Africa among a mortality rate of something like 300 per 1,000, which is unbelievable, then you know death and if you know death, you know—you don't take it for granted—but you see it on a regular basis and if you see people who have given up hope, then you know death is very close. Most of them didn't give up hope, but those who did they're just as good as dead.

DeFries: Do you ever meet them now years later?

Gittins: Yeah, because I worked in the shelter for a long time and then the shelter closed, but I still—on the streets—I still see them. I look for them and I see a few of them. And when I did this book on homeless women, I gave copies to all the women in the book and I've see a few of them since then, but I know also that since then some of them have died and been murdered and been cut into small pieces. I mean the stories are just human, human stories.

DeFries: Have any of them been able to make it out and live a different life or—or no?

Gittins: A few. A few, but if they have, you see, either I don't know about them or they are very few, yeah. I don't know about them because they would've made a new life and that would be it, you know. So yes, some of them have, but it's a struggle, real struggle.

DeFries: What do you see as the cause—so we talked about causes of behavior—what do you see as the causes of prostitution or homelessness and—and it persisting? What is the underlying cause?

[01:31:13]

Gittins: The—the structural cause, in the majority of cases, is a lack of foundational love. In other words, a lack of a feeling that I am a person who is loved. And if you don't love yourself, you can't love anybody else and if you don't love yourself, you can come to hate yourself and anybody else and you can externalize other people. They're not relationships, they're just clients or johns or whatever. And all of the women have been abused or—or unloved, many of them, and their children suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome, so—but—but the moment the child is born, its brain is warped. So it's—it's biological to a degree and it's certainly emotional, it's affect, and the story of Susie just goes on and on and on, but it also involves her adopting other people and each of those other people that she adopted has self-destructed. And as we've looked at the situation over the years, we've realized that the very people that she adopted were already harmed. One of them of them was only four. In fact, just last week, her own child—who is twenty—said for the first time that he had been raped in Catholic school to which his half-sister said, "That means everybody in this family has been raped." So that's the reality. Husband, wife, all children—raped. The husband, when he was five, he was sleeping on the couch on top of his father. His mother came in and killed his father with a crowbar. That's his initial thing. Then he spent twenty-five years in prison for murder and he only got out three years ago, but that's why I don't want to go—(laughs)

DeFries: I understand, I understand.

Gittins: —because there's no end to it. It just goes on and on and on. But what I'm saying is that the—the seed, almost before it is—is—the egg before it's hatched, it can be bad and if it goes back to the age of five or four or three or two or in the womb, you can love them almost to the end, but, sadly, it doesn't work.

DeFries: Trying to overcome a difficult beginning is—is the—yeah.

Gittins: Yeah, and—and I've seen it both with Susie and her husband and her three kids. You love them to death and they—they self-destruct. Yeah. Now I'm sure there are other cases, but the ones I know are bleak, including Edwina's child. So let's go back to something else.

DeFries: Okay. Well thank you for sharing that, I'm—I'm sure those are difficult issues to confront.

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) You're welcome, sure. No I have no problem with sharing it, it's just that I don't—I don't want to kind of go too far away from Spiritan stuff.

[01:35:03]

DeFries: Oh, I understand, but we can, like—this is your forum so you can talk about anything you wish to talk about. That's fine. Well, so in—in this work that you've done then in—you're discussing love and people learning to love themselves—have you found,

even if your life has been different, a different path than the women you've encountered or people you've encountered, do you find more commonalities than differences or—or no in our—in our humanity?

Gittins: You have to look. We have to decide. You have to decide whether you are defined by your differences or defined by your similarities. And Jonathan Sacks is the great chief rabbi of England and—and one of his recent books is called *The Dignity of Difference* and in it he simply says, look, difference is God creation and if you look at the story of Genesis, it is God creating difference on a massive scale and every time the Genesis story gets to the end of the days, it says, "And God looked to what God had done and said it is good." So the principle is difference is good. Human beings, however, and all human beings being members of cultures, see differences as bad or differences as causes for discrimination. So God's idea is differences can be and must be, not only tolerated, but lived with. Culture's idea is difference must be eliminated or controlled, and so culture and theology always come to clash over the question of difference. Are you more different than me because you're a woman? Or are you more human than me or as human as me because you're a woman? And that's the history of civilization. It's also the history of theology.

DeFries: So it's an ongoing question.

Gittins: Yeah and the Catholic Church still hasn't worked it out. You know, Saint Paul says three times, "In Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female." With culture, certainly there is, but what Paul is saying that despite the fact that there is a difference in culture between Jew and Greek and slave and free and male and female, there is no moral distinction for Christ, but the church is still struggling to accept that there is no moral distinction because it wants to say that there's a physical distinction and there is a cultural distinction or there—and therefore there must be a distinction and so we can't do this for women and you can't—it's all about seeing discrimination and justifying discrimination on the grounds of otherness and God says, "No, otherness needs to become brotherhood and sisterhood." But there's no culture on God's earth that doesn't do that. It sees difference and it makes a hierarchy between the difference. One is better and one is worse. One is in and one is out. One is up and one is down. One is good and one is bad. One is me and one is you.

DeFries: Do you think it's—whether or not it's seen this way within a culture—do you think that is the spiritual question that all cultures come to—have to grapple with? The ultimate—is it otherness or togetherness?

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) They should, they should. Yeah, they should deal—yeah, the otherness, but of course if you—if you predetermine then that otherness is bad, then you build the walls that Donald Trump wants to build and we're—we're back to a kind of fascist control of other people, by building walls—physical or—or moral walls—outside the church, no salvation. There you got it. You know, outside the United States, no Mexicans. It's entirely the same thing.

DeFries: Is this something that you deal with in your—in your teaching, in your academic life? Are these questions that you teach and discuss with your students?

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Yeah, yeah. I wrote a book called *Ministry at the Margins* and it's precisely about that question, who is at the margins? And what do you do

about the other person on the other side of the margins? But what Jesus does is remove the margins, but cultures build them higher.

DeFries: So you were the—you taught theology and cultural anthropology and now you're the professor emeritus of theology and culture?

[01:38:42]

Gittins: Theology and culture, yeah.

DeFries: Yes, okay. So how many—how many classes have you taught over the years at CTU?

Gittins: Go on, I mean typically, you would—you would teach six courses a year and I—I taught from 1980 to 2011, so that thirty-one years, six times. That's two hundred courses.

DeFries: Oh my goodness, so what are you teaching now? What—what—

Gittins: I'm not teaching now because I'm—I'm not teaching at CTU. I—I teach summer school. I teach seminars. I teach small courses here and there, but I'm not teaching stuff for which I have to read papers and grade papers. So that's the difference.

DeFries: Is the student body at CTU, is that—it's—it's multicultural, correct?

Gittins: Yep. Yeah.

DeFries: It's not just Catholic, there are—

Gittins: No, no, no, we have—you know, increasingly over the years we have become diverse and no, it's not Catholic. It's usually people with some kind of religion, so we have courses in Muslim dialog or Jewish dialog and if you—if you're doing a course in Christian-Muslim dialog, you have to be a Christian or a Muslim. If you're a Christian, in order to do the course, you have to take some courses in Islam. If you're a Muslim, in order to do the course, you have to take some courses in Christian theology and it's the same if it's Jewish-Christian dialog, you have to be a Jew or a Christian, but you take courses in the other. So yeah, it integrates quite well.

DeFries: Is it lay people and religious?

Gittins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Probably now more lay people than religious, yeah. And we do a range of degrees. We don't do an academic PhD because we've always said we are a pastoral community, so we do a doctorate, but it's a doctor of ministry, not a PhD.

DeFries: So the goal is that the students would then take what they've learned and share it?

Gittins: They're either already ministers or they are becoming ministers, yeah. Pastoral professionals.

DeFries: So as professor emeritus you said you teach summer school and you are also traveling and doing retreats? Correct?

Gittins: Well, that's what I'm doing full time now.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: Workshops, retreats, small courses, so on and so forth.

DeFries: About missiology and various topics?

[01:40:58]

Gittins: Yeah, but about this intercultural stuff that I'm going to talk this afternoon about. This is the—this is the number one item on the agenda of international religious communities now [ed. note: Gittins was giving a lecture entitled "Intercultural Community Living" hosted by the Center for Spiritan Studies at Duquesne University].

DeFries: How to understand—

Gittins: How to understand the difference between multicultural living and intercultural living. The easy way is to say multicultural is people living together separately and intercultural is people actually living together, together.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) In relationship.

Gittins: Yeah, and many religious international orders are multicultural, but not intercultural and they pretend to be or they claim to be intercultural, but they're not. We're not.

DeFries: Is that a challenge of the Spiritans?

Gittins: Yeah.

DeFries: Can you talk more about that idea of living together separately that you've experienced?

Gittins: Well, it's just a reality. It's a social fact; it's not just what I've experienced, but I mean, I live in a place in Chicago, which is a neighborhood city, and the area—my neighborhood is called Uptown. Uptown is two square miles—two miles north south, one mile east and west. There are a hundred nationalities. That makes it multicultural. So every day, in my daily movements, I am multicultural, but I don't go to their homes or eat in their houses or they don't come to my home and eat in my house. I don't speak their language, they don't speak my language; it's coexistence. People living together separately. When I joined a religious order, realizing that people come from many different nationalities, I didn't expect to be living together separately. I expected a different dynamic. You find it in the novitiate, you find it to a degree when you're together as students in a—in a house at theology, but then we tend to allow our independent spirit to take over and I do things my way and you do things your way. You go your way, I go my way. We come together for prayer, but we, as I will say this afternoon, we know less about each other sometimes after fifty years than we know about Donald Trump or the latest film star because we don't talk to each other on a deep, deep level. And that's the—that's the flaw in, I think, a lot of men's religious communities. The women are light years ahead. The women are much, much better than the men.

DeFries: How do you propose to overcome that within the order? What do you think can be done?

Gittins: Well, write a book and then be invited to talk about it and then keep my head down. I don't know. I mean, if—if you ask me that six hours from now I might have a better idea, but—but yeah, it's tedious. It's tough. I've just come back from England where I gave the retreat to my own community and six months ago I told them about the book and there is absolutely no reaction of any kind. So what do you do? Well, if you don't want to be a prima donna you don't do anything, you just say, "Okay, that's fine." What can I do? I can't force anybody, that's proselytism. So—

DeFries: Is it sometimes hard not to feel that— (papers rustling)

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) It's always hard, yeah sure. I mean especially if you do something that is intended for a broader community of which your own community is part. Yes, but then they—it's always—it's a truism that your own people take you for granted. I mean that's true of everybody, everybody. You're taken for granted in your own family, you're taken for granted in your own parish, you're taken for granted in your own academic community to a degree. Relative to the fact that somebody from another community will say, "Oh, I hear you did this!" or, "Will you come and join our faculty?" but not—in your own community you're just part of the furniture.

DeFries: You feel like it falls on deaf ears.

Gittins: Yeah, yeah. So you don't want to go around pontificating after a while because—because the ears will be even deafer, so you just smile.

DeFries: Can you tell me some more about the other anthropological work you've done? You said you've visited thirty—over thirty countries?

[01:45:05]

Gittins: Well, yeah, I've been in over thirty countries, but that's largely to do things with the people there rather than to do anthropological work.

DeFries: Oh okay.

Gittins: I've done some anthropological work in the central Pacific on a—on a very particular basis. The—the nation of Kiribati—K-i-r—Kiri—K-i-r-i-b-a-t-i, is actually spelled—pronounced kiribass, which is a corruption of Gilberts and it used to be called the Gilbert Islands, it's now called Kiribati. And I went there about twenty-five years ago. And when I was leaving, I said to the bishop, "What does your community need most?" and he said, "We don't know anything about our own culture because the missionaries destroyed it and we don't know theology or the Bible." Now I've been teaching a course with a professor of Old Testament for thirty years, once every two years—so we taught it at least a dozen times—called Bible and Culture—big title, it was more than that—and I said, "Okay fine, if you don't understand the Bible and if you don't understand the culture, how about if we brought this course to you for your clergy, for yourself, for your clergy, for some of the sisters, and for some of the ancient lay people?" So we did that and we did it for a month, at the end of which they

understood more about their own culture and more about the Bible and more about the relationship between the two, and then I went back three times after that over a period of fifteen years. So that was one piece I did.

I did another piece in the Trobriand Islands and the Trobriand Islands are off the tip of Papua, New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands are interesting because the society is a matrilineal society. It's not matriarchal, it's matrilineal. A matrilineal society traces descent through one's mother. The consequence of that is brother and sister—and I don't want to get too complicated here, but I'll get to the—the end point in a minute—the consequence is that the marriage bond between a husband and wife is essentially a bond between strangers by definition. The core bond in a matrilineal society is between brother and sister, which is not a stranger bond. It's a blood relationship. So typically, if you say to a man, who is the—"What woman is closest to you?" he will say, "My sister," self-evidently. Christianity has always said for this reason a man leaves his family and clings to his wife and therefore for Christianity, the answer to the question addressed to a man, "Who is the woman closest to you?" should be, "My wife." In fact, it isn't. And the answer for the woman, obviously, should be the other way around. So I would go 'round in this community saying to a woman, "Who is the man who is closest to you?" and she'd say, "My broth—I mean, my husband!" And I'd say to a man, "Who is the woman closest to you?" and he'd say, "My sis—I mean my wife!" Well in a matrilineal society you can break marriages like that, but you can't break sibling bonds. So whenever marriages break up, the sibling bonds cohere and are very strong. So what I—what I wanted to find out was, given that the Trobriand Islands had a hundred years of Christianity, what was the relationship between the strength of the marriage bond and the strength of the sibling bond and the answer was marriage bond—very, very fragile. Sibling bond—very strong. So, interesting.

DeFries: That is interesting.

Gittins: Yeah.

DeFries: Is there any work that had come out of that for the church in trying to—did they try to change that or did they—

Gittins: No because the missionaries weren't remotely interested and one of the things I finished up doing was writing about the missionary himself, rather than—I mean, I've got all the research, but I didn't write about that. I wrote about the missionary who was completely impervious, didn't—didn't even know that this was a matrilineal society much less did he care, so he never wanted to ask the questions. He was never curious and just said, "These people," in the way that you do, "These people are stupid. These people don't respect marriage," didn't ask why, didn't know why, didn't want to know why. So my—my writing was about the problem with missionaries, not the problem with marriages.

DeFries: That's really interesting. So in your—in your books, your other scholarly work, who is your primary audience you are trying to reach?

[01:49:49]

Gittins: It depends on the books. I mean, I've done six or seven books on discipleship and my primary audience would be people in parishes, not theologically sophisticated—

ordinary people. With other books, they—it would either be people who want to be missionaries or want to work in cross cultural areas or—or people who are interested in the theology of mission without necessarily being directly involved in it. So it would be very—there'd be probably three different kinds of audiences and they would overlap sometimes. The anthropological audience, pure and simple, would not be my primary concern. If I'm interested—if I write anthropology, it's usually anthropology for people involved in Christian mission of some kind. In other words, it's trying to make them anthropologically literate for particular reasons, but I'm not trying to make anthropologists anthropologically [sic, theologically] literate. Anthropologists are not interested in theology, but theologians should be interested in anthropology. That's my purpose.

DeFries: Do you travel to write your—your books or do you primarily stay in Chicago?

Gittins: No, I nearly always write them in situ where I've got a good library. I did write one book, which was not an academic book, entirely at airports. I had a laptop and I'd just sit for hours waiting for a plane and I'd just write and it didn't need footnoting, it didn't need a whole lot of stuff. It's actually sold more than most of my books. (laughs)

DeFries: Which book was this?

Gittins: It's called *Encountering Jesus: How People [Come to Faith and] Discover Discipleship*. So yeah, I just did it and then it was done. These others take up a lot more time. This one I just did recently on intercultural living, I'd been teaching seminars for probably ten or fifteen years, so I had all the material there and I wrote it very quickly and all I really needed to do was to put in the academic paraphernalia, but the actual narrative I just—it was almost, I—I knew it.

DeFries: Second nature.

Gittins: It was there and I'd been doing it for a long time. So yes, there's no—there's no single way of answering the question, it varies.

DeFries: And the book you're going to discuss today, *Living Mission Interculturally*, that's the one you're—you're talking about?

Gittins: That's right, yeah.

DeFries: Who invited you to come speak to the community today?

[01:52:12]

Gittins: Well, this province decided that it wanted to take this topic seriously. Then my book came out and then James Okoye was the person who asked me. Now, where it came from, whether it came from James or whether it came from the provincial—I suppose it came from a provincial conversation, provincial council, so it was probably generated between—between them and a few others, but he says quite a few people have read it. I don't know much about that and I've done a little bit with local communities. I did a bit with the western part of this province in California and I did a little bit with—in Dayton. So I—I guess it was generated by the—by the provincial administration.

DeFries: And then you have another book coming out at the end of the year, *The Way of Discipleship, The Way of Jesus?*

[01:53:06]

Gittins: That's due in August, yeah, yeah, yeah. And again, that's for non-theologically literate—intelligent people, ordinary—ordinary people. For people who want to get into discipleship or into the New Testament a little more deeply and a little bit more systematically. And there is a section, the first third of the book is about a—a contemporary understanding of mission that I then can link to discipleship because, as Pope Francis keeps on talking—he doesn't just talk about discipleship, he talks about missionary discipleship. But the problem is that a lot of people still have the idea of missionaries as kind of crazy people who go out beating the bushes and baptizing anything that moves. So I have to do some theology of mission in order to attach it to twenty-first century understandings of why we should think of ourselves as disciples when we spent centuries thinking of other people as missionaries, not us, and other people as disciples, not us.

DeFries: How do you define discipleship today?

[01:54:06]

Gittins: Well, this is the big issue. A woman knocked on my door twenty years ago and—she is a Muslim from Indonesia. She already had a doctorate in Islamic mysticism and she said, “Are there any Christian disciples today?” And I said, “Come in.” So I said, “Why on Earth did you ask that question?” and she said, “Because there are no Muslim disciples.” So she explained why there were no Muslim disciples because after the death of Mohammed, the last of the disciples would've died and no disciples subsequently. So she wanted to know was it the same with Christianity and I said, “No, a disciple of Jesus is anybody who is called and by the spirit of Jesus by baptism undertakes to follow the call to discipleship that was primarily placed among the contemporaries of Jesus, but which is continued from generation to generation.” So discipleship today means people who are intentionally following Jesus and not just card carrying Christians, you know? And that's—that's something unfortunately—it's a word that we don't use. It's a word that's used—the word disciple is used nearly 300 times in the New Testament, but we don't call ourselves disciples. We call ourselves Christians, which is used once.

DeFries: Interesting.

Gittins: Which means to say that we have a long way to go to try and move people from simply being loyal, mass attending, silent majorities to people who are actually infused with a spirit of—of discipleship and a spirit of mission.

DeFries: So what do you anticipate for Spiritans going forward?

[01:55:53]

Gittins: Well, I mean—

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) For the order.

Gittins: —the gross characteristic of Spiritans is that we are predominately African and that's absolutely different from when I joined. We were dominant culture—Europe, either French-speaking or English-speaking, and then we grafted onto ourselves French-speaking or English-speaking Africans, but we were still dominant culture European. The fact is now that the vast majority of Europeans has died out or is dying out. Ray French, who has been ordained thirty years, is the last person to be ordained in my community in England.

DeFries: Oh my goodness.

Gittins: We've got nothing. We've got nothing in the United States. Once or twice you get a novice and then the novice leaves. We got two novices this year, for the whole of the English-speaking countries, and one of them left within the first month. So we got one novice in Trinidad. So what's happening is that the gross profile of the Spiritans is African, but the gross mentality of the Spiritans is European. That's what's got to change.

DeFries: So a demographic, but not a—

Gittins: Yeah, if it doesn't change either the Africans will fragment while the Europeans die out or we will just disintegrate as a whole community. So we are, in fact, international, but not, in spirit, intercultural. And slowly we're getting leadership. My—my province, the British province has just recently elected an African provincial. That's the first time and half of the British province is African now. This is mission in reverse because the Africans who joined the community want to be missionary. So the principle you operate on is that you will leave your own culture, it doesn't always apply, but that's the principle on which you operate. So the Africans will leave their culture. Some of them will go from one part of Africa to another part where the culture is pretty different or some of them leave Africa and go to Europe or Asia or the Philippines or wherever. So the mission now is being carried on by the people who were missioned to in the previous generations, but the—the danger, from my perspective, is that instead of being assimilated into the European culture, they are aspiring to become Europeans and they come over to England or the United States and they become very English or very Americanized and they've got all the very latest gadgets and you say to yourself, Well, just a minute, is this what we joined for? Is this mission? Is this ministry? Is this religious life? So there's a lot of issues, a lot of questions. And some white people are clinging to their power and authority and some black people are looking for power and authority, so there's a mixture. There's a mixture. There's still a lot of good service, there's still a lot of good virtue, but I don't think—I know, for example, that we have not espoused intercultural living, any more than the English and the Irish have tried to live together and now we can blame the Africans because in—in Nigeria we have four provinces—in Nigeria—and that's because of tribalism. But the tribalism between the English and Irish, it was no worse than the tribalism in Africa. So we look at them and we say, (imitates disapproving voices) “Oh well—.” We don't get it, we don't realize that we have committed all the sins that we can identify in anybody else.

DeFries: I think that's—that's going to be a very interesting discussion among the Spiritans and hopefully, you know—if it is a discussion.

Gittins: (speaking at the same time) Well we'll see. I mean, the idea is that tonight we have an hour and a half just with the Spiritans and I don't want to get into a conflict and I think I will just say my piece and see—see how the discussion goes, but I'm not going to be drawn into controversy. Most people have a pretty good idea of what I think anyway and I'm willing to be converted to other ways of thinking, but I'm not particularly willing to defend my corner against all odds.

DeFries: What do you see for yourself in the future? What are your future plans?

[02:00:23]

Gittins: Well, I was talking to a group of sisters about a month ago and I went into the extended care and I was talking to this sister who's 101 and I said, "Sister, what are your future plans?" and she said, "I'm preparing for my next journey." So that would be true of me too, I'm preparing for my next journey. There comes a point in your life where you say, "Okay, what has it all been for and where is it going?" and the priorities shift. So as I'm preparing for my next journey, I—I have good health and I'm active. If I have heart attack or a stroke tomorrow, I'm not in control of that so I will do what I can do as I can do it and when I can no longer do it, I don't know what I'll do. I don't have any plans long term. I'm just preparing for my next journey.

DeFries: What does that preparation look like?

Gittins: Doing the best I can today. I mean, for example, one very, very simple example—I have decided I'm not going to get another car. So I don't need to worry about getting another car. Great! I'm free from getting—worrying about another car. So there are certain things that you do in your twenties and thirties and forties and fifties you don't need to do in your seventies.

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) It falls away.

Gittins: But some people do. Some people obsess about the next car. I'm not interested in that and people say, Well where would you like to be for retirement? I said, "I'm not retiring and if I need to retire I'll worry about it then." And if I need to retire, it'll either be because I'm physically incapacitated or mentally incapacitated. If I'm mentally incapacitated, I don't have to make the decision. If I'm physically incapacitated, it depends how and somebody will make the decision. I will make it if it's up to me and if it's not [shrugs shoulders]. So it's an idle question for me really and people ask it all the time because they want five-year plans. I said I can't give you a five-year plan. I could've been four years and 363 days under that turf five years from now. I don't know. So you do what you do and that's it.

DeFries: What, of all your experiences, stand out to you?

Gittins: What's that?

DeFries: What, of all your experiences as—as a Spiritan, what stands out to you?

[02:02:39]

Gittins: Nothing stands out to me and everything stands out to me. It's—[Sister] Joan Chittister asked a question many years ago, "What do you want to be caught dead doing?" and the similar—similar question would be, "What would you like to be remembered for?" and I—I don't know. I mean sometimes I think of things that I am proud of and either nobody else is aware of or people wouldn't even dream of and occasionally somebody comes up to me and tells me something about myself that they've remembered for thirty years and I have no recollection of it at all. So I don't know. I don't know.

DeFries: There's no particular experience that's most influential on you as—as a—

Gittins: Influential on me—those first African priests—from Africa, that was influential. The superior who told me to go into canon law and then said do something else, that was influential. Getting sick and not being able to go back to Africa, those would be the influential things because they changed the course of my life and they were nothing to do with me. They were things outside of my control.

DeFries: Thank you Father for—

Gittins: You're welcome.

DeFries: —taking the time today. This has been fascinating (laughs) and informing and I—I really thank you for taking the time today to speak with me.

Gittins: You're welcome. I hope it might be of some use. I don't see that there's any particular reason I would want to control it. I probably said a couple of times things I might just modify. I might have said, "Because people leave you and they don't do—" I might just want to scratch that out.

DeFries: I understand.

Gittins: But apart from that generally I don't know. So you let me know.

DeFries: Okay.

Gittins: Shall I sign this now or what? [Referring to deed of gift form]

DeFries: Oh well, we can—yeah—well, thank you—thank you for your time today.

Gittins: You're welcome, you're welcome.

end of interview