

Sister Mary Tacheny
Mankato Center for the Sisters of Notre Dame
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

November 23, 2015

Sister Mary Tacheny—SMT
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: Today is the 23rd of November, 2015, and we're in Mankato, Minnesota. We have the privilege of interviewing Sister Mary Tacheny, from the Mankato Center for the Sisters of Notre Dame. Mary, it's good to see you again. We've had a lot of years together. We haven't seen each other for a while, but a lot of years working on sustainable agriculture issues in Minnesota.

SMT: Good to see you, Ron. I remember our first day together. [Laughs] Way back in about...

RK: 1982, probably.

SMT: I think it was about that time. And I heard about you and that you had this idea, and I wanted to hear about it from you, so we met at the Farmer's Union center on University Avenue in Saint Paul, I believe it was, and you were in this little cubby hole some place as an office. And we talked about your vision. And from that grew the Land Stewardship Project organization, which we have become very fond of, as a religious order.

RK: You ultimately ended up on the board for a while?

SMT: That's right. I think maybe even the first board.

RK: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, too.

SMT: And so it was a great introduction.

RK: And you were one of the people that were instrumental in helping it grow. So, I like to start these interviews with going back and talking to the people I'm interviewing about how they got interested in agriculture—sustainable agriculture. For you, going back—even to your childhood—what brought your thinking of this? And for you especially, how it's touched, how your whole life with the church came into the picture, too, and how that became a part of your whole vision, even with agriculture.

SMT: Well, I think I grew up on a sustainable farm, when we think of sustainability. I grew up on a small dairy farm, about nine miles southeast here, of Mankato itself. It was a small dairy farm. It's on land that's somewhat rolling, so it called for pastures and rotational grazing. So, Dad was a great farmer in his day, as were a lot of farmers in that day. There was no such thing as chemicals and they rotated crops. I remember as a child growing up enjoying the thrashing

crew to be there. And the farmers in the area cooperated, used the same thrashing crew, and changed off using it. They set aside a different starting schedule each year, so everybody had a chance to be the first one, and the last one, too, of course, to get into rotation. So I grew up on that kind of farm. We had row crops, but they were always rotated with grass or alfalfa or oats and barley, and I remember wheat. Because those were products used back on the farm with the dairy cows and the pigs and the chickens. And dairy cows really had their ... we rotated the way they grazed. The pigs were on grass. The chickens roamed around. And the produce from that farm was used by the family or the animals on that farm, which produced the manure for the farm. And so, when you think about sustainable agriculture today, where in a sense we'd like to emulate some of that, we can't go back to the total way we did farming, that's true, but it was a more sustainable model until World War II came along and the aftermath of that. So, I was lucky to have grown up there. Helped herd the cows down the lane for the lower pasture, I remember that—enjoying that little walk with others down the lane. Had chores like feeding the calves and feeding the chickens, and the children—we were six children, four were older and two came as an afterthought, so there were mostly four of us for that time. And it was fun to be together. We all had chores to do. We took it seriously, and we loved doing it—grew to love that kind of atmosphere. So that's really how I grew up, and we all went to school in Mankato. We had a parish elementary and high school there, that's where we went to school. We were taught by the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Jesuit Fathers at this elementary and high school. It was a small school, but large enough that it was a very good school, I believe, and enjoyed that kind of religious atmosphere, environment, really, which matched that at home, because we were Catholic, too. One of the things I remember about that was how Mom and Dad enjoyed looking at the fields on a Sunday afternoon, and sometimes we'd toddle along with them. But they enjoyed ... that was part of the enjoyment to go and see how the crops were maturing and whether there was erosion, whether they needed to be fixed the next year, or changed the next year. And we got in on that discussion, too. So I think I grew up in that kind of an atmosphere.

(6:16)

RK: You also must have developed your appreciation for education and for teaching growing up with the Jesuits, and much of your earlier career then became in the area of education, correct?

SMT: That's true. And I thought it early of being a teacher. I loved that idea. And had good teachers. The School Sisters of Notre Dame were fun to be with, and they were happy people. They were serious about getting a good education, and I think that's right. I think that entered into my decision to become a teacher. Also, my mom and dad did have a long formal education. Dad had less than Mom, actually. But, they appreciated education. They saw to it that we got there. Those days didn't have bus service, so we had to get to Mankato to get to school, so there was an appreciation there. At the same time, in those days Extension was much stronger for that average household than it is today, maybe. It touched more of that average household. And I remember Mom going to Extension meetings for meeting. They would have an afternoon one. They would spend time together learning something new about sewing, or learning something new about preparing a food, or baking, or doing canning—for instance—or drying foods. I remember just a few years ago we unearthed some of these early papers Mom had gotten. She'd bring home and study them and use them in her homemaking. So that appreciation for learning more. Dad—and my older brother, who gradually took over the farm—was early-on a member of

this founding of the NFO, the National Farmers Organization, so there was a sense of justice there. I remember that keenly. They both had this strong sense of justice. Farmers need to be paid a just wage. People need to be given a just wage. And kind of grew up with that kind of atmosphere. They were helping to organize trying to talk to other people and get them convinced to become members of the NFO, and how hard that was sometimes to counter the feelings and attitudes of some of their neighbors who didn't want to join. Then I think about the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) also coming into the area and they got that idea of cooperative from both that NFO and that REA program. So those things I think ... even though I didn't realize it, and when I look back now I realize it more—influenced my own attitudes and feelings about life in general. So, those are some things ...

(9:30)

RK: I'm sure they did. I was thinking, as you were talking—in the years we've known each other, I always thought of you as, in your own way, being an organizer in a lot of ways. So, while you're not an organizer in the strict sense of some of the community organizers like our friend Mark Schultz or our late friend Steve O'Neil, you still had that same impulse, which is built around the idea of helping people learn how to work together to make a change.

SMT: Yeah, that was really important. Another thing I think that influenced us was that Mom and Dad made sure that we got into 4H work. And we had a 4H Club in our area that was very active. We had an unusual leader, a woman who was a great teacher herself—she was a great teacher. And she was a friendly, happy person. Gave of her time very freely. She had an older daughter who sometimes helped her with the club. And we learned so much about running a meeting, and she was not one to do it herself. She would get us to do it, and that was encouraged by my mom and dad, so that helped. We learned how to talk about what we were doing. We got into demonstration work at the county level, even. And that kind of thing was again part of that education, the strength of all of that, and that all really influenced me. When I was in high school, another thing that I remember so vividly was we had a principal who was very forward looking, so she started a cooperative in the school, had us start this cooperative. And we had a little store there where we bought school supplies and we could buy almost anything—some snacks, but mostly school supplies. We could take out shares of this cooperative, and at the end of the year we shared what we made and the profits by the end of the year, also. So it was a great learning tool, and, of course, you bring that back home again, of course, and talk about it at home. So, that enabling of learning was part of what School Sisters are all about, in fact. That's what we believe about education. I should talk maybe a little bit about what we as School Sisters of Notre Dame believe about education.

(12:16)

RK: Well, before you get into that, where did you go to college and where did you get your training and formal education?

SMT: Well, I graduated from St. Catherine's College in St. Paul, and got my master's at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. I entered the convent as a School Sister of Notre Dame, right up here on this same grounds. It was a smaller place then, but this is where I entered. And I

entered shortly after high school—a little later than that, but that basically was it. We started, as we entered the convent the first couple of years we were hearing about the order. We were hearing about what would be the practices that we would be involved with, got our preliminary education and scriptures, and that sort of theology kind of classes, and got some other college experiences right here on campus, because we had a junior college for our sisters right here, affiliated with Mount Mary College in Milwaukee. We also had Minnesota State University here in town that could supplement some of those courses. But then we went off and finished our degrees at other, all kinds of different colleges and universities. So, our foundress was an educator. She founded the order in 1833 in Germany, because in Germany at that time the girls were not being educated. It was a time when schools were being closed. It was just the general history of that time. So she started this school for girls, primarily, because they weren't getting the public education. So that has been our charism always—she believed it was important for women to be educated, because they carried the family along. They were important in the development of that family, and therefore the women really needed to have an education. So that has been our charism from the start. And we believe that education means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential. That's what education means for us. And that we reach the fullness of our potential as we're created by a God, who loves us very much. So assisting us to discover our gifts and the gifts of those that we work with, and always—it's in our very constitution—toward building the earth so that that appreciation of earth is there from the very start, and the connection with what that means for attitudes of people. The other thing that we believe is that we are educators in all that we are and all we do. No matter what, we are always educators. And it's interesting to look back at your life and see what that means—what does that really mean? There's kind of an inborn drive in us to see someone else thrive and to be, sort of, the instigator of that, and kind of the yeast that brings this on. It's that attitude. Another thing that's kind of strong with our constitution is that we confront justice—we confront injustice, I mean. That we must live justly ourselves—that's uppermost for us—live justly ourselves, and then act justly. That we can't really act justly unless we're living justly. So we value human labor rightly, we respect the dignity of every person, we witness to the values that others can actually see, so they can emulate. If we can't live justly and live simply today, then we aren't going to be influencing in those directions. So that's uppermost in our lives. We also treasure making connections, collaborating with others, not reinventing the wheel, and we carry that sort of with us in our justice work. So, when we talk about the Land Stewardship Project, for instance, we treasure the research that they do, because we can't do it all. And that attitude permeates what we do in education. So, that gives you a little idea about what our very constitution ... in recent years we really developed the notion of care for the earth much more strictly, too. We're getting into it much more because of our justice and peace work.

(17:52)

RK: Yeah, I want to hear you talk a little while about that Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry, too. If we may, I'd like to go to after your years of teaching and being a principal, how you decided to go out and do your ministry, you might say, outside their direct research activity and that's where we found ourselves working in the '70s after the pope visited Iowa, etc., if we could move in that direction.

SMT: Well, I kind of moved in that direction. I was teacher and principal for twenty-eight years,

always on the secondary level, in small ... I was at Lismore, and St. Michael, Minnesota and Cresco, Iowa, small rural communities. And I loved every bit of it because there were a lot of farm kids in those classes, and only looking back do I realize, you know, how enjoyable this group of kids was, and how free they were. You know, they were themselves. In fact, they worked hard all summer and when they came to school, they were full of life because now this was a lot easier than it was on the farm all summer. They were full of life. But anyway, I came into this other aspect by accident. By the way, I did spend some time in that big urban center, too—my last ten years of teaching was at Totino-Grace High School in Fridley, and I was principal there. Anyway, after ten years of being at Fridley, our provincial leader asked me to consider a job that had been dreamed by the Minnesota Catholic bishops of that day. That was about 1977-'80, in there some place. If you remember, that was a time when farms were being foreclosed on right and left by the Federal Reserve, and banks and all of this kind of thing. And the bishops were getting very alarmed about what was happening out there because there were a lot of rural areas in Minnesota that were being affected by this movement. And so they thought that their rural life directors—there was a priest appointed in each diocese to be a rural life director—that if they had some help, some educator who could help them to be more effective in their work that this would be an important thing to do. So, she asked if I would consider this job. Well, it was really pretty different from what I'd been experiencing. It would mean traipsing all over Minnesota, because there's six dioceses and their centers are in Crookston and St. Cloud and Duluth and New Ulm and Winona, and of course the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, which had many rural areas, still has many rural churches today. Well, she was a visionary. Her name was Sister Eunice and she was a visionary of her day. She could foresee that this was an important thing to do, so she gave me time to think about it, but she kept reminding me and nudging me a little bit, so I finally said yes. Well, it changed my life. I have to say that. It changed my life. Because I was forced to go back to my roots, now. I had to learn a whole new language because I had been out of it for twenty-eight years. But I had kept up with my family. I remember when I visited the farm and my brother was showing me his ridge till farming method. He had changed his row crops to ridge till. So he's explaining this all to me, how you cultivate the land so the ridge is ready for next spring, which will warm up first. That was the big thing. So, I'd kept in touch somewhat, but it was a whole new thing. So, I started working there, and that's where I early-on met with you. I began to meet with a lot of people that I could hear would be ... there were very few resources around then, if you recall. Now we have an explosion of them. But, back then it was not. It was people you had to meet with and what they were struggling to do. It was the day of Ken Taylor at the Minnesota Food Association; it was the people at the Minnesota Project at the time, and, of course, your ideas about the Land Stewardship Project were foremost developing there. And you met all kinds of other people. Ken Taylor, of course, would have other people that he would know, that he could direct you to. So, the word kept spreading around, and that's how I got a whole new education; I had a whole new education. And gradually I met farmers, too, who were more vocal and really practicing different things. And so farmers taught me tons of things about what they're trying to do to farm more sustainably. So, it was an exciting, exciting experience. So, gradually then I got acquainted with the rural life directors, got them to form boards, or committees at least, and begin to think about what was happening in their area and what they could be learning about what was happening, and what could they be dreaming about to do about the situation. So that was happening in each of the dioceses. And some of those dioceses I also had some of our sisters on those committees or boards. And then, as a part of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, I was under the Social

Action Committee, and that action committee was headed by Don Bargon. He was a whiz at organizing people and developing meaningful committees and boards. And so he was my supervisor and became a great mentor and supporter. He, actually with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, was another area that, of course, was moving in this same direction, trying to get people at that local church level to be more aware of what was happening, because it was happening in the whole Midwest, not just Minnesota.

(25:17)

RK: Right.

SMT: And so, we kept in touch with them. The Brother Dave Andrews was there at the National Catholic Rural Life Conference of that time. Between him and Don Bargon and some others of the rural life directors, we began to think more broadly than Minnesota, about other dioceses, and from that we developed this whole group that gradually brought *Strangers and Guests*, the document of the bishops in 1980, together, and it was a statement about the land and what needed to be done. They had ten principles that they developed in that document. The preliminary statement was simply printed on newsprint and multiplied. So we took that copy back to each of our dioceses and held hearings on that document, spread that document around widely. It was a short document, but it really involved the three separate parts of the document they wanted to write. We had wonderful meetings of people. Sometimes two-hundred people would show up. For the first time they felt the church was being—listening to them, hearing about their situation out there, in a new way. And they appeared and came, and came with ideas, which then got copied and incorporated. I remember I had to pull together all the statements from Minnesota. We had six different hearings across the state, sometimes two or three in a diocese. I'm sure in the end we had more than six, actually. But, pulling all of those statements together and ideas—lots of repetition. Minnesota, being a broad state, there were different issues in different areas, and that was true of the other states as well. So it was an interesting time. So, then a man was hired, Mr. Hart was hired, to put this statement together from what we heard from the people. And it was published simply so that it wasn't a big expensive deal. And we began to develop then educational programs in the dioceses around that statement so that with the previous visit of Pope John Paul II in Des Moines, at the crisis time, too, and then that document following it—by the way, the inspiration for that document was the Appalachian document that we had, *This is Home to Me*, that had come out just a few years prior to that. And that was ... the Appalachian bishops had pulled that one together in much of the same way. And that was about coal, of course, and the damage that was happening to the earth as a result of mining coal. So that was a great impetus for the Midwest bishops then, so that in the end—I remember the day we went to Chicago at their meeting and got their actual signature to this *Strangers and Guests* document, and, of course, we were reminding them the Appalachian bishops had done this. So this was the Midwest bishops. There were thirteen states here then, which we got them to sign this document. So, this is how things got started, you know, in terms of the church and its values and why it was concerned about the land and the people who live on that land, and how important it was for the bringing up of families and for them to be able to make a living there and to treat that land in a caring way.

(29:24)

RK: Right, that was a great influence on a lot of us and seen as a very important development because, to me, as a person trying to organize a group, and work with groups who were really trying to build the notion that the first calling of agriculture is not so much production, production, production, but it's to care for the earth. And out of that will come the blessings of production. And that's really what that *Strangers and Guests* really taught. And then not only that, but then it spread to the point where even other churches like the Lutheran Church—the ELCA—had their own statement, *The Land: God's Giving, Our Caring*. I was so grateful, because it put the churches right in there with kind of the vision that several of us had for a more organic and sustainable types of farms. It all came together.

SMT: Yeah, that's really true. It was interesting. Rural life directors would, from the state of Minnesota, for instance, would get together once a year. Often we met at St. John's in Collegeville and loved being there because they were developing that prairie and their forest area sustainably, you know, and the Lutherans joined us. The Lutherans joined us. We stayed overnight there, and they joined in with us—we met together. And we did that up at the Crookston diocese, too, because there was a strong Lutheran element up there. So, we became good friends with a lot of the Lutheran Church people as well as—well, farmers were living next to each other out on the land. There was nothing new for them. Their neighbors were not always Catholic. There were all kinds of different religious groups, so farmers didn't have any problem with this at all. It was official church people who sometimes did, and they made distinctions.

RK: Well, it challenged some of the basic notions of kind of unbridled capitalism, just like today's Pope is.

SMT: Yeah, exactly, and his whole emphasis for care for our common home today. You know, we all are going to live or die by how we care for this common home together. We're in it together. I go back to our own charism of education, too, because in all of this—at all of this time, the big thing was enabling people to reach their potential. And that's been such a strong part for the Land Stewardship Project. I see the staff functioning in that way all the time. Staff enable them to speak for themselves and gradually get the courage and the sufficient satisfaction about how their own development is happening. Verbally, as they think about this or testify before a group. It was fearful for them at first, but there was no stopping it once they got the feel of it and could see that they were influencing. The last part of my years at Minnesota Catholic Conference, I was also a lobbyist for the bishops, but I didn't particularly enjoy doing that myself, but I could tell right from the start that if a farmer came and could speak about his situation and what was needed in this particular situation, it made a much bigger impress than if I had done it. And that pleased me a great deal because it was how we felt as School Sisters of Notre Dame, too. Try to help people become confident in themselves, knowledgeable, unearth the materials they need, try to help them find the materials they need about a certain bill, for instance. I remember it was great to be at the Minnesota Catholic Conference office because we had the copy machine there that we could use. I remember people being so tired that they would just lie flat on the carpeted floor for a while to get some rest because you know how testifying at a committee is. The committee goes into the night or postpones, and then they only convene again at night and pretty soon people are staying around all night, or at least have to have some in-between time. So, it was a great thing to be able to have a place on University Avenue close to

the Capitol at that Minnesota Catholic Conference office where we could gather and get prepared for a testimony, and so on. And they gave courage to each other, you know, as they came together, women and men. Getting their facts down and what they were going to say and how they were going to say it. It was great. Great time.

RK: Well, you played such a role, too. And speaking of coming together, that same sort of impulse as sort of democratic leadership took hold in Iowa with the Practical Farmers of Iowa, and Wisconsin with the Michael Fields Institute, Kansas Rural Center—a whole array of groups doing that.

(35:09)

SMT: Yeah, yes.

RK: But what also then started happening was the groups themselves, the leaders of them, started to figure out how they could come together for more power and influence, and could get more things done.

SMT: That's right.

RK: And you played a role in that. I think, particularly, I'd like to have you talk a little bit about the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and that Sustainers Coalition.

SMT: Yes, well that, you know that just kind of grew like Topsy also out of some of this. The feeling began to be stronger and stronger that this land grant institution in St. Paul was really not fulfilling what it should have been doing as a land grant institution. And so we began to think about that much more. Various leadership people in the Twin Cities area and around in some of these other states, too. I know Iowa was struggling with the same thing, at that same time. So, somehow or other, we got involved with that, and I'm not sure just how it happened at the university. I think it first started as a sustainable group first among us movers and shakers. I mean, among the organizations. And then we decided, hey, we need to rap at the door. We need to have a place at this table, too. And that's how the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Ag started, I believe.

RK: Yeah, it is. And that was ... you mentioned Ken Taylor earlier. He played a very big role in that, and having the nerve and the vision and commitment to really try to take that whole thing on.

SMT: Yes.

RK: And it took several years and a lot of work, but it actually did get to the point where ...

SMT: And Ken was clever enough to realize that for—I remember this about Ken particularly—the connection between food, good food coming from good land being farmed properly, that whole, making that connection. And that was hard to turn down for the university, because they prided themselves in being an educational institution. And they prided themselves

in research, so it was like, yeah, I guess we didn't think of this quite completely ourselves and we're after the grants always and we're after whatever. Or the wrong person gets in as dean of the food and agriculture department. And so it just falls by the wayside, and they begin to lose track of these people out here in the environments that were doing the actual farming. And so that movement was just very, very important. And, of course, Don Wyse, we can't leave him out of this whole picture because he had that same get-up-and-go that Ken Taylor had and rattled the cages often enough. Got himself into lots of trouble a lot of times, too, at the university, because he did not give up. But, he had the support of a lot of these other folks, like Ken and yourself and others that I'm not thinking of right now. And it was multi-state.

RK: Yeah, some of it's just, you know, bearing fruit now with the Green Lands Blue Waters program ...

SMT: Oh, my.

RK: ... that's now working in multiple states, and Don Wyse has been a leader in the Forever Green Initiative, it's called, and he's working on continuous living cover, they call it. And all of that, Don talks about it taking thirty years, but it's really happening and that's where a lot of the roots were from.

SMT: And he's been in there from the start. And what was beautiful about the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture was that he got this idea about those district, regional centers, or regional—they're really not centers, but they were regional districts—getting a certain amount of money each year from the legislature so that development projects could be dreamed up in those areas that would help that particular area. Keep people on the land, keep people involved in the small towns, so that more—each of those districts, each of those regional groupings came together and had their own little boards and dreamed their own dreams. So more and more people said—well, yes, that's what that institution should be doing for us. There should be a connection here between what we're doing and what they're doing. So gradually people out here caught on about... I mean, recalled about one more time that institution was to serve them, and should—needed to be—serving them. So it was a great time and has led to these wonderful projects going on.

(40:25)

RK: And I know for a while you served not only on the board of the Land Stewardship Project, but on the Catholic Rural Life Conference board because I happened to be on that board for a while myself with you. And then also on the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Ag, you were also an early board member of that, bringing your skills and the strength of the church behind you.

SMT: Yeah, I had to keep emphasizing that they really needed to be there for their ... we had strong people on that board, too, from those various regions. I'm not thinking of the man who died prematurely of a heart attack, but he was such a trooper there. The southeast area. And strong participation. And they just couldn't, they just couldn't—they didn't allow them to forget at the university that people were alive out there and wanting attention and wanting their help.

So, it was good. Good time. Yeah, you just—you know, I sort of certainly just kept getting more and more involved, you know, as you got ... and it got more and more exciting because there were more and more groups doing things.

RK: Right.

SMT: And getting ... it was, it was a fun time.

RK: Do you recall any of the work you did probably through one of those groups that got you more involved in federal policy? Were you involved with any of the fly-ins, you know, the work that ... at the same time things were happening at the state level, people were coming together, realizing after the farm crisis of the '80s, and the need to improve federal policies so that the farm bill started paying more attention to deep conservation, even food issues. Did you get involved with that?

SMT: I got involved with it, not heavily, but through the Land Stewardship Project, of course—you couldn't not. But, I made two trips I remember, doing to Washington DC with a group of farmers from Minnesota, and it was a trick to keep up with them. But again, as you move from one House to another, they're from the House to the Senate and back and forth, meeting with people. But again, it became very clear to me that farmers speaking for themselves really was the strong point. And that's what the Land Stewardship Project always emphasized, helping prepare them. They never left them high and dry. They helped prepare them for what they were going to do at Congress. So, people went with confidence, more and more, they were confident and spoke confidently about their ... and what was neat about it was, Minnesota farmers were not just going by themselves. At the time when they would organize these fly-ins there would be farmers from Iowa, from Nebraska, from Wisconsin—other states who had joined those coalitions, the multi-state coalition, going with them. So, they had support for one another and began to learn—oh, it's happening in other places, too. We're not alone in this.

(43:42)

RK: And the legislatures—legislators were eager to hear from farmers instead of the, you know, you might say more the citizen's lobby, the grassroots, rather than from all the professionals. And so that was another really good thing about the fly-ins. They continue to be a real important, necessary strategy.

SMT: I think so. I think so. Sometimes I remember we got involved as the School Sisters of Notre Dame in making a contribution of money so that farmers could have a cushion to go on, because it was expensive to get there. And Land Stewardship Project and other groups didn't have the money either to get them out there. So, a lot of it was their own money, but we could at least provide some funds that way. We couldn't do it ourselves, but we could help them do it for themselves, and that got to be very satisfying for us, too, and taught us, too, how we could be involved in this. Calling was important for us as School Sisters and it still is, that we take those emails from Land Stewardship very seriously, their background information comes through, we know exactly what we're talking about so that we don't just make a statement, a blunt statement,

and not know what we're talking about. It's important that we know what we're talking about and believe it ourselves. So, it's good information, good collaborating, good connecting with one another.

RK: That brings us up a little bit closer to today. I—you know—after you spent several years with such activism, you sort of came back home. And one of the things you did here was establish the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry, continues to grow and thrive today. I'd like to have you talk a little bit about where that came from and what that's all about.

(45:43)

SMT: Well, when I left the Minnesota Catholic Conference work after about fifteen years, I believe, I had been a part of our Rural Life Committee here for our own province—Rural Life Committee of Sisters. And we had started by, as I said once before, by helping people who taught in rural schools to have a better notion about what their people were up against, and gave curriculum ideas and so on. So, that committee was actively involved. They decided that, at one point, that we needed to do something more because we had land right up here on this hill that had been given to us way back in 1912. And what were we doing with this land? We had about fifty acres. We had a farmer who... at one point we farmed the land ourselves. We could no longer do that by ourselves and continue doing our school work as well, so we got a farmer to do it. But, some of the land was not really farmable.

RK: Too hilly?

SMT: Too hilly. Too much of that kind of ... and smaller pieces. The farmer was fine for him to add that acreage to his own, but it wasn't the best. So, we decided we'd better do something about what was happening to our own land here on the hill itself if we were going to be believable. So the idea came to investigate the possibility of putting up a center of our own here. What would it be? How would we bring our values to it? Could we afford to do it? What would we do with the land? You know, all of this kind of came up. So, two of us were given the privilege of spending a year-and-a-half just investigating the possibility. We talked to farmers, too. And, actually, they would ask us—what about your own land up there? Well, that's what we're asking you about. I remember Audrey Arner and a few others coming up here and helping us look at the ridge of this, the erosion going on. What we could possibly do, giving us ideas and background and so on. So, finally, we decided to take the plunge and set up this center, and it was supported by the community. Two of us, Sister Kathleen Storms and I, started that center, and the first thing we did was to look at the erosion problems and to deal with that. We got in some experts to help us with the worst parts of what we needed to watch, because we're up on top of a hill and there are hillsides that gradually just erode. So, we worked at that erosion problem first. The second project was getting a community garden going on our own land, so we got a couple acres set aside, started checking to see whether a lot of our sisters started first. The third project was developing the rest of the land into prairie lands, getting into the conservation programs, and into prairie, so that we no longer have agricultural crops on any of our land, except the two acres of garden. We have an orchard back here. We use a lot of apples, cherries, gooseberry, for our own use here, primarily on the hill. So that was the idea to practice what we preach in terms of our care for the land. That was the idea behind it. Planted a lot of trees and shrubs in vulnerable spots

where it could erode, and hopefully it would hold the soil together. We try to practice no chemical use up here at all, including the orchard. We don't spray. We don't get perfect apples, but we have a groundskeeper who really watches and does everything she can do to naturally try to give us as good of fruit as possible. We don't mow right up to the ridge of hills—we keep that wild. We don't irrigate, we don't water, we don't use any chemicals. The school across the way is separate from, I mean, they use our building and it's school-supported by four parishes in town, so we're trying to have them also honor their grassland, their football field, their parking area without using a lot of chemicals, watch how much they cover with asphalt or cement, which kind of is a struggle all the time because they like to do more and more of it, you know. So, anyway, all of those things come into this center. Today we have a laywoman who is in charge of this who's prepared...

(51:29)

RK: That's a salaried person, right?

SMT: Yes, a salaried person.

RK: That's supported by...?

SMT: By our School Sisters of Notre Dame. And full-time, and she does a lot of teaching of classes, besides running the community garden.

RK: Which has a hundred—you told me 135?

SMT: About 135 gardening up here, a little mini-United Nations, coming from around Mankato to come up and garden. They do a wonderful job. She has a kids' garden, she has an herb garden, complete composting goes on. And we have a waste management program here that Mankato is experimenting with and we're part of—one of the institutions that's practicing where we have commingled products go together, even some paper that can be used for composting, so they're experimenting.

RK: And food waste?

SMT: Food waste included in that, yes. And they're hoping, eventually, to make it so successful that the town of Mankato can be involved in this.

RK: And I know you also have a continued at least one annual program, too, that's part of the education effort of the Center.

SMT: Right, we have a conference. We call it an Earth Conference. It's an annual conference the first Saturday of November. I don't think there've been very many years when we haven't had some person from the staff of the Land Stewardship Project on the program. Because they're good speakers, they come with the same values we have, and we just get to know them, of course. We have a lot of ... they've met up here a lot of times. We try to use our space, too, offer our space so they can have a meeting, because they draw from people around here. This kind of

is the central spot for this southern part of the state. So, it's easier for them to come to Mankato than to go to Winona, or to go far west. So, we try to offer our space for little meetings, and in general help the rural cause in that way, whatever way we can.

(53:55)

RK: Well, good. And I think we're nearing the end of our time. I'd like to end on kind of a future note. Have you got anything to say about where you think the sustainable agriculture movement, or where the church meets it, or however you want to think about it? Do you have anything that should be priorities in your mind, going forward, now looking back to where we are? What do we need to do next?

SMT: Well, I think the federal program has to continue to be worked at, beefed up, made more visible. It's federal programs that are getting us into the trouble that we're in. You just take the insurance, the Crop Insurance program alone, which we're working on. We have to do—we've got to do—the word is getting out among more and more people. I think the problem is that they don't have enough influence on legislators to do... so that legislators have the support they need to really take a strong position on something. The moneyed group always gets in there stronger. But, the word is getting out about the connection between poor handling of the land and our own health, our own food production and our own health. There's a big push today for making that connection, and I think that's what we need to keep doing. If we're going to influence that ordinary person, that ordinary person is influenced by the school lunch program, by what happens in parishes and schools and institutions, and people are clamoring for a healthier kind of food. Just have cancer appear in someone's family and the first thing they go to is—what do I eat? They've caught that connection, and I think whatever we can do to further that connection is important.

RK: Right. That brings in, too, those people who learn to care about their food end up being a constituency, as it were, for then, some of them anyway, for policy changes that happen at that deeper level.

SMT: That's right. That's right. I believe that.

RK: Also, one more word, or something I'd like to touch on then—the role of the church. I mean, one of the interesting things I referred to earlier is the fact that we now have a pope who reminds me somewhat of what we saw 30-plus years ago, where the bishops were encouraged and it's a very interesting development in the last couple of years with this new pope and what he ... what that whole thing can percolate down and bring to this.

SMT: One of our Shalom workers—Shalom is our peace and justice community—he said (he works for us)—I have had more requests for the pope's document on the environment than I have had of all the church documents put together.

RK: Very interesting.

SMT: I think it was very interesting. People are finding his statements meaningful in their lives,

and I think that's something that we need to do as a church. Back when I started working with the Minnesota Catholic Conference, we had progressive bishops to work with. It was a joy to work with them because they supported us. We need to have that kind of influence again at that upper level. It will happen when people at the grassroots level make their voices heard, and they're getting encouragement from Pope Francis to do that. To me, I think it's a very hopeful time right now again, and we need to have that hope.

RK: We do. Well, thank you very much.

SMT: You're welcome, Ron. Good to be with you again.

RK: Good to be with you.