



Interview with Reverend Al Gibson

Under the Auspices of the
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

**Remembering The 20th Century: An Oral History of
Monmouth County**

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Name of Interviewer: Connie Paul

Premises of Interview: Ms. Paul's home, Freehold, NJ

Birthdate of Subject: not available

Ms. Paul: Al, you and I have known each other a long time. I think it was 1973 and I met you when you were the pastor of Hope Lutheran Church and I became a new member there. How did you get to Freehold in Monmouth County? Where did you come from?

Mr. Gibson: We got to Freehold in Monmouth County from Baltimore, Maryland, which happens to be my home town. I was born there and then had the opportunity to serve for a little over eight years as pastor of Christ Lutheran Church there. Then the American Lutheran Church, through the American Missions Department, called me to come to start a new congregation in Freehold Township. The response that I got from my spouse was, "Where in the world is that?" Well, we soon found out where it was, right off the Turnpike, Exit 8, and we were happy to make the first visit here and visit the house that was to become our home, which was at



Al Gibson on this sixty-fifth birthday, August 1997

266 Stonehurst Boulevard. Interestingly enough, it happened to be the first real estate sale of the person who has become very active in the community for a long period of time and that's Bob Cuneo, with Danis Realty. That was Mr. Cuneo's first real estate transaction after having been in sales for pharmaceuticals for many years. So, we've had a good acquaintance with Bob Cuneo, and his wife, Norma. We came to start a church. The building was not quite done when we arrived, but the site was in readiness and the building was under way, out on Adelpia Road, and I moved here with wife Lois and three children. For the first few months we were the church in the community. It was in the middle of July, 1966 when we came here, and we started our ministry by going from door to door, trying to find if there were any people who were vaguely interested in becoming part of a new Lutheran congregation.

Ms. Paul: Why did the American Lutheran Church (ALC) pick Freehold as a site for a missionary congregation?

Mr. Gibson: Well, they picked Freehold because a pastor in Neptune, New Jersey, kept driving through Freehold Township on the way to Fort Dix and noticed that there was a lot of growth going on here and that growth was on the Western side of the Township, and he thought that we ought to start a new congregation there.

Ms. Paul: And that was the Reverend Eugene Beutel.

Mr. Gibson: That was the Reverend Eugene Beutel, who had also been a pastor in Baltimore, Maryland when I first came into the ministry in 1958.

Ms. Paul: Why did you become a pastor? Is that a long question?

Mr. Gibson: That is a long question. I became a pastor because of my pastor in Willard, Ohio when I was at the age of confirmation, which was thirteen, fourteen years of age. He never asked me to become a pastor, but out of the sixteen members of that confirmation class, three of us became pastors. And it was just because he was a neat guy and was able to lead a congregation and lead young people into looking into opportunities for service through the church. He did say to me one time, not only to me, but to all of us, that when he was a kid, he grew up on a farm and he was the runt of the clan, and he got the opportunity to go out very early in the morning and milk the cows sitting on a three legged stool with a tail of the cow swishing him in the face. He said then that there had got to be something better in life than this.

Ms. Paul: So the ministry in the Lutheran Church was another option.

Mr. Gibson: Yes, that was one of them.

Ms. Paul: Okay, so you came to Freehold Township with your wife, Lois, and your children, Marti, Tom, and Steve, and you started knocking on doors.

Mr. Gibson: Correct, and we found not too much interest in the first couple of weeks of doing that. Prior to knocking on doors, we did try to acquaint ourselves with the community, so I tried to find where the Township offices were and they were in the Gables Building, at the time, down in the basement--a very obscure place, but none the less, they were there. I think Bob Farrell was the tax collector at the time, and so I met him and a few other folks.

Ms. Paul: There wasn't any other Protestant church in the Township at that time, was there?

Mr. Gibson: At that time, I don't know - the Assembly of God Church down on Georgia Road might have been there, but I'm not positive about that. But there was none in the Township, and there was no Catholic church at the time in the Township.

Ms. Paul: Most of the people in the area went to Freehold Borough where there were lots of churches.

Mr. Gibson: They went to the Freehold Borough area and of course, I think this is one of the reasons why the ALC wanted to start a church here. They thought that it was better to do it in a community where people are newly moving in-- that people would rather stay within that community than transport to another community--that they would prefer to start afresh.

Ms. Paul: So how long did it take you to get a group together and actually have a service?

Mr. Gibson: We began door-to-door canvassing about the first of August and we set a target for ourselves to have our first worship service on the last Sunday of September. And by that time we had made several contacts and there was some response. Part of that response was people saying yes they would be interested and they committed themselves at least to coming to the first worship service which was, I think, on the twenty-fifth of September, 1966. At that particular service, the building was not fully complete, but it was finished enough that we could utilize it. That was before certificates of occupancy were required for entrance into a building, and Jack Allen did not prohibit us from entering the building. He was the building code inspector at the time. So we had 150 people who showed up for the first worship service. Not all of them were interested, some were members of other congregations such as the Buscaglias and the Madges who gave good support to us.

Ms. Paul: They were neighbors on the property...

Mr. Gibson: They were neighbors of the property and became good friends of both Lois and me as members of the congregation and the Hope congregation on the whole. We were indebted to them for a number of things early on.

Ms. Paul: So what were some of the early ministries that the Hope congregation got involved in?

Mr. Gibson: Very early on we discovered that there were a lot of young people in the community, a lot of young people who did not become five years old before October first -- the cutoff date to enter the public school-- and therefore they had no opportunity for any preschool experience. So we looked at the possibility of starting a preschool the very first year that we were in existence--actually, in 1967. We started the Hope Christian School. We started with thirteen children, age four at the time, with one teacher whose name was Gloria Kropa. That progressed from one class of thirteen to eight classes of one hundred fifty-six, or seven three and four year olds.

Ms. Paul: So that been in existence well over thirty years.

Mr. Gibson: Yes. And that was a good experience because it gave us an outreach into the community to people who were not necessarily interested in the church but were interested in the children having some preschool education that was Christian oriented, and were willing to put their children in the school.

Ms. Paul: And of course there was the Sunday school program.

Mr. Gibson: And we had the Sunday school, which was for outreach as well, but primarily for the members of the families of the congregation. Early on, we started to think of ourselves as family and very rarely did we use the word "congregation." We used the word "family" because all of us were in need of brothers and sisters and children and grandchildren.

Ms. Paul: When I joined the church, one of the things I heard was that Hope had the reputation of being a "kissing" church.

Mr. Gibson: Well, yes, yes...kissing and hugging and I suspect that in all honesty it probably would be safe to say that I may have been the initiator of that. So, in retrospect, I've been told by others, and I have evaluated it myself, that was probably the most dangerous move that I made in terms of everything that's happening now in the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That hugging and kissing of anybody who comes in through the line on Sunday morning is maybe not the wisest thing to do, but you can't teach an old dog new tricks, so I still do it.

Ms. Paul: You mentioned that there wasn't a Roman Catholic Church then, but one was started soon after.

Mr. Gibson: The Catholic church in the area was in Freehold Borough and that was Saint Rose of Lima. That was a very, very large parish, and some time after we got started, the Bishop in Trenton decided it ought to be split to better serve the people on the western side of Freehold Township. The Bishop bought some property on Georgia Road, and called a pastor to serve that congregation. The pastor's name was Father Thomas Dentici, and he quickly became a friend of Pastor Al Gibson.

Ms. Paul: I heard a story that there were doughnuts involved in that friendship.

Mr. Gibson: Well, there was breakfast involved. Breakfast. And some of us had doughnuts, and some of us had other things, but we had the opportunity to meet together once a week for breakfast. We found breakfast a time that we were both available and it wasn't encroaching upon any other things that we were expected to do, so we did that for a couple of years. St. Robert Bellermino met for the first few years at the Elton Road School, that's what Erickson School was called at that time. They met in the gymnasium there, and I guess one of the first ecumenical events that we had together was when it came time in May for the first Holy Communion for the youngsters from Saint Roberts parish. Rather than have the service in the gymnasium at the Elton Road School, I offered them the sanctuary at Hope Lutheran church for First Holy Communion.

Ms. Paul: Certainly when I grew up in Missouri, Catholics and Lutherans didn't have that kind of cordial relationship very often.

Mr. Gibson: Well, true, that was never part of my experience in any of the communities that I have lived in, including Baltimore where I served as a pastor. The friendship was not an edict from our superiors, but it was two clergy persons who liked each other and found that they had many, many things in common, including what they did as a vocation.

Ms. Paul: And so from that mutual respect, a more formal relationship developed, right?

Mr. Gibson: Yes. From that came the opportunity to formalize our relationship with an accord that was signed by both of the Bishops which had within it certain elements relative to the relationship about how we would try to get together socially, how we would do things in terms of worship and education, how we would do things in terms of social ministry in the community: activities we would do together.

Ms. Paul: A joint Vocation Bible School was one of them.

Mr. Gibson: A joint Vocation Bible School was the first thing that we did together. Because we had the facility (and even after their parish building was constructed they didn't necessarily have the facility for educational opportunity)

we used our facility on Elton -Adelphia Road, and that was the first real ecumenical thing that came out of that. Then after that we had other things together, such as tennis parties and the exchange of pulpits a few times a year, the doing of joint Lenten services together-- sometimes in the sanctuary, sometimes we divided up among homes within the community. A program that I recall was called Ashes to Easter which we did within the homes of the community and the formal Accord was something that developed as a result of Tom's and my visits with each other on a regular basis. But in effect we had nothing to do with the Accord itself. We just thought it would be a good idea for a group of folk from each parish to get together and see what they could come up with and so we had a meeting with them, we shared our thoughts, and then we exited and never returned again until they came up with something.

Ms. Paul: I was on the church council at that time and I remember that process very well. It was a liberating thing for me because it was just exciting to get to know people of another faith and discover how much we had in common. I thought it was a wonderful program and a wonderful process that we went through.

Mr. Gibson: As we did that, the two of us, Tom and I, got involved in the Freehold clergy group. It was kind of a council-of-churches thing at the outset and it evolved into a clergy association in 1967-1968. That group included lay people who would meet together on a monthly basis, like a council of churches. And, of course, there was some interest at that time on the part of some within the group to work out something with the community so that night racing did not take place at the Freehold Raceway. A lot of effort, energy, and dollars were spent in trying to deter that. Indeed it never did happen. I don't know that we could say it was the result of what the council of churches did or not, I think it just didn't happen for many other reasons. But that took a whole lot out of the council of churches in terms of energy and finance, and so it was very difficult to get lay people together again. But the clergy felt the need to continue to do that, and so we did. We formed the clergy association that met on a monthly basis.

Ms. Paul: That group is still meeting, isn't it?

Mr. Gibson: That group is still meeting and I guess one of the neat things about it is that Father Dentici and Saint Rose of Lima participated, and then we had some participation from the Jewish community in the form of the Rabbi who started a new Jewish congregation, Shari Emeth, which is actually located in Manalapan. But the Rabbi lived in Freehold Township so that's another extension of our ecumenical outreach or togetherness in that I got to know Rabbi Phillip Schecter very well. And he got to know the rest of the clergy very well and ultimately he became Coordinator of the Freehold Clergy Council -- a position which I held a couple of times during my tenure here in the community, also.

Ms. Paul: And the two of you became close personal friends over the years.

Mr. Gibson: We did, and remain close personal friends. We communicate by e-mail and the phone lines, which I happen to prefer, but none the less we do it both ways. And he is just retired -- I think that this past Friday. This is June 3, so that yesterday, the second of June, was his concluding service at the Shari Emeth Temple. He will be leaving the community in the not too distant future, this time following another rabbi, his wife, to Stamford, Connecticut, where she has a congregation that she has been called to. Early on it was a concern of mine that we find every way possible to serve the community, not just to serve ourselves as a congregation, and so the best way I could figure to do that was to get acquainted with the community. So I would make it a point to go to Township committee meetings and just find out what is going on with the community, what made up the community, who the power people were within the community, and to try to get acquainted with them.

Ms. Paul: You got involved with some of the community activities, also, didn't you?

Mr. Gibson: Yes, and one of the first things the growing community needed was to do something in the area of recreation. And that was right down my alley since I like to play, so, I got involved...

Ms. Paul: And you had some children who liked to play...

Mr. Gibson: Yes, children who liked to play, also. We got involved with the Recreation Commission which was a creation of the Township committee, and I ultimately ended up being chairman of that commission for a period of time.

Ms. Paul: What kinds of things did it do?

Mr. Gibson: Well, we instituted the opportunity for adults to become involved in recreation. There was adult basketball time set aside and we had to negotiate with the Board of Education, so I got acquainted with that piece of the community by doing those negotiations with Marshall Errickson, Superintendent of Schools, and got them to set aside schools and time within the schools to use for recreation for adults. Also for children, so that they could participate even though they may not have been on the high school or the middle school teams. But I guess early on one of the major things that ultimately proved to be most important in the Township was that we got involved with the utilization of the setting aside of green areas.

Ms. Paul: Green Acres?

Mr. Gibson: Green Acres areas. And so at that time, the area down on Georgia Road, which is now part of the Freehold Township Park System, was set aside, and we began to explore how that could be developed.

Ms. Paul: Is that Liberty Oak Park?

Mr. Gibson: That's Liberty Oak Park now, but even before that we set up a summer program so that there was recreation provided. It was like a summer camp that would take place in the morning, and it was fully supervised and, as a matter of fact, the former athletic director of Freehold Township High School was the first director of that summer camp program. Bernie Goldwater. So I had the privilege of hiring Bernie Goldwater for that job. And then other areas were set aside throughout the Township, and we began to meet with people who were in the business of developing parks and recreation areas. Before all that took place, I went off that Recreation Commission and went on to something else that I never thought I'd be involved in, and that was the Planning Board of Freehold Township. I found that to be very interesting work as you looked at the proposals of people who wanted to come in and begin developments and all that you had to do for site planning and zoning. It was a whole new arena for me in terms of my experience, and I wondered the whole time I was there why in the world the mayor would appoint a clergyperson to be on the Planning Board. But I found it to be fascinating, and I was told by members of the Planning Board that I did make a contribution because I had a different view, a different vision of things. ...

Ms. Paul: When did you get involved with the hospital?

Mr. Gibson: Well, I got involved with the hospital as soon as there was a hospital, but even before that, when the hospital was still an idea and when it was just a cornfield over there on Rt. 537. They were doing fundraisers for the hospital, and I went to some of the fundraisers because I wanted to see that there would be a hospital there-- mainly because I had early on the need to be hospitalized. I had an accident out on Adelphia Road: I totaled my Oldsmobile on a tree that still stands in front of the existing High School. I did not get rid of the tree and I guess it's a memorial to me that it's still there. But I had to be transported over to the Jersey Shore Hospital by the First Aid Squad of Freehold Township and my good friend Charlie Buscaglia was the driver of the wagon that took me to the hospital. But I, along with a lot of other people, thought it would be nice to have a hospital right in this community, and so I wanted to participate in that and I did. And then I was pleased when the hospital was built and I got involved then with clergy visits to the hospital. At first I was doing that alone, but then having a greater concern for the total population of the hospital, particularly after it expanded to the number of beds that they currently have, about two hundred and forty, I guess, I tried to set up a chaplainry program through the clergy association in the Township of Freehold area. And the consequence of that was that we did do that, and Ron



Lisa Lancaster, (far left) chaplain at CentraState; Tom Litz, CEO at CentraState; Al Gibson; Claire Morris, Council President of the Hope Lutheran Church

Van de Bunte of the Reformed Church was very helpful in coordinating that. We tried to utilize all the clergypersons, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and the Jewish rabbis, in providing pastoral care for the patients in the hospital. So we were involved with that for a long time, and then I think I said something to the effect that the hospital was constantly coming to the churches and asking the churches through their membership and as a whole, to participate in the fundraising and the gathering of funds for the hospital. I said, "Well, you always ask us for money-- maybe it would be good if we could have some representation on the board." So I was asked to be on the board.

Ms. Paul: Do you remember when that was?

Mr. Gibson: I think it was 1980. I'd been in the community for fourteen years already, so I was on the board then for twelve years.

Ms. Paul: And you ended up as Chairman of the Board.



Groundbreaking at Applewood Estates, 1989.
Left to right: Robert McLean and Dr. Kenneth Posner (CentraState Board Members), Al Gibson, and Jack DeCerce

Mr. Gibson: I ended going through the chairs, so to speak, of serving in the position of chair, of every one of the committees that they have and also each one of the vice-chair positions, and then ultimately ended up as Chairman of the Board. And right during that time we expanded, so it was not just the Board of Freehold Area Hospital, which became CentraState Medical Center, but it was a board for the whole CentraState Healthcare System, which includes the nursing home, the Manor, and Applewood Estates, as well as the medical center, and some outreach places too that we have.

Ms. Paul: And I know that one of the things you were happiest about accomplishing then was the chaplainry program, wasn't it?

Mr. Gibson: Well, we had that in mind early on when we did chaplainry as a volunteer program and I made that a goal of my position as Chairman of the Board. If I didn't accomplish anything else during that term I would accomplish that, and so indeed we were able to do that. We had the proposal before the Board several times. I think this should be part of the record that I was not able to convince the Board that that was the right thing to do at that time, but it took someone like Rabbi Phil Schecter to be the convincer of the group. He allayed a lot of fears that people had that there would be a lot of proselytizing going on through the chaplain's office. Once those fears were laid aside, they called a chaplain and that was Lisa Lancaster. She was the first and is the current chaplain at the hospital, so we were pleased with that, and it continues to be a very vital program.

Ms. Paul: Another area of social ministry that you got involved in from the beginning was Open Door, was that right?

Mr. Gibson: Yes, and Open Door came about as a result of all of the churches being bombarded with requests for funding, for food, for shelter, and paying of gas and electric bills, and for all kinds of social needs. We were solicited as individual congregations, and so we started to think that maybe it would be good if we could put something together so that we could say to the people, "These are the resources that we have, this is the place that you can go, and we will be collectively supportive of that place." And so Open Door was what we called it. I think the finalization of that came about as the result of a meeting that was held at the cemetery of Old Tennent Presbyterian Church. On a very, very sunny, hot Saturday morning, we met there and put the final touches on it, and we were able to get a facility through Saint Peter's Episcopal Church -- they owned the building on Throckmorton Street and we were able to utilize that building as the site for Open Door. So then it was a matter of keeping open the door which we said we would do, manning it with volunteers who would distribute food, clothing, and early on, helped with other bills that people had.

Ms. Paul: Eventually it expanded to a tutoring program?

Mr. Gibson: It expanded into a tutoring program. Another thing I think that grew out of it eventually was another ministry that we got involved with at Hope. There was a prison over at the camp at Marlboro which is located right behind the state hospital. Persons were incarcerated there, but they were there without any educational opportunities available to them. So through members of Hope Lutheran Church, we provided some educational opportunities for them. We did that for a couple of years, and that drew attention to what they were missing in that regard, and so the state ultimately put a trailer there so we had classroom space even before we finished with the project, and then they took over the program and they provided the people.

Ms. Paul: Was that the late 1960s, early 1970s?

Mr. Gibson: It was the late 1960s, early 1970s, yes. And we even had opportunity at that point to utilize some talent within the prison camp in the form of some of the fellows who got together and did some singing and called themselves The Convictions. They were paroled for a night into my custody, and they came to Hope and sang for a wine and cheese tasting party that we had.

Ms. Paul: Didn't you have a special relationship with one of the prisoners there?

Mr. Gibson: Well, I think all of us had a special relationship with those we encountered, with those that we were teaching or counseling with, and my role was in the role of counseling. I did some group counseling while we were there. I was not an educator per se. We had other folks who were educators who taught

specific areas such as English, mathematics, and language and worked with the prisoners in that regard. But we all had our favorites, and some of them kept in touch after they were paroled as well. So we thought that was a good ministry. And the best part of the ministry was the fact that the state recognized their responsibility and took it over and spent the money that had been duly allotted for that program, so we were catalysts for something taking place.

Ms. Paul: How long were you the Pastor of Hope Lutheran Church?

Mr. Gibson: How long was I Pastor? Forever. Forever, it seems, because I was the first and only pastor up until November 2 of 1997, so I was Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church for thirty-one years.

Ms. Paul: And at that point you retired.

Mr. Gibson: At that point I retired and with many good thoughts, many good memories, and many good feelings--but also with the need to move out of this community into a new community for us so that we could start out afresh so that I would not be tapped, verbally, or in any other way, to render an opinion or offer a suggestion.

Ms. Paul: Or stay involved.

Mr. Gibson: Or stay involved in things which were history and which needed to move on, and which new people needed to be involved in.



Lois Gibson, Al's wife

Ms. Paul: Your wife, Lois, had been a kindergarten teacher in the Freehold Township schools for how long?

Mr. Gibson: Lois was a kindergarten teacher in the Township for twenty eight years. That came about as a result of our registering our kids for school. Midge Erickson took the registration of the kids and found out that Lois had been a schoolteacher previously and said, "We need school teachers very badly, and can I put you on the substitute list?" And the substitute list became a permanent list. It was after our youngest, Stephen, was in kindergarten, that Lois was able to teach full time.

Ms. Paul: So where are you living now?

Mr. Gibson: We're living in Fayetteville, Pennsylvania. It is not Fayetteville, North Carolina although people keep asking us if we live in North Carolina when we say Fayetteville. It is Fayetteville, Pennsylvania, and it is a relatively new community. It is a golf community, Penn National, where there are two golf

courses, two very fine four-star golf courses that I am still trying to conquer -- not with a great deal of success.

Ms. Paul: And where President Clinton comes to play.

Mr. Gibson: In the three years we've been there at Thanksgiving, President William Clinton has been at our golf courses playing. I followed him around the first year; the second year we were able to get his autograph. This year I'm going to write to him and tell him that it is his final year to play as President, and I would deem it a great honor if I could play with him. So whether that happens or not I don't know -- I know all of my Republican friends in Freehold Township will love to know that I may be playing golf with Bill Clinton.

Ms. Paul: And you're still preaching part time?

Mr. Gibson: I am still preaching part time, yes. If my spouse, Lois, had her way, she would have me preaching full time, but it is right now on a part time basis. She finds that even on a part time basis it tends to get in the way of other things that we would like to do. But I have limited the doing of that for the most part to the congregation in which we are members. In Pennsylvania there are hundreds of Lutheran churches; most of them in the area where we are living are very, very small. I preached in one just before Thanksgiving. Its date of birth was 1715. It is still operating as a small congregation -- the building does not date back to 1715, but the congregation does. The building dates back to 1863, and they are still worshipping in that building. It was fun to be there with them and share in a little bit of that history.

Ms. Paul: Well, I was part of your retirement celebration when three hundred people gathered as witness to the impact that you made in your ministry here both in the church and in the community. I wanted to get on the record some of the impact that you've had here and express the joy that I've had in knowing you and being associated with you all these years.

Mr. Gibson: Thank you. We enjoyed Freehold Township and we enjoyed the people, the people in the church, the people in the community. It was fun for me to be a part of it, to be a part of its history, particularly to participate in the big three-hundredth anniversary of Freehold Township and to parade in the rain portraying myself as Martin Luther in very wet garb. It's been a fun experience, and we relish the relationships that we have both in the congregation and in the community, and we will not forget them.

Ms. Paul: Thank you very much.