Heath Wooten: My name is Heath Wooten, and today is September 25, 2018. We are currently in Lamar Hall on the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford, MS, conducting an interview to learn more about the Underground Church, so let’s get started. Would you state your name for the record?

Tony Caldwell: Tony Caldwell.

H: And when were you born?

T: February 19, 1974.

H: And how long have you been living in Oxford?

T: Three and a half years.

H: And where did you grow up?

T: In the Tupelo area. Tupelo, Mississippi.

H: And so what is your religious background?  
T: So, growing up, most of my exposure to religion was through my grandmother who’s Pentecostal… like old school Pentecostal. And so that was always… very animated. And then, but my parents, they weren’t really religious. So, so that was most of my exposure growing up to religion. As a young adult, I moved into the Methodist world. I’ve sorta been the for the past, I guess 20 years or so, but slowly getting okay with evolving out of that in some ways, or just… ahead of where they are as far as their evolution… some particular issues… I can’t wait, so… yeah, so. Getting okay with that. That’s tricky when you have a small child, you know, it messes with your sense of community and belong and a lot of things, you know, so, it’s… kind of a process, and it’s not an easy one.

H: I can imagine. So what is your educational background.

T: Education background. Got, obtained a bachelor’s in social work here, and then got my master’s in social work from the University of Tennessee, and currently in school at Vanderbilt working on my Master of Divinity degree.

H: So… are you formally trained as a pastor, is that Vanderbilt degree the pathway to that?

T: That’s what I’m currently doing… yeah. I’ve been taking classes. There’s a partnership between Vanderbilt and Suwanee, so I’m taking classes at both, both those places. Theological classes, and I have about a year and a half left to complete that.

H: Okay, so you kind of talked about the Methodist church before… before moving away from that, but directly before the Underground Church, where did you, where did you go to church?

T: Oxford University United Methodist.

H: Okay. And what made you decide to establish the Underground Church more specifically.

T: So I felt this, what people call a call—this need, this desire, this draw to do this for a long time, but I’ve, I’ve tried in Tupelo and here to make it fit into the context I was in, and it’s just really been incompatible with… not to say that one’s right or wrong or one’s good or bad, but there’s just been a level of incompatibility where I either have to sorta… deny parts of who I am in order to fit, or get okay with the fact that being natural in the ways that I feel led to be requires leaving, so yeah.

H: Yeah, excuse me, what was the process like establishing the Underground Church? How long did that take, maybe?

T: It’s been very grassrootsy… it’s literally inviting people and making an event page on Facebook and just gathering people of like mind, inviting people, and literally not knowing if ten people would show up, and being grateful that roughly 60 did the past… you know we’ve met twice, so it was right around 60 people each time.

H: Right on. So what is the mission of the Underground Church?

T: Yeah, so there’s no formal, someone… we’re setting up… this, everything doesn’t have to go on the website right?

Simone Delerme: No, no.

T: Okay, okay, cause some of this is kinda irrelevant or weird, but so I was talking to someone today. We’re setting up a tax structure just for anytime we have money coming in that doesn’t go directly to a cause. We have to… be legit, you know. So they were asking about the mission, all that, just what I was explaining is that I’m really uncomfortable with that because I think that that’s, that’s why there’s so many people. That’s why margins exist or why so many people are on them because there’s this, it’s said, this is what you have to be or at least pretend to be to belong, and I don’t want to… perpetuate that, so that lends this loose undefined feeling in a way, but I think sitting with the tension of everyone being just where they are is, can be holy as well. And I also as a… I think that honors people under the divine more than prescriptive ways of doing things sometimes, so. So short answer, no we don’t have a written mission. Yeah. Informally I think it’s to be a safe space for people who don’t fit in traditional spaces, and to be a place of authenticity and a place of healing for a lot of people and to sorta radiate that out into the community. I think it’s… yeah, I feel the social work… push, you know, pretty much whether I’m teaching or doing this church, or just councelling or whatever, there’s this thing I think of… wanting to be a part of liberation for self and other and the collective, so that’s at the heart of… if we had a written mission that would be part of it.

H: Right on. So you’ve touched on this a little bit, but can I ask you to define how the Underground Church is different from other churches?

T: Yeah, so we’re… I talked about this at the first meeting, I think of what it had to do was deconstruction of what we’re not, because that can hurt people too-showing up with expectations that are not met and that sort of thing, but something I wanted to be out there from the beginning is that I want to transcend… there’s a lot of language we have to use to just because it’s where we are, like…affirming or inclusive or…just words that usually mean this is somewhat of a safe space for LGBTQ people, and I wanna be a place that transcends that, and that’s part of starting anew, is that there’s no baggage of, this is issue and we [indistinct] or we’ve resolved it this way or we’ve worried through it in this way. It’s more of, this is not an issue from the get-go—that we’re not resolved or intention or whatever… we’re starting from a new place of this is not an issue at all, so that’s one way that we’re different. I think another way we’re different is that we explicitly talk about what’s going on in the world, and that’s sorta a no-no from most pulpits, unless it’s very conservative on the right. Sometimes aloud or kind of…part of how some pastors or congregations operate, but for the most part, I think especially in the worlds that I come from it’s sorta a middle-of-the-road, mushy, just don’t talk about it kind of a feel, and so I think it’s important to, to just name things and talk about them and, also think it’s unfortunate that for a lot of people who would be considered—for lack of a better word—liberal, there’s a sense that there’s the religious and then there’s the liberal, and for some people there’s a lot of overlap that’s not honored or even acknowledged, so I think being, being a church for people who feel that they’re kind of both is part of what we do as well.

H: Okay, would you consider the Underground Church Evangelical?

T: Such a tricky word… short answer’s no. So I feel like I’m a little culturally Evangelical because it’s part of how I grew up, and I think it, you know, Evangel, sorta the root, good news, and I think there’s, I believe in good news. As far as being Evangelistic as far as sorta pushing people towards this sort of preset…what’s the word I’m looking for…preset conversion experience. There’s already a precedent for what that looks like and feels like and should be in order to fit in this group, you know. No, no evangelical. No way. And then also I think evangelical there’s days culturally means very right wing, very conservative, and most of… there’s a lot of black evangelicals, and evangelicals of all colors and nationalities and everything, but in the, is… how we usually talk about it these days in the political culture we’re in is…conservative, far-right, straight, white males that are trying to keep the world in their grip, in their grasp, you know, and so definitely not evangelical in that way.

H: That’s understandable.

T: Yeah, yeah.

H: So can you tell us a little bit about Red Letter Christians?  
T: So Red Letter Christians is an organization based in Philadelphia. It was started by Shane Claibourne and Tony Campollo. Tony is in his 80s. He’s an old school evangelical leader, and Shane’s pretty evangelical in way, too, but he practices what he calls new manastacism, so he makes his own clothes, his mother makes them. He lives in the inner-city. They bought a lot of houses, and they do shared housing, shared meals, and really they’re…they’re just really living hardcore…out in the streets, feeding people, you know. He does a lot of speaking engagements, and so as a partnership between them and they brought along a lot of other writers and activists and different people. You go to their website, you can see there’s a [indistinct] roster. Probably one of the more prominent people on the roster right now is Reverend William Barber. Poor People’s Campaign and yeah, Pairs of the Breach, so he’s one of the most active members, yeah, so it’s weird because these guys are my heroes and now when you go on their site, like there’s, because the names are in alphabetical order. There’s Tony Campollo, me, and then William Barber, I’m like, I don’t belong between these people, but hey, I’ll take take it, you know, but…but it’s an organization of people. They invite you in if they feel like you’re doing the red letters, or the words of Jesus, and are doing that in sorta a new or unique way in the context you’re in, and so Shane came here…I think February…somewhere in, it was close to a year ago, I can’t remember when, but anyway. When he travels he stays with people cause he doesn’t spend money on hotels and all that, so he stayed with my family and I…we got to know him and, and said hey I write, you wanna look at this or whatever, and so…he was just very gracious and connected me to the editor and say run it through them, see what they think, and so they invited me to write, and after a few articles, they invited me to be in their roster of writers and speakers, so…yeah, so they…there’s not really so much…there’s retreats and things where people gather, but it’s mostly just a gathering place for people who are trying to follow Jesus in ways that are just sorta, somewhat counter-cultural, and maybe not because we’re just wild or anything, but just because…you know, the world’s…the world’s the world, you know, and so…I hope that answers the question. I’m sorta rambling on.

H: Yeah, yeah you totally answered the question. Do you wanna…

Harrison Williams: Yeah, cool, so how would you describe the population?

T: Population…so we’ve only met twice. The…my first impression was there were, I was surprised, there were a good many older people who…I had not expected to be there because they come from sorta…excuse me…sort of a Universalist Unitarian background, and think part of what I was getting from them, or some feedback, was that there’s this sense of study in their context that feels good and, and their religious world feels very harsh and a lot of times very mean toward people who are necessarily fundamentalist or…or at least somewhere in the mushy area, and, but, there’s sorta a sense of…spirit community missing in their lives, and being a part of something that’s kind of energized and not sorta becoming a group of older people that just kinda hang out and, like a book club in a way, and so that was surprising demographic. I think there’s been a little bit of everybody. Artists, musicians, sculptors, just a lot of creative types. I think the professors…it’s been diverse racially, sexually. You know, I think, I think probably in a small 60 person group, I think it sorta reflected the make-up of the community a little bit, you know racially and sexually, and age wise, but I think there’s a definite leaning towards those of us who were a little left of center politically, and a little weird or strange or, you know, not…I don’t think we’ll attract a lot of Hotty Toddy culture there. You know what I mean? So, yeah. It feels good. I guess I could call it weirdo church, you know.

HA: Yeah, absolutely.

T: Because I’m weird, and other people are there, and they must be weird if they’re there. So, yeah.

HA: So, how…so you basically said your current [indistinct] is about 60 people?

T: So far, yeah.

HA: How do you plan on expanding that?

T: I think…Think just, just being there, hopefully the word will spread, and hopefully people will feel comfortable, and invested enough and find community enough to want to return and maybe ask other people to come, so hopefully in a grassroots way we’ll be out in the community some doing various things so I think that’ll raise at least a little awareness. You know what, at this point I don’t know how much is just curiosity and how much…how many people will stick around. I think time will tell.

HA: Yup, sounds like a plan. So, how does your service usually go? Could you like…how do you like describe it to people?

T: Like the structure of it?

HA: Yeah.

T: So it’s pretty typical. We start with a song, and then we, the first…service my wife read a poem by Rupi Kaur, and, so sometimes we’ll have things like that. Like a poetry reading or something. Always the scripture reading for the scripture to base the sermon around. I always get my son to pray cause I love to hear him pray. He’s 11. And…so it’s usually song, some sort of intro or poem or something—another song, scripture reading, prayer, sermon, song, and then some sort of Benediction or dismissal, so it’s pretty standard.

HA: How’s the music? Is it like more upbeat or is it more…

T: Yeah, it’ll be different every time. The first time we had Stevie and Andrea from Southern Star Yoga, and they’re friends that…so they came over and they played the harmonium and just…I play with them sometimes when they play Kurtan which is sorta like Hindu devotional music, so they did the same type of music, the same instruments and everything but played songs that fit the context, and last…last month it was my friend Laura Gillam. She’s the associate pastor at First Methodist here. African American congregation, and then my friend Effie Burt sang, and so they did old hymns. This coming month it’ll be Andrew Bryant doing his spin on old hymns, yeah so. Yeah, I mean there’s a lot of different people. Mostly I think the theme, to fully answer that, is…I want it to be people from the community who are artists or musicians or whatever that do what they feel like they want to do, and the way they do it, and it not be this traditional worship leader situation, you know, where it’s the standard worship music and the standard style or the standard look and the whole thing. I want to not do that.

HA: Right.

T: And just… Yeah, but this whole thing for me is just about creativity really at the end of the day. It’s like, participational creation. So if you’re creative then you’re participating in creation. You’re a part of what’s going on in the world. So I think when people offer their talents and their music and…in a way that’s authentic to them, and fits the theme in some way…I think that’s just so much better than, than you know, trying to squeeze somebody into a mold that doesn’t fit, and then the traditional way of doing music just wouldn’t fit kind of who we and how we do things either so.

HA: Yeah, doesn’t really fit the whole idea. So, how do you plan on, like…do you want to forge like, links I guess with other churches in the area, like form connections [indistinct]?

T: I do…I…You know, see what that looks like, because sometimes that is…those kinds of alliances are based on sameness, and sometimes when you, I’ve found out the hard way many times, if you mistake similarity with sameness there’s always a bad break-up at some point, and so I wanna be aware of that on the front end, but I think…I would love to have partnerships and positive connections to other congregations. We’ll see how their congregations feel about that when that know that we’re…affirming and inclusive and all that. That may be a game changer for them, but if not, I totally welcome that. I’m particularly interested in…connection with other congregations that are, sorta not mainstream, and the congregations of people that are on the margins for whatever reason, you know, socioeconomically, or racially, or any other way, you know. That’s really important to me, so. I think a lot of the things we’re going to be doing in the community sorta move in that direction, so I think that’ll happen naturally without sorta formal and trying to do that. That’s my hope anyway.

HA: Yeah. So…what like, what has been the responses from other churches in the Oxford, like towards your idea.

T: I haven’t really had any yet. There’s…there’s an awkward silence sometimes when I’m around other leaders, and I have to wonder what the thought or the feeling or the gossip or whatever may be, but I have no idea. So, and I’m okay with not having any idea because it affects me when I know negative things, you know, so. I mean I can work through that, you know, but being aware of it is sorta aware of it, when you’re trying to be in a flow of creativity and joy, it’s a buzzkill, so I’d rather not. So hopefully, hopefully it’ll stay that way, so yeah.

HA: Okay, so…how do you plan on reconciling race relations, LGBTQ relations, like…ethnic relations?

T: So that’s…that’s something I’ve been doing personally for a long time. You know, and there’s some way that all this kinda comes together, but I’ll ramble for a second, so, you know, I had a colleage. She moved last, last semester. Was her last semester here, but we were doing—she’s an African American female—we were doing racial healing groups together and community events in Tupelo and here. You may have heard of…we had one called Together Oxford. It was at Paris Yates Chapel, but each time there’s a theme of reconciliation and…and it’s sorta I think, getting okay with the fact that it’s conciliation not reconciliation because things were never good in the first place, and…and she really did work around privilege, and she did one of the TEDx talks here whenever that was a few months ago right before she left—about the work that we were doing together, so been doing that work. I’ve done a lot of LGBTQ advocacy work. I supposed to have been on a panel yesterday at the law school, but I had a, a sick child, but coming up we’re hosting an interface symposium at the church for the Human Rights Campaign, so in the past…and we’ll have Rob Hill. He’s the leader of the Human Rights Campaign for Mississippi. He was a Methodist pastor who was [indistinct] when he came out, and so he’ll come preach at our church. But he…he invited me a while back to a, to moderate a town hall in Tupelo where it was get to know your neighbor, so people in the, in rural Mississippi that are transgender and you know, there’s just couples who think…they tried to cover each demographic they could, so he was like, meet the neighbor, invite your community, so I moderated the conversation you know, and so…Toyota and Levi’s sponsored it and they put more funding into it, so we had another town hall panel discussion there, and I participated in their video series, Love Your Neighbor Campaign, talking about what I’ve seen from a mental health perspective. Anyway, a lot of the things connected about a year that…Southern Poverty Law Center asked me to contribute to their amicus brief they did to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals regard House Bill 15-23. So I was, I came from the mental health perspective of, look I can literally turn somebody away because of their sexual orientation, or for couple’s counselling because of the composition of their union or whatever, and I have students tell us, basically saying out loud, oh yeah I’ll exercise this right if you give it to me, and just how damaging that is. And…and so of course we sent that, and it was shot down, here—and it’s the law of the land now, so, but…but yeah, so I’ve been doing that kind of work it in different…just worked with the Kellogg Foundation doing racial healing groups, and we…part of that we…was we tape conversations between—we had 18 white people, 18 black people anywhere from 16 to like 84 and we did paired interviews and group interviews and group discussions all this, and it’s, it’s gonna be archived at the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson. They’re kinda working on the recordings [indistinct] so you can listen to them while you’re there, so the conversations—cause they were intense and beautiful and ugly and tragic—

HA: [indistinct] like, three years ago?

T: I’m not sure how long ago that’s been. We just did this project last year, so right now they’re working on the recordings to get them installed there. They had did get the waivers and everything signed like a month or two ago, but…so that, and then just certain other projects, but anyway all that to say, been doing a lot of racial work and writing around that and also around LGBTQ equality, so that’s…now it’s the tricky business of merging that with religion in a way because that’s a game changer for a lot of people on everything side of every issue, because you have religious people that are like don’t bring that in my world, but then you also have people that have been hurt by religion and rejected by religion saying don’t bring religion into my world, you know, and so there’s…it’s a tricky thing in a way. I guess if I though about it it’d make me anxious or something, but…I…I think to get back to your original question though, it’s my intent to bring all that, to reconcile it all to the…as best as is possible, you know, and to, to let it be weird and awkward and uncomfortable—whatever it needs to be, and just be there, you know.

HA: Yup, cool. So the Underground Church website lists incarceration, predatory lending, community building, literacy, circles of concern, school lunch department…can you tell us more about like these…issues and topics that…yall look at?  
T: Yeah, so…with, with school lunch room debt, that was the first one that, that there at our first meeting we didn’t take any kind of offering. The second one, excuse me, we did, and…and it went to the school system, so it was a total of $345 collected that night, and then someone else that hasn’t even attended the church yet…it’s, this is a great story, so this is someone who is in a same sex partnership that works at a church, but is kinda in the closet or hidden or just not talked about it or something, that decided to, that said I really want to come visit the church. I just haven’t yet, but I want to send a donation to…I saw what you guys are doing or whatever, and sent $200 dollars, and so it made the total 545, and there’s been a lot of little things like that that like, no matter what happens I’m already like…you know, just very moved, you know. Just like Effie that sang the other night—she, it was her first time to step in, to be there, you know, and afterwords the money I had given her she gave back towards the fund for the kinds, and was like, you know, wrote this long letter later about how healing it was to be there and have white people in a church setting talking about, you know, race related issues and, you know, and just had some people who have been hurt by the church because their gay contact me and say wow it’s so great to see…a mom, dad, and child doing this together. That feels good to me. You know what I mean, because my wife, my child, and I, and because, you know, you kind of remind me of my family but they don’t accept me, you know what I mean? That kind of stuff, and…and the funniest feedback is—I’m glad there’s something that’s kind of progressive but is not hipster. You guys are like normal and old and whatever, you know. That’s actually a compliment in some weird way.

HA: Yall aren’t trying too hard.

T: Trying to sell anything, or yeah. Or just you know, the whole…I don’t know. The whole visual I guess, I don’t know. So anyway, I’m just rambling, getting off track. So yeah, school lunch, incarceration—that’s near and dear to me because I grew up in a neighborhood south of Tupelo called Verona and it’s…it’s just basically infested with crack and stuff and always has been, and I was, I was the white kid my age in the neighborhood. My younger sister, she has special needs, but she’s like five years younger, and there were a sibling group that were around her age that were a few doors down that were white, but I was like the only white kid in my age in the neighborhood, and, and so I think I got the education of a lifetime there because I, I’ll never know and have know idea what it’s like to be black, but I would watch living while being black playing out in front of my eyes all day every day, and I watched the merger of race and class and…gender and all these…just it was, it was like live action watching it all play out. Most everybody in the neighborhood is not thriving these days, and there’s a reason…and there’s…I know firsthand what privilege is because I happened to be the one white kind and almost the only one who sorta made it in a way, you know? And that’s not a coincidence…So incarceration is near and dear to me in that way because a lot of my friends and even, you know, other friends from neighboring neighborhoods or whatever, from school. We were all kind of where we were mostly because of economics, and there’s just a lot of similar outcomes for a lot of my best friends have been in jail or prison or whatever, you know, from childhood, and so…it’s…I know people usually by the time you get there you’ve already lost a sense of…connection to your own worth and value as a human, and that’s part of how you end up there, you know? Or had it taken or both, and so I think mostly just reflecting…dignity and worth back to a person who may have forgotten his…what makes that important to me.

HA: I grew up in like a similar…like.

T: Yeah.

HA: Neighborhood, so I know what you’re saying.

T: Yeah.

HA: So what about predatory lending?

T: Predatory lending, oh yeah, whoo. Sorry for getting all autobiographical on you. So yeah, part of crawling out of there was…was getting into that trap, yeah. And…seeing a lot of people in that trap, but yeah. I mean, so I went back to school here when I was 26. Before that I was just kind of stuck, you know. Like thank God for late blooming or I wouldn’t have bloomed at all, you know, but it’s…it’s such a trap and so it’s something I’ve been studying and writing about some, and I took Silas, my 11 year old, and we went through Batesville because I just recall seeing on the main drag, there’s just so many. I was like let’s just go count these, you know, so. After you cross the bridge to where I guess what…Cracker Barrel or whatever is, till you get to the end of that main strip, like through Batesville before you go over the bridge, where it obviously becomes more like the delta. It’s 1.3 miles and there’s 27 predatory lending establishments in that 1.3 miles.

HA: Wow.

T: 27. I took pictures of all of them. Yeah

HA: That’s insane.

T: And so, by the time we got through with that trip and then we visited my friend Laura’s church, Silas just had a complete come apart like, because at Laura’s church the…the envelope where you give the offering asked which apartment complex do you live in? You know what I mean? And we didn’t have that at our church, and after studying predatory lending and seeing that and the whole thing, he just…when we got outside, he just lost it. Like, he had white guilt all over him, you know, so I had to deshame him, you know. But just, I can’t believe what we did, and all this, but I’d also taken him to the Civil Rights Museum and all these other things, so it was all marinating in him, but to…to…it all just came together like all, all the little pieces of knowledge formed a constellation in his mind and it broke his heart in the best possible way, you know what I mean? So, that was a very…sacred moment in, and I know some parents would’ve been like what are you talking about, but it really really was, because it was I think…it was a part of seeing…you know, when you invest in your child you just have to hope for the best, you know, because there’s so many variables you can’t control, and I saw the future him that I could only hope for, you know what I mean? In that moment, so.

HA: Well this leads really well into the—how do you think religion can be used a medium to promote social justice?

T: By acknowledging that it’s a huge part of the problem, yeah. It’s—I mean, so when we did the Kellogg group, we had affinity group and I was, sorta the leader of the White group, and the main theme that came up automatically from the get go. I was totally unexpecting it because, not expecting it because most of these people were older than me, and I just assumed this was more acknowledged in my generation and future generations, but all these people in their 50s were just processing the…it looked like anger but when you got down to it, it was grief of how religion and their pastors and their parents and all the people that mentored them and shaped them either didn’t talk about what was going on or they did talk about it but it all the wrong ways or they used racial slurs or just all the ways that they felt betrayed by the people that raised them, and damages by the people that raised them and how religion had been sorta the glue because religion is the glue that holds culture a together in some ways, you know…as far as how, how people form identity and when they cluster and how and where, you know. It’s an adhesive in a way, and how looking back you know, if religion literally like, root word is ligation, like glue to bring together, hold together, it was holding together all the wrong things like white supremacy and racism and…just all the wrong things, and it wasn’t holding together. That’s what’s part of what’s unravelling in Evangelicalism now is the glue has held all the wrong things together, you know, and so anyway, they all at some point found their own language for expressing the fact that…their religion they experienced in their youth was, was separatist and…intentionally segregated and fearful and angry and hostile…and just spiritually dark, you know? There’s a lot of, best way I know how to put it is there’s a darkness that’s running through whiteness that’s projected onto dark skin, you know, but it’s to me that’s what white guilt really is. It’s not…there’s been this, this…this language around, if you’re white you feel compassion or concern or empathy or broken or whatever, that that’s guilt when really it’s like, hey that’s just trying to make what I’m feeling pathological, you know, so trying to diagnose it, like this is an illness that I got from like, you know, watching too much Anderson Cooper or something, you know what I mean?

H: Yeah.

T: That it’s this thing that happens to you, and so it’s a way to shut down all the natural emotions, and you know as a guy, we have that happen to us anyway, you know, but anyway, to me that’s not guilt, those are, those are positive human reactions to seeing suffering, and experiencing it, but I think the real guilt is, you know, how people act when their guilty. They don’t wanna talk about it or shut you down or argue or get angry or, it’s reactive and hostile and it’s a…all the defence mechanisms come up, so basically saying that religion served to strengthen that instead of humanity…the more human qualities that were shut down--

HA: Yeah, their [indistinct] became more like chains.

T: Yeah, and to…there’s something particularly sinister about doing it in the name of God and community because if you, if you vary from that any way you don’t belong anymore. Jen Hapmaker is another person that…presented at the festival. She presented that this summer, and she…that was how she named it. The price is belonging. If you come out of the closet as affirming, you don’t belong anymore. If you come out as I’m going to name whiteness and I’m gonna name white supremacy and I’m gonna name all these things and I’m not gonna shut up, you don’t belong anymore, you know, so…that, I think that was the main thing that a lot of the people in the group had expressed is that…sorta this feeling of grief, like they sold parts of themselves in order to belong, and they felt guilty about that, but that’s what traumatized children do, you know what I mean, so we had to sort through that, so what are you…what else would you’ve done. It’s a survival skill. It happens—

HA: [indistinct]

T: Sorry.

HA: It’s like, what else could you have done?

T: Right, yeah, yeah. I mean there’s, it’s just an impossible, it’s something you end up having to work through as an adult like most kind of abuse, you know, so and that’s where they were. I think a lot of them didn’t know it till they got there and everybody sorta had a similar story. It felt like a support group it a way. It was really strange that…

HA: Cathartic.

T: Yeah, but I just had no idea that thing was going to be the prominent theme that emerged. I had no idea, but it was an interesting—I mean we…the oldest lady in the black group had had seen someone lynched when she was a small child, and it lets you know how long ago that wasn’t, you know? It’s just like Mr. Higginbottom here. They’re doing a, yeah. I met him in Montgomery at the Equal Justice Initiative opening and, bless his heart, you know, he…he—can only imagine the trauma at such an early age to experience something so horrific, you know?

HA: Yeah.

T: And, uh.

HA: He’s a great guy. I’ve known him for years.

T: Have you? Yeah, he’s sweet.

HA: He’s a family friend.

T: Is he?

HA: and he is…

T: Yeah. So you’re, you’re from Memphis?

HA: Huh? No, he moved down to Wesson to start teaching at CO-1, and that’s where I met him. He was my Spanish teacher.

T: Okay.

HA: And since then he’s come to like, all of my events—graduation, everything.

T: Yeah, wow.

HA: He’s a really good guy, and what he’s gone through is a lot.

T: Yeah.

HA: So, you talked about it earlier, about how these people have this pent-up grief and anger and resentment towards the religions they were grown up with, so how would you define a toxic religion?

T: So…I think it’d be case by case people identifying what…what harmed them in a particular, you know? Like, I had a friend a while back, you know, I’ve had my church-hurt experiences, and I have a wise friend say one time, don’t be that vague. Say this person hurt me in this way, you know what I mean? So something, naming. It come down to naming the particular things that a particular person did, or a particular group even maybe. But I think it’s really important to, me just coming from a counselling background, I think it’s, it’s important to name things, you know, like…if you’re gonna wrestle with a demon, you gotta call it by name and engage it, you know what I mean? And so naming racism, naming church cover-ups, and all that kind of stuff. I mean, you just have to…it has to be named. Just like in a dictionary, you have to name it before you can work with it, so…yeah, so it’s, I think some of the most toxic things though in religion is the ways that…most of us come to a point where we have to, I think a lot of it happens when we’re teens, and you know you’re transitioning the identity from family to peers and everything, and if you don’t make all the right moves, you’re up the creek, you know what I mean? And then I think in some, some settings that…that gets really weird in religious settings where it’s run on emotion and just hormonal changes and all these things, you know, and there’s—even if it’s unspoken, this expected thing that’s supposed to happen, and for some people maybe that’s great, or. But I’ve seen a lot of people damaged by there, where you’re not supposed to sit with tension, or. You’re supposed to come to very defined answers, and there are… you already know what they are, you know, and so there’s a lot of hiding. People are coming into touch with their sexuality and are having to hide, and you just end up with divided people, or things…whole parts of who they are or how they think or how they feel are cut off, and against that’s the trauma of contorting in whatever way you have to to belong, cause that, that’s one of the primal terrors of human and probably most creatures, is you want to belong to the pack or the tribe or the, you know, the collective. It feels like safety and a lot of times that’s also familial too because if you don’t, if you make the wrong moves you don’t belong to family anymore, you know?

HA: Yeah.

T: I’ve seen a lot of that where way too much of that, where parents feel like they have to choose between their child that’s just come out and their religious convictions, and like, like it’s a football game or something, you know what I mean? There’s a winning team and a losing, and how very much divided the parent is. It’s not even just, you know it’s easy to think of the parents as sinister and their just being ridiculous or whatever, and sometimes that’s part of it, but for the most part their literally tortured, you know what I mean? And that, that’s sad, too, you know, to see that not only are they torturing their child, but it’s coming from their own torture, and when you trace it to its roots, a lot of it’s religious, you know? So that’s probably not very clear, but.

HA: That makes sense.

T: Yeah, I just think…I think there’s probably countless ways in which we are damaged by things people say and do in the name of God or the context, in a religious setting, and may not even know it at the time, but it works its way in there, festers, and shows up in some way, and then we’re trying to trace it to see, okay what’s the root of this think, you know? And a lot of it is guilt and shame and…I don’t know. Everybody in here feels that to some degree I’m sure, yeah.

HA: So, you talk about earlier how your church kinda leaned a little bit to the left. How would you describe your political affiliation?

T: I’m not affiliated. Yeah, I…with the whole of the…I mean, the whole setup I just, I can’t buy into.

HA: Yeah. I get that.

T: [indistinct] I’m just like, you can all have it all, and I just don’t want it, but also I have to be engaged and involved, you know, cause sorta how we got where we are is people [indistinct] about it, participating, but you know, I, I don’t like any labels at all. I guess, you know, if I’m totally self-disclosing I was very much a Bernie Sanders supporter.

HA: Yeah.

T: So, and…you know, I don’t know. I lost, I’ve lost as many friends for being honest about that as have about being honest about my stances on race and sexuality and stuff, it’s so funny. It’s bizarre, but you know, you think about the context of where I grew up, you know. It’s like 45 miles and 45 years down the road from here, cause it’s a homogenous community in a lot of ways. There’s not the…Toyota’s there now, but there’s not…The university brings a life here that’s not available in small rural Mississippi towns that aren’t… don’t have a university, so--

HA: Yeah, absolutely understand that.

T: Yeah.

HA: Yeah, you, we’re in 2018 here, but go to small town Mississippi, and they’re still in like, 1940s.

T: Yeah, yeah.

HA: So, are there any particular charities that yall support?

T: So we partnered with the schools, we’ll partner with families first. Laura that was playing piano, she works there, and then also my mom works there. She was sitting in the back. Dr. Debra Moore—she taught social work here. She just retired last year. She and her husband were sitting in the back, and…anyway she…she works there and so we’ll help support them, but most of that’s gonna be through volunteer work. They do literacy and help people with preparing for GEDs and things like that, so we’ll do some of that. You know, the main thing I want to do outside of the school lunchroom debt, I like the theme of cancelling debt, you know, and I think that’s a very…appropriate Christian theme, if you will, and so I, the thing that energizes me the most is thinking about taking funds and buying people’s loans from predatory lenders like here, you know, in Oxford and in Batesville, or whatever, you know, so that when they are stressed about their payment, they go to make it. Somebody says, somebody paid off your account, you Know? And then that’s just great.

HA: Seriously.

T: I mean, you know, just I want to do ridiculous stuff like, you know…I don’t know…flash mobs of fire department or something, you know what I mean? Just, just do like fun stuff that brings, makes people smile, you know?

HA: Yeah.

T: And…so yeah, some people call that being like a merry prankster, you know, so yeah.

HA: So, do you, like what’s your favorite bible verse?

T: Probably Philippians 1:6, says that, you know, a good thing that’s been started in you will come to completion, and so that, that’s always been, that’s always been meaningful to mean cause it’s like, you know, that this impulse or thing growing in you will come to completion in Christ, and that’s, that’s been a great source of hope for me, you know, that…and I think…I think I’ve already experienced that to enough of a degree that, you know, I’m not expecting that to look a certain way, or to dream up what that might be in, anything short of that, then, oh gosh I should lose my faith or something, you know. But I’ve already experienced that enough to a degree that it’s already happened in a way, but I know I’m not full, fully bloomed or done living or not dead yet or however you want to say it, but…there’s still work to be done, blooming to be done, and joy to be experienced, and you know, so I take a lot of comfort in that.

HA: How would you say that like supports…or how would you say like that supports the mission or like your idea of what you want the Underground Church to be?

T: Yeah, I think, you know there’s a lot of glory in seeing human beings thriving or you know, I think that the quote uses, the is the glory of human that’s fully alive, you know. I think that’s, I think that’s…oh gosh, what am I thinking of…I can’t remember, but…that’s, that’s part of what I hope to see is that…so, in my belief system there…we’re all already children of God, and we, conversion if you will, is awareness of that, and baptism is acknowledgment of that, and but we don’t get changed from not a child of God into a child of God when we get our thoughts all straightened out, you know what I mean? And so to see people, I think it’s our job to activate people than to convince, convert people, and so active, activating people which is really just telling them you’re already there in some sense, is important to me…and that that’s not gonna happen once you decide you figured out how to not be gay or how you figured out how to…believe in a talking snake if you don’t really, you know what I mean? Because you just get into that lack of authenticity and the shut. We just develop such incredibly huge shadows like that, and so I consider this shadow work in a way, you know? Like we’re dealing with our shadow, our personal ones and the collective ones and the ones in the culture and the ones that are there cause of religion, and religious people and pastors are some of the most screwed up people I know from being a counsellor. Like very tortured sexually, more than the average person, you know what I mean? And a lot of, a lot of, there’s a lot of church coverups and stuff, right here, you know. I see em come through my office, and there’s just a lot of shadow work, you know. The very moralistic about homosexuality or whatever and not paying attention to the fact that one of three girls are molested, and their perpetrators are mostly sitting next to them at church. You know what I mean? Right, let’s talk about that. So that’s a huge shadow, just like the church, these scandals in the Catholic Church. That’s shadow work, that is, we’ve been so busy projecting our shadows onto those people, whoever those people are, but it’s our stuff, you know what I mean?

HA: It’s our problems that are influencing….

T: Yeah.

HA: A lot of the shadows.

T: Yeah, yeah. I could go on forever about that one.

HA: So, how does your religion affect your daily life?

T: I try to be as nonreligious as I can.

HA: I understand that.

T: I don’t mean irreligious necessarily, I don’t, I say a lot of that in jest, but it is, there’s also a little, as you can tell, a little bit of…there’s a, there’s a little bit of what I think is a justified anger. I don’t want to be abusive with it, but—

HA: I understand.

T: It’s kinda the anger of the comedian in a way, where you’re naming a thing that hurts and talking about it and laughing about it sorta all at the same time, you know what I mean?

HA: Yeah, I understand.

T: But…so yeah, I don’t want to be religious. Jesus was harder on religious people than anybody, you know? Like…literally the, I mean that’s who he was crawling when he crawled people like, you know? They were like…this talk of sinners and these people and those people, whatever, you know? But when he really sorta dug into somebody, I mean, look at who they were, you know? Pretty much every time.

HA: Yeah.

T: You know, even when he said go and sin no more, or whatever, he wasn’t saying you brood of vipers to her, you know what I mean? I…very much think he was, I can’t speak for him of course, but very irritated and agitated about things that are done in the name of God, and saying…by the way this is what Orthodoxy is, and this is who God is, and anything besides that is wrong, you know what I mean? And in some ways, I think he…he reflected a healthier version. Who he was, was a healthier and better reflection of God than the religious teachings in the culture he came into, you know what I mean? He was an updated restorative reparative…gosh, corrective experience for religious people as much as for sinners, whoever that is, because that’s everybody, you know, but yeah so I, I don’t wanna be religious. I wanna respect the culture I live in, but also you know I want—some people say why do you stay on this Jesus path, you know what I mean like, this Jesus tradition, and I…I don’t wanna be anywhere else, but I do, I will probably always call myself a Christian because I don’t wanna be at the on the outside throwing rocks, you know what I mean? I wanna be on the inside when I say something that hits somebody in their…in a way that they don’t like, I can also say I’m critiquing from the inside, not criticizing from the outside, you know, and because I care enough and it’s taken a hell of a long time, and a whole lot of heartache to get to a place where I can and do, you know, and don’t just stuff it or hide or leave or some lesser thing, you know, and I think that’s part of my role as well as that…it’s permission granting in a way when you fully show up, other people feel that and want to do it, too, you know, so people that’ve inspired me have inspired me in that way, and I hope to have that effect on people in addition to irritating some people, you know?

HA: Yeah.

T: So,

HA: Is there anything else you wanna say?  
T: No, I mean I’m, I think it’s great that you guys are curious about this, you know? And, you know, I guess that’s it. Thanks for having me, and—

HA: Are there…are there anyone you, else you recommend we talk to? Any directions you wanna point us in?

T: So what are you looking for?

SD: Trying to understand the Underground Church and also perhaps comparatively other churches.

T: Okay.

SD: But certainly the community you’re forming is the community we’re interested in.

T: Okay, so people affiliated with the church maybe?  
SD: Absolutely.

T: Man, let’s see…I think…gosh, I find everybody there fascinating so far. I would say maybe…I would say Debra Moore. So she was my teacher here, and now I just O’Ma, she’s my mom now, but she, she’s fascinating. She…she has a lot to say, so yeah. I would talk to her for sure, and…I think…the most unheard, unrecognized, shut down, dishonored voice in America is that of, of the black female, and so, that’s we need to be listening to, and talking to, you know?

HA: Yeah.

T: For everybody’s health, including our own. Like if we’re not…female or black or whatever…as a part of the collective, I mean [indistinct]…I think Dr. King was right when he said that we’re bound up in this web of mutuality, you know, in our healing is, we’re bound together, and…and there’s so much, and that’s part of the shadow work. There’s so much that’s been repressed that’s so amazingly beautiful in the voices of the black feminine that white men need to reclaim, you know what I mean? And there’s so much darkness projected there that white men need to reclaim and take ownership of and deal with their stuff, you know? And that’s projected on black men probably than black women, but…but yeah, I think I would definitely talk to her. She has a lot to say.

SD: Thank you so much for your time.

T: Thank you.

SD: Are there any follow-up questions? Okay, it’s good. I’m gonna stop the recording.