



Justin Rose
St. George Melkite Catholic Church
Birmingham, Alabama

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[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:03.25]

Michelle L.: All right. Today is November 21, 2019, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Father Justin. We are at St. George Melkite Church in Birmingham, Alabama. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project. Father Justin, to get started, if you'll just tell us your full name and date of birth, for the record?

[00:00:27.27]

Justin R.: Okay. So, Father Justin Richard Rose. My birthday was April 14, 1967.

[00:00:36.11]

Michelle L.: Okay. And where were you born and where did you grow up?

[00:00:42.08]

Justin R.: So, I was born in Manchester, New Hampshire, and I grew up in Maine—Bangor, Maine, and then Portland, Maine, and then ended up going to back to college in Manchester, New Hampshire. So, pretty much a Yankee boy here in the South.

[00:00:58.09]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Yes, you are. You are. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Did you have any siblings?

[00:01:04.28]

Justin R.: Yes. So, my mom currently lives in my house in California. I was in California before I came here. I was assigned there. But my parents are divorced. My dad passed last year. And my sister is married and living in Maine, still, but she's estranged from the family, so I don't know anything about her.

[00:01:31.05]

Michelle L.: Okay. When you were growing up, did your family attend church? What was—?

[00:01:36.24]

Justin R.: Yeah. We were Roman Catholic, we weren't Greek Catholic. We did, for a while—so, the upheaval in the Roman Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council, everything changed overnight and it threw my mom kind of for a loop for a while. So, we didn't go to church for a period of time, 'cause she was used to the old Latin mass and all of those sort of things, and all of that changed overnight in the early [19]70s. So, it just kinda threw her. But, for the most part, we were church-going, um-hm.

[00:02:07.08]

Michelle L.: And for people—I know it might be hard to condense this down—

[00:02:10.04]

Justin R.: Sure.

[00:02:10.04]

Michelle L.: But for people that are not familiar with that change in the Second Vatican Council, could you kind of give the highlights of what that meant?

[00:02:16.19]

Justin R.: Yeah. Let me do a couple of things, actually. So, first of all, the term Melkite defines the particular church that we belong to. So, I'm a priest of the Church of Antioch, which is today in Turkey. It's kind of a nowhere village in Turkey now, but it was a great city in the ancient Roman empire. So, I'm not a priest of the Church of Rome, right? So, Roman Catholic priests, that would be their head. My particular Church of Antioch went into communion with Rome in 1724, okay? So, we follow the same traditions that the Greek Orthodox or Russian Orthodox or any of those churches that people might have a reference to. If they walked into our church and attended our services, it would be exactly the same as what they see in those other churches. But we're Catholic, okay? So, the Roman Catholic Church, in the mid-[19]60s, had a big council. In general, the council was just trying to update the church so it was more approachable for people, and the policies that had gotten kind of old could be renovated and so forth. But it was received in the United States—you know, the [19]70s were kind of a wild time, and it was received like everything was different now. So, a lot of people who were more conservative fell away from the Church, because they went from Latin hymns to "Leaving on a Jet Plane" with Peter, Paul, and Mary. [Laughter] Stuff like that, you know, clown masses and—just wild stuff. So, it was this huge upheaval for some folks.

That's what I'm talking about. For my church, it was not an upheaval at all. It actually helped us to go back to our roots and go back to our tradition. You know? So . . .

[00:04:09.13]

Michelle L.: I mean, is the Peter, Paul, and Mary an extreme made-up example, or is that something you actually heard of a church doing?

[00:04:16.06]

Justin R.: They did not have music, so they created this new mass, right? The current Roman Catholic mass that's celebrated was a big, big change from what they were doing, and they had all the hymns they needed, everything for the old mass that they were doing. But the new one, they hadn't written any music for, so they ended up looking to where the Protestant churches that have hymns or ending up—'cause that was the period of folk music, right? So, for the Feast of the Ascension with Jesus goes up into heaven, I know of churches that used "I'm Leavin' on a Jet Plane." [Laughter] I'm serious. It's not hard to see why folks had a hard time with that, you know.

[00:05:00.09]

Michelle L.: So, what led to you wanting to go into the ministry and to study? Did you know that in, say, high school? Or was this something in college?

[00:05:15.19]

Justin R.: I had a really rough eighth grade year. I was the nerd that everybody picked on, right?

And I did most of it to myself, frankly, but when you're a kid, you don't realize that. I think, for me, the solution at that time was, "Well, I'll be a priest, then, and I'll be better than everybody else." Eighth-grade thinking. I had a better time in high school and an awesome time in college; I mean, college was really where I fit, that level of study and that interaction with people. But the desire to be a priest still stayed there. It still remained. In the process in college, I was Roman Catholic growing up, and I discovered the Melkite Church. There's a small parish in Manchester, New Hampshire, that's still there. I had never really—I didn't know anything about the Eastern churches at all. So, when I encountered it, it was like everything that I had always felt but didn't have the words for. I didn't realize why I didn't feel quite right in the Roman Catholic Church. I was happy with it; I didn't leave because I was angry or anything like that. So, I entered the seminary. After college, I went home and waited tables for a year, just to kind of let it all settle. That next year, I entered the seminary, and I've been a priest for twenty-four years now, twenty-four and a half years.

[00:06:35.09]

Michelle L.: So, where did you attend college?

[00:06:39.02]

Justin R.: I went to a college called St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, run by the Benedictines. The seminary was in Boston, so I attended the Greek Orthodox Seminary, actually, in Boston.

[00:06:55.05]

Michelle L.: So, tell me about the year waiting tables. How did you decide on that for your gap year, sort of?

[00:07:03.17]

Justin R.: My junior year in college, I ended up as a mason tender, right? The guy who mixes mason for the mortars. It was absolute hell on earth. It was the worst summer of my life, 'cause I hated it. I just hated that work. So, the next summer, basically, my sister was working at this restaurant. I was like, "Let me go try it." I had never waited tables before. So, my senior year, basically anytime I was home for vacation or whatever, I'd do some shifts. Then, when I graduated, I basically fell right into it for the year, and I was hosting and waiting tables. I started a graduate program halfway through the year that I was just going down to Boston for a couple days and working on. It was probably one of the most formative experiences of my life. I don't know if you've ever waited tables.

[00:07:57.09]

Michelle L.: A little bit.

[00:07:59.14]

Justin R.: Yeah. When you've done that kind of work, the world divides into two groups, right? You've got the people who tip and the people who don't, right? But it also taught me how to be organized and how to prioritize things under pressure, and how to listen to stupid

people being mean to you and just kind of smile and nod. It was all those kind of life skills all in one. I was saying to someone the other day, I noticed I went through the living room upstairs and I had left a glass from the night before, and pre-bussed it, basically. [Laughter] I learned that about thirty years ago, now. Twenty-five, thirty years ago, and it still sticks with me. When I'm in a restaurant and a waiter walks by and doesn't grab somethin' off the table, I'm like, "Dude, seriously?" [Laughter] It was a really formative experience for me.

[00:08:52.04]

Michelle L.: So, attended seminary in Boston. Then can you take me through just the early part of your career after that? What were some of your early assignments?

[00:09:07.15]

Justin R.: So, because I had been doing a graduate program at Tufts in classical languages just before I started the seminary, they gave me permission not to take a full load at the seminary for the first year and a half so that I could finish that program. So, I would go, like, two days a week over at Tufts—which, I was living in Newton Center, Massachusetts, so the subway took me all the way over there, basically. It was really cool. Then, the other days, I had a reduced course load in the seminary. So, I finished in four and a half years—it's a four-year program, but I ended up having to do one more semester. Finished in [19]94, December of [19]94. I was ordained a priest in May of [19]95. So, I accepted an assignment in February of [19]95 to go to Harlem, New York, and to live and work with the homeless. At that time, we had a homeless ministry there.

So, I did that for about a year, almost two years, a year and three quarters. The priest who had been there had been involved what was called the Emmaus Movement. He was one of the founders of the Emmaus Movement. It was something that happened—it was founded after the second World War in France. It was a priest named Abbé Pierre who saw all of these folks who had been basically displaced by the second World War, and he started what they called the rag pickers, where they would go and find stuff and clean it up and sell it, so they weren't getting charity. They were . . . basically supporting themselves. Come here. [Snaps fingers]

[00:10:56.26]

Michelle L.: Just for the recording, there is a dog in the room with us. [Laughter]

[00:11:01.01]

Justin R.: Yes. One who doesn't listen to commands when she doesn't want to. So . . . Father David had had some serious health issues, and by the time I got there, he had been in Harlem for thirty years. His mental health was not great. But, of course, he didn't really have any accountability because of the kind of ministry it was. So, I ended up—long story short—leaving in kind of the middle of the night, because he was kind of famous, when he decided someone had wronged him or whatever, he would basically put their possessions on the street. So, I could sense that we were heading in a direction where—I hadn't done anything wrong, but he was feeling challenged by me or whatever. So, I basically left in the middle of the night. That was a difficult ending, but it was a very powerful experience. It was formative to start as a young priest, serving and working with

the homeless every day and living right there in the homeless shelter with formerly homeless people. So, that was another one of the kind of main, formative experiences of my life, was kind of going into a parish after that. 'Cause what I did is, I took a short leave of absence to get my head back on straight, and worked for Bally Total Fitness for a gym for a couple months. They were gonna take me off the probationary period and promote me when I went in to give my two weeks' notice. I hadn't told anyone I was a priest. So, he said, "What job are you going back to?" I said, "Well, I'm a priest." He said, "Well, I can't really fight with that." [Laughter] So, I took an assignment in Southern California, in Orange County, California, where Disneyland is. I was there for a year and then moved to San Bernardino, California, where we had a small mission parish, which is an undeveloped community right on the edge of the Mojave Desert. San Bernardino is about fifty miles due east of Los Angeles. Okay? So, it's in the middle of nowhere. It's a very poor city. But it's close to everything. I was there for twenty years. In that time, because they couldn't afford me, I had wanted to teach anyway. So, I got a job at a Catholic high school there in San Bernardino. It's something now, at fifty-two, I don't rely—I can't imagine how I was able to do two full-time jobs like that, but when you're in your thirties, it's different than when you're in your fifties, I think. [Laughter] Looking back now, I think to myself, "Yeah, no. That just wouldn't . . . yeah, no." I just wouldn't do it. But it was fun. Sometimes it was difficult, but it was fun. So, then I accepted this assignment. The bishop wanted me to come here. The priest who had served this parish for twenty-nine years was ill and having serious health issues that were getting in the way of him doing active ministry. So, I accepted the assignment here, and I've had a blast.

[00:14:09.04]

Michelle L.: So, what has it been—I mean, that's a lot of bouncing around.

[00:14:12.26]

Justin R.: It is.

[00:14:15.12]

Michelle L.: What do you think about that? Has that been in hard to be in so many different communities? Have you found it helpful to be able to be in many communities, or . . . ?

[00:14:27.17]

Justin R.: Yeah. I think one of the nice things is being able to start fresh, right? I was with that community for twenty years, and that was a really long time. It was difficult because the people who didn't like me or didn't want to work with me or whatever, they were kind of stuck. Where, when a priest moves a little more regularly, fine. I mean, the folks who didn't like him will come back and try to work with the next guy, sometimes. That's just the way things are. I mean, it didn't hurt my feelings any. A lot of times, what people didn't like was that I was just doing what I was supposed to be doing, and they didn't want to be told they were not doing something they were supposed to be doing. So, fair enough. That's just the way life is. But . . . so, yeah. I think all of those experiences have brought me to be able to take care of this parish, which is much more dynamic. There's a lot more at stake in terms of the physical property, in terms of managing a staff, in terms of managing the finances and overseeing all of those pieces. I wouldn't have been ready

to do that twenty years ago. This is a very active parish. Our festival is something that takes up nine months of the year, practically, to put together. So, it's not an easy assignment, but it's a lot of fun. It's a very rewarding assignment, so.

[00:15:55.08]

Michelle L.: Yeah. So, for someone that had never been to St. George, been here before, how would you—and you got into it a little bit with your answer there, but how would you describe this church? It's got a long history in the community, I think it's been here—

[00:16:11.00]

Justin R.: Long history.

[00:16:06.13]

Michelle L.: A hundred?

[00:16:12.25]

Justin R.: We're almost, our centennial year will begin April 23, which is the Feast of St. George, in 2021. So, actually, we've been doing archival work this last month. The committee, the historical piece, we're trying to set up a museum exhibit for that year that hopefully will be able to be part of a temporary, moving exhibit, like what do you call it? A moveable exhibit.

[00:16:38.20]

Michelle L.: Yeah, travelling.

[00:16:38.28]

Justin R.: Well, no, that's not what I'm trying to say.

[00:16:41.01]

Michelle L.: Oh. [Laughter]

[00:16:41.23]

Justin R.: It's not a travelling exhibit, but it'll be a temporary exhibit up at the Vulcan Museum here on the hill. They have one space that they use for—they have it for three or four months, and then they change it out. I don't know the word I'm searching for, but—

[00:16:55.28]

Michelle L.: I gotcha, yeah. [Laughter]

[00:16:58.03]

Justin R.: No, I led you down completely the wrong path, because I was telling you exactly what I wasn't trying to say. But anyway. So, yeah, that's really cool. We're starting to do—we went down to the library just recently and did some archival work and stuff. Found some really interesting stuff about the history of the parish. So, to answer your question first—and we can go back to that if you want to, the other stuff—this is a very hospitable, very family-oriented, very dynamic parish. There are two large families that

comprise, I would say, two-thirds, maybe, of the parish—maybe not quite that much anymore—kind of extended families, right. Then, there are a number of other people who have been here all their lives and their parents were here all their lives, as well. So, there's a lot of deep roots in the parish. But we also have a lot of newcomers, which means, in the last ten or fifteen years or in the last couple years that I've been here, too. On Sunday, we have a ton of young families, which is great. It's a very diverse community in that way, as well. People who walk through the door are welcomed. And they're also a very—you know, sometimes, you end up in a parish where people don't know their faith really well, but this community's been very well-educated. We have a real strong dedication to both children and adult education. And there's some unique features here that you won't find in any other Melkite church in the United States. We have not only a youth group, but we have a group for the fifth to eighth graders, you know? Which is so cool. We're very serious about godparents for the baptism, so one of the godparents has to be a member of St. George. We have a godparents' lunch every year, where the godparent sits at a table with all the people who are his or her godchildren. I've never seen that anywhere, and it's just super. Just that whole kind of extended family dynamic that's going on here is awesome, yeah.

[00:19:15.12]

Michelle L.: That's great.

[00:19:16.24]

Justin R.: Do you want me to go back to the other piece now?

[00:19:17.18]

Michelle L.: I would love—yeah, I would love to.

[00:19:22.10]

Justin R.: Okay. So, the foundation of this parish is 1921.

[00:19:25.18]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:19:27.04]

Justin R.: Okay? I'm not sure how far back there were Middle Eastern people—so, this is the Magic City, right. So, in the 1890s, early 1900s, the steel and pig iron industry went crazy and the city grew up like magic. That's what the thing is. The mountain that we're sitting on, we're at the base of the Red Mountain, and that's where all the iron ore came from. So, it's very cool to me. I have a background, a PhD, in religious studies. I study a lot of materiality; material culture and stuff, so, it's really cool to me that we're right there on top of the ore. We're really very much a part of this city. The Middle Eastern folks who came in the late—yeah, late 1800s, early 1900s, and again, I'm not sure how much presence there was . . . we're talking, probably by 1910 or so, there was a community that was starting to grow. They were coming from what was, at that time, the Ottoman Empire, right? So, all of them were designated Syrian at that point, pretty much, 'cause Syria was the region that the Ottomans called that whole area of the Middle East. But

most of them were ethnically Lebanese. We have a fairly large Palestinian community now, but I'm imagining—we haven't got that far in the research, but I'm imagining they came after the foundation of the state of Israel and all that stuff in the 1960s. So, they're a much later addition to the parish. The Middle Eastern people—and one of the cool things we found, the library here has what were originally just address directories, and around the 1930s they became phone directories, right? So, I started to kind of look up some of the big names in the parish, and I started with, like, say 1918 and kind of went up by the year. You start to see a couple of names, and then the next year, by about 1920 I think it is, you start to see all the names of the grocery stores that they opened. So, the Middle Eastern folks were all the grocers and restaurant owners who were feedin' the coal miners and the people working in the mills. So, we knew that, but now I can actually kind of put a rough date to when that shift happened. You're talking, like, 1920. There's a Maronite Church around the corner here, and the Maronites are another one of the Eastern churches. They don't follow the same tradition that we do, although they are a church of Antioch. They don't have the same—so, if you went there, it wouldn't look the same as the Greek Orthodox or Russian Orthodox or whatever. They're from a different root. But they're all Lebanese. So, before 1921, all of our community worshipped with them, 'cause they were the only show in town. Then, when we founded our parish, we're literally five minutes away walking. So, this whole neighborhood was originally Lebanese. You know? Now, there's only a few families left. I buried two ladies this past year from the neighborhood. So, most everyone else has moved out to the suburbs. But now that Birmingham's such a glorious place, they'll all be moving back again.

[00:22:44.22]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Right.

[00:22:47.01]

Justin R.: They wanted to move the parish and I said, "Why? Yeah, you're gonna be moving back here. Your kids will be cursing our name because they're gonna be wanting to move back to Birmingham 'cause it's such a cool place." So, anyway, that's kind of the beginnings of the parish. We had one . . . one location prior to this that is actually fairly close to here. Another St. George prior to that. But I can't . . . so someone . . . we're starting to kind of put feelers out to people to see what we catch. One of the things that someone said is, "We used the original St. George church." I'm like, "Well, wait a minute. The original St. George church is over right where one of the playing fields at U.A.B. is. Right here on 6th Avenue." We don't know exactly where. The problem is, we found out from the archives that they had really solid, really, really good, specific land records, but when the university bought big blocks of land, they threw the records out. Now, why they would do that, I don't know.

[00:23:56.26]

Michelle L.: Oh!

[00:23:58.19]

Justin R.: But if the university bought just one chunk of land, then they would preserve the records. So, we don't know if we can find the exact spot that the original church was in.

But we know, generally, it's over on 6th Avenue here, not far from where we are. So, we're really at the beginning of all that hunting process at this point, trying to find all this cool stuff. So . . . I think it's the second property. So, this was where we really kind of settled in to grow. There's a wonderful story behind the acquisition of the property. So, the priest who was here at the time was named Father Joseph Raya, R-a-y-a. He eventually became archbishop of Galilee in Israel at the time when Golda Meyer was prime minister. So, there was constant friction. He finally got kicked out of the country because he was trying to organize the Christians there, the Palestinians there: peaceful protest. He marched with Dr. King. He was very much involved here in Birmingham with the civil rights movement and all of that, and he took that model with him to Israel. So . . . he was the priest here when they were going to buy the property. It was the mid . . . [19]60s, I don't know the exact dates. But the man who owned this property was Protestant and was damned if he was gonna sell to a Catholic. Okay? And those words: he told him. So, Father Joseph came over with a statue of St. Joseph and buried it in the property, which is kind of a voodoo thing for getting intercession from the saint. [Laughter] And the guy got sick. Like the next couple months, he ended up with terminal cancer or something. So . . . he called Father Raya and said, "Look. Don't put any more curses on me. I'll sell you the property." [Laughter]

[00:26:10.15]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Oh, my word!

[00:26:12.18]

Justin R.: I mean, Raya didn't intend that.

[00:26:14.14]

Michelle L.: Right!

[00:26:14.14]

Justin R.: He just wanted the intercession of St. Joseph. So, they're all Prot—you'll hear that story, anybody you talk to, you'll hear that story. [Laughter] So, that's how we got the triangle of that land. I think this side of the property came later. I'm not sure of the details, but it's all been part of the kind of campus of the church since the [19]50s, at least, if not earlier. So, yeah. He eventually, like I said, became the archbishop of Galilee, and after he was kicked out of Israel, he basically retired and was kind of an itinerant preacher. He kinda wandered around. He had a very distinct style. And one of the cool things is, we have in our archives here his bulletins, the bulletins that he composed every week. I knew the man late in his life; I was a seminarian when he was doing his last kind of big preaching tour up in New England. So, we were his groupies. We got to follow him around. When you hear him speak, he was very dynamic and very dramatic. But you can hear his voice when you read the bulletins. The way he would put things, it was very flowery language, dramatic and so forth. So, we haven't even started to go through the bulletins yet, but we know that's going to be a huge treasure trove of material about the parish.

[00:27:43.29]

Michelle L.: Yeah.

[00:27:44.29]

Justin R.: So, that's pretty cool.

[00:27:44.29]

Michelle L.: That's a great story.

[00:27:46.18]

Justin R.: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:27:49.21]

Michelle L.: I wonder if there's a recording of his voice anywhere.

[00:27:49.23]

Justin R.: There is. There is. Yes, we have it.

[00:27:53.10]

Michelle L.: Oh, great.

[00:27:55.10]

Justin R.: As part of the kind of development of the centennial, we're gathering photos and we're gathering recordings. We have a recording, I think, of the first liturgy that was celebrated

here. I think we have a recording . . . Archbishop Fulton Sheen, does that name ring a bell? He was a big deal. He's just been moved up towards sainthood by the Roman Catholics. He was a very famous Roman Catholic bishop—in Boston, I think. I don't know where he served. But he was one of the first to have a television show. He had a television show back in, like, [19]50s. He was famous for having this big chalkboard and he would write on his chalkboard. But he's famous because everyone around the world knew him because he was on T.V. It was one of the earliest televangelists in a way, I guess. But anyway, so, I think he was here at one of the banquets or something. We've got the recording of that and so forth. So, there's some really interesting stuff we've got. But like anything, it's all in pieces, so we have to kind of gather it.

[00:28:55.19]

Michelle L.: That's really cool that y'all are doing a lot of great research for that project.

[00:29:00.16]

Justin R.: It's bringing out the nerd in me. I completely nerded out the other day when we went to the library, because those—we found there was a whole section in the archives with people that I know, as little kids, pictures of them. There was a . . . a conference paper someone had given on immigration in Alabama. Huge. We haven't got them yet, but we just kept doing what I call triage, gathering, seeing what's there. Now, the thing is to lay it all out on the table and start to kind of actually dive in and start making notes and all that stuff. But it's pretty cool.

[00:29:46.10]

Michelle L.: Yeah. 'Cause obviously I'm a history nerd, but is there anything—I love the connection that you're making with the grocery stores in town. I mean, is there anything else like that, you're just really, surprised you, or . . . ?

[00:30:05.10]

Justin R.: Um . . . surprised me. Not yet. You know, one of the pieces that I want to explore more is because of my social justice background. You know, Arabs read as white. Right? Ethnically, they read as white, but they're "ethnic", quote, I'm doing air quotes at the moment, so I'll narrate that. "Ethnic" white, so they're not, in that model, they're not pure white or whatever. They're not from British background. So, it would be interesting to see if we can find any kind of stories or indications of how were they treated? In terms of the whole . . . black folks, of course, had a difficult time. But did white police officers target Middle Eastern folks too? Or did they just think they were white? Were they just kinda like the Italians who were also kinda darker? I don't know the answer to that stuff yet, 'cause there was basically, in the housing here in Birmingham—the housing that they built for the workers in the steel mills and the mines—I've heard if you go to the Sloss Museum, have you been there?

[00:31:27.21]

Michelle L.: Um-hm, um-hm.

[00:31:27.21]

Justin R.: So, you saw the little video that they did?

[00:31:30.04]

Michelle L.: Um-hm. But, I mean . . . let's not assume everybody has seen it. [Laughter]

[00:31:37.27]

Justin R.: No. So, they're saying that they built housing—the housing in the back was for the black folks, and then the housing up here was for the Italian folks. Middle Eastern folks, I don't think worked in the mines all that much. I'm sure there were some who did. But they were basically, like I said, store owners and restaurant owners and all of that. So, it would be interesting to see where they fit into that picture, and where they kind of ghettoized as well. Like the Italians. I mean, the Italians had a section. And then the Greeks, the Greeks were also here. I might be able to get at those narratives through the other avenues of the Greeks and the Italians as well, just to see what kind of civil rights connections we can make. Because today, the folks in my parish identify as white. And they are; that's the classification. But there would have been a time when everyone was clear that they weren't good Southern white folks. You know? So, that's a kind of . . . what did, we're working with a curator, a museum curator who's a parishioner now. He was talking to me the other day about thought clouds, right, creating thought clouds so that you're talking about the kind of big themes. From what we start to theme, what major themes can we pull out of it? You know? We thought in general about some of the things we might want to look for, and that, for me, is one of them, the whole justice piece of that. Just in terms of trying to . . . recreate what life was like. Did they live above their

store? Did they all live in the same neighborhood? All those kind of things that may, because it's been less than a hundred years, it might not be so hard to identify. We may have grandchildren here who can start navigating some of that stuff, or narrating, sorry, some of that stuff. We're planning to do some of what we're doing right now, doing oral history work. So.

[00:33:48.06]

Michelle L.: Great. So, with St. Elias being so close—like you said, it's less than a five-minute walk from here—and you're both part of this neighborhood.

[00:34:01.19]

Justin R.: Right.

[00:34:01.19]

Michelle L.: And with so many of the parishioner's families overlap—do you think historically, and even now, are you all sort of a family feel with both of the churches? Do you all do a lot together?

[00:34:17.18]

Justin R.: We do some things together, and we always invite each other to our stuff. You know, they have a festival right after Easter every year. I don't know how they do it, I mean, because the week after Easter I'm certainly not up for a festival. [Laughter] I'm sitting in a corner somewhere trying to figure out what day it is. So, they have their festival right

after Easter. We always attend that and support them, and then they come and support us in the fall. But, throughout the year, there's any number of things. If they have a special visitor or something come, they'll always call me and invite me to come for the banquet or that kind of stuff. We do the same thing. There's a good rapport. Like you said, we have so many families that—one sister comes to us, one sister goes to them. Or we have a lot of mixed marriages, so that people are always going to funerals back and forth, or marriages back and forth. So, yeah, there's lots of interaction. We don't do all sorts of formal things together, although they have in the past. They've done some processions and things like that for certain feast days, they've done together. But we certainly have a really good rapport with each other.

[00:35:29.23]

Michelle L.: I remembered talking with the organizers over at St. Elias, and I think they did sort of look to y'all and to the Greek church when they were looking to set up their food festival.

[00:35:41.11]

Justin R.: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:35:44.12]

Michelle L.: Do you—I just imagine all the leaders of all the food festivals in town sort of, like, meeting of minds and how do we—is that a sort of thing that actually goes on?

[Laughter]

[00:35:52.20]

Justin R.: Yeah. There's this really interesting dynamic. So, I'm blown away by the level of organization and dedication that this parish has. This food festival is the . . . wellest, the most well-oiled machine I have ever seen in my life. The coolest thing is that every year—so, my job is the best, because I get to wander. I wander and smile at people. I don't smile for a week after that because I use it all up in those three days. I go into the kitchen and help out for a while; I'll go upstairs and give a church tour. I'll sort of walk up and down the tables and just say hi to everyone, thank them for supporting me—us—all those kinds of things. What I hear in each area, 'cause there's a captain in each area, is, "Okay. Next year, we're gonna do this. Next year, we'll change this; we'll do it this way." So, they're already thinking about next year. They're already jazzed up. I mean, they don't want to make any commitments until about January or February—you know, we had our wrap-up meeting, and everyone's like, "Yeah, maybe I'll do it again next year. Maybe." We know they will, but they just don't . . . it's so much work, and it's so exhausting. It's three really long days and several months of work that kinda gets more and more intense. But they've got the recipes down; I mean, we made sixteen thousand grape leaves last year. Okay? We rolled 'em all ourselves. Every single one of 'em tasted as good as the other one. Okay? Because they've got the recipe down, they've got the portions down, they've printed 'em all, and they've got them. They'll tape 'em right to the wall over the mixer or whatever they're putting things together. And every group knows their thing, right? So, we got one lady who orders everything. You met her, Norma. You've got one guy who's in charge of all the meat stuff; any time there's meat involved, he comes in and

prepares it and sets it up. It's just an unbelievably well-oiled machine. So, it's very humbling for me to walk in, frankly. I was the pastor, the administrator, of this little mission for twenty years. The community there always wanted to have a festival, but they never got it in their head that they actually had to work it and they actually had to prepare for it, and it actually costs a ton of money before you have it. They thought, "Well, let's do it next weekend." I could never convince them, "This is a lot of work. And it's a lot of prep and all that." So, the communities got it down. We have a picnic in June that's a parish picnic, and the proceeds of that picnic are the seed fund for the festival. That's when it really starts in earnest. We spread out the cooking days, so that the cooking days are . . . basically, like, one a month until you get to August. To go back to your original questions about in terms of how we interact with each other: so, the Greeks have the largest festival. They're down right in the middle of U.A.B. They could care less what any of the rest of us do, because they're gonna make their money because they're right there. So, they're very generous to us. They always try to share with us the date, 'cause we already try to do ours before them. Of course . . . football is a very important thing to consider here. So, if there's a big game—there's some calculus that they all go through. I'm not a football guy, so, it all kind of goes over my head. But, through this sort of magic process of the calculation of when the Greek Orthodox are having their festival, and what football games are being done, we arrive at a date somewhere in September. [Laughter] So . . . and it pretty much, it's about that complicated. Like I said, I just have to trust them when they finally come to the final decision, that that's the magic weekend. So, this next year, it's going to be 10-11-12 of September. This year it was in the early twenties, 19-20-21 of September. It's always in that zone. The Russian Orthodox church, there's a Russian

Orthodox church in Brookside, about twenty minutes north of here. And they always have their festival the first weekend of November. So, they just had it. It's wonderful. It's a very small, little community, and they work really, really hard. They do unbelievably delicious Russian food with pastries and everything else, and if you're gonna go, go at 10:30 in the morning, because by 11, the line's out the door. By 11:30, it's down the street.

[00:40:32.17]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:40:34.08]

Justin R.: These guys don't have a huge capacity, but they do a super job. Anyway. So, the O.C.A. church, which is another group—Orthodox Church of America—St. Simeon down here, St. Simeon has been trying, they've just started. They were very much asking us for guidance and assistance and so forth. They kind of keep moving theirs around, because they were gonna do it on the same weekend we were gonna do it, and we told them what the Greek Orthodox told us: that will not hurt us at all, but it will hurt you. Right? So because they're a small church and they only have a one-, I think they did a two-day festival today—this year they call it a fair. And the other interesting thing that happened was that, and again, they always comp. Any of the clergy that go, they insist that they comp us, and we always make a donation some other way. But there's a real respect and camaraderie among us, is the point I'm trying to make there. They love seeing us there and supporting them and they're grateful for it. All the rest of our paper goods

that we have left over from our festival, we donate it to them, so they had a big leg up on it. One of the feedbacks that we gave them last year is, they had nothing but sweets. They did all sorts of kinds of cookies and things, but they had no kind of a lunch at all. So, this year, they had a couple of lunch options. It was huge; it makes a huge difference. I mean, there's only so many cookies you're gonna eat if you haven't had lunch, you know?

[00:42:11.08]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:42:12.20]

Justin R.: It helped people kind of linger a little bit longer and stuff, so. So, that's the kind of—that was your original question, the interaction between us. St. George has definitely kind of mothered and mentored St. Elias, St. Simeon. I think we also were mentored by the Greeks to some extent, but it's been going on for thirty-two years. I think this is our thirty- . . . I should know this off the top of my head. I'll be striking that out of the record.

[Laughter]

[00:42:43.29]

Michelle L.: Well, that's all right. I mean, anyone can Google that, you know? [Laughter]

[00:42:48.13]

Justin R.: Yeah, but they'll kill me if I don't know that part. We were on T.V. up the hill here, doing T.V. spots for the festival, and—

[00:42:56.08]

Michelle L.: I'll tell you, everyone I interview, they can't ever remember. 'Cause it's always in the upper thirties, hardly everyone can ever remember the exact year. I promise you; everyone I have interviewed this year, same problem.

[00:43:04.09]

Justin R.: Good. Well, honest to God, someday I'm gonna get a phone call from one of the festival chairs say, "Rah rah rah." You know? Anyway, so, they've been doing it for a while. They've made their mistakes and they've refined things. We're at a kind of critical juncture, because they're driving to try to make more. And we were more successful than we were last year, financially. But there's only so much we can produce. You know? We don't really want to start kind of farming this stuff out, you know? 'Cause the Greeks do. The Greeks don't make all their own food. So, we really want it to be, when someone eats something at our festival, that we made it. You know? So, that's kind of—that's really where we're at right now. We're hitting a wall if we want to grow this, because we did online ordering this year for the first time, and it was so successful that it shut us down on Thursday for a little while. Because they just didn't expect it to be so successful. Actually, we can pretty much point to the profit we made this year more than last year, to the online ordering. You know? So . . . but for that to kind of keep growing, we've got to produce more food. You know? 'Cause we try to run out by Saturday evening. You know, they shoot for that zone. And usually, there's something left over, and we kind of auction—not auction, but people can buy it bulk. But usually, it's not much. They

actually do a really good job of portioning it out for the three days; again, I'm just kind of blown away by it all. You know? I just have to kind of stand in the middle of it and just let it happen around me, keep smiling. It's very cool.

[00:45:02.21]

Michelle L.: What do you—or, do you know, what has caused this interest in so many food festivals in so many different churches? It just seems to be—again, you were saying, the Russian Orthodox churches are interested in it now . . .

[00:45:20.08]

Justin R.: Right. Well, as I understand it, about five/six years ago, it really started to change here in Birmingham. So, I'm happy that I arrived just in time. Honestly, I attribute it to a change in the liquor laws that allowed breweries to start to come. 'Cause, see, now the Good People Brewery is just celebrating its tenth anniversary. They've been around for about ten years. The thing about the breweries is that they've anchored restaurants around them, and they've converted buildings that I'm imagining were abandoned or burned out or whatever, and now they're useful and cool. So, it's attracting people, and then they want food, so you have restaurants around them. Most of them are dog-friendly because they don't serve food in themselves, in the brewery, so you can bring the dogs inside, which is—I'm speaking from experience, it's what I do on my day off. [Laughter] Walk the beautiful parks here in Birmingham, and . . . but I think it's that kind of stuff. So, for instance, my favorite place is the Birmingham District Brewery, and it's at a place called the Battery downtown here. It was like a repair garage or something; it's got the big

garage doors on it. So, I'm imagining last year, or—well, yeah, they've been open a year—so, I'm imagining about two years ago, it was a big, empty garage. They moved in, and then a fried chicken place moved in on the corner, and Wasabi Juan's moved in on the corner, and then a touring business that you can kind of tour and do a brewery tour, makes good sense, but those kind of things moved in. A nutrition store moved in. So now that whole block, all of a sudden, has been anchored by that brewery. My point behind all of that is that there's been a culinary and kind of culture explosion here in the city in the last ten years. I think that these festivals are kind of a part of that fabric; we've been doing it way before they were here, but I think the real kind of passionate interest in it right now is that it's different, it's homemade, it's authentic, it's all of those kinds of things that people are looking for today. Just like, well, why do you like craft beer? Because craft beer is handmade; there's the brewer right there. We're talking to the brewer, and he's really excited about his—he put something different in the beer this time. You know what I mean? So, there's this kind of connection that you don't get when you're sitting at Joe's bar down the street or something, or Applebee's restaurant or something. I think it's part of that larger fabric of the really cool stuff, the Pizitz Center downtown, and all these kinds of really interesting avant-garde things that are happening in the city.

[00:48:21.22]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Then, what is it that you've observed in your parish that drives—what drives them to do it so well? I mean, like you're saying, it's such a well-oiled machine.

[00:48:36.13]

Justin R.: Yeah.

[00:48:38.03]

Michelle L.: And that they're immediately trying to figure out how they can do it better next year. Where does that drive come from?

[00:48:44.18]

Justin R.: So, we're the only Melkite parish in Alabama. Our next neighbor is Atlanta, Georgia, and then after that, it's Houston, Texas. Okay? Then, to the north of us, you have to go to Ohio before you come to a Melkite parish. Well, Virginia that way, but straight up, it'd be Ohio. So, we're really here alone, as far as our tradition's concerned. We're very conscious, as a community, that the buck stops with us. I mean, it's not like a Roman Catholic parish, where you've got—in Birmingham there's, I don't know, a dozen, or I don't know how many there are. But if one closes, okay, well, that's sad, but we can go down the street to the other one. With us, we're very conscious that we're it. Because we have such large families and groupings—not groupings . . . multi-generational roots here and they've been here for so long, they're passionate about St. George. St. George is it for them. They don't have other options. This is where they belong and this is their home. These are the families they've known for forty years or more. So, I think that's that love, is what really drives them. They realize that, if they don't actively work to constantly build the community, then it won't be here. You know. And that they just love being with each other. There's very deep friendships here. It's a very warm community. There's drama, of course. [Laughter] You know, of course there is. But, in general, it's a very

loving and forgiving community. People really work hard to really kind of resolve differences and get along with each other. It's unique, and it's a wonderful gift to be able to be here.

[00:50:51.14]

Michelle L.: And why are there so few Melkite churches? I didn't realize just . . .

[00:50:58.26]

Justin R.: So, our diocese is the entire United States, right? So, we have a bishop in Newton, Massachusetts; in Boston, just outside of Boston. We're a small church. Our roots, as I said, are in the Middle East. So, our parishes here are based on immigration; where clumps of people ended up, like here, a parish opened. But we're just not as big. I mean, the Roman Catholic Church is enormous. The Greek Orthodox Church is enormous; Russian Orthodox are enormous, but we're just not that big a community worldwide. And part of the problem, too, is that a lot of times in places around the country—even here—we'll have people who will go to the Catholic schools, and then they basically begin to identify as Roman Catholics, and then they're off. Or they'll marry someone who's not Melkite and they go to their church or something. So, there's a lot of attrition that happens. We have about fifty parishes and missions around the United States. For the most part, it's kind of the border of the country. We don't have a whole lot in the Midwest. We have a couple of outreaches, but mostly, if you look at New England, all the kind of mill towns in New England, that's where we are. Across the Midwest, if you know anything about the demographics, Michigan, Detroit, Michigan area, there's a huge

Middle Eastern community of every kind, Muslims and everybody else are there, so that's not a big surprise either. I'm imagining they were there for the car industry. I don't know why they ended up there. But again, if you go to . . . I forget what the name of the suburb is in Detroit there, but like there's all these restaurants and all this stuff. They're doing the same kinds of things that they did here. You know? Then, of course, the newest region of the country is really California. Our first parish out there, which is I think now over a hundred years old, is in North Hollywood, right outside of Los Angeles. For a long time, that was it. I mean, California's a really long state, and so people in New England didn't understand when they were asking to open a parish in Sacramento, which is ten hours away, nine hours away, folks were saying from Massachusetts, "Well, why do you need another parish out there?" [Laughter] "Can't you go to St. Anne?" It's like, "Yeah, no. Not really. Can't." [Laughter] So now, it's the newest region because a lot of the immigration, the most recent immigration, has ended up in California and Washington state, and down in Arizona. So, there's a lot of kind of very young parishes, floundering, kind of struggling parishes, trying to kind of get stabilized and so forth. And it's a very mobile . . . crowd out there. I mean, folks are trying to get themselves established, and it's different. In 1920, people moved to Birmingham and they basically worked in the grocery store that Uncle Joe opened. In California right now, there are those family groupings, but it's much harder for them to find employment that's gonna pay the bills because the cost of living is so high and so forth. There's a lot of kind of moving around, trying to kind of find the right formula.

[00:54:32.09]

Michelle L.: I know you weren't here when the festival started, but I wonder if you came across this information—when they decided what to name the festival, this one's called the Middle Eastern Food Festival. St. Elias is called the Lebanese Food Festival. Do you know how they were decided, how did they decide, "We're gonna call this Middle Eastern." We're gonna, you know . . .

[00:55:02.11]

Justin R.: Well, because we're the only Byzantine Catholics—you know, the Greek Catholic style, we have a fairly large group of folks from the church called the Ruthenian Church, which are Slavic Catholics. So, their liturgy's the exact same as ours, the music is different, and some of the local, ethnic customs are different. And also some Ukrainian Catholics. So, they come to us because we're the only show in town for them. You know? So, I think early on, they tried to do an international food festival where they reflected those—the Italian immigrants that they had in the parish and the Ukrainian and Ruthenian or whoever else that they had, and they found really quickly that that was just hard to sustain; that really, the thing that would draw folks is the Middle Eastern food. So, they kind of zeroed in on that, I think. I'm not sure, but that's kind of short-handing it. I'm not sure how the eventual—I think, also, there was probably some shifting, some of the people who were from those different traditions might have moved, so there was less of a community that was able to continue doing the cooking for those kinds of things. But I think they found that the brand they were looking for was the Middle Eastern food, so.

[00:56:18.23]

Michelle L.: Hm. Okay. That's interesting. So, I mean, would you say . . . what do you think of?

Or what dishes are when you think Middle Eastern food . . .

[00:56:34.28]

Justin R.: You're gonna make my mouth water.

[00:56:34.28]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Or tell me about some of your favorite dishes.

[00:56:37.15]

Justin R.: So, we're in a fasting period right now. [Laughter] We're not allowed to eat meat, so I'm about to tell you about a whole bunch of things that I'm looking forward to Christmas for. Rolled grape leaves that have meat and spices and rice in them, okay? And they're steamed, basically, in broth. There's a couple different versions of how to do that. Essentially, they don't like it when I describe it as a meatloaf, Arabic meatloaf, I guess 'cause that sounds low-class or something, I don't know. I love meatloaf. But it's basically bulgur wheat, so kind of the fine-grained wheat mixed with meat, and fine ground. They kind of re-grind the ground beef and mix it with spices and onions and things like this. There's a layer of browned meat in the middle with pine nuts. And the recipe we have, the parishioner that has nailed it, I mean nailed it. So, a lot of times, people have access to what we call the *maza*, the appetizer, kind of food. So, hummus. And hummus, I'm going to go on the record for saying, if you buy it in a store, you're an idiot. Okay? 'Cause hummus is really easy to make, and it never tastes as good from a store-bought container

as it does—I mean, it's five ingredients and a food processor. It really is very easy to make, and I'm a garlic fiend, so for me, it's one clove of garlic for one chickpea, basically. [Laughter] You know? But that's something that, if someone didn't know much about Middle Eastern food, they've at least probably seen hummus in the store or whatever. *Babba ghanoush* is another dip that is made with eggplant, smoked or roasted eggplant, a little bit of a smoky flavor. My favorite thing is tabbouleh, which is a parsley and mint salad with—again, the bulgur wheat, the fine wheat, and tomatoes and onions. Some places will put cucumber, chunks of cucumber in it. Our parish in Danbury, Connecticut, is very, very proud of the fact that they put frozen green peas in their tabbouleh. No one else on earth has ever heard of it; it's just their one place. Here, I've seen basically the basic tabbouleh, but I've seen it also with some chunks of cucumber in it. What other Middle Eastern dishes? Those are the major ones. Certainly I'm kinda running down the major list of what we serve at the festival. They also do a roasted chicken, which the process is absolutely glorious to watch. I filmed it last year. They melt an enormous vat of butter, and they take the chicken quarters, I guess they are, and they just dunk 'em in the butter. And then they slap 'em on the tray, and they spice 'em with a spice mix which has lots of oregano and garlic, salt and pepper on them, and then they will roast 'em. Oh em gee. That's all I can say. I mean, it's absolutely delicious. Then, of course, the other things we serve that are really, truly wonderful, are: we serve meat pies and spinach pies, and lots of different cultures have those kinds of things. The Russians have them as well, some kind of a dough stuffed with something in it. It's very common, ravioli kind of thing. These are basically triangles that are baked, so they're kinda crunchy on the outside and golden brown. And inside, the spinach has got lemon and

some spices and onions, and the meat pies . . . are onions and spices. I don't think they put any rice in their meat pies; it's just the onions and the spices with the meat. But again, they're just sublime. They're just so wonderful. So, those are the big things. There's obviously other things, but that's what we serve at the festival, and those are the most . . . for a while they were making what's called *kousa*, which is stuffed squash. Right? So, like yellow summer squash. They're really hard. You have to scoop out the inside, which is a pain in the neck. I mean, when you're doing it for your family, it takes all day. And they were trying to do this for the whole festival. Then you put the meat and rice mixture in the middle and bake 'em. They're glorious—or no, you don't bake them, you put them in a broth and cook them.

[01:01:19.13]

Michelle L.: Oh.

[01:01:19.13]

Justin R.: They're wonderful. But just in terms of trying to make something, you can put a pan of kibbeh together and bake it, and that serves a ton of people. These things were just really hard. So, after a few years, they decided, you know what? Let's just take the *kousa* off the menu. [Laughter] It's just too hard to do. So, we don't serve those anymore for the festival, but yeah. A lot of . . . if you look at Armenian food, if you look at even Afghan food or Greek food, when you kind of go around the Mediterranean and a little bit further in, you're seeing the same ingredients. Sometimes, you'll see the same, it's almost exactly the same except a spice is different or something, so it's really interesting to be able to—

and of course, when you talk about, like, Afghan food, you've got some Indian influence 'cause of where they are geographically, so there are some curry spices and things and so forth. You get, even among the Middle Eastern countries, there are slight differences in terms of how they'll prepare the same things. So, Iraqis will, they'll do the same thing in terms of stuffing grape leaves and things like that, but they also stuff tomatoes and onions with the same kind of meat stuffing, meat and rice stuffing. The Lebanese won't do that. The things I described are very typical Lebanese foods. But there's variations, you know. Everyone's grandma made it a little differently, so.

[01:02:46.21]

Michelle L.: Yeah, yeah. What kind of foods did you grow up eating, mostly?

[01:02:50.08]

Justin R.: So, I grew up thoroughly American, kind of white, middle-class American. My mom was fairly adventurous. I mean, she would make her own pizza crusts on Sunday nights, and so we would do everything from what you would expect: baked beans and hot dogs, casseroles and things like that, to we would experiment with Chinese food. We certainly went out to eat at restaurants. Having lived in Southern California for twenty years, I can say that the Mexican restaurant we had in Portland was actually pretty darn good. Usually, when you have really authentic Mexican food in Southern California, when you've got *abuela* in the kitchen actually making the food you know what it's really supposed to taste like. So, I grew up with a fair sense of adventure in terms of food and a little bit of orientation. Having moved around the U.S. now, when I see an Afghan

restaurant or an Ethiopian restaurant or those kinds of things, I'll get really excited about those things. But yeah, my mom had her version of spaghetti sauce. We had pasta on a regular basis and stuff like that. Meatloaf and things that you'd expect, yeah.

[01:04:07.06]

Michelle L.: Do you feel like, or have you noticed, the community that comes in for the festival, are they pretty accustomed to the foods you all serve now? Or do you feel like it's an adventure for them to try different foods here?

[01:04:23.28]

Justin R.: I would say the majority of feedback I get is, "We come every year." I think there are some people who come in and are kind of looking around like, "Oh, my gosh. What's happening here? Who are these people? What is this food?" So, they do a really good job about having a picture, like on the big menus that we have. They have a picture and then we have descriptions of what it is, so that people aren't thinking they're eating lamb brains or something. [Laughter] Which, in Middle Eastern cuisine, is a possibility. [Laughter] It's a New Year's delicacy to eat sheep heads. My first year in Southern California, I was serving a largely Jordanian immigrant community, and that was apparently their big thing. So, we prayed evening prayer and then they brought me across for the New Year's dinner, and they pull this enormous manhole cover off this cauldron and there's all these sheep heads bobbing in the broth. They said, "Choose yours, Father!" I'm like, "Yeah, no, I think I've got a head on my shoulders, I'm fine. I'll pass on the sheep head, thank you very much."

[01:05:21.17]

Michelle L.: You turned it down?

[01:05:23.11]

Justin R.: I sure did. Yeah. No . . .

[01:05:27.24]

Michelle L.: Was that an okay thing to do?

[01:05:28.22]

Justin R.: Yeah. [Laughter] They really didn't expect me to eat the lamb brains. They figured this little white boy was not gonna be able to handle that, blue-eyed Melkite. [Laughter] So, I forget how we got on that . . .

[01:05:44.27]

Michelle L.: Oh, oh. I was asking the reaction from the community about trying different foods.
[Laughter]

[01:05:50.27]

Justin R.: Oh, right. So, I think the majority of people come because they've done it for years. Most of the other folks who come have tried Middle Eastern food before. They may not have tried everything, so they might be like, "Oh, I'm gonna try that." You know? But it's

not many folks who come who are just kind of out in left field about it. Because if they haven't come to us, they've gone to the Greek festival or something. So, like, they know—although the Greeks serve a very different menu than we do in some respects—like I said, it's all Mediterranean kind of ingredients.

[01:06:28.18]

Michelle L.: Yeah. All right. Well, is there anything I have not asked that you wanted to talk about or wish that people knew about your church or you or the festival, or . . . ?

[01:06:41.05]

Justin R.: I think we've covered good ground. No, I think it's something that I'm very proud and very happy that we do it, that we're able to kind of have a share in this kind of culinary renaissance in Birmingham. We're very proud of the work that we do and exposing people to our church. Part for us, the church tours are a really huge part of the festival, and we were running four or five tour guides with ten, fifteen people each, all day Saturday this year. So, we had probably—I don't know how many hundreds of people come through the church. For us, not ever trying to steal people or evangelize, well, we evangelize, of course, we want to share the Good News, but we're not ever tryin' to get people to sign on the dotted line when they walk in the door, that's not our style. We have had people, because the tour guides gave such a passionate—for instance, our Holy Week services are glorious, the week before glorious. They're so beautiful, we had a Baptist family come last year for Holy Friday because the tour guide had so passionately and so beautifully described that service that they were like, "Yeah, we gotta go see that." So, as

rich and as sensual and kind of satisfying as the festival is, the food part of the festival, the spiritual part—even if people just kind of come in and look at the church real quick and are kind of in awe of the church 'cause it's really beautiful—we try to kind of give people on all sides a holistic experience of richness and depth. So, that part is, I mean, you know, I think it also contributes to peoples' knowledge, peoples' understanding that there's diversity in the world and that that's something to be celebrated and not made fun of.

[01:08:53.10]

Michelle L.: That's great. Well, thank you so much for your time today.

[01:08:55.16]

Justin R.: You're most welcome. Thank you.

[End of interview]