Full transcript of an interview with

MIKE DAVIS

on 15 March 2001

by Lewis McMaster

Recording available on CD

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This is Lewis McMaster interviewing Pastor Mike Davis on the 15th March 2001, to record aspects of the history of the Bethesda movement in South Australia. The recording is being made in the pastoral office of the Living Hope at 819 Marion Road, Mitchell Park for the J.D. Somerville oral history collection of the Mortlock Library of South Australiana.

Mike, thank you for taking time to see me today. I appreciate that and I realize you have a very busy schedule. I have also valued over the years your support for Pastor Peter Vacca and the administration of the movement. You’ve been an invaluable source of strength to all when it comes to helping get the movement together. But I wonder in the context of general history, how did you become involved with Bethesda and particularly with the associated with Pastor Peter?

I guess it’s maybe one of those things where God has some way of doing things. I was a serving officer in the Air force in Canberra and was transferred to Adelaide from Canberra in January 1974. I was searching around for a local church where I and my family would feel comfortable and after searching around about Feb/March of that year, we went around to about 8 churches, Pentecostal churches in Adelaide and we came here to Bethesda at where it is now, the same location at 817 Marion Road. Within about 2 minutes of being in the service, we just, my wife Sandy and I looked at each other and said, “This is it.” The kids nodded their heads and they were in their teens and from there we, once we’d committed I’d been very much involved in working and commencement of the Christian Revival church and the Crusade church in Canberra so I’ve really just tucked into the church and once we came involved, we came involved. Very soon after we were here, from something I said, Pastor Vacca and his associate Charles Schwab called me in and they shared with me that they had a vision here in the church for a 24 hour counseling service and strangely enough when I was in Canberra even as a very young Christian the, I thought what a need there was in Canberra it looks good on the outside but it was crying out on the inside. But I realized they could do nothing up there and they asked me if I was still interested from something I said at the previous meeting. And out of that, it’s a long story; it’s a story in itself. But out of that came the fact that we commenced Living Hope in February 1975. And so I was involved from a very early time with Pastor Peter, I became an elder in the church in 1977 and was ordained a pastor in 1980. Then I was still at that time working in the public service, I’d left the air force working in the public service here in Adelaide and I was offered a position in the church just while having left as the administrator. I was offered a position in the church, which I took up in September 30th, 1985 as the administrator.

Mike I wonder if I could ask what were the sort of things that attracted you to Bethesda at that stage? You obviously were an instant repor, what worked for you at Bethesda?

It was a church that had a sense of excitement about it. It was a church that was warm and had very much a family atmosphere and I think a lot of families, we were a relatively a young family or coming up towards a middle aged family as far as Sophie and myself were concerned, that we just wanted somewhere where our kids would be
involved, there was a good youth presence here and we wanted somewhere where we could not only be happy as a family but be involved. It was a whole ethos in those days of the 70’s that if you became a Christian there was no, that you found yourself in the body. Unfortunately I think we’re getting into the consumer instead of these days through people just staying and so forth.

That’s right. shop around.

Abuse me and so forth and there isn’t the commitment there was in those days. It was just a way of life.

Great.

We just felt comfortable. We’d had many carrots dangled before us because of my involvement in Canberra, many carrots dangled in various positions and various churches, which didn’t mean a thing, that’s not my psychic. That’s not my way.

Mike as the administrator for Bethesda church, what involvement did you have in the starting of the actual movement, the wider satellite churches that related to Bethesda and who were the people involved? Can you tell us something about the story there?

I guess to be really honest I knew very little about the very early planting of the movement. I’ve since read about it and I realized that it grew out of the Omega fellowship that used to meet in, which was really a teaching and pastoral ministry for those churches that didn’t really have a covering at that stage, it was provided by Peter Vacca, per say. They designed his input to them or otherwise they’ve got no real teaching unless they went to conferences. But I was aware that there were things happening at the Omega and there was a real pressure on Peter to head up a “Denomination”. People still see it as a denomination and I guess we’d better talk about it as a denomination and there was a transission period going on but infact I had nothing to do with that.

How did you perceive the pressure? What was generating or who, how was the pressure being generated? What effect was that having on Peter?

Well just observing Peter, he’s a fairly believe it or not retiring kind of guy and very much a local churchman and he had mersisted that he talked about it on occasions with me. He’d resisted opening up another denomination, he said, “there’s no need for another denomination, not another Pentecostal denomination.” But of course, the people that he had fathered and mentored and taught, they wanted a sense of belonging and this was really the only vehicle possibly that they could have that sense of belonging. And it was very hard for an independent church, Pentecostal church in those days as it is now, to survive the things that can come up without some mutual support and some leadership, especially with the young starting up. Abit like you yourself.

That’s right. We appreciated it.
You were one of the original people there so you would understand.

*Who were some of the people that were coming, any names come to mind in terms of people that were so as it were quotes “Pesterling Peter!!” Say, come on we need some.*

Yeah, there was a guy called Athol Searle from Altona, Victoria. Athol’s name seems to come up as those days the one who was really pushing it. I think Milton Greenslade was another from Cheltenham in Victoria. There was a number, I think you yourself, Ken and Mary Farrell, then there was Ken Graham, Malcolm and Pam Busby who taken over a church in Aldinga and some people up in the riverland. There was just a general counterpush but I guess the person that was acting like a dripping tap over this we really need to have it would have really been Athol.

That’s interesting.

Strangely enough of course, he was one of the first out of it.

*Just while you’re on that subject, what happened for Athol that he went out? Was it a personal problem or?*

I think, I can’t quite remember what it was about and I’m not sure if it would be relevant to this history. It would have been a personal disagreement I would think over doctrine.

*Right. Ok.*

And of course the movement itself had a slogan in those days which is still relevant today of where as there was a lot of central government going on within the other denominations, there was a lot of vision of each individual church was clamped to the central vision in other areas and it was a vision of this Bethesda Movement and each church would be in fellowship, an affiliation for mutual support and for counsel when needed. But, that it sort God for its vision for its own individual church and what every individual church would do. A vision of this but then just quoting and instance, Bethesda Christian center as is was then did not ask the rest of the movement whether they should start Bethesda College when it started the vision or Living Hope, part of the vision. It was the responsibility of that church who didn’t want to get everybody else into it to just get the vision going.

Quite rightly.

So Athol, I guess had problems in that area as times went on.

*He was wanting, you’re suggesting a more central control.*

I think so.

*Right.*
Yes I think he did.

That’s interesting.

My memory, you’ve got to realize, Lew that I’m now 64 so,

A young fellow. Just getting in your full stride now.

I have now what you call senior moments. Long-term memory…

Being a bit younger I can empathise in what you’re saying. Getting close to that.

Mike I came across a document when talking to Pastor Ken Graham, dated in 1983, which was the minutes of a meeting formally moving and passing to incorporate Bethesda Movement as a denomination. At what point either then or after, did you formally become involved in the administration of the movement? When did you take on board responsibilities in that area?

Obviously as a member as I was with the Bethesda board at that time, Bethesda Christian Outreach board, I was aware of what was happening. But I wasn’t involved at that time. I became involved really from the, I suppose from the day that I came on board on 30 September 1985, when it was necessary to pool together a formal meeting, and there had been formal meetings and I know you’ve got minutes of those. But this was to ratify the constitution, which had been drawn up by the brethren,

Yes.

Prior to 1985. It was set up first executive that would handle the denomination per say, it was a matter of dealing with the legalities, it was fairly obvious as the administrator of Bethesda, it was central on here at that time because this was the other church, that one of my roles as administrator here would be in the role of executive officer of the Bethesda Movement. Not because of whom I was, but because I was the administrator for Peter Vacca and therefore I, he could not do all the administration.

Of Course.

One of my first jobs was to set up the meeting in I think it was, it’s probably in your minutes, but I think it was about the 11 November, I seem to recall it was armsters day. But I may be wrong. That was the first time when various things were ratified and I guess you could say up till then, they had been working at the background stuff to really get set up. I believe that from there onwards we then got under way. I think there were 19 at that meeting. There were 19 churches represented. It may be documented which you can access to.
Well certainly the movement has grown since those early days, both nationally and internationally. What sort of needs do you think the movement has been satisfying for its members?

I think the personal contact, the pastoral care especially for the ministers who have been part of the Bethesda movement and are still part of it, some have moved on. The personal relationship to a mentor in Peter Vacca and latter days other members of the executive have matured over the years, the movements been going, and of course they too have now taken on their roles in a lot of cases in various states, which has been regularly support to Peter Vacca. But I think its been a personal relationship and for the sense of belonging.

Yes.

And I hope really the day is never lost in just pure beurocracy. If the movement looses that I think it looses its heart.

Do you think the movement has changed very much since it first started? If so, do you care to comment?

Basically no. I think its as its meant to be covering out of control. I think what may have happened is that whereas when they’re independent churches to various member churches, really had to seek the Lord for their own vision. I think in some ways, they may have got a little bit lazy and began to corportise it and pass it through others. Therefore it waters that vision down.

Can you unpack that? What do you mean by that, corprotise that?

Corporitising, I think then what a lot of them don’t necessarily go to their own overside, they’re a local church overside… and their more inclined to passing by other members of the movement, other members of the executive and get the wisdom from the others. Where as I feel that it’s a vision for a local church they should, receive the vision direct from God and then they should work it through the local churches. I don’t think that happens all the time. But I think that could be a trend, simply because the, what’s happening in the world of course, is that litigation is becoming so right, in the early days there was no fear of great litigation but now if you say the wrong thing at the wrong time or be politically incorrect then you could have a litigation case against you. And I think that so positively has come in is the fear factor.

It’s just a feeling I’ve got. Although, you know when you’re in your teams and general meetings and chat school of ministries, that family atmosphere is still there and I hope that stays and I know that new churches joining or new ministries joining sense that and that’s what’s drawn

That’s good.

If that’s lost then half of it’s lost.
That’s an interesting observation about the fear factor. What stands out for you then the significant events in the development of the movement over the past years?

I guess the steady growth. What would have worried me is if in the early days, it had become faddish to join the Bethesda movement. And there’d been a whole swag of churches and ministries that were out on their own, Lone rangers, all kind of situations in their churches and they would just rush to join. I believe that within reason, we are screening of affiliation over the years has been very good. Like anything else we’ve had one or two that have got in under the cover but that happens. Therefore I think the screenings need to say will this church have this minister, senior minister blend into what the movement is all about, I think has been one of the key aspects and I can remember the various executives for that. I think the area of course, is that when we first started, every church had its own mission thrust or had none at all, as the case may have been in some cases. Now what has happened is that as a result of the churches going out and sharing about Bethesda movement, for instance, the Tasmanian churches have contacts in the Philippines and they went out and shared with them, or in their affiliations and immediately the Philippine Brethren showed interest into being affiliated. So we had to look at making our movement international rather than Australian thing. And that was enhanced by Rick Morrell who was one of the founding fathers. Rick felt to go to the United Kingdom and start a church there and in fact one or two satellite churches come out of that.

That’s correct.

So you’ve got some affiliations in there. We’ve got affiliation in Fiji. We’ve got some very strong affiliation through once again, through missionary journeys with the church in Myanmar, which is now Bethesda movement churches in Myanmar who are undergoing persecution, and currently of course the senior minister is here in Australia as a refugee because his life was threatened. But he’s still running and has an influence in their even from here. Its different things we’ve had to, and I think more a centralizing and a support system had to be raised up in the early 90’s maybe 92/93 to cater for the support and which doesn’t take away from the fact that the churches can either in the movement, can either accept to support what we now see as affiliated missions abroad. Or continued to support, what we’ve all supported as a church, which the people want to continue. It’s been on a voluntary basis but I think centralizing of the missions’ area has been a big movement.

Mike, I’m well aware that you’ve got a very passionate interest in missions having served in Papua New Guinea for some 18 months, nearly 2 years I believe, assisting the work there, not for our movement but certainly have a heart to reach people in other countries, how long have you been formally involved with missions for our movement? Currently you’re our Missions Director/Coordinator for the movement, when did that start and what was the story there?

Yes you’re right. In 1996, it’s a very interesting fact, Peter Vacca was invited to go to Port Moresby as a minister for an old associate of his from the Christian Revival Days,
David Silverback, who was the missions operator for the Christian Revival Crusade which was the main mission station for the C.R.C. over in Papua New Guinea which in fact had over 300 churches in all the Islands, the provinces of New Guinea and I just felt the staleness was coming on and a real burden that something new was going to happen. Maybe if I’d known what was coming, I may have stifled that but I didn’t because I was open to what the Lord wants. Peter, with his big heart, had come back from visiting there and ministering over there and Barry had shared with him that his current administrator had to leave because his wife was sick and Peter with his big heart said “Don’t worry Barry. I’ll find you an administrator.

So he came back and as there was an administrator here, he called me in and said, “I’ve done it again!” You have to realize that then he’s got a big heart and he genuinely does want to help. And so we were looking at 2 or 3 people that may be interested here and their names I can’t recall. And they were approached. Peter came back and…… what are we going to do now. We used to have these stragically meetings and quite unusual what for me because I’m fairly conservative.

I just said, “Why don’t you give me a try?”

And Peter nearly fell over. He slumped back into his chair in his office and said, “Are you for real?”

And I said “Yeah I’m for real.”

And he said, “What does the savior think about this?” I said “I don’t know because I hadn’t mentioned it to her.”

You brave man.

So he said, “What do you think?”

So I said “Well I think she’ll take it with thought.”

So I went home and cause I’d discuss the need for something fresh. And I let her have her main course and then I kind of said, “How would you like to go to Papua New Guinea?”

And she said “Are you being funny?” and I said “No.”

I told her the story and she got up from the table and started running on the spot pumping the air with her fists.

Really. Just like the ad.

Just like the ad and of course from then onwards we started to move… and I guess in that way, previous to that they’d always had people from their own movement go into the missionary spots. So this was a breakthrough I guess in, a new breakthrough of cross-fertilization of giftings being used where he was.
That’s good.

And I think it needs to be said at that time we were both in our 60’s and therefore I saw it in my Christian walk, I’d seen bread and butter as the normal working in the local church. I’d seen the jam as working with the Bethesda movement and I’d seen Mrs Cream on the top of my Christian walk involvement. I’d saw it personally once; I saw it in those catalogues.

Wonderful attitude.

And thoroughly entered into it. If you know Papua New Guinea, you’d realize climatically it’s a very wearing kind of climate.

Particularly on an Englishman.

I suppose the age and also with the bush background, yes. But I had been in Africa for 10 years so it wasn’t that totally bad and it made it easier for me to as simulate into the mission field rather that go out as a cold turkey.

So I dropped in very quickly and my wife did too into functioning with the nationals in Papua New Guinea and unfortunately, I suffered a heart attack in July 1997, which resasititated me finishing up there and coming back to Adelaide. Still really frustrated I guess, one that it had happened but that was my own fault, I’m not blaming anybody for that, I’d had the usual problems and I just said that would never happen to me. And it did.

This was pressure relating to...

Pressure, stress of the new job, its totally different. My own eating habits – wasn’t to keen on exercise especially in Papua New Guinea. You could just stand and get a sweat up. In fact I lost 13 kilos over that time, which didn’t do me any harm but it was too quick. So I came back here frustrated that I hadn’t completed my 3 years, but with a definite heart for missions. So what happened there was once I took 2 months in recoperation and then Pastor Peter said to me just to mention, what ever I wanted to do in the local church or movement I could do. He’d be happy for me to function in any area. But I still had a heart for missions and I had a heart for Living Hope here. I felt it was unfinished work. At that time the missions were being run from Tasmania, Launceston, but the brother who was functioning over there felt he had to give that up and concentrate on his local church. And therefore was a hiatus. So that was put to me and I said yes I would take it over. There was a need and I guess with me that’s a need plus a heart and I followed it.

So when was that when you formally took over the missions?

Let me try and think. I guess that would have been in early 98, very early in 98 – January/February, because I didn’t in fact come back to any kind of functioning within
the local church till about late November. So Christmas or I would have said very early 1998.

Mike, I wonder if I could pick up a comment you made in relation to Peter, Pastor Peter and his big heart? Peter has certainly been central to your Christian experience here and as the founding father of the movement, would you care to make some comments about his role and function in the development of the movements founding and has that changed do you think over the years? It’s certainly; the movements got a lot bigger and his relationship with his membership, would you care to make some comments about Peter?

I guess the thing is of course a year ago that would have been around about 1999/2000 he felt to concentrate more on the local church, which had been suffering as a result of his 50-60% of his time was spent with the movement and that was to the detriment of his own local church. And he felt at that time that it was necessary, it was something he and I had talked about in relationship to the fact of there was aging, our own board here was aging, we’ve got grey hairs, I just bought that up, let him knowing of course they would be the first one to go off because I was also the eldest in that oversight. But we needed to foster the up and coming people and give them the responsibility rather than die and then they had to take it over suddenly. So I guess what’s happened in that, and that infact happened and now of course we have Greg Cush, and Greg and also Mark Crawford who’s taken my role that was and prior to that of course when I left for Papa New Guinea, Colleen Kettle took over from me, took over the role of executive officer. Colleen’s certainly 16-17 years younger than me but now of course we have that and they’re finding their feet. But the fact that Peter is still around to give them advice and for them to talk upon him as an elder statesman, as a father figure, as a mentor, I think has been the greatest thing that has happened.

Yes.

I think he was very near to burnout himself, purely and simply carrying the burdens of the things that were happening in the various churches and it was just too much for one man. I think it was a bit of a diversification as I said earlier into the fact that you have senior men now like Peter Frogley, Greg himself obviously and others, Ken Graham down here in South Australia is a very key kind of person who are now running state groupings and first of all, the people go to them rather than to Peter. I think Peter was in danger of (a) burnout, although he’s a very strong man, and (b) he was not physically very well over the last ten years. So that was a real concern as a colleague, associate of his and I’d like to say as a friend of his.

Of course.

He and I don’t live in each other’s pockets, got a friendship that’s lastest.

That’s right, that’s excellent.
Mike you’ve touched on how Peter’s role in the movement has changed in the sense that he is now perhaps a little more distant from the front line by a necessity because of the increased number but also there’s state mechanisms for people to work through for their immediate needs. What do you think are the key issues that would affect the ongoing development of the movement? It’s progression, we’re now penetrating other countries potentially Africa soon in a greater way?

I think that the movement, if it doesn’t move ahead, doesn’t get fresh impotence, a vision is in danger of stagnating and something stagnant eventually dies and that would be a tragedy. I believe its affiliation to the Australian Christian Churches is probably a move in the right direction, whereby it gains more voice in the spiritual tenor of the country, which is needed at this stage. It’s able to speak up to the things of God with a voice; I think that’s good. I think that here in Australia it has stagnated in its affiliation numbers over the last 5 years. I would ask why that is, I don’t know the answer because I haven’t been in the pit face since 1996 but I know when I was executive officer; there was a steady kind of flow over about 11 years I think it was, maybe 12 years. There was a steady kind of flow of enquiries, research with them, getting to know them, visiting with them, meeting with them and slowly go through the process of the affiliation which is never rushed. But now as I look at the directory, I notice very little fresh churches coming in, I notice the odd one leaving. There’s a stagnation there that concerns me, I don’t know why. I haven’t bothered, I know having handed over the executive officer. I don’t interfere; it’s not my nature. I don’t interfere once I’ve handed it over.

No. It’s a walk away.

I’ve still got a heart for it but I don’t try to influence the people behind it unless they ask any questions, they queue up.

Well, let me put it another way. What would make the movement move in a greater way here in South Australia? Just off the top of your head, what are the issues that would see?

I honestly don’t know. I’ve never given it thought because I guess I’ve never given it thought in the last 5 years because my mind’s been elsewhere. So consequently if I’d been involved in it then obviously I would have a view on that. Sorry about that.

No that’s fine. I just thought I’d ask.

Mike, in your opinion, what difference has the movement made for its membership and for the community in which the member churches function?

I think without a doubt for the membership, the differences made is, I’ve mentioned this before, it’s a sense of belonging. They feel that they have people that they can, we’re gregarious, we’re carers by nature, God’s creation is gregarious, everyone hates being on the outer, being a church without some kind of affiliation or covering leaves you very exposed to attack from the enemy, leaves you very vulnerable. And I think
that’s very much a thing that’s benefited from being affiliated to the movement. That
flows on of course to the people. They too have the sense of belonging. I know many
times here in Bethesda that we’ve had a number of people over the years, who when
they come on holidays, love to come to either Bethesda here, which is still seen as the
mother church, and from where their whole church structure is got some strength. Or to
other surrounding churches wherever they are. But then they say we’re part of the
wider family

That’s right.

Of the church cell. I think that the same things have happened for the churches
themselves also happen to the people. And of course it gives them the basic structure of
worship, basic structure of teaching and a basic structure of spirituality.

What do you think would make the movement more affective in having a positive,
making or contributing to a positive difference for its members in the ministry itself?

I think the danger; let me call it the danger rather than the positives. The danger is that
we can become so cosy in the relationship of the affiliation that we cease to have a
hunger for evangelisation. We cease to have a hunger on social interaction, being part
of a social fabric of the country. Therefore we’ve become introverted and a little
retiring, I would see the necessity of movement. And I think this will happen to a
degree now with the affiliation with A.C.C. but I would like to see the movement, even
in its own right, that Peter or Greg or any of the others, if they make themselves
available to state their view on equivantly with, if they believe strongly in something
and want which the movement itself strongly, they probably need to let their light shine
a bit more brighter.

Do you have any thoughts on why some member churches and indivials leave the
movement?

Yes, I do. One having come with good intentions and really wanting things I’ve
mentioned, they sometimes have a personal agenda of which they think is a good idea,
they try to push this agenda and if it’s resisted for whatever reasons, by the executive or
the annual general meeting of people, if that’s done, then they’re inclined to spit the
dummy and say this group is unspiritual. Maybe because of the gender. I think in some
cases that we’ve seen that where that’s within the movement itself we’ve had to come
to grips where ministries especially have fallen under the problems that have been
worldwide across the denominations of greed and money, problems in immorality and
the third one of course is the big one – pride where God says I will give my glory to no
man and many people because the gifts of the spirit have been operating through them,
haven’t given glory to God but taken on themselves and have fallen. When
apprehended in love, and with a sense of reconciling, and bringing them back, they’ve
refused to accept that and of course then have not only have left but have rejected the
movement and in fact in some cases..

It’s sad.
But having said that there’s nothing happening in the movement that isn’t happening right across the Christian spectrum.

*What opportunities do you see for the movement for the future?*

I see it really as only in its present level it will be a part of a jigsaw puzzle of the Pentecostal/charismatic network within this country. It will never probably rise to the level of volume wise and so forth of the Assemblies of God, which is well established in Australia. Therefore I believe within its structure of the A.C.C. that it will bring a voice of to those councils it will bring a voice of the need for outreach, will bring a voice for the need for the things that have been outstrengthened which is the sense of relying on the sense of fellowship and just there, which sometimes the bigger you get the less that comes in, you just become a number and I would like to see the movement as it has done on a number of occasions foster especially amongst the Pentecostal/charismatic fields, a more sense of cross over from time to time of ministry and learning from the others. Another words, I guess well I probably leave that to another question, there’s one other thing I’d like to say.

*Please do, go right ahead.*

Ok. If I had one wish a prayer would be that the sense of denominationalism, which I think, is breaking down and I really do believe that its nice the change in 20 years is unbelievable. The sense of denominational there we accept each other in Jesus Christ, we accept a diversity and a difference is and we work together and what I’m very excited about aver the current time is either 2 things I think need to be and that’s where the church is and I’m talking about the protestant and the Catholics work together to take our cities to Christ. I’m very interested in praying in that area and involved in that area in the current time where I believe people don’t take churches and denomination seriously because they are soon fighting amongst themselves. My prayer is that they would see the united front with a diversity of doctrines. With basic doctrines in common, diversity of operation but one in desire.

*That’s good and if you had a second wish, what would that be?*

Second wish, I believe would be an addition to that or come from that. I’d like to see the churches and the people, the movement people included obviously become get out of their gettos and their local church, what I call naval gassing and start to move in the area of Jesus Christ would see going to the whole world and preach the gospel. Let’s get back to the good old basic of evangelism and not be afraid of people’s faces.

Sounds good.

Well it the…

*It sure is. Thanks Mike for your time. Any closing comments concerning the history as you reflect back after many years of service?*
Yes I guess I’d like to say what a privilege its been to be part of something in to be very involved in it, to be able to see it at the stage it is now, to be able to pray for its future and desires its future and to see it becoming an intrical part of the Pentecostal/charismatic stream in Australia and centered parts in the counsels in that area but not just for the sake of just being there. But because of the testimony which is about to be invited to that and I guess if I’ve had anything to do with that and as a result of that, that eventually I go to be with the Lord, I get there good and faithful servant that is all I want.

Wonderful. Mike thanks so much for your time, it’s been a pleasure talking to you.

Thank you.