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Foster, Wendell

Mark Naison

Interviewee: Rev. Wendell Foster
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
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[START OF TAPE 1; SIDE 1]

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): —Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. We're interviewing Reverend Wendell Foster, the pastor of Christ Church on Forest Avenue, who was the first African American to be elected to the city council from the Bronx. We're joined by Dr. Mark Chapman, who is a professor of African American Studies and Theology at Fordham University, and Dr. Peter Derek (sp?) who is the Chief Archivist for the Bronx County Historical Society. On this interview, we'll focus on your background, your ministry, and how you came to run for the city council, and hopefully we'll get beyond 1970. [laughter]

Okay, what part of the country did you grow up in?

Reverend Wendell Foster (WF): I was born in Alabama, a small town called Elba, E-L-B-A. It's on the [inaudible] bay, [inaudible], in a completely racist, segregated community. And my father, I never knew. He died of, either—one story is—I was less than three years of age. The only thing I remember about it is, in those days, blacks did not have funeral homes. They would lay the bodies out in the home. And I just remember a lot of people dressed in black, and a lot of screaming, "Harold." So for years I had nightmares as a result of that. And after my brothers and sisters took him away from the house [inaudible] a lot of people in an emotional state, started crying. Of course, as a baby, it just shook me up. My mother was left with seven children. We—when she died, when I was twelve years of age, my older brother took me with him to live in Birmingham, Alabama. And there I spent interesting years. I lived with him and his wife and three daughters. And it was there that I was placed in the reform school. Not that I had

committed a crime, but in Birmingham—the South—in those days, it's still like that to an extend, sent—it's still like that, like in upstate New York—they'll build the prisons just for the convenience of the ordinance of the people. So the crime was, that I had committed the crime of having no mother and father. I had tried to explain that I was living with my brother, I was at his home, but they didn't hear it. So, God was good, and I was able to get out, which seldom happened then. I thought I would.

MN: Were you in high school at the time that you were in, or—when you were arrested?

WF: Well, I was twelve years of age. Let's see, where was I then?

MN: You were put in reform school at twelve years of age?

WF: I didn't stay there. I was there just for a few weeks, or a month or so. They use the kids in the reform school simply as slave laborers. Birmingham was a metropolis, like most big cities close to Birmingham, of the fallen communities, and other communities. So the reform school kids, like the prisoners—most famous prison in the state was called Kill Me Prison (?). And the Kill Me Prison was used also as just a slave camp. You didn't have to commit a crime. Already the crime was being black. And I remember the day when I went into a restricted parking zone for handicapped people, and the police would say, "Hey, that's for handicapped." I said, "I am handicapped, I'm black." Being black was a handicap. [laughs] So I was in there for just a matter of weeks or a month before I was out—but long enough to experience what was happening. It was in there that I first discovered that boys rape boys. And they line you up. And it so happened

that—I guess this is one of the reasons I believe in God, because the miracle was that the bully had stopped them from assaulting me. He sad, "That one's mine. Don't touch him." So I dreaded him. He said, "Boy, take a shower, boy, and go to bed." Nothing happened.

So I moved from Birmingham to Jersey City. Well, first of all, I left Birmingham because I just hated it. I saw things happen that you won't believe. That's why when I read about what's happening in Iraq and all these things, it doesn't surprise me. We still have the same thing. I saw black women raped. I saw black men beaten up for no reason at all. I remember my sister had come from the hospital with pneumonia. And it was a rainstorm, and we were on our way to the house, and they stopped the bus, and put us out in the rain, because they needed to leave room for white people to sit down. And all these incidents that I experienced. And then they had a rather ruthless policeman that would come around the schools, and whenever they had proms and things of that sort, he'd always show up. And he had a favorite quote: "Nigger, do you love my mother?" And if you said "No," he'd beat the hell out of you. He said, "How dare a nigger like you not love my mother? What's wrong with her?" And so I'd say no, and I'd be beaten for saying no. And then they'd ask the next black fella: "Do you love my mother?" So that fellow, who'd seen me get beaten up for saying no, and he said "Yes." And he beat that one up, and say "How dare you, nigger, love my mother. My mother's a white woman." And the stopping him was not by the authorities, because you had no one to appeal to. But another [inaudible] black fella that they claimed was crazy. They said—policeman said, "Nigger, do you love my mother?" He said, "Hell no. Why should I love a bitch that would give birth to something like you?" [laughter] And when the policemen reached for his Billy club, he caught it, and took his gun, and took the Billy club, and beat the cop up. And the other policeman was waiting down at the door.

He walked up with the Billy club and the gun and said, "Your partner would like you to hold this for him. The partner [inaudible] come down, because he's bloody." After that, Sualy George [sp?] never came back to that school again.

So all these experiences where I saw: I remember going into department stores where you could only shop at a certain counter, after the last white person was served. You could not try anything on: shoes, hats, clothes, whatever. You'd have to buy them. If they didn't fit, that was too bad. They—So all of this was something familiar to me—

MN: Reverend, what year was this? Mid 30s?

WF: It had to be. My mother died in '37—I think it was '37, or '33. So it was right about—I'm not very good at dates.

Dr. Mark Chapman (MC): You were born in what year?

WF: 1924. I'm 80. [Phone rings]

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

WF: —No, last year. My daughters gave me a surprise 80th birthday, and I called my brother, who is my senior. [inaudible] my senior by about two years, he was in [inaudible] school in California, and I said, "Hey, I had a wonderful time at the church today." He said, "What

happened. That's unusual." I said, "My daughters gave me an 80th birthday party." He said, "They gave you what?" and I said, "80th birthday party." He said, "Who told you were 80?" "That's what they did." He said, "They were not there when you were born. I was. You're not 80." And that goes to another thing about Alabama: in the rural communities, we didn't have doctors. In the small town I was born in, there were two doctors. And only one doctor would treat black patients—and only after he ran out of white patients. Many of our people—black people—have no birth certificates. They were delivered by midwives. And I don't have a birth certificate. That goes back to [inaudible] law. By law, I can't prove my birth. So, years later, I'm skipping around Alabama and I needed a passport to get a birth certificate. I had to get one with a statement. And the standard at the captain building downstairs, where you would get birth certificates was a wino—a drunken white wino. I mean you could smell him before you got to reach him. And you say to him before you went to him upstairs, "Well, whatever you want to come upstairs and get, give me ten dollars now. Otherwise, you pay more when you come down." So you go upstairs and tell him you need a birth certificate. And then you've got to prove that you were born. You got to give proof of your mother, your father, etc.—an absolute witness to the fact that you were born. And that white person would do that. And so you'd go downstairs, and that little joker said, "Well, I told you. It's $25 now." And he said, "What was your mother's name?" And you would say that. "What was your daddy's name?" And I would tell him. And he said, "okay." He went upstairs—

Now, I'm gonna again skip ahead, but I was ready to set up my social security after I decided to retire. I went to the office on Jerome Avenue and 161st street. And the woman looked it up and she said, "You have three birth certificates. Three dates. Which one do you want?" I said,

"Which one's best for me?" [laughter]. She said, "Oh, you gonna take the one that makes you oldest." I said, "That's the day I was born. I was there when I was born." So that—

So, throughout all that, as I got this job working at a drugstore, at this time my sister in law, who never really appreciated that my brother had taken us in—

MN: Now, you were working at a drugstore in Birmingham?

WF: In Birmingham, as a delivery boy.

MN: Now were you in school at the time also?

WF: If I could. When my sister in law actually put me out, though she would say she didn't—which made it that—The only time I could eat in my brother's house was when he was home.

Unknown Man (UM): Wow.

WF: If she would have something in the kitchen, my brother would leave for work, and I'm gonna tell you what he did: when he'd leave, she'd snatch the plate. So, all day, it was a good long day, and she would let us swing on my brother's front porch. So I would sit a swing. So she told him: Come on Tony, get up, I want to sit down. So he'd sit in the swing and stretch out like, and use the whole swing, and I'd sit there all day on the porch, on the floor.

This was at the time that I went into the kitchen to eat, and she would snatch the plate. And I'd put it on the table and she'd put it back. And so she told [inaudible]. She doesn't want to hear this, because she has, in her whole lotta years, she has developed into a supposedly loving sister-in-law. So, as a result of that, I got a room. Rented a room while I tried to go to school. And the thing that I remembered most about the rented room was that in the winter time, when it was cold, I asked for a blanket. And the old landlady won't give me one. And one day, her son came upstairs with a blanket for a roomer. And he said, "Here's a blanket. The man downstairs just died."

So I got this job at the drugstore, [inaudible]. And I was a porter, cleanup man, delivery man, whatever. We couldn't eat there. If we wanted something to drink, they give you a paper cup. But I had to wash dishes for the white folk. We—later I got a job at a –[phone rings]—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

MN: You were saying you worked in a restaurant?

WF: I was ordered to go to school. And after a while I had to leave that, because it was a full-time day job. In fact, you'd come in at 6 in the morning until whatever time they decided to close. So, I was walking down the street one day, quite hungry, looking for a job. And a black man approached me and said, "you look like you're hungry." And I said, "I am." "Come over here, you want a job?" I said "Yes." And he gave me a job as a busboy. He said, "You know how

to bus dishes?" I said, "Yes, I was doing work [inaudible]." I never heard of a busboy, I never heard of busing dishes. So he showed me how to bus dishes, take them off the table—dirty dishes—and help him set up tables. [inaudible] But before I started to work, the fella, the chef, said, "Would you like something to eat?" and he gave me a full plate of food, and I ate it—I guess like a hog. So he gave me another plate. He said, "Well, you're hungry." I said, "Yes sir." He said, "When did you last eat." And I said, "I don't really remember." Which was true.

But prior to renting the room, I had the experience of sleeping on park benches, and actually eating out of garbage cans. And that's when I discovered, accidentally, that newspaper can be a good covering when it gets cold. So I got this job where I work form 2 o'clock in the afternoon to 2 o'clock in the morning. I dropped out of school, and one man had an interest in me. I had never made less than an A or A+. And I remember the first time I—One young lady got an A+ and I got an A, I almost had a nervous breakdown, cause I didn't imagine anyone was smarter than I was [chuckles]. But Mr. White—Arnold White was his name—the teacher, was interested in me. I also, prior to Mr. White, before I got the job at the restaurant, I worked at a black movie theater. And it was such a tremendous bargain, because they had three feature films, two or three what they called chapter films—"to be continued next week." So you go in there at 8—11 o'clock in the morning, [inaudible]. Mr. White would come by every single day after school. My job was to sell sodas. I walked up and down the aisle selling candies. And he'd come by and buy a ticket, and come to the candy counter and spend the time talking with me, and "How you doing" and et cetera. "Do you like this?" "No." "Why don't you come back to school?" And I would say, "No, Mr. White, I can't. I need the job." In the meantime, prior to leaving school, the kids had given me a nickname: my name was Ragman.

MN: Ragman?

WF: A rag. And they—the school newspaper said, I remember the other boy's name, Brady Cuts (sp?), and Wendell Foster are still running neck and neck: Brady Cuts is still the meanest boy in school, and Foster is still the Raggedest Boy in school. And they didn't lie, because I was raggedy. I really was. I went to school without shoes in the wintertime and would tell them that I had a race to run, so the kids wouldn't laugh at me. So I dropped out, and I was hungry. And Mr. White would always bring an apple or orange or and extra sandwich and say, "I don't know what's wrong with my stupid wife. She knows I can only eat one sandwich. Why did she put two in here? I don't eat apples, and I don't eat—" And he said, "Take it and give it to some kid who may be hungry." And I would take it, go into the boy's room and lock the door and cry like a baby as I ate. Other times, when he felt that I was—when I felt too proud, because the kids were laughing, what we'd do was Mr. White stepped over, and he'd put it in the garbage can in the men's room. And I'd wait around and eat it.

It's not fun eating out of a garbage can, but it's better than starving. And I did that for a while. And then I got this job working at the restaurant. Mr. White had convinced me to go back to school, and I couldn't tell him that I had to work. I had to be at school—at work at 2 o'clock. And I was more interested in the security of a warm place to work and something to eat, and the money they pay you. If I remember correctly, I only think I made about three dollars and fifty cents a week. But the point is I could get something to eat. And they had a place upstairs where the black help could relax between meals, cause they'd close after lunch hour—

MN: So this was a white owned restaurant?

WF: White owned restaurant. They close after lunch hour, and open again at 5 o'clock. So between, say, 2 o'clock and 5 o'clock you could go upstairs and rest or finish your work while you finish the table.

So I began to save my money, and one day I was working at the restaurant, taking the garbage down to the garbage room. I found a newspaper, *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black publication. I'd never seen a black publication. I read about blacks in school, and blacks doing this, that, and the other, and it just shook me up. I took it out of the garbage and I cherished it. And later on I found another paper from Chicago, another paper like that. Now we did have a black newspaper in Birmingham, called the *Birmingham World*. I also saw the *Birmingham World.* They gave me a job, but I didn't sell enough papers to merit even the time they gave me. So I began—I read how blacks were making in other places. And I decided that I wanted to go North. I saved my money, and I decided to go wherever I could: Detroit, Chicago, New York.

Chicago was my first choice. I don't know why. I'm guessing because I read the *Chicago* [inaudible] and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. But I went to the bus station and the White waiting room over there, Black window over here, no waiting room with it. And I stood there—this is unbelievable—12 hours trying to buy a ticket to go North. And the reason I had to stay so long is each time I'd get the other window, a white person came and [inaudible] "Boy you wait. Nigger, you wait while I serve this white person." So by the time they got to me, she said, "Where do

you want to go?" And I don't remember what I asked her but she told me that I wanted a bus to New York. I don't remember. All I do know is a bought a ticket. One-way ticket to New York City. And I rode on that bus day and night, cause it was a long ride. Of course, Greyhound stops—

MN: How old were you at that time?

WF: About 12.

MN: So this was not that long after those other experiences.

WF: Everything, all of these incidents happened—See what happened is: when you are growing up by yourself, you have to press a lot of years of learning into a few years. I knew I—something, I just felt that something was out there bigger for me. So at 12 years of age, after my mother died, I think she died in March of my 12th year, and I was 12 in February, because she had always prayed that God would let her live to see us become adults like her. Her background, a twelve-year-old person becomes a man. So I was never good at sports, even as a child. But I loved books and reading. So I compressed a number of years, skipping grades, and sometimes being promoted, often so they promoted me not because I was so smart but because I was so raggedy I was embarrassing the teachers. I left there. At this time I was also attending classes at Miles College, and also I was trying to go to high school, moved from Licham (sp?) what was then called Industrial High (Sp?).

MN: So you were taking classes at Miles College at thirteen years old?

WF: I was not quite thirteen.

See, what could they prove? Since all blacks look alike. And they didn't care. There were two colleges in Birmingham: Daniel Payne College run by the African Methodists Episcopal Church, and Miles College, run by the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. So I was going from place—I just wanted, if I had no job, I couldn't stay in the room with this dead man's blanket, because, quite frankly, I was afraid of it. So wherever I could go and do things without getting in trouble, I did it.

So, I got the bus and came up to New York. And I remember when we reached Washington, DC, someone said, "You don't have to sit in the back of the bus. You can sit wherever you want to." I came into New York City, landed at the old Greyhound bus terminal, which was then at 49th street, they had an old cross at old Madison Square Garden. I don't know if any of you old enough to remember where it used to be. I had one bag, and I asked the baggage man if I could leave it there. And he said, "Yes." And I began to walk around looking for a job. [inaudible] Well the first job I found was a flyer advertising workers for a Fresh Air Farm. Well the Fresh Air Farm was catered to kids my age. But I was never a child, because after the death of my father, we all worked. 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock in the morning, 5 o'clock, my mother would have use go out to the cotton field. You'd get dressed in the car and the trucks would be there waiting to take you to a cotton field—

MN: And this is when you were living in Elba?

WF: Yeah, when my mother was alive. So I never knew not to work, because things were so tough she needed whatever we could get, through little handmade crocus sack as she called it, when she put it around your shoulder, pull it as you picked cotton.

And—I'm just skipping back and forth.

MN: That's okay.

WF: But, as I said, I always read whatever I could. And I had a good mind. And this farmer had a child, a little boy. And for some reason—I don't know who told him, but they said I was a genius. I knew everything for a kid my age. So then he told me that if I would teach his son to read and talk to his son about things that his son needed to know, I wouldn't have to go in the cotton field.

MN: And this is in Elba?

MN: In Elba. So I got out of picking hot cotton in the hot sun because—even now I don't like the hot sun. when I served in a church in Bermuda, I would never go out in the son when I can. They have a joke that when we go to the—my wife is from Bermuda—we go home, as they call it. I see the hotel room and nothing else. But the sunshine, I guess, it's like [inaudible] cotton fields. They made me sick.

So, as I said, I got to New York City, and so this added pressure. But prior to that ad, I'm walking down the street and across the street was the famous Roxy Bowling Alley. And I know I'm dating you guys.

MN: This is in Manhattan?

WF: In Manhattan [crosstalk]. And they gave me a job as a pinboy.

MN: Right, I remember, there was still pinboys in the bowling alleys when I was just, when I was growing up.

WF: That's right. You stood behind and put the pins there before they threw another ball. The man—they must've been short—so they gave me not one alley, but three to work.

MN: Wow.

WF: Now, I worked so hard that when I finished my hands were so swollen, by this time one man, one fella, as I walked out, one fella told me that I could get a room at the YMCA. He took me up to Harlem. That's why, you see—everything that's happened to me would make me believe there was a God somewhere. Of course, this man could've killed me, raped me. But he took me to the Harlem Y. I went to a room. There was a lot of people there. He went to the back room, and I don't know whether he was drinking or using drugs, but he wouldn't let me come

into that room, and took me to the YMCA on 135th street. Got me a room there. And so I got the room like tonight. The next day I'd sign up for Fresh Air Farm. But I could not undress after I worked for that bowling alley, because my hands were so swollen. I slept in the bowling alley—I mean, the bed—I guess all day and all night. When I could undo my clothes, the Fresh Air people offered me this job working as a dishwasher. I guess when I get to heaven, I'll be a dishwasher [laughter]. So I ended up at the Fresh Air Farm.

MN: Was this at a camp? A dishwasher at a camp?

WF: And kids wanted you to know them. White people wanted to, black people wanted to. Mostly white, because in those days Fresh Air only catered to [inaudible] and whites. And we cleaned the dorms and washed the dishes and served for kids our age. And while they're wherever, you know, I used to came back and [inaudible]

MN: So you were living at the Harlem Y at 13 years old?

WF: [laughs] Then I happened to call Alabama to speak to my mother's sister. And she said, "You know, your mother's brother lives in Jersey City."

UM: Your mother's brother?

WF: Which is her brother as well. And I said "No, I didn't know." She said, "Well, here's his telephone number. You call him." And I didn't. [inaudible] Well my mother was suffering in

sickness, still trying to bring up seven kids. And perhaps her brothers, who were better off, could've come to her aid financially, and they didn't. So therefore, not knowing that they may not have been able to, I became quite bitter, so I refused to call him. So she called. I called her back. She said, "Did you call him?" I said, "No." And she said, "Well I did call him." And he told her how to get to Jersey City. I went to Jersey City, and he had a truck where he sold coal, wood and kerosene. We came home. His wife was in bed. She had suffered an allergy. When she had sinus trouble she had to go to bed. It was the humidity. And she introduced her, "Well this is your sister's [inaudible]." She began to cry and embrace me and said, "Son." That was the first time I'd ever been called son in a while. "I want you to come live with me." And I told her I'd think about. And I thought about it in less time than it would take you to turn that machine on. [laughter] Went back to New York, called the Y and got my belongings, and moved into Jersey City.

MN: This was your mother's brother.

WF: My mother's brother, right. And they were there: Lokiem, L-O-K-I-E-M and Suzy. They were the parents that I did not have. And they had one daughter, and had lost their son, Emitt, in infancy. And they substituted me, I guess, for Emitt. My cousin Louise and I became not cousins but brother and sister. Because whatever they did for her, they would do for me. And every Sunday morning, I woke up, and they just had everyone in house around the kitchen table and say prayers. And I went to church and Sunday school. That's one thing I promised my mother on her deathbed. I didn't mention that. My mother was dying, and before she died, she had us, all three of us, my sister Rebecca, and my brother Howard come to her bed, and she told us she was

going to die. She said she was tired, sick, but if we could just trust [inaudible], God would take care of us. Of course, I was just filled with heartache, crying and weeping, and she put her hand on my head. I remember it like it was yesterday. And she said, "I want you to make me a promise that you'll always go to Sunday school [inaudible]." I made that promise. And that's the beginning of my story. So I lived in Jersey City. And I would go back to Alabama, because I still wanted to study at Miles and Payne. And—

MN: Now, what church did your mother's brother belong to?

WF: Called Pisjah, P-I-S-J-A-H, AME church in Jersey City. 860 Forest Avenue in Jersey City. And I studied there. And many time I had to fly into Alabama about my age, because I'd be going to see a movie with [inaudible] and Robert Talyor about the great Navy, and how these men just had to be stupid enough to keep their [inaudible]. So I signed up to join the service. And I was not yet 13, I was just hungry and disgusted, and I said I was 19. So in Jersey City the lie caught up with me and one evening the FBI came to my uncle's house, looking for me. And said, "Don't you know there's a war going on?" I said, "Of course I do. Everybody knows there's a war going on. It's got nothing to do with me" He said, "It does. You're draft dodging." "What do you mean I'm draft-dodging." He said, "You are 19 years old, almost 20, and you should have been in the service by now." So they took me in, and locked me up in Armory.

MN: This is in Jersey City?

WF: [inaudible] was close to Frank Machine—again organized crime. Frank Hayes ran Jersey City.

MN: Right, right.

WF: He ran New Jersey. And they called him Frank "Am the Law" Hayes. And that came about because Norman Thomas tried to have a rally over there. And Norman Thomas talked about the Constitution, the law says this, that, and the other. And he got him arrested and said, "I am the law." And he was the law.

So my uncle, with his coal truck, every election day he would not sell coal. He would deliver Turkeys. The black folk that voted for Hayes, the captains, received turkeys. And the slogan was, the first time I hear it, I hear it all the time now, but the first time I heard it was from my uncle, where they said, "Vote often and vote early." You a captain and went to vote, and if you put out X number of votes, you got more than one turkey. So my uncle would take the one day of voting, and keep all the turkeys. And he'd deliver you a turkey, give you two turkeys. And you couldn't use two turkeys, so he'd come back and get another turkey, the second turkey, for doing nothing. And they third or fourth day he would have seven turkeys. He let me work with him for a while, but he thought the work was too tough, and I had an opening in my back from when I was I think three years of age or earlier. Of course in those days they didn't suction it out. They would operate, and put a tube in there. And so that was still tender, even though it went a year, and I tried [inaudible], and at night I'd be miserable. I would have to wrap a sheet around my back to

try and [inaudible] the pain. Well anyway, when they took me to Armory he was able to get me out, because of the connection with Frank Machine.

I went into the Navy reluctantly. I refused, by this time my Uncle's coal truck got in trouble. I got a job working in the Government Warehouse. And the commanding officer of that warehouse was a Texan who was as big as a [inaudible]. So I organized a demonstration against his administration. And the compromise was that if I called off the—I was just a child, alone for 8 years, and people listened to me, and they called the demonstration. And so they had someone write a letter on my behalf saying I was a good boy, when I went to take the [inaudible] . So I took the [inaudible], and then we took place with the induction center.

"So you know what the captain says?" So I said, "yes?" "He's recommended you go North." I said, "Yes, sir." In that case [inaudible]. So they put me on the train to drive, to go from Jersey City to the Great Lakes Naval base in Illinois.

MN: And this year you're 13 years old?

WF: No, about 14.

MN: About 14.

WF: I was always ahead of my time. That's why at that age—because I was never—The first birthday I ever had was when my daughters threw one for me last year. I never had a birthday

party, because when other kids would be having birthdays, I'd be out there working trying to just live. Someone [inaudible] got me out of there, lock up. They were taking me up to Danbury for [inaudible] as a draft-dodger. Put me on the train, going to the Great Lakes. And that's when the trouble started.

I had not read Ghandi. I just developed the nonviolent attitude. They said that my father was a very mean and vicious man, and that was in the Foster blood. All the Fosters were supposed to be fighters and mean men and all this. And they told me a story about my father walking twelve miles to kill a man for walking across his garden [chuckles]. He told a man not to walk across his garden in front of the house, and the man did it. So my father walked six miles to buy some shells and six miles back to kill the man. And my mother was the only person that could constrain him. And he had a mother, Charlotte, the meanest woman in the world. There is no doubt in my mind that she had to be the mother of the devil. Grandma Charlotte liked only one person, and that was my first cousin Harrison.

MN: This is your father's mother?

WF: Yes, she hated everything and everyone except this grandson Harrison. They would claim that that woman was so mean that on the night the day she died, the sun was shining and it was hailing the same time. [laughter] Then other things they said about her: when they tried to bury her in the summer time, the ground froze. I don't know whether that was true or not, but I know that she was a mean, mean person. And so that was a part of my heritage I guess. So—and going back to school in Birmingham—the reason I became, I guess, nonviolent, is because two

reasons: I tried to kill my brother Harold. And I wasn't trying to kill him. We were playing, Howard—They would not let me play ball, because I was always small. The only time I could play with them was when one kid had to go home. So, therefore, I took an axe and made myself a little dam, and began to play with it. My brother said, "Come one, man, you can play." And I said, "No." And he kicked my dam in, and I swung the axe at him, and hit his foot and cut his toe off [laughter]. And when my mother chastised me for cutting his toe, I honestly admitted I was aiming at his head. Which is stupid I guess. And then the other thing that made me nonviolent was the school, Lincoln, in Birmingham. We was at this basketball practice, and we sat in the bleachers. And this kid said something to me. I think he wanted to play the dozens with me. And having just lost my mother, I guess I was sensitive. So they claimed I picked him up and threw him all the way down—I don't know where I threw him, but when the teacher pulled me out, he was down on the bottom bleeding. And as a result of that, I just decided I didn't believe in violence, because I didn't want to carry on the reputation of my crazy father.

So when they took me to the Great Lakes, I refused to bear arms. Still a kid, you know, gave me a rifle, I would not take the rifle. And I think it was a segregated community—naval base—and we had the meanest person there as our, I guess, I don't know what you call , but he was in charge. Bad ass Brown they called him. Mean, vicious man. And he told me, "Well, you gonna carry this rifle whether you want to or not." The truth of it, we didn't have rifles. Blacks were not trained with real rifles. You never read about this. They were given wood—axehandle and something made like a rifle [laughter]. And so you were supposed to take it and do the drilling. So he said, "Well, you just drill. I promise I won't put it against you, against your own will." So I served my time in a segregated community in a Great Lakes Naval Base. And, still underage,

they sent me to Captain Compton California (sp?). Still underage. From Compton they sent me to Hawaii. Now, I had in Birmingham—remember I told you I used to work at this theater. And I'd go up and talk to the projectionist, or go out and get his food for him. And he showed me how to operate the projection machine, et cetera. So, when I got to this base in Oahu, I was the only person there that knew how to operate a motion picture machine. So they let me do that, and put me in charge of Special Services. And I didn't even know what being in Special Services was. Special Service Office, one condition: it was supposed to have a white officer over us. And we were supposed to be responsible for USO shows and anything else and movies, etc. And I had that job, until one day the men had been out working all night on the boats, and they came in, and after breakfast, they had something to eat. And the day crew would view the movie. And I had gotten this movie, showed it to them, and the men had seen it. But the white commanders wanted me to show it again, because what I called whores—I shouldn't' have said that, but their women that they had picked up downtown who wanted to see it. So I made a serious error. I had cut it off and put a new movie on. And then they raised hell about that. And from the booth—The booth had a sound system connected to the stage. And the one on the stage reached the whole camp. So, trouble was my name, and when the white officers come up there with their wives and girlfriends and mistresses mostly, young people, young women, "How are you?" Black fellas would be sitting down. They wanted to sit in the theater. So they got up. "You're out here working all day and the white officer's going to the beach and doing nothing." And a man who was our commanding officer, who was a man by the name of Grady Evat (Sp.), from Mississippi. And his speech for us was, "I have never been in the Navy. I know nothing about the Navy, but I'm from Mississippi and they needed a white man to do —

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

WF: —Went to a movie—segregated of course, in the balcony. And I had to—you know, when the [inaudible] comes and you have to—

MN: This was in Alabama?

WF: In Alabama, in Elba.

MN: In Elba.

WF: We were going to see a western movie. A cowboy movie. And we saw this in the cowboy movie, saved my brother's life. We walked through—there was a—the town square, a courthouse, Gerber Pecks, Markenberger Mont (sp?), in the—And on Saturday mostly white people sat out. Men would come in, set out in the courthouse. And in the summer I was passing through, not saying a word to anyone—because we were taught not to—and I heard some white fellow say he was bored. And another folk said, "I know what we can do. Let's lynch a nigger." And they stood up and started chasing us, and we started running. Being small, they chased my brother, and I got away. He jumped in the river. And it was called Pee River (?). And he said the thing that saved his life was in that western movie: we saw this cowboy take a reed and put it in his mouth while he was hiding from outlaws under the water. I ran home and told my mother that

they were after Howard, and I think they caught him. And I say the last time I saw him he was—he jumped in the river, but I didn't see him come up. That night, all lights were off in the house. And my mother wouldn't let us have lights, because she was fearful of the white men coming in to get little Howard, or get any of us. Later that morning, early that morning, Howard and I had to go through a password, a whistle word. I heard him whistle, and he came in. But my mother would not let Howard be seen anywhere, by anyone for the next week or so. Because—and we committed no crime, just walking through. But the point is they—and I think they meant it as a joke—but and the ones that started—see, like one started chasing us, the other white guys started running behind them. So, the ones that started, I think would've gotten started, and got either [inaudible] or they were too embarrassed to say there nothing wrong. So, we lived with that and a lot of other things that hurt, were dreadful.

So, when I was in the Navy, I refused to bear arms. I just said I wasn't gonna go shoot anyone. This white, religious man asked why, and I said, "Well, if I steal from you, I can give it back to you. If I take your life, I can't." So, and I caught hell at Great Lakes. And I mean, I caught hell. And I couldn't eat hardly, because they would make the other blacks—if you didn't obey, they wouldn't have to hurt you, they'd just get their housewives. And I guess they were just trying to survive themselves, so they would gang up on me. I remember the Great Lakes I stayed hungry most of the time because—

[PHONE RINGS. CUT OUT]

MN: You were saying that you had trouble eating at the Great Lakes?

WF: There are bullies in the Navy, or whatever organization. It's just a name. And I did not curse. I did not [inaudible]. I spent most of my time as I always did, and I still do, reading. I've always been a loner, and I think, analyzing it, I became a loner to survive. I was quite small growing up. I couldn't play as well as other kids, so I guess I just began—and I fell in love with books in the strangest way. My sister in law, before she ordered me out of the house, told a lie to my brother, and my brother punished my by making me stay in the room while all the kids were out playing. I found a either history book or geography book in the room, and—what it was, it was geography. And I had to stay in the room, and I began to read. And I began to claim countries and places where I would one day go.

MN: This was in Birmingham?

WF: Yeah, and I was a kid, when I first moved, when I was twelve years of age. As God willed it, later when I became a partner or a peace consul, God enabled me to travel to 109 countries in the world. And most every country that I put my finger on in that geography book, I visited. The first one was a little country called Cope [inaudible], in Hawaii. Only God knew that I would wind up pastor in Bermuda, and marry my wife. And last week we celebrated 40 years of marriage. And the strangest thing about it: we never had a single date. So, I was praying that God would send me a wife, and I described— Liber (sp?) had told us, Noah's tiller, I think one of them said, general prayers aren't prayers. You can't throw a prayer up and expect God to run around getting it. Specify what you want. So I practiced that. What I wanted, how I wanted her to look, and what I wanted her to—so, she said when we were getting ready to get married, I never

asked her to marry me. I said, "[inaudible (wife's name?)], can you play the organ, can you type. Could you do church music?" [laughter] "could you live as a minister's wife?" Because my wife came from a family that was not well off. Let's put it this way: She had a—they had a housekeeper. She never made a man-cooked meal, and they didn't even [inaudible] because she was beautiful, had a good mind, they were always hoping to develop her. So I married her, discovered that she had never cooked a meal. And the first omlet she cooked for me was as sticky as your tape recorder [laughter], and that's why it has to stay.

At the Great Lakes they would stop me at the chow line, as I got to the front of the line. They would push me out of the line, and sometimes wouldn't let me in. Because in this time, I'm not sure, it was just that they wanted to get in to eat. And I'm not sure this was done purposefully, or whether they [inaudible] themselves. What I'm gonna say is I do that because I refused, again, bearing arms, et cetera, within the special unit, after running the motion picture—that I do know that at the Naval base, they did put the word out that other kids—blacks—to get me. And I remember time and time again I would get in the chow line at food time. I would stay there, and the moment I reached the door, someone would kick me, push me out of the way. And the petty officer's say, "Go get in the back of the line." By the time I had gotten back to the chow hole, chow was over. But one day—and this happened both in Birmingham and the reform school. In the reform school, happened at Great Lakes, and it happened in the Naval base overseas—and this is why I know there's a God somewhere. The bully in all three places, pushed others out and they didn't get anything to eat. And I remember vividly in the morning in Oahu, he said, "No, he's not in your place. He's in my place, and I dare you to push him out of my place." And that's how I got to eat. That was before they discovered I knew how to run a motion picture machine.

And I knew nothing about USO shows or [inaudible]. I just read a lot. Every paper that came to the base, I read. So they had me in charge of Welfare and Recreation.

MN: This is in Hawaii?

WF: Yeah. The guy who used to referee for Joe LaRousa, famous [inaudible], whatever his name was, he came to the troops. [inaudible] and those people came, and I was the guy that had to set it up. Now it didn't take much imagination: you only had one stage. You had two dressing rooms that went up. It was all imagination, and they thought I was doing something magnificent! It was nothing! Because you've got your orders from headquarters that came down from San Francisco: "This man's gonna be there. This officer's gonna be there. This is what you need." So it was all written out. And they thought it was my stuff. So, the night I got in real trouble, serious trouble, they kicked me out of line, and then they gave this job—Then when they gave me this line, they were kidding up to me. Because my responsibility—still about 14-15 years old—was to write requisitions for whatever they got. They needed chairs, they needed white walls, or if they needed anything, I had to write for it. And I worked in the chaplain's office. And one evening, when we were showing this movie, and the men were hungry, and they wanted to see—they weren't enjoying the movie. They made me—I don't remember what they made me—They made me cut that movie off that I was showing, *Men Who Joined*, and put the new one on, that was supposed to be showing the next night. The men who left their limbo. I'm backstage, and not realizing that [laughing], speak of a fool, camp was on, I made this announcement: "Turn the lights on. Let the officers get their whores out, and start the movie over again." Everybody in the camp heard, and it created a riot. Guys started screaming, carrying on. Some of the officers

wanted them to move from their seats. I said, "Don't move, you've been working day." They wouldn't move. So, before I could close up that evening, the MPs came to get me. Escorted me to the brig. But see, I was the only one—how long does that sister have to take you out myself—I was the only one who knew how to run all the movies, I was the only one who knew how to do that, so they had to let me out. Otherwise they couldn't be entertained.

One day, I went to get—I would go down to the motor crew, and get a car assigned to me to go down to Pearl Harbor. We were in, not at Pearl Harbor, but in Oahu outside of Pearl Harbor. Pearl City, we were stationed in. Gotta go around to get the movies, to get whatever information that I had to have to, you know, do what I had to do. And there was one guy on the crew who said, "you can't get a car." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "You're going to Diego tomorrow." That mean San Diego. I said, "What do you mean I'm going there?" He said, "You're going to prison tomorrow in Diego." I said, "What do you mean I'm going to prison?" He said, "You were court martialed and sentenced to prison for creating the riot." I never had a trial or hearing, and I still say God is good. At that particular time, a man by the name of Bishop Howard Gray from [inaudible] was the most prominent black pastor in America, came over with Lester Granger and Irving Lee, and Edmund Livitz (sp?) was with them, came to inspect the black troops all over the city. And so someone got to Mr. Granger or Bishop Gray, and told them about this black kid who's being sent to Sand Diego, hadn't even had a trial, court martial, et cetera, et cetera. So, Livitz was with them, and they told Livitz what happened. So Livitz then, almost fought, calling an investigation over there. I love Livitz, because [laughs] Livitz, he saved my life, I guess. So he vacated the order, called [inaudible] ,and read him out with the [inaudible]. And that's how I stayed out from prison in San Diego. I didn't know I was supposed to go. But

they did that to blacks all the time: you were sentenced, you had done this, you were put in jail. No one told him. You had no recourse. No one could fight for you, because you had to go through the chain of command. Now, who was I gonna tell? The person that was in charge, a black person, was not going to go against [inaudible]. It was he that brought the women into camp—well, he brought them, they [inaudible]. But my exposer said, you know, he was on the hot spot, so of course he signed the papers against me, I guess. I never saw—I never had a hearing. All I know is I was not allowed to leave the—However, they made sure that my films came in every night, and that I was there to operate the projector [laughs]. I wondered why they weren't having me train these other kids to do this.

MN: How many years did you stay in the Navy?

WF: I think it was a maximum of two years, if that long.

MN: And by the time your term ended, was the war over?

WF: Yes. Oh, it was over.

MN: So, you left the Navy in, what, 45 or 46?

WF: About '45.

MN: and then did you come back to Jersey City?

WF: Back to Jersey City.

MN: And by that time, were you ready to enroll in college? Or, did you, you know, were you still in high school? Or were you way beyond that by then?

WF: I was beyond that. It's a strange tale, in that, often, I was working at Western Electric at night—No, day. And I would go to colleges in my off-hours. Sitting in as though I had enrolled.

MN: This is in Jersey City?

WF: I went to Columbia University to enlist, I went to Union to enlist, and I ultimately talked to Neva (sp?), and Dr. Neva wrote me a letter that said the most brilliant student that he ever had. Didn't know that I was not enrolled in Salem.

MN: So you were taking courses at Columbia and Union as what today they would call a non-matriculated student, but taking the exams?

WF: I just took, took the work. I didn't need to pass exams at the time. I just took it. I just sit there—I sat there trying to learn something.

MN: So he knew you from your class discussions?

WF: Because he would—Neva, you were not there, Neva died long ago. Neva was such a tremendous teacher, that he had to give his lectures in St. Paul chapel. He couldn't give them in the classroom. They would advertise when he was to give his lectures. And if you were a student, you had priority that would very often the community would crowd that room. Like they'd stand in line like they were going to see a premium movie. And I always had a lot of questions. And Neva was the first teacher that ever cursed me out. [laughter] And he didn't really curse me out, but I'm not supposed to be in his class, but no one knew it. But I was falling asleep, and Neva was making a presentation on the Virgin Birth. And I don't know if that has happened to you gentlemen, though I'm sure it has, when you know that you are doing something wrong, or not doing something and you try to cover it up. So I woke up and I made a stupid statement to Dr. Neva. "Well I can understand why you would say that, since you don't believe in the Virgin Birth." Neva was as far from me as we are from the entrance of the Church there. He marched over to me and stood over me and, "Who the hell told you I don't believe in the Virgin Birth?" and he preached to me one-on-one. And I'm backing up like this, and he's getting into my face [laughter]. And of course since I had said it, I had to try and prove why he didn't. Thereafter he would see me—and he was not difficult, he was odd. His wife was more sociable than he was. But he thought that, I guess anytime a black boy would be stupid enough to stand up the great Dr. Neva. But I didn't know, I was fast asleep. And I was trying to cover my embarrassment.

MC: That's a funny story.

WF: And so when I was serving in Birmingham, I wrote him a letter, asking him would he please come over and preach for me and et cetera. He wrote me a letter saying that he was on the

doctor's orders, and the doctor would not even permit him to ride a train. He said, "I remember you well. You were one of my brightest and most brilliant students." So I kept that letter and cherished it. And I got another letter from Henry Wallace and a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt—because I was before my time. I had no childhood. I had no childhood.

MN: So you wrote letters to all these individuals—

WF: —Invited them to Bermuda to do something there.

MN: Now, when did you become an ordained minister?

WF: The man—my mentor—is being buried this Friday in the Episcopalian Church in Jersey City. My wife can look it up, because I don't have—as I've said, I'm bad with records. My memory's good, except for dates. But, let me find out—

MN: So you began as an AME Minister?

WF: Yeah.

MN: Okay, okay, let's—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

MN: So, in the AME Church, do you have to go to seminary—

WF: Well, they thought I had.

MN: Okay.

WF: I sat there with the graduates.

At the AME Church, you have an AME woman with you at the Sunday you presided at the Church, [inaudible]. In the AME Church—and this is what AME Church brethren were doing right after it was established from the other black congregations, because they insisted that their ministers had to have a degree of education. So those that could not go to school, they established a training session within the conference. Each conference had to have a full year course taught by the other ministers who were graduates of educators. So I went into the courses. I didn't have to finish the course. I had always—God had given me a good mind. The thing that I guess got me in trouble was this: from the moment I can remember, I never had to write homework down. Teacher put it on the whiteboard, and usually by the time she'd finished, I'd have it down.

MN: It was a—You have a photographic memory for words.

WF: I can never remember when I could not read. I can remember when I couldn't tell time, and that was because my brother—my mother was teaching my brother. My mother didn't have clocks in the house. Because we were living in poverty—

MN: So in other words, you started the course, and then they let you move ahead because you—and, so how many years did you actually go before [phone rings]—sorry—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

WF: I went to Washington for a religious intersession overnight, and it's been our custom in our family—and I guess this goes back to my [inaudible] as a job—we do not miss a day without calling. We do not miss—go to bed at night without my saying to my wife and daughters, "I love you." And so everything we do, we connect. She was on a train from Washington, then her mother called, "No, she's back." So she'd call and say she's back on the way home. And I asked her about her sister. Well her sister has a music business, and she's on tour with Busta Rhymes. She's a rapper lady, so they hired her as production manager. She's done Peter, Paul and Mary, Whitney Houston, all of these people. But wherever she goes, there's not a date that she's away that she won't call home. If she doesn't get me, she'll get her sister.

So, anyway—

MN: So, how—So, you return, you're working at Western Electric, you're taking the courses, and you become a minister. Do you remember what year you were formerly ordained as a minister?

WF: Excuse me.

MN: Sure

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

WF: I can find out.

MN: Okay, was—it's the late 40's, would you say, or the—

WF: Late '40's, early 50's.

MN: Right, and when you became ordained, your first appointment was in Bermuda?

WF: Actually, what happened is this: in the AME Church they have what they call the Missionary Room. If you have an assignment outside of the country or outside of the conference, and you've not finished your studies, or you're not eligible for ordination, you can be ordained in what they call the Missionary Room, which would give you the right for all of that, and educate you when you came back. You could then go and get whatever degree you needed.

MN: So it was a way of accelerating your ordination to do missionary work?

WF: Yes, with the understanding that you continue to study and you finish when you get back.

MN: Now, at this time in the late 40s, were you politically active in any other organizations outside the church?

WF: Yes, I—I mean, active in the Indian League of America with Indians who were fighting towards independence. I became active in a Polish group. I became active in the early day of CORE, Congress of Racial Equality. In fact, Jim Forba (?) was chairman of the selection committee for to the person who would become the leader of CORE, and they selected me, but I refused to resign from my church in Springfield. So I became active in the CORE, I became active and one of the original active members of what was the American branch of the Afro National Congress. And later in Jersey City, I was president in the youth chapter of the NAACP, and later president of the senior chapter.

MN: Right, so in Jersey City, you were in the NAACP?

WF: President of the NAACP—

MN: Right.

WF: —and involved with anything and everything having to do with liberation and community.

MN: Right, now did you [crosstalk]. Did you have any contact in those years with Paul Robeson or W.E.B. du Bois?

WF: I met Paul Robeson on three occasions. I didn't know him. I met Mary Cloud Mathoun (sp?), but I didn't know her. But I did have in later years with people like Malcolm X and Gerald Foreman (?).

MN: Right. Now, did you get at all involved in the Henry Wallace campaign in 1948?

WF: [crosstalk] I was a kid. And I remember, I was telling my daughter, before she went to Washington, and my wife because they bought 100 Paul Robeson stamps. And the joke was that when I took my daughter to see Malcolm X [inaudible]. We were walking off of the concourse plaza. And my daughter said, "You knew him, didn't you, dad?" I said, "Yes, we used to talk at least once a week." See, his place was at 116th street and Lennox Avenue. My church was at Madison Avenue and 116th street. So, coming in from Queens, he'd usually stop by my office, almost every Monday. And first thing, "I know we don't agree, but did you make it plain to the people yesterday?"

Unknown Man (UM): What made you become a minister? It's probably obvious, but—I mean, clearly thinking about it—

WF: It was, if there's such a thing as a conversion to a calling, it was that. A young fellow in Jersey City, supposedly a handsome young fellow. All the girls like me, so I'm told. I didn't have a system of knowing it. And we had planned a part of the night to go to and organize the magazine, a black magazine. And I was keeping my promise to my mother by going to Sunday school and staying active in church. And Malcolm had came here. He was a class—at the AME church, they still go with the resident system. Each ten members must have a leader, it's called a class leader. Malcolm had a class and he became leader. I was one of his class, so I took over his class. He didn't ask me. It's just pride—whatever. And this evening, I went to class—It's a joint prayer meeting, class meeting. A prayer meeting is where you go a pray and sing. And a class meeting is where you go and testify by the members. I went to see Brother Chapman—Brother Chapman's not doing well, he's asking for us to pray for him, I visited [inaudible]. And that's the way the AME Church grew, because you kept in touch with your members. If they were sick, you knew it. If they would need you, then the class leader would report to the missionary society who needed food and this, that, and the other.

And, so, I was dressed up on my way to this party. And in the midst of the class meeting, I suddenly began to weep. And I believed in God, but I had not had the spiritual experience of having the type of conversion that you would feel. So in other words: I was not converted by the book, or by someone anointing me. It came from the power of the Holy Spirit, and crying and praying and just believing. And I was supposed to go to have been a Christian all along, but I gave my heart anew to God, to the Lord Jesus Christ that night. Got up from that prayer meeting, drove my aunt home, and I stayed up in bed with her. At this time my uncle was dead. He had been sick, as I told you a couple of times. He had died. I drove her home, went in the house, and

couldn't come out. They were at the party, having a good time, and I didn't make it. And a young fellow that was wearing a coat, got the spirit of [inaudible], was a member—part of King Catholic Church from Ocean Avenue which was a block and a half from my house. And I was living next door to him. So, come the next morning, cursing me out and raising hell because I didn't go to the party. And I couldn't make him understand why I didn't go. I couldn't explain to myself why I didn't go. All I knew was, as the old hymn says, that something within pulled at the reins. That was the hint. And I didn't just become a minister. I became superintendent of the Sunday school, still a teenager, because they needed someone. First of all, I had the largest class in Sunday school. And I organized according to council of churches in New Jersey, the largest Sunday school in the state, in Jersey City. And I guess one thing led to another, and again at a prayer meeting—I don't know whether I was encouraged into the ministry. I don't know how it happened. Because most people in the church thought I was a playboy because they didn't see much of me. I worked and I went to somebody's school, sitting in the back of the room, sneaking in, trying to hear what was going on. I couldn't pay the money to enroll [chuckles]. So they must've thought I was with the girls and guys, but I never was. And that's what most of the parents in Mt. Pisjah didn't want me to date their daughters or be seen with them, because I was supposed to be a playboy, because I was always hanging out in New York. They didn't I was hanging out trying to get something in my head. They thought I was trying to lure girls in my pants [laughter]. And I fell in love with a young lady who was the daughter of the former superintendent. And the pastor and this man's family made her cease talking to me and would later encourage her to marry some other kid in the group with us. And all I know is that I appeared before the steward's board by this time, in the [inaudible]. In the AME church you have

not deacons, but stewards, which are similar, I guess, to deacons. We still have them here, because there's a lot of growth in the AME church here. We all have stewards and—

MN: Now this is—so this is a—this church is an AME affiliate, or it's Congregationalist?

WF: It is a United Church of Christ. Most of our members are AMEs.

MN: Were, were?

WF: A funeral happened last week. Always remind me, there are only three of us left. Only three AMEs are left, rest in peace.

MN: Now is this also true of your father's church? Where it's—

UM: No

MN: —your father was United Church of Christ. But—

MC: Right, he was Baptist first, right?

WF: Yeah.

A lot of the ministers were from other denominations, and then—

WF: Not many black ministers regionally were of the United Church of Christ. They came from other denominations. It's like—

MN: Now, was the United Church of Christ founded as an African American Denomination?

UM: It depends on the Congregation.

WF: No, no, the United Church of Christ came out of the old—Actually, doing the history of the chaplain in Brooklyn has been doing, again, history. The Congregation of Christian Society was the oldest thing in this country—because you remember the [inaudible] father—

MN: Right

WF: England, the king, we are seeking freedom. So they organized the Congregation of Christian Society. And out of that later came the Congregational Church. And they organized the American Mission, and their Association of [inaudible], and some of these other schools. They were quite involved in the abolition movement. And the first black minister that god renown in the Congregational Church was Lemuel Haynes from Springfield. But, then they joined with the German—what was the German merge?

UM: The Reform Church

WF: The Reform Church, thank you. And the congregational Church and the Reform Church became one, and they later renamed themselves the United Church of Christ.

MN: Right, now—

WF: And now they're involved with the Christian Disciples.

MN: Now, one question: many of the people who I—we've interviewed, some of whom came out of the—were members of the Church that Mark's father pastured, were involved with camp Minisink. Were you ever involved with Camp Minisink?

WF: Camp Minisink was in Harlem.

MN: Yeah.

WF: Remember, I was living in Jersey City, sneaking into New York to get an education, to go to [inaudible] to see the girls. I had no time for that. When I became involved in politics, it came about in Jersey City—remember, of course, since the experiences in Alabama, I'd always fought racism, any kind of discrimination, in the NAACP, and helped organize things in Jersey City, and a number of other places. And that's when I met Robeson. He was brought there by the Aggressive Movement. And spoke, as I said I didn't know him myself. I went to hear him. I got a chance to [inaudible]. Because I began to read everything I could find on black people. Started with Richard Allen and [inaudible], any black clergy member in the country was part of the

AME Church, et cetera. So, I saw him there. And then Henry Wallace had a rally at Madison Square Garden. And I parked my car—I bought Michael's car before he died. Drove to New York City, parked my car, and was so anxious to get into Madison Square Garden I forgot where I parked the car [laughter]. And after the rally I spend half the night trying to—I went to every street. I know the street through this way to find my car. But I went in there, and the experience I saw that night was magnetic. Wallace was speaking, and suddenly, an eruption—I mean, the loud screaming. And they threw a spotlight on the door. Henry Wallace said, "I think I see Paul Robeson coming inn." and the next 15-20 minutes, that place went wild. You couldn't hear a word. Wallace declined to speak because he couldn't. Everybody just went wild with Robeson. And then, as God would have it, when he died, my bishop at the AME church was on the program to help prepare his funeral at My Lady of Zion Church. And I took the Bishop there, because he was on the program, he was able to get in. I couldn't get in [laughs] so I was celebrating roadside.___.

MC: Could you take us through, again, your, after your appointments, the, your appointments in the AME church, which you became a minister in the AME church. Could you take us through your appointments? And then if you could return to the point about Malcolm X, which church that was on Madison, 116th and Madison.

WF: I was dating the Bishop's daughter, so they felt—I really didn't do that. And this is probably something you have to take it out, because she's like a thought so as well. So, the rule was that the Bishop ordained me in the Missionary Room, and sent me to Bermuda, had at that time, ten AME churches.

MN: Ten? There were ten AME churches?

WF: Eleven, in Bermuda.

Bermuda was of a British Commonwealth. But a Bishop visited, from the Canadian Conference of the AME church, who was solicited by the people of color in Bermuda, to come to Bermuda to establish an AME church. And that's how the AME church was established in Bermuda. And the mother church, the cathedral of the colony, the—not the Anglican Cathedral, but the AME church would be St. Paul AME Church. And then you had ten other AME churches. And they later established 11. It was—the AME system is if you don't declare membership, you're automatically under the Church of England. But the largest number of churchgoers and participants in the island were AMEs. For some reason, the Baptist Church never took hold there. They had a small black Baptist church, and Gardner Taylor, and other big Baptist were sent of there, but for some reason—See the AME church was close to the Anglican church, because they had a liturgical part of it. Even now, they have a chance to accept the communion, et cetera. So, the Baptist Church became big over there, during the war when the when the Southern servicemen came over and established branches of the Southern Baptist Church.

But, so, going back to your question: I was [inaudible] in Bermuda, and the bishop There. And there was one church, they said, that needed, possibly one man and the Bishop, Rev. Hildebrand, whose brother William Pastors up in New York City, and became a Bishop, suggested I come to Bermuda. But they ended up with a new mission in Bermuda, so I'd leave my job [inaudible]

drop out of school, drop out of what I was doing. So, that's how I came to Bermuda, serving the Labor Church. Stayed a member of the church for 2 years that I never dated. The Bishop came, and the whole conference was going, cause the Bishop was back home.

See, the Labor Church, you have an annual conference every year, where at the end of the conference, all the pastors make their order. So everyone's making an important mission, and then he'd decide, by the virtue of the fact that God speaks to him and he speaks to us, that's where we should serve. No human pastor ever chooses his own appointment. So I left the [inaudible] and the bishop had lost his wife, and the woman he married had lost her husband, who was a colonel. So they got married, and she was the new bride, and met this young lady that they thought I was dating, and they became close. So my wife, to be a minister, told Mrs. Weber that we were going to get married and I was dating her. So that night, in that huge church, the Bishop said, "This man's doing a great job. And he's gonna get married. Stand up, darling. [inaudible] Doesn't want to sit next to his wife." She stood up and all the single women in my church almost died because they thought if I was gonna marry anyone, it would be one of them [laughs]. Marriage was not in my mind.

But then my mom came to visit me, came down and stayed with me. And I collapsed one evening in my parsonage. And she said, "You need a wife. You need to have someone living with you, so when you get sick, you'll be taken care of." And of course my wife became [inaudible] and [inaudible]. So if there's ever a marriage being arranged for me, the Bishop lying [inaudible] arranged the marriage. And I had a youth program at my Church every Saturday night in South Hampton. My wife was at the [inaudible] Church, and came up every Saturday to play the piano

or help me out with my youth program. And she was always sneaky enough to wait until the last bus left, so that I would have to drive her home. But I never drove her home by herself. I would always have 10-16 kids in the car. And this evening I drove her home and she said to me that "I enjoyed working with you. And the Queen has given me a scholarship." And I said, "Well, tape it on the radio. (?)" And she said, "I'll be back in 2 or 3 years, and if you're still here [inaudible] you come back [inaudible]." So I said, when she got out of the car, I said, "I'm sorry to see you leave." I said, "I was praying to God to send me a wife." She sat back in the car, and said, "What are you saying? Are you saying that God told you to marry me? I said, "I'm not saying that. I was praying God would send me a wife." She got out of the car and into the house. And by the time I got home and got all the kids out, my phone was ringing. She said, "I want to go back to the conversation in the car." [inaudible] So this was around 11 o'clock. That phone—we must have talked back and forth until 5 o'clock in the in morning. All of her belongings were on the ship, except for carry on. She was leaving Monday morning, sailing at 8, Nova Scotia, papers ready [inaudible]. Teaching [inaudible]. That was a big thing [inaudible] guest on roads, that's how big it is. So by 5:30 that Sunday morning, after talking, she had decided that she was gonna take her luggage off the boat, on Monday morning at 7:30, and that's how we got married.

UM: Oh, wow.

WF: And her mother called: "What sort of foolishness are you putting in my daughter's head. You realize people would kill her for this scholarship?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, I do." I said, "I told her nothing." So, I told her what I had told her. Then the Director of Education at the [inaudible] Remedial High School Christian, who was her godmother: "Listen to me: Helen is my

goddaughter, and Margery Baynes accent is more British than the Queen. You can not play with my godchild's heart. What is happening?" And I said, "It's happening." Because after we agreed to get married, we both agreed to keep it a secret, and tell no one—but you can't keep a marriage a secret, because three weeks before the marriage, you must begin to publish your bands in the newspaper or in the church paper. And so I was too bashful and too embarrassed to publish it in my church, so I had to put it in the Bermuda newspaper. And Helen [inaudible] from [inaudible] Parish, published or bands that she was to be married to Thomas Wendell Foster. [inaudible] any reason why they shouldn't be married to you, after you report to the Associate General of the registrar. So [inaudible], so we went through it, bands published and everything. We were not supposed to tell anyone. However, the secret was such a big secret that we had the biggest wedding in the history of Bermuda. 20,000 people crowded the sidewalk of the church. The airports couldn't leave—the planes—because Bermuda didn't have any roads. So I said, "I thought you were not gonna tell anyone?" She said, "Well I only told me Godmother and then my mother." But the word got out. So—If I showed the—

[END OF SIDE TWO]

[END OF TAPE ONE]

[START OF TAPE TWO; SIDE 1]

MN: Okay, now, what year were you married?

WF: 19—let me call my daughter. I think I'm at a good place—the—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

MN: 20,000 people at your wedding?

WF: That's what the paper said. When you see it, you'd think it's a—like, the [inaudible] was out that day. I mean, the road, you couldn't pass.

MN: It was—yeah.

WF: So other people told me "Oh, you're the one that messed up my plane trip."—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

WF: Anyway, it was in the 50s—

MN: And how long did you stay at the church in Bermuda?

WF: The bishop transferred me immediately.

MN: Back to the United States?

WF: Yes. In other words, we got married on Monday night and left on Tuesday.

MN: And this was back to Jersey City?

WF: Came back to Jersey City.

MN: To the same church, or a different one?

WF: I went and came back to live with my aunt. I didn't know where to set up (?), because my marriage was so sudden, I had not made the arrangements—

MN: Right. So, did you become a pastor at the same church that you had attended?

WF: No, I never became a pastor for Mt. Pisjah. Okay, I was sent out of Mt. Pisjah to pastor in Bermuda. I pastured two churches in Bermuda, and came back, the Bishop transferred me back to the States, but would not appoint me. And the assignment was—this was a cute way of saying you don't have a job—you had to walk with the Bishop. That means just what you would indicate when you—until he assigned you somewhere.

MN: Alright, now did you take any—

WF: That means you have no appointment, and you're waiting for some church to open up to you.

MN: Right. So, how long did it take before that happened?

WF: Six weeks or more. So I went with him to Grant St. Church and I went with him to Belkin Church (sp?). I went with him everywhere, to Alley Church. I went with him to all these places, until finally he sent me to Springfield, Mass{achusetts].

MN: And that's where the opening took place?

WF: Yes. I did not wish my—See, when I went back, when I came to this, when I came to this—I'm getting ahead of my story. When I came back here, I went to several churches in Woodbury, New Jersey, in Beverly, New Jersey, and Cranford, as what they call a student pastor, with my wife. And then the Bishop said that there was a need: the people of Bermuda wanted me back, St. Paul. I said, "What's the assignment?" And it was Cathedral Church, and I'd done such a good job, they said, at the smaller church, so he wanted me to go back to Bermuda. I did not want to go back. But then in the church you don't have—not even a dialogue with the Bishop. You simply—an example: the Bishop was so powerful [inaudible] is our largest church in the East, the Allen AME church. If the Bishop should call for Flake while we're talking, and said, "Pastor Flake, I'm transferring you from Allen to some other Church." He has three choices: "Yes, sir, I'll go," drop dead from the shock [chuckles], or resign. Because absolute authority was with the Bishop.

MN: Okay, so you were student pastor at three churches in New Jersey.

WF: I went—Yes, I went back to Bermuda first, that's—I went back to Bermuda to St. Paul. The Bishop agreed—and I told him I'd go back, "But Bishop, there's only one thing I've always wanted." I said the two most famous churches, most outstanding churches, black churches in America, that most people don't know about: Mother Bethel, in Philadelphia, where it all started—all the other black denominations grew out of that—and the Metropolitan AME church in Washington, where Abraham Lincoln delivered the eulogy for Frederick Douglas. And I felt that the people that they had been sending there did not give the proper—I don't know the word—They did not *magnify* the heritage. Out of that Bethlehem AME church, mother Bethlehem in Philadelphia came the Underground Railroad, our first schools. All that stuff came out of that. That was where Daniel Payne walked from—came, escaped from South Carolina and went to Mother Bethlehem church, and supposedly walked from there to Green County, Ohio with ten copper pennies in his pocket to start Wilberforce University, the first institution of higher learning for Blacks in this country. So I felt that no one knew the history except [inaudible], like you know what's in your own home, but no one really knew what happened there. They did not know that in that church you have manuscripts showing that when the founding fathers had their interview—There's only one photograph that I've seen in Congress: There's a black man with the founding fathers and word was that he was a servant. According to—and I don't know whether the book is still in print, because they let me—Charlie Rainer (?) was able to let me get it in the library of Congress—one small booklet, called *The Musings of Ben Franklin*, the two men that was friendly with Richard Allen, when he went to start this movement was Dr. Benjamin Reich and Benjamin Franklin. And Ben Franklin's *Musings* talked about all this stuff, and according to *Musings*, Franklin, Allen was not a servant, Allen was

taking notes for the founding fathers. And therefore it was not a cloth in his hand; it was a tablet that he was writing on. Now, I don't have proof of that, and Miles—Do you know Miles Matthews (?), who used to work for Charlie?

MC: No.

WF: Miles used to be Charlie's Chief of Staff. He was able to get that thing out of the Library of Congress. I still remember that, because all they had [inaudible]. But, so that—And the Metropolitan. I wanted there because—see, in every city in America, the first black institution established, was established by the AME church: Quinn Chapel in Chicago, FAME in—First AME Church—in Los Angeles. That's why when the Rodney King erupted, everything you recall was FAME, was because it was there. And Metropolitan in Washington, D.C., and Allen Church in Jamaica was the first black church there. And so—

MN: Allen Church in Jamaica, Queens?

WF: Yes. So, anyway—because we were the first movement.

MN: Right.

WF: So I said that I'd like to go to Mother Bethlehem. I really wanted to make it big. I wanted to make it the real sacred meeting place for all us and black events.

But when I came back from Bermuda, after two years or three years I served, the Bishop said, "Son, I hate to break my promise, but Dr. Stewart is an old man. He's been denied proper recognition. And I'm gonna send Dr. Stewart to Mother Bethlehem. He won't be there more than two or three years. And then I'll send you." Two or three years, Dr. Steward was dead, and someone else coming, the Bishop was transferred to another conference. So I did not want to go back there, but I did. And—let me see something, excuse me.

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

UM: I would like to cover this interview up until when you came to the Bronx.

MN: [crosstalk] Or, actually, when you moved to the United Church of Christ. And now, are those two—

WF: I will do this: I will get my dates from my wife and my daughter.

MN: Right, and—

WF: When I said, we were married in '48years—

MN: And this is 2004.

WF: Yeah, 48 years.

UM: So it's 2003.

WF: 48 years. And—

MN: So what does it work out to?

UM: That's pretty good. 1956.

MN: '56.

[crosstalk]

MN: Okay, 1956, okay.

WF: That's pretty good for not having the date right.

MN: Right [laughter]

Anyway, so—but let me just sort of get it straight in my mind: You wanted to be assigned to Bethel.

WF: Mother Bethel.

MN: But the Bishop put someone there.

WF: Who was much my senior.

MN: Who was much your senior, and then he sent you to Springfield?

WF: Springfield, Mass.

MN: So, and how many years were you in—

WF: See, because in this New York Conference, it covers the state of New York, all of New England, Bermuda, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware.

MN: Okay, that's the New York Conference of the AME church?

WF: That is correct.

MN: Okay, New York and everything North in the U.S. and Bermuda.

Okay, so you were Springfield for how long.

WF: Two years, approximately.

MN: Two years. And then where was your next assignment?

WF: Harlem.

MN: Harlem. And what was the name of that church?

WF: Mt. Zion AME Church, 116th street and Madison Avenue.

MN: So you were in Mt. Zion. Oh, boy.

MC: That's where you made connections with Malcolm X. During those years, right?

MN: So, you're the pastor starting in 1960 or something? Or was it earlier.

WF: Again, my wife can get you—As I said, with dates, I don't—

MN: Okay. Now, wouldn't that be considered a very prestigious assignment?

WF: No.

MN: It wasn't?

WF: No, because Mt. Zion would be the 4th or 5th church in rating within the New York City. You'd have Bridge Street would be Number 1, Bethel would be number 2, Saint—the church on 153rd street, and Emmanuel on 19th street.

MC: St. Luke's

WF: St. Luke. St. Luke would be probably number three.

MN: On 153rd street in Harlem?

UM: Amsterdam.

MN: And Amsterdam. So—

WF: But, see, the point is: No. To me it was a—after I didn't get Mother Bethel or Metropolitan, anything and everything would have been a disappointment.

MN: Right.

WF: Because I wanted to do something there. See when I was in Bermuda, I made the only—I produced, wrote and produced a film called, *The Man Called Allen* about the life of Richard Allen, the growth of the AME church and the freedom movement that grew out of that.

MN: Do we still have this somewhere?

WF: I have the script, but I don't have the tape. My wife and one of my sextons destroyed my tapes. We made the film in Springfield, Mass for TV, and then produced it on 16mm. And for a couple of years Iris down at the Ideal Motion Picture Company, which used to rent movies, sent me a check every month, because all over the country—

MN: Are there any copies of this anywhere?

WF: I can't find the tapes anywhere. I just have the—I have the original manuscript.

MN: You have the manuscript but not the actual—right.

WF: So they cleaned house. And believe me, I had two copies and one master that I can't find anywhere.

MN: Now, so—

WF: My wife—my daughter and wife—I love you Helen [laughter]—she said, "Well, you wrote it once before, you could write it again if it's that important to you." That was her answer.

MN: Now, how quickly did you get to meet Malcolm X when you were at AME Zion, and how did this meeting?

WF: It's not AME Zion, it's Mt. Zion AME.

MN: Mt. Zion AME, right.

WF: See, Malcolm X's wife was AME. Betty Shabazz came out of the AME church when she joined Malcolm. And Malcolm—See, I've always been active in anything having to do with the Freedom Movement. Everything, anything. So, as I said, I'm not Indian, but I go to the Indian League of America, where they were fighting for the freedom of Indians. I fought for the independence of Israel. I just joined anything having to do with liberation. And at Mt. Zion, as I said, three blocks away was his temple. And so I would meet up with him down there sometimes and I'd go into them. I'd never been in the temple. I only went to the restaurant that he was writing in. but he would come by and just, I guess he'd just stop by cause the door of the church would be open. He'd come in. I had a little office downstairs. And he'd come in almost every Monday and have a conversation. And, "My brother, how are you? Now I know we don't agree on what we preached yesterday. [inaudible] But the only thing I want to know, brother, is did you make it plain?" Did you make it plain? Did you make it plain to the people? And whether I agree or not, that's unimportant. The important thing is when you speak, preach to people, and teach people, make it plain. If you don't make it plain, you're going to confuse them. Don't give them a lot of hype, just make it plain. Don't try to educate them above their means to comprehend it. Make it plain.

MC: There was a great CBS documentary about 5 years ago that used that title, *Make it Plain.*

MN: Really? So this is a phrase you've heard?

UM: Well, sure. You know, "Make it plain." In other words, preach clearly so people can understand. Make it plain.

WF: That's right. Make it plain, Make it plain.

MN: Now, how long did you stay at that particular church?

WF: I had never stayed anywhere more than two or three years.

UM: Until you came to the Bronx, right?

WF: And I came to the Bronx when I withdrew formally from pastoring for the AME church in the [inaudible]. See, when the Bishop transferred me from Mt. Zion to Niagara Falls against the wishes of the people there, he—90 percent of the congregation withdrew, and said they would start a congregation for me. Now, the Bishop would give me an assignment to Allen Church in Jamaica, which was much better. The people wanted me there, they came to see me. The offices said, "I don't care what your salary is at Mt. Zion. Whatever it is, we'll start by giving you $40 more a week." But I didn't want to go, because I—there was some internal questions with the elder, the man that I succeeded. You see, in the AME church, you have a Bishop, and between the bishop and the pastor there's what they call the Presiding Elder. The Presiding Elder is the

one that is supposed to oversee the local churches until such time to go to another conference. And then his report will go to the Bishop, and each pastor will end up going to answer themselves. And I didn't want to leave under the conditions the Bishop wanted me to. The people wanted me to stay. And I was bull-headed, and perhaps should have gone, because at that particular time, Allen—as I said, the oldest church in Queens—had more of the black professionals than any church I think on the eastern seaboard. That's why people [inaudible] what Flake did. But if you're starting with a church that's already 100 years of age when you got maybe 50 of the top black in corporate America, where else can you go up? But in all fairness to Flake, Flake is a business major, and Flake used that ability plus his engine in politics and was able to make sure that he got grants. And he assigned someone to read every proposal that came up. So now in Queens, I would say Allen Church probably controls more property and buildings than—

UM: Right, so did you go from Mt. Zion to Allen at one point? No.

WF: I refused it. I still have somewhere in my—downstairs, in those boxes, somewhere down there I have my appointment down there.

MC: And so, when you refused it, did that sever your connection to the AME church?

WF: No. No, what I did when the bishop—What happened was this: I was then sent to Niagara Falls. At the time I was sent to Niagara Falls, my wife was in the hospital in the Bronx, Bronx Lebanon. My daughter was in the hospital on 16th street and 2nd avenue. My wife had a

miscarriage, and things didn't work out, and my daughter had—was born with a breathing problem, and [inaudible] about that. Then he sent me to Niagra Falls. And I went there and stayed there a few months, and did what I was supposed to do. And then he—they say never speak anything bad about the dead, but—he then transferred me to a church in Warwick, New York, that was one of the underground stops, that was famous during the days of the Underground Railroad. They had five names on the roll. Only one family's name on the roll and their members. The door was leaning against the wall. And when you're ordained, you take an oath to go where you're sent. I wrote the bishop a letter and said that "I am obeying my order. I did go to Warwick Church. I have a wife that I brought to this country; I cannot support my family in a church where there is no membership. I therefore, tender to you my resignation." I made it clear that I was not resigning from the denomination. I resigned from the church. So even today I consider myself AME—See, each pastor must be a member of a congregation. He's not supposed to be a member of his local church.

MN: In the United Church—

WF: In the AME church. In the AME church you are supposed to have a church home. You simply pastor a church, but you are not technically a member of that church. So my membership, after all these years, is still in Mt. Pisjah AME church in Jersey City. So I have dual standard in the marketing. In the UCC you can have dual standard. Malcolm had it, and so did Jim Forbes and all the others. And [inaudible] had it.

MN: Right. And Riverside is United Church of Christ.

MC and WF: And American Baptist.

WF: And American Baptist.

MN: It's both?

WF: Both.

MN: Now, how did you end up in the Bronx?

WF: Well, first of all—

MN: Can we do this in less than ten minutes? Or we should do it on the next tape?

UM: Don't worry about it.

WF: No, I can do it—When they sent me to Mt. Zion, they had—each church is by law of the church, is supposed to supply a parsonage for the pastor. They had none. So they had an upstairs where they had a youth program, and they wanted me to live up there. And I'd stay—I rented a hotel room on Central Park, right off of Museum. [inaudible] And I remember it well, because a few Sundays after I was there when we were getting ready to drive to church, when on the radio came that Marilyn Monroe had just committed suicide. So we stayed in that rented space, and

then my cousin, my wife's cousin, who was a member of Mt. Zion AME. And we heard of a real estate person looking for a place. So we found this place on Woody Crest Avenue. In the meantime, on the night that the Bishop gave me the appointment to Niagara Falls—I didn't know where I was going because the law of the church: the Bishop is supposed to place your appointment in your hand. This Bishop decided he would give the appointments to the Presiding Elder, and after he closed the conference, the Presiding Elder would tell you where you're going.

MN: Now, Woody Crest is in High Ridge?

WF: In High Ridge.

MN: Right, between where and where was the house?

WF: 168th street, right near Sager Hall (?). I was the first black in there, and when I went there, I started working at the United Nations, and Arthur Goldberg had to get the federal government to put marshals around my building because the whites show my windows out every day. Excuse me. [answers phone] "Hello—"

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

MN: How—It was the early 60s.

WF: We bought this house on Woody Crest Avenue.

MN: In the 60s

WF: The first black in the neighborhood, and the leader of the movement in the neighborhood—his great claim to fame was that he had been a member of the Youth Nazi Party in Germany under Adolf Hitler. And so my daughter was [inaudible]. And come out and sit out front where the sun shined, et cetera. And they would shoot bullet holes in our windows. And the reason I got Arthur Goldberg is because I was in working, or living, with him Governemnt Agency, and I got to know him and campaigned for Goldberg and Bowser Patterson (?). And he had the federal government appoint people to guard my house, saying I was working the United Nations there. Which was true, diplomats would visit my house—

MN: So you were—at that point, had a job with the federal government?

WF: No, I never worked for him. I helped with the [inaudible] American from Africa. I helped to organize the—

MN: Okay.

WF: So anyway, the people, the 9th division movement, by the time I got back to the Bronx, there were so many parishioners in my house on Woodcrest Avenue, and on the street, that the police would actually have to divert traffic to another—the other streets. People were telling me, "Don't leave. If you stay, we will by a church for you."

MC: People from Mt. Zion?

WF: [inaudible] And at least 200 or more people from Mt. Zion were there waiting for me. And the later we called the Mother Church, we called Mother Brighton. Mother Brighton died and was buried in front of this church at the age of 105 and almost as active as anyone in this room. She was so strong that no one wanted to shake her hand, because she'd almost break yours [laughter]. So they organized a movement. And we rented the Bermuda home on 146th Street in Harlem. My wife and daughter—my wife and cousin belonged to the Bermuda society. And we worked out of the brownstone for almost a year until we found this place.

MN: Okay, now, so this is in the middle 60s. This was found—this place was purchased in 1967? That's what—

WF: Again, again, I'll have to get you the record.

[crosstalk]

WF: When we came here, this had been a formerly a Jewish Temple.

MN: So this was—

WF: This was a Synagogue. Bought by the Greeks and made into a Greek Orthodox Church. And we came here, all the icons were up so that when I'd preach, I'd have to tiptoe and look over there.

MN: Right. Now, at the Bermuda home, what, this was 200 people from AME Zion.

WF: Mt. Zion.

MN: Mt. Zion. And, but did you formerly affiliate—

WF: They stayed there and joined. They organized a church there, they called it Christ Church. And I preached out of the Bermuda home every single week.

MN: Now that church was called Christ Church?

WF: That movement.

MN: That movement. Did it affiliate formally with United Church of Christ?

WF: No, not until we came here.

MN: Okay, so it was Christ Church, and when you purchased this building—

WF: it was Christ Church, Interdenominational.

MN: Interdenominational.

WF: That's what it still is, officially, on the archives downtown.

MN: Christ Church, interdenominational. And then that was when—

WF: Either interdenominational or nondenominational, I don't remember exactly.

MN: Right.

WF: Then later I knew a lot of people in, from sneaking in these classes unauthorized and talking to people and being active in so many movements. Starting CARE and once pastored your church, and Bob Johnson, the pastor at St. Albans congregation, [inaudible] from Nazarene in Brooklyn. So they suggested that I talked with the, what was then called the Association of Ministers, of the Metropolitan Association of the United Church of Christ. And they invited me to come in for their meeting and see if we would like to affiliate with them. What I did not want to do: I did not—I knew we were not going back to the AME church, because the members were—I was hurt, but they were bitter. Excuse me. I didn't know any other denomination that I wanted to go in. they didn't want to become Baptist, the didn't want to become [inaudible] Apostle. So we were invited to Chappaqua, at one of the association meetings. And we took a busload of people there in separate carloads. It was there that they asked us, Don Strickland (?)

was the man—I think was long before your dad became the [inaudible]. So Donald Strickland was the association minister, and Phil Scott was the conference minister, so they invited us to be a part of the UCC. They investigated me—I guess that's what you'd call it—interrogated our congregation, and the congregation agreed for us to become a part of the UCC.

MN: And this was when you were in this building.

WF: I believe we were here before we did that. I'm not sure, but I can get you that. But anyway, the joke about that was that one of the selling points for our becoming UCC is they said, "Now, if we become a part of the United Church of Christ, do they have Bishops?" "No." "Okay, that's okay then." [laughter]

MN: Right, okay.

WF: They had two brothers in the church who's name was Bishop. The congregation said, "You guys got to change your name."

MN: Right, I—

[TAPE CUTS OUT]

[END OF INTERVIEW]