

3-3-2006

Scott, John L.

Scott, John L. Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scott, John L. March 3, 2006. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

[START OF INTERVIEW]

[START OF SIDE 1]

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the one hundred forty-eighth interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here with Reverend John L. Scott, who was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement in the South and New York City, is the pastor of St. John's Baptist Church in Harlem, and has been a community activist in the North Bronx Neighborhood, where he has lived for the last thirty years. Reverend Scott—and with us today is Dr. Mark Chapman, Chair of the Department of African and African American Studies. Reverend Scott, tell us a little bit about your family and your background in North Carolina.

Reverend John L. Scott (JS): Well, just in a nutshell: I was born in a rural area called Delmar, D-E-L-M-A-R, that is between Enfield and Halifax, North Carolina, Halifax being a very historical place. Not only is it Halifax County, the county seat is Halifax. Also—which was the draft of the Halifax Resolves, which is the rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. And the town has not grown hardly an inch since. [laughter]. Off the Roanoke river, which is one of the earlier trade routes in early America. We've been there I guess about five generations. We have an old cemetery, but we were landowners, farmers when farming was bustling throughout the South, particularly. So I not only had the benefit of knowing my grandfather's a farmer, my uncles as well as my father. Five of us boys—well, six of us really—I was a twin, I was the oldest. I was the puniest and the weakest, not supposed to live. But somehow or another, Providence breathed upon me, and here I am.

MN: Now did your family own land for several generations?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Yes they did. Yes, yes. We were known as hard working, and if you wanted to have somebody who would take care of you, we were a prime project to marry, because you'd never be hungry [laughs]. Yeah, sure.

MN: Now how did the racial dynamics of this town play itself out? Was it a very strictly segregated community, or there were like nuances and this?

JS: Well it was lock, stock and barrel segregated. Jim Crow, although there were—strange thing to me, is when I was five years old, black farmers and white farmers lived side by side, and they worked interchangeably. And even some of them worked on our farm. But growing up, school: segregated, water fountain—you just name the works. All the humiliating aspects of apartheid was there when I grew up. And the police were the most feared, just as much as the Ku Klux Klan, The Sheriff. Because—they were in their uniform by day and their—their outfits by night. Yeah.

MN: So there was a lot of physical intimidation and harassment and humiliation of African Americans?

JS: Without doubt, same as in Mississippi. You were not supposed to hitch a white mule and a black mule together. That's how idiotic and irrational. And you were supposed to—if there was a white girl walking on the same side of the street, you're supposed to walk into the street. I was taught that as a kid growing up. And much of that goes through, you know, oral tradition, you

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

know, how you pass things on how to stay out of trouble. So that was kind of the experience that all of us grew up in, I would say from Groverton, Delaware down.

MN: Now, when did you begin to become aware that this—that there was a possible change coming, that this system was going to come under pressure? How old were you?

JS: Five years old. I saw—I wanted to go to a movie on the streets of Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, which was the town from the rural community. We lived in the rural community. And I wanted to see Gene Autry, and Dale Evans. And my father said I couldn't go to the movie. And I said, "Well how come, daddy?" He said, "Because we're colored." And when I tell these things, they're still very painful. The pain is buried with us within our bones. And I said, "Well, what does that mean?" He said, "Well, it means that you can't go." And so I said to him, "Well, daddy, when I grow up, and become a big boy, I want to do all I can to change this." [laughs] So it started when I was five years old.

Dr. Mark Chapman (MC): So you were born—what year were you born?

JS: 1937.

MN: '37, right, right.

MC: So then, were you in high school when you first sensed—I guess you must've probably been a bit out of high school at the time in which the Montgomery bus boycott was beginning to emerge.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

Was that your earliest sense that there was a Civil Rights Movement beginning to take shape in the South? Or were there events prior to that?

JS: Well, I think the Little Rock, Arkansas incident was earlier, wasn't it? I think it was, under Eisenhower?

MC: '57

JS: It was '57? Well, I know that captured our attention. And yeah, I was a student in college in '56, and welcomed the Montgomery Bus Boycott, cause I had went to Bloomfield College, in Bloomfield. And so when I got to Washington DC, I would have to transfer to the back of the train. So, certainly, I think all of us were—nationally, if not globally—aware that there was effort to dismantle this brutal system called segregation.

MN: Did you have ministers in your family that influenced your decision to enter the ministry?

JS: Not really [laughs]. That was the irony of the whole thing: that is we were landowners. And I don't know, I've always drifted towards the devotional side of life. I've always liked church. And the spirit of the sanctified sisters and the amen brothers, and there's a likable preacher in the pulpit. And so when I went into it, when I got my call, my father's response was—well, that we've always had our own, and never had to work for anybody. And so he said, "Boy, well you working at the parish now." That was his response to my welcome into the ministry. So we—it was not in any of us. But we did have very, what did I say, impressive pastors.

MN: And what was the church in your hometown that you grew up in?

JS: Well that's a misnomer. I grew up in a rural area of unpaved paths. We didn't have streets.

What was the question again?

MN: What church did you attend when you were growing up?

JS: A country church. A country, A little country church.

MN: Really?

JS: Yeah, a country church on—built on cinderblocks, and about five miles from town. It was Quankey, Q-U-A-N-K-E-Y. It's a very ancient indian settlement in that area, cause when I was a boy, we used to plow up indian arrowheads and stuff like that—you know, arrowheads on bows and arrows.

MC: So where were you when you recieved the call to—?

JS: Eighteen years of age.

MC: And you say you went to Bloomfield College? Was that—where was that?

JS: In Bloomfield, New Jersey.

MC: Oh, Bloomfield, New Jersey.

JS: Which was a Presbeteryian School. But I went because that was the only place I could go, wherin I worked at night, and went to school in the day. I put my own self through school.

MC: And how did it come about? Was there a guidance counselor at your high school that told you about the college, or?

JS: No, I finished high school, I had a scholarship to Virginia Union. But I worked at MGM Records, and so I realized that if I went to Howard University—where I really wanted to go—I ran the risk of, you know, being poverty stricken. So my aunt belonged to the Calvary Baptist Church, there in East Orange, whose pastor was close to the dean of the school of Bloomfield, David O’Roberts. And so it was through my pastor—her pastor—that I got to Bloomfield College.

MN: Now, how far did you have to travel to go to high school?

JS: Five miles, but we had to walk about two miles to get to the bus.

MN: Right, right.

JS: Which was the pattern throughout the rural South.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Right. And did many people from your high school end up going to college?

JS: Well, a few of us. I had a classmate that we ridiculed, who went into journalism. We said no black would ever be a news reporter. And his name was Ernest Johnson—now deceased—he was the Public Relations Director, became the Public Relations Director of the Urban—of the National Urban League. But we were graduates of the same school. Some of them went to college, not most.

MN: When you got to Bloomfield, did you do so with the understanding that you would go back, or had you planned to stay in the North?

JS: Well it was kind of like undecided—indecisive at that time. I'll really be honest, I didn't like the North. One, it was too cold [laughs]. And too cold socially also. And, but I was just making the best of what I had for the time being, and let the future take care of itself. But I'm pretty sure my dream was to settle back in the South. And really, to become a livestock farmer like my great uncle.

MN: Really?

JS: My father's uncle was one of the few blacks that engaged in selling beef cattle. But I chose—I like livestock farming.

MN: So you grew up with animals? Taking care of them, and all that stuff?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: I would say those were my friends during the week, and I didn't see free(?) folk but on the weekend [laughter]. I was so glad to see a human being. [laughter]

MN: Okay, now when did you have your first church? When you went back to North Carolina—

JS: Right.

MN: And you organized your own church? Or did you become an assistant pastor somewhere?

JS: No, following seminary. Following seminary, I finished Crozer theological seminary, where Dr. King—

MN: Oh, wow.

JS: —Dr. Procter, and at that time Dr. Bill Jones—we just buried him about two weeks ago—were graduates. So when I finished Crozer, I was called to one of the oldest black churches in Hertford County, in Ahoskie, North Carolina. And that was my first pastory.

MN: And what was the name of that church?

JS: New Ahoskie, A-H-O-S-K-I-E, Baptist Chuch.

MC: And what year did you begin there?

JS: '63, 1963.

MN: Wow.

JS: Twenty five years of age, yeah. Fearless and wasn't scared of anything—excet them folks in them pews. [laughter]

MN: And was the Civil—had the Civil Rights Movement come to Ahoskie at that time, or were you the Civil Rights Movement?

JS: Well, it had come. They had an organization called The Better Citizens League, that invited Wyatt Tee Walker, then the executive secretary of SCLC, to be the guest speaker in February of 1963—whom—I had met him, I think in '61, when he visited our campus to speak. And so when I went to Ahoskie, there was a great social awareness to improve things before I got there.

MN: And as a minister, were you expected to participate?

JS: Well, I think it was sort of optional. But when I got the call, in December of 1962, I wrote God a letter. And I said, as for myself, I did not know which path I would take, but I hoped that I would do what God wanted me to do. So when I got there, I had a delegation of high school students who visited me in the study, and asked me what was my stance on Civil Rights. And if my answer was

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

wrong, they had my suitcase on the other side for me to take the train back to Chester, Pennsylvania, where I had come from. So I pledged to them that I would join them in the struggle to end all that nonsense of segregation and so forth.

MN: Now, you have—this is, Ahsoskie is a fairly small town—about how many people?

JS: About 7000 in the town.

MN: Okay, what did winning the Civil Rights battle in Ahsoskie mean? What were the main issues that you confronted in this community?

JS: Well the main thing—well, it was the same thing as elsewhere—segregation in restaurants, and movie theaters, in employment, job applications. You didn't dare ever apply to the banks, had no black workers in the banks, or in telephone industry, in major industry. And [indistinguishable], and also in the schools, were segregated, and underfurnished. Underfurnished, the school—education was a hot issue. Although, that was '63, schools were still segregated. Because, although the law was on the books, nobody had hardly intended to carry it out. You had to *force* them to do what the law said. Yeah, so those were the issues: public accomodation, school, segregation, and public transportation.

MN: So the transportation was still segregated, even after the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Even after the Montgomery Bus Boycott—except on the trains going South. And we deliberately tested the law, knowing what the law was, to make sure whether they live up to the law. And there were no infractions, to my knowledge, after they—as far as inter-state travel was concerned. On busses, or on trains. And I rode them both.

MC: Now what was your—you mentioned that Wyatt Walker came, when you were recently just called to the church, in February '63.

JS: Correct.

MC: I guess you had just been to the church—just called to the church—and was there an effort to establish a satellite of SCLC in that area, or did you work—or did your Civil Rights activity in the area emerge out of the other organization that you named, that was—what was it, “The Citizen?”

JS: Better Citizens.

MC: “Better Citizens?”

JS: Well, it was an affiliate.

MC: Oh, it was an affiliate of SCLC?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Yes, it was an affiliate. And they had him to come, which was quite an historic event, because Ahsokie is not that big a metropolis. It's not a metropolitan area at all. Yet Wyatt Tee Walker at that time was a national figure. So when I got there, I found that somewhat of social awareness, there was more of the, I would say, the Urban League or NAACP. They really were not too much interested in marches. Freedom Rallies, okay, but it was kind of a conservative town.

MN: So you didn't do the—so organizing a sit-in was not a kind of tactic that people would use there?

JS: Not too much. They believed in the process and negotiation.

MN: And were there whites in the town who were willing to negotiate?

JS: Yes, yes. We were favored with a pretty fair-minded newspaper, the *Hertford County Herald*. I forget the editor's name, the owner. Parker was his last name. He was descended of the Parker that, I believe they owned the—he originally owned the *Raleigh News and Observer*. But he was a pretty fair-minded man. When they ran to pass ordinances in Ahsokie banning demonstrations, Roy Parker, Sr.—that was his name—stood up in the city council, and pleaded with the council not to pass the ordinance. But they didn't—which as not heeded, and they passed it. And I told him that they had sung to the wind, and would reap the whirlwind. And so they sent the senior pastor of the white church down to council me to take it easy [laughter]. I told him we had took it easy too long.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Now did things get heeded in Ahuskie for you at some point?

JS: Yes, on the day when the Civil Rights movement workers, when the children in the 16th street baptist church. That was my first freedom rally. We had the field secretary from the NAACP from Charlotte, which was like 300 miles away, to be the speaker. And on that day was when they bombed the 16th street Baptist Church. I have never, ever, made a speech of advocacy for our people speaking personally. And he was so overcome, he couldn't speak. And rather than allow the meeting to go into just a flop, I rose and spoke and said that this fight would go on, and we were gonna carry it to end all of the defamation of rights, and you know, White with capital letters, and I our race with small letters. Whereas Negro is a noun, whereas black or white is an adjective. So I vowed at that time to carry it on and to keep up the fight. And it was journey, it was on at that point.

MN: Now what were the events that led you to ultimately come to New York City?

JS: Well I had been—led the effort to end this thing—end segregation in the Hertford County schools, where we had to file suit. And to end segregation in the hospitals, we had to file a suit. And my name was hung out on the clothesline and being shot, picked off by anybody, like King on the back of Lorraine Hotel. And then going into the anti-poverty program, which was really even as frightening, because it was talking about empowerment, black representation—I'll say poor representation, which was predominantly black in my area, because I come from the Black Belt. That's fifteen counties where the major population is black. And my good friend, Dr. Bill Jones, who was an upperclassman, and he led the downstate struggle, Downstate Medical Center.

MN: Right, in Brooklyn, yeah.

JS: In Brooklyn, right. And he led that. And knowing of my involvement, he invited me to come and join the Breadbasket struggle here. And I came to work with my friend, and then help him.

MN: So his name was Bill Jones?

JS: Correct.

MN: And you went to seminary with him, or to Bloomfield?

JS: Seminary, Crozer Theological Seminary, in Chester, PA.

MN: Right. Now were you—when you were living in Ahoskie, were you married at the time?

JS: No, I was not.

MN: Were you ever physically threatened by local white supremacists?

JS: Not really. Only call I got was when I tried to organize a labor union. It was a non-union state, and I had Ku Kluxes and everybody down in the basement of our church, organizing into the IOGW, International Governance Workers. We're the union makers of solidarity, for everybody,

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

union makers strong. And that was the only time I was threatened—although I never went into my house without looking back, based on the experience of Medgar Evers, in . And I never cranked my car sitting down. I always rolled the window down, put my are through the window and crank it up. Cause you did not become a part of the Civil Rights Movement unless you willing to die, you were willing to lose your home, you were willing to be bombed. That was the price you paid.

MN: Did you carry a gun in those days?

JS: Well I— [laughter]

MN: You're a farmer, you know.

JS: Well my father did, but I became a student of nonviolence, and so I realized it was futile, any kind of violent insurrection, anything like that, because we did not control any ammunitions factions, we did not control the Army, Navy, Marine—anything like that. If I did, I don't know what my response might have been, but it was a tactical strategy.

MN: Right. Now was there a garment factory in Ahooskie that the IOGW was trying to organize?

JS: Right, yes.

MN: And so there was a mill in the town?

JS: Right, correct.

MC: Did you say the KKK members were in the basement of your church to—

JS: Well, you know when we had the workers who were trying to organize, you knew good and well—they didn't have the hoods on—

MC: Yeah, yeah, I see.

JS: But the white public in general, you know, many of them were Ku Kluckers, and were, you know, sympathisers. They didn't make me any difference.

MC: But they were supporting the idea to create the union.

JS: Correct.

MC: Oh, I see.

JS: And they would use our church. The strangest thing, they used our church because they couldn't in the white church, they were not welcome. And well, I would just say—I was just a rebel, you know. I was just a rebel.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MC: Your Civil Rights activity at that time, was that mostly through the SCLC affiliate, the Better Citizens group that you'd referred to earlier?

JS: Interrelated—well not through the Better Citizens, because, you know, they were a little more conservtive.

MC: Okay.

JS: It was really through the NAACP and the SCLC.

MC: I see.

JS: And I would say more through the NAACP in the sense that they had legal representation. So whenever you got in trouble, you had the legal defense and educational fund that got you out of trouble.

MN: Now when you came up to New York City to work with Bill Jones, was this a staff position that he gave you?

JS: Yes it was. Yes, a salaried position.

MN: A salaried position with Operation Breadbasket in New York City?

JS: Yes.

MC: Do you remember the year?

JS: Yes, 1969, October '69. And my salary was paid by the Foundation for Non-violence. An attorney was the head of it. Oh my goodness, his name just re-emerged sometime back. I never met him, but I was surprised to know he was still alive.

MN: Right. Now, where were you living, where did you get an apartment when you took this position?

JS: I lived in the Flatbush section, on Lenox Road.

MN: Oh, okay, my old—Now, what were some of the activities of Operation Breadbasket in New York City at that time?

JS: Well, when I came, Dr. Jones had led the fight—you know, the minister's fight for jobs and rights, and the bread industry. Wonderbread, Tasty Cake, Tasty Bread. Then we went into the garment industry. We led a fight against a modern department store for top—for our share in top management, banking, advertising, service contracts, philanthropy, Mae's Department store. Then we moved from the garment industry into the bottling industry: Coca—Pepsi-Cola first, Coca-Cola, Canada Dry. But our major effort was in the food industry, when we took on A&P.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Now how did you organize a campaign in New York City? What was the first step you would take in doing something like this?

JS: Well, we would first have—we had a fourfold strategy. First was education. Second was—what shall I say?—information. Third, demonstration. And fourth, reconciliation and a signed covenant, which was a covenant agreement between the major industry and, say, the black community.

MN: Right. Now, when you were doing—putting pressure on a company, which would not make the kind of agreement you were looking for, was your major weapon picket lines, or boycotts—or both?

JS: Both,

MN: And where did you get the people for picket lines and boycotts?

JS: Well, there was a voluntary group. We met each Saturday at the Breadbasket Saturday morning meeting, of which Reverend Al Sharpton was head of our youth division.

MN: Really?

JS: Oh yes. He was the head of our youth division. Reverend Jones was a spokesperson, I was the staff person. And persons came voluntary, of various ethnic groups and backgrounds—

MN: How old was Reverend Sharpton when you first met him?

JS: He was about 17. About 17 years of age.

MN: Now, was he a minister at the time?

JS: He was a boy preacher, yes.

MN: He was a boy preacher, from Brooklyn?

JS: Yes, from Washington Temple, Church of God in Christ, under his pastor, the late Dr. F.D. Washington.

MN: Which campaign made the biggest impression on you, of the ones you were—

JS: Well, A&P was the most national. Because they had the backing of Richard Nixon and the White House, and they refused to recognize our rightful demands for equality in employment. They had 75 board of directors members, not a one was African American—or say, you might say, of the third world. The first black was [indistinguishable] Taylor, who was Lyndon Johnson's former legal assistant. They had a 5.7 Billion dollar corporation, gave not one dime to black causes. Not one dime to black colleges or universities or so forth. So what we did at Overseas Press Corp,

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

we declared a nationwide boycott. And Jesse Jackson joined us, and Ralph David Abernathy and we led a march and shut down the Greyboy building.

MN: Where was this building located?

JS: I believe it was 420 Lexington Avenue, right beside Grand Central. And we occupied the officer headquarters of A&P, and shut it down. And for days, wave upon wave—

MN: When you mean—by shut it down, you just walked in and took the elevator up and—?

JS: Walked in a just sat down.

MN: And just sat down?

JS: Yeah, sure. Sure. And with demonstrations and picketing going on outside of the Greyboy building, Grand Central, it was followed by all the major networks, Gale Noble and others, Bill McCreary. And it caught the attention of—not only the attention of the nation, but the world itself.

MN: Let me just stop for one second, cause—[tape cuts]

[TAPE CUTS BACK]

MN: So Dawn, you remember the demonstrations, “A&P Must Go”?

JS: Exactly, exactly.

MN: Were there demonstrations in front of stores and neighborhoods?

JS: There were, yes—throughout the metropolitan area. There were 502 A&P stores, I believe, metropolitan-wide, and they had only one black manager.

MN: At 502 stores?

JS: Now our first effort was to negotiate. Correct. The first step was to negotiate, and if they refuse to negotiate, then to educate ourselves on the statistics and the demographics. And after that, then to demonstrate, if we could not negotiate.

MC: Most of the demonstrators, were they high school church people, or community organizers?

Who were they?

JS: Cross section. Not too many, I would say, church folk. The rank and file. The rank and the masses have always been way ahead of the classists. Always way ahead, because they have the most to gain, and they're the ones who are most affected.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MC: So if you were to organize, say, a rally or a demonstration on Lexington Avenue, and you needed to get 500 people, you know, or however many people you wanted—where would you go to get those bodies out there on the street?

JS: Well, you would contact the local organizations. At that time, you had welfare rights organizations. You have 70 major welfare rights organizations in Manhattan, Bronx and Queens. And many of our picketers and demonstrators were from the welfare rights organizations. And we were supported by organizations across the board, or by the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Long Island, the social action part of the New York Diocese. So first, we contacted various activist organizations. Send out a notice, and they would come together voluntarily on the Saturday meeting—on the Saturday Breadbasket Meeting.

MC: And was Bill Jones pastor of the church in Brooklyn, the—

JS: Yes he was.

MN: So which church was that?

JS: Bethany Baptist Church. We just buried him, matter of fact. They carried it across all the major networks. We just buried him about two weeks ago.

MC: But the church leaders for the most part were not major supporters of it? Milton Comalison, Gardner Taylor, were they people that you could count on to rally behind you?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Milton was a brave fighter and the Ocean Hill Brownsville's and the educate in the school—community school board struggle. And I was in the South at the time when he took over 110 Livingston Street. But when we really got out there into dealing with major industries, it was mostly rank and file ministers.

MN: Were there any ministers in the Bronx, or any leaders in the Bronx who you remember who really supported this campaign?

JS: It was mostly, I would say, a Brooklyn based, Brooklyn supported. I think most of our support came from Brooklyn and Manhattan. Reverend Earl Moore in Manhattan was our coordinator in Manhattan. But most of our demonstrations took place around Stuyvesant A&P in a symbolic way. As far as the Bronx, Reverend Kenneth Fowles was our contact person of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church.

MN: Which is on Prospect Avenue?

JS: Yes it is.

MN: So Reverend Kenneth Fowles?

JS: Yes.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: He was mentioned by Dr. Samuel Christian in—So he was your contact person?

JS: And Reverend Timothy Mitchell of Queens was quite an activist. As well as—there was a—oh boy—a fella out of White Plains. We had several affiliates. C.E. Thomas of the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark. A.L. Tyler of Pallison. It reached all the way up to Buffalo, New York, so it was quite wide braces for us, metropolitan wide. Reverend Phillips, who's now deceased, out of Staten Island.

MN: Now, what led you to eventually leave Operation Breadbasket and become the pastor of your own church?

JS: So you want to get a little controversial, huh? [laughs]

MC: And how long did you stay at breadbasket before moving on?

JS: I was there from October '69 through, I would say, August of '72. And what persuaded me: I disagreed with the action SCLC took to suspend Reverend Jesse Jackson as the National Director of Operation Breadbasket. I knew that its destiny was, in a sense, doomed without him being at the helm. But he had violated some rules regarding SCLC. What they were specifically, I don't know. But when they did that, then I realized it was time for me to move on. And then, at the same time, those two years was just like ten years, and I realized my calling really was to pastory.

MN: It was just so exhausting and stressful?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Exhausting. Seven days a week, late at night, early in the morning. Everyday. And I found out I just didn't have the gasoline to last. That's why I admire politicians. I do, because they just have an indomitable spirit, and just endless enthusiasm. And a wide breadth of knowledge—you gotta be—have a wide breadth of knowledge if you're going to be a politician.

MN: Now when did you meet your wife? Was this in New York City?

JS: No, I was pastoring in Ahoskie. I met her at a funeral [laughter]. Yeah, her mother pointed her—pointed me out to her as I eulogized the father of the dead president of the Union University, Dallas Simmons' father. Dallas Simmons of president of Virginia Union University, is now retired. But it was there, and I met her in Ahoskie, although she was originally from Portsmouth, Virginia.

MN: Now was Virginia—how close to Ahoskie was Virginia Union?

JS: Oh, about two hours away.

MN: Oh, okay. And so you got married in North Carolina?

JS: No, I got married in Virginia.

MN: In Virginia.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Yeah, in her home—in her father's church. She's from the Great Ebenezer. It's not just Ebenezer, it's Great Ebenezer Baptist Church or Portsmouth, VA, which has a great, tremendous history in Black America, in the times of blacks initially pastoring the then-white Churches, and so forth. Portsmouth has a great history. You read about Portsmouth a lot in Grant Russel Hodges book, *Root and Branch*. Yeah, so there's a lot of tremendous history in these small areas here.

MN: Now when you came to New York, was your wife active in—?

JS: No. Scared stiff. Scared to death.

MN: So, what did she do while you were, you know?

JS: She prayed. [laughter]

MN: She—right. So did she support the decision for you to—?

JS: Well, knowing that she was from a—we'll say a—small town and had not been through the movement, I thought it was best not to involve her in all the things that I was doing. Because I did not know whether she would approve of all of it. And so I just continued. And some of it I shared, and some of it I didn't. Yeah.

MC: So you left Breadbasket in August of '72?

JS: Correct.

MC: And did you have a call from a church at that time, or did you—?

JS: Yes I did. I was called to three churches. One in Danville Virginia, I was the first black to be called as Co-Pastor. And Emmanuel Baptist Church, Lafayette and St. James' Place in Brooklyn, right opposite Pratt Institute. And St. John's Baptist in Harlem. And I chose Emmanuel because of the salary package.

MC: The one in Virginia—in Danville?

JS: No, the one in Emmanuel Baptist Church, in Brooklyn.

MC: Oh, across from Pratt.

JS: Which was much rued by old man Pratt. Yeah, Pratt. So when Rockefeller got his university, Pratt got his institute. And I left in three weeks.

MC: At Emmanuel Baptist?

JS: That's right.

MC: Is that right?

JS: I couldn't make it. I—

MC: That was an all-black congregation at—?

JS: No, it was historically a white—and it had become predominantly black, with white parishioners and officers. In fact, Dr. Judd, RNC Judd, J-U-D-D. Was a republican judge. He was the first judge to vote against the Vietnam War. He was one of the deacons of the board. And they were concerned about maintaining the integrated congregation. I was not concerned about integration to that extent. I was concerned about liberation, and whoever was involved in that. You know, okay, all come. But my whole effort was not just to maintain integration. You know, my effort was to free our—free oppressed persons, economic and otherwise. So I saw I couldn't survive there. You know, when you finish seminary in those days, you came out and, you know, you prepare for a white congregation. And then you realized that, when you got out, you really weren't going to be comfortable in any white church. And so you went back to your roots, your black roots. And I got too a black, I couldn't go back. [laughter]

MC: So you resigned after three weeks?

JS: Against their wishes, I turned down three times the salary, cause I saw my future—I didn't see my—and it's a great church, and it's a great church now. But I didn't see *my* future there. And I saw my future with the congregation in Harlem, that was paying me that time only 150 dollars a week, with no insurance, no retirement at that time. Just 150 dollars.

MC: So you left Emmanuel and then went up to St. John's?

JS: Right, correct.

MN: And is that when you moved to Fish Avenue?

JS: Yes.

MN: So they did have a—

JS: Parsonage.

MN: —a parsonage on Fish Avenue in the Bronx?

JS: Yes.

MN: And what was that neighborhood like when you moved there?

JS: It was a mixed congregation—mixed neighborhood, a mixed block, and pretty safe, at that time. It was—at one time it was a dream community. When they bought the parsonage there in 1960 from our predecessor.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Now that was at that time considered an elite neighborhood for African Americans in the Bronx.

JS: Yes.

MN: And when you moved there, it was '72?

JS: Correct.

MN: But you felt very comfortable there?

JS: Very comfortable, and liked it very much.

MN: Did you have children at that time?

JS: No, I didn't. I didn't.

MN: And was your wife comfortable in that community?

JS: Yes, to a—But she she loved her beloved South. Her warm southern small town and her warm church. Cause the churches are warm in the South, and compared to here—they were a little cool here.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Including St. John's baptist, was a little cool? Or was that a little warmer?

JS: It's much warmer now. But it was still kind of cool, yes.

MC: Do you recall your reaction to black theology when it emerged? You know, James Cone has written the book, you know, 1969, *Black Theology and Black Power*, and was right here at Union Seminary. So you were here in the city at the time that James Forman—

JS: Black Manifesto

MC: Black Manifesto at Riverside, and the creation of the National Committee of Black Churchmen. Do you remember any of your reactions to the emerging black theology movement at the time? Did you ever participate in any of those discussions?

JS: To a degree, in that I did—I didn't know James Foreman, but I certainly have applauded his efforts when he announced his Black Manifesto at Riverside Church, I believe in 1965.

MC: '69

JS: '69, it was? And also applauded Dr. King's stand against the Vietnam War in 1965. We demonstrated in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, saying, all we asking to give peace a chance. And also with Jim S. Rollins, he was quite an activist. I think he was the head of the—

MC: That's right, the NCBC.

JS: NCBC.

MN: Now was he at St. Augustine's at that time?

MC: Yeah.

MN: So, he was operating out of St. Augustine's church in the Bronx when he was—

JS: Later. Yeah, later. I think he probably came from the senate of the Presbyterian before coming to St. Augustine.

MC: That's right, that's right.

JS: Certainly we applauded James Cone's idea of Black Theology, and most particularly his book *God of the Oppressed*.

MN: How many people were in the congregation when you took over at St. John's?

JS: Well it had sort of dwindled down over the tragic death of my predecessor. The congregation was quite devastated because he was found dead on his bed under mysterious circumstances. And

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

so I found I had to not only build the congregation—the morale of the congregation—but also had to build it back numerically.

MC: What was his name?

JS: His name was Walter CTJ Willebad. Willebad (SP?) That was my predecessor.

MN: Now did you get more involved in Harlem or the Bronx in terms of organizations when you took over at St. John's?

JS: Well I really gradually became involved in Manhattan through the Council of Churches. You know, we had a community center, and we had a after school program that involved a lot of the kids in the community. But more particularly it was the Bronx, where I lived. Because next door to me became one of the largest drug operations. And I don't call any names, even now, because I realize that it's life threatening.

MN: Wow.

JS: It's still life-threatening. You know, and my thanks to God that I'm still alive.

MN: Wow. Now when did this drug operation take hold in your community?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: It was about 25 years ago, when my son was born, the drugs on that block were just proliferated everywhere. They were so bad on Fish—on my corner of Fish Avenue and Boston Road, that they sold the drugs across the cars at the stoplight. And that's how bold they were. And the police did not do anything to them. And that proliferated drugs throughout the—

[END OF SIDE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2]

JS: —what triggered the whole—my involvement—to organize the Catholic, Protestant and the Jewish community, was my youngest son, who's now 26, was a baby in the crib, and all of a sudden somebody got shot in front of the house. My wife screamed and said, you know, "Someone has gotten shot. The man is in the driveway bleeding." And I believe in the voice of God, and it was like I heard a voice that said, "How long is it gonna take before you do—before you do anything?" And I said, well, if I fought the Ku Klux Klan in the South, I gotta fight again. So I went down to see the captaan of the 30th—no, the 47th precinct, the then-captain. And he told me that if I wanted to fight drugs in the community, go see Sterling Johnson, who handled the mid-Manhattan task force. And I forget his name. but then the—oh, my goodness, O'Brian—O'Brian became his successor. And it just got worse. So I went down to see him on my own. And I told him I was a pastor, and I just said, I said to him—and they were selling drugs right across the steps and everything. I asked him, I asked him the question, "How do you know that—" I said, "Do you have a daughter?" He said yes. He said she was twelve years old, I think, at that time. And my son was 13. "Well, how do you know your daughter will not marry my son?" He looked. I said, "So

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

for the future of your son—your daughter, my son—can we work together to end this situation, this drug proliferation?” And he said yes, and he called Fair Dayes, who had by then displaced the drug dealers off of the Boston Rd. down to the shopware plaza. And then I found out that my efforts were too fragmented. And so we met with the police officers now, who was no longer the 47th, [indistinguishable] Robinson. We met in the home of a preacher across the street, and we identified various persons and we—Ben Ward was commissioner. We had a clergy breakfast at the Episcopal Church on 222nd street, and father Walker was there. Father Reed is there now. And that—out of that meeting we organized the Clergy Coalition of the 47th Precinct.

MN: It was called the Clergy Coalition of the 47th Precinct?

JS: Yes.

MN: Now what drugs were being sold? Is this predominantly crack or heroin, or—

JS: It was heroin at that time. It was heroin. Marijuana and heroin all throughout the hillside apartments, right next door to this school, and right beside the school, and right in front of the St. Philip—St. Charles Roman Catholic Church. It was just everywhere.

MN: And where were the sellers coming from? Were they from the neighborhood?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: I would think most of them were from the neighborhood, but the operators were not from the neighborhood.

MN: Now, how old were most of the people who were doing the selling?

JS: Teenagers, same thing like today. Teenagers. Older teens.

MC: Do you remember the date, the year the Clergy Coalition was formed? Would it have been—

JS: It was when Ben Ward was commissioner of the police department.

MN: That's under the Katch administration, or—

JS: I guess it was so, I guess it was. Though he was not one of my favorite men.

MN: Right, right. Now, were you threatened when you did this organizing, by the drug dealers?

JS: Not directly, because you had to be very discreet. We did not deal with the local police, we dealt with the captains. We would meet in our monthly meetings with the captains, concerning drug operations and drug sites. And then we decided to have marches down Boston Road, and rallies on the National Night Out, on the athletic field of Evander Charles, at which time I had been wanting to be the keynote speaker, and then invite the mayor, and he descended in his helicopter [laughter].

MN: Now this is in the early 80s or the late 70s?

JS: It must've been around the late 70s I guess.

MN: And this is even before crack that there's a tremendous problem?

JS: Yes, correct.

MN: With heroin and marijuana?

JS: Correct.

MN: How did you explain what was going on, you know, why there were these many young people selling this? I mean, you know, how did you explain to yourself what was going on in this community?

JS: Well one thing, I knew that it was exploitation of young, of I guess young black males, and them desiring a better future for them. Certainly coming from an all-male family. I have all males myself. And my uncles were all males. You know, six males. And so, I've always been a tremendous male advocate. And I could just not bear seeing young black males being *used*, you know, as, you know, as sellers. And I just believed more that young people deserved better than that, than to put themselves on the death row, or on the hit squad, which was a matter of time. And

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

then also the destabilization thing. And I was determined that I was not gonna let my neighborhood become the run down, like many other neighborhoods, because I was determined that where we went as black folk, we were not gonna make the neighborhood worse. We were gonna make it better. And thank God, God helped us to do that. Because I don't believe that when you go somewhere, it ought to be worse. You ought to make it better. [indistinguishable]

MC: So did it change for the better in large part because, did the police come through with a greater presence and sweep the neighborhoods, or was it that—

JS: They did, yes. When O'Brien became the captain, he was—he set the precedence. He and the 47th were a long lane—a long line of effective captains working with the pastors and trying to bring it under control, yes.

MC: And that's basically through more patrol cars—more cars on the street, more police presence in the neighborhood?

JS: And dealing with the actual sites. And we demanded that they stopped cutting the limbs off the tree and get to the root of the tree. Because the whole thing of the crime thing was a hoax. The drug thing's a hoax, to round up a lot of a people when they know who the top cats are. And you want to clean up a forest—which I have done—you don't cut the limbs off the tree, or even cut the tree down. You dig it up. And then you can till the land. And so that was our view.

MC: So there were major arrests in those areas?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Yes, yes. And the same thing like in the West Side of Manhattan. Because they had—they said they had forty-five major druglords, Colombian and Dominican, on the West Side.

MN: Now who were the major druglords in this community? Were they predominantly immigrants, or they were predominantly people who were born here?

JS: I guess it was a mixture. I did not ever really know who—I know at one time they talked about the Posse, the Jamaican Posse that at one time I understand was pretty strong in East New York. And they were the ones who were supposed to have sold drugs in East St. Louis to raise money to finance the—I guess whatever movement was in Jamaica at one time, that almost became the most—almost became a civil war, you remember, during that time. So it was all during that time that—I do know that the Posse was involved, but who the major runners—one of whom really was an African American. I will not call his name, because I think it's almost still too dangerous for me to call his name. But he was the dominant fella in the drug proliferation at that time.

MN: And did he live in the Bronx or Harlem?

JS: In Harlem.

MN: Right. I probably know his name.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MC: And it just so happened that the church, St. John's, the parsonage is located there, on Fish Avenue.

JS: Correct.

MC: Is that the same house that your predecessor lived in?

JS: Correct.

MC: Which was found mysteriously there?

JS: Not, not at—he—

MC: Or was that in a different?

JS: He was found at a different site. Not at the location. No, not there on Fish Avenue.

MN: Now did your block eventually become a safe place for your children to grow up?

JS: Oh yes, oh yes. Oh, yes, thank God for that. I decided I wasn't gonna live for nothing. I was gonna die for something.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

MN: Now did you have block patrols that you organized independently, or you depended on the police primarily?

JS: Well we—dual efforts, most of them being with the police, with the captains. We would not meet with any under them. So if anybody got hurt, we knew where the problem came from. And also the neighborhood associations.

MN: Yeah, did you have a block association?

JS: We did, we had to activate the Fish Bay Block Association, which was seventeen blocks in that area.

MN: And is that still—

JS: Still very active, and they meet at the Eastchester Presbyterian Church, by the Reverend Jay Perry Wootonist Pastor.

MN: So you created—you have a neighborhood association, you had a clergy coalition, and these organizations still exist.

JS: Correct.

MN: As a way of dealing with any sorts of problems in the community.

JS: Correct, and Reverend Sampson, Samuel Sampson is the current president, and quite a tremendous leader. I guess he is president for the second time.

MN: And what church is he from?

JS: He's from the Wake Eden Baptist Church. They just built a new edifice, I believe they're on Murdoch Avenue, over there by Mount St. Michael's Academy.

MN: Were the local elected officials helpful in this campaign?

JS: Not at that time. Not at that time. And even then, district manager was not. The lack of—community pride was not there. Because if you love something, you're gonna protect it, and to preserve it, and to develop it. And so we just had to take the initiative. And thank God with the captains, we did get full support and cooperation, after Mendite—Mendite was the captain that I spoke to initially. But anyway.

MN: Were there—was there an NAACP chapter in that community?

JS: There was an NAACP that runs the day care center there on White Plains Road. I believe they have that building there. To what extent they were involved, I don't know. I just decided that whatever was being done was insufficient.

MN: So the churches were in the lead?

JS: Yes, we organized, and Father Sullivan—they elected myself president. Father Sullivan of St. Mary's Catholic Church on Copperton Avenue as first vice and Leonard Rosen of the Synagogue on Seymour Avenue as second vice. Reverend Wooten became a member, and we began then to organize and to become active. Father Reed of—I can't even think about the name of his church. The Episcopal church there on 222nd—

MN: Was that St. Luke's Episcopal?

JS: St. Luke's, correct. St. Luke's, that's right.

MN: Which is a major league Caribbean congregation.

JS: Yes, but very active. Because what we did one time, when Fr. Reed was very actively involved: we stopped at every—we identified every major site, and had a prayer rally on that site by the local clergy who [indistinguishable] in that area.

MN: Now do you have any—

Dawn: I changed tapes.

MN: Oh okay. Let's do a quick stop. [TAPE CUTS OUT]

MN: Okay, now, as you're doing this in the Bronx, is this something which gives you ideas about how to be active with your church in Harlem?

JS: Well, yes. So what happened was that became the emergence of the drug proliferation, the most horrifying thing I ever saw. It was bad in the Bronx, but it was horrifying in the West Side. Because from about 135th street on Broadway all the way up, they were just patrolling, and you could drive into most any block: 144th street, 147th street, 149th street, 152nd street, 153rd street, Edgecomb, and 145th street—I mean it was just full blown. And what happened was Fr. Finland of St.—Our Lady of Lords Catholic Church on Convent and 143rd street was a member of a group that Revrend Wythe Walker organized called HIT: Harlem Initiative Together. And they had met with then-comissioner Bradley, concerning the drug situation in Harlem. Well then but prior to that I had appeared on NPR with a reporter, and we had driven around to various sites prior to HIT. And when—HIT grew out of HCCI. Harlem Community—Congregation for Community Improvement—that I was one of the organizers in, but I couldn't keep up. It was just too much. So when they met with Bradley, Rev. Coopercamp of—

MC: Oh yes, Earl Coopercamp.

JS: Earl Coopercamp. If Bobby Kennedy had ever lived, that ever one lived—he was one of the priests at intercession. And he called for a meeting at intercession. And I happened to be at the meeting where Comissioner Bradley was present, and I told him him if he cared a thing for our community, it would be good for him to show up. During the same time the Dirty 30. And—

MN: The Dirty 30 is the police officers in the precinct in Washington Heights?

JS: Correct, and during part of that, we had met with the captains of the 30th precinct who, in a sense, were unconcerned. Unconcerned, they could've cared less. Only one or two, and I forget the fellow—one of them was tremendously good, but they transferred him to the East Side, and then they brought in a fellow from Central Park who mostly dealt with the scooper dooper law—I think, am I saying that right?

MN: The pooper scooper.

JS: Pooper scooper laws? Right. And we met with him concerning the rising proliferation of drugs in the community. and we had had a tremendous captain—I forget his name. I'm doing him injustice by not remembering his name, but he got bought. Not busted, bought, by his associates. And we admired him so much that we appealed to the then-commissioner Ward to keep him. And Ward did not. And so his successor, we met with him, and he told us, "If you think I'm gonna be"—this captain's name—"you got another thought coming." We thought we were saying something that would be very heroic, and challenging him to maintain an honorable reputation. But he deferred to it. So, during that time, I'd say after Ward came, commissioner Lee Brown with Adopt-a-Block. And I adopted St. Nicholas Place, which was rampant—drugs were rampant. So it all led up to the Dirty 30. And there were police officers who would tell me, you know, "Preacher, you got to do something." Not only the community out of control, the *precinct* is out of control. So when the officers got arrested, and [indistinguishable] came and lifted the badges of those various

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

officers, it was a welcome moment in the community. And then Coopercamp, when he came that night, Coopercamp and I organized the Clergy Coalition on Community Police. So that's how it came about.

MN: Now so you have better cooperation in the Bronx from the police than you did in Harlem?

JS: Oh, my lord, yes. [laughter] And what was so tragic was, is that "Fidelis ad Mortem" is the motto, and then US District Attorney Guliani had made it known that the Upper West Side was being heavily proliated with drugs because they were not there, and bought—either they identified a site as the buyers would come accross the George Washington Bridge, from Fort Lee and so forth, and then go back. That was all prior to HIT, and the organization HIT, as well as Adopt-a-Block. And so that's what I couldn't understand, how they could have that knowledge and then do nothing about liberating the people who were under that kind of bondage, where you—gunfire allthrough the night. And they wouldn't have been taking over buildings and running up and down the street. Thank God for Fr. Finlan, who had a Good Friday of the seven last words on 138th street, between Convent and Broadway. With the pushers and everybody all around—he's the bravest, one of the bravest clerics I ever saw. Fr. Thomas Finlan. And the *New York Times* did a full page on his activism out there in the midst of the users. And they said that the drug lords—where the buildings they were, they had barriers about five deep. So you bust through one, you really hadn't gotten to the bottom of it. But he went out there in the midst of that sea of infamy and would have his Good Friday observance out there in the streets.

MC: Our Lady of Lords?

JS: Our Lady of Lords.

MN: Now did you get involved with the education issue at all in the Bronx and Harlem?

JS: Well, not really with the education. I did join Reverend—[indistinguishable] Reverend—pastor of Thessalonia Baptist Church, when Reverend Grant was living also on Convent Avenue, when they had a press conference at City Hall—Oh my God, yes! [laughter] You do so many things you forget about them! During the time when the budget cuts and the kids from [indistinguishable] Stuyvesant, and we had the rallies over at City College, but mostly in Manhattan.

MN: This in the 70s? Or this was later?

JS: Later.

MN: Well, you know, Dr. Chapman has to leave. So why don't we cut this interview—

JS: Sure.

MN: —and then I bet—And then we'll do another one at some point. In looking back at this, if there were three things that you feel were your greatest accomplishments, in a life of hundreds of accomplishments, what would you see as the highlights in your organizing career? The things, you know, if you were gonna look and say “these were the things that had the most lasting impact.”

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Well, certainly I was very proud of the—of my initial entry into the Freedom Movement. We didn't call it Civil Rights, we called it Freedom Movement. We had freedom rallies, freedom marches, freedom speeches, freedom rides. The legislation labelled it Civil Rights, but to us it was a freedom fight. And that was—and ending segregation throughout Hertford County. Thankful to God to be useful in—to that extent. And we did organize a People's Program on Poverty that was cited by the Office of Economic Opportunity, under Sergeant [indistinguishable] as one of two examples involved in the rural poor in North Carolina. I was very proud of that. People's Program on Poverty was supported by then the North Carolina Fund that was founded by the late Governor Terry Sanford.

I would say the second, outside of the Ministry we developed through our community at 459 W. 152nd St., named after my, after the first pastor of St. John's, Drxc which had built that ministry to 45 full-time workers, we had five nutrition centers. We had a home-attended program. We had youth employment training programs with GED. Office training, clerical skills. I was very proud of that.

MN: So this is community economic development?

JS: Improvement, economic and improvement.

MN: Wow.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: And I would say certainly the Clergy Coalition of the Bronx and the Seacop. Seacop we'd call with Coopercamp and I. I would say those would be some of the highlights of, you know, my usefulness for the human betterment of mankind. Yes.

MN: Now before we—you know, I wind it up to—Dawn or Dr. Chapman have any more questions?

MC: What would you say in terms of your preaching, how your activism affected your preaching over the years at St. John's, and the response of the congregation to that? Would you say that it was a major influence on the way you shaped your weekly sermon?

JS: Well, yes. Jesus was not a within the walls preacher. He was a righteous rebel [laughter]. And so I think all of those—Dr. King and all the rest—saw us in that prophetic tradition of Christ in terms of going about doing good, whether it's—who said “the spirit of the Lord God”—that would be the mantra of the things—the spirit of the Lord God, Isaiah 61 is upon me: “for he has anointed me, or called me, appointed me, to set the captives free, preach liberty and healing.” So, in that sense, you can't really pastor people without looking out for their total welfare. How can a shepherd be a good shepherd and the sheep who graze from the pasture-land are eating grass as stubs in the dust and dirt of life, where there's parts of green grass to graze upon? How can you be a good shepherd in the economic in the economic, the education, the political, the social, the domestic life of your sheep, and then let them eat on stub grass? It's what Jesus called a wolf in sheep clothes. That's a harlot, who fleeth when the [indistinguishable] come. So it is a matter of living out your faith in everyday, as you have men to do unto you, also do unto them. How can

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

you expect to get a privilege in life that you're not willing for another man to have? Who is no less than you are, for we're all members of the same human family. So Jesus, and certainly the prophets of old, but primarily Christ, who went about doing it in a Jericho rose situation. We all feel condemned by the priest, and the Levite who walked by and left the man wounded. And Jesus took a reject of society, the Samaritan, the mixed race, the colored man, and said that he got on his knees and healed his wounds, poured him oil and wine, and said—

MC: You know the reason I asked that, because as basic as the message of Jesus is—

JS: Yeah, sure.

MC: —as you just expressed it, many churches in Harlem and all over the country, are growing at a great rate, because they preach a message that's very contrary to that. You know, prosperity message, a feelgood message—a message that doesn't really require and kind of social engagement. And so it seems that the people such as yourself, who are relating the Gospel to the social, political, economic struggles of people in a very real and consistent way, seem to be, unfortunately, in the minority.

JS: And have always been in the minority.

MC: As basic as that message is.

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

JS: Have always been in the minority. If you look at Dr. King's life, he was not joined by the big fish. Matter of fact, our own denomination kicked him out, and he was [indistinguishable] to the late James Jackson. So it was the masses of rank and file persons: pastors and people. And in a real way, I would say the masses, white and black alike have been brainwashed to say that there should be no involvement in the political arena. Up until late, until you have the moral majority of the 700 club, Pat Robertson, who realized being out of the political arena determines your destiny by those who don't have your welfare at heart. And so that, I would say, even in the black community today, we still have not gotten from that myth, that there should be no involvement in politics, when that's all about what makes up life.

MC: Right.

JS: So we've never really—cause when Dr. King went to Memphis, he went to a Pentecostal church. Where were the baptists? Where were the Methodists? Where were the Presbyterians. Where were the Episcopalians. Name any of those churches, and generally speaking, it was because you had a defiant cleric, like a Father Gloop of Milwaukee. Or those of the Catholic Church, whom even the recent Pope we had asked them to get out of the human arena. Cause that's all that politics is: it's what's happening in the marketplace. So you still have that dichotomy, that preachers should not have anything—To me it was not politics. It's life. You know, what kind of home you gonna have. What kind of community you gonna live in? How you gonna educate your children? How you gonna send them to college? How you gonna pay your rent? How you gonna own your homes? We would've owned those buildings that in this neighborhood, or in Harlem, but most of my congregation could barely take care of the rent and stay afloat, much less own the buildings or go

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

into businesses. So it's [indistinguishable] that, that we don't own those buildings. How you gonna own those buildings when you don't even get the minimum wage law that we fought with Bruno, because the minimum wage law up until last year wasn't even six dollars an hour. You couldn't even afford to pay your rent like that. And as a result, right now there's a tremendous disheaval of people who can no longer live in Harlem, forget about buying.

DR: Something on TV just this morning: young woman with a teenage daughter, gainfully employed. She has lived her entire life in Harlem. She just had to move to Jersey City. She said it breaks her heart, you know, it's her whole background. But she can't afford to live there anymore. So I wanted to ask you if you think that churches and activists are doing enough now—

JS: No.

DR: To—no? [laughs] To deal with those economic questions, like about where people live. And also: you said something about the [indistinguishable], the movement was labeled the Civil Rights Movement, and you thought that was limiting?

JS: Sure.

DR: If you'll elaborate on that—

JS: Well, you know the whole idea that the ideology of Jesus to set the captives free—to free the oppressed, and let the free go, and let the captives go free, is the whole idea that every man should

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

be able to live on his own—fine, that's the utopian concept—on his own vine and field [indistinguishable]. So that, in a real way, no father should be able to have the mother be out of the home and let their children grow up and become just, you know, at random, as many kids do. Because most of the kids that get involved in crime from single-parent families. And many times, it's all because that, you know, the home is economically viable. So what we're dealing with, is a economic situation that disenfranchises, and disempowers people. Because, you know, if you cannot—if you've got to have the mother and the father out of the home, how is the child to rear themselves? My children grew up there, right on Fish Avenue, and all that mayhem of crime and violence. What was the difference? Mother and father in the home. Mother at home when the children come home. What's the difference, in the sense that, when they want to go off to college, we've had exposure to know what's available, and the options that you have, the many options. You know? And so we need, really, a whole restructuring of the economic system that we have. A whole restructutring for the masses of people. Because the powers that be don't care anymore about the white masses than they do to the black masses—as we've seen in the labor movement, where they shot them down. And then the coal industry, as to what happened there. That's a good example to show you what happens regarding the rights of man. And so, how can you be—how can you be a servant of Christ, and instrument of his, and not work on behalf of human betterment and human uplift? But everybody will have a stable home, and every child will have his chance in life. I mean, it is criminal, you know? Because some of the kids that came along with John, ended up in [indistinguishable], because they were never—and just as gifted as he was. But never was able to go to college, because when it came to summer camp programs, I would take [indistinguishable] and send them myself, you know? And so we're dealing with an abandonment of the family, you know. So we really need to restructure our society to really deal with the health

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

and appropriate parenting, because we have a very dysfunctional society that produces dysfunctional—yeah, well.

MN: Amen. Well, you know, Reverend Scott, I want to thank you for coming and sharing your ideas and experience and life with us. This is an honor to have you, and I think what we have is something very powerful that we can share with a lot of people through the power of video.

JS: And one thing further I want to say. I mean I call upon the young people: our sons and our daughters, my own sons, who have reaped the benefits of those of us who have struggled and put our lives on the line, to rise up and build upon what we've left and not just be persons who go out for their own economic betterment without reaching back to the rising number of the working poor, and the masses of those—what, 32 million people?—in America. And the world. We cannot forget the situation in South America, the whole liberation movement. So they—casue King was only—what, 25 years old? I was only 25. But we made a commitment to make things better for the people. And I call upon you young people. I mean, it's a call of conscience. I don't see that happening, to the large scale that we did. Because, as you know, there was a movement—other movements—prior to the Montgomery bus movement. In Baton Rouge, under TJ Jameson, a young man. You know? EK Sears, steel in Tallahassee, Florida, right? Fred Showsworth was a young fellow—[indistinguishable]—which King did. The young people, there at Virginia State College and Charlotte University, right across the board. Jay Murden, Arthur Ray Lewsy. Young people, in their twenties. You know, where are our, you know, pioneers are now—you know, who continue that same kind of struggle? Where are they?

Interviewee: Reverend John L. Scott

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 3/3/2006

DR: I think part of it is that mistake that middle class young people sometimes make that, if they can live where they want to, and if they have their civil rights—in other words, they are able to live where they want and have good jobs and consume as much—that they seem to think that that's it. That that's what it was about. That's why I was interested in the difference between the term Civil Rights and Freedom Movement. You know, because it's one thing to be able to eat in a nice restaurant if you have enough money, but most people cannot even go to that restaurant.

JS: Yeah, that's—and that, see, that was the third leg of Dr. King's movement: economic advancement. Because you say that, if you don't have silver, S-I-L, you can have all the Civil Rights you want. But if you don't have *silver* rights, you don't have the resources to eat at a restaurant or to stay—sleep at a hotel. Or buy with, whatever the open housing may be—

MN: Right.

JS: So that was his last dream, when he organized the poor people's March on Washington. Which, the powers that be decided not to—that, through the CIA, that it would never come to pass.

MN: Well, okay, thank you very much.

JS: Okay—

[END OF INTERVIEW]