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Rollins, Joseph Metz

Rollins, Joseph Metz Interview: Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Metz Rollins with Elizabeth McGee

Interviewer: Dr. Brian Purnell

Date: 11/13/2007

Transcriber: Mary Maxwell

Dr. Brian Purnell (BP): Today is November 13th, 2007 in the home of Reverend Metz Rollins. Reverend Rollins thank you for having us here today. Also, with me, is Dr. Elizabeth McGee. And Reverend Rollins if we could begin by you sharing your date of birth and the spelling of your full name?

Reverend Metz Rollins (MR): I was born September the 8th, 1926. I'm now 81 years old and I've been. I was in the Bronx for 25 years, that's how long I've served as a pastor of Saint Augustine Presbyterian Church. I went there in 1972 and stayed until about 25 years after.

BP: And what is your first and last name? I know most people refer to you as Metz Rollins.

MR: My full name is Joseph Metz Rollins Jr.; I guess the junior is not important, not anymore. No longer important since my father has been dead for some time.

BP: And where, where were you born?

MR: I was born in Newport News, Virginia. That's where my father had been pastor. I'm a third generation Presbyterian preacher; my grandfather Joseph Andrew Rollins was a classmate of Dr. William Metz. That's how we got the name because they were both graduates of [inaudible-possibly Mothersdunn] Bittle Seminary 1890--, 1899 I think. So my father--. I was born in Newport News; I was ordained to the ministry in 1950, January the 10th 1950. I remember that date because my father was still living and he was pastor of Father [inaudible] Presbyterian which was then separated of Southern Virginia to --at the time when I was to be ordained. And it was very interesting because I had been told to prepare for one thing, and other preachers asked other questions, some of them were dumb. But they were the kind of questions they answered. And so it was quite interesting. And my father had invited other ministers to witness the

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ordination and some of the preachers from the Presbyterian got carried away and started fussing and you know agitating. But it finally went on and took place after some plea for—to act. From my father to act like Christians.

[Laughter]

MR: You laugh but--.

Elizabeth McGee (EM): But that's the truth of the matter isn't it--?

MR: That's the truth of the matter, and so finally it went off and I was ordained. Because in Presbyterian [inaudible] many lay their hands on your head and you kneel. You kneel and you know, they lay their hands on your head and you come up, quote, an ordained Presbyterian minister. So okay--.

BP: Was there ever any doubt that you would become a Presbyterian minister? So I guess, what drew you to that calling, aside from your father and your grandfather having done it?

MR: Well, in 1944, or '45 I can't remember, we were at war. And I went because I went into the ministry then, to get out of the war but you were permitted to finish your education if you were planning on being a minister. And I took that route and accepted the fact that it sounded like a long time ago, and it was 1945, that's when the war ended but I decided that you know, to keep on going, though I had some offers--. Some Episcopalian or sort of clergy--.

EM: Trying to recruit?

MR: And they tried to recruit me but I decided that I was going to be a Presbyterian. Because they don't wanna give our ministry--. I had a chance to preach down in Philadelphia and this was when I was director of the Black Churchmen and we were--. I was not allowed to go into the Episcopal Church, high Episcopal Church, I think it was Holy Trinity, that they kept me outside the inner sanctum because I was not pure of heart.

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EM: Why because you were a Presbyterian and not Episcopalian or because you were black?

MR: No because I was--. This was a very high church Episcopalian Church and so they had me to preach. But I couldn't go back into the, what I call the sanctorum sanctorum, you know they kept me out of the main place and I sat just outside of the place to preach because that's how the Episcopalian, High Church Episcopalians were at that time. I don't know whether they had changed or not, but that was, I would sit just outside and I preached from the pulpit but I was not allowed to go back into the--. But you know that's just one of the things. Okay.

BP: Some people that I've spoken with have, they remember you as a preacher who joined the Gospel with the lived experience at their time. So they say that you did a very good job, that marrying—preaching the Gospel with commentary on contemporary issues especially political issues. How did you develop that approach to preaching the Gospel and how did you develop that approach as a minister?

MR: Well, in 1953 I went down to Tallahassee, Florida to organize at that time, the Southern and the Northern Presbyterian Church separated and I left and became a part of the southern church. And I had been brought down to organize a church, but at that same time I had met Martin Luther King and he had been a part of the thing in Montgomery and then we got in--. The girls got into a, were arrested, two girls were arrested in Florida for not moving back, to the backseat, you know, the segregated thing that they had at that time and I--. And I—really, really the children, when I say children, the kids at Florida A&M, that was known as Florida A&M, Athletic and Music University at that time because the two things that they emphasized, Jay Gather was their winningest football coach. And that's where all this marching band stuff started. It started with the black students at Florida A&M University and at that time Florida State was not much of a basketball or football team and the white representatives used to come down, to sit

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down and watch Florida A&M University basketball and football team when games, Jay Gather used to suit up some eighty odd, children, boys, when they had home games and he was the winingest football coach at that time. Okay.

BP: So it was your time in Florida with the--?

MR: We started--. Two girls got arrested and they tried to brush it off and that Sunday morning when I was getting ready to go to church and preach the front page of the Tallahassee Democrat had a little item, "Two Front Seat Riding Negro Women Were Arrested for not Getting to the Back." They took the long seat rather than to go back and so I said to myself, we may have a bus boycott, and so the kids didn't take too much time. Because the bus used to come right through the heart of Florida A&M University and within about--. They said two of our girls have been arrested and I had gone down to be a part of, to see what was going on and they didn't take too much time because the bus came through the campus, they came out and started the bus boycott. And then later on there was a meeting of preachers, as to whether they should support the black students and I lost my temper and some self control, because what else was there to do but support us, them in terms of their effort. They had already started the bus boycott, it wasn't a question of whether we should or shouldn't, we should support them, and that's how the bus boycott got started in Tallahassee and later on--. Sometime much later on we invited Martin Luther King to come down and the white people who had supported my efforts had organized in a church told me that I'd either give up my role in the Tallahassee bus boycott and I asked them, well if I did that would they come out to my church to hear me preach and of course—you weren't going to get that kind of support and that's how, how I got involved.

BP: To go back a little bit. Newport News, Virginia, and even Tallahassee, these were racially segregated places at the time you were a youngster, and even as a young man.

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MR: Yes, I finished high school in 1943 because at that time the principal of Huntington High School got fired because he had advocated L.F. Palmer had advocated, you know, support for being involved and all that type of stuff, so I grew up, even though I was in a segregated situation, I grew up being encouraged to participate and be involved from my high school days.

BP: Well you came to the Bronx in 1972, well why? Why did you come, why did you leave the activity of the south and your leadership in the south and--?

MR: Well, what happened was I was a part of the National Committee of Black Churchmen and they had just run out of money. So I asked somebody where was there a church that I could be involved with and I was told about Saint Augustine Presbyterian Church and I actually went there in 1972 because there wasn't anywhere else to go. I mean, that may sound like, but that was really the truth of the matter. And I went to Saint Augustine in 1972 and I was installed as pastor about November, sometime of the 1972, and I was the second pastor, I succeeded Edler Hawkins and I stayed there for 25 years.

BP: What was Reverend Edler Hawkins like, what are your memories of him as a leader as a preacher?

MR: [Laughs]

BP: As a person?

MR: Well, he was the first black moderator of the church. I was there in Oklahoma City when he was elected moderator. I would say Hawkins was, he was the well-known Presbyterian minister. He was not a activist in the sense of being involved, at least, that was my estimation of him. And he was, because the year that he was elected moderator of the church there were some places where there were actually—he may not of known about it, but the church, for many as the church accepted the fact they had a black moderator, the first black moderator, there were others

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who were not ready for the fact of having a black moderator and ordinarily the moderator goes to many churches. He did go to Rome and see the pope and all like that but he did not go to a lot of churches in this country, who were not happy over having a black moderator. That was, that was, that was the simple fact. And while he made certain statements and things like that, when I forget, I'm trying to remember, when something happened down in the south and he didn't go see Garcia down to--.

EM: Who? Julio Garcia?

MR: Right.

EM: Oh, okay.

MR: But he went, I'm trying to remember, he was, the kids were arrested down in, my mind--.

EM: Mississippi or someplace?

MR: No, it was in Georgia, but I can't remember, I'm sorry, it may come to me later on—go ahead.

BP: When you, when you arrive in Saint Augustine's Presbyterian, in the Bronx, do you have any memories of what the neighborhood was like, what the parish was like, what were some of the issues facing that community of Morrisania and that parish that you became involved in, in the early 1970s?

MR: Oh yeah, well in 1972 when I went there, um, there wasn't much going on. When I say going on, I'm talking about being involved and facing issues that the black folks needed to face. Her father, I remember, was a--. I helped him become a judge, in fact, he joined the Presbyterian Church, he had not been, I don't think--.

EM: Yes, he was Episcopalian.

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MR: Right, but he needed, oh gee, but he--. In other words I helped and took him in and he became a symbol, because one of the things that I enjoyed when he was a judge, when he was throwing the book at people and folks and I'd go down and see him and I'd realized, you know, that he was important to the, to the, to the issues that were facing black folks. We were essentially powerless, so far as I was concerned.

BP: Well what were some of those issues facing black folks in the Bronx at that time?

MR: No representation, the different people who were, I mean, when I say representation, they just didn't have much in the way of power, even though it had become obvious that black folks, and Hispanics were becoming the majority, but they still didn't have power even though we had people like Joe Gallaber, who was a state senator, and Larry Seabrook, he's still there.

[Laughter]

MR: But I don't know that if, he's any consequence, things have changed since I left, and whether they've changed for the better, I don't know.

BP: But political power, and political representation was one of the most important issues facing the community?

MR: So far as I was concerned? But it was unfortunately, since I remember that, the Borough President at that time, invited me down, when I first came there to change the name of the street for one day, and I got up and hung a sign that said, Martin Luther King Boulevard. Now that was, I did that because that was my first real introduction, but it was an empty thing, you know, and I promised myself after that, that I would never participate in anything like that, but at that time, he had me climb up hang up, and change the street to Martin Luther King Boulevard. But that was just a empty, empty thing.

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BP: Do you recall any of the, some of the needs, or the concerns of some of your parishioners in the Bronx back then? Aside from political representation were there certain needs or things that the church or even the parishioners themselves had brought to you that reflected what was happening with African Americans in that neighborhood at that time?

MR: I'm certain there were, and I'm trying to remember specifically when they may have been, but I had to speak out. In other words I had to encourage even our foot people to be aware that they were being short changed in the Bronx. And I did that through my preaching and I tried to help. I can't remember particular things that happened but they were shortchanged. For instance, I remember that they changed the name of the street there to--.

EM: Reverend Poy?

MR: Reverend, well that was, they named the street after--. They named, as a result of Foster's being elected, to the city council, and we went through the thing of renaming that section of the Bronx for Martin Luther King Drive. There was a symbolic thing. I'm sorry that my memory doesn't hold up any better but maybe you could keep on asking me questions.

BP: That's okay. What was the parishioner population like when you arrived and what was it like when you left? Was Saint Augustine's a strong church when you arrived?

MR: Well, I got some of them who, several things, when I came there in 1972 I had a funeral of a young, I forget their names, they had not been to the church, but they came back as a result, the boy that became an artist, or was an artist, he just got a big grant and it was written up in Jet Magazine recently. But anyhow, when I first came there in 1972, one of his brothers had been, I'm not too sure if he was killed or what--. But they had not been to church before and as a result of several things, that and other things that I had done, some of them began to come back and also because of--. I consider myself a fair to midland country preacher, and I preached, you

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know, tried to keep things before my congregation and as I said, I'll never forget that when he decided, what was it your father ran for, judge?

EM: Yes.

MR: You know, I helped him out and I spoke on his behalf and it was just, you know, just everyday preaching, I mean, not everyday preaching but Sundays. Plus the fact I was involved in the life of the community. And tried to make everybody aware that they had a stake in trying to participate and be a part of what was going on in the Bronx.

BP: When you were pastor, where did you live?

MR: I still live right here in White Plains. I drove down every Sunday. When I was, I went down to the Bronx every day to be on the scene and everything.

BP: During the 1970s the section of the Bronx where Saint Augustine's is located experienced a lot of fires and arson and things of that nature. Do you remember any of that and how that might've affected the parish community of the neighborhood?

MR: Yes, well two things seemed to have been occurring. One was that, they were beginning, that was that housing project--.

EM: They built Forest Neighborhood?

MR: Yes, I'm trying to remember, because Pollier, the President had come, I should know his name--.

EM: Jimmy Carter.

MR: Right, he had come to that section before and not long after, they built some housing in that area. I can't remember, what did they call it, but there was middle class housing that helped to restore a certain amount of--. Well people moved into the housing and that helped. And certain

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places, I'm sorry, but the housing that your talking about is that unit that stands up out that day and it became a very nice area. And then of course there was the park. Park, what is that section?

EM: Crotona?

MR: Right. That became a center of activity and also a lot of good things were going on in the Bronx as a result of some of the changes that took place and part of my job was to encourage Bronxites to participate in it. Even where, for instance, a girl, had a house and she was trying to encourage, and they just got rid of her not too long ago.

EM: On Lyman Place?

MR: Right.

EM: Lyman Place.

BP: Oh, Heddie Fox.

MR: Heddie Fox, right. She was a person that got things going because she was trying to quote, stabilize the neighborhood. Whether she did or not, I'm not too sure. But it was an issue that stayed on the front burner for a while.

BP: Do you remember ever participating in a organization or a group called, Save, Save the Generation? No? Or South Bronx Churches or--?

MR: I was a big part of the South Bronx Churches. There were several people there that did a, you know, tried to--. The South Bronx Churches was an effort to revitalize and you had a white minister up at a Lutheran Church I think. Before he left and went over to Brooklyn, I forget his name, but he was part of the effort to revitalize what was going on in the South Bronx. For a while there was some real activity and then of course, when you had, when he got to be, your father got to be judge, I remember that I used to go eat and then your father would eat with me or near where we were. And then he would say I gotta go back and start throwing the book at, at, at-

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- . Some things were really happening in, in the Bronx and I was a part of the [inaudible], encouragement of what was taking place.

BP: Why did you leave Saint Augustine's after 25 years? Was it just--?

MR: Well, I just felt that I had stayed as long as I could. I didn't want to be like the Baptist preachers you know, who hang on, and hang on and hang on. And I was, you know, I was fairly healthy and I still, after I continued when I was able, still continued to preach at churches in the Bronx. I even, moderated some, but I did come to your church. Kids worship, go ahead.

BP: So you just, you left because it was, it was time, but you still preached here and there. Well, I've preached at her church, Felaban Lane, the church up on the Concourse--.

EM: Tremont?

MR: And I've, you know, I was just busy and I was healthy at that time. And it was nice to be able to go around and see what was happening without any responsibility.

[Laughter]

BP: Now, I guess I have one last question for somebody who spent so much time in the Bronx and as a leader, not only in the Bronx, but in Tallahassee and as a, as a minister. Would you say that, could you say that there's one particular message from the Gospel or one particular theme in your preaching that you tried to communicate over and over and over again throughout your career?

MR: Well I think, and then don't forget 5 years of action out of Nashville. In which I helped desegregate Nashville. But always was the idea that you were supposed to make things happen. Make things change for the better. Also, to stir up people because a lot of times people were sort of indifferent-- . For instance, I can say that I look back on 25 years, I didn't have 100 percent support for what I was doing, in, in, in, in the Bronx. But I had those places that people were in,

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were, happy to have somebody to take the leadership. It was also to find, that you found a few folks who, you know, I used to enjoy going to her house. Because her father, her mother, were involved. And, and, and it was the kind of things that happened, but you weren't always certain that they would participate and a lot of times, people were not too certain as to whether they should or shouldn't be involved. Some people were reluctant, some thought that if you kept quiet, maybe things would change. But that wasn't, at least, that wasn't my way. That you had to be noisy and let people know that you were dissatisfied.

EM: What seminary did you go to?

MR: I finished, Jay C. Smith Seminary. It was, when I finished seminary in 1950, it was still at the school, at Johnson C. Smith, before it moved down to become a part of ITC in Atlanta.

That's where--.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MR: That's where, believe it or not, that I got the doctorate, honorary degree, it came from, from Johnson C. Smith in Atlanta. I was honored by, I'm trying to remember, but I just got something from them, not too long ago. But I taught out at ITC, I mean not at ITC, but out at Dubuque Seminary out in Dubuque, Iowa. I spent a summer out there and they, I taught, Black Church History and another course, and they honored me with a—you know honorary degree. But it was very interesting because I got a chance to see the other side of the fence. Because these were mainly white clergy, who were pursuing other degrees and stuff like that.

BP: This is in Dubuque, Iowa you said?

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MR: Right. I was out there for--. And then, as I said the next year, I can't remember, that they honored with me with a honorary degree, I have 2 honorary degrees, not that that makes much difference, it don't change the quality of the ham none.

[Laughter]

MR: I learned that from my father a long time ago. Because he spent 40 odd years in the church in Newport News. My grandfather was the pastor in Gastonia, North Carolina. He was a principal, because at that time, black ministers who had degrees, he was not only a pastor of the church in Gastonia. He was a principal of a high school. Because at that time Presbyterian ministers had the most education. And they benefited, I don't know how much, but they benefited from, you know, that kind of advantage.

EM: Did you Roscoe Brown up at Bronx Community College; did you ever do any work with him?

MR: Yes, right, I knew--. I was, when he was part of the, I saw him because he was a part of the--. When they let us in the Air Force--.

EM: Oh, the Tuskegee--.

MR: Right.

EM: Okay.

MR: But I knew him through involvement and we were good friends and everything.

EM: In the Bronx, we did work in the Bronx together.

MR: Right.

EM: Did the, I know that the black Presbyterian ministers have a group now, that meet regularly, did they have one back then? Or were you—how many black Presbyterian ministers were there in the Bronx? Were you it?

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MR: There weren't too many, but actually--. I still get invitations, but I'm not able to, you know because--. I don't go to Presbyterian meetings.

EM: Were you active in the Good Shepherds? The one that Paula, the organization that Paula Jenkins is in?

MR: What?

EM: Doesn't Paula Jenkins work for the Good Shepherds?

MR: Oh, the Bronx Shepherds?

EM: Bronx Shepherds. Were you active in that?

MR: Yes, I was active when I was even, after I retired and I was able to get around. I did support and go to the different affairs that they had that the Bronx Shepherds--. Because they've grown quite a bit and done quite a few things, but I--. You know, I don't--.

EM: Yes, you can't do it now but I was just wondering if you did it in the past?

MR: Right.

BP: Thank you for your time Reverend Rollins.

MR: Oh, that's alright. I'm just sorry that I couldn't remember more--.

BP: Well what you did remember was quite a bit and it was a very good contribution, so thank you.

MR: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]