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Mark Naison (MN): Reverend Boakye could you please spell your name and give us your date of birth?

Reverend Benjamin Boakye (RBB): Okay, Benjamin B-E-N-J-A-M-I-N, Boakye B-O-A-K-Y-E, and my date of birth is 03/16/1962.

MN: Reverend Boakye could you tell us a little bit about your family and how you grew up in Ghana?

RBB: Okay. I'm the first born of my family. I have five other brothers and sisters, two boys and three girls, in addition to me is six. So being the first born in Africa especially in Ghana is a lot of responsibilities laid on your shoulders, it's like you become like the second dad of the family. So, by the grace of God all of us are living and my dad and my mom are alive; I recently visited them in Africa. Last year by this time I had just arrived from Africa and it had been a very kind of long time, 21 years since I travelled out of Ghana and just went back last year. I think my other brothers and sisters, my other brother is studying at the University of Denmark and although the rest are there, so basically my family is doing well.

MN: Now, so you mentioned that had been out of Ghana for 21 years before you returned?

RBB: Yes

MN: When you were growing up –

[Interruption]

MN: Okay, when you were growing up in Ghana, did you ever imagine that you would spend that much time outside the country?

RBB: No. No, because I had intentions on founding a church in Ghana and to become a pastor there.

MN: Was your father a pastor?

RBB: No.

MN: So how did you become involved in the church and get the call to ministry?

RBB: In secondary school there was this Christian group on campus called 'the S.U.' so one of their leaders –

MN: How do you spell it?

RBB: S-U. The Scripture Union.

MN: The Scripture Union?

RBB: Yes, the Scripture Union. So one of their leaders got hold of me and spoke to me about Jesus and then I repented and received Christ as my Lord and Savior and then from there I had the passion to become a pastor. So, after secondary school I was looking for the opportunity to found a church when missionary friends from America, here, was in Senegal and I got invitations from them to come and serve as a missionary with them in Senegal.

MN: So you went from Ghana to Senegal?

RBB: Yes.

MN: Now, how had you developed the missionary contacts from the United States? Was that through The Scripture Union?

RBB: No. They were introduced to me by a friend who had actually met them in Côte d'Ivoire. They weren't actually resident missionaries in Côte d'Ivoire but this, my friend, met them and the missionaries stressed the interest in finding an African young man who is also a Christian because where they were in the north of Côte d'Ivoire and also in Senegal were predominantly Muslims. So they needed a Christian to be like their tour guide but it should be a Christian

though. So when I was introduced to them they just wanted me to work with them as a missionary.

MN: Now where was the secondary school you attended? Was it in Kumasi?

KBB: Yes it was in the Ashanti region, a suburb of Kumasi it was called Wianloasi –

MN: Wianloasi? –

RBB: Yes –

MN: How do you spell that?

RBB: W-I-A-N-L-O-A-S-I. And the name of the secondary school is Komfo Anokye Secondary School. K-O-M-F-O-A-N, capital A-N-O-K-Y-E, capital A-N-O-K-Y-E secondary school. The town is Wianloasi.

MN: Wianloasi and Komfo Anokye Secondary School?

RBB: Yes.

MN: Now did all of your siblings go to secondary school and then to college?

RBB: Yes. My other brothers and sisters, matter of fact I did not go to the university, but two of them have finished the university and one is a pharmacist in the Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital, the second largest hospital in Ghana and one of them is currently studying at the University of Denmark to become an eye doctor.

MN: Now, what sort of work did you father do?

RBB: My father was a plumber was a plumber in the University of Science and Technology, the UST in Kumasi.

[Inaudible]

Benjamin Heither (BH): And your mother?

KBB: My mother used to be a cook in the University she cooked for the students.

MN: She grew up in the atmosphere of the University.

KBB: Exactly. As a matter of fact I was born on the University campus [laughter] since my dad was an employee over there [crosstalk]. Exactly, and also he had one of their [caucuses? Some help on this?]. He lived in the campus.

BH: Who provided facilities for him? I assume [crosstalking/inaudible]

MN: So your first missionary position was in Senegal?

RBB: Was in Senegal,

MN: And which city was that?

RBB: Dakar

MN: In Dakar?

RBB: It was quite an interesting and exciting trip, oh I'll call it an adventure there because I didn't know anybody there same as the missionaries we were all starting our plans to start a church in the most – in the core center of the Muslims. It was a quite a challenge.

BH: What town was that?

RBB: Grand Yoff.

BH: Grand Yoff?

RBB: Grand Yoff, Dakar.

MN: And the language there was mostly Wolof?

RBB: Wolof.

MN: And so you spoke –

RBB: I learned a little Wolof but the French I learnt a lot of. By the time I was leaving Senegal I

was able to speak, write, read and understand every French.

BH: Wow.

Jane Edward (JE): And when did you leave Senegal?

RBB: I left Senegal in 1990.

BH: After how many years?

RBB: After four years.

MN: Now were – when you're a Christian missionary in the middle of a Muslim city, what is that like?

RBB: It is a quite a challenge. I remember sometimes when we were having services and they would be throwing stones at our windows. Yes, they just didn't like it. This man who rented out his flat, in Africa we call it flat –

JE: Apartment.

RBB: Yes like the apartment. They treat him like a traitor because he has given his building, his flat to Christians, even though he himself was a Christian, but the Muslims around him didn't like him very much. They called him names and stuff but for some reason, God be on our behalf, he had this compassion for us to be there all the years that we planted the Church in there.

BH: Was there any physical threat to his person?

RBB: As a matter of fact no, but they just called him names.

JE: Did the church grow in those years?

RBB: In those years yes, just about when the church was about to pick up we had programs from the missionaries they had to be called back to the United States and the core support for the missions kind of died out so it was left to me alone and the supportings was very weak so I, yes,

so I couldn't continue to hold [trade?] so I had move to another establishment, another church there and I worked with them for a little while.

MN: Also in Senegal?

RBB: Also in Senegal, yes.

MN: And when did you end up coming to the United States?

RBB: Okay it's quite an interesting story. I was young, one night when I was in bed, it was late in the night, about one o'clock in the night, and I had somebody was calling my name outside from the window "Pastor, Pastor, Pastor" and I [not clear] what's this – woke up and I found this young man with this lovely [not clear] baby on him and said "I have just arrived from Ghana my brother has asked me to come here so that he could research the purpose of the visit for me to come to Spain with him and I came here and I don't know nobody. Somebody, one of the Muslims just pointed to me that pastor lives out there so go maybe you can get a shelter." I took this young man in, and as a matter of fact he was very hungry and I remember in the night that the bowl of rice that I had everything in it, the fish and I give him food to eat and I asked him. I was going to say this story because it's quite a touching one. I asked him are you full and he said no. Then, and you know in African culture you don't nobody say no because food is sometimes, you know people share a little food so when he shares with you even when you are not full you say you say you are full. So he said no and then I went back to the kitchen and brought another bowl of food and fish in it and he ate it all and I asked him are you full now he said now I am full. And he said "you know this food that you have given me I will never forget it in my entire life. And mark it on the wall I will remember it and the day I remember it I will remind you I will remind you to remember it" and I said okay this is just rice. So life became difficult when

the missionaries left because they left me alone and I was really planning to go back to Ghana and just about that time the visa that his brother in Spain has reserved went through and he the brother that I gave the rice to has to go to Spain. So he left Senegal to Spain and when he went there he talked with his brother and said ‘there was a pastor that gave me some rice to eat please don’t let us forget him.’ So he after a couple of years he became successful and then he got his papers as well as that he moved from Spain to the Netherlands. And then he processed – I was there one day I got a letter in the mail and the letter said “Reverend minister, just get your passport and go to the Holland embassy in Dakar.” Even though I wasn’t a citizen in Dakar. All my my – this friend has processed every document necessary for me to go to, to go to Holland. I went there as soon as I got to the embassy they knew me already. “Oh don’t wait come here” they pulled this document straight from Holland everything was set they sent me my passport and I went to Holland.

JE: And when was that?

RBB: This was 1980, um, that’s as a matter of fact 1990 that I went to, I left Senegal. I went to Senegal to Holland, yes, 1990.

JE: And how long did you stay in Holland?

RBB: Three years

BH: What were you doing there while you were in Holland?

RBB: I was also a preacher.

BH: A preacher?

RBB: Yes.

BH: Any particular church?

RBB: Yes, yes, Assemblies of God Church. They had this Assemblies of God Ghanaian Church there and then they –

MN: Oh it was a Ghanaian church?

RBB: It was a Ghanaian church in the center of Amsterdam.

Amy Davies (AD): Is it appropriate to ask –

RBB: Yes, sure

AD: What were some of the challenges were that you had with the parent church in the U.S.

You said that when you were in Senegal there was some problems with the parent church –

RBB: Yes, with the missionaries

[Crosstalk]

RBB: One of the missionaries son got very sick at the point of death yes so they had to rush him back to the United States and when he came here then returned.

AD: Oh, okay.

RBB: And one of our main supporters of the missions there Dr. Allas [spelling?] was with the State Department and he also was called back to the U.S. by the State Department and the other missionaries moved from the brethren church that they were serving went to the Baptist church so it was left to me alone.

MN: Now the missionaries, what church were they from?

RBB: Originally we were in the Missions of the Brethren, the Brethren Church. And then their missions kind of collapsed and then the Baptist became very effective in Dakar at that time. And some of the missionaries moved to over there.

AD: And so you lost support financially?

RBB: Yes, I lost all my financial support at that time.

MN: Now is the Assemblies of God a large denomination in Ghana?

RBB: Yes, Assemblies of God is one of the largest if you, probably the first Church of Pentecost followed by Assemblies of God. As a lot of churches in the regions and you know

MN: What years was the Assemblies of God founded in Ghana? Is this a group from a long time ago?

RBB: It's been about I think we celebrated their 60th anniversary, something like that. Their 60th Anniversary.

MN: So you're a minister with the Assembly of God in Holland –

RBB: Yes

MN: – in Amsterdam?

RBB: Yes Assembly of God in Amsterdam.

MN: And how did you end up making another move that took you to the United States?

RBB: Yes, I really wanted to – all this time that I was serving as a missionary and as a pastor in these churches I hadn't been in a bible school. Because I knew that I'm called to preach all my life, so I needed the education to support the profession. So in Holland before you can get a certificate or a degree to become a minister or pastor, you have to go to the school and there you have to first learn the language, the Dutch language. That's going to take you about four years and then you are going to take your main course for another four years. So I was looking at it, it was going to take me about ten years just to get the license to preach as a minister in Holland so I decided to come to the United States here since I already speak English it is going to be easy for me and then um –

MN: Did you learn English growing up?

RBB: Yes. In Ghana, the official language in Ghana is English.

MN: So that's the school language and the government language?

RBB: Yes, from third grade up.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Now, you went to the United States first to go to Bible school?

RBB: Yes

MN: And is this through the Assemblies of God?

RBB: Yes.

MN: So where did they send you?

RBB: At that time when I came I did not find any financial support to go to the bigger colleges of the Assemblies of God so at that time they had just started what they call the Berean Bible College or Berean Bible Institute in the Assemblies of God, and it was sponsored by Global University. So they had a campus in Queens, that was the first campus they opened in Queens and then that was cheaper than the main college setup so I work in the daytime and I go to school in the evening time.

MN: Now did you have family and friends who helped you get an apartment and find jobs?

RBB: No I – when I was coming from Holland I was introduced to this couple here that had a two bedroom apartment but when I came it was full so I had to sleep in the living room and then.

BH: A Ghanaian couple?

RBB: A Ghanaian couple. And I slept in the living room and life became difficult for me because they had kids and the apartment was crowded and the burden of the studies was too

much I couldn't study and I was falling behind in my grades and stuff and especially with work too.

MN: So let me just – where did you find your first job in the United States?

RBB: I worked with a iron strauss? The strauss, the autoparts shop.

MN: And how did that job? Was this somebody suggested you?

RBB: Somebody worked there in the apartment that I lived and he took me to see the manager.

MN: And what borough was this?

RBB: In the Bronx.

MN: Aha! Okay so the apartment was in the Bronx?

RBB: The apartment was in the Bronx.

MN: Now, when we had our last discussion, closer to [Ahranhah? Need help on this] and Doctor Hayford [spelling?] were saying that many people in Ghana know about the Bronx. Is the – when you found this couple did you have any preconceptions or ideas about the Bronx?

RBB: No, I did not know. The only thing I knew about the Bronx was the name Bronx that the address they give me to fill it out at the airport. [laughter] And so I came to the Bronx and everybody was in the Bronx and I find out that there's a lot of Ghanaians in the Bronx so that made me feel very comfortable.

MN: So you felt at home right away?

RBB: Yes, even though I don't know nobody yet.

JE: And you mentioned that you stayed three years in Holland, when did you come to the United States?

RBB: 1994, if I'm not wrong.

BH: You arrive here?

RBB: I arrive here in the United States

MN: In 1994?

RBB: 1994, yes.

AD: And you have been here ever since?

RBB: I have been here ever since.

MN: Now, was the Strauss store right here on Fordham Road?

RBB: Third Avenue and 169th.

MN: Wow, now that's a tough area.

RBB: Yes, 168th and Third, yes.

MN: And where was the apartment you were living in? What street?

RBB: The apartment, well I remember the address until now. 1316 Morris Avenue.

MN: 1316 Morris Avenue and what was the cross street?

RBB: The cross street was it was between 168; 169 and 170 and Morris.

MN: So you were right near the Grand Concourse.

RBB: Right near the Grand Concourse, yes.

MN: And were there other Ghanaian families in the area?

RBB: A lot of Ghanaians lived in the area.

BH: And how many people from your town, hometown?

RBB: No, no

BH: No, okay but just Ghanaians?

RBB: Just Ghanaians, yes.

MN: And in the Strauss store were there a number of Ghanaian employees?

RBB: A few, a few, maybe two or three?

MN: And the other people were?

RBB: Were Spanish and African-Americans.

AD: You said earlier that you didn't really know anybody in the Bronx when you came, I was just wondering how with all those Ghanaian people did you find them helpful and useful to lift you up?

RBB: Yes, very very helpful. I remember one kind gesture someone did for me when I entered I got the I-94 thing from the airport and it just sat there and somebody saw it one time and they said "you have this?" I said "yes," they said "and do you have I.D., a state I.D.?" and I said "no." He looked at it and it was like about to expire or something and he said "you better go to the motor vehicles and get a state I.D. before this thing expires." And I remember this until now that that brother really was very helpful to me because if those papers that they gave me had expired it would have been difficult. I wouldn't be able to pick up packages from the Post Office and other stuff and through that I was able to learn how to drive and to get a learner's permit and then I got the driver's license. So I remember this up until now like, as you said people were very supportive.

JE: And you said you combined work in the auto store and also studying. So how did you do with your studying?

RBB: It was very, very difficult. The school that they set up was in Belrose, Queens. And at that time I didn't drive so I had to take the train. I get out of work by 6 o' clock sometimes 8 o' clock, sometimes 8: 30 and depending on the schedule that I have in the school and then I was – it

would take me two hours to get to the school and then I would have two three hour classes, and then I would have another – sometimes I get home by 1 a.m., 2 a.m. and especially in the cold at that time it was really tough. I almost gave up. And then when I come home at, let's say 2 a.m., and I have to get something to eat, take a shower, to go to bed maybe by 4 o'clock and then I have to wake up by 6 o'clock in the morning.

MN: So you were sleeping 2 or 3 hours a night?

RBB: 2 or 3 hours a night. In a little room. And this is where I had because of the job I had gotten been able to rent one room.

MN: Oh so you got another room? [crosstalk]

RBB: Yes, I got a room.

MN: And where was the room you were renting?

RBB: The room was 1057 Boston Road.

MN: 1057 Boston Road between where and where.

RBB: Between 167 and 166th.

MN: Right near Morris High School.

RBB: Exactly.

MN: Oh, I know exactly where that is.

RBB: Yes, right here. That became my home for about three years until my own apartment.

MN: So you rented a room in an apartment, were the other people who rented rooms all African immigrants?

RBB: Yes, they were all African immigrants.

MN: Were they all Ghanaians?

RBB: They were all Ghanaians too. The men has just got in the apartment and he was looking for someone to get one of the rooms to support the payment of the apartment. So I got it and it was – it helped me a lot because I was able then to study and to get my grades back.

AD: So you had like a support system?

RBB: Yes. [Crosstalk]

JE: So when did you finish your studies?

RBB: I finished the studies after three years it was a four year course, but I did it for three years and once I got to the licensing I was like able now so I took the licensing and you know practiced with the licensing and then I would find time – very soon I'm going to go to the ordination sector of it.

BH: So you have a license officially?

RBB: Yes.

BH: No attainer?

RBB: Once we have the stages we have certified minister, we have the licensing, and then we have the ordination. So, but once you get the first one you are qualified to do everything that pastors do. The ordination is like the crown so it means I would be able to perform all the [not sure here] liturgical services.

AD: What's the first level did you say? The first –

RBB: The certified minister.

BH: So at this point which church were you serving in the Bronx?

[Crosstalk]

RBB: This is the church that I was in. I came in there the church had just started about a year

and it took me as the associate pastor.

MN: You started as associate pastor?

RBB: Yes.

MN: Now what kind of structure is the Ebenezer Assembly of God in? Is it in its own church building or is it in part of –

RBB: No we rent from a Spanish church that we've been renting.

BH: Even now?

RBB: Even now we still rent. We made an effort about five years ago to buy property on 165th and 3rd avenue but eventually we found out that there were problems with the building with the fire code, and the everything, engineering, and environmental so we had to let the building go. So we came back to renting again and we rent this place where we are now.

MN: And what's the name of the Spanish church that you're in?

RBB: El fin se Acerca. El Fin se Acerca Church. El fin is E-L and the fin is F-I-N and the se is – C-E no [not clear] Acerca is A-C-E-R-C something like that.

MN: Are they a comparable denomination to the Assembly of God?

RBB: They are Pentecostals too but they are not Assemblies of God.

MN: Right.

BH: Ebenezer that's what you were in?

RBB: Yes.

BH: Was it part of the American structure of the Assemblies of God church.

RBB: Yes, everything that we do there is under the structure of the Assemblies of God.

Appointing a pastor, the election of the offices and the board, and the finances, everything is in

the domain of the Assemblies of God policy.

BH: So you had a lot of [not clear] policy to them?

RBB: Yes.

BH: So they officially hired you as assistant pastor?

RBB: Yes, officially twelve years ago I was the pastor until the senior pastor and I became the senior pastor.

MN: Right, now were you working at other jobs alongside this or once you became associate pastor that became your major?

RBB: I was assistant pastor for about one and a half years and then they felt the need to employ me to be the associate pastor. And then the senior pastor left about a year or two and then I took over as senior pastor.

BH: What is the population of the church?

RBB: Right now average attendance per week is a little over two hundred, but the main members in our day to days is about four hundred, five hundred.

BH: What's [not clear] like? The composition? Ghanaians, Nigerians, or Sierra Leoneans?

RBB: The people that are [not clear] into the Church are Ghanaians. And then we have Sierra Leoneans and we have two families from the islands, one from St. Thomas and the other from I think Jamaica, something like that.

MN: Now other than spiritual issues, what are some of the other issues that people in your church face? And does the church get involved in their lives with things like school or healthcare or housing issues?

RBB: Wow. Africans in Diaspora basically all of them have the same problem. And the problem

is with [not clear] the finances which, of course, because we travelled here with the idea to get money to send back home people do not have the time to go to school that much. They just come and they find a job and to get money in their home. [Interruption: not clear] So they work, especially the men, the boys work with odd jobs, like in the parking lot, hotels and the taxi –

MN: Security guards?

RBB: Security guards, yes. And the women are in the healthcare [crosstalk].

AD: I was just wondering do you offer any services like help them with preparing health care, or maybe day care center to, you know, help the women when they go to work? And perhaps provide scholarships for the young? [crosstalk]

RBB: Thank you for asking. In broad terms this is in the vision of our church. We want to aid the future, providing services like insurance, health insurance and daycare centers as you mentioned and to also give scholarships to the young ones that are just coming from Ghana to encourage them to go to school instead of taking up the odd jobs. But the finances of the church right now is not up there to be able to sponsor these services and programs. So right now we're just encouraging them from the pulpit to be good Christians and to be good citizens, work hard, if you go to school to make sure you go to school, if you're working make sure you onto your work.

AD: Do you get any external support, financial? Because I was reading something in the papers today about churches, you know, not only in the Bronx they get money. Like Bloomberg gives money to some churches, sometimes its kind of from –

MN: Yes, grants or donations.

AD: Outside the collection that you take.

RBB: No we do not. We do not receive them.

MN: So this is, you're talking about hardworking people who work two, three, or four jobs and send money back to their families. [crosstalk] And everybody sends money back?

RBB: Yes.

BH: What about the youth? Do you have program for the youth in your church? I'm talking about not just your extracurricular education but cultural identities, [not clear], something or, you know, or try to be, you know, the kids in school are really rough sometimes and how do you bring them from these kids experimenting in all kinds of risky behaviors, you do have this kind of initiatives for Ghanaian kids in America?

RBB: Yes, we just talked about that. Like getting the youth and the little ones together, just like teaching them [not clear] because those that are born here cannot [not clear] So they can't speak so we just thought about that. And that's why when you were saying it I was just smiling you know, so yes. So it's in the plan.

MN: Are there family events that you have, like picnics or, you know, like [crosstalk]

RBB: Yes, we do that a lot. You know in the summer, this past summer it was packed with activities we went to Jones Beach for Baptism, we went to Orchard Beach, we went to New Jersey to one of our church elders' house, he has a big house there and he has a big backyard so we had games and fun over there. And we went to Six Flags, to Great Adventures, yes to go see the animals, it was so fun. Then we went to Pennsylvania, the Amish Village, yes, also to see that beautiful show they have there to see the Amish people.

BH: You travelled in your own church bus or in a company bus?

RBB: In our own church bus and if the number is – we went there twice, three times this

summer and depending on the number we hired a bigger bus.

MN: You have your own bus?

RBB: We have the brand new church van, the Ford.

AH: Do you have any of your members of your congregation, the young ones, who have studied and go to community college?

RBB: Oh yes, yes we have a lot.

AH: You have a lot?

RBB: You know I've been in the church for almost fifteen years now and the kids that has grown with me, recently we've been getting nurses, yes, we've been getting nurses and chemists, people in the healthcare, and we have two doctors. Yes, we have two doctors.

BH: In the church? Full time members?

RBB: Full time members of the church, full time members of the church. As a matter of fact, one of them is going to give a presentation to the pastors association here in the Bronx in one of the big churches down there as to health and fitness to, you know, us pastors. So, I'm excited about that, to see them learning and coming out of the colleges.

MN: Now, is there a problem with some of the young people adopting the dress of the street, and becoming, kind of look like thugs or?

RBB: Definitely. Definitely.

[Laughter]

RBB: But there was a time that I taught biblically about that and it got changed. Now they are more careful about what they put on to come to church, especially with the ladies, the girls. The men, I'm finding now I see them come in with tie and suit and they look very handsome.

[Laughter]

AD: And no problem with drugs?

RBB: No, no, no, no. We don't have any problem like that.

BH: Alcohol and drugs, no?

RBB: No, that's what I give thanks to God for because sometimes I feel I'm the president of their [not clear] that's Ghanaian Pastors and Church Association. Sometimes I'm called to intervene in situations like that, but with my church I, thank God, we haven't had [crosstalk]

MN: What's the name of the Ghanaian Pastors Association?

RBB: Ghanaian Ministers Fellowship.

MN: And is this only in the Bronx, or is it all over the city?

RBB: It's all over the city, it's like one fellowship, but the base is in the Bronx.

BH: And this is made up of all the Pentecostal groups in the Bronx?

RBB: Yes, we have the Methodist church, we have –

MN: So this is all the Protestant –

RBB: The Protestants and the Pentecostals.

MN: And the Pentecostals, but not the Catholics?

RBB: Not the Catholics.

AD: How about Baptists?

RBB: Baptists are in here too?

AD: Oh they are?

RBB: Yes.

AD: They were featured in the papers.

BH: And you are the President?

RBB: Yes.

MN: President, and where is there an office?

RBB: We currently do not have any office now, but whoever becomes the President uses his office.

MN: Oh, so your own office?

RBB: Yes.

BH: And your missions of this organization. What is the mission of this organization?

RBB: The mission is to bring the pastors together. There was a time that we all kind of, each and everyone, doing his own thing in his, at his own corner. But now we want to be, to come together and to have a united front. So, –

MN: You know, one of the things I was thinking of is that, you know, you should take young people on tours of Fordham University and we should put you in touch with people at the admissions office who do tours for family groups but also for community groups because this a beautiful campus and to have, you know, in the summer to have young people visit and find out what it takes to go here and what it's like would be, you know.

RBB: Now that this contact has been established between us, we'll be thinking about that during the summer. And one thing about Fordham University is that the young men from Africa considers Fordham as a top class university and they don't even want to go there. They don't even want to [crosstalk]. They feel they can't get in there.

MN: We have a student, Karen [check spelling, Breefou] who you should invite to speak at your church because she grew up from a Ghanaian family in the Bronx, went to Fordham, and now

works for the Federal Reserve Bank.

RBB: Okay, oh my goodness.

MN: And she is a remarkable speaker, she has presence and power, and I actually have in my office, Dawn made a video, which I will give to you to take. Because I think she would be a wonderful inspirational person because there are a number of students from the Bronx from African families who go to Fordham University.

RBB: And I think, you know, with Fordham there's this prestigious idea, prestigious idea attached to it with the support base and most of the young men and woman that has finished college in our church always, 95% they all go to Buffalo. Suny Buffalo.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Which is a very good school.

RBB: Yes, that's where they all go and right now when I am speaking we have about five of them in there. And there – I asked them why do you go so far and they said the financial, they have special program for immigrants whereby they are very lenient in terms of the finances and also to approve you with your parents' income and those things very, very easy. That's what they told me.

BH: I'm sure that Fordham has something for students of this nature, meet the requirements and we'll support you. [too quiet to hear] And please, show that video of Karen Breefou [spelling?] to the pastor's group, just the church.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

RBB: Okay, wonderful, that would be nice.

[Crosstalk]

JE: And one more thing, do you perform marriages in your church?

RBB: Yes I do.

JE: So is it – what kind of – is it religious or combination of religious and traditional marriages?

RBB: Both religious and traditional. Normally we do the traditional at home, at the couple's home and then on Sunday they come to the church.

BH: Do you bear the [not clear] the costs that they bear to –

RBB: No, the financials, that's not – they pay at their cost.

BH: By their own accounts?

RBB: By their own accounts.

BH: The reception is all paid by them?

RBB: All by them. The church just gives a little token.

MN: Now, do most of the people live fairly close by or do people come from some distance?

RBB: The people that are predominantly in my church live just around in the Bronx, just around here. The church is kind of in the center so they come from all the four corners of the Bronx.

JE: So one thing I just want to ask you, because we have a large community of Muslims in the Bronx who are from Africa, so I don't know if there are any interrelations between the Christian churches, especially the clergy, and the Muslims?

RBB: No, no, no. We do not have any interaction like with them. The only time that we sometimes mix the Muslims when there is a function at the Ghana consulate then they call all of us to go and that's when we meet them.

JE: And what about not from Ghana? Like other countries like Senegal, Mali?

RBB: No, from Senegal, no.

BH: What about the church's relationship with the many ethnic groups. We have several ethnic groups here. I believe your church membership is made up of Fante speakers, Twi speakers, [not clear]. So do you link with any of the Ghanaian ethnic organizations that we have in the area?'

RBB: Yes, the membership profile in our church has all these ethnic groups that you're talking about. We have from Ga to Ewe to Asante Twi-Fante to everything in there, so in terms of contacts or relationship with the other ethnic groups no because we attract all so – all those groups are secular groups so –

BH: And you are going to go to meeting? [question not clear]

RBB: Yes, we do, we do. At one time I said it in the pulpit I refrained [I think] them to go to those meetings. But they should be careful not to get themselves involved with a secular [pause] things that goes on there.

BH: So I'm getting the impression that you actually do some mentoring of these young boys and girls in your church, young men. What about the adults who have problems?

RBB: The adults we have other adults in the church that have set up these committees. When they have these problems they go to the adults groups, committees, and then they take care of them.

BH: One of the biggest problems that most people have is making [not clear] regularized. Do you often face these problems, people come to you and say 'pastor, my [not clear] is not complete, I think it's past and what do I do?'

RBB: A lot, a lot of problems like that we have in the church because it's not – because of 9/11 it became more difficult to be able to [not clear] papers in this country. And I have people in there that has been here ten, fifteen years, and they're still struggling to get their papers.

MN: Have you found any trustworthy immigration lawyers that work with people in your church?

RBB: Yes, we have some Ghanaians themselves that are immigration lawyers so that's where they go to, good Ghanaian immigration lawyers in downtown Manhattan.

BH: By the way, there's an association of Ghanaian lawyers in the New Jersey-New York area.

RBB: I think there's something like that.

BH: I went to their meeting last year, this year, April yes. And they even want me to talk to Dr. Naison about an interlink with us [laughter]

RBB: [not clear] a Ghanaian association of lawyers want to join the BAAHP.

MN: Nothing surprises me.

[laughter]

MN: The businesses near your church, are there more Ghanaian businesses opening up in the area around Jerome Avenue, the Concourse?

RBB: Yes, yes. There's a lot of them opening up selling the Ghanaian clothes, yes, the print and the food and they call it African market. Lot of people – when I came here African market in the Bronx that I knew of was about two or three, but now it's all over the place, African markets.

MN: What about music? Are there places which sell Ghanaian music?

RBB: Yes. Yes they have places that they sell Ghanaian music that you can go to, especially in these African markets they sell everything from Ghana. [Laughter]

JE: Ghana and Nigeria.

RBB: Yes, Ghana and Nigeria, the movies people like them a lot.

JE: They said the immigration issues that come into your attention most of them, what are the

other issues that you encounter when people come? Do they talk about –

BH: Personal problems?

JE: Personal, like family issues?

RBB: Yes, a lot of people come with their personal and family problems and especially people that are looking for child bearing, you know this one of the problems that is quite touching and we praying a lot about that.

BH: They've been married for a couple of years?

RBB: They've been married for a couple of years, some of them have been married for four or five years and they haven't seen any pregnancy and they're still working on it. And sometimes their money run out because they go from doctor to doctor and many promises and they all fail, something like that and it becomes really hard. I thank God that people in my church that don't find themselves in hard times who are breaking the law of the land and going to the prisons or to the prisons to go see a church member, no. I have – we've been blessed with that.

BH: I was going to say that the church in [] one of the most respectable places in Ghana, the people there are very succinct, respectable and loved, so I can imagine that these people have been transferred here to the United States.

MN: So you've been able to hold the fort against some of the negative influences on young people.

[crosstalk]

RBB: Yes, yes.

MN: Well, this seems like a very exciting opportunity to work with your young people.

RBB: Thank you.

MN: And do most of your members see themselves going back to Ghana?

RBB: Yes, yes. Everyone that travels from Africa, from Ghana, to here first of all we want to secure a job, and to get some money, and also to get their papers. Once they get their papers the first thing is to go back to see their relatives and their family members that are there. Then come back and get settled.

MN: So it must have been very, your own experience of being away for twenty-one years, that must have been very emotional for you to go back.

RBB: Oh yes, it was, it was like a president arriving [laughter] I mean –

BH: The pastor president.

RBB: – It was, it was overwhelming. I look forward to it and I got there and the whole family has come together to see me after 21 years and then when I was leaving my sisters were just 13, 10, 12 they were just kids. I went there and now I have, one of them have [crosstalk] they are mothers now. 3 children, 2 children, 4 children and I have nieces now and, however you call it, nephews.

MN: Now when you're away that long, and this is true of you and so many of the people in your congregation, is loneliness an issue?

RBB: Yes.

MN: And how do people – do people talk about this with each other? Do they help each other? Because, you know, you must have faced moments of loneliness.

RBB: That's true, loneliness is one of the things that actually bothering the Ghanaian immigrants and so it kind of sometimes, it led people to make decision to marry, especially if they are single, they marry. And once you marry it kind of terminates your going back to Africa

progress and going back to Africa too because people are really, really lonely here.

AD: I think this is a problem for the older immigrants because they younger people, they sort of integrate.

RBB: Yes.

JE: So you talk about marrying, do Ghanaian men marry Ghanaian women, or are they marrying

—

RBB: Yes, 70, 80 percent of the marriages that goes on in the Ghanaian community are Ghanaian to Ghanaian.

MN: Ghanaian to Ghanaian.

BH: Sometimes do you have marriages where it's a woman from Ghana and she's brought from Ghana to join the husband here or [not clear] the wife here or the husband here.

RBB: That is not often heard of. I think those things are gone where they used to arrange the marriages and bring the women here. But, what is happening now is maybe that young man or that lady, when they were coming from Ghana they had somebody, they had a fiancée, a boyfriend or girlfriend, and then when they come here and get established they go and marry them and bring them here.

MN: Now are there cases where people in your church marry someone who's not Ghanaian and then bring them into the church?

RBB: Yes, yes. There have been a few incidents where people marry from other countries and then they bring them to the church.

BH: What do you do to make the new arrivals comfortable?

RBB: We have a new arrival system in the church whereby we make sure after the service we

all go and greet them, make them feel comfortable, and then we call them over the week and sometimes we send them letters welcoming them and then we try to ask them and put them in the areas where they feel they fit, and they feel like they can be comfortable in the departments and ministries. We have a lot of ministries and departments in our church, you have the men's ministry, you have the women's ministry, you have the youth, we have the young single girls, we have the young single boys, we have sports, clubs, and so many things there so it makes people feel very comfortable.

MN: Does your church evangelize at all with other groups, in other words to try to encourage people – it seems like a very appealing church to be a member of if you're living in the Bronx where you have this group of disciplined people who help each other, whose children go to school and work, is this something that other people are starting to become attracted to?

RBB: Yes, yes. Recently we have seen a steady growth in our church membership, people are coming from all over the city and another time at the church council we were trying to understand and question ourselves as to what are we doing better, or good, that's bringing in this kind of, I'll call it revival in terms of theology, but in the circle we call it growth. So, we were trying to understand what's going on that it seems, as you said and as I have said about the church, one thing's adding up to another because of our way of life and the way we portray ourselves as Assemblies of God Church, it's also appealing to the people to come.

BH: Have you had any connection with the Dutch church and the Senegalese churches you left years ago, any kind of link at all?

RBB: Yes, yes. But Senegalese church basically died out when I left there because the missionaries weren't there anymore. But the Dutch I've had a lot of contacts with, as a matter of

fact, when I was married they sent a little gift from Holland to come to my church here. That church too is growing.

MN: Does your have direct connections with Ghana in terms of working with community centers, or projects?

RBB: Not really. The Assemblies of God has a constitution and a by-laws system that if you found a church here you are under their Assemblies of God, under the American umbrella. So, whatever project that goes on in the [not clear] churches, that which is thrown together –

MN: Would be in the United States.

RBB: – Exactly, in the United States.

BH: If the church wanted to offer something, a donation, they can do that?

RBB: Yes, it's not directly under the Assemblies of God Ghana.

BH: You know that some of the Methodist churches in the New York area are labeled the Ghanaian Methodist churches.

RBB: Oh yes, and the Baptists too. The Methodists and the Baptists and the Pentecostals. I think it's only the Assemblies of God that is kind of independent in a way from the Ghana arena because the constitution doesn't allow us to do that.

JE: You mentioned that you got married, do you have children? –

RBB: Yes.

JE: – I don't know if this was asked before.

RBB: I have three children.

MN: How old are they?

RBB: One is nine, one is seven, one is five.

MN: And do they all go to public school?

RBB: Yes, they all go to public school.

BH: In the Bronx area of course.

RBB: No, two are in Manhattan, there is this special school, like a pilot program school that the minister of education is setting up they call it "Harlem Success Academy." It's like the best of the best.

[crosstalk]

RBB: Harlem Success Academy, yes. You've heard about that, right?

MN: Yes.

RBB: Good. So I was blessed to have two of my kids admitted there this year, so two of them are going there.

BH: They commute?

RBB: Yes I commute there [not clear] and one of them is in the charter school in Harriet Tubman.

MN: Now, how far from the church do you live?

RBB: About 20 minutes in city driving.

MN: So you live on Forest Avenue?

RBB: I live on Forest Avenue.

MN: In between where and where.

RBB: On Forrest between Boston Road and Home Street.

MN: Oh so you live on that block with those brownstones? Or the one just north of that?

RBB: Brownstone?

MN: No, you live right near Morris High School?

RBB: Morris High School, yes, just over there.

[crosstalk]

BH: Is that place owned by your church?

RBB: Which one, where I live?

BH: Yes.

RBB: No, it's just an apartment that I'm renting out.

MN: Do any of the families in your church have school problems? Do they ask for help or are they fairly happy with the way their children –

RBB: They are really fairly happy with the way their children are faring in school.

BH: And what would you say is the average level of education for your congregation, you know, high school, maybe two year college, the average?

RBB: The average, everybody's doing nursing now in school, the girls, the young girls are doing nursing and the young men are doing chemistry and we are graduating some chemists, physician assistants, which I'm very excited about.

BH: And are the parents doing anything to improve themselves too while they're here, the mothers and fathers?

RBB: They do, they are mechanics or they are [not clear] attendants.

BH: Have they done anything to improve their education while they are here?

RBB: Yes, yes. Everybody is now trying to put their kids in school whether by financial aid or by cash they working hard to do that, because now the system has become like education; you go to school, you succeed, you don't go to succeed, you don't.

MN: So the parents invest in their children's education more than their own?

RBB: Yes.

MN: Because that's what we saw with Karen, that the mother was working at the nursing home and the father was driving a cab, but the daughter actually went to a top private school in Vermont.

[crosstalk]

BH: And we hope that they will in turn take care of you when you get older, whether you are here or there it doesn't matter. And you can have [not clear] that the Ghanaian child will take care of mom and pop.

RBB: Exactly.

BH: We have a saying that [speaking in another language] If your mom and poppa wash you and nurture you to grow your teeth, you want them to see us fall down when they get older.

[crosstalk]

JE: So one thing actually because I have to leave, what about women in your church? Do they play a bigger role in the church activities, like they can preach on Sundays?

RBB: Yes, the women – African church in general women play a bigger role. Most of the times you go to women's ministry meeting and there's a bunch of women there. You go to the men's ministry meeting and it's just a few, just a couple of men there. So they play a larger role, they serve in the church as ushers, they serve as housekeepers, they serve as Sunday school teachers, and they are all over the place.

AD: But you don't have woman pastors?

RBB: Assemblies of God has woman pastors, but not at our church.

Interviewee: Reverend Benjamin Boakye
Interviewer: Mark Naison, Benjamin Heither, Amy Davies, Jane Edward
Date: October 29, 2009

MN: What about in the Ghana Ministers Fellowship are there any woman members of that who are pastors?

RBB: Yes, we have about five women in the Fellowship.

[END OF INTERVIEW]