

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. WILLIAM HOWARD, JR.

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the fourth interview session with Reverend Moses William Howard, Jr., on April 5, 2019, in Lawrence Township with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here again.

M. William Howard, Jr.: Yes.

SI: Let me thank, on the record, Mrs. Howard for the wonderful lunch today and all the other days I have been here. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about making the transition from your job with the Reformed Church of America as the Executive Director of the African American Council to then becoming President of the New York Theological Seminary?

MWH: Yes. During my time--I was with the Reformed Church of America for twenty years and essentially involved in leadership training, especially for new pastors and lay leaders, and so on--all of this work was done in city churches, in New York, in Chicago, in Oakland, California, Los Angeles, in big cities, working with pastors who were trying to be effective in post-industrial urban contexts. [Editor's Note: Reverend Howard served as the executive director of the African American Council of the Reformed Church in America from 1972 to 1992. He served as president of New York Theological Seminary from 1992 to 2000.]

Of course, during that twenty-year period, I think as you know from our prior discussions, I had been President of the National Council of Churches, been active on boards within the World Council of Churches. So, my experience was a bit broader than the Reformed Church, but what I did in the Reformed Church was very close to the mission of New York Theological.

I received a letter from the search committee of the seminary and they indicated they were interested in my candidacy. They sent along a job description and the job credentials that were required. I wrote them a letter saying how honored I was to hear that they were interested, but I didn't envision myself in this kind of role and didn't think I met certain professional credential requirements.

A few weeks passed. I attended a reception. A member of that search committee saw me at the reception and came over and said, "Look, we were very disappointed to get your letter. We do have these requirements, credentials, and so on, but we also know who you are. So, we're interested in you and, if you would, I'd like for you to have lunch with me, so [that] we can talk about this a bit more." Indeed, we did have lunch, and that led to an interview.

A period of time passed. I didn't hear much. Then, I was asked to come for an interview with the faculty. In so many words, in time, I was invited to, I think by--they started talking to me in the late winter of '91--as it was becoming springtime, I would say. They voted to have me come as president in December of '91 and I came in May of '92.

It was a totally different trajectory for me, but, when I learned more about--well, I knew about New York Theological--but, when I began to study it more carefully, it was really a natural fit, because New York Seminary was, I would say, a premier leader in the conception of non-residential, urban-focused theological training.

Many seminaries today, because of the profile of the new seminarian, have non-residential student bodies. Residential student bodies, like Princeton and others, [are] pretty unusual, I would say. It's not rare, but it's not quite [common]. Back in the day, people graduated from college and went straight to seminary. That's not true anymore. Even at Princeton, though they have significant residential facilities, a lot of their students are in a second career, as they say.

New York Seminary specialized in that. Its student body was always older. The interesting thing was, the student body was comprised of students who lived in their communities and served in their houses of worship as leading lay people, some of them as licensed clergy without ordination. So, my work in the Reformed Church and that focus of the seminary was a great fit.

I had to learn a lot about running a business. I'd been a kind of program executive, I'd managed a budget for my office, but I was not responsible for the whole ball of wax, right. Now, I was. So, I attended seminars on fundraising and learning how to read financial statements, all that kind of thing, because my strong point was that I knew the subject matter and I knew the mission. I could relate well to the constituencies of the seminary, but the business of running the seminary--having to think about the performance of an investment portfolio, how to hire people who could run in a professional and productive manner an annual campaign, how to launch a capital campaign--all of these were new things.

I went to the seminary at a time when the information revolution was just bursting at the seams, so, it was incumbent upon me to hire a team to supervise sophisticated computer technology. In fact, my predecessor had agreed, after help with consultants, on the software that we would use to manage student records and finances, an all-in-one suite. It was the big thing at that time. It was called Blackbaud, I think it was.

It was thought to be the leading software for that purpose, keeping track of transcripts and that sort of academic management, but we had no computers at the seminary [which] could run this sophisticated program. So, the first big capital project of mine was to interview vendors for sophisticated computer hardware, of course, of which I was an expert, ha-ha-ha. [laughter] We did that. It was an interesting transitional procedure, a few little bumps in the road, as all of these things produce little bumps in the road.

I think the other part of the program that commended itself is it had a very robust component to manage fundraising. That's the real job of the private seminary president, to raise money, right. So, we managed that. The next big capital project was to renovate a significant part of our facilities. So, we were able to do that.

SI: Just for the record, in very rough numbers, can you give a sense of how many students you were serving, and how many faculty and other people were part of the seminary at that point?

MWH: Now, seminaries don't have, like, Rutgers numbers.

SI: Sure.

MWH: So, New York Seminary, at that time, was the largest theological seminary in the State of New York; actually, the largest seminary from New York to the border. I think we were about maybe six hundred or 650 students, forty, thirty or forty different religious traditions, people of very different walks of life, and all non-residential. So, one thing I didn't have to worry about was dormitory space and things like that. That was good, but to retain an attractive space for classrooms and assemblies in the middle of Manhattan was quite something.

So, the other thing about that is, the seminary was sort of the focus of politicians and other opinion-makers in New York, because we were training this number of clergy, virtually all of whom envisioned serving in neighborhoods in New York. A large part of our annual fund, maybe a third of our annual fund, came from contributions from these local congregations. So, our tentacles were out there in the community among leaders that would, on a Sunday morning, speak to tens of thousands of people.

SI: Yes.

MWH: So, the politicians understood this. So, for example, there's a picture here, the one with Secretary Clinton, if you can sort of see that one around there, that's an example of, she announced to the clergy her intention to run for Senator at New York Seminary. Clergy from all over the city convene and she gives her talk. We had the famous Cuomo-Pataki debate at New York Seminary. You see that top picture there, where Mayor Dinkins, right across the wall, Mayor Dinkins is presenting me with something? Well, Mayor Dinkins gave a special reception at Gracie Mansion as a tribute to my ascending to the presidency. So, it trained several hundred leaders a year. At our commencement services, you'd have some of the most influential leaders of the City of New York, in churches--but, when you get that sort of power gathered, politicians are not too far behind. So, that was the nature of the role. [Editor's Note: Hillary Clinton, First Lady from 1993 to 2001, served as US Senator representing New York from 2001 to 2009 and US Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013. In 1994, Republican George Pataki defeated three-term Democratic Governor of New York Mario Cuomo. David Dinkins served as Mayor of New York City from 1990 to 1993.]

I remember, one highlight of our time was to host Percy Sutton, who had been the President of the Borough of Manhattan, a very distinguished man, who owned radio stations in New York. Because he owned the radio stations, he remained very influential in the political world. We honored him. [Editor's Note: Percy Sutton (1920-2009) served as Manhattan Borough President from 1966 to 1977.]

So, we were a student body of that size. See, most seminaries--not so much now, but then--most seminaries had student bodies, and I use my alma mater as an example--New Brunswick is more like New York, and there's a reason for that, by the way--but people, when they graduate from Princeton, they go in so many different directions. My student body was going on the subway, see. So, we had a disproportionate kind of influence in a particular geographical area.

SI: You mentioned the student body tended to be older folks, I assume older than usual.

MWH: Yes, more mature than a recent college graduate.

SI: Was that true of alumni as well, or did they have more of a traditional experience?

MWH: Well, I think if you go back far enough.

SI: Yes.

MWH: New York Seminary was founded in 1900. By the way, it was founded in Montclair, New Jersey.

SI: Wow.

MWH: It was called the Biblical Seminary at that time, referencing a particular approach to Bible study. I'm going to say in the first five years or so, the Biblical Seminary moved to New York and built a monstrosity of a building there on East 49th Street. There it remained until '68 or '70, something like that; I'm not sure about those dates. If you go back when they had dormitories--and all of this East 49th complex had student dormitories--the students would probably have been younger, more traditional. One of the seminary alumni, by the way, was Pat Robertson. [Editor's Note: Named the Bible Teachers' College at its founding in 1900, New York Theological Seminary moved to New York City in 1902. The institution's name changed several times until the current name was adopted in 1965. Televangelist Pat Robertson received his Master of Divinity degree there in 1959.]

SI: Oh.

MWH: Pat Robertson. While I was the president, there were people who sent overtures as to whether the seminary might be willing to give him an honorary degree. By the early '70s, there was no similarity between the line of the seminary and its mission and what Pat Robertson was about. So, the faculty, which is very determinative in who you honor, would hear nothing of that. I was not inclined myself, but I was obligated to let them know that we had this overture.

After '68, when Bill Webber became the president, somewhere around in the late '60s--he had been in the administration of Union Theological Seminary--it was Bill who led the change of the mission of the seminary. He wanted the seminary to be more involved in equipping black and Hispanic pastors in storefront churches. That began to change the age equation. [Editor's Note: Dr. George "Bill" Webber (1920-2010) served as Dean of Students at Union Theological Seminary. He served as President of NYTS from 1969 to 1983.]

He actually set aside the first professional degree at the seminary, which was, at that time, the BD degree, Bachelor of Divinity degree. The Master of Divinity degree, which is the going degree today, was not adopted until maybe 1970, something like that, but he set aside the BD. He retained the ThM degree, Master of Theology, or STM, Master of Sacred Theology. That Master of Sacred Theology was for people who already had a BD degree and they were doing sort of extra study not really required by an adjudicatory. That program was populated mostly by white males.

In lieu of the BD degree, Bill Webber offered a certificate in Christian Ministry, which required a high school diploma. That enrollment was overwhelmingly mature leaders of small congregations all over the city, all the Boroughs. In the early '80s, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the AME Church, in the First Episcopal District, as I understand it, determined that all of its new ministers must have a formal theological education. That created a big market, and New York Seminary was caught off guard, I would say.

That's a little bit rough, but it was. I mean, it was caught off guard because it didn't offer this first professional degree that this large church was now expecting its ministers to have. So, Bill Webber and the then President of New Brunswick Seminary, Howard Hageman, had gone to Harvard. They were in the same class at Harvard. They were personal friends. [Editor's Note: Dr. Howard Hageman (1921-1992) served as President of New Brunswick Theological Seminary from 1973 to 1985.]

So, Bill Webber contacted Howard Hageman and they worked out an arrangement that the accredited courses for the MDiv degree would be taught at New Brunswick for the New York Seminary students. That went on for a while. New Brunswick, which had a declining enrollment, was able to help a neighboring seminary.

During that period, New Brunswick, really for the first time, began to be a seminary of choice for non-white students, non-Dutch Reformed students--not just non-white, but non-Dutch--because, somehow, in this partnership with New York Seminary, which was focusing on urban education--and, by the way, New Brunswick hadn't thought of itself in that way, but it did offer biblical studies, theology, church history. New York Seminary hadn't. Well, it did have that years ago, but it had put that aside.

During that period, Bill Webber understood that while this was a great help, something had to change. So, the seminary was able to persuade Dr. Gayraud Wilmore--now, this is long before I came--distinguished scholar, who was at Boston University or Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. He had been at both of these, but I'm not sure where he was at the time. He might've been at Boston University. They persuaded him to come to New York. He re-created the MDiv curriculum. Because of his reputation, instantly, to the accrediting bodies, the program had credibility.

That was when New York Seminary no longer needed to have its students come [to the New Brunswick Theological Seminary]. By that time, the mission of New Brunswick had been altered in a way that helped the seminary to carry on and NYTS was on a new footing.

My predecessor was Bill Webber's successor. Just before I came, the seminary had had, under the leadership of the dean--the dean at that time was a man by the name of Dean Trulear. Dean was his first name, a very gifted young scholar. His degree, terminal degree, was from Drew University. [Editor's Note: Reverend Dr. Dean Trulear served six years as Dean for First Professional Studies.]

He led the seminary in reconfiguring--reimagining--its curriculum. I think it must've become the first seminary to require community organization as a course, but it was very much centered on

equipping clergy and lay leaders for service in these communities. So, my coming in, that was already rolling and [it had] a very well-suited faculty for implementing this kind of program.

The interesting thing about our faculty at New York Seminary, as I found them, they were taking charge of this highly-innovative curriculum, but they were all from traditional schools--Princeton and the Episcopal Divinity School, the General Seminary, General Theological Seminary, which was the Episcopal Seminary, Dr. Trulear from Drew, Professor [T. Richard] Snyder from Princeton. They all had these classic theological degrees, but they were molding something new and different, which really made New York Seminary a very exciting place. We often had people visiting from other seminaries who felt they needed to go in a different direction. They wanted to be a part of the New York Seminary model or take that into consideration.

I was then sort of elevated into the ranks of the Association of Theological Schools, which is the accrediting agency, because I was representing a new wave of theological education, or I was in a school that was plowing new ground in that regard, and invited to go on a couple of visiting teams to other seminaries who were in some kind of transition, thinking that what we brought to the table would be useful.

SI: In your role as president, did you let your faculty and deans run with what they were doing, or did you bring any ideas or initiatives that you wanted to contribute to this movement?

MWH: Bill Howard always brings ideas. [laughter] I remember before going to the seminary, I have a very dear friend, who is now a Professor *Emeritus* from Princeton, who took me out for breakfast, because I wanted to know from him, "What am I getting myself into?" He was very experienced. He had been at Vanderbilt, and then, at Princeton, University of Chicago.

He said to me, "You know, Bill," he said, "institutions of higher learning are historically for the faculty." That was a new concept. He said, "Of course, now, they engage in teaching, but, historically, these brilliant researchers and people of great knowledge, the society wanted to be sure that you could collect them in one place for the sake of the society. Otherwise, they'd just be smart people who couldn't earn a living." [laughter] So, the faculty, I went into the seminary understanding the power of the faculty, the wealth of the faculty, but it had an egalitarian or collegial type of philosophy.

So, the president, as a member of the faculty, his voice was welcomed, but I always knew that my academic peers were responsible for the academic program. We had really wonderful conversations about how that would be manifested. We were generally on the same page--and they insisted that I find the time to teach. After a year or so, I taught virtually every summer.

I taught a course and these courses were generally packed, because the students wanted to get to my course thinking that would be, somehow, to their advantage. [laughter] I never accepted that they came to my course because of my brilliance. I remember, I taught one course, I'll just mention this one course in the Abrahamic faiths, I team-taught this course. I had a female rabbi and a Muslim judge. Yes, he's a judge, a very devout Muslim. The three of us taught this course on these three faiths that emerged from Abraham.

It was kind of a famous course because the president always gave his two colleagues--at the end of the course, we had five essay questions--my colleagues were given two questions each. I just took one. This got around the seminary. "The president is teaching this course. You'd better be very careful before you jump into this course." [laughter]

Well, my colleagues would always invite the students to write these four essay questions that were basically reflecting on something that they had learned in the class, but I had one question and that question had to do with, "You have witnessed the eloquence and the wisdom and the resourcefulness of the Muslim teacher and the Jewish teacher," and all of these were Christian students. I said, "You've witnessed that. So, as Christians, I want to know from you, why is it that Christianity is not just one more competing claim about God?"

Now, they were all reared under the notion of Christian exceptionalism, how it was the superior faith and that Bible quote, "No one goes to God except through me," that type of thing. So, I hit them with this question, because they'd been exposed to these two brilliant people and they admired them. "So, why is it that our faith is not just one more competing claim about God?"

In my class, I told them about the fable of the six blind men and the elephant. Do you know that one? So, the fable goes like, there is an elephant. Six blind men are brought to the elephant and [are] allowed to touch the elephant. Based upon what they touch, to say, "Now, describe the elephant to me." So, one grabbed the elephant's tail and determined the elephant was sort of like a snake, you see. [laughter] You should read that fable. I'm not doing it justice. The point is, in our quest to know the nature of God, are we acquainted with just one little piece of it?

It was quite interesting. Maybe of twenty-five students, there might've been, on an average, three to five students who wrestled with this question. Most of the students were ill-equipped to examine deeply this type of probing question. They would give you platitudes, and so on. I would give them a "C-minus." Then, you'd have just a smattering of these really brilliant [students]--and, very often, women, by the way--who would just dive into this thing. I have met, over time, some of the students who were particularly good at this, who always introduce me to their friends as someone who opened a door for them in terms of thinking about their faith.

Let me say, oh, yes, because of the new mission and the momentum of what we were trying to create there, there was a fair amount of fresh blood in the personnel lineup. We were taking the seminary, in our minds, to another level, and that demanded a certain new, fresh caliber--so, the tough job of identifying and recruiting and adapting, integrating, new people ...

SI: Faculty members or students, are you talking about?

MWH: Principally, administrators, the person who ran the development shop and a staff. I hired a--what did we call it?--it was a vice president for operations. We hired a new person to oversee the financial life of the seminary, new people to manage the supplies. That was an interesting part of the mission, the personnel, identifying the right people, having them work well with the people who preceded them. It was all very rich.

The people at the American Management Association knew me by first name, because I was always taking short courses in this and [that]. I remember, I took a course called "Financial Management for Non-Financial Executives," learning how to read a balance sheet. That was my favorite, I think, and understanding investment portfolio mix. Now, we had excellent people on the board who were on the sub-committee on investments, who had background in that whole field, but, as president, I wanted to know, and needed to know, the basis of some of their choices, so that I could be as aware.

At the close of that time, from '92 to 2000, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations gave the seminary its much coveted Award for Excellence and a sizable grant to the seminary to be used in whatever way it wanted. Now, of course, this great honor and the money was coming in light of what had been achieved under my leadership, but I was on my way out the door. [laughter] So, I didn't have the benefit of spending the money.

SI: Yes.

MWH: But, my vice president for operations served in an interim capacity for a couple of years. She was the principal benefactor, and very appropriately so, because she was a very solid colleague, and is now--she must be near retirement now--but she went on to become president of a college in South Florida, yes. So, we received the Arthur Vining Davis award, but, in the latter days of my tenure, the pastor of Bethany Baptist Church came to visit me. Did I ever tell you that story?

SI: Not on the record.

MWH: Yes, a very distinguished man, James Arthur Scott from the Bethany Baptist Church. He had just led the church in building a twenty-plus-thousand-square-foot building for an elementary school, for, I think, first through third grade, state-of-the-art building. Back in those days, they had something called T-something wiring. I forget exactly what that was, but it was a big thing in terms of connections for the Internet, and so on. [Editor's Note: Dr. James Arthur Scott, Pastor of Bethany Baptist Church for thirty-seven years, was the first African American to earn a PhD in urban planning from Rutgers and taught at Rutgers-Newark for thirty years.]

He came to see me because, in selling the church this idea, he said that, in addition to being an elementary school in the daytime, in the evening, this building could be used to train clergy in the City of Newark who didn't have formal education, I mean, at least graduate-level education. It could also be used for a church school. "You have a state-of-the-art building and, on Sundays, we could have our church school, and then, Monday morning, the elementary school." He wanted some involvement by the seminary in conceptualizing this adult training thing.

So, [the] vice president and the dean and I went to visit. We saw this building. They had not yet been given the certificate of occupancy, but it was near complete. We could tell it was quite a place. They had a model classroom, "When the thing is finished, this is how it's going to look." [It] had the desks, everything in the room. We had a car service drive us to Newark.

So, we finished our visit and we were driving back to New York. Dr. Rodriguez said, "Bill," she said, "did you notice those desks?" I said, "Yes, I did." She said, "Those are little kid desks," as they should be, for the school. She said, "Where will the adults sit?" There were other issues, but that was it. They had these non-folding, permanent desks, the little desks that you see in lecture halls, that are not pinned down, but the seat and the surface that you use to write on, all one unit, with the little container underneath for your school books.

I said to him, "Jim," I said, "if you intend to conduct adult education in that building, adults can't sit in these little seats." He hadn't thought of that. There were so many things he had not thought through, so many things he had not thought through, but he was trying to respond to the real education crisis that was in Newark.

What happened is, the architect of the whole thing, of the education component, not the building, was a really respected educator in the City of Newark. In fact, there's a school named for this woman in Newark. [She] was the victim of a murder-suicide, just before the school opened, by a year or so. She had been convening all the people, talking through it. So, she left behind people who wanted to keep this thing going, but they didn't have the theory quite as tight as she did.

That didn't stop the pastor from our conversation, which I fully enjoyed. He would come to New York and we would have lunch at a nice restaurant. We would talk through what he was intending. On one of those visits, he said to me, "Bill," he said, "you know I'm going to retire. We built this building and I'm nervous about what's going to happen to what we built. Have you ever thought of pastoring a church?" By then, I'm over fifty, never pastored a church before. I said, "Of course, I thought of this in my younger years, but, Jim, I've been serving in different capacities prior to now. I just never thought of it anymore." He said, "Oh, you must. You must let me say to the people that they should look at you as a possible candidate."

Well, if you're raising money, you've got to have a cause and you have to be an embodiment of that cause. People, ultimately, most of the time, give money to you, and I'm raising money. I said, "Well," I said, "Jim, let me say this. I'm not really looking for a job, but I respect you. So, if you want to speak to the people, fine, but on this condition--I'm not seeking a job and I will not complete any written forms or letters or anything. I can't imagine that they would call a pastor without this information, but that's it." He said, "Look, that's enough. I'll go in, I'll see how they respond. I understand." He was very understanding.

So, a lot of time went past, I don't know, several months. The word came back, "Look, some of the people there know you. They are absolutely thrilled to know that you're open to this, but they just can't proceed without having some information from you." I'm not entirely sure what happened that led me to complete the form they had, but I do remember sitting down with a ballpoint pen almost recklessly filling it out, like, almost causally, not being quite as serious and attentive and dotting every "I."

The next thing that happened--and I can't say the time that passed or whatever--but the next memorable thing, Shaun, was they invited Mrs. Howard and me to be interviewed, or they invited us to the church and I would be interviewed. We both agreed. She's not applying for a

job so she's not going to be interviewed, but she'd happily go along with me, no problem. People should be able to meet her.

They had the same notion. So, when we arrived, there was a small delegation of women who took Mrs. Howard on a tour of the church facility. By then, the church had completed, in addition to the school, some significant additions to the main building of the church. So, she was taken on a tour.

We had an experience before all of this. We had a great friend, an artist, who had been commissioned by the church to do a triptych that illustrated the African roots of Black American spirituality. It was a tremendous painting in three parts. This artist, he lived in Montclair and he sought my advice on how he was approaching the painting and everything.

So, before the painting was carted to be delivered to the people who had commissioned it--now, I don't know Bethany--he invited my wife and the children to come to his studio in Montclair. We went to Montclair and saw his work; turns out that Bethany had been the church and that painting now had been positioned in the new chapel. My wife walked in and saw that painting, and she felt that was some kind of sign.

It was a very interesting interview, because, remember now, my experience is global, it's ecumenical, it's radically diverse in terms of nationalities and racial [background] and the involvement of women and all of that. I'm coming to a virtually all-black church, which, of course, is my roots, but, for the last thirty years, I'm not in that milieu as much--comfortable there, but my work life is a little different.

Very interesting interview; first question asked of me is, "How did I feel about foreign mission?" The answer they got was not the one they were expecting. I went away feeling we'd had a very pleasant conversation, but I wasn't clear about how they felt. They had other candidates. The other thing was that I really was enjoying the heck out of my work at the seminary, so I wasn't looking for new work.

In fact, one of the interviewers--no, that mission question was number two--the first one was, "So, Dr. Howard, why do you want to be pastor of Bethany Baptist Church?" That was the first question. I said, "Well, I'm not sure if I do, but I'm here today because I'm interested in knowing more about you and you can know more about me." The person who asked that question told me later that that was the end of the interview for her. She said that all the other candidates were [saying], "Oh, yes, I've dreamed since I was a little boy," I mean, not literally, but they were all very eager. They were, like, campaigning, and here was a guy who said, "I respect you, I'm eager to know more about it, but I'm open." She was impressed. She thought that was authentic. Though I didn't know it at the time, she told me later that that was a game changer for her. She just felt, "This is the pastor we should have, who's not so eager to get in." There's something to be said for that, I guess.

I always understood this to be, in the way we who are in the faith speak and think, kind of divine providence, because I've never had a job that I sought. Remember, I turned down the seminary. I think we talked previously about how I went to the Reformed Church, right. Yes, it was

serendipitous. I was on my way to a job at Dartmouth College. This lovely woman, who became a very close friend, who lived to be almost a hundred, by the way, I wound up being her eulogist, this same woman. So, that's the way my work has gone. I mean, I've never been out there handing out leaflets looking for [jobs]. I said somewhere, in the media, that it just felt like a natural progression from New York Seminary.

My wife said to me, because we're together almost fifty years, and, by then, it was thirty years, she said to me, "I've always heard you talk about what churches ought to be doing. You've been in the seminary teaching people how to do. When are you going to do?" [laughter]

So, I went to Bethany with that challenge, without the baggage of a lot of congregational service. It was almost like a blank slate. So much of the things that we did together there was the result not only of an enlightened and committed congregation, but of the fact that my mind was free to imagine what service in a congregation should look like.

I sensed within the first weeks that Dr. Scott had really promoted me as a miracle worker. [laughter] He said, "We built this building. We got this big mortgage. You need Bill Howard. He can come and help you 'burn the mortgage.'" [laughter] So, I'm thinking, "Gee whiz, I don't walk on water. So, I have got to help shape the expectations of my new congregation, because, otherwise, they're going to be very disappointed in me."

So, we had three separate sessions with a professional process person, talking about the history of the church, the location of the church, the milieu of its ministry, and, therefore, "What is our peculiar mission in this day and time?" It was a wonderfully galvanizing experience where people sort of got on the same page about what we were doing together.

I always said to them, "I'm sort of a permission giver. I'm here to help empower you to exercise your discipleship." They loved that, and so that's how we [proceeded]. Almost everything can be traced back to that collection of thoughts and expectations. We were able to ordain women to the diaconate because of that. We did a lot of improvements on the physical plant. We did a lot of community-oriented work, young people coming out of prison, people who were heavy-laden with--what do you call that?--I was saying bail, bond, but not bond ...

SI: Parole?

MHW: Not parole. You were a fugitive and there was a warrant.

SI: Okay, yes.

MHW: For a long time, we were one of the highest number of people to have warrants adjudicated--fugitive safe surrender. We did that.

We also had that private school that the church was trying to create. Within two years, I recognized this was likely to be an utter disaster for a lot of different reasons. We applied for a charter from the state, successfully. Today, that school has nearly a thousand students. It goes

from pre-K through eighth grade. That involved building a separate building across the street from the church to accommodate the higher grades.

The interior of the sanctuary was transformed--new carpet, new chandelier. The project that we promoted as we were going out the door was a new grand piano. That piano was acquired shortly after my departure. Now, the motivation for that piano, we had a great gospel choir. Our pianist for the gospel choir, he could make any instrument sound good. He'd, "Bang, bang," [laughter] and everybody sounded great, but we had these world-class pianists coming for the Jazz Vespers. They were accustomed to playing NJPAC, Carnegie Hall, the great pianos. We wanted to be sure that they were comfortable.

We had Cyrus Chestnut and Mulgrew Miller. I mean, I could go down the list of great pianists, Aaron Diehl, another one of the outstanding young pianists. Then, of course, we had Geri Allen. I don't know if that name means anything to you, but Geri Allen is a phenomenal, internationally-acclaimed composer, pianist, college faculty member, who passed away in her early sixties [in 2017]. She joined the church. So, we didn't want to be embarrassed, and we campaigned for a new piano, which is a lovely instrument.

All of this was done through permission giving or "traffic cop" directing, orchestrating. People took things and ran with it. We were blessed to have a congregation with enormous capability, so this was something that was possible to them.

I would say, when it was clear to me that I wanted to step down, about two years before that, we hosted a leadership retreat, might've been close to a hundred people. We went away to NJIT, down the block. We wanted to be physically away from the church. We had a full day of discussing, "What did the future look like to us? What kind of leadership might be required for that?" That really shaped the profile of the person that they wanted to bring.

SI: First, I want to go back to that mission-defining and long-range planning session you mentioned earlier. You went into the role of the church and its history. For people who are going to read this, can you give us a sense of what that is and what the status of the church was when you first joined? Then, talk about how you settled on those three areas that you outlined, in addition to any areas that you want to talk about.

MWH: Well, we didn't settle on three areas. Our process observer proscribed three separate sessions ...

SI: Okay.

MWH: ... And time between sessions, so that we could unpack among ourselves, informally, what we'd talked about before, and with the newsprint and the production of the report and sharing it with everyone. So, it was three separate sessions--but what did I find there?

First of all, I found a well-established church that had been led by the same pastor for thirty-seven years. So, we had to deal with the exaggerated expectations of the new guy, coming from

New York, you see, [laughter] who was going to perform magic. We had to deal with the nature of the new personality of leadership after thirty-seven years.

I remember, in one of those first sessions, the process person is a woman by the name of Joyce Dudley Hamilton and she is the CEO of Dudley Hamilton Associates, up in Teaneck [Englewood]. She asked the question, "What is the mission of your church?" One person said, "Our mission is to bring people to Christ," right. She said, "Well, sure, I understand." By the way, this woman is brilliant. She has a lot of corporate clients, but she works very well with churches. She said, "I get it," she said, "but, let's say, let's put you in the middle of Phoenix, Arizona. What would be the mission of your church?" Right away, the person understood that what she had articulated was a general mission of the Christian Church, wherever it happened to be, but they soon understood they had no location or time-specific mission for the church on that corner in the City of Newark. That's sort of where we were headed.

We developed a mission statement. Then, each organization within the church was asked to develop its own mission statement in relation to the overall, the overarching, mission statement. In other words, the Christian Women's Alliance, that's an organization. "The church mission is," blah, blah, blah, "how do you define your piece of that mission?" and we went right through the church--the ushers, the choir, the Men's Fellowship, the this, the that, close to forty different organizations. "Tell us your mission." Some of them, they could say [snaps fingers]--they had to polish it, but they could say it right off the bat. "Our mission is to," blah, blah, blah, "and that's how we contribute to the big mission." There were a few groups in the church, we learned, they were just fellowship groups--you know what I mean?--social. They went on trips to see theater performances or they had dinner together. What we said was, "That's fine, but we're going to not look to you as a mission-driven group, but just as a social circle."

We organized the church in small groups of twelve. We assigned people to be responsible for--not twelve people, twelve households. We called them "fellowship circles." I engaged a seminarian to come and work with me and design this. These fellowship circles are to keep an eye on the families in those twelve houses, "Are they attending church? Do they have specific problems?" The objective of that is that no family would get lost. It's a sizable church; people can get lost in the mix, but you are [less likely to this way].

We named them after, like, the Circle of David and the Circle of Ruth, you see, the Biblical thing, and you were "Head of Ruth." "So, make sure those twelve families in Ruth, keep an eye on them. Did their son get kicked out of college? Did the mother just get promoted on her job? You understand? Keep an eye on them." So, that was one of the fruits of that.

It helped people, more and more people in this generation, they were interested in joining groups that were going to do something that interests them. Back in the old days, if my sister-in-law were in the Women's League, I was going to join that. Now, people would join the Women's League because they were responsible for the food pantry, "I want to work with poor people and make sure they have nutritious food. That's going to be my motive." So, unless you knew the mission, you didn't know what to join. So, we had a new upsurge in people joining different groups.

Then, we created something called Bethany Cares, Incorporated, because, right away, I saw a number of things the church was doing that they could do better, or not better, but they could do more of, if they had partners beyond the congregation. Bethany has a very respectable and long-standing scholarship fund, which was started back when tuition was fifty cents, but, now, they give a scholarship for a couple thousand dollars--maybe you could buy a couple of biology textbooks. You're giving these scholarships, by the way, to students in general, not just to your members. "So, why can't we have a partnership with Prudential? Prudential has money, but it doesn't have relationships. We bring relationships with their money. We can give a kid a twenty-thousand-dollar scholarship, see." I mean, that's the theory behind it.

SI: Yes.

MWH: I used Prudential as an example. The Clothes Closet, no sectarian stuff going on there. We don't teach Bible study in the Food Pantry and the Clothes Closet. Whoever you are, if you're referred to us, you get help. We could blow that thing up, make it into a bigger [aid].

So, we founded Bethany Cares, 501(c)(3), with a board that had members of the church and friends of the church. We supported that through a major golf outing, which we founded, and it still goes on today. We receive substantial support from area philanthropic foundations and corporate-giving programs. Prudential supported us, and various other foundations in the area, they supported us, the Chubb Family Foundation, which is called the--I can't believe I'm forgetting it--but they were big supporters of what we were doing.

We created a freedom school, which was associated with the Children's Defense Fund. You know that group, Marian Wright Edelman? [Editor's Note: Civil Rights activist and lawyer Marian Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund in 1973 to protect and aid children and lobby for legislation that benefits children.]

SI: Yes.

MWH: The Children's Defense Fund sort of reimagined and restructured the freedom school, which was actually created in Freedom Summer in Mississippi in 1963. Was that '63?

SI: 1964?

MWH: In '64. The freedom schools were taught, especially in Mississippi, under shade trees, as we would say. These young students from the South and the North, but college students, were teaching the kids Shakespeare and African-American writers and other things that weren't being taught in the schools. It was called the freedom school.

[Editor's Note: Stymied by segregationist violence during its activities from 1961 to 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) decided to expose the oppression its workers faced in Mississippi by creating the Mississippi Summer Project, later known as Freedom Summer. The project brought in over a thousand primarily white volunteers from the North to register black voters in Mississippi. Wright Edelman, the first African-American woman to pass the Mississippi bar, defended the SNCC workers in the legal system.]

By the '80s, CDF decided, "Okay, we may not have a need for the shade tree schools, but, particularly in urban centers, young people are dying on the vine in the summers. They lack intellectually-stimulating enrichment programs. You have swimming pool programs, you have basketball programs, but no programs for the mind." They created a marvelous program reimagining the freedom schools.

Entities around the country could become a part of it and we did. Senator Codey was instrumental in our being able to get involved, because you had to pay money for the freedom school. You had to send your young people away to a place where they were trained to supervise and conduct the freedom school. There were educational materials, literature, and so on, to be used--cost money. We didn't have quite the money that we needed, and Senator Codey gave the first grant to this program and launched it. [Editor's Note: Democrat Richard James Codey served as Governor of New Jersey from 2004 to 2006. He assumed office after the resignation of Governor James McGreevey in November 2004. Simultaneously, he served as the President of the New Jersey State Senate, a position he held from 2002 to 2010. Governor Codey was elected to the New Jersey Senate in 1981, where he continues to serve, representing parts of Essex County.]

The freedom school still goes on today. At its height, in my time, we employed about twenty college students for the full summer, at competitive salaries, and they were repeaters. In other words, these were bright kids who could've gone off and got other jobs. They came back to the freedom school because they liked the work, but, also, they didn't sacrifice too much financially. We were able to give them sufficient support. So, you can imagine, I mean, x-number of years, we were basically supporting twenty North Jersey area college students with a summer job. Finally, we're told we had to trim back, but, at some point, we had 150 kids in a summer program, and CDF did not allow you to charge any money--wow.

SI: Yes.

MWH: That was pretty good, right.

SI: Yes.

MWH: I thought that was good. [laughter]

SI: Yes, absolutely.

MWH: Then, I mean, that thing I told you about with the kids coming out of prison, the young boys, in the aggregate, we might have mentored over a thousand young boys coming from Jamesburg and down here in Bordentown [juvenile corrections facilities]. They were coming back to Newark without a clue about how they were going to stay out of jail. They became a part of our family.

Tynesha McHarris, graduate of Rutgers-Newark, and Lawrence Winn, a student at Princeton Seminary, the two of them were the staff coordinators of this "Uth Turn" Program. They worked

closely with these young people and introduced them to all kinds of things that you and I would take for granted--going to museums, having intense discussions about what you want from life, teaching young black and Latino boys respect for women, how to dress, how to eat nutritious meals.

One of the key people representing me in this program was Delroy Johnson. Delroy Johnson spent twenty-some years in Sing Sing Prison [in Ossining, New York]. He was a member of the original Jamaican Posse. [laughter] You know anything about this?

SI: I have heard of them, yes.

MWH: Jamaican Posse, big cocaine ring and everything. Delroy was there for manslaughter or something. Now, I met him in Sing Sing because New York Seminary offered a degree in Sing Sing Prison. He was one of our students and he was coming out on parole. I said, "Come work with me." We had to negotiate an agreement with the New York Parole Board to get him to travel to New Jersey every day. Peter Harvey, who was our Attorney General at that time, was integral to working that arrangement out. Delroy was like a god to these guys, because he had been in "the big house," I mean, the big one. I would say we had about fifty or more women and men, lay people, in the church who were mentors to these young men. [Editor's Note: Peter Harvey served as New Jersey Attorney General from 2003 to 2006.]

SI: Wow.

MWH: Well, I'm going on and on.

SI: No, this is the kind of thing I want to hear. Let me pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: One of the enduring legacies of your time at the Bethany Baptist Church is the Jazz Vespers. How early in your tenure there did you institute them? Can you give me the background of how that came about?

MWH: I came to the church in May of 2000. Sometime during that summer, officers of the church began to speak with me about a formal installation. They had a tradition in the church of a homecoming, which was in October. So, I said, "Let's peg it to that." So, we established the date.

[TAPE PAUSED]

We agreed on the date. Then, the content of this, as we began to really get into this, was obviously critical, and time, at that point, was bearing down on us. So, I sat quietly and thought carefully about, "What would be fitting for me?" I proposed a Friday-Saturday-Sunday kind of program. Some installations of pastors go on for a whole week, but I thought Friday evening, Saturday, Sunday, with two services on a Sunday.

So, Friday, I proposed that we have a discussion of the role of the church in three areas--one, culture. What is the role of the church in culture? What is the role of the church in conceptualizing public policy? What is the role of the church in politics? Public policy, politics, those were different in my mind.

So, we had a prominent political scientist from Howard University, Dr. Ron Walters, who had written books on this subject. We had Megan McLaughlin, who was the head of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies in the City of New York. She was a social worker by training, doctor in social work, but she dealt in the sort of human services, public policy--maybe it was human services, not public policy.

The culture component was led by Amiri Baraka. Amiri Baraka's family is from our church. Amiri Baraka was baptized in our church. Now, he did not go to church *per se* by then, but he was a leader in culture in the City of Newark. So, he gave [a talk].

So, that was Friday night, well-attended, robust discussion and great interaction among the three people. Then, Saturday--now, the church had something, sort of a non-traditional Saturday church. It was called, I think, "Saturday church," no dressing up, jeans, sneakers, sandals, whatever, informal service, very different from the Sunday service, but the people who were leading that were not satisfied with the attendance.

They wanted my help. "Reverend, we need your help. Help us to make it more of an attractive thing. More people would come." So, I sat and talked to them. I said, "Well, what is your concept? Casual dress, yes, informal, yes--but what is the organizing principle? It can't be what you wear. It's got to be something else."

So, one of the deacons, a very capable man, Ross Upshaw, was one of the spearheaders of this casual thing. He agreed with me that I could insert, during my installation, a kind of experimental idea and that was having jazz. A trustee of the church, William Lee, now deceased, big jazz fan, joined in with me hand and feet to organize, choose musicians, why this one was good. They were all local. Newark has great musicians.

So, in October, on the fourth Saturday of October, we had our first performance of jazz in the context of a worship service, the homily delivered by the guy from St. Peter's Church. Was it the homily?--no, maybe he gave the prayer, but he was involved. That's October. After October, we have nothing planned in that respect. Everybody loved the thing, everybody who was involved and who came. There were people--this is a traditional church--there were people in the church who didn't think much of it, but, because it was a one-off, they weren't concerned.

October came, October went. Dorthaan Kirk, the widow of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, distinguished woman in her own right, worked for WBGO, one of the founding staff people at BGO, said to me, "Are we going to do that again?" "I'd like to, but how do we do it?" She said, "I'm willing to help." Well, Dorthann Kirk became the central mover, and still is, of the Vespers, because she had friendships and connections with all of these world-class musicians. [Editor's Note: Dorthaan Kirk helped relaunch WBGO 88.3 FM as the Metropolitan Area's only full-time jazz

station in 1979. She started in the music business by managing her husband, jazz artist Rahsaan Roland Kirk, until he passed away in 1977.]

So, now, think of this--beginning in January of 2001, to this very day--every first Saturday from October through June, we have the Jazz Vespers. Now, this Saturday, we have Reggie Workman on base. Reggie Workman is eighty-one years old, played with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, all of these great people. He lives, like, in Montclair or someplace. He's going to come and bring a band, of young people, probably, but they are playing with the legendary Reggie Workman.

This is the fare of the Jazz Vespers. Even if you never heard of the artist, people know they're going to be good, because that's the tone we've set. Now, we started getting these artists that they had a pronounced religious overtone. They were performing music that could easily fit into the Sunday service, which was a bit traditional. We decided to experiment.

So, in addition to the Jazz Vespers, every Sunday in August features jazz, but it is jazz that is more pronounced in the worshipful mode. There are quite a few artists with church roots who play traditional jazz. They come on these Sundays in August and they perform. Now, have you ever heard of Gregory Porter?

SI: No.

MWH: You have Apple Music or something like that?

SI: Yes.

MWH: Call up Gregory Porter. There's an example. This guy, he's performing at Wembley Stadium and all of this. He's performed on a Sunday morning in Bethany Baptist Church. I mentioned Cyrus Chestnut before. He's beyond description, I mean, just brilliant.

By the way, before we bought this piano that I told you about, when we would have artists like this coming to play, Steinway would lend us a piano. They knew Cyrus Chestnut and they wanted to have Cyrus Chestnut playing on one of their pianos, see. Geri Allen, Geri Allen preferred that piano, it's an Italian-make piano, Fazio. Have you ever heard of that?

SI: No.

MWH: Oh, man. God, this piano is unbelievable. When Geri was performing, Fazio sent a grand piano. I'm sure it's Fazio. Fazio, they only make so many pianos and an even smaller number come to the United States. Oh, boy, yes, the Fazio piano, and it's crazy expensive--Fazioli.

SI: Okay.

MWH: Fazioli, I said Fazio, the Fazioli piano, boy. Now, what we started doing also is having special interim music programs of jazz, so, for example, Geri Allen on the one hundredth birthday or the centennial year of the birth of Mary Lou Williams. Mary Lou Williams, an

enormously accomplished composer, pianist, devout Catholic, composed something called *Mary Lou's Mass*, a Catholic Mass--she was a devout Catholic--set to jazz, performed at the Vatican, okay. [Editor's Note: Composer, arranger and pianist Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981) premiered *Music for Peace*, a Mass commissioned by the Vatican, in 1970. The work soon became known as *Mary Lou's Mass*.]

In the centennial year, Geri Allen, with "the permission-giving traffic cop," we decided we would have a performance of *Mary Lou's Mass* at Bethany. Geri did four or five of these *Mary Lou's Masses* all over the country, with the San Francisco Orchestra and the Houston whatever, but it happened at Bethany. Father, I can't think of his name--I should, because they all revered him, I met him only on one occasion--he was the manager. He's a Catholic priest, but he was the manager of Mary Lou Williams [Father Peter O'Brien]. He attended our *Mary Lou's Mass*.

Performing in *Mary Lou's Mass* was the Howard University jazz chorale called Afro Blue. They've performed with major symphonies. We had Dwight Andrews, the music director for August Wilson on Broadway, performing on reed instruments. We had Carmen Lundy, a great jazz singer from California. Various other prominent people like that came to perform at this *Mary Lou's Mass*.

So, we had these interim musical events. Sometimes, we would have three artists in concert, no vespers. See, a vespers is actually a worship service. This would just be a concert. Who did we have that night? We had Randy Weston, oh, Randy Weston. We had two others. I'm not remembering, just a concert. People come and hear, free. We'll take up an offering, but it wasn't a ticket charge or anything like that.

One other one; I'm trying to remember, oh, yes, Randy Weston, who died in his early nineties, just about a year or so ago [September 2018], Randy Weston, I don't know if you know, but many jazz artists, because of racism in this country and the lack of opportunity, and, in some cases, if they had a drug problem, they had their cabaret card taken. I don't know if you know this story.

SI: No.

MWH: Lots of them had their cabaret cards taken, which means they couldn't perform in any of the major clubs in New York. These were brilliant people. Most of them pulled themselves together. They ceased to be involved in drugs, but they couldn't perform. So, they went to Europe. They went to Sweden, Stockholm. They went to Paris.

Randy Weston went to Africa. He was, like, the only well-known artist who, instead of going to Western Europe, he went to Africa. He studied traditional African music and he was a pianist--about six-foot-seven. I mean, he was a giant and he had these big hands. He would play the piano almost like a percussive instrument. That's another one you should listen to, Randy Weston, tremendous. He wrote his autobiography [*African Rhythms: The Autobiography of Randy Weston* (Duke University Press, 2010)].

After I retired, the church invited me back to interview Randy Weston about his book, interspersed with selections on the grand piano. That was a memorable Saturday afternoon, packed with people who knew this giant. He lived maybe three, two years after that.

So, we had the basic Jazz Vespers. You've heard how that started. Then, we had the Sunday edition, which continues, and that's when Barbara and I like to go back to visit. We go on one of those Sundays. The musicians know us, so we alternate the Sundays, or we don't go on the same Sunday every year, because the musicians will feel that we're ignoring them; [laughter] then, the occasional musical event.

So, I would say the part that I haven't talked about is the acculturation of the church to this idea, how we sort of got the church going on this. This is after the installation, and so forth.

When I was discussing my interest in this, there was a Deacon Major in the church, who retired to South Carolina and, subsequently, passed away, but I was the new guy. People wished me well, but I was coming in with some somewhat different ideas about things. So, Deacon Major said to me, "Pastor," he said, "tell me, what does jazz have to do with Jesus?" [laughter] Just before I started trying to explain it to him, I said, "You know, Deacon Major," I said, "let's get in the car one Sunday and ride over to St. Peter's." I said, "They have a great vespers there and, rather than my explaining in words, let's go see." He was a music lover, so, he said, "Oh, I like that."

About three or four days later, I was told that a few other deacons wanted to go, and so, we would be taking a church van to New York. Well, when we went to St. Peter's to witness the vespers, we had three touring busses, both church vans and a private car motorcade, not counting the people who went on New Jersey Transit. It was the largest jazz vespers attendance in New York in the history of St. Peter's; always a popular program, but they'd never had a big group of people like this come to one of the vespers.

Now, this was all orchestrated because Dale Lind, who was the pastor at that time to the jazz vespers, I told him, "I want to come and I want to bring these African-American Baptists, traditional Baptists, to a jazz vespers, because we were sort of trying to get one going." He said, "Well, Bill, let me get back to you to suggest a date when you should come, because I want to make sure the artists that we have will connect."

Juanita Fleming, I'd never heard of her before, Juanita Fleming. In an interesting sort of way, she looks sort of like Ella Fitzgerald. She was that big, tall, thick-boned, big, strong woman voice, and a lovely, lovely lady. She performed at the jazz vespers at St. Peter's with a quartet that could've been the Miles Davis Quartet. I mean, they were just unbelievable, percussive jazz, upright bass, piano--maybe a piano, I don't know, but four instruments--and she was singing. She sang sort of like, I wouldn't say overtly gospel, but certainly a gospel style, sort of belting the song, big voiced, confident. Juanita was a mature woman. She was not a kid. She was a mature woman.

Now, you can't generalize from one jazz artist what the next one is going to sound like, right, but, boy, did Dale serve me well, because Juanita Fleming was perfect. The people loved that.

They said, "Reverend, if that's what you're talking about, let's have it." I got nervous, because I knew that not every artist would be sounding like Juanita Fleming. Juanita Fleming, subsequently, performed at Bethany over the years a few times, here and there. She was always a hit, and everybody loved her.

We had the okay to start. Right off the bat, there were people who wouldn't come. "I love my pastor, but this jazz thing, it's a little too much for me. I don't see how that fits." Over time, it not only became uncontroversial, it became something people were proud of. People would invite their friends, people whose friends would hear about it and mention it to them. Even though they had never been, they would bring their friend, because they were embarrassed to say, "Oh, you heard about this and you want to be a part of it, but I don't go to it." They couldn't do that. They would come, and they would like it.

I had one deacon who was very supportive, very respectful; he couldn't, it wasn't his thing. I invited him specifically to come and hear Cyrus Chestnut. Cyrus Chestnut produced a CD called *Blessed Quietness*. On this CD, he played a hymn, songs from the hymnbook--I don't know if these songs mean anything to you--*What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross*, blah, blah, blah. These were all songs that the deacon loved, but he had never heard them played like this. He came to this thing and he went out and bought all of Cyrus Chestnut's CDs. So, we saw people's lives change in this way, being exposed to unfamiliar things.

I remember the first Mother's Day. I had a male visiting speaker who was not a reverend. Mother's Day in the black Baptist church, my friend, is bigger than Easter almost. I mean, it's right up there with Easter; I wouldn't say bigger than Easter, but, certainly, very popular. The speaker was Derrick Bell. You know that name? Derrick Bell went on leave from the faculty at Harvard Law School. You know this story?

SI: A little bit.

MWH: He vowed not to return from leave until they appointed a black, female tenured faculty member. Harvard, being Harvard, may have been inclined to do this, but, now, they couldn't because Derrick had told them and he gave them an ultimatum. So, they were Harvard, right. It turns out that Bill and Camille Cosby funded a faculty line at the NYU Law School for Derrick to teach, where he taught until he retired. This was a man who had an enormous record of support for women and people knew about him. They had never imagined meeting him, but they knew about him, right. He was our Mother's Day speaker. He talked about the nobility of women. [Editor's Note: Derrick Bell (1930-2011), the first African-American tenured at Harvard Law School and a pioneer of critical legal/critical race theory, demanded that the school hire an African-American female professor in 1990. As an act of protest, he took a leave of absence and, when Harvard did not comply, Bell continued his career at NYU.]

Then, my first Father's Day was Johnnetta Cole, a former President of Spelman College [1987-97] and a former President of Bennett College [2002-07]. She's an eminent personality and a very strong feminist voice. She came to talk about the affirmation of men. This was a very unusual diet for the church, but they were open and they received it.

That was sort of like the journey. I think they put up with me as much as I put up with them, [laughter] and it was a very good run. We look back, my wife and I, and we can't think of any major thing that we're disappointed about.

SI: I was going to ask about that, because you prefaced this part of your career by saying Mrs. Howard had said, "You always wanted to put these ideas in action--why don't you do it?"

MWH: Right.

SI: Was there anything that you thought either did not work out or that you did not get a chance to implement?

MWH: Well, there were things that, look, I know a little bit about human beings now and I know that you can have an idea and, the moment it hits the ear of another person, it morphs into something slightly different from what you have in mind, right. So, there were things that, like, for example, Bethany Cares, I can't say that I was disappointed, because there was some really amazing things that happened through Bethany Cares, and still do, but I did have something bigger in mind.

I would say most of the programs of Bethany Cares were new programs, new ideas, new thrusts into the community. Initially, I wanted to take existing programs that were serving the community, to make them bigger and stronger. I won't say I underestimated the power of custom and tradition, but I certainly saw it in full bloom.

For example, the Scholarship Committee entertained the possibility of becoming a part of Bethany Cares. They would continue to have responsibility for choosing the recipients of scholarships, but, by becoming a part of Bethany Cares, they would become eligible for corporate matching gifts, for example. Members of our church and friends of our church who would contribute to the scholarship fund, if they gave a hundred bucks, their company would give a hundred bucks, you see. So, you could greatly expand the scholarship, but they'd been in existence for so long--unless they have by now and I don't know it--they never fully integrated themselves into Bethany Cares to get those benefits.

That's an example. I think it was too much to be fully digested in one generation, but the seed has been planted. The question becomes, under the new leadership, will they also share the vision and continue to work toward putting more "flesh on the bones?" We don't know. I would say that, in the category of things that I envisioned as a "space travel became a very good passenger flight," and there was satisfaction in that, because, for example, the church did not have a 501(c)(3). Now, it does.

The church also, by the way--I would say uncharacteristic for a traditional African-American church--it had a decent administrative framework. It had personnel policies and it had operational practices and things of that sort, but we took it to a more efficient level. We brought in a professional comptroller with an accounting background. We had the computer consultants in, created a local area network. When I came, all the computers were freestanding.

We revolutionized the trustee operations, so that when income was recorded on computers in the trustee room, it hit a file in the accounting office, so that, on Monday morning, information was there. We had armed guards delivering offerings to the bank. Before I came, that was done, but the deposit information and all of that was electronic, things like managing records on the staff. We had a significant-sized staff and we had, essentially, a punch clock, but it was more of a digitized operation. When people logged in or signed in when they came in, the hours were automatically integrated into an electronic system. We did things like that. We revolutionized, meaning we completely revamped, the sound system of the church, high-end sound.

Now, on the capital changes, I pastored a church with people with background and knowledge of these things, and so on. They were very open to that. That was always a question of, "Do we have the financial resources to underwrite that?"--once we satisfied that, straight ahead.

For example, before I came, there had been envisioned a memorial plaza in front of the church, where there would be brick pavers with names engraved, memorializing family members, and so on. During the construction--that pre-dated me--they ran out of money. So, when I arrived, the front of the church was just a broken concrete mess. We were able to--[laughter] I make it sound a little easier than it was--but we were able to affect that plaza, which is quite a beautiful thing.

Church members understood those kinds of "get it done" things. It was in the programmatic area, when we were introducing things like all the auxiliaries having a mission and gearing itself to that mission. I remember, the church has an industrial-sized kitchen. It has the range and the refrigerator. It's not your home refrigerator. It's this big stuff. You had a lot of people operating in this kitchen who treated it like the kitchen at home.

I remember, one Saturday, coming in--I taught a Saturday morning Bible study--and I came into the church and I smelled gas. Right away, I had the custodian check the gas [range]. He said, "Oh, my God," he said, "Dr. Howard, the gas was coming out and no flame." So, we implemented kitchen procedures. That was a real interesting thing, because anyone who knew how to cook were accustomed to going into the kitchen and cooking things. If they had their group coming, they would make desserts and all of that stuff--nope. We developed what we call "kitchen protocol."

We partnered with Essex County College, and everybody who wanted to work in the kitchen had to do two things. They had to have a formal little teaching thing on how to operate all the equipment. They had to demonstrate, in the presence of proven people, that they knew how. They had to complete a food handling course at Essex County College and become certified in food handling. Then, we posted the names of the people who were eligible to get a key to enter the kitchen. The custodians were told, "If that person's name does not appear on that list, you cannot give them a key."

That was really something, [laughter] but the people liked the idea of being certified. It was sort of a distinction. "Did you get certified yet?" "No." "Well, honey, you should get certified." "Oh, yes." So, now, today, it's a settled issue, because we added something. By the way, we didn't know that people would respond to this in this way, but we offered the option of getting a certificate in food handling, which was a glorified "wash your hands before you touch the food"

type of thing, but it had a few more things than that, how to refrigerate and how to avoid people getting a food virus or something--food virus?--but you know what I mean, things like that.

I think, when we implemented the new accounting system, we put in certain protocols that confused people a little bit, but when they started seeing the fruits of it, they warmed up to it--and we didn't take away authorities. For example, when the controller was hired, the deacons no longer wrote checks, the trustees no longer wrote checks. Remember, deacons and trustees, often, they are full-time workers, and so on; the church is a volunteer thing. So, they would write checks and forget the amounts. You'd get the check, the balance in the bank--we didn't know. There was no malfeasance. It was just non-professional, volunteer stuff.

Today, in Bethany, the controller cuts all the checks, computerized. The record of the check is entered in the database, but no check is cut without the same authorizers signing a form. So, I'm not taking away your authority to spend--I'm taking away your responsibility to implement. Once they saw they were getting feedback--every week, they got printed records. The deacons were accustomed to giving charity contributions to different people and churches, and so on. They would often sit in a room and make a decision without knowing the balance that was in the benevolence budget.

So, if they met--every day that they were going to meet to make these decisions, the appropriate officer could pull out of his mailbox an accounting of what was available--he was relaxed, see. So, that kind of clarity; you have, sometimes, interpersonal conflicts in churches based almost entirely on the lack of clarity about how things are done. So, we clarified all of that, so [that] we could devote ourselves to, really, the work of the church.

SI: I am curious, during this period, and even stretching back further, it seems like all religious entities were facing the issue of declining attendance and involvement. Was that a significant problem at Bethany?

MWH: I would say yes. I would say we had no precipitous decline during my tenure, but the decline was revolving, and still is, over time. I'm tempted to try and explain why that is, but I think [there are] multiple explanations. Specifically, after 1967 in Newark--maybe even before that, but certainly after that, and accelerating as the years went by--many people with the capacity to move just outside of Newark did so. I had a big swatch of members in my church ... [Editor's Note: The Newark riots lasted from July 12 to July 17, 1967. They began after the police arrested an African-American cab driver and rumors spread that he had been killed in custody. The riots resulted in over two dozen deaths, over seven hundred injuries, fifteen hundred arrests and property damage exceeding ten million dollars.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

So, I had many of my, I wouldn't say elderly, but mature members, who would not come to the church for evening functions because they felt Newark was dangerous. You have that group as they grow older and pass away. Then, you have a lot of the millennials who elect--they don't buy into the ritual of regular church attendance. Even if they self-proclaim to be believers, they're doing other things on Sunday.

Bethany also was a kind of a "boutique church," I would say. I think my predecessor, he didn't use the word boutique, but he said that Bethany was not a mass church. I try to reduce complex things to simple, little concepts. So, I say, in every family, you have a lot of scrambled brain people, and then, you have one or two people who are very responsible and organized and industrious--we tended to get those people, [laughter] the one that all of the cousins and everything depend on to be reliable. Bethany's services were structured--I wouldn't say, like, rigid, no, no--and the sermons were not lectures. They were spirited. The music was great, and so on, but it was orderly. You knew what to expect.

I mean, what is happening in the black religious tradition now is the upsurge of neo-Pentecostalism, where an inordinate amount of power or authority is invested in a charismatic pastor. Prior to this time, the church was more institutional. The pastor was highly-regarded, but the church had procedures and by-laws and things like that, that everybody was accountable to. If I took you out to lunch, I was reimbursed, but I had to give receipts, you see, and I gladly gave receipts. This was the nature of the business, right, but there's an emergence of churches where pastors have free reign, spend money, the laity doesn't really know how much, and so forth.

Bethany's not that kind of place, and the people who have an appetite for that kind of approach, I wouldn't say are few and far between, but they're not as numerous as they used to be. You take that across the country. You find megachurches, ten, fifteen, twenty thousand people. They are pastored by a guy who is free to go and come as he pleases, to be corrupt and unaccountable.

I had many young pastors--remember, I was president of a seminary--a lot of these graduates came to Newark. They were pastors of churches and [said], "My, our president is over at Bethany." So, they'd come over and they'd say, "Dr. Howard, what do I have to do to be able to sign checks?" "Why do you want to sign checks?" "You don't sign checks?" "No, I don't want to sign checks. I mean, I tell my leadership what I need and what I want. If the church can afford it, they never say no. Why do I want to sign a check?" But signing a check, see, that was a test of your worth.

I think the underdevelopment of post-industrial cities is one of the issues. I think the decline of interest in institutional religion by the new, emerging generation [is another]. There are exceptions to this, but I know that the young people with whom I have connections, they don't--I mean, I have three. I have three young adults; well, relatively young.

They're all very wonderful people. They're all sort of accepting of faith, but, on Sunday morning, my granddaughter goes to swimming, my other, that one is a lawyer and his wife is a lawyer, right, she goes to brunch with her friends that she hasn't seen all week. I mean, it's different life patterns.

We had the intention of bringing in a younger person and, [when] my successor came in, I think he was thirty-three or thirty-four years old. The first problem he faced, of course, is people expected a pastor who had been to Iran and had ducked bullets in Lebanon, see. I said, "No, no, no, you're not going to get that type of person," [laughter] but he's a great guy, Ph.D. candidate, Boston University, Amherst graduate. He's a capable guy.

"But, we want a young person," because, when we came, the student population at NJIT [New Jersey Institute of Technology], Rutgers, and, of course, Essex, they were almost all commuters. Now, you have 24/7 student life, and we are within--I can walk to Rutgers from Bethany in under ten minutes, I could walk to NJIT in five minutes. We've got to have a pull of the university community, if we can.

Yes, I mean, all across the country now, you will find churches dwindling in number, even as the need for strong institutional church witness has never been greater, in my view. There are some things now, that churches, the culture of church, is not reflective enough, in my view. It's not reflection-oriented.

This was an area where I got away with things people don't believe--I wouldn't say I got away with it--but we talked about non-traditional things in church. The church does not provide itself the space to contemplate old notions of human community, old notions of the nature of the human being, sexuality, moral choices. I mean, I can say that much of our moral "high horse" thing has a lot to do with the type of country we're in, at least that we used to be in. I'm not sure which one we're in now, [laughter] but a certain amount of religious freedom has defined the way we understand our faith.

I've been in countries where you don't have religious freedom and the conception of faith is totally different, or where Christians are in the minority, see. You go to Palestine, and the Christians are fleeing the West Bank. So, now, the churches of Bethlehem are populated by tourists. We don't have these kinds of complex issues, so we latch on to a brand of faith that has been predetermined by the context, the civil context, that we're in. We think it's theological, but it's not. Do you know what I mean?

SI: A little bit.

MWH: Yes. I mean, what would the Christian in America understand about his or her faith if this were a predominantly Sikh country, just by sheer weight of population? What would we think? We'd have a totally different notion, I think, [regarding] issues like homosexuality or asexuality or bisexuality or marriage relationships, money issues, transcultural issues.

I mean, for example, I've said from the pulpit in Bethany, "I'm not a promoter of abortion, but my friend, number one, if you're against abortion, the first obligation you have is not to have one--*you*, you see, you, not the other person, you. The second thing is, if you abolish legal abortion, you don't abolish abortion, you see. So, you want to kill safe abortion in favor of unsafe abortion."

To talk about the relationship or the--what do you say?--the converse relationship of civil government and religion, that's a big one. I hope to write about that. Religious bodies must elect not to oppose lots of things that they're not expected to endorse.

One of the big issues in our state is marijuana legalization. I never spoke about legalization, but I was always in favor of decriminalization, but legalization. I remember when "the numbers"

[lotteries] were a big thing, illegal numbers, right, controlled by organized crime. By the way, the jackpot was a lot smaller, right. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

MWH: So, we got involved in the lottery business. Now, I'm not in favor of either one, but I like the fact that the government is controlling it, rather than organized crime.

If you smoke marijuana--and, by the way, I'm a child of the '60s, I never smoked a marijuana cigarette in my life--but I want the people who go and buy it to know what they're getting. We know all kinds of recreational drugs are laced with other things that can harm people even more than the drug itself. So, I'm for regulating, taxing, [and] dedicating the revenue to treatment, so that people [can get help].

Heroin overdose--I spent a good part of my adult life in New York--most overdoses for something like heroin is [that] the addict never knows what he's getting, what level of purity. If you had properly-supervised government dispensaries where a person could purchase, God forbid, that poison, at least they would know what they were getting. Do you see?

SI: Yes.

MWH: By the way, as a pastor or a leader of a religious group, I'm not going to get up on a pulpit and preach how we ought to sell marijuana, but my government, I'm expecting to be in charge of this stuff. It's like traffic lights. Are you free to go where you want and drive? Yes, but if you don't have a traffic light, you're going to run into me, because I'm coming in the opposite direction. This is my problem with the Libertarians, by the way.

The biggest civic discussion we have to have in our country is, and this should be an ongoing dialogue, "What are the things that we will cover together financially and what are the things we're going to handle privately?" We can't have that discussion. Even though the Soviet Union is dead, we cannot have that discussion, because, if you talk about shared cost for medical care, or you name some other thing that we may talk about, they say, "Socialism."

Our forbearers built a very impressive highway system and, when a business tells me how they don't need public works, I want to punch them in the nose. They all go over the roads that we finance, and we should--I don't want private highways. I want a good railway system. In other words, what are the things that we as individuals must take responsibility for and what are the things we should have covered by our public sector?--cleaning up our air and all of that stuff.

Now, I don't think we have one dialogue and have a list for one side or the other. It has to be a civil, open dialogue going forward. "What is proper? How can it best be done?" I'm going off on a tangent, but let me say, this thing about the measles, oh, my Lord, "I have a religious conviction against inoculation, but I'm going to expose you because of my religious conviction." Do you understand?

SI: Yes.

MWH: We have to talk about the diverse--did I ever share my statement on gay marriage with you?

SI: No.

MWH: My thing, when I spoke to the congregation about gay marriage, I said to them, I said, "Look, I'm not a proponent of gay marriage. I have my wife over here. That's the marriage that I have control over," I said, "but, as a black man, who am I to say to another citizen that I can have a right they don't have?" You see that?

You can get up and read what the Bible says all you want, but we're not living in the "United States of the Bible." We're living in the United States of America, which guarantees the Mormon and the Zoroastrian and the Wiccan and the Baptist and the atheist the same right. Our "bible" is the Constitution. On a non-religious level, our bible is the Constitution. The whole thing we have here is holding on to the Constitution, right, however that is interpreted. Without that compact sitting in the middle of us, we're like people driving fast without traffic lights.

So, religious bodies need to be sophisticated in understanding how they connect on these issues. I read about, for example, new immigrants bringing practices from their countries of origin that are profoundly contrary to the battles we fought and we think we won. My daughter-in-law is an expert on human trafficking. I remember the day she announced to me that Newark and Essex County has one of the largest human trafficking problems in the United States, where West Africans bring their servants and take away their passports. They can hardly go to the toilet without permission.

SI: Wow.

MWH: What is that called? Slavery, you see. Right here in our state, you still have families choosing spouses for their children, and on and on and on.

SI: Yes.

MWH: I'm not saying you just take a hard line on any of this, but religious groups have to create space for themselves to have true, open, informed dialogues about all these things. That's what I was hoping at Bethany to help foster.

I believe there was a degree of success. We talked openly about HIV. We had people passing away who were infected. I spoke often, from the pulpit, about respect for gay people. People come to me sobbing, "Thank you. I've been so prejudiced, so bitter. My nephew is gay. I love him, but he's that way. You helped me to know how to embrace it." People coming to me admitting they were homosexuals, "You've empowered me to say this about myself." I think my successor will continue that. I think he's certainly of that mind.

SI: You mentioned earlier you started ordaining women.

MWH: As deacons. Now, my predecessor ordained a woman to be a clergy person, sometime before. In other words, Bethany was the first African-American Baptist church in Newark to ordain a woman to be a reverend, but, among the laity, the deacons are ranking just next to the pastor. Women were excluded, but we were able to ordain them before I left.

SI: Did you meet a lot of resistance in that?

MWH: I would say respectful caution, lots of questions. I believe in dialogue, I believe in hearing people out and questioning. I believe in the method of Socrates and Jesus, "Why?"

My predecessor, who was a really gifted and proven leader, promoted the idea that women should not be ordained, because, in the church, there was one place for black men to be in positions of authority and that was as a deacon. If women were ordained, that would take away that perch and some of the men would even drift away.

My thing is, "If you're that weak, I want you to drift away. If you're going to drift away because your partner here is a female, with equal intellectual capability, leadership, and so on, you're not the guy I need to help me," right. Well, we didn't talk quite that crudely, but we asked, "Why?"

I remember one evening, after a really extensive period of discussion back and forth with women and men about this, a man said, "Look, fellows," to the men, the deacons, "the pastor is going to have his way on this. Why don't we just vote this thing through tonight?" I said, "No, no, please." I said, "My objective is to help each of you make the case for the decision we will take. If you just give me a vote because you know I have the votes, if somebody asked you why we were doing this, you wouldn't be able to explain." Oh, my; well, that was great, too, because they saw that I was not trying to railroad things through, see.

[TAPE PAUSED]

On the women in the diaconate, and one other issue, based on prolonged, in other words, aiming toward consensus, when we reached consensus, I might turn to you and say, "Shaun, now, why are we doing this?" In your own words, you should be able to say, not, "The pastor said," but, "I believe," okay.

Now, the other issue was baptism. In the Baptist Church, the traditional method of baptizing is immersion. Are you familiar with this? Under the water, you come up, okay, but there were many, many people in the church who thought that was the only method that could be used to baptize. In the by-laws of the church, it said that every member coming from a church that was--either from no church or from a church that was not Baptist--had to be [baptized]. So, I wanted to challenge that.

Now, why did I want to challenge this? There were people coming to join our church who had been Methodist, who'd been Presbyterians or Episcopalian. My wife is Episcopalian. They were baptized according to their tradition. So, I wanted to ask--well, one woman came to us from a church and she had been active. She had come from another town. She found that Bethany's approach to worship [fit her] and her friends, and so forth, they were in this church, but she was

from, I don't know what kind of church, but she'd been baptized. She was serious about her baptism, so she said, "Do I really have to be re-baptized?" I said, "Well, tell me what your issues are." She said, "Well, I've been living as if I were baptized."

So, I opened the conversation this way. I asked my leaders, I said, "How many of your relatives are Christians? How many of you have relatives who are not Baptists? Do you think they're Christian?" and they would crack a joke. They would say, "Some of them," like that, [laughter] but they believed, "Yes, of course, they're Christian." I said, "Well, suppose they came to our church, wanted to join your church. We would have to re-baptize them. Do you know that?" "Well, yes." I said, "So, you're really saying they weren't Christian." I said, "When you join this church, do you think you're joining a club, or are you joining a branch of a universal organism called 'The Church?'" See, they could understand this, but they'd never been asked these questions. So, for two years, we discussed baptism, eventually leading to a change in our by-laws.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Just finishing that last thought.

MWH: Yes. So, we adopted this rule that allowed for, first of all, all Trinitarian--this will be very brief ...

SI: Sure.

MWH: ... All Trinitarian Christians--meaning all who believe in the Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, right--coming from another church, if they were baptized as conscious believers--in other words, no infants--but, if you were mature enough to know what you were doing and you were baptized into a Trinitarian church, you would not have to be re-baptized in Bethany.

The second thing is, we authorized different methodologies of baptism. I said, "If I were asked to baptize someone with full-blown AIDS, you expect me to get in the pool?" "Oh, no, no." I said, "Well, do you think they should be baptized?" "Yes, yes." So, we talked about sprinkling--it's a more technical name, intincture, or something like that--but I said, "We have to have alternative ways of baptizing people, some of whom are afraid of water and won't go into the pool. Some of them may be so obese and not as mobile and can't go down into this pool." All of this made sense to them.

There were two deacons in this room who had been visiting a young man--he subsequently died--but he lived for a while as paralyzed from the neck down in an auto accident. He was not a member of the church, but they went to visit a member and they encountered this young man. They asked me to come to the hospital and baptize this guy. He was a thirty-year-old guy. They shared their experience of how all the hospital personnel came to the room and how it was such a meaningful [experience], but how did I baptize him? See, I put the water on his head and spoke about baptism.

SI: Yes.

MWH: For two years, we discussed this. After we adopted it, we had no candidates to have alternative baptism for another two years. We had a young woman who had joined our church who had cancer. She was going to Sloan Kettering for her treatments. A deacon who was in charge of new members came to me and he said, "Dr. Howard, I need you to speak to her, because she's completed all of her instruction, but she never signs up for a baptismal date."

So, I spoke to the woman and she said, "Dr. Howard, I can't go in the pool for so many days after my treatment. Your baptism always conflicts with that." I went back and the deacon said, "She doesn't have to go to the pool." We put this woman on the riser there and baptized her. People stood and applauded--but it was because we weren't ramming it down their throats. We listened. "Come on now, make your argument for why we shouldn't do this. It's okay. Never mind my thinking. Let's hear your argument. Where's that coming from?"

The first time I spoke about homosexuality and the church, I said, "Man," I said, "when I see two guys kissing on the street, it makes my flesh crawl," I said, "but it has nothing to do with theology. It has everything to do with bias coming from socialization. So, don't blame your bias on Jesus." [laughter] Anyway, I hope that's useful to you.

SI: Thank you so much.

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