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Interviewer: I got it set, yeah. I haven't used this equipment before very much, so I might be glancing at it from time to time. Yeah, if you would just tell me about your activism in the '50s and '60s – it's a broad question.

John T. Fisher: Well, I went to public school in Memphis. I went to what's called the Campus School, which is the grammar school at the University of Memphis. Back in my day, it was Memphis State College. It only had one school, which was an educational school. So the training school, as we call it, is where all the classes had one or two student teachers in them all the time. That's where I went from 1940 to 1948 – grades 1 through 8. And I left there and went to Woodberry Forest School in Orange, Virginia, and was there for four years, from '48 to '52, and graduated from there and went to University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.

And left there and went into the Marine Corps. In my day, everybody went into the military, but this was a long time ago. My college class is '56, so I'm five years in front of Jim Jalenak, really, in distance; yeah. And then I left the Marine Corps and came back to Memphis to a family business, and I worked for the same employer for 41½ years. So I've really been in Memphis all the time. And I grew up in a traditional Southern city; there were no black children in my grammar school in the '40s, and I'd been to few social occasions with a black person on an equal kind of basis. It just didn't happen. It wasn't what the world was about. So that began to change some; in the '60s is when it really started to change.

So all kinds of social awareness to do with racial divide came up, and there's still plenty of racial divide around. It's not short in supply today, but it's a lot better than it was. And my first real experience with that came about 1962, '63, something like that, because I built a new building for a car dealership in 1964. And about a year before I built it, I was called on by the NAACP, by Maxine Smith, as a matter of fact, who I didn't really know at that time. And she talked to me about the rest rooms in that new building. And the plans that had already been drawn, to the extent they had been drawn – they weren't finished, but they were all sketched out – there were in fact colored rest rooms and white rest rooms in that building in 1964. Or 1962, let's say, or '63, somewhere in there.

Before then, that was just the way the world was. You didn't set out to do it. For me to build it different than that was to be different, not to do that. That what I was doing was ordinary and to be expected, and well accepted. And Maxine was there with about three or four other people, whom – I don't remember who they were, and she doesn't either. But she looked me square in the eye and talked to me very straightforward, and she is a – as I've said to everyone, she talked then in a very articulate fashion, as a well-educated direct somebody would do. And I appreciated that, and I acknowledge that, then and now, and that made me take her seriously.

So I asked her to let me consider what she'd asked me to do, and her only request was, "Don't do that. Don't build separate facilities." And I said, "Let me think about it," because I knew it would be different. I had no idea what the – I anticipated that the acceptance by the people that worked for me would not be high, and I was right. The blacks all stayed quiet and didn't make a motion or a sound when I told them what I was gonna do, and almost to the person the white staff complained. But I called her back and – well, I didn't tell the staff first. I spent my two days and decided to do what she said. And I decided to do it because that seemed like the right thing to do.

And if that's the way the world is going, I don't wanna be left out, so I called her back and told her that we would honor her request, we would do that. And that's really all I said to her. Then I told my staff. I didn't wanna tell the staff first because I didn't wanna debate it. It's a done deal. And that's what we built, and then subsequently the only difficulty ever it called was we had a larger room for car mechanics, and they're the ones that had more interaction, because they changed clothes from uniforms and stuff that they used to fix cars with, and there was more interaction than just an ordinary rest room. So they're the ones who raised the most pressure back to me.

But it didn't turn out that way; I never had an incident over it. It worked out fine over the years. But that started me – that was my first encounter with civil rights. And subsequently the car dealership received an invitation to bid on furnishing some cars – I don't remember whether it was 20 cars or 40 cars or 50 cars, but it was more than 5 or 10 – to what was called the Delta Ministry Project. The Delta Ministry – have you ever heard of that?

Interviewer: No, I haven't.

John T. Fisher:

All right. The Delta Ministry Project took place in Coahoma County, Mississippi, which is Clarksdale. And I put it to my staff to respond to the bid and to the person – to this little part of my staff, the ones that dealt with that area – and they didn't wanna do it. They said, "Just throw it in the wastebasket; you don't wanna do that. That's all black folks. You don't wanna do that. It's all that people down there moving around in the South." And I said, "Well, that's not a good enough reason not to. This is a perfectly logical thing, coming to us, and my response would be to answer it.

"And if you don't wanna answer it, you've gotta give me a good reason not to answer it – because I'm gonna answer the letter. Just what do I say? And if we make the decision we're not gonna do it because it's black folks, then that's what I'll write and tell them I'm gonna do – but I'm not gonna write that letter." So we ended up insofar as I know I was the only one that bid. I don't know if anybody else bid, but we got it. So that put all of us involved in dealing with people who were in the South, and most of them were white, and most of them were young. There were black people involved in it in some cases, and one of the things our staff told me is that we were gonna lose some cars – and we did.

We lost two; they never showed up. It turns out the National Council of Churches of Christ on Riverside Drive in New York City, who leased the cars, paid for the two cars that were lost, so that was of no economic consequence to me. But it did put you with a whole different group of clients than we were used to dealing with. We were used to selling cars in Clarksdale, but we'd sell them to the plantation owners, not the people out running voter registration drives. We did what they were doing. So that was my second core encounter to civil rights. And then the one that made Jim Jalenak think of me, and the one that puts me in the Memphis collection, was the sanitation strike.

The sanitation strike began in February of '68. I was out of Memphis when I saw it in a newspaper in a little square that said it just started. And some friends – and really I got involved in that because of the church. We're Episcopalian, and three other Episcopalians telephoned me and said, "We want to go and visit with the mayor, and we know you know him because you grew up next door to him. And would you get us a date with the mayor – with Henry Loeb?" And I said, "Yes." I called Henry and made a date, and we went to see him. My memory – I don't have a calendar from those days. I kick myself for not having it, but I don't. And I've kept one ever since, but I don't have one for '68.

But it was probably in early March, and we went to see Henry, and it was kind of an extraordinary encounter because he was so adamant about he was right and people couldn't strike. And he was probably legally correct. Legally the people did not have the right to strike, because they were municipal employees. But Jim could tell you more the legal merits of that case; I don't look at it from a legal standpoint, because leadership-wise he was taking a blind eye to what was going on in the city. He had been a PT boat captain, as you undoubtedly know, and so he was used to taking charge, used to giving commands, and used to being responsible, but he didn't see this encounter that way.

And I was sort of surprised at the lack of inquiry that he gave us. He did all the telling to us about what was going on. And later, the next week, the same group asked me, tell me that they were gonna go see Jim Lawson, who was the spokesman; a black Methodist minister. A spokesman for the sanitation workers at Centenary United Methodist Church, and they asked me if I wanted to go with them to go see him, and I said, "Yes." And I went to see him, and that was equally as extraordinary a visit, because Jim is well-educated. He's not from the South. He talked back to me in a way that I wasn't uncomfortable with it, but I was just really very conscious of the fact that I'd really never encountered that in Memphis.

Memphis black males don't have that sort of – he grew up in Ohio, and he didn't have any of the black mentality. A lot of it's still here; sort of a one-downness or something. I'm not sure what it is, but.

Interviewer: What do you mean by "black mentality"?

John T. Fisher: In talking to black males who grew up in Memphis, there's sort of a deference to me as a white person – especially a white person like a car dealership owner or something. But Jim Lawson didn't do that. Jim was not the least bit arrogant or pushing back; it's just that he didn't have any of those characteristics. He just talked to me like I'm talking. I thought I was just talking to another colleague, because he didn't have any of that. But he was quiet-spoken; he was well-educated; and he's still probably the best preacher I've ever heard – although I don't mean that for the circuit kind of preaching, but for the incisiveness of what he had to say in the pulpit, because I began to go to his church after King was killed.

I'd go to my church for Sunday school and go to Jim Lawson's church for the 11:00 sermon – often – for several years, until he left. So that was a very different experience, and while we were there, a guy named Ralph Jackson, who's another minister, came in. And he had been maced on Main Street by a policeman, and he was just irate over that. And we had an interesting talk about that. And as we left Jim Lawson, Jim said, "I want to tell you all something. You all are the first group – we've had a lot of people come to see us and talk to us, talk to me, about this matter, and all of them have come to tell us what we ought to do. 'This is what we think that you should do. We're sympathetic, and we think you should do this or that.'"

He said, "You all are the first group that's come to listen to what it is we had to say, to see why we do what we do and what we want." So that sort of hooked me into the whole process, and so I began to be curious and get to meet people that was in that group. My wife ended up with another friend of hers in the first march of Dr. King, which he was surprised at. I wasn't in the march, but she was. And the whole thing took on – it had – I wouldn't know how to create an atmosphere in the community like that one. It's not – it's almost – it's not theatrically reproducible. When the community gets that scared and there's that much emotion; that many people feel so strongly, it's just almost like a combat zone.

Interviewer:

You mean in terms of what it was like among the white and black community in '68?

John T. Fisher:

Living in Memphis – that's right. I had people on my street in east Memphis physically afraid that black people were gonna come out and march down the street, which was highly unlikely and never did happen. But they thought it might happen, so it became very electric in that sense. So I got to know a number of people and got to talking to them, and knew a lot of people involved in the sanitation strike – a lot of black ministers involved in the sanitation strike – through the church. And then the unthinkable happens, and you think it can't get worse, and suddenly it gets a lot worse. King has been shot, and that all took place between late February and April 4th; I mean it wasn't a long period of time.

It really is the whole month of March, and some of February and some of April. And at the place where I go to church, which is right here on Poplar – St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral – there was a previously scheduled meeting of the Memphis Ministries Association, and it had to do with taking some action with respect to the political situation in Memphis to do with the sanitation

strike. The meeting had been scheduled for some time. There were some – so we had been scheduled for some time, and they all came. And from that meeting, some of the people that had done some of the preparation work for some documents to share with the group in that meeting did so, but as the process happened this took place the morning after King was killed.

King was killed on Thursday night, and this meeting takes place at 8:00 on Friday morning, and I was a member of what you might call vespers – it's called a chapter, actually, in a cathedral. But I was a member of that group, and I got a phone call to come and be present because of the tensions. So I was there to be present, and that's the meeting that the ministers decided to go and call the mayor. You may have seen some photographs of a young – not young, but sort of a short minister carrying a cross down the street with all these people behind him. And they went to the mayor's office, and I would guess probably a third of them went to the mayor's office.

The other two-thirds, marching was not their deal and they just didn't do it. So that was when –

Interviewer: Did you go to the mayor's office?

John T. Fisher: No, because I'm not a member of that group.

Interviewer: Oh, right – you were just president.

John T. Fisher: Present because I was a member of the St. Mary's Cathedral board, just the host where they were meeting. But I was with the Bishop of Tennessee at the time, John Vander Horst, and we watched them walk out. His name is spelled Vander Horst – V-A-N-D-E-R H-O-R-S-T. That's pronounced "van draw". I don't know why. And we talked about making some kind of a statement in response to what had happened in Memphis. And later I got with some other people and we pinned it down. For instance, that night – that was on Friday – Friday night or actually early Saturday morning I was down with the Bishop at the Peabody Hotel meeting Jim Lawson.

And the Bishop and Jim Lawson agreed to sort of host and lead an assembly of invited Memphians to come and speak. And I went to see the Director of Fire and Police on Friday before we met with Jim Lawson that night.

Interviewer: And who was that?

John T. Fisher:

That was Frank **Holleman**. Frank Holleman was the Director of Fire and Police, and went to see Frank. And I'd known him – not very well – and I told him what we were gonna do, and he just thought that was a terrible idea. He said, “You can't do that. It's too risky.” It turned out that I thought we'd need a permit or something to do it, but we didn't. But also I'm not much of a civil disobedience person; I'm willing to do that, but I can't claim any real civil disobedience stuff, so I was not there to do this in defiance. But I do remember when Frank tried to persuade me not to do it.

And I'm in the room with him – just the two of us in the room – and I finally told him, I said, “Frank, unless you tell me ‘no’ we're gonna do it.” And I stood up and started – literally backed up to the door, looking him square in the eye, saying, “I'm leaving here to go and plan on conducting this assembly somewhere. I don't know where, but somewhere.” And so once Jim Lawson and the Bishop made their agreement to both be present and to both take part, then the next morning, Saturday, I got on the telephone and began to call people to call people. One of whom I called was the head of the Board of Education, who had a room and stuff on Saturday that would be open so we had typewriters and things like that.

So we met over at the Board of Education, and I remember there were about eight committees, and they were all on newsprint around the room. One to find a program, one to get the speakers, one to print a program, one to arrange for a site, one to do some publicity, because we were gonna meet the next day. This idea formed on Friday, it's put together, and it's initiated and the first action took place on Saturday. And the assembly is to take place on Sunday, and we're under curfew, and there's no budget. So that to me is the fascinating part of what took place was to get these people together, and it was about half white and half black in the room.

And it was a black man that coined the term “Memphis Cares” which is what the assembly was called. And it was scheduled – I thought it was gonna take place in the big football stadium, in the Liberty Bowl, when the group left. But the group went to the Liberty Bowl to try and get it and discovered that the Army was all camped inside the Liberty Bowl to keep them from being visible to the populace. Only people in airplanes could see them. And they also had the restroom facilities and dressing room facilities and stuff in the stadium to help accommodate that group of men that's

out there. But that's not available; it's occupied. So they end up at an old football stadium called E.H. Crump Stadium.

And so we go to the E.H. Crump Stadium, and I learned that we were going to Crump Stadium the evening before, on Saturday night, because one of the committees was to do the publicity. And what's really interesting is to go out and do something like this with no budget; it changes everything. It's so spontaneous you don't have time to talk about it. That's the interesting dynamic is you go to TV stations and ask them to run these spots and to film them, and you never talk about budgets or approvals and stuff. You go to this one station and ask them to film them, and not only film them, but make copies for the other three stations in town – and they did.

It became a civic endeavor process and everybody helped. The Park Commission put a speaker's platform on the football field with a microphone and stuff to go into the speakers that are in the stadium, and another group went out and did that. Each of these groups is working independent. There is no headquarters to call back to. When they rolled up their newsprint – that's why I don't have the newsprint. Each of them rolled up their own newsprint and walked out the door, and we didn't see them again as a group. And there was no place to report back to, because with the curfew we couldn't stay and do anything. So that meeting broke up – I don't know, started about noontime and broke up maybe about 4:00.

And as you can imagine, lots of people got lots of different ideas, so it's a very talkative group. And there were eight speakers and we met about 1:30, I guess – I forget what the time frame was. It lasted longer – people spoke longer than they were supposed to. Not a long time, but somewhat longer. It was supposed to be three minutes – they spoke seven or something like that. And there was a wide variety of speakers, over half of which are deceased, but there was all kinds, and eight people, there were different frameworks. I was the first speaker, and I think that either Jim Lawson – I think Jim Lawson was the last one. Ben Hooks was a speaker.

But that's what put me on the radar screen with Jim Jalenak, so he saw my photographs in the newspaper, and I get written up as being one of the instigators of that – which I was – and that process. And it had lots of repercussions. It affected our business. And my phone would ring with threatening phone calls. My children were harassed at school as a result of what I did. So yeah,

it had lots of repercussions. I don't say it like against them – that's just the way it was. And would I do it again? Yeah, I'd do it again.

Interviewer: How did it affect your business?

John T. Fisher: We didn't sell quite as many cars after that as we had before. That did kind of change itself back around, but there were people who weren't gonna come there. There were personal friends that we had that the wives told my wife that "we can't come to your house any more. My husband won't let me come to your house." Now that's another Southern sort of trait that "my husband says I can't come to your house any more." And all the ones that I know about that did that have all apologized. It took them a long time to apologize, but they have since initiated the apology and said, "I want you to know that when I told you that, that I'm sorry I said that. We're both sorry we did that."

And I was often given credit for seeing the world that was kind of coming, which they didn't. And I also got to know – I regret that I didn't use my time with Jim Lawson to meet Martin Luther King. After we left the Cathedral and they marched to the mayor's office, I got in the car and went looking for Jim Lawson, and went to the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home, which is where the body had been taken. And I was in the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home when King's body had been prepared for burial in an open casket, which was brought from the back room to the front room. And later *Esquire* magazine wrote a story about that process and said there were no white people present, but that wasn't true, because I was there.

I was the only white person present, but I was there. And that's the kind of thing that took place in those days. At the same time that that happened I was chairman of the board of St. Mary's Episcopal School for Girls, which is out in east Memphis. It's out near – practically Henry Loeb's house is directly across the street from St. Mary's School. And we were doing a fund drive to build a new building, and there was one lady in the school who didn't like what I had done. And she went to the Bishop of Tennessee and tried to have me removed from the school board. I was chairman of the board, and she tried to have me not just not be chairman, but have me removed from the school board, which he wouldn't do.

So there were lots of tensions going on then. But I got to meet a lot of people and I gained a lot of respect from the black community, which still pays off. Black people that I don't even know that talk to me about that that came to Memphis Cares; and only 12,000 people came, and there's a lot more people in

Memphis than that. But that's what put me on the map race-wise. The Tuesday after the assassination – the assassination was Thursday. The Tuesday after was the city was still under – I remember there was a big march here on Monday. I've forgotten what the focus of that march was on Monday, but there was a big march in Memphis on Monday after King was killed.

And then on Tuesday, the Rotary Club meets. And I was not a member of the Rotary Club, but two of us were invited to put together this program to come and speak to the Rotary Club about it. And I was not at the time very happy with what I said on my speech, and I didn't know what I'd said, really, except for my notes. I still have the notes. I've since gotten – my son for Christmas one year gave me a tape that he got from the University of Memphis of the program, and my speech wasn't as bad as I thought it was. But I got to speak to the Rotary Club and made my mind up that I was going to speak more incisively to the Rotary Club than I had done to Crump Stadium.

And I was not – I didn't think I was vociferous or anything, but I guess 20 people got up and walked out on me. So if you tried to tell the truth, it's gonna be painful. And I've often thought about the Rotary Club motto, and I ought to know what it is, but it has to do with telling the truth and something about making friends. And part of what I would say, "If I tell the truth today I'm not gonna make any friends. That's just not where we are." So – and I got a big write-up in the newspaper for that.

Interviewer: You said there were 12,000 people who came to the Memphis Cares. Was it mostly black or mostly white or mixed?

John T. Fisher: Everybody agrees it was half and half. And the stands were evenly dispersed; I mean there weren't blacks in a section or something.

Interviewer: Okay. It was integrated.

John T. Fisher: It was very much integrated, and there was no difficulty. None.

Interviewer: And who were the eight speakers at it?

John T. Fisher: The eight speakers were me; Bishop John Vander Horst; Tommy Powell, a labor leader; Tom O'Brien, ran an advertising company; E.W. Reed, a doctor; there was a schoolteacher. What's her name? Mary Lawson was a schoolteacher. Her name was Mary Collier when she spoke – C-O-L-L-I-E-R – and she later married a guy

named Lawson. She was there. Jim Lawson and Ben Hooks. How many is that?

Interviewer: I think that's eight.

John T. Fisher: That's eight.

Interviewer: It's interesting to me how you took a stand as a business leader. What was your sense of what other businessmen's sense of civil rights was – where they stood on civil rights from the mid-'60s or 1962 onward, when you first had this experience? Because in some of the civil rights literature I found that businessmen have been more supportive of civil rights than other occupational groups. But on the other hand, I found literature that says the opposite.

John T. Fisher: Well, most of them want the problem to go away. I was back in Henry Loeb's office on Saturday morning, after King had been killed on Thursday night, and I got to see him take phone calls. When we were there he took a stack of letters and shook them in our face to say he had their support, and I got to look at some of the letters and I know where the support – the sort of white conservative country club group that the letters came from. But lots of them telephoned him and told him that he'd done a bad job by letting King get killed – he should never have gotten that far. And they all withdrew their support.

I've never seen a more dejected human being than Henry Loeb that day, because he had done what he thought was right, and obviously with other people's support, because I had seen that first-hand. But then they pulled the rug out from under him, and he left Memphis. He served out his term and moved to Arkansas. His wife is Mary Gregg, whom I've known all my life. I saw her not long ago in Forrest City and she's very pleasant, and if you had the chance to visit with her, it would be productive. But I can see why Mary won't do it.

Interviewer: Yeah. I can too. Do you think that the businessmen's rejection of Loeb after King's murder dealt with moral reasons, or that they realized that the assassination was bad for business and for the city's image?

John T. Fisher: That's what they thought – bad for business. I mean I even heard people say, "I'm not sorry it happened. I'm just sorry it happened here."

Interviewer: Yeah. That's something. You talked about Maxine Smith and how she persuaded you to build the buildings without the colored and the white facilities. What did she say to you that made you change the way you thought about things?

John T. Fisher: I've forgotten exactly what she said, but she said it in a very straightforward way that made sense, that this is not the way the world is going. That we've got to break down the barriers and we've gotta start with these designated separators. And "it's just offensive to me to go someplace and I'm supposed to look for the colored ladies' room instead of the white ladies' room, and I can't use them." And the way she described that, it's exactly what I would feel if I was in that spot. So that's what made the difference. The thing when talking, when they said, "What made you do this and that?"

And one of my children, I think my son, in a speech about someplace to do with something, made this statement about me. He said, "What you guys wanna watch out for Dad is if you want him to tell you the truth, that's what he's gonna do. So if you don't wanna hear the truth, don't ask him the question." And that probably is oversimplification, but that really is – I didn't invite Maxine to come. I don't even know how she – well, I guess she knew that we were doing it because we had put a sign up that we were fixing to do that. Because we had bought the property. The girls' school was still on it, and I think we had some kind of modest sign that we had bought it or something.

But anyway, it was not uncommon knowledge, so she could've found out lots of different ways. But I didn't know her – I had nothing to do with inviting her there. And then subsequently – I had no inside knowledge, but subsequently I was – been chairman of the board of St. Mary's School, and we had had an inquiry from one of the public school board members about a black insurance executive in town wanted us to know if we would entertain an application for his daughter to attend school. And that got some discussion, and a negative answer went back. And I can remember my discomfort at that, because I didn't think it was right – but there again, I'm not a civil disobedience kind of person.

And we had met as a group, and the whole group consensus was "no" because we're trying to raise money to build a school building. I mean you can talk about it forever, but the answer went back "no".

Interviewer: And you said you were uncomfortable with it, but did you vote “no” as well?

John T. Fisher: No we didn’t really vote. It was kind of a clear consensus. But no, I encouraged them to take it. I said, “You know if that’s what they wanna do, take it.” Part of the argument was that this isn’t the way to do it – for us to get with another board member and kind of set this. And I wasn’t dissuaded; I still think that’s a reasonable perspective is for us to engineer this child to come to our school, I’m not sure that’s what we’re supposed to do. I knew what the racial climate was in Memphis when that was going on, and I grew up in it, and so I wasn’t totally put out about that. And also I didn’t know what it would do to our fund-raising efforts for the school building.

But at any rate, we didn’t do it. And some months later, maybe three months later, the headmaster calls me and says, “In the mail this morning I received an application for this child to be admitted to the school, and I have it in my hand.” Well, that’s different. So I remember convening a board meeting – well, that’s not quite true. Convening an assembly of the members of the board. It was not a board meeting. But we did meet at the school, and the headmaster came in to tell us about the application. He had it in his hand, and we got to look at it and talk about what we were gonna do about it. And really – I think there were 21 people present. That’s my memory.

And they really wanted it to go away – the whole process to go away. So they didn’t know – they kept wanting the headmaster to find some way to duck it, and my position as chairman was, I said, “All right, if any of you wanna give the headmaster instructions, then you gotta make a motion. When you make a motion we’ll open a board meeting.” “But oh no, I don’t wanna record it. I don’t wanna be the one in the minute book for making it.” “Well, if you’re gonna give him any instructions, you’ve gotta go on the record.” And I don’t know why I thought of that or what led me to that sort of decision to do with the matter at that point.

After two and a half hours of discussion, the headmaster finally stood up and said, “Well, if you aren’t going to give me any instructions, then I’ll do what I ordinarily do,” and walked out of the room, and that ended the assembly. And we never did open the minute book because no one ever chose to make a motion for us to vote on. But another guy and I who were there were talking afterwards, and we said that if anyone had made a motion to do something the motion would’ve passed 19 to 2, because they all

want it to go away. And when they had to vote, they'd vote "do whatever you need to do to not let her in here."

And I've often wondered if those other encounters in my life didn't have something to do with the way that worked out, because after King was killed and I was at the R.S. Lewis Funeral Home, the insurance executive was present with the child that morning. And he was telling me that she was headed for the school the next week or so to take the entrance exams. What the headmaster said after it was over was, "I hope her test scores are clear." Because St. Mary's is a – you know St. Mary's School, ever heard of it?

Interviewer: No.

John T. Fisher: Well, it's a very academically-oriented – it is the academically-oriented school in town. And it's very demanding. And so there's no assurance that she is for that school; I mean there are lots of kids that are not – that school's not for everybody. They expect too much and they push too hard, and they get the most merit scholars in town and all that kind of stuff and all the students go to college, and they all go to good colleges everywhere. So it really is the academic institution. And the child did well – the child tested well, and the child did well in the school.

And the unhappy part of that event is that later after she graduated from college, the child was in Houston living doing something, and she committed suicide. But that's been a profound lesson back to me because how do any of us know what the pressures are for that child to come in and be the one to integrate that school?

Interviewer: Yeah. So she did come and integrate it.

John T. Fisher: Um-hm, and after that all the other private schools integrated.

Interviewer: So she was the first one in a private school to integrate in Memphis. How did that experience go for her?

John T. Fisher: Well, we thought it was going reasonably well. We thought it was going well; she had lots of interaction with white people. But see, I don't have any idea what her home neighborhood life was like. I don't understand how black children blamed her going off with all these white children. I don't know what that was like. But it made a profound impression upon me when she killed herself.

Interviewer: Did you have any evidence at all that that was related?

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- John T. Fisher:* I don't think so, but I don't know the family history all that well. But I do know it made me awfully glad, it made me content that we had not sent back a "yes".
- Interviewer:* To the admission?
- John T. Fisher:* Um-hm. It made me content that we had not sent back a "yes"; we had sent back a "no" and they applied anyway, so we're not implicated in the fact that she came to that school. Her family chose to do that.
- Interviewer:* Oh, that you didn't engineer it – that she ended up applying.
- John T. Fisher:* I was just as happy that we did not engineer it.
- Interviewer:* Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I've heard talking from other people in some of my own research that school desegregation here and busing just seemed to be the issue that inflamed people more than any other.
- John T. Fisher:* And as a result of that my wife and I made a decision about 1970 – which is two years after the assassination – that we would like for our children to know that there's more to the world than Memphis. So I made a deal with the people I worked with, my work colleagues, that they would run the car dealership and pay my salary for a year's sabbatical. And I tried to take that year's sabbatical in 1971, but I had too many commitments to do it, and I couldn't do it until 1972. And Jim Lawson – black Methodist minister – in the process of looking at some papers I'd written looking for something to do for the year's sabbatical.
- And I really thought that I'd go as an instructor on staff in some university and teach one course. But I wanted to go with a group of people, be within a structured framework where other people with families were doing things. And Jim Lawson wrote a letter to a man named Eugene Carson Blake. Eugene Carson Blake was then the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. And as a result of that letter to Gene Blake I was invited to join the staff at the World Council in Geneva. So in 1972 in the summer we sold our house and moved to Switzerland; stayed there a year.
- Interviewer:* Do you think you would've done that if there hadn't been a much racial turmoil?
- John T. Fisher:* No.

Interviewer: And was that experience what you hoped for?

John T. Fisher: Yeah. I tell people I really don't know why I went, but I got what I went for. And I add to that I didn't get to stay long enough. I went for one year; I'd like to have stayed for three.

Interviewer: What were you looking for and how did you get it while you were there?

John T. Fisher: Well, I wanted to be in a different environment than the economic environment of selling cars. And I went over there, and the guy over there running the place said, "I can tell from what you've written is that what you really want to do is work for a group about church and society, which is the social issues to do with the way the world works and stuff and interaction between church and society; church and the people around the world. And that's what you wanna do, so we wanna fulfill you with what you wanna do. So how about you working half-time for church and society?"

"But we need you to work in the finance office, to do some work for us in the finance office, because we don't get much outside help in the finance office." So I said, "Okay, I'll spend half the time in the finance office and half the time in church and society," and church and society was what I – it was a fulfilling job that I got to do. Turned out that we got the money together for a conference on technology and the way it interacted with society and with church, and a guy named Ernest Shumacher wrote a book, *Small is Beautiful*. And he present his first paper for *Small is Beautiful* at that conference. It later became a best-seller.

And I was in charge of running that conference; I was convener of that conference. So I had to write people all over the world. I would write letters and send them up for translation, and they'd translate into Spanish and Russian and Chinese and all kinds of languages and send the letters out. I'd sign them. They'd send them out and a response would come back, and I'd have to send the response back up to translation and they'd translate back into English and send it back. Of course, lots of colleagues in Geneva were bilingual; they spoke more than one language. But I didn't – I had my French I could get by in, but that's all. I couldn't do anything in French.

But I did get to run that conference, and I enjoyed doing that. But what was more interesting was that that August – we got there on July 4th and that August the World Council governing board met and passed a resolution to divest themselves from any – no

investments in South Africa. No investments in Apartheid companies, companies invested in Apartheid. And when I got back to Geneva, my boss in the finance office said, “John T., I want you to implement that resolution.” And I said, “Frank, I don’t have a clue how to do that from here.” He said, “Well, we’re always short staffed.

“And one of the things we talked about was to find something for you to do that you could start and you could finish it, so that you don’t go out and start a project that when you leave, somebody else has gotta keep it up, because I don’t [audio glitch] knew. I knew a younger sister, Frances Barbe. Frances Crawford had married a guy named Barbe who was with the Swiss Bank in Geneva. And I’d been to look him up and all – and I liked Terry, got to know Terry, and it turned out that the World Council doesn’t have any endowment money. They won’t accept it because the need in the world is too great.

But in carrying out project work they have cash funds on hand that they do some investments with, and they had at the time three investment banks. One in Boston, one in New York, and one in Geneva. And it just happened that I knew the senior partner by chance of the one in Geneva. So I went to Terry and I said, “This is my charge. Would you get somebody to help me do this on a worldwide scale?” And he said, “Yes.” And so first we did four countries: the United States, the one I knew the best. Then we did England and Scandinavian countries and I think France – or maybe Switzerland. I think France. And we did four to get a handle around it, and all we really did was make up a list of names of what not to invest in.

And people kept wanting to make this issue emotional, and I kept trying to resist that. If you do that, all we’re gonna do is get in arguments and fight. What I wanna do, the trick is to write a letter to our banker and say, “Don’t buy these stocks.” That’s not emotional. They’ll know where it came from but they don’t have to get involved in it, and they can either take the instruction or not. So the trick for us was to go back and find companies to make up the list, and the most productive resource to do that was the Yellow Pages of the telephone book from South Africa, where we went and found all these companies. And one of my rules was that if a name gets on the list, we have to have some document in the file, something written, to justify it.

So if the company would write and say, “Why is my name on the list?” go to the file and pull out the Yellow Pages page and photocopy it and say, “This is why you’re on the list.” Or to get

their annual report. And it turned out we had lots of paperwork – we had lots and lots and lots of paperwork. We had groups all over the world to send us bales of stuff, so which it was interpreted. And the World Council maintained cash reserves in 12 currencies in 12 different countries, so we did 12 different stock markets. So we wrote four of them before Christmas and I did the other eight after Christmas. And before I left, the goal was – because I left in August or something, and the goal was to finish the project, which I did.

So it turns out that I enjoyed the work for church and society the most, but all my standing in-house came from the work I did in finance, because everybody wanted to make this emotional and I would never let them make it emotional. It's not unlike me running the board meeting where I said, "You gotta make a motion. We're not gonna let this get into this long drawn-out shouting match." And so that really is the way I ran that, and one of my encounters I remember was up in a group called Combat Racism or something – what's the name of that group? At any rate, this guy that works in that took us some roll of these papers and said, "You gotta take these and take them to that banker and tell him to stuff them up his you-know-what."

And I said, "No, I don't." And he said, "Yeah, you do, because you work for God in here now and you gotta follow this mission." I said, "No, I don't. I work for Frank Northern down in the finance office, and my goal is to write a letter to these banks, and that's what I'm interested in, that's what I'm gonna do, and I'm not gonna tell him that. If I tell him that, he'll just tell us to close our account." That's what I'd do. And it turned out that one bank did tell us to close the account, and the other two banks took the instructions and said, "Okay. If you have any of those, we'll sell them and we won't buy them, and you just maintain the list with us." That's what we did.

Interviewer: So you did have market impact on those banks and businesses.

John T. Fisher: Oh, yeah. Oh, they all knew where the instruction came from.

Interviewer: Yeah. Wow. One question that I think of, and it's more of a philosophical question, is why do you think that there would be an existence of a segregated society, and that one group would subordinate another, and why there would be so much resistance to a change, when it's just a social construction?

John T. Fisher: Slavery. I mean no doubt about that in my mind.

Interviewer: The historical legacy of slavery.

John T. Fisher: The historical legacy passed down. The old adage in the South was a nigger's like a duck. He ain't got no soul. And that was the way lots and lots of people hung their hats and believed in the slavery days. The enslaved African-American was property and was in bondage, and was not viewed in the human brotherhood principle at all. That's where I think it came from.

Interviewer: When you said you grew up next to Henry Loeb, did you hang out a lot with him?

John T. Fisher: Um-um; he was older than I was.

Interviewer: Okay.

John T. Fisher: I don't know how old. Let's say he was active in the Second World War; he was a PT boat captain, and the Second World War is when I went away to Woodberry Forest. Now that would make Henry at least 10 to 12, 14 years older than I am.

Interviewer: From your perspective of being his neighbor do you have any sort of insights into his character?

John T. Fisher: Um-um. I just knew him. I'd see him across the fence, and he was an older guy. The big difference I remember was that Henry had a brother, William, who's also deceased, and he was in a wheelchair. And for reasons that I'll never fully understand about the family is that Henry and William split, and Henry's son could tell you more about that than I can. I can't tell you anything about that. I just know it happened. And so they were not that way when I knew them; they were together. But Henry – Billy was kind of scary because he was in a wheelchair all the time, and he would take his BB gun in the back yard and shoot birds out of trees with his BB gun out of his wheelchair.

So I didn't really know him very well, but I knew he'd remember me as a neighbor the same way I remembered him as a neighbor. And so when I called his office, I thought he would take the call, and he did.

Interviewer: Before you had your moment of racial consciousness in 1962, were you aware of the civil rights activities taking place in Memphis, or did they have any sort of impact on you?

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- John T. Fisher:* I wasn't aware of any that were taking place. Everybody here was talking about how peaceful Memphis was and how content the black people in Memphis were, and that we wouldn't have any trouble here like they were having elsewhere.
- Interviewer:* That's interesting. What I've been thinking about focusing my Masters thesis on is the 1959 city election in Memphis in which Loeb ran for mayor and then Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks ran for positions. And with looking at the press coverage of that and the rhetoric, all the white politicians are saying, "Well, race relations are peaceful and they're fine here and harmonious."
- John T. Fisher:* That's exactly right. Memphis took a lot of pride in that, and so people like me, I'm just – 1959 is when I married. I mean I came out of the Marine Corps in '58, met my wife in '58, married in '59. And I went to work in '58, so that's the very beginning of my work career and all, so my view of that is strictly a bystander, really, in '59. I think and keeping my ear to the ground, and being in the car business and working, that I took some comfort in the fact that Memphis was not having the racial push-and-shove that was going on in other cities – beginning to go on in other cities. That reassurance I got was that the black people in Memphis were content. That was the story I was told, and I had no reason to challenge it.
- Interviewer:* And you didn't have contact with black people at that time, so this was something that the white community thought.
- John T. Fisher:* I can remember the first time I invited – actually, it was Ben Hooks. Ben and Frances came to my house for dinner one night, and that was the first time that a black person had ever – not that they'd been in my house, because they'd been taking care of my house for all of my life, black servants. But the first time that I'd had a black person sit at my dinner table as a guest, and that was an emotional event for me because it was so different.
- Interviewer:* And when was this?
- John T. Fisher:* That was probably '68.
- Interviewer:* Do you think that – well, I don't know. It's hard for me, coming from – I'm from Grand Rapids, Michigan, originally, in the north, to imagine what it was like back then. But it's important to have a sense, because to me, when thinking about how blacks were segregated and only admitted one day to the zoo and so forth, I

think, “How can whites think that things were peaceful and harmonious?”

John T. Fisher: The general mood that was put out by the establishment – whoever that is. Whoever sort of puts this word out – is that we’re not gonna have any trouble here because the black people in Memphis are content.

Interviewer: Yeah, and that’s all that was in the newspaper coverage. Were you aware at all of the Freedom Movement downtown where they boycotted Main Street?

John T. Fisher: Um-hm, I was aware of it. But that wasn’t till when?

Interviewer: That was like 1960 and ’61. Did you hear any business people talking about that as having any sort of impact on their business?

John T. Fisher: Well, just the ones who were being boycotted, which as I remember it was Goldsmith’s Department Store.

Interviewer: Yeah. What were they saying about that? Do you remember?

John T. Fisher: Well, I don’t recall hearing anybody particularly sympathetic with the people who were boycotting the stores. They thought they were troublemakers. And you’re doing that, but you represent a minority of the population, because all the people you say you’re trying to do this for like it the way it is. The inference being – the zoo never came up as an entity in my consciousness, but I mean the same word is that they’re very content to go to the zoo on Tuesday. I recall that’s the day they were –

Interviewer: I think so, yeah. Interesting. And you were saying that in 1964 when you lended the cars to the black population it was in Mississippi, and that was during the Freedom Summer, right? So what was that like?

John T. Fisher: Well, I found it kind of interesting because I got to meet these people that were very different from me. I got to see firsthand people I’d been reading about in the newspaper and in *Life* magazine. But some of them would come in the car, and I would get to at least meet them and talk to them and, “How’s it going?” and have them tell me a story or something. So I had some contact with a group that I would not have otherwise had any contact with, because the idea of getting in a car and going to Mississippi and then having interaction with them was not one of my choices.

To have them bring the car to Memphis to do something, or have them pick up one or come and bring one back for service, that's mechanical and it has to be done, and here they are, and I'm curious, and so I get to talk to them. But it never occurred to me to go to Mississippi and talk to them. That just wasn't the way it was done; that just wasn't the way the thought worked.

Interviewer: Did other business leaders – what were their reactions to you like lending out the cars to blacks in '64? Did you feel any animosity, or was there acceptance, or did they –

John T. Fisher: I didn't – maybe light animosity, but it wasn't so much animosity as "I don't understand you. I don't understand why you'd do that. What makes you do that? Why would you do that? None of us do that. Why would you do that?" It was almost like the only thing I really got from them is some underlying thing of "are you trying to teach me something?" which I truly was not. And I never had much trouble with that because I knew I wasn't. I wasn't doing that to teach somebody anything. I was doing that because I got the letter. I convened the school board in that kind of meeting because I was the chairman, and we had this event that for us to do nothing wasn't gonna take us anywhere.

And for us kind of to sit on our hands, all kinds of things could happen, so the thing to do is take it up and address it frontally. So when we convened the group together, most of them didn't know that we had the application. They didn't know what they were coming for, because we met right away. But that's more reflective of what I think is my general managerial type style.

Interviewer: Right, sure. What do you think – I mean one thing that I've discovered from living here and from my studies about how racially polarized Memphis still is today. What do you see as the differences and similarities – well, two questions. What do you see as the differences and similarities between Memphis back then and Memphis now, and also what you think could be done to make things more harmonious and less polarized?

John T. Fisher: Oh, make it more harmonious and less polarized would be to have a more productively engaged black population. Memphis is very heavily black – I don't know what the percentages are, but let's say it's half and half – I don't know. I mean if you wanna fix Memphis schools, to me it's not very complicated. It really can't be done – it's unthinkable – but get rid of the private schools. Back when my day was with the private schools, we were an insignificant proportion of the student body, so whether the private

school was there or not there wasn't gonna make any real difference.

But the white flight has been such that there are many more private schools today than there were when I was at St. Mary's School, board chairman, and the whole environment of doing them. And so what's happened is all the affluence has left the public school system. So you have public schools that are predominately black. They're predominately fatherless families – the males not in the family. The income level is poverty, and the persons who are to be reasoned with are working, so they're not gonna be home when the kid comes home. To me it's just a disaster, and the way I would know to fix it is if everybody went to public school. And the affluent parents who go buy the private schools wouldn't permit that to happen in their schools.

And they'd all get engaged with the PTAs and do what families do with schools and straighten it out. So the thing that you've got too much of today is that there's a whole segment of the population that is mostly isolated economically, but the high proportion of that is African-American. So it becomes both a racial problem as well as an economic problem. And then see, in Memphis back in – my sister married a cotton farmer in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In 1950 when she married him, he had as I recall it about 1,800 acres, and on the 1,800 acres he had 100 houses with families in them, with farm workers and children. But a house.

And by 1970 he had eight, and that's the cotton picker and mechanization of farmland development. And it took a lot fewer people to raise the cotton crop than had been done when you hoe the weeds out and you pick the cotton by hand. So when that happened, the families had to go – they left. And where'd they go? Came to Memphis. So Memphis picks up this significantly large population of uneducated, unskilled black people. But the ones in that group that had some vision, some desire, some drive, they kept going. They went to Chicago or Toledo or Detroit and got on the assembly line – got them a good job. But the ones that stayed here?

So now you're faced with a Memphis tax base problem, for instance, that's different than a city like Sacramento that doesn't have a race problem, or Omaha, Nebraska, doesn't have a race problem. They kind of spread the tax base out over everybody. Everybody pays their fair share of picking up the garbage and stuff. Not in Memphis. We don't have fair share of paying for the fire services and stuff; we've gotta have a huge singular population

that live in such substandard houses that the property taxes they pay are nothing compared to what I pay. But they need the same police service, fire service – they need all these services. And it's not just a few more people – it's a lot more.

There's a lot more people. And so Memphis tries to pick itself up and join the world of big cities, it's pretty hard, because you don't have the economic structure to do that. So my view of Memphis is that it's the most populated small town in America; that there are lots of cities that have fewer people than we do. And all my business colleagues tell me that I'm being negative about Memphis when I say that, but I don't see it as a negative thing. I see it as trying to really understand it, and I'm surprised that the baseball team and the Grizzlies basketball team do as well as they do, because we don't have enough people to pay for \$80.00 tickets.

Interviewer: Do you think that the rise of black elected officials has made a positive difference toward race relations here?

John T. Fisher: Yeah. On race relations, no question it has. Whether it makes a positive direction on getting the job done from a white – from my managerial perspective, we live in different cultures. And I see it as, okay, we gotta go; this is part of the journey that we must take to get to some peaceful stance. What really is wrong right now is the African-Americans have the political power and the whites have all the economic power; that's where it is.

Interviewer: Ah – okay. Yeah, I did a paper and looked at how black political power has been looked at through time by historians. And one of them talked about Memphis in the late 1960s, and his hypothesis was that a city would modernize and be better economically the better the race relations were. And so he found that with Atlanta, but that was like a modern industrial center; but Birmingham was very behind in terms of race relations, and also an antiquated economy. But I think with Memphis he thought it was pretty modern, but he wrote in the late 1960s. It's kind of interesting to look at that argument now, and given what you just said about how things are still economically behind for blacks, and that it's still like you said a small town.

John T. Fisher: Well, my general view of that – it's troublesome, and I have no evidence to indicate that it's correct – is that my own bias is that too many blacks when they get some affluence do the same thing whites do. They move out. They move out to where I live and buy them a nice house, and that's the end of their – if they get delivered, then they come out there and make up a small

percentage of the population in a sense of being an African-American community. But they don't want any more to do with the low income group than anybody else, and sometimes it's harder to get them to be socially conscious on an economic basis.

Interviewer: Yeah. This intersection between race and class is really interesting.

John T. Fisher: Well, they fought so hard to get out that the last thing they wanna do is to do anything back down there.

Interviewer: What did you mean by that?

John T. Fisher: Well, the whole vision was to succeed and to move out where I'm talking about is economic. If you don't have the economics straight, you can't do that. It's not some hypothetical economic argument. If you don't have enough money, you don't move to a nice house. So if you did that, you worked so hard and stuff to get out there that the last thing you wanna do is reengage yourself with where you left.

Interviewer: Ah, right. Now you've had a lot of involvement with the church. Have you found that church members are more racially progressive than other people, or?

John T. Fisher: I think yes.

Interviewer: It seems like Memphis does have a strong church community of church leaders who are active.

John T. Fisher: Memphis has a strong church community. If you've not seen it before, you can get one of these, and it will tell you how strong Memphis is on giving compared to other cities. And I'm convinced it has to do with the church – but that's a good book. I'll tell you where you can get one – you can get one there. This is the only one I've got, or I'd give it to you. But it'll tell you all about – it's a study about the giving patterns in Memphis, and Memphis is real strong Southern Baptist. And they take missions seriously, and they put their money up for it.

Interviewer: How did people view Maxine Smith and Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks in the 1960s? What did white people think of them?

John T. Fisher: Kind of distance. Well, they often would think Maxine is too outspoken. Most white people in Memphis would not know how well educated she is; that she went to Middlebury College, one in

Vermont, and she's fluent in French, which is why she went to Middlebury – that's the language school. But mostly they see her, when she'd ask for things her visibility came by serving on the city school board. She was a City of Memphis Board of Education board member, and she would do things to try to equalize the stuff for the races. But a lot of people would criticize her and think what she was doing was wrong.

But what she was doing in my view, looking back at it, that she never had the council sessions that you think you're gonna have, because then the school out there was like the public school I went to. Back in my day, the public school was all white, and the PTA was alive and well, and the parents were engaged in athletics and all kinds of stuff. Your parents would bring you to school and pick you up. But now you go to an inner city black school, and neither parent can come and pick you up – if you've got two parents. So they start one down to start with.

Interviewer: Do you think some of that had to do with also her sexism, that people were surprised that it was a woman who was so aggressive?

John T. Fisher: I don't think so. I think it was just that she used her mind and she had plenty of sense, and she was bound to go find these ways that people thought to do that she's being uppity. And the fact that she was a woman doing it I think made little difference. Other people could see that differently.

Interviewer: You said that a lot of your friends have apologized to you for dropping you for your racial stances. Do you find that other whites you know have experienced changes in their attitudes toward race?

John T. Fisher: Yeah.

Interviewer: And look back now at the '60s and '50s and can see that things were wrong? In terms of business again, some of the literature on Memphis and civil rights makes business leaders out to be heroes of Memphis, or that they were kind of real for the integration and so forth. But from talking to you, it seems that business leaders weren't willing to – except for some people like you – to stick their neck out. They were more for maintaining the status quo or doing what was best for the business in terms of –

John T. Fisher: Well, I think that in Memphis as far as giving away ground before you start a battle, that's where Memphis succeeded best was these different business people you're talking about would be viewed in the main I think as progressive. Because they did do things to

integrate and stuff; they did do things like get rid of the zoo day. At the point where that became where you needed to do it, they didn't do it out of the goodness of their heart. But they were savvy enough to say, "We need to change this."

Interviewer: You think that because they saw that this was what the future was heading toward, or that there was this fear that if they didn't do that, that they would be boycotted or Memphis would break in violence, or?

John T. Fisher: Well, mostly it wasn't the way the world was going; it was the fear of what the disruptive activity might be if – you know it's easy to give up this ground than it would be to defend it. And once it's kind of doing the beginning graciously what you're gonna do in the end anyway. Memphis does a good job of that. And the political attitude here was very pragmatic in that sense. So if someone wants to label them as progressive, I would take no issue with that, because they would be viewed as progressive.

Interviewer: Because this report by the Southern Regional Council by Benjamin Muse, which was written in like 1964, talks about how in his view he thought Memphis had made more progress toward desegregation than any other city in the South with less strife.

John T. Fisher: I remember the night that King was killed. There was significant violence in city across America, but there wasn't in Memphis.

Interviewer: That's what I heard from somebody else, and I wasn't aware of that.

John T. Fisher: And I know why – Ben Hooks and Jim Lawson both got on television within hours after his assassination and told Memphis to cool it. You know, you'll see this stuff in other cities. And I've never seen that footage again, but I'm confident that those speeches are out at the University of Memphis. There's tons of TV footage at the University of Memphis. In fact, you don't have time in your life to look at it all – there's too much. But Ben Hooks and Jim Lawson were the two people who went to bat and said, "No. Cool it."

Interviewer: With business desegregating, was the sense of what's gonna happen or the fear of disruption caused by their awareness of what was taking place in other cities like Birmingham, or because they were aware of the activities of the NAACP here and their efforts to boycott, or a combination?

John T. Fisher: No, I think that the moral sensibilities of the people I'm talking about, that that would view as progressive as a group. For instance, when I did this thing at Crump Stadium, I got support. The TV stations gave us the ads and the Park Commission gave us the space. Later we got a bill from the Park Commission, which we wrote back and said, "We don't have any budget, and don't feel bad, because nobody else got paid either." So in that sense, I think that the sensibilities of the people here, in my view, would not have been tolerant of Birmingham.

Interviewer: In terms of the civility of it and not allowing violence.

John T. Fisher: No, the fire hoses on people was not part of the game. That was beyond what they will – all kinds of people here would've stepped in and said, "You're not gonna do that." Henry Loeb was no Bull Connor.

Interviewer: That was something when I was here a few years ago I talked to Maxine and Vasco Smith and Russell Sugarmon, and I remember Maxine Smith, I asked her that, why was Memphis relatively peaceful compared to other cities? And she said, "Well, you have the cream of the crop here in terms of black and white leaders," and she didn't think white leaders would allow that.

John T. Fisher: I think she's right.

Interviewer: Yeah. And you don't see here either activity of like the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens Council. Why do you think that is? Do you think it relates to the same sort of sensibility that it'd be bad for business?

John T. Fisher: I would give a lot of credit to the strength of the churches in Memphis. The same thing that you will find in this book is that the church involvement in Memphis is very strong. There isn't any way to keep your church activity or your synagogue activity or your temple activity consistent with the fire hoses on those children.

Interviewer: Yeah. But I see Memphis – and what I've been learning I continue to see it's very contradictory in many ways. On the one hand it seems like there wasn't as much violence; that it was relatively peaceful compared to other cities. People were civil. But on the other hand there was with the sanitation strike this outbreak of violence and such opposition to school desegregation. Why do you think that there was so much opposition to school

desegregation and not as much to these other issues like desegregation of the parks or black voting power?

John T. Fisher: I think it's the same thing that the way neighborhoods change. You can integrate a neighborhood; it doesn't present any big problem. But when the balance starts to change, that's when the white flight takes place. And I don't know what the percentages are, but when a certain amount of neighborhood that was formally white gets to be sufficiently minority, then that's when the whites start to leave. When the first black moves in the neighborhood, no white leaves. But if it starts to change the neighborhood, that's when the flight will take place. So I think that's the – and they didn't want the – I mean when I went – in Geneva my children walked to school.

And when I lived in east Memphis my son walked to school, public school. And that's the best of all worlds. There isn't any better world than walking to school. And when you start to busing these kids, it puts all kinds of things out, the tensions and all you can lose. Parents have no time with the school where that child's going. There's all kinds of things wrong with busing children, and there's no evidence I've seen to indicate that it has some beneficial outcome.

Interviewer: Yeah. And stepping back from like even before busing, I know that there was really token school integration here. So why would there be opposition – well, I guess I'm thinking – well, they had to do the busing because there was such token school integration. So yeah. So apart from busing, why would you think that there would be this opposition to this, or that people would want to have like gradual school desegregation instead of –

John T. Fisher: I think it's less painful – that's why. I mean I'm not sure what you – the busing's a real dilemma. I mean it has all sorts of logical basis in law of what you have to do to make things equal. But I don't see any evidence to indicate that busing had this laudatory effect on our society and contribution to the way we grew up and helped make us live a better way. I don't see that. We spend a lot of money on it. We hire a lot of people; the people driving the buses and stuff are not properly trained, and lots of difficulty with that. It helps undermine the schools to do with parents.

Interviewer: So you were against busing.

John T. Fisher: Well, not so much. If that's what we need to do, then I'll accept that. But I'm not persuaded in hindsight that that was one of our

better moments. If someone thinks so, then tell me why. I'd be curious to listen. But somebody say how Memphis has benefited from this; why our children and our neighborhoods are stronger and healthier because we use the busing. I haven't studied enough, so I'm not prepared to take too many shots at it. It's just that I don't have any confidence that it has had a big payoff for us. But I've really not engaged with it, so I'm not prepared to assert that very strongly. I've not heard it debated; I need to hear it debated some.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything at all about the 1959 city election when –

John T. Fisher: Nothing except that I had a friend that ran for some kind of office then, in 1959, and I remember voting for Henry Loeb in 1959. And he had – that was still the commission form of government, because we didn't go to the city council form till January of '68. The city council had only been sitting for three months when King was killed, which is part of the political difficulty then.

Interviewer: I didn't realize that that was so soon after the city changed that.

John T. Fisher: That fall we'd held the elections, and my recall is January the 1st – it is what it is, and all of it's well recorded somewhere. But in my view of it is that all the activity took place as much as a year and a half or two years before to change the form of government and start the process and the votes and whatever to do that. Then once you got the form of government changed, to take effect, and you still had to go through the political process to fill the slots and all that stuff. And if my memory is right, that first city council – the one in January of '68 – probably had 3 out of 15 black members. Maybe 3 out of 13. Now it's majority black.

Interviewer: Did you find that people respected the black councilmen, or that people talked a lot about how this was a change that there were black people who held office?

John T. Fisher: Well, the first thing is they got to know them, and they got to know them in some working way, which made a difference, and not in some more tokenism way that they're used to. So and you're doing things differently because they view the world differently than you do – and they still do. It's still a problem. I mean a lot of black people, and even these black politicians who make mistakes, I'm convinced that they get these economic deals that turn out to be prison term type stuff, that they really believe that that's what the whites have been doing all the time. They really believe that.

They believe that the whites go out to the country club and sit around and talk to each other and make all these deals, and in that part, they're right. There is a lot of networking works. But the whites know how to do the power and not break the law, and the blacks aren't sophisticated enough to do that. They haven't learned how to do that yet. Some have, but not – that's why the others see it and say, "Well, I didn't do anything that y'all haven't been doing all the time." I've heard that statement before. And I wanna say, "Well, then you don't know how it goes on, because the people that you're talking about, they don't do what lets them get caught in jail like you're fixing to go do. They don't do that.

"The outcome looks to you like what you did, but that's not what they're doing." See, you've got two different cultural views.

Interviewer: Yeah. How strong was labor here in the 1960s?

John T. Fisher: I wouldn't say labor here has ever been particularly strong. You had a Firestone plant that had a labor union, and an International Harvester plant that had a labor union. There wasn't a lot of big union labor here; it's been the trades. Carpentry, the electricians, stuff like that. Like in today the largest employer in the county is FedEx. A huge employer – they're not unionized.

Interviewer: Yeah. And what did you think too of like the newspaper coverage here like in the '60s of civil rights activities?

John T. Fisher: Well, my view of it at the time was – well, that I have sort of a bias because the editor in that days was Frank Ahlgren. In my grammar school grade was Frank Ahlgren Jr., so I knew the family well, and he was a personal friend. And I would go to his house and stuff for the day and stuff like that, so I got to know his dad real well. So I sort of had a personal bias on account of liking the Ahlgren family and thinking they were doing a good job. So I'm not much of a critic of the paper. But that's because of the personal bias.

Interviewer: Right, sure. Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about or that we haven't discussed?

John T. Fisher: No. Mostly I tried to talk about what I think you wanted to hear about, so no, I don't have anything to –

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Is there anything that I haven't brought up that you think significant at all?

John T. Fisher: No, I don't think so.

Interviewer: I guess – you said you thought that the church, people in the church, were more racially progressive than other people. Did you find that across denominations or in your particular church or?

John T. Fisher: Across denominations. I think the church influence in Memphis – in the white community, for instance. I don't know the black community that well, because the most divided time we got in town is Sunday morning, between the churches. There are not many integrated churches. There are white churches that have black members, and there are black churches that have white members. But they're minuscule in percentages. It's just not – no, the church is really divided. But from my view of the white church – and my mother grew up a Southern Baptist, I grew up a Methodist and became an Episcopalian.

But and I associate with people across the board in churches, and it wouldn't – now I think it's the church that let the board convening that we had about this racial student coming into the school for it not to get out of hand. Nobody walked out. Everybody stays in the game with the school. Nobody over-pushes the deal about trying to tell the headmaster. They were not above doing something wicked, but they acceded – besides we're sitting in a church. St. Mary's School at that time was housed in the Church of the Holy Communion – the church building across the street from Henry Loeb's house. So all that in my view comes, ties it all together more.

I would think Memphis would've been much offended if anybody had tried to put fire hoses on people. I mean what happened in Birmingham to me is – and there are no instances in Memphis of any real note with the Freedom Riders.

Interviewer: Yeah. And they came through Memphis?

John T. Fisher: Um-hm.

Interviewer: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah. How do you see – you've talked about this a little bit – Memphis is different and similar than the rest of the South?

John T. Fisher: Well, the biggest thing I think the difference is is the churches. But I'm biased on that score because I'm active in church groups.

Interviewer: Yeah, but it's been a big influence, the churches in Memphis.

John T. Fisher: I mean it's the church who took me to Henry Loeb's office. It was the church that set up Memphis Cares, and the whole cadre of the people that organized that Memphis Cares once we decided to do it and had so little time to do it. But the whole interaction process was all tied together by the church. The groups that went to call on Henry Loeb goes under the guise of the cross – even the Jewish rabbis following the cross.

Interviewer: And so it seems to that your spirituality definitely was a factor in what made you become more of a civil rights activist.

John T. Fisher: Oh, there isn't any question about that.

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