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David Yarbrough: Excellent. All right, I am David Yarbrough. I'm a senior at Rhodes College, and we're conducting this interview on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom.

Matt Strauser And I'm Matt Strauser, and I'm a freshman at Princeton University.

David Yarbrough: Okay, let's get started. What is your name?

Rev. Fred Morton: I'm Fred Morton. I'm 71 years old. I'm a retired United Methodist minister. I was born here in Memphis, and live here now. Most of my life has been here in Memphis.

David Yarbrough: Okay, and –

Matt Strauser And could you tell us what today's date is, just so we know for the - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Today's date is June the 24th?

Matt Strauser The 22nd. June 22nd, awesome.

Rev. Fred Morton: The 22nd? June 22nd.

David Yarbrough: Close enough.

Matt Strauser That's fine. We just needed to have that for the transcriptionist.

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah, okay.

David Yarbrough: Okay, could you describe some of your more recent work in Memphis?

Rev. Fred Morton: More recently I've been working – doing some community development work in the Highland Heights area with a cluster of churches in that particular community.

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We've been trying to work to uplift the community, to help with those people who've been marginalized. It's an interracial community at this particular point. We're working in the public schools tutoring and working with scout programs and young people, and that sort of thing.

David Yarbrough: Okay.

Matt Strauser All right, so first, we're just gonna kind of talk about your home life growing up here in Memphis. Could you talk about your parents a little bit? What were they like? What were their occupations?

Rev. Fred Morton: My parents – my father was a salesman. He worked for a chemical company after the war. During the war he worked with – at one of the aircraft war plants, and before that he'd been a salesman back during the depression era. And my mother was a housewife most of her years. She worked later on when my brother and I were older, in high school and college. But my father was basically a salesman most of his life, working life.

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Matt Strauser All right, and can you talk about the influence your parents had on what you're doing now and on your viewpoints regarding race relations, particularly your mother you talked about, but also your father and they way that they were raising you affected the way you viewed race?

Rev. Fred Morton: Right. My parents were both very common, middle-class working people. My father's people were from northwest Arkansas. My mother's people were from northwest Tennessee, and they sort of migrated to Memphis during the depression years, and earlier, to kind of find a – you know, a better way of life, to find some opportunities here in Memphis. Neither were college graduates. My mother finished the eighth grade, and my father had, I think, maybe one year of college. But my mother was the most influential, I think, in my kind of spiritual and values formation. She was very thoughtful. She read extensively for a person with her background, and so on. And she was a real strong –

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moral influence growing up in the home.

Matt Strauser All right, and when you say that – did you have brothers and sisters, first of all?

Rev. Fred Morton: Yes, I had an older brother.

Matt Strauser Yeah, and would he say that he had a similar relationship to your mother, or was this, like, a special relationship that you had, that he - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, I think we both had a similar kind of relationship to her. She was very intellectually kind of challenging and pushing us. My father tended to be sort of quiet and sort of in the background, in the back scene, always there supportive and helpful, but my mother was the more intellectually and spiritually challenging to my brother and myself.

Matt Strauser Awesome, awesome. All right, so now we're gonna talk a little bit more about you growing up. Can you talk about the neighborhood you grew up in? You're from Highland Heights, correct?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, yeah, I grew up in Highland Heights, which is in the eastern part of Memphis, and it was designed – it was built and constructed in the early 1920's, 1910's and 1920's, and basically was a bedroom community for Memphis.

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And it was almost exclusively a segregated community. There were no residences for any African-Americans to live in that community, as far as I know. I grew up and never looked an African-American young person in the eye until I was at – I was a freshman in college. That's how isolated and insulated we were from African-American community. I saw a gentleman who worked in my grandfather's barber shop, and the domestics that worked in my aunt's houses, but that was the only contact that we ever had with African-Americans until I was nearly grown.

Matt Strauser Interesting, interesting. All right, and you mentioned one particular story that had a big influence on you. Do you mind describing that for - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah, that was the incident when I was about eight years old, my first vivid awareness of racism. I and some of the other children in the neighborhood were raking the leaves of one of the ladies in our neighborhood, and there was an African gentleman who was also working in the yard. And we had some occasion to –

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cross paths, or do something, and I – in just typical deference, I said "sir" to her – to him, and the lady of the household, she

overheard that, and she came bursting out of the house and said, "Young man, you will never say 'sir' to a N." And I was just nonplussed. I didn't know what to do. I mean, I just kind of gathered myself up and said, "Yes, ma'am," and went about my business. I went home later that day and told my mother what had happened. I mean, I was just kind of in shock. And my mother told me in no uncertain terms that all adults were to be treated as equal, with respect and consideration, regardless of their color. It did not matter what color they were. They were to be treated with respect, and you continue to do that, to say "sir" and "ma'am" to anyone who is your elder, regardless of what their color is.

And that was the tenor of my mother's moral guidance from the age of eight on, and you know, going against the tide of sort of built-in racism in the culture. And this was about 1948/1950 –

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1st cut at 6:00

when this event occurred. And so that was the kind of gentle and yet strong influence that she continued to have upon myself and my brother, as we grew up in those tumultuous years.

Matt Strauser Yes, and so you talked about how your mom had a moral influence on you, as well as an educational and intellectual influence.

Rev. Fred Morton: Right.

Matt Strauser So let's talk a little bit about your schooling, where you went to grade school and middle school and high school, and then all the way up to your college years.

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah. Well, in Memphis, at that particular time, the educational plan was to have a kind of community school, grade one through twelve, and so you'd start in the first grade and go all the way to the twelfth grade. There wasn't as much mobility then as there is now. And I was in Treadwell school, and I was in that school from first grade until the twelfth, in the same school. Most all of my family, all of my cousins, went to the same school, just as I did, practically. And it was a completely segregated school system in that particular time.

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The blacks had a very inadequate school system, but I think nearly all of the African-American children in the community, you know,

did receive schooling, no matter how poor the quality was. But the education that I got was – it was pretty good for that particular time, and it was challenging. We had some excellent teachers. And as I grew up, you know, I was challenged to, you know, kind of explore a lot of new and different ideas, and then decided to go on to college. My older brother had gone on to the Air Force Academy, and so – and there were others that we had associated with who had gone on to school outside the immediate environment, which kind of challenged us to kind of look beyond the immediate horizons.

And so that was kind of how I was headed, and through sort of a quirk circumstance of scouting, I became acquainted with an older mentor who encouraged me to apply to Princeton, and I applied and was accepted, and that's how I left Memphis to go east to school.

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Matt Strauser All right. So let's talk a little bit more about your experience at Princeton, out east. You talked about how there was some intellectual condensation from people at Princeton, especially people from the east coast towards people from the south. Could you explain that and describe that a little bit more?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, as I remember it, there was this sense of kind of looking down at the south as being sort of a hillbilly place. The only persons of note from Tennessee were Elvis Presley and the like, you know, that kind of thing. And so there was not – to me, it didn't seem to be a very keen appreciation of a lot of the profound intellectual and cultural roots of our era, Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner, and all that. That was kind of overlooked for sort of the hillbilly notion. And so that was one of the kind of things that I ran into, that sort of eastern condescension towards the south, that you're hillbilly hicks, that kind of thing. So those of us from the south, we felt like we were kind of struggling to kind of overcome that –

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kind of stigma.

Matt Strauser Did you feel like you were able to overcome it? And if you did, how long did it feel like it took you to overcome that condescension?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, yeah, within a couple of years. Yeah, yeah, as we made our way, as we kind of, you know, earned our way and got some academic credibility and social standing and all of that, why, it was fine. I was in a social eating club and all that, and so it all turned out well; although, the glaring thing that was so stark in that particular time was the judgment that the south was so racially polarized and mistreated African-Americans, and yet we were just as segregated in Princeton, New Jersey, as folks were back in Memphis, Tennessee.

Matt Strauser Could you talk about some of that segregation at Princeton, and what form it took?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, I mean, there were only three African-Americans in my class at Princeton, and there were 670 freshmen in my class, starting out, and of those three only one finished and graduated.

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So theoretically, it was open admissions, but practically speaking it was just, you know – there were just virtually no blacks in my class at that time.

Matt Strauser And was there discrimination outside of the white/black discrimination as well, at Princeton, or - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, yeah. The other most vivid form of discrimination was against – was anti-Semitism, discrimination against Jews, and that was very – and that was something that was altogether new for me. You know, I was not aware of that until I came east. And because we had a lot of good friends who were Jewish in Memphis, and some of my classmates from Memphis were Jewish, and we had a, you know, good relationship. And so that was an altogether new kind of thing, and that was probably the most visceral kind of discrimination that was exercised at Princeton, was that against Jewish students, particularly in the social clubs, where they were denied admission to some of the clubs.

Matt Strauser All right. And so after school at Princeton –

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2nd cut at 11:00

can you tell us what you did after Princeton?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, sort of what happened to me was that while I was at Princeton I discerned the call to the Christian ministry, and a

central part of that call was to deal with the issue of civil rights. I felt like that was a part of what God had called me and a lot of my generation in the church, and in the ministry to do. This was a burning social issue, an issue of immense injustice that had been perpetuated for decades and decades. And if the church was gonna be what it should be about, we needed to do something about it. And so many of my colleagues in the ministry and in the church at that particular time, particularly in that setting, and many liberal arts colleges and universities throughout the country had a similar kind of passion, and that was sort of central to my calling to go into the ministry –

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and one of the reasons why I chose to go a seminary, at that time, which was in the south and in a southern setting that would deal, I thought, more practically and authentically with the racial issue. And so I chose to go to Duke University, to the divinity school there.

Matt Strauser And let's talk a little bit more about Duke Divinity School. You all – you talked about how you were stationed at rural, white, conservative churches, but that you had a black colleague, and I'm interested to know what was their divinity school experience like compared to the white students at the divinity school?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, I can't speak for them. The young man that I was referring to was in our carpool. I was serving a church on the – just virtually at the border of Virginia and North Carolina. It was about 50 miles from Durham. And there were about ten of us, and we had arranged an elaborate carpool system that, any given day, there were two cars that would go back and forth from Henderson, North Carolina, to Durham, and we would take turns driving and so on.

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And one of the students in our group was an African-American who was serving in an African-American church in Henderson. And he would ride along with us on occasion, as his schedule would dictate. And we had a good relationship in seminary. The seminary was completely open. We had a number of international students, students from all over the world, and so it was a very inclusive kind of community there. So it was a good relationship that we had.

Matt Strauser All right, all right. And so you described the attitude of your parishioners as akin to those of Timothy Tyson, which he wrote about in his book. Can you tell what those views are in more detail?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, it – North Carolina in 1960, it was 1963 – yeah, 1963, rural North Carolina was very much like rural Mississippi and rural Tennessee –

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at that particular time, and the mindset of most persons was very conservative. They were very resistant to any kind of major social change of any sort. And so those of us who were serving rural churches knew that, you know, we were not gonna have a great deal of impact on changing a lot of those deeply seated attitudes and practices at that particular point. So we just did what we could to be authentic in doing the ministry and caring for the people, and then as we had an opportunity to make some headway, maybe with some of the younger people, we'd try to open them up to see things a bit differently; and that was sort of on the side, that was surreptitious kind of ministry and education. And then we would dutifully do our civil rights sermon once a year, as our denomination kind of required us to do. And the people in the pew, they would sit and they would kind of politely accept it and then go on their happy way.

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3rd cut at 15:00

But there was a wide recognition, I think, among the clergy of my generation going through seminary in the mid '60s that the institutional church in the south was not gonna be a force of change, that it was gonna more reflect the changes that were taking place than be out at the forefront and the vanguard of making change. So we – I think we came to terms with the fact that we were gonna be not in an active but in a more passive, almost a sideline position, and then we would just have to do what we could to, as occasion would present itself, that we could make some kind of effective and significant witness to help the process along.

Matt Strauser All right, and you said that the Methodist church had you give a sermon every year about civil rights - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Race relations.

Matt Strauser A race relations one? Could you maybe give us a little summary of what that was like, especially when they know you're having to –

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preach to more conservative – a more conservative group that doesn't really wanna accept the change, did they make you tailor it?

Rev. Fred Morton: Right. Well, it would be something like this. The social creed of the United Methodist Church stipulated that the church was open to all, persons of all color, and so forth. And so we would read that kind of preamble, and then we would pick a text out of the New Testament, or the Old Testament, that would deal with how God had – did not have a regard for a person's class or color, and then try to relate that to a person's experience. And so – but we would only go so far, I think, in terms of their awareness. So we would, you know, just try gently to help people open their awareness and understand. And this was when *To Kill A Mockingbird* was very popular as a movie and as a book, it was going around.

And so it was in the vein of things like that, that was the way we were attempting to deal with the issue, and helping people to kind of open their eyes and see beyond the kind of –

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prejudices that they had been saddled with for generation after generation, to see that the world was different and people were different than what they had been lead to believe.

Matt Strauser Did that frustrate you, the slowness with which that had to take place?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, sure, sure.

Matt Strauser Because you mentioned that you were more liberal and active on the racial front, was that a frustrating - ?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, sure, sure, sure it was, yeah.

Matt Strauser Yeah.

Rev. Fred Morton: Sure it was, yeah.

Matt Strauser So real quick, could you tell us about your family life at this point in the divinity school? Were you married?

Rev. Fred Morton: Yes, I was married and had a child. My son was – he was five, I think, when we finished seminary and moved back to Memphis.

Matt Strauser Awesome. And then where did you meet your wife?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, we were high school sweethearts. We grew up in the same school, in the same neighborhood, and married my senior year at college, so, yeah.

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Matt Strauser All right, so now we're gonna move on to what's traditionally the civil rights era, like the 1950s, the 1970s. Are there any stories, first off, that you wanna tell, that you distinctly remember, something that maybe shaped your thinking on it?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, probably the most significant thing that happened to me, we returned to Memphis in 1969, and I was assigned – I was on the staff at a large suburban church in Whitehaven, Tennessee, a large growing – today we'd call it a mega-church, I guess, but a large growing church, active, a lot of people, professional people, lots of things going on and a vibrant kind of place to be. And I was there for three years serving on the staff at that church. And that was – Whitehaven was just right on the periphery of Memphis proper, and so I was part of a network of other Methodist clergy in –

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the city at this particular time. And Memphis was going through sort of a gradual transition, moving, hopefully, in a more positive way to desegregate the school system, to open things up a bit. And so when I came to Memphis in 1969, I had this notion that, you know, Memphis was doing pretty well, as opposed to Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia, you know, where things were pretty strident and violent and all that. And so we thought things were going pretty well. And so we thought things were going pretty well. And there was a network of clergy, white clergy, and we would meet together sometimes with black clergy and try to do what we could to open the lines of communication, do what we could to build some bridges of understanding and that sort of thing.

So we thought things were going along pretty well, and – but then by 1968, when the sanitation workers' strike started, well that –

that's when things really got tense, and we discovered that our notion of benign improvement –

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4th cut at 20:00

was not the case. We had just really underestimated, and I had not seen how painful and how marginalized and how disempowered the African-American community was, in spite of the fact that Memphis was probably one of the best lead African-American communities in all of the country at that particular – some exceptional black leadership within the church community and the professional community, and I mean it was just extraordinary for the times. And one of the reasons why Memphis, after Dr. King's death, did not blow up into such awful conflagration, was because the black leadership was just so powerful and strong.

But that was an arresting kind of thing to see, that – and to discover that the kind of change that was in front of us was not gonna be gradual, it was not gonna be peaceful, it was gonna be tumultuous and heart wrenching and heartbreaking –

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in so very many ways. And so – and I mean, I remember vividly the night that Dr. King was killed, and at our particular church, at the Whitehaven Methodist Church, the police chief of Memphis, Frank Holloman, was speaking to the men's group. And they came in and pulled him out and said that there'd been an incident. Well, what had happened, Dr. King had been killed, and so we were all sent home. And I mean, that's how close I was to the sort of – the things that were going on at that particular time. And it was very difficult that – you know, the months after that, as things began to settle down somewhat, to sense that it was gonna be very difficult, that things were not gonna be the way that they were before, and that there was so much heartache, there was so much bloodshed, there was so much ill feeling, and all of that, and that it was gonna be a difficult time _____.

Matt Strauser And how much of a unique view was that?

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I mean, how many people in your community, in the white community, were aware of how difficult of a change it would be?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, it all depended on kind of where you were. If you were in a position of leadership, I think you were in – and you were vested in Memphis, in the Memphis community, it was as sobering thing to realize kind of where things had turned, what was gonna happen, and what the future lay ahead, particularly if you were concerned about education, because I mean, the future did not look good at all, because you could sense that with the direction things were going with the courts and forced bussing, that most of the whites would bail out of the public education system. And so it was really sobering from that point of view.

If you were the parent of children who had to be educated, then you were desperate, especially if you were middle class working. What is gonna happen to my children? Where am I – what am I gonna do? You know, they – the feeling –

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that your children's education was kind of in jeopardy, and to this kind of conflict over which you had no control or no way to leverage things for better. I mean, if you were wealthy, well, you could always put your children in private school, or you could move somewhere else, or something like that. But that's one of the things that's sometimes overlooked, I think, is that the people of my parents' generation going through the depression and World War II, and afterward, education was the ticket to success. I mean, that was the meritocracy kind of society that was built. And so it was getting an education, going to school 12 years and then going on to college, and so forth. And so, suddenly, with the civil rights upheaval, all of that was thrown into jeopardy for middle class people. They didn't have access to that public education the way that they did before. And so – and that was the kind of anxiety and fear, and sometimes rage, that fuelled a lot of the white community –

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and explains a lot of the crazy kind of stuff that went on in the generation succeeding.

Matt Strauser And you mentioned bussing, that forced bussing was a big part of that.

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah.

Matt Strauser What was your personal opinion? What did you view the best solution would be?

Rev. Fred Morton: At that time, I mean, I just could not understand and accept forced bussing. I mean, that just did not make sense to me, and to most of my contemporaries. The white liberals said, "That just does not make sense." In hindsight, it was probably the only thing that could be done, sort of like the civil war. There was no way to resolve the slavery issue without a war. There was no way to resolve the segregated school system in the south without forced bussing, and I mean, that's a reality, but it wasn't one that those of us who were – who had children involved were willing to accept at that particular time.

Matt Strauser So choices did that affect? What – how did that have an effect on the choices you made for your children's education?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, the choice that I made was I left Memphis.

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I had an opportunity to go to west Kentucky and to serve as a campus minister in a university campus community for 12 years, and so I just took my family and we moved – we removed ourselves from that conflagration and put ourselves in a community that was virtually all white, and so we escaped that.

Matt Strauser So would you say that the virtually all white community was behind or ahead of Memphis on race relations, since they didn't necessarily have to confront it the way Memphis did?

Rev. Fred Morton: They didn't have to deal with it. In Murray, Kentucky, there were – only five percent of the population were African-American. So it was a – it was as lily white as Germantown was back then, so to speak. So we removed ourselves from that situation in order to – and basically, to ensure that our children would get a good education during all that turmoil. But many of my colleagues in the ministry did not – were not so fortunate. They were moved around from small – you know, small communities, churches in the country, one church –

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5th cut at 26:00

community to another, these small communities in west Tennessee and northern Mississippi and western Kentucky, and where the

school system would shut down and they would open up these kind of Christian academies, you know, and the children would not get good educations. But the parents thought, "Well, at least they're safe, you know, they're gonna be safe." Well, we know what happened. So there's a whole generation of my contemporaries, or of children who were my – of young people who were my children's contemporaries, who got an inadequate education because of all of that turmoil, but my children didn't, they got good educations in a small college town.

Matt Strauser All right, and so you said there was a lot of – it seems like there was a lot of fear in the white community of kind of the change that's happening.

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah.

Matt Strauser So I'd be interested to know about the reaction to the violence that occurred around the sanitation strike, you know, because it's one of the few instances where a Dr. King led march experienced violence. So what was the sense in the city, or how did that stoke –

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the fires of fear here in Memphis?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, it's just really ironic, because it was always used as an example: Well, this is what happens when there are civil rights demonstrations. They get out of hand, and there's gonna be all this turmoil and so forth. And what people just failed to see then, and I think are as reluctant to see now, is that the level of violence was just really very little for Memphis, considering what had happened. And the – but the perception in the white community was that the – well, the blacks have gotta be held in check, and if we give them too much freedom, they're just gonna tear this place apart. They're gonna ruin our education system. They're gonna take it all away. And so the only solution we have is to get out of here.

Matt Strauser So there was a real effort then on the part of the white community to have those – that sense of fear kind of stoked?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, sure, sure, sure, yeah.

Matt Strauser All right. And so you –

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talked about Dr. King's death, and how you received that information from, I believe, Mr. Holloman?

Rev. Fred Morton: Yeah, he was the police director.

Matt Strauser Yeah, right. You wrote about how you received a threatening – an early morning phone call after Dr. King's death. Can you describe that for us?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, yeah. Well, and it was in a – the Sunday following that event, I was – I assisted an a worship service. I was a worship leader, and in the pastoral prayer I had just lifted up sort of a generic petition for peace and community and understanding within the community. And then it was a couple of days later I got a crank phone call, somebody saying something like – you know, using some epitaphs and so forth to say that I didn't need to be saying that from a church pulpit, that sort of thing. But that's the only threat that I ever experienced in that whole episode.

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Matt Strauser Did you hear of any other threats to people that were close to you in the ministry?

Rev. Fred Morton: No, no.

Matt Strauser So let's talk about politics in this era. Where would you say you stood on the political spectrum in comparison to the population in general, and in the white community in Memphis, and in the south?

Rev. Fred Morton: Are we talking about national politics, or - ?

Matt Strauser National politics, my bad.

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, as far as national politics, I mean, I've voted democrat ever since I could vote. My mother's last act, before she died, was to vote for President Johnson against Barry Goldwater, and I tell everybody I'm a yellow dog democrat, and I'll vote democrat until the day I die. So I've always voted democrat, by and large. There are some exceptions to that, but I've always tried to support leaders who were progressive in their leadership within the local community – as well as the state and national scene.

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Matt Strauser: And how – how would you say that would compare to people that were in your neighborhood growing up, the white community in the 1960s –

Rev. Fred Morton: The typical people in my neighborhood, where I live now and where I grew up, they would be 70 percent Republican now.

Matt Strauser: All right. So what – let's see. Can you elaborate more on the effect that Dr. King's death had on you, personally? Did that strengthen your resolve to attack the civil rights issue, or how strong was it heading into that? Was that already a decided factor for you?

Rev. Fred Morton: No. It was a sobering experience, and to realize that for one thing, what people have been saying along, that these were vital times, and that the resistance to the civil rights movement was visceral and deadly.

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And that made it all very real in spite of the fact there had been instances where civil rights workers were murdered and so on. But that made it just very real indeed. And the – but there was a shift in the mood, I think. The notion before was that we can work together and we can be collaborative, and we can move things. So we can reason together to affect constructive change.

But with Dr. King's death, and I think the ascendancy of the black power movement, that had – you know, it was a fist. It wasn't an open hand. It was a fist. And the reality of how do you work in an environment that is – that has that kind of reality?

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6th cut at 32:00

You know, that was a sobering thing. You know, what can we do? Those of us who were in the church leadership, we felt kind of powerless to affect any change, and it was a difficult time. But I had learned, and Timothy Tyson's book was really very helpful in bringing me to understand the necessary progress of the African-American community to come to that point of sort of self-identity and empowerment.

They had to make that step. They couldn't be just lifted up. They had to, in a sense, raise themselves up. And it was a difficult kind of rite of passage. And we just had to stand back and sort of let it take place, and then define some place to stand and maybe be of some help along the way. But it was a sobering and arresting kind of thing.

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Matt Strauser: So could you sympathize with the black power movement and feel like you could work with it, or did –

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, sure.

Matt Strauser: Or did you feel that it hindered civil rights progress?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, you know, sometimes the excesses were – yeah, it would hinder it, but it was a necessary and inevitable part of what was taking place for the change to occur.

Matt Strauser: All right. So now, we're going to move on to post-civil rights era Memphis. You talked a lot about that in your own personal autobiography and how you think race relations stand today. So I'd be interested to hear you speak about how you would compare the race relations in Memphis back in the '60s and '70s and how they are now.

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, it's a different world now. Really different. The – in Memphis, the city of Memphis, and even the county itself were where blacks clearly have a significant hold on the power structure.

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They – and that's the way it should be. And the education system is – it's better than it used to be, but it's got a long way to go. The realities that I think we're dealing with in Memphis more has more to do with poverty and underclass than it does race. That's my perception.

Now many of my white contemporaries will say, "No, it's a racial thing," but for myself, I think it's more of an underclass. It's a poverty issue is what we're dealing with. The problems that get peoples' attention about crime, unemployment, and those sorts of things, those are not racial issues. Those are, I think, social and economic issues that need to be addressed, and I think the city and

the county are making very serious efforts to do that. And there are many sections of the business community, the church community, that are doing the same thing.

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My ultra-evangelical friends, I mean they're – they're in these urban communities and the black communities working just as hard as any of us liberals are to try to help to uplift the life there. So we're all working together. We have a different approach to how things maybe ought to be, but we're all working at it, and that seems to be the main thing, that folks are coming together, working together, to try to make life better.

Matt Strauser: Do you think – you mentioned how important education is to solving those problems of poverty and the underclass. Do you think that the – what some have termed the white flight from public schools to private schools by the many affluent people in the white community, do you think that's had an overall negative effect on the education in the city?

Rev. Fred Morton: Oh, yeah. I mean in hindsight, that was the big mistake that was made was for whites to bail out of the public education system and attempt to set up – I mean because basically, we have a segregated system, education system, in Memphis in Shelby County.

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And trying to work that out and to – is a nightmare as everyone will admit. So yeah, that – I don't know how that could have been done differently, but the fact of the matter is that the predominant white community sees it that they've got their education system in the county schools or the private schools, and the blacks are left with the public education system.

Matt Strauser: Do you see any future for that changing, or do you think that's such an entrenched thing now?

Rev. Fred Morton: It's pretty entrenched, but I think the amalgamation of the county and city's education systems hopefully will begin to address that in a significant way.

Matt Strauser: And do you think it's even a race problem now, or that it's just that people are still going to those private schools out of a sense to not have to have their children interact with other races, or do you think it's purely because the education systems have – the public

education system is viewed as failed by many in those communities?

[0:37:02]

Rev. Fred Morton: I think it's probably more the latter. It amazes me how tolerant and open-minded a lot of my contemporaries are. After having been away and come back, and I see some of my classmates from high school at reunions and so forth, to see how open-minded these folks are, and I thought they never would be. So I – I – I think it's – deep down, I believe it's more a concern about the quality of education than it is wanting to protect their kids from being with black kids.

Matt Strauser: All right, and you said that most of the people where you live now, which is Bartlett if I'm correct.

Rev. Fred Morton: Right.

Matt Strauser: You've said that it's mainly a Republican community, and they send their kids to white, conservative, Christian schools.

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Matt Strauser: And you – you kind of talked about how you think the recent corruption in the Memphis city government or the perception of corruption in the Memphis city government may have led people to vote that way or have particular views about the black leadership in the community. Could you elaborate more on that and your thoughts on that?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, I think it's an easy excuse to make, although if one were to look at the incidents of corruption, I don't think that the incidents of corruption is higher with black administrations and white administration. That's people just selectively looking at things.

Matt Strauser: So it's more of a perception by people, and it's almost an easy scapegoat for them.

Rev. Fred Morton: Sure it is, sure it is, sure it is. Yeah.

Matt Strauser: And what I'm interested in is living in Bartlett, how does – do you feel removed from the Memphis community at all, or do you – do you feel kind of like a foreigner in a strange land being out in Bartlett?

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Matt Strauser: And do you think that's affected the way you've been able to minister in the city of Memphis?

Rev. Fred Morton: Well, yes, it does. I've tried to kind of immerse myself in Memphis a majority of the time, but Bartlett has kind of become a bedroom home for me, but I spend much of my day in Memphis in the inner city of Memphis and trying to interact with folks that live in Memphis. That's my intentional purpose in terms of this last stage of my life. This is what I'm going to do. It's kind of atoning, in a sense, for the sins of my segregated past and so on. But I'm feeling more and more at home, you know, living and working and moving about in the inner city of Memphis. But I'm finding that there's more and more openness of many of my very white neighbors and citizens in Bartlett, too. So I'm encouraged.

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Matt Strauser: So is there any advice that you would give to young Memphians right now, kids that are going through the school system, both black and white to kind of bring this city towards more racial equality and more racial openness?

Rev. Fred Morton: I had a real interesting conversation with one of our scout leaders this last week. She's African-American. And she accompanies some of the young ladies who are with our venturing scout group. She works at a school, African-American church school. But she herself went to a prep school at Sewanee and had a very interesting experience as a young person in a predominately white preparatory school. And she said that in finding things for her – places for her children to go to school, she wants to find a school where her children can go that they will have a diversity of students.

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Rev. Fred Morton: That they won't be the only black children there. That for their well-being, they need to be in a diverse school. They're gonna – no matter how good the school is, if it's not diverse, no matter – if it's all black, no matter if they – you know, all the children get admitted to Harvard. It's not good enough. I think the same thing is true of white parents.

For white parents to have their children in school that's exclusively white denies them a precious legacy of their own education, and if

all of our parents could see that on both sides and see that that needs to be a part of the equation of how we configure public education as well as private education, then I think we would all be better. Now the private schools have, you know, they have students, diverse students.

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They're not very many, but still, that claiming diversity is an integral part of one's growing up is, I think, essential.

Matt Strauser: Thank you. Is there anything else that you'd like to add here before we wrap it up?

Rev. Fred Morton: I can't think of anything else. I just appreciate the opportunity to share my story.

Matt Strauser: We appreciate you giving us your time, and we're looking forward to seeing this interview up on the website.

Rev. Fred Morton: Okay.

Matt Strauser: All right, thank you.

Rev. Fred Morton: Thank you.

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