

SS018

June 14, 1968

We are re-taping Rev. Ezekiel Bell at the Memphis Search Committee Meeting Offices, 3677 Southern Ave after having failed to tape him on the second tape at the first session.

Interviewer #1- Alright, Rev. Bell on the first tape we had left off at the point where you and the marchers were maced that Friday, Feb. 23 as you left the auditorium. Can you go over after the march? What happened after the march?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- After we were maced?

Interviewer #1- After we were maced.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, well (?) and I were together and the officers scattered all of us, as I mentioned to you and we went back to the hotel. We went back to the Firestone office where my car was parked. We had walked. No, I'm sorry, we had walked back to the auditorium, to the side where the meeting had been held. I got my car and went back to the union hall to see if any people had come back there so that I could carry them on over to the Mason Temple where we were headed when the march was broken up. When I got back there, there were a few people who were seeking a way to the Mason Temple and I carried as many as I could in my car over to the Mason Temple where we met for a short while. And then it was decided on the next day, that there would be a meeting. We would call off the grand march that had been scheduled for that Saturday and we would need to form some sort of organization to come to the real support, the full support to bring the whole community in support of the sanitation workers and that is what we decided to do. Now on that Saturday afternoon at 2 o'clock we had a meeting of anywhere from 125 to 150 of the Negro preachers in town. Then, that's where we formed the organization COME and decided that on that Sunday morning all of us would call for a boycott on all the stores downtown, would call for a boycott of the newspapers, and would also call for a boycott of all of the Loeb BBQ places in town hoping that this would bring to the attention of power structure and some of the other more (?) people in town bring to our support these people who would speak to the Mayor and perhaps rally him to the cause of sanitation worker.

Interviewer #1- Who's idea was Come?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I think really it grew out of, Jim Lawson suggested the name COME but it really, I don't think anyone in particular except those of us who were standing with the sanitation workers, had been standing with them long before there was any formal organization. So really those of us who had worked rather loosely with the men, didn't know we have to resort to any kind of an organization. Frankly, I was not necessarily in favor of organizing any other group in town here but it was just necessary to this in order to bring the full community to the support of the sanitation workers.

Interviewer #1- Did COME include anybody besides the black ministers?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No it didn't, at that time, but it included at this organization meeting only the black ministers were present. But we said from the very onset, that all groups in town would be represented and eventually when we formed the steering committee with Rev. Lawson being chosen as the chairman, all organizations, political, social, fraternal, all of these organizations in town did have representation on the strategy committee of COME and of course we claimed the full support of the entire black community in this organization.

Interviewer #1- Who was the leader of COME?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, Rev. Donaldson served as the chairman and was the overall organization. He, together with the Rev. Stark kind of served as co-chairman. We thought that these gentleman were certainly were 2 of the most influential ministers in town and they were from different denominations and we needed to have various heads at the organization if we were going to continue to rally the support of the whole community. Jim Lawson was served as the chairman of the strategy committee. Now that was the committee which was responsible for carrying out the day to day details, the day to day activities of the workers and that committee, we ended up making most of the press statements and most of the press releases. So a lot of people started to call Jim Lawson the president, but he never was. He simply served as the chairman of the strategy committee, which was one of the few committees. We had a finance committee. We had speakers committee, and we had a publicity committee. So this was just one committee but most of the work was actually done, most of the strategy was actually carried out, formulated and carried out by this small committee.

Interviewer #1- What was your own special area of responsibility?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I sort of served on the, I really did a little bit of everything that was necessary to be done but by and large I was the, I guess you would say the inspirational speaker at many of the mass meetings and each day I would go by the union hall and support the men and sort of do something to boost their spirits and cheer them on and ordinarily I spoke at the mass meetings sort of as a pep speaker. I did some publicity and this was about the extent of my participation. I led many of the marches but everybody sort of pitched in and took turns. We really didn't have time to nail down specific responsibilities for many people and I just worked where I was needed.

Interviewer #1- How about with the young people?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I addressed them 3 or 4 times and here again I just made some pep talks. This is what they felt I was best for and this is what I did. Even though I did assist with fundraising, some of the negotiating sessions, especially since the strike was over. I was in most of these meetings. I spoke to the city councilman on several occasions. Both before COME was organized and after COME got organized.

Interviewer #1- Did you raise funds?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well through our church and through the community at large I sent out letters to friends who I knew both here in town and also out of town and got a very good response from them. Since I was the the only Presbyterian on the strategy of COME, I got in touch with our national body and we eventually got \$5,000 or more through our national church and then in our own congregation we pledged a \$100 a week as long as the strike lasted. We received over \$1500 with (?).

Interviewer #1- Did many churches do this?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Many of the churches made contributions. I don't know how systematic they were but I would suspect all of the Negro churches made at least 1 contribution and may have made weekly contributions. Some were very small, like \$2 or \$3 others were \$300 or \$400 and some were regular like ours. We gave systematically \$100 a week.

Interviewer #1- Did the union contribute anything financially?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I am sure the union did. In fact I doubt if we will ever know except perhaps in round figures of our way of guessing how much money the union actually gave. You see all of the money we received was turned over to the union and they in turn had all of the responsibility for interviewing the men and determining what bills were going to be paid and what size allotments the men would be given. We had no responsibility for writing on any checks. We simply turned our money over to the union and they in turn gave the men as far as they could give. See they had the machinery for this.

Interviewer #1- Was any money given to the men, actually?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, Yes. Money was given to the men to pay bills. The last 3 weeks of the strike, I think it was just before the death of Dr. King or just after the death of Dr. King we gave the men \$40 checks each for the last 3 weeks of the strike. Before that time, contribution had been on requisition and they were primarily given for medicine, for house notes for utility bills and for groceries that could not be purchased through the church there where they were. But the men had been looked after fairly well.

Interviewer #1- Okay. When COME was organized Feb. 24 and the Feb. 25 the black ministers called on the congregations to boycott the march and Monday, Feb. 26 Rev. Jackson addressed the mass meeting and this is when the Loeb compromise was considered. Can you tell us about that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, I don't. If you mention something as to what you in mind, I may could recall. I remember the mass meeting quite well. It was very well attended, as many of the mass meetings were. Dr. Jackson, I remember brought a very stern message. I don't remember, though, any mentioning of a compromise except that some people had

said that Mr. Loeb, I had simply heard this; I didn't have any conversations with any of the persons who were in on the conversations, that Mr. Loeb had indicated that he would announce in a day or so, perhaps the next day, I'm not sure, that the men would get union recognition to do (?). I think some kind of an increase in salary but the newspaper carried this, Loeb makes compromise or something to that effect. I wasn't reading the paper, so I didn't see that particular headline. And of course the mayor got on television very shortly, and denied all that had been said. Now this information was told to me by Rev. Lawson, he might have made mention of this on his tape, I'm not sure. I understand he knew persons who were in the meeting with Mr. Loeb when such a compromise was reached.

Male Interviewer #1- I understand this was a meeting that was kind of set up through Jauq (?) but you didn't attend that meeting.

Interviewer #1- I think we ought to mention that we have been joined by Dale Connor. The next day is the day of the march on city hall.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Let's see here... This was the march, when the hearing was to be had?

Male Interviewer #1- Was this the one before the macing march?

Interviewer #1- After the macing march.

Male Interviewer #1- That's right. We stopped at the macing march.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Uh, now we had several meetings with city hall and the first meeting, the one just prior to the macing took place; no this is the one where we are going to have a hearing. Yes, the hearing. That was a meeting called by Fred Davis. Is this the one you are talking about?

Male Interviewer #1- Feb 27 where they had a big crowd converging on city hall, about 700-800.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, this was the hearing meeting where Mr. Davis called for the meeting and when the time for the meeting to start, there were just a few people present and those of us who were there went up and testified and stated why we felt the strike should end and why the men should be permitted to go back and work for raises and so forth, why the union should be recognized. Mr. Davis indicated to us that he felt that enough of us had spoken and he really wanted to hear from the sanitation workers themselves. Well there were only a few present. In fact, they were at the union hall. He insisted that the men be brought there to tell their own story and speak their own peace and so they came. There were 7 or 800 people and of course the place was only large enough for 407 and Mr. Davis insisted when the men came that they leave; that is those who were standing around the wall and in the aisles. He said they had to leave and I insisted, I just got up from where I was sitting and told the men that they had been invited down there and they should remain and to come on back in the building, that we had been

out long enough. They were invited down and could stay until we could transact the business that we were invited to do there and then men stayed. So Mr. Davis indicated that he would have to adjourn the meeting unless the men left and so we told him the he could adjourn the meeting if he wanted to, which he did and then we started to have our own meeting and the meeting lasted for a number of hours and there were people who came and preached and others who sang. Then many people got hungry and those of us who had money put it together and went out and bought some bologna and ham, mustard and mayo and we made sandwiches because we were determined that we were not going to leave until the men were heard. So that afternoon, I suppose it must have been around 4 o'clock, Mr. Davis came back and reconvened the meeting and there was a compromise reached at this meeting, went into the little (?) and it was agreed that the proposal which they were going to suggest that we come back on tomorrow and all of these things would be presented to the council. Of course this didn't take place. Well, the meeting took place but this is when the macing was so actually this isn't the same meeting.

Interviewer #1- I think it was Feb. 22 that we are talking about now. Then that next meeting in the council chambers is the 27th.

Male Interviewer #1- This came after the story on the compromise was created and then Loeb said he didn't mean to make any compromise. Then there was a meeting on Tuesday. The end of that week was the songfest where the strikers at Mason Temple.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, I remember that now. I didn't attend this meeting but it was a group singing and Mr. (?) I think was in charge of the arrangements for that affair.

Male Interviewer #1- Rev. Lyke, you made a couple of speeches that drew an awful lot of commentary, now when were they?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, one was the day prior to the macing.

Male Interviewer #1- And what did you say that...

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I told the story of what the symbol, I don't really know what Nigeria must have some indications of what Memphis stands for and what it is famous for. The city seal, you have to have something to talk about when you have a meeting that could last all night. So this symbol brought to my mind immediately what I felt represented the cotton and the steamboat and I went on to tell the story about how the black people in America, and particularly in the South, had picked all of the cotton and now many of them driven from their farms, and many were still living on the farms but were stopped and didn't have wages to live on. That their daughters had stayed out of school to pick all of the cotton and never put a black girl ever be the queen of cotton. It just sounded ridiculous and ironic and I told this story and I took a long time to do it, because you have got to have something to amuse people and then I told the story about the steamboats, that it reminded me of Negro's being sold on the auction block here in Memphis and right down the Mississippi River and that this was no city of (?) that we were in fact, what we were doing, the fact that we were there was indicative that it was

not a city of (?) and this kind of talk. In fact, I remember having said that the building was not brick (?) down, I know that and I did say that perhaps we ought to redecorate the building. I didn't like the brown and I thought better colors were needed for the building.

Male Interviewer #1- A red carpet?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Another kind of carpet would perhaps be a little better and no one had consulted us about the color and that I felt that probably if it were redecorated that it would be a little more attractive. Some people said that this was suggestive language and perhaps it was.

Male Interviewer #1- What did they mean?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- They was suggesting that I might have been suggesting that we would deface the building in some kind of a way. And I also indicated that I didn't know how the people would relieve themselves since it was just a few restrooms in the building especially if we plan to stay all night and that it would behoove of the city fathers to come on back and listen to us because we could have a real catastrophe if all of us had to stay there all night. No telling what could happen. But this didn't really; it got the attention to the center. They came back and reopened the meeting and gave us the promises that we had gotten but by and large the city would not move any more than it is right now. But this is after the fact now, but I don't really think the city fathers are any more moved than they were prior to the assassination of Dr. King. In fact, I think things are getting worse instead of better. Although I see some signs of hope but I see more discouraging signs than I do encouraging signs.

Interviewer #1- The next city council meeting in which the 116 were arrested for the sit in at city hall, were you one of the ones arrested in this?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, I was arrested and in fact I had suggested that we do that prior to this occasion but many people felt that we should continue to march along and go step by step, sort of do them and take steps and I was frankly tired and wanted to go ahead and do something dramatic so we could perhaps bring the strike to an end but we did decide to remain in the (?) that day and there were 116 of us arrested that day after we refused to leave, after we had been warned. It was near 6 o'clock and we were arrested. Some kind of a compromise was reached where we could walk over to city hall and this kind of a thing. I had felt that we should have put the officers to work and they should have had to pick us and carry us out. I think it would have made them have to earn their money.

Interviewer #1-Who's decision was it that you wouldn't do that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I don't know. I think Jim Lawson and some of the rest of them decided that all of us would just walk over to the jail but I had no intention. I was being arrested and I wanted to be escorted by an officer but the decision prevailed that we would simply walk over and there would be 1 officer with 2 of us and we had simply sat in our seats, they would have had to have 2 officers. My point in wanting to do this was

not just to be disorderly but really to have to use the entire police force so that it would become a financial burden on the city and therefore would have done more, I felt, to bring pressure to them because the city is still much more in the red because of the officers they had to use but I trust that they should have had to use the whole police force to arrest us.

Interviewer #1- Did you suffer any abuse from the police?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I didn't received any abuse at all but now I was behind. I never said a lot about it. Maxine Smith and I were partners and we went out together and when we were arrested, her picture was taken first and then my picture was taken right after that. Her picture was taken before mine and she was sent off into the restroom behind me and I know that. She made a complaint about that and the commissioner of the police indicated that this was not so. But I know this was not true because she was right behind me and I didn't know that other ladies were not in this particular cell and of course when you recognize what it was, she was all the way into the place and there wasn't anything we could do about it. Now this was the only abuse that I saw take place. Everybody else was the way you would expect policemen to be.

Interviewer #1- Did the police use courtesy titles with Ms. Smith because she had complained that they had not.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I don't know if they did or not. They didn't use them with me. I indicated what my name was and they simply wrote down Ezekiel Bell on the little ticket. I said my name is Rev. Ezekiel Bell and I don't know whether it is customary for a policeman to use courtesy titles or titles for a minister, doctor, lawyer, and people like this. Frankly, it didn't bother me and I don't know what they used for the ladies when they wrote down on the charge that they give you.

Interviewer #1- Did he call you Mr. Bell?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- He called me Ezekiel. He didn't call me Mr. Bell. They didn't call me Rev. Bell even though I indicated my name was Rev. Bell.

Interviewer #1- Well what happened then after you were arrested?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I was prepared to spend the whole night in jail and so was my family before I was finally put in the cell. But about 10:30 or 10 o'clock that night, someone, the officer in charge, came and told us we could go and all of us just got what we had and went back to the church where the mass meeting was in progress. I remember having address the meeting that night after I got out.

Male Interviewer #1- This was about 10:30?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- 10 or 10:30. They were still there though; obviously they were waiting for us.

Male Interviewer #1- We had talked to Ms. Smith yesterday. She didn't get out till after 11.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, some people got out much later than the others. I carried to dinner with me 9 men. We had waked back from the jail and after we got out they were very hungry because we missed supper and there was no food so I carried the 9 men and I made the 10th person down to the Holland House where we had dinner. This perhaps doesn't have anything to do with it, but all of these were sanitation workers and I had enough money to buy them the best that the Holland House had and they all wanted hamburgers.

Male Interviewer #1- Oh really? The arrests came at what time? Do you remember that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- At about 6 o'clock.

Male Interviewer #1- They had already fed in the jail?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, they had already served supper because I remember asking when is supper going to be served. When is supper going to be served? Somebody told me that supper had already been served. That we missed supper.

Male Interviewer #1- Something went wrong with the strategy and planning. Did you ask him about the other speech? I was interested, you do a lot of fire, or at least there is a lot of controversy over the speech in which there was confrontation, and I don't remember who it was in which, maybe you were misquoted and maybe you weren't, in which you told the councilmen "you are all going to hell"

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, yes. This was at a subsequent meeting of the council when Mr. Donaldson and I had been attacked, verbally attacked, as I usually handle when I go to the council protesting center, by somebody on the council but I had attacked by several councilmen and I had indicated to them what I considered the seriousness of the (?) been calling them and imploring them to use their power to bring this strike to an end and I felt that as Christian gentlemen, I assumed that they had a peculiar responsibility because they were Christians and they did constitute our governing body in town. I pointed out to them that certainly the judgment of God was upon all of us if we didn't do these things and chances are we would end up in hell if we didn't do what the Lord wanted us to do.

Male Interviewer #1- So it was kind of a quote out of context then because that's all I ever saw was just that much of it. Can you tell us what went before that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I mean I indicated that people who didn't do right things were like rats and that I didn't like that. I didn't like big rats. I didn't like little rats. I didn't like white rats and I didn't like black rats. I just didn't like rats. I didn't say that they were rats as I was quoted in having said I think. I simply indicated I didn't like rats and I felt the city council that many of our actions were not above board. They certainly did not

be speak the kind of men and lady who should be running a city the size of Memphis, especially right after the (?).

Interviewer #1- You said that they had attacked you personally, what did they say, do you remember?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Uh, well I know Mr. Donaldson was the last person who said, Rev. Bell you are going to come down and here and threaten us and carry on like this we will just have to adjourn the meeting and I told him that I was using my best manners in trying to get their attention of men who were acting very stubborn I thought and that if it were insulting for me to say to them what I felt the issues were, then I would insult them as long as I live by trying to say to them what the truth was. All of them agreed with me. A great majority agreed with me and I just didn't feel that this many people could be wrong.

Interviewer #1- What reaction did you get from the council?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- They adjourned the meeting.

Interviewer #1- They adjourned it just as quick as you said that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- They adjourned the meeting when I insisted to Mr. Donaldson that I would not stop saying what I felt the truth to be and he moved that the meeting be adjourned and they adjourned the meeting and left and went on out as they always did. The same way they did the day when the macing took place. They simple adjourned and really they literally ran from the building and we under the protection of police officers that particular day. That first day after the macing, after the macing took place, but they adjourned the meeting and left. I mean they never wanted to hear what really had to be said in the way that I felt it should be said.

Interviewer #1- Do you think their were any members on the council that did understand what you were trying to say?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- What I really frankly feel that they all understood but I don't feel that any of them had the guts and backbone to do anything about it. No more than I feel that many of them right now have too much incentive to do what is right.

Interviewer #1- Do you think that the sanitation strike and what it has done has changed any of the council members?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I think a few of them have indicated from what they have said, one or two of them indicated they might have changed their actions, but by and large I don't think so. I think they are the same people with basically the same attitudes and basically in a conspiracy to punish the black community for even the little raise that they have given. They are doing this in several ways as anybody can see, as I with any kind of perception. For example, a community where I grew up, and this was the headline story this morning. This is a community, I don't know, it used to have 1500 homeowners out

there but it's a small community and the people have struggled. We moved in a community 25 years ago when my father came from Mississippi and we were very proud of our little home out there and all of us were. But the community has continue to deteriorate and now the morning paper stated, and I am going there when I leave here, that they have put a garbage dump just to the rear of our community, in walking distance from the school. And of course you already have a packinghouse at the other end of the county with cows, a slaughterhouse, cows all over this place at the other side of the community and with a dump at the backside of it, it just is really ridiculous. Of course the people on Macon Rd. in Raleigh had indicated that they did not want this dump out there and was closed and now they have brought it to a black community where they intend to leave it and of course this is unfair. I think it is another way of saying to the black community we will do what we choose to do when it comes to black people. Now we are going to see and the people of the community don't want a dump in their backyard. They don't want a dump in their community. And of course another thing is the charging of taxes for the sanitation workers. Now everybody knows that you don't need to charge \$2.50 a month or whatever they intended to charge for the little raise that was given to sanitations workers. Now this is a means of trying to get enough money to give everybody else a raise that needs one and I am not against raises for other people but I certainly don't feel the people who are already poverty stricken should be taxes anymore because they don't have anything to begin with. In fact, they should be giving them something in order to really have a decent income. Of course I could speak about what has taken place in education, about what has taken place in housing, about the fact that we had been told that plans were on the board for the Kansas St. area but it was recently revealed; in fact it was revealed after the last meeting of the city council, that only 3 weeks ago has a serious talk been done about doing something about the Kansas St. area. Only at the last meeting of the city council, did they condemn not backing down this vote somehow or another, they were already dilapidated, but these were already vacated. But the man who owns the property was there to ask for an extension of time for the houses and if it had not been for many of us there, and the council knew well why we were there too. Busloads of children and adults from the area, chances are they would have given this man additional time and yet the place has been a slum for many years.

Male Interviewer #1- Now is this Texas or Kansas?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- In the Kansas complex. But by and large, most of the houses that I am talking about are on South Main and on Texas St where the people have already moved out and where the homes should be demolished and the council obviously was not going to condemn these places.

Male Interviewer #1- Who is the property owner in there?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- The man who appeared the other day was a Mr. Katz. He appeared as the owner of many, many homes that were read for condemnation. But now even with the homes being condemned, the council voted 12 to 1 to condemn the property, he still has 10 days to work with the building authorities and he can make some commitments or to start doing certain work and he still can maintain those homes. You see the streets, there

never were sidewalks, and curbs and gutters in this particular neighborhood and yet they were required in most other neighborhoods. They never had any hot water in the area. It hadn't been too long that people have not had outhouses for a restroom. Two years ago a lady was burned to death (?) 6 months ago a baby suffocated and people are paying all kinds of rent for houses and a lady indicated before the council that it took her from the middle of January to the first of April to get her commode unstopped. That she had called and called and called, but that there wasn't anything she could do about it. So frankly, I don't feel that many changes have been made. I think many people in the community like yourself are concerned about wanting to do something but if you mean the city at large, I don't think the city at large is even equipped to start anything in terms of doing what needs to be done. In fact, I don't think the whole nation is prepared to move in a way towards saving it. And by saving it, I mean doing what needs to be done in order to survive. By that I think that our country needs a major operation, a major overhaul and it's a question or not as to whether we are strong enough to take on such an operation without collapsing. Frankly I feel that we are near the end of the road unless we are going to be able to rally and to rally by equipment. I put the church in the same category. When I say church, I mean the organized church, as we understand it now. White churches, many of the black churches and all of those who simply dance along to the tune of what America is singing, what the culture and society are singing. But not taking a radical, forthright stand on the issues that should be taken and faced squarely because we ought to do it whether America said do it or not because there is a mandate under those of us that feel the challenge of being a Christian. I just don't see that this is taking place from high enough levels of government I guess.

Interviewer #1- Lets get back to the sanitation strike. You said that you did not attend the Sunday songfest for strikers, 8 hours of gospel sing?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, I did not attend that.

Interviewer #1- What about the prayer vigil and singing at Mayor Loeb's house? When was it?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I don't remember the dates on that but it all came; I think it was prior to the mass meeting at city hall where we marched. There were not too many of us at that meeting that night and we simply went out there thinking again that this would encourage the mayor to go ahead and sit down and negotiate with me.

Interviewer #1- But the mayor wasn't at home?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well if he were there, he didn't come out and speak with us. We simply stayed on the sidewalk and called to him about an hour and a half but not more than 2 hours. It was cold and we came on back home. There were any number of police squad cars out there.

Interviewer #1- What about the policemen? You said there were out there.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- There were any number of policemen out there patrolling the area because they had heard that we were coming.

Interviewer #1- Were they around the house or were they in their cars?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- They were stationed, not around the house, but they were stationed on the street there in front of the house and all along that particular street in front of all of the houses around there.

Interviewer #1- Did they say anything to you?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No they didn't say anything. They used the radio call I guess to indicate back to the police station how many folk had come and all.

Interviewer #1- Did any of the neighbors come out?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, no.

Interviewer #1- About what time was this?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I guess it was 8:30 or 9.

Interviewer #1- How many of you were there?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- There were 2 carloads of us and I guess there must have been about 12 or 14 people. That's 2 carloads.

Interviewer #1- Do you remember any of the people?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I remember Mr. Crittendon had come in his truck and he decided to ride along with us and there were some other sanitation, at least one or two other sanitation workers.

Interviewer #1- Mr. Crittendon is a sanitation worker?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, no. He is a merchant in town. He has a grocery and a filling station.

Interviewer #1- But there were some sanitation workers?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, there were some few. I don't remember now, in fact I don't remember the names of them, but I remember all of the faces but I didn't make an effort to remember as many names as I might have.

Interviewer #1- What songs did you sing? Do you remember?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, we sang the freedom songs, the traditional freedom songs; We shall not be moved, we shall overcome, if you want your freedom, songs like this and this was a lot of fun for those of us who had been engaged in the struggle for freedom over the years have always found that simply (?) and all of us like to sing.

Interviewer #1- Did you go with the intention of staying all night?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No we had no intention of staying all night. We had simply wanted to begin dramatically illustrating to the mayor the fact that we were concerned about the flight of these men and that he had a responsibility to listen to their grievances.

Interviewer #1- Lets go on to March 11, Monday when Northside students walk out. Were you there at that time? It was reported that black ministers had the march.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, is that the day of the march? The students decided to have march? I was not there and in fact I knew nothing about the walk out. I had heard about it when I say I knew nothing about it, I mean that I was not in any strategy meeting and I attended 99% of the strategy meetings and I knew what was taken place when the others were being held. I just felt it was that important. In fact, I stayed away from many of the activities in my church but I did not know specifically, what was to take place. The students had had a meeting with their advisors. I think that Sunday, or the Sunday prior to that walkout; I don't know what they 11th was on, and they had decided that they were going to do this and all of the students in school were going to but somehow I think most of the students that walked out came from Northside but I did not know that they were going to do this. In fact, I spoke to the youngsters after they came down there. I did not encourage them. I did not discourage them. I simply said that if you are here for this then lets get on with it. I did march with them that evening.

Interviewer #1- Its not long after that that Roy Wilkins and Brad Ruston speak at the mass meeting. Were you instrumental in bringing them or who suggested that they be asked?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, I figured it was Jessie Turner who suggested Roy Wilkins and who made the contact because Jessie Turner is the President of the Memphis branch of the NAACP and Mr. Wilkins is the executive secretary of the national NAACP and it was he that suggested that we bring him and I don't know who suggested Brad Ruston, but it so happens I think that is why (?) made vocal contact. Maybe Jim Lawson made it. I didn't make either of the contacts but I do know that they both came on the same night and we had also indicated that we wanted to bring Dr. King as soon as we could get him and we would start with these men.

Interviewer #1- Who called Dr. King?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I am sure it was Jim Lawson because he used to do nonviolent workshops for them and we instructed him in the strategy committee meeting to talk with

Dr. King and to have him come as soon as Dr. King could find it possible and let him name the day so we could receive him whenever he came.

Interviewer #1- So Dr. King did come on March 18 and addressed the rally of 17,000; How long did he stay?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I think he left the next morning. I am fairly sure he did.

Interviewer #1- Did he agree to come back and lead a march then?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Dr. Abernathy suggested at the end of Dr. King's speech; He said I tell you what we ought to do, and at this point I was sitting on a platform right next to the pulpit there, and Dr. King had finished his speech and Dr. Abernathy was then introduced and he said, I tell you what we ought to do after all of this enthusiasm and before he could complete that, there was a little conflict between Dr. Abernathy and Dr. King and Dr. King suggested that if they wanted to march then he would come back on such and such a day and lead a march. That is when he agreed to come back and lead another march.

Interviewer #1- Then the day of the march and the big snowstorm... What was said about that?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, I don't know if it had even been predicted. Some of us who look back on it feel like it was just sort of a (?) maybe and those of us who were determined to not stay at home that day, just went on through the snow and went on and had coffee and joked around and decided what we would do next.

Interviewer #1- Which was what?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well to await word from Dr. King. See, he didn't even know that it had snowed here and of course he had called that morning. We called him and told him that we couldn't do any march in all this snow and he said well we would have to get together and see when we could have the next one. We simply sat around and talked.

Interviewer #1- Where was this? Where you went?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- We went to the (?) building. Most of our strategy meetings were held there and most of the mass meetings, well many of the mass meetings were held at Clayborn Temple, which is next door to the (?).

Interviewer #1- Who is the lone man who was determine to march and didn't march? Did you know him?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I don't know him. I think he was a white gentleman. I don't know who he was. I simply heard about him and I believed there was something said about it on the television and the newspapers carried pictures of him, which I didn't see.

Interviewer #1- Well, then Dr. King did come back on March 28 to lead the march and this was the march that ended in the riot.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I think it is unfair to say a riot. It was not really a riot. There was a march, you see, by a group of youngsters who just broke out a few windows, nothing major took place even though all of the national newspapers, because I went to Washington that same evening. You would think that we had been attacked and that half of the city of Memphis was jumping on the other half of the city and that property was being destroyed, and homes were being burned down, that the whole city was on fire, well this didn't take place. There were windows broken on Beale St and a number of people were beaten up and I think several hundred thousand dollars of damage was done. I think the newspapers said something like \$900,000 but by and large when you look at what's happened in some of the other cities, I think that the damage here was not very bad at all. Now this is what I happened that I observed; I had gone to Hamilton High School the morning before and each minister was to go to some of the high schools and ensure that the youngsters who were leaving school had escorts. My job was to go to Hamilton High School, which is the school closest to me, another minister and I, Rev. Roke, and we had addressed the students on the way to school and many of them had indicated to us that they would be putting down their books and they would be checking in school and be checking out. So many of them decided to do this. Now, at about 9:30, I heard over the radio, WLOK that police cars were all around the school and I immediately went back to the school because I had been assigned the responsibility of looking after the students at that school and there were at least 25 or 30 police cars and 45 police officers and it was impossible for me to get near the school. There was a large group of students on the way down Bellevue heading on down toward the Clayborn Temple. They walked all the way into town. Now they were not supposed to have done that. They were supposed to have gone to the Church of God in Christ on Greenwood and there a bus was going to pick them up. But because they had been so harassed by the police officers and nobody really knew how many were coming anyhow, they simply walked on into town. Word had gotten out that policemen had beaten up 2 or 3 students. They had tried to make them go back in the school. Word had gotten out that the young lady who was beaten had died and the other boy, they said, was in critical condition. The students were all upset to begin with and then there were other groups down to the church where we left since Dr. King was late getting there. He was usually late on most of the marches. And I think the students were keyed up for anything that might have taken place that day. I think the moral is that I think we need to be pleased with and glad that demonstration didn't break out on Main St. because then all of Main St would have been ruined and with all of the shoppers around, everything down there could have been looted, not by the people who were marching, but just by bystanders. Many people tend to pick up things as they are put forth. They don't intend to be stealing but if a television set is there and nobody is guarding it, a lot of folks would just pick it up and go and I think that it was a miracle that what little glass breakage took place on Beale St rather than in the Main downtown section otherwise we would have probably still been trying to...

Interviewer #1- Do you think that any of the rioting and looting was caused by the more militant black students?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I would suspect, I couldn't blame it on anybody. I blame it as much on the policemen. Really I blame on the stuffiness of the white (?). Now the things that set it off might have been just one youngster on a march for the first time. That could have been what set it off and it could have been some of the speeches received from some of the black militants whom I understand did address many of the youngsters that morning; the morning of the march. It didn't take much for them to gather those sticks that the flags were on, the banners that people were carrying, and break them.

Interviewer #1- Do you think that this was any kind of organized thing by the black militants?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Evidently not because if it had been organized, they certainly would have waited, I think, until they got to Main St. Somebody just started to break windows and everybody just started grabbing a stick. The kids did, they seem to be pretty well. My job was to bring up the rear of the line that day. I was a marshal and it didn't seem to have too much organization otherwise I think the damage would have been much greater than it was.

Interviewer #1- Had there been efforts made to include the black militants in the strategy meetings or in the...?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, they had come to some of the meetings.

Interviewer #1- Had they come invited or had they been invited to participate?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- They really hadn't been invited warmly; let me put it like that. See, I mentioned to you the organization, COME, was to try to include every group in town, black, and the blacks students certainly were an organization. But they had not been warmly welcomed into the group and this was known by the students themselves.

Interviewer #1- Did they participate in the meeting? Verbally?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- In some of the meetings they participated, although these usually were ignored as they still are by many in the community but ultimately their views will be heard I think.

Interviewer #1- Dr. King always used the black militants in his marches and his philosophy was to give them responsibility and a part and this was not done in this march. Do you think it would have made any difference if it had been done?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- It might have if we could really feel that they were primarily responsible for having broken up the march. They might have participated in it, I don't know. I saw some windows breaking but I couldn't identify the youngsters who were

breaking windows whether they were invaders or just students angry from what was taking place at Hamilton High School or some other school, I really don't know, or someone who has been beaten, harassed at some other time or some youngster who just saw somebody else breaking windows and just wanted to do the same thing. Everybody has a flag you see on a stick.

Interviewer #1- What did you do after the march broke up?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well we went back to the Clayborn Temple and I had told my wife, we had 2 of our sons with us, and we met in the minimum salary building.

Interviewer #1- Were you marching with your wife?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, they were up near the front behind the banner of our church. Our church had a banner in there in support of the sanitation workers and it was carried by elders at our church. All of our members were up there behind our sign. All of the members who came.

Interviewer #1- You obviously had no inclination as to anything was going to happen?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, many of the parents had left their little children near the back of the line and we would have done the same thing with our little boy, 7 and a half because it was going to be an orderly march. We didn't anticipate any violence at all, any looting or rioting or anything, or any kind of disturbance.

Interviewer #1- Well then, go ahead after...

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, we went back to the minimum salary building and many people were then told to go on into the church and the officers did throw gas bombs into the church and the minimum salary building was just filled with tear gas and with mace, I assume. You see I had to wrap my little boy up in my overcoat in order to bring him out of the building when we finally left and my wife carried him home in the car and I went on to a meeting at the Rivermont Hotel where Dr. King was living and we discussed some of the things that had taken place and then he wanted to know if he could get in touch with some of the young men who might have been participating in the rioting. And I had to catch a plane that same evening to go to Washington on a fundraising tour so I took off.

Interviewer #1- Who was in this meeting with Dr. King?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Many of the strategy members were there. Bill Smith was there, I am not sure Jim Lawson was there, he might have been. Mr. (?) was there. Reverend Patterson was there. I was there. Three of the union men were there; Mr. Lucy, Mr. Elkes, and one of the others who's name I don't recall right now. Dr. King was there and Dr. Abernathy was there. Mrs. Crenshaw was there. I suppose others would have come had they know where it was.

Interviewer #1- Had Dr. King asked for a meeting or did people just kind of find out.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, he wanted to meet with us right after that and we knew where he was living so that it was very easy for us to get in touch with him and find if anything had happened to him and to find out what we would do while he was here.

Interviewer #1- Had he talked to any of the black militants before this?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, in fact Dr. King's staff did not want to come here, I understand because they were busy trying to immobilize all of the folks they could for the poor folks march and they felt this was going to take away the momentum of the march, which they were planning, but he felt obliged to come here because of the nature of the strike. This was exactly why we were going to Washington, you see. But there had been no sending in of his whole staff to prepare the community for such a march, the training of marchers, the teachings of workshops on nonviolence. That had not been done. He simply assumed that we had things under control here and we thought we did because we just didn't think that anybody would break up the march as it was broken up.

Interviewer #1- Was he angry or upset after the march? How did he seem about what had happened?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I think he felt disappointed as all of us did, but he didn't ever appear to be angry. In fact, he is not a man given to much violence at all in conversation or in public life with all of the ridicule and criticism that he received from the press and other people. So he just wanted to know what had taken place and if certain folk had been included and who the culprits were that had broken up the march and if he could have a conversation with them. And I understand that he did have a conversation with these men.

Interviewer #1- Do you know who he had a conversation with?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- He said he had a conversation with the leaders of the black power students here, the black organizers, Cabbage and John Smith.

Interviewer #1- Do you know what went on in that meeting?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, I don't. You see this took place after I had gone to Washington but he did meet with them and it was after that that he made a press statement indicating that he would come back and lead another march to prove both to this community and to those had been saying that there would be no more peaceful demonstrations.

Interviewer #1- Then, did he send his staff back in? Were there any preparations before the next march?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, not the entire staff, but many on the staff had already come back and had begun to train marshals and there were to be 500 of them. They were to be given specific instructions on what to do, where to stand and so forth. The way of the march was going to be clearly marked out and so forth. They had already come in and begin to do this. He was to arrive on that Tuesday or Wednesday I believe.

Interviewer #1- April 3, when Dr. King came back and was staying his time at the Lorraine, why was he staying at the Lorraine? Was there any particular reason?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I don't know how his plans were made for where he would live but I would suspect that he is an advocate of using Negro businesses, you see, he couldn't hardly preach it unless he lived it himself so that he simply the things that he was talking about, you know.

Interviewer #1- Did you see him that day?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, in fact I had picked up a friend of mine from Atlanta to carry him to the same hotel and I had seen him. I believe they were on the way to Court to go down and fight the injunction that morning and we sort of passed each other on the way.

Interviewer #1- Did you speak to him?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- We might have in passing. It was a handshake kind of a thing. But now we had met with him in a group of ministers the day he first came in. That's right because he spent that night and the next morning he had met and addressed a group of ministers, and I shook hands with him that day. He remembered me from Huntsville because he spent the night in my home and Dr. Abernathy and I were having a little conversation and Dr. King came by and we sort of exchanged greeting and he wanted to know what kind of work I was doing here and so forth. In fact, he had offered me 2 or 3 jobs to work with him on his staff at one time, which I had refused, while I was working in Alabama.

Interviewer #1- Where were you when you first heard that Dr. King had been shot?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- I was coming from a meeting of churchmen from the Parkview Manor Hotel. I had been there to try to encourage them to make a financial contribution for the sanitation workers. We got back to the hotel, police cars were all around it and I switched on the radio and within a few seconds, I got the notice.

Interviewer #1- What did you think at that moment?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well, I just was hoping and praying that it wasn't serious and I carried my friend on back to the... I didn't think he would get in the Lorraine Hotel, which we were not able to. We didn't try hard. We just saw it surrounded by policemen and they were telling us to move on and we did. I carried him on back to the Peabody and we went

up to Teal Jones' room and he was scared to let us in because he felt that it was a conspiracy or something. But I told him who we were.

Interviewer #1- You went to Teal Jones' home?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- To his room. He was living in the Peabody. He had a room up there.

Interviewer #1- And he wouldn't let you come in the room.

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- He didn't until after we identified ourselves.

Interviewer #1- So you knocked and then he...

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Yes, and gave him my name and he knew that it was all right and I told him who was with me. So we went on in and the television was on and in just a few minutes they indicated that he had expired. I had gotten my friend a room there so I started on home then. They wanted many of us to come by the radio station to encourage folks to be calm and not to do any looting and violence or anything like that.

Interviewer #1- And you didn't go?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- No, I didn't go.

Interviewer #1- Why did you not go?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- Well I wanted to get home to see that my wife and children were all right. A lot of flashes were already coming on from many of the ministers who had been involved and I just didn't feel that I was needed. I had played the role of trying to do many of the things that other folks just couldn't do but anybody, anything that somebody else could do and was doing, I certainly didn't feel that any need for duplication of efforts around these lines. I think the message was getting across loud and clear that we certainly wanted our people to remain calm. This was the way Dr. King would have wanted it and so there really wasn't a whole lot more that I could have done along these lines. Other than that, I would have no objections to going. It's just that 15 or 20 ministers had already...flashes were coming on every few minutes you see and the same thing with the television station.

Interviewer #1- Did you think at this time that it was a conspiracy?

Rev. Ezekiel Bell- And I still do.