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Dennis Ross, 2014

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Stevion Young: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rose College, and Knowledge Quest, I want to thank you for participating – for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Stevion Young, and I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Today's date is July 2nd, 2014. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record? What's your name?

Dennis Ross: My name is Pastor Dennis R. Ross, Sr.

Stevion Young: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Dennis Ross: I was born in 1960.

Stevion Young: Where were you born and raised?

Dennis Ross: Born and raised right here in Memphis, Tennessee.

Stevion Young: What is your occupation?

Dennis Ross: My occupation is two-fold. I am, by vocational, I am the Pastor of the Evening Star Missionary Baptist Church –

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Right here at 1051 Mississippi Boulevard at the corner of **Jeannette**. And I also work for Cummings Diesel Recon, a global engine and turbo manufacturing business.

Stevion Young: Can you elaborate on your job at Evening Star?

Dennis Ross: My job at Evening Star is to communicate the love and the plan that Christ have for – and the purpose as well that Christ have for all of our lives, even right over here in South Memphis.

Stevion Young: Also about your job at Cummings, can you elaborate on what any specific things that you develop in your job?

Dennis Ross: Yeah. As a team leader, I am responsible for a team of seven plan who I daily have to make sure that they have –

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The proper tools and everything that they need to get their job done. And what we do is we remanufacture diesel engines and turbos and components. Now, as for the community involvement part of my job, I spend a lot of time doing community outreach. We have an excellent company that's a proud corporate sponsor, and we have schools like Treadwell where I go over once a week to tutor.

I go over during the TCAP time to proctor. And then we have Oliva Daycare Center, that we adopted that daycare center over in the area, and we also go over and read books to the infants. Also, we are a community partner with LeMoyne-Owen College. And so I'm over here a lot doing work at LeMoyne-Owen. And also, we're community partners with the Civil Rights Museum.

So comings is out there, and we're out there doing a lot of work in the community.

Stevion Young: Did you marry – well, are you married?

Dennis Ross: I am.

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Stevion Young: What is your spouse's name and occupation?

Dennis Ross: My spouse's name is Hazel Elizabeth Hicks Ross, and she is a system analyst at Federal Express.

Stevion Young: If you don't mind me asking, how many children have you had and what are their names?

Dennis Ross: I have three children. Their names are Christopher Ross, Dennis Ross, Jr., and Travis Ross.

Stevion Young: Okay. Let's talk a little about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Dennis Ross: Yeah. The neighborhood that I grew up in was actually sort of like South Memphis. I grew up in North Memphis. I grew up in a housing project, Oaks Manor Housing Project over in the Manassas High School area. So it was sort of similar; different locations, but same thing going on.

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Stevion Young: With your brother being an example and role model, if you will, for you, was he also a very good student? And what college did he attend if he did go to college?

Dennis Ross: Yes. He was a very good role model and a very good example. And he went to University of Memphis, graduated with honors and he had been on the police force since then. Now, he's a Lieutenant and also a member of our church, which I'm happy about that. So yes, he was an excellent role model and still is.

Stevion Young: What churches did you attend, and what are they like?

Dennis Ross: I started off in True Light Missionary Baptist Church for the first part of my years until I was about 20. And at the age of 20, I met my wife, Hazel, which brought me over in South Memphis in this area. And I became a member of her church. And so I did serve in ministry at that church for about 20 years until the age of 40. I was an deacon administrator.

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And then at the age of 40, I was called to pastor Evening Star where I am now. And so I've been affiliated with three churches, started off with True Light Baptist Church, Greater New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, and now Evening Star Missionary Baptist Church, Incorporated.

Stevion Young: With you being the pastor of the church, are there any remarks that you would like to give to those – to the youth that go to that church?

Dennis Ross: Yeah. I tell my youth and young adults as well that the easiest thing to do on this journey is learn how to accept the gift of Christ, which is – gift of God, which is Jesus Christ, and then start their faith journey off. Once you accept Jesus Christ, everything else is done as far as your destination. It's never about the destination from that point because your destination is _____. Now what happens is you start your journey. And I always tell them –

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That in your journey, you have to keep your life as balanced as possible so that as you do things and as you say things that you become involved in life, you are actually sowing seeds. And the law with seed time and harvest is that you will reap what you sow. And so it's always good to try to make sure that you're sowing as

many good seeds as possible so those days can come around. So your journey will have a lot of twists and turns in it. But if you stay close to God, stay connected to the vine, you will never be left to walk alone.

He'll always be alongside of you to help navigate you through your path. What your path is based upon the choices that we make. If we make good choices, we always have good consequences. When we make bad choices, then we can only expect bad consequences to follow.

Stevion Young: Can you share some fond memories of your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

Dennis Ross: Yeah. Like I said here, again, thanks to my mom –

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She kept us sort of kind of rooted in church. So my role models back then were deacons and preaches, you know what I'm saying? I grew up wanting to emulate being a deacon or want to emulate being a preacher because that's what I spent most of my time around, unlike most of the kids. Today, they have role models that are athletes or entertainers or things of that nature.

But growing up in the '60s, it's totally different than growing up in 2014. So the people that I was exposed to, the people that I was around the most were people that were involved in church. And so that's what influenced my life and kept me grounded in this area.

Stevion Young: Okay. Let's talk a little about the life in South Memphis. What does South Memphis mean to you?

Dennis Ross: South Memphis means opportunity for ministry, particularly in our area that we're in now over in the Soulsville area, which in sunder days was a very affluent part of our community.

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And as it began to go through the transformation and people began to exit out of this area and go to other places, still I like the resilient of the neighborhood, the people that are leftover here are very resilient and they're able to adapt to change. And so with that change come a lot of challenges, and with challenges come a lot of opportunity to do ministry. So we're in a fertile mission field

where we can do a lot of ministry. And when I say ministry, I'm talking about offering service and relief to people that need that.

Stevion Young: When you talk about ministry, what type of ministries is your church involved in?

Dennis Ross: Church is involved in several ministries. We have a Sunday school ministry that's good for to help educate our young people. We have a Bible study ministry. We have an outreach ministry, which consists of feeding the community quarterly.

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And we are – in conjunction with the South Memphis **Alone Zone**, we have a clothes closet now where the churches in this alone zone have come together and designated one area to make our clothes closet such that when people come to our various churches, we can always send them to our clothes closet, which is housed in **Seninary Church**.

Stevion Young: What was going on in South Memphis during the '60s and '70s?

Dennis Ross: A lot of change was going on in South Memphis during the '60s and '70s. The civil rights movement was really big, was really a big thing back in the early '60s, which was one of the reasons why Dr. King came to Memphis. But he came to Memphis to kind of help the sanitation workers with the "I am a Man" movement because they were not being treated fairly in terms of their hours or work and in terms of their pay, and they were being treated like sub-standard human beings.

So by them standing up –

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To the powers that be and having Dr. King come in and protest and march brought an acute awareness to the need to uplift our people and raise up, not only their standard of living, but raise up their consciousness too. So that's where the "I am a Man" came in and a sense of pride and everything began to cascade in that South Memphis community at that time. Along with that some riots and busing came in. And like I said, people started moving out of the neighborhoods, you know, and the neighborhood began to change.

But the neighborhood is – it's going through another transition now. The people that are here now have woke up, and when I say woke

up, woke up with a consciousness of our community is the sum and total of all of our efforts. And we can make it good or we can make it bad because that's what change is. Change is not something that you can put in a category. We can say change is good or change is bad. Change is the thing that you make good or you make bad by the effort that you put in.

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So as we began to come together as a community and come together as a people, we can be as good as the sum total of all our efforts for that individual point in time.

Stevion Young: With growing up during the civil rights movement, how did that affect the way you learned and saw the world?

Dennis Ross: Growing up in the civil rights movement made me want to know and learn more about my heritage as an African American and as a black man in Memphis, Tennessee and this county made me really want to know more about my roots and know about – more about where I came from. And so it made me conscious of equality. Here again, it raised my sense of being equal to any other ethnicity or any other race that was in our country at that time.

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Stevion Young: How was South Memphis different now than when you were growing up?

Dennis Ross: It's a little different in terms of the landscaping is different. Things are changing. The landscape has changed. It went from being very affluent and very nice, if you will, to kind of sort of kind of maybe rundown for lack of a better word. But at the same time now being raised back up. So it's been going through a couple of transformations, and now, it's on the upswing. And now, to be raised back up to where it was, I believe that South Memphis is making a change for the better.

And I think the change is us coming together with Crossroads; us coming together with LeMoyne-Owen College; us coming together with the South Memphis Alone Zone and looking at our assets and seeing what we have and seeing what's good about where we are and then shining the spotlight on that. So we're going through another transformation –

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Now, and it's a transformation for the better.

Stevion Young: I learned about an organization, if you will, called Asset-Based Community Development. Exactly how – and it's focusing on assets and building upon those assets to make the community better. Which assets do you think should be improved more to help the community improve?

Dennis Ross: I think those assets that we take for granted first of all are because when you look at asset management and when you look at the difference between assets and liabilities, when you start to focus in on that, it makes you more conscious of what you really have right there at your own accessibilities. Sometime, we think that we need something and we don't focus on what we already have. We start looking for what we think we need. But when we change our focus and look at what we actually have –

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And then use what we have to the fullest, then we can start making improvement without even trying to get help from the outside. Once we start helping ourselves, it's easier to get help from somebody else, from other sources if you will.

Stevion Young: What is the reputation of South Memphis and how has it changed?

Dennis Ross: Well, the reputation of South Memphis depends upon I guess where you are individually. Reputation is manmade, so the people that you hang around and the people that influence you sometimes will influence what the reputation is. So depending on what kind of people you hang around, the reputation for South Memphis where I see it from my vantage point is I look at South Memphis as a place here again as opportunity, a place for us to come together, a place for us to grow together and learn together because my mission is to raise the people's –

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Awareness about the hope and the abundant grace and the salvation that God has given us. And so our hope is based on all these things, so we focus our attention on the positive and accentuate what's positive. So the reputation, from my vantage point, is it's a positive place. It's a place that's fertile for improvement. That's my reputation; that's my vantage point.

Stevion Young: What are some places in South Memphis other than the churches like businesses that help make it a better place?

Dennis Ross: Well, we are in the process of trying to bring new businesses to South Memphis. Last year, we had a movement called South **Memph-Ex**. And we had some vacant buildings along the corridor of Mississippi and Walker that we kind of focused on that was vacant. And so we took the opportunity –

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To clean those up, fix those up, paint those up, and then show them off. And in that effort, a couple of those buildings have been occupied now. But we have a staple in the community, which is the Four-Way Grill that has been around for decades, and it's still on the corner of Mississippi and Walker, and it still shines as a beacon of light and a beacon of hope for this community. And we're in conjunction with LeMoyne-Owen College and their CDC, they got their own plans to bring in a supermarket in this area, a Whole Foods store in this area, and also to bring a bank in this area.

And the South Memphis Alone Zone is trying to get some funds to get the mall that used to be the metro mall on Crump Street and then convert that and try to make a movie theater and some other things for activities for our kids. So we're doing a lot of things to try to improve South Memphis.

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And one of the cornerstones is still standing bright, and that's the Four-Way Grill.

Stevion Young: I was involved in the South Memphis operation, and I saw that some businesses that they showed – that when they showed off the buildings that the buildings were really – they looked like they had been there and they could stand for decades and they look like they had been there for decades. Exactly how many – do you know of any businesses that were there and that should be considered as historical places in the South Memphis?

Dennis Ross: Yeah. Right there on the corner across from the Four-Way Grill, once upon a time, there was a movie theater. And I can't remember exactly what the name of the movie theater was. But we need things like a movie theater and more activities in our community –

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Right here for the young people that don't have transportation, cannot get out to the Wolf Chase Mall, they cannot get out to Cordova, any of those places. But they have the opportunity to walk to certain things and certain venues in their community, they can uplift them and make them better.

Stevion Young: What is the best thing about South Memphis?

Dennis Ross: The best thing about South Memphis is people. I think the best – the greatest asset that we have are ourselves, people. Yes.

Stevion Young: With new renovations in South Memphis like College Park, are you hopeful about the future of South Memphis?

Dennis Ross: I'm very hopeful about the future of South Memphis. Like I stated earlier, I can see South Memphis going through another transformation. And here again, like I stated, they're trying to bring in things like a neighborhood bank, things like a neighborhood supermarket and things like a neighborhood I think community center is on the rise. And so these are things that are right here, right in our neighborhood –

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Along with the churches that people can walk to now and just make the community better and safer.

Stevion Young: Do you have any fond memories about your life in South Memphis that you would like to share?

Dennis Ross: The fond memories that I have is just being a conduit, if you will, or an instrument to promote change, to change people's consciousness, to change their awareness and to point them toward a greater hope and a greater way of living. And that is by pointing them toward Jesus Christ. And when I have an opportunity to offer Christ to the people in this community and they accept Christ and they begin to change the way they think about the community and the way they think about the world, then I get great joy out of that.

Stevion Young: How would you compare to living in North Memphis than to living in South Memphis?

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Dennis Ross: I think where you reside is all in your state of mind. I think wherever you are, if you take pride in your surroundings, if you keep your property up, if you keep your grass cut, if you keep your house painted, if you do the things that will help keep your neighborhood beautified, I don't care where it is, a beautiful neighborhood is a beautiful neighborhood.

Stevion Young: Is there any advice that you would want to give to young people in South Memphis?

Dennis Ross: Yes. I want to tell all the young people in South Memphis about a better way. I want to tell them about trying to keep balance in their life. I want to tell them to make sure that they get all the education that they can and be all that they can be because life is what you make out of it. And if you prepare yourself for the future, the future is there for those who prepare themselves. And so if you want to be a part of the next movement or a part of the next wave –

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Of greatness in this area, then you must do the things that's applicable to doing that, and that is getting your education, staying rooted in family, staying rooted in Christ, and staying rooted in community and those things will help make us a better place. So I would say that to all the young people, have balance in your life. All work and no play is not good. All play and no work is good. All world and no Christ is not good. You've got to combine all those things together, and that will help make us be a better community and a better place to live, work, and play.

Stevion Young: Is there anything you would like to add on that we haven't covered already?

Dennis Ross: No, not really. I just like to say that I'm grateful and happy to have this opportunity to just be interviewed and to share my thoughts and share my experiences and share my hope for this community in which we live, work, and play in. Thank you for the opportunity.

Stevion Young: Well, we would like to thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project and we will hope you have a blessed day.

Dennis Ross: Thank you and same to you.

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