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## Rev. John W. Aldridge, Civil Rights Era Minister, 1968

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Download date	2026-03-07 17:37:08
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33798">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33798</a>

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David Yellin- This is David Yellin and this is May 26, 1948 and we are at our home 4241 Park Ave. and we are talking with reverend John W. Aldridge sometimes called Bill Aldridge and with me is Carolyn Yellin and Mrs. Wilson Veyer otherwise known as Gerry. (Tape Break)

John W. Aldridge- Alright my full name is John William Aldridge however occasionally I go by Bill Aldridge.

David Yellin- Well now that we are sort of comfortable an drinking our tea, more or less can we start to give us some background and introduction to yourself reverend Aldridge. Tell us a little bit about your background where you were born and the vital statistics.

John W. Aldridge- I am a Mississippian from Leland Mississippi educated in secondary school sin Tennessee and Mississippi. One year Southwestern, graduated the university of Mississippi. I was in the infantry as an officer for two years. Came back to Mississippi and started running a cotton plantation. After 4 years there I went into the ministry. I went to Columbia seminary Atlanta Georgia. University of Bozil, Switzerland. 3 years in a church in Baltimore Maryland.

David Yellin- In the Presbyterian Church.

John W. Aldridge- Right Presbyterian all the way. And that was a united Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. Then came back to the southern church and have been here in Memphis since September of 66.

David Yellin- Was Memphis your first church?

John W. Aldridge- No the church in Baltimore. Baltimore first but then here. Now assistant pastor at Idlewild church on Union Ave. here in the city.

David Yellin- What made you leave the cotton business? Or is that an irreverent question? What made you get into it first of all?

John W. Aldridge- Well I very briefly I think that I found out that by becoming active in the church after several years inactivity that I felt if the church were worth anything it were worth being number 1 sort of a total commitment type situation, sort of an all or nothing.

David Yellin- Are your parents church people or anywhere in your family?

John W. Aldridge- They have been active in the life of the church but I don't have any clergy in the family. They have been in Mississippi for a number of years.

Carolyn Yellin- You said you were in secondary schools in Tennessee was it?

John W. Aldridge- Columbia military Academy at Columbia.

Carolyn Yellin- Oh yes. And then from there back to the university of Mississippi.

John W. Aldridge- Well Southwestern, then university of Mississippi.

David Yellin- Now where is this located in Mississippi?

John W. Aldridge- Leeland, straight down highway 61, 150 miles south of Memphis.

Carolyn Yellin- When you were growing up there was Memphis what you thought of as the nearest large city or where you New Orleans oriented or?

John W. Aldridge- No Memphis is really my home city, I have always felt really close to this city and we would come to Memphis to do the shopping at the department stores down town rather than got o Jackson for instance. So I had known Memphis very well.

David Yellin- Just like in the novels they wrote about mid south and Memphis...

John W. Aldridge- Right the Delta Mississippi begins of the lobby of the hotel Peabody and ends in catfish roll alley in Vicksburg.

David Yellin- I see, so that did you seek coming back to Memphis when you joined the church here?

John W. Aldridge- No I didn't. I was very happy in the east, I had a great admiration for what the united Presbyterian church is doing and has been doing, they are the leaders in both the social consciousness of the church and in the ecumenical movement. However, I felt that I perhaps should come south again. Since I was raised here and knew many of the problems , as someone mentioned during all this controversy..

Carolyn Yellin- The troubles.

John W. Aldridge- Patriotism is what do you say Patriotism.....anyway from the other side of the border Patriotism is a...I can't think of the term I think (muffled) used it? Patriotism is a hollow thing from the other side of the border I believe that is the statement.

David Yellin- I see.

John W. Aldridge- But anyway I came down for two reasons, one is that I had been interested in teaching at a seminary level and I came down for the dual purpose of being an assistant minster at Idlewild and teaching in the field of theology at Memphis theological seminary and I have been doing both of those since I arrived.

David Yellin- Now how about your family? Your present family, your won family?

John W. Aldridge- I am married and I have 4 children.

David Yellin- What ages?

John W. Aldridge- From 15 down to 4, three girls and the boy is the smallest.

David Yellin- Well isn't that interesting, we are just the opposite.

Carolyn Yellin- We are two years ahead of you, we are 17 down to 6.

John W. Aldridge- I have a surprise coming in October.

David Yellin- You mean we are the first now to know?

John W. Aldridge- No, no, it is general knowledge now.

David Yellin- Oh fine then you will be 5 then. I think if we could our main purpose here is to get what we will euphemistically term the disorder and the troubles in Memphis.

Carolyn Yellin- In fact, it even interested me that the searching that everyone seems to have to do to find one word that will encompass what did happen here. The assassination doesn't do it, the strike doesn't do it, the troubles, the crisis.

John W. Aldridge- I think that Ed Stanfield in this from the Southern Regional Council did the best job and he said if you have to use one word it would have to be dignity.

Carolyn Yellin- To think the word was the search for dignity.

David Yellin- And then Horton picked it up recently. Who is Ed Stanfield by the way?

John W. Aldridge- I have met him and talked with him as a Presbyterian minister and I believe his official title is field representative for....

David Yellin- But he is a Presbyterian minister?

John W. Aldridge- That is my understanding.

David Yellin- He writes beautifully.

Carolyn Yellin- Is he southern?

John W. Aldridge- Yes and he has experience in the southern Presbyterian church, that is my understanding I haven't questioned him on his background, I haven't talked with him.

David Yellin- Well can you recall or from your own point of view and mind you we are not asking you very definitely to represent anybody but yourself, you are not a spokesmen for anybody this is a personal recollection. Do you recall your first awareness of the fact that he points relating to the strike which we are pin pointing February 12<sup>th</sup> the sanitation workers strike. But any awareness you had about the strike or before the strike and so on?

John W. Aldridge- On the morning of Sunday February the 18<sup>th</sup> I had a heated discussion with some members at Idlewild concerning the strike.

Carolyn Yellin- It had been under way 6 days then.

John W. Aldridge- Right. I actually got into it I believe not so much being pro-union or pro-strikers but from the standpoint of being anti-southern way of life that was attempting to counteract this movement in the city. I believe that is the way I looked at it.

David Yellin- So it was in a way a reaction to the reaction of...

John W. Aldridge- I didn't know a great deal about the strike at that moment but what I heard from the general southern white philosophy, in other words what was expressed through that made me realize there was something here that needed to be looked at.

Carolyn Yellin- What sort of thing?

John W. Aldridge- Well I remember getting a little perturbed in that conversation with these gentleman and this lady. I said, mayor Lobe is holding a batch to this city. And that was on the Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup> but I felt that this was very early and I had not looked into the situation in real depth but I thought that one of the biggest problems was the southern reaction against organized labor. That really became a problem as you so well now.

David Yellin- Can you pin point what was said on the side that made you?

John W. Aldridge- I am sorry I just cannot remember all of that conversation. I just think there was an anti-union, anti-black sort of coming out of these people.

Carolyn Yellin- Was there any sense...

John W. Aldridge- I know Pro-Lobe it was just so much pro-Lobe against these... I recall now, I recall exactly it is Luther. The only thing that Martin Luther really did wrong was when he wrote his tract against he robbing murdering peasants. And to me the southern white man during this period was just saying the same thing against the murdering, robbing, union people that have come into our city and tried to destroy our fine city.

David Yellin- There way of life?

John W. Aldridge- Right, outside agitators and so forth.

David Yellin- They equated the union with all of these things that they equated with people who were against their way of life.

John W. Aldridge- Right, and their whole-hearted endorsement of the mayor.

David Yellin- Who was defending their way of life.

John W. Aldridge- Let me just go back just awhile. (muffled) of July the 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> of last summer I arrived back in town from my vacation, I had been at union theological seminary as visiting scholar. I ride back in town back at 7:30.

David Yellin- Excuse me was that Union Theological at Richmond or in New York?

John W. Aldridge- This is New York I am sorry. And I arrived back at approximately 7:30 that night and I started seeing really what was going to take place in Memphis, not times, but right at that moment. I preached for 6 weeks, Dr. Jones was gone and I preached for 6 weeks and I....if you go back through my sermons you will see that I am trying to lay out to the church the fact is of it that the white church must repent and I think it is as simple (muffled). Also at the last I began to speak of what I called the new reality which is biblically known as the new creation which is equated at times with the Kingdom of God. There is a real possibility in this city with the election coming up to really make a step forward.

David Yellin- Do you have copies of those?

John W. Aldridge- Well no not exactly they are just all sort of notes. This is one of the problems I have in all of my, everything I have done has been so rushed since that time I only have notes everywhere on it. Alright, now I started talking about the election and the possibility of that election. On the night of October the 5<sup>th</sup> aft eth first election I told several of my friends because we were mad because we saw what was going to happen. I said that Memphis doesn't give a damn about their neighbor and just laid it out,. I also spoke at half and half coffee house on the night of, well immediately after that election and I mean in the next few weeks and that was a topic of my talk.

David Yellin- Now the signs that you saw were Lobe winning?

John W. Aldridge- Well I don't want to say specifically Lobe because I think that Lobe reflects the southern white majority and it s thinking. It's whole motto is be proud again showed the direction this city was going to take. And there was no, and IO think that anyone that had lived here and felt the pulse and could see what was happening realized what was going to happen in this city. Now the actual circumstances and the way it came about and the death of Dr. King nobody would have ever seen this. But the thing is that Memphis did not have a mayor (muffled) , or an administration that showed the underprivileged, the black man, those in the poverty area that they had someone up there that was for them and to see Lindsay somehow keeps the lid on New York. Memphis is a very easy city to get to know, the power structure, how to work in it, how to make decisions. You go to a city like Baltimore, New York, how are you really going to do anything there. There is a such a complicated ward, political, every thing of the entire power structure is so complicated where do you know the key to unlock that, it is almost impossible. Memphis is a very easy city to change. If they had the will, but the problem is during that election is anyone could see that Memphis did not have the will to change.

David Yellin- By Memphis you mean the entire population?

John W. Aldridge- Well that, the population who elected and who voted in the administration and controls the power structure of Memphis.

Carolyn Yellin- Would you think it was an apathy or an active, an active decision not to do anything, a negative thing.

John W. Aldridge- I think that after that near riot and this is a personal observation that the riot was as much the fear of the white as it was, this was back on July 27<sup>th</sup> of last year. It was as much the fear of the white as it was anything that the negro was going to do.

Carolyn Yellin- You mean the white man's fear of?

John W. Aldridge- Right, and it was that fear that became so manifest in the voting, October the 5<sup>th</sup> primary and November, whatever day it was the second....

David Yellin- Now I want to be clear you mean the fear of the white, the fear of the white against what he was going to do, or?

John W. Aldridge- The general white man and this of course is my impression in Memphis Tennessee, had gone along with advancement about as far as he was ready to go. He had put up with all of the civil rights laws, he had done very much. Now once this near riot came it was almost a half fear and half hope for reckoning you see I think. And a lot of the white population the older people just running scared. They wanted to get a mind back in there of the caliber of mayor Lobe who ran an economy platform, status quo, be proud, and that is just my opinion.

David Yellin- They wanted this assurance this brick wall that they needed.

John W. Aldridge- Alright you see from the negro side, Lobe was the perfect man because he represented Pharaoh. But from the white side Lobe only reflects the thinking of the persons who elected him. And to this I am not trying to say anything personally about mayor Lobe...

Carolyn Yellin- Speaking of Lobe as a symbol.

John W. Aldridge- Right. Lobe as a symbol.

Carolyn Yellin- When you say for the negro he was a perfect, they could so easily see that he represented Pharaoh.

John W. Aldridge- Right, well when the strike began at that time.

David Yellin- I think reverend Aldridge to represent your point of view and to clarify that when you say Lobe as a symbol, he did not purposely seek to make himself a symbol, Lobe was Lobe and because he was he became that symbol so that he would....

John W. Aldridge- Yes let me reiterate this, this is nothing personally against him anything in this way, He has tremendous attributes and integrity and honesty.

David Yellin- Because other wise he would be a demagogue if purposely set out to be this, but this is what he is.

Carolyn Yellin- May I just ask one other question. Speaking of the election, what about Ingram? Do you feel that Ingram would have been a different kind of symbol or let's go even further back before the primary, the other candidates running including A.W. Willis the negro candidate.

John W. Aldridge- Now these are just observations, A.W. Willis from my understanding did not have the support of the negro. Ingram about I am not pro-Ingram in any form or fashion however it is my understanding that the way he did business he would have probably have kept this thing from coming to head because he had a way of promising everyone everything and to keep the situation from you know really just coming up to a boil and I don't know if this situation would have happened under him but hat is not any...

Carolyn Yellin- It was a very steadfastness of Henry Lobe.

John W. Aldridge- Right, the problem and this is stepping up, the problem as it occurred is that both the union as I see it made a mistake. I felt hat they sent a man, sent Champa down here thinking they would bully a small town and a hick town from their standpoint. They (muffled) and they didn't understand Henry Lobe at all whereas Henry Lobe misplayed the game by not sending out his assistants and letting them reach the point of no return, Lobe would have had in his pocket certain alternatives that he could have then brought in and solved the situation.

David Yellin- So he himself did act small town.

John W. Aldridge- Right, to me it was a political mistake for him to get on the firing line so early. The union didn't send their president down until later. So why should the mayor get into the situation?

Carolyn Yellin- Good point.

David Yellin- That is kind of a sophisticated relationship however that now I think Memphis might learn from. But ok so that your first entrance into this arena was inadvertently, it was obleek. You were concerned about the people in your congregation and their reaction to it.

Carolyn Yellin- And you did have forebodings before...

John W. Aldridge- Right.

Carolyn Yellin- You had forebodings from the moment of your return in other words, knowing Memphis well and seeing the situation.

John W. Aldridge- Right I could see, in fact, that I was kidding a couple times but I was going to leave on my vacation on June the 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year because I didn't want to see Memphis burn.

David Yellin- When did you say that?

John W. Aldridge- That was way back, last October or November, just to my wife and some other friends, I would not say that in public.

David Yellin- Well then obviously but let's state the obvious, what was the reaction of your congregation to your sermons, to your point of view.

John W. Aldridge- Well see I was not preaching that much at this time.

David Yellin- Oh you had preached in July?

John W. Aldridge- I had preached in the last Sunday in July through labor day.

David Yellin- What was the reaction there?

John W. Aldridge- There was a great deal of support from many people but many of the old people said I don't want to go hear him preach because he is preaching political sermons. Some people will say I go to church to get comfort and he doesn't give you any comfort, I would say it would be false comfort to try to say the situation alright when you could see that it wasn't.

David Yellin- Otherwise you were being listened to?

John W. Aldridge- Right.

David Yellin- Which is some comfort to you.

John W. Aldridge- Good crowds there incidentally, as far as the month of August I thought that there were tremendous crowds.

David Yellin- Now unless you can discover again anything let's kind of skip back to the February 18<sup>th</sup> so that following your discussion with your group of several men and a women about your observation of what was happening then what was next?

John W. Aldridge- The afternoon of February the 18<sup>th</sup> there was a long (muffled) meeting sponsored by the downtown minister's association asking ACTS the association of Christian training and service, to be the resource person, the reverend William Jones who lives here in the city is the executive director of that. Gerald Moore, our city planner, excuse me the present mayor Lobe's executive assistant. Whatever his official title is the overall press of that because ACTS has about ten different denominations. Anyway the downtown minister's association had a meeting at Idlewild and exploratory conference.

David Yellin- Was this all white?

John W. Aldridge- Yes, excuse me no it wasn't. It asked 22 different denominations over a hundred persons to be present. I am not sure of the actual attendance statistics at this moment but it was very well attendee. These were to be decision makers in order that somehow the churches of this city could get together some

body, a structural body to be able to work together and coordinate and collaborate and communicate on effective ministry to metropolitan Memphis. In other words to try and get some form and semblance of order as the different churches tried to do different projects.

David Yellin- So was this a result of the strike?

John W. Aldridge- No this has been a long time planning.

David Yellin- Long time planning.

John W. Aldridge- This just shows one of the problems is that from the churches viewpoint there was no structural base in Memphis Tennessee. But the reason that I brought this up was because Jim Lawson and several of the other key negro leaders were there and I talked to them that afternoon. Alright so I got the better informed on the situation.

Carolyn Yellin- Had you ever met them before?

John W. Aldridge- Yes. I had known quite a few of them, Henry Starks is a student at Memphis theological seminary, I have known Jim Lawson ever since I arrived and several of the others I had, through this downtown minister's association I had met a lot of them.

David Yellin- Are they members of the downtown minister's association or where they invited to this organization.

John W. Aldridge- Some of them are, for instance Jim Lawson is not because his church is not really what is considered the downtown area. Reverend William Smith of college chapel CME church is a member of the downtown minister's association and the reverend Henry Starks is a member of that. It is just....but after talking to them and being able to see the situation somewhat better, on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> of February Taylor Blair who is in labor, a labor man with the electrical union but also a member of the Christian relations committee of Memphis presbytery of which I am chairman called me. Now Taylor Blair had been sitting in on the talks that were sponsored by the Memphis minister's association. The mediating talks that took place the night of the 18<sup>th</sup> at St. Mary's cathedral. Rabbi Wax was then in charge, Rabbi Wax had to lead town and Dean Demmick took over the moderatorship of this. And they moved to the first Methodist church and these went if I am not mistaken up through Thursday the 21<sup>st</sup>. Now Taylor Blair called me and said those talks were about to break down, was there anything the Christian relations committee of Memphis presbytery could do in this situation.

Carolyn Yellin- Did he report why they were going to break down, did he report what the sticking point was?

John W. Aldridge- Yes, and I have to go back. I knew on the 18<sup>th</sup> and I had forgotten to say this was that the polarization was talking place.

David Yellin- Between who?

John W. Aldridge- Between white and black.

David Yellin- Ministers?

John W. Aldridge- No.

David Yellin- But white and black people?

John W. Aldridge- Right, now that I knew on the 18<sup>th</sup> and that was the first thing I knew and I was very disturbed about this, Alright now, Taylor Blair calls me and he says the mayor says I cannot do business with the labor union. All of my mail says we support you 100%, Taylor Blair says, what can we do, I said we can call an emergency meeting of the Christians relations committee of the Memphis presbytery. So we call that meeting for the night of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday the 20<sup>th</sup>. And we sent out, I mean we made up a letter that has become very controversial in the southern presbytery circle. To the mayor, stating that we felt that this were not only a legal dispute but rather one of human dignity, we had those words in there.

David Yellin- This was the?

John W. Aldridge- This was the letter to the mayor that we adopted on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, the Christian Relations Committee of Memphis Presbytery. Alright, secondly, we said that we feel that all citizens of Memphis not only have an obligation from the city but an obligation to the employees of the city. If they are poor, we feel that the city should see that the employees have a proper grievance procedure, have a proper wage hours etc, all the things. Therefore, we recommend that the mayor recognize the union of the sanitation workers choice. That the mayor recognize the union of the sanitation workers choice. And we signed this letter with the persons who was present at that meeting not wanting to implicate the other two members who were not present at the meeting but this was done as an official letter form a body a church body, a committee of the Presbyterian church rather than individuals.

David Yellin- How many were there do you remember?

John W. Aldridge- There were only 6 members and 4 were there.

David Yellin- Do you have a copy of that letter?

John W. Aldridge- Yes.

David Yellin- Ok I will ask you all of that.

John W. Aldridge- Not with me, all this elsewhere. Alright for the record I signed that as the chairmen, Taylor Blair, an elder on the committee, Dr. Sam Morgan and James Simpson, who happened to be a member of the parkway gardens church which is Ezekiel Bell's church. So we sent this and remember this is on the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month.

Carolyn Yellin- And these did represent all of the southern Presbyterian churches?

John W. Aldridge- No this is very complicated and technical problem which will come up a little bit later. We were challenged and Presbyterian procedure as to whether we had erred in overstating our authority in writing a letter to the mayor. And the presbytery of Memphis ruled that perhaps we had but they also complimented us in our efforts in reconciling forces in this endeavor and this was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April the presbytery of Memphis finally met after all this situation was over. So the Christian Relations Committee was in a sense told as one old time minister said, you shouldn't have done it but we are glad you did.

David Yellin- And during that period between the time when the letter was sent and April 23<sup>rd</sup> when they finally said but we are glad you did the committee was in a sort of state of a limbo.

John W. Aldridge- Right, we got a great deal of criticism from various sources. Idlewild Presbyterian Church itself wrote an overture to the presbytery whether or not the Christian Relations Committee had overstepped its boundaries which put me in a rather precarious position as the assistant minister.

Carolyn Yellin- This was done by the...

John W. Aldridge- Session, which is the official governing body of the local church. Anyway let me go on with the presbytery, with what the Christian Relations Committee did for a moment and I will bring this through. We also in conjunction with the board of national ministries asked the board of national ministries for \$5,000 to be sent to COME for aid to the sanitation workers and this was sent.

David Yellin- Now this was your own initiative?

John W. Aldridge- It was a sort of a double initiative. We actually had a member of the board of national ministries present. We had been working on securing this \$5,000 prior to the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, however the official action was not taken until the afternoon following the death of Dr. King. Lawrence Bottoms, the reverend Lawrence Bottoms was here from the board of national ministries and we actually did this on a telephone conversation in order to get faster approval however officially we wrote a letter to the board of national ministries and they sent the money to COME. So the southern Presbyterian church gave \$5,000 to COME which is now being questioned before the general assembly. So this whole situation as far as the Presbyterian church is concerned, the southern Presbyterian church is concerned has raised some real questions. Alright now, when your man writes a story this is important to me. Would he please find out why our Christian Relations Committee letter that was written on the 20<sup>th</sup> was not mailed until the 21<sup>st</sup> appeared on the Precimeter on the afternoon of March the 1<sup>st</sup>. Who sent this letter to the Precimeter on the afternoon of March the 1<sup>st</sup>? In the mean time the catholic human relations council had met and sent a light letter to the mayor. And their letter was printed in, I believe the Precimeter before our letter was printed in the Precimeter. And someone has suggested that because there was so much kickback on the

Catholic human relations council that maybe our letter was sent around through certain channels to do this. Now that is just a question I would like to have answered someday. There is one other question I want answered while I'm on this. On passion Sunday I preached at Idlewild and I had in there the statement as quoted in the paper was that white Christians must like Jesus take the risk of alienation and rejection by their community to do what is necessary in this time in Memphis. Now passion Sunday is the Sunday before the death of Dr. King. Now my statement made the Tennessee edition and the midsouth edition of the commercial appeal but was left out of the final edition and I would just like to....some of these questions I have answered but I would just personally like to know those two. Those are two questions...

Carolyn Yellin- The Commercial Appeal.

John W. Aldridge- Yes the Commercial Appeal, on the day after Passion Sunday which would be, Passion Sunday would be the 31<sup>st</sup>, and so on April the 1<sup>st</sup> that appeared in the Tennessee edition and the midsouth edition of the Commercial Appeal but it did not appear in the labor edition.

Carolyn Yellin- Well think we might be able to do a little sleuthing on that.

John W. Aldridge- I am just interested in these things not so much that I have hired a private detective but these are two questions I would like to have answered. Now we have sort of been around the situation is you want to come back to specifics. On Monday the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, the first mass meeting was held and I was the only person there, the only white minister there and of course this does not include the reverend Malcolm Blackburn who is classified as a negro ministers since he belongs to the AME church. Well this was and the reason I bring this up is this is for future clarification, this is where Ed Standfield made on small error. I was there that night and was asked to read the scripture and I said a few words of support. This was at Clayborne Temple.

David Yellin- This is the night reverend Jackson gave the speech.

John W. Aldridge- Right, now the next night I was there and that was the night that I read, this was I believe the St. Paul's you will have to check the exact names, but St. Paul's Baptist church on McElmore.

David Yellin- That was a Tuesday night?

John W. Aldridge- Right, Tuesday night was the night that I read a letter of support which happened to be our aforementioned letter to mayor Lobe by the Christian Relations Committee.

David Yellin- And that Tuesday night was when they formed the strategy committee?

John W. Aldridge- I think so I am not sure of that you will have to check that out. And now (muffled) as being the only white person there that first night and goodness knows while I was there I came home and I was going to take my shoes off and relax and I saw the meeting in the paper and I just went down there. Of course there had been other persons such as Dick Moon that were already in the situation but I was the only one I was there. So Tuesday I started going to work to getting people go. We had some white ministers out on Tuesday. I got the word out to Southwestern and to some other people, Memphis theological seminary and by Wednesday night we had a good percentage of white persons represented at those meetings. And this continued throughout and after Wednesday night I did not feel that I had to be at every one because I felt like we had enough white persons there. But Monday night and Tuesday night the situation there was a real degree of black racism and I can understand this. After that we had enough white persons present plus white persons reading the scripture and praying and so forth and so on, to the extent that this black racism died down. Of course the white racism was at a normal paramount, in the white community. But interestingly enough I attended one of these mass meetings at Zeke Bell's church, I guess probably around the 8<sup>th</sup>, I guess it was a Friday night around the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. And someone said that my prayer was the most militant thing they had heard at the whole meeting, so you see the difference. But it was pretty tough there at one time.

David Yellin- So the 26<sup>th</sup> was the first mass meeting for COME which had been previously on Saturday before that had been formed.

John W. Aldridge- Right.

David Yellin- Obviously from the way you even phrase this you did this with a real sense of purpose and would you relate this to your feeling of foreboding about the city, that you must...

John W. Aldridge- No I would relate this more to the polarization, I just didn't want to see it take place, because you see what happened back in July and I sensed this back then and I sensed this again, oh somewhere around the 18<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> I am not sure but your whole, and this of course hurt me as a minister because it wasn't a Christian versus a non-Christian which it would be bad enough to draw your lines at that point like they did in the crusades but this was black against white and people were drawing sides, it didn't matter whether you were Christian. In other words black, excuse me from the white man's standpoint. White took precedent over Christian. And it is in my experience that some of the greatest Christians who ever lived are black men in Memphis Tennessee.

David Yellin- And that is confirmed by recent, by your experiences in recent weeks even more so?

John W. Aldridge- Some of those people are just tremendous you take a person like Jim Lawson is one of the finest men I have ever, Henry Starks all of this, all of this trouble when he could have said so many terrible words against whites and never

one time uttered one word against us. Just a man of true compassion, not ever a word against a white man or any hatred or anything else just truly a reconciling force within the negro community itself and with between whites.

David Yellin- Now Henry Starks was important because he was the real voted leader of COME.

John W. Aldridge- The interdenominational minister's alliance which is not COME itself. COME is Jim Lawson as the...

David Yellin- Head of the steering committee, yes.

John W. Aldridge- Right, and COME include the entire black community and finally they even had to bring in the black militants as you know after the first ill-fated march of Dr. King.

David Yellin- Well now I guess can we because this seems to be working so well as far as your recollection is concerned chronologically.

Carolyn Yellin- May I before you go on ask one more question about this mass meeting, were there union people there, where there any white, there were no white union people there?

John W. Aldridge- Yes excuse me Jerry Worth was there, and you know his statement that it is odd he has preached in a lot of churches but all of them are black. And during these meetings incidentally and I think this is really a combination of the white churches. The negroes had come to the white man, the white church, into the white power structure, time and time again and they didn't get anything and all of a sudden they knew force was on the scene that is ready to help them. And this is labor and how can we condemn organized labor when they have said we are going to help you, because the white has never really said that. He has said we will give you what we have to, to keep you happy.

David Yellin- Now you said that after Monday night, the meeting and then you started Tuesday to appeal or collect or white ministers to do what?

John W. Aldridge- To go to these meetings.

David Yellin- To go to the COME meetings.

John W. Aldridge- Not only that just white people, we got Southwestern people and ministers and others.

David Yellin- They were holding nightly meetings?

John W. Aldridge- Nightly mass meetings yes.

David Yellin- This was COME?

Carolyn Yellin- In various negro churches?

John W. Aldridge- Actually it was under the ministers, under the guide of ministers which is the interdenominational minister's association which is in conjunction with COME.

David Yellin- No I maybe anticipating but there was no effort at this time, and you made no effort at this time to appeal to the white minister's association to join with?

John W. Aldridge- That was it on Monday March the 4<sup>th</sup> I did and I was going to get to that in just a minute. Let me make a couple observations here.

David Yellin- Sure.

John W. Aldridge- One of the problems that the negro movement had, was that they didn't have any type of organizational structure, just as there was no super structure or structural base within the churches of this city to really be able to make some positive response, the negros had to rely on mass meetings which have a certain really charismatic effect but still you can do it better on a black organization or something of this nature. And they didn't have this and if they are ever really going to accomplish their purpose they have got to get a better organizational base than they have at this moment.

David Yellin- Would you just parenthetically would you say that might be related tot the fact that never was the negro community organized.

Carolyn Yellin- Unified?

John W. Aldridge- Unified but not organized. That is not enough because I talked to many negros and if you were really open with them then t hey would show you but they were pro-strike. Now the maid s out in east Memphis normally parrot or reflect what the white people want to hear. One old negro, he would be a perfect uncle tom and even told me this I don't know why that (muffled) treat us like he did, this had even gotten through to him. But anybody that would talk to him on a normal circumstances would say, well he would reflect back to them the type of thing he wanted them to do.

David Yellin- I don't know if we want to dwell on this again, but along the same line with mayor Lobe, somebody said that mayor Lobe was the unifying element with the negro community that is was not Martin Luther King and it was not even the death of Martin Luther King, it was the attitude.....

Carolyn Yellin- This is the Lobe as symbol and Pharoah, this is an interesting...

John W. Aldridge- You see throughout this there prayers and everything just beautiful the way they used this, they went back to this Egypt and this Pharoah business and it was great. And then old Ralph Jackson who was, I don't know his official position but he was self appointed money gatherer.

David Yellin- He was treasurer of the steering committee.

John W. Aldridge- Right and he would get up and he would say, now we are going to talk about Lobe a little while. And this is just great from that sense. And this is very unfortunate and as we said we don't want to bring the man into it but his symbol is really something.

David Yellin- Well this is so important to the story. Now I guess we left you at Wednesday February 28<sup>th</sup> I think and you have stopped going to the meetings. And you were getting towards the March 4<sup>th</sup> but....

John W. Aldridge- My mother was rather ill during this period and I went down to Mississippi on several weekends. And I managed to come back on that Sunday, now wait a minute. The 28<sup>th</sup>....(muffled) Sunday the 3<sup>rd</sup> and went to the singing that they had at Mason Temple a big singing from 4:00 in the afternoon until 11 at night. I didn't stay very long, I couldn't I had other obligations but I did drop by there. this is a side comment if the negro has knowledge it doesn't have the theology they need for modern movement. This is a sad thing but they don't have it. And they need to work on this if the church is going to be able to adequately respond. That is just a side observation. But for them to (muffled) Monday the 4<sup>th</sup> I had gone around to a couple of ministers who were in the social action committees and so forth of the Memphis ministers association that met on the 4<sup>th</sup>. But I had been around to see these ministers the previous week to try and see that some, excuse me that some motion would come forth from this group to make some positive response of the Memphis minister's association. However, and this is the sad thing that I found in the ministers throughout and they are some great individuals. Some white ministers stood as tall as any people ever will in this situation and I had the greatest admiration for them. But generally speaking this issue was too hot to handle. They had the Memphis minister's association because of the astute and wonderful leadership of Rabbi Wax had called together on the 18<sup>th</sup> the two opposing parties the city and the union for their talks. But evidently they had gotten alto of criticism and somebody said well we better not bring up this situation it was a little too hot to handle.

David Yellin- That is the previous February 18<sup>th</sup>.

John W. Aldridge- Previous February the 18<sup>th</sup> not we are up to the 4<sup>th</sup>. We went to the social (muffled) committee and the race relations committee and everybody and they were just about to adjourn and I got up and I have forgotten my exact words but anyway I told those men that Memphis was in the worst crisis it had been in since the yellow fever epidemic of the 1880's and here they were about to adjourn I told them I didn't know about them but I had made up my mind and I was for this negro movement and I just hoped that they would get up and make some time of motion. I was a little bit hot, I had been during this whole period I could speak rather frankly. I sat down and Jim Lawson got up and he in his very wonderful manner just laid it out that this movement might die,. Or even go, excuse me, the ministers might not be able to control this movement much longer and then it would be turned over to the black power persons and they needed some help. Well finally after all of this came the motion to request a meeting with the interdenominational

ministers. Alliance, the reverend Henry Starks' group in order that these two groups could get together and talk and see what response is taken place. Now this was on March the 4<sup>th</sup>, we met and I would also like to know why the delay in this meeting. I have heard two different reason. One is the negro ministers weren't particularly interested in meeting with the white ministers because they didn't want to just talk some more. You see the white ministers were good about talking about the situation and not acting. The negros said they didn't have time to do anything but act you know. On the other hand I have heard other rumors to the fact that they were so hot to handle that nobody really made the effort to get the white ministers you know to put it on the line to get this thing set up. But this joint meeting took place on April the 3<sup>rd</sup> the Wednesday before Dr. King's death.

David Yellin- And why the delay?

John W. Aldridge- Yes why the delay I don't know that? That afternoon Frank McRay district superintendent of the city part of the Methodist church made the motion after some talk, that we proceed to the mayor's office and remember that the two different alliances, ministerial alliances are meeting together. Proceed to the mayor's office and I seconded that motion. In order to ask the mayor to get this thing settled because there was complete breakdown between white and black community. Well sadly to say the ministers, the white ministers talked themselves out of it going that afternoon, but we did vote to go Friday morning.

Carolyn Yellin- That was April 3?

John W. Aldridge- April 3<sup>rd</sup> he day before...

Carolyn Yellin- They talked themselves out...

John W. Aldridge- Well they talked themselves out of going that afternoon with some beautiful flowery speeches, I am all for this but and so forth and so on. I don't think it is appropriate at this moment and all of that. But this is the way we had to work with the white ministers all the time. And very interestingly enough Rabbi Wax got up and truly a tremendous person said we have two issues before us gentlemen at this meeting. One is how can we, immediate situation and how can we have long range better communication between the races and everything. And he said I don't know the answer which one do you want to deal on. Someone got up and said the long range is much easier than getting white ministers involved in a specific situation. Ralph H. Jackson got up and boy he let them have it, He said, I got 1300 sanitation workers and their families and I am responsible for feeding you got me over here to talk? Mr. Chairmen I am going home. Zeke Bell got up and said Mr. Chairmen that I make a motion that we have a collection and then adjourn. Well it was after that, that Frank McRay made his motion. But anyway that got the specifics of the reasons that we needed to be there and it was wonderful that we didn't adjourn, rabbi Wax handled the thing very beautifully.

Gerry Veyer- He had decided to go to the mayor's office though before the death of Dr. King.

John W. Aldridge- Yes right.

Gerry Veyer- You were already going to go that Friday morning anyway?

John W. Aldridge- Yes.

David Yellin- yes. Now we have left March 4<sup>th</sup> however.

John W. Aldridge- Alright March all this time in there is just a lot going on,. I continued to be interested in the....I went to some of the mass meetings and tried to work with the Presbyterians trying to get them to understand a part of the situation. I got some real definite committee of Presbyterians and we got a groups of Presbyterians together trying to get some things done at the same time all during this period there was attempts to get debates and forums and so forth and so on.

David Yellin- Can I ask...

John W. Aldridge- Alright now, what day did save our city get organized?

Carolyn Yellin- You would know that Gerry?

John W. Aldridge- I was there but I cannot remember that date?

Gerry Veyer- We went tot eh mayors office this group of women on a Thursday and it was the Sunday after that Thursday and I have no idea the date.

Carolyn Yellin- It was toward he end of March I believe or mid march.

David Yellin- Can we just, if I may because I think maybe if you can Bill and this is going to be difficult but just if you can if we want to give you a little help here and there and kind of prod your mind. What did you personally run into here what were the objections to you, your friends your congregation and so on. At this point, I mean what is so difficult not what you think now but if you can recall then.

John W. Aldridge- Alright well now you see the thing is I was busy almost every night I went to some form of meeting for Save our City and I was with David Dowdy and Dick Gilliam one night in this strategy session and Presbyterians meeting almost every night. I was somewhere trying to do something trying to get the situation (muffled). Now specific time is do not remember, I do remember the 13<sup>th</sup> is when the session at Idlewild was made there.

Carolyn Yellin- March 13<sup>th</sup>?

John W. Aldridge- Excuse me March the 13<sup>th</sup> yes, the session at Idlewild met and had their overture and that is when I challenged them. I said I don't know if I have been right in this situation or not but at least I have responded to it and all you cared about was to see whether or not I was right or wrong and I also told them I didn't do this as an individual but as the chairman of the Christian relations committee. Anyway there was a lot of heat going around and I felt challenged at that time and I

have a note that I made when in trouble just attack and that is what I did all this time I just quit putting up with a lot of foolishness.

Carolyn Yellin- Were you aware of polarization within your own congregation, the Idlewild congregation and in other Presbyterian circles?

John W. Aldridge- Except for a few ministers and they slowly became to cut off but there was just tremendous polarization but I had some support let me say that. The problem was that the support was on the level that it was not of the governing body and so forth.

Gerry Veyer- What was the relationship between you and Dr. Jones at this point, how did he feel about what you were doing?

John W. Aldridge- Well Dr. Jones is very kind and gracious in letting me do what I felt needed to be done and also that I must confess that I didn't do....I would go to church meetings and I would leave and I had something to do almost every night but I would have to miss some committee meetings because I felt that this was more important however he did not agree with my position and a number of people there were very much pro-Lobe and they ran down to mayor Lobe and I have got some of their letters and everything support that they would send me copies. John William Aldridge does not represent the majority of people at Idlewild. I started to write them back but I am just glad I didn't. I almost wrote them back and said I most certainly never claimed to represent the majority people of Idlewild but I do represent the feeling of the general boards and agencies of the southern Presbyterian church. And during this period the southern Presbyterian church, and both some of the key figures and the board of national ministers came to the support of our committee and very tremendous...

David Yellin- Was there anything or were there anything that you happen to recall that stands out most vividly in relation to those who supported you and those who didn't that would be indicative of the climate of the times you can think of. Some little old lady that came up to you that had a (Muffled). There was an amazing set up of people that I had, there as some little old ladies that had a great admiration for me although I think that if they had understood maybe the situation a little bit more they would have wondered maybe what I was doing. But anyway the fact that I was out there trying to do something it was amazing to them. The main problem that I had was not from the little old ladies but rather from the persons who it would most actively involved in the community of affairs in Memphis Tennessee.

David Yellin- Here to forth.

John W. Aldridge- Yeah.

David Yellin- Community affairs in what way?

Carolyn Yellin- The substantial citizens.

John W. Aldridge- Right.

David Yellin- Who always lent their names to the thing and how did they...

John W. Aldridge- Because they were the Lobe supporters you see the problem at Idlewild was this, that Idlewild people had been very interested in the city for a number of year sin their reputation both as a church and as individuals, it is well known the fact that the progress they make.

Carolyn Yellin- They are indeed substantial citizens.

John W. Aldridge- Right but they had enough of Mayor Ingram because they were getting the run around from him and he just wasn't to them an able administrator and they wanted a man that they could, from what I understand you can go to mayor lobe and he even says yes we will do it or no we won't and that is it you have his word and he is honest and...

David Yellin- Now their concern was it anything of a personal nature, or was it for the city? What was their concern, you said they were tired of mayor Ingram or they can get action from mayor Lobe.

John W. Aldridge- Well I had comments (muffled) that I had tore everything that Dr. Paul Jones had built up and that I was responsible, I got letters that I was one of the ones responsible. Dick Moon and myself and a few others you know we were responsible for many of the things that had happened in Memphis Tennessee the looting and the burning and all of this kind of stuff. Of course I was supporting this movement you see.

David Yellin- Was that the (muffled) actively supporting mayor Lobe or did he just stay out of it?

John W. Aldridge- Well now this is the problem I mentioned earlier about the tape business. I would just not prefer to go into al of this if I may I just think it will be better.

David Yellin- Well I am concerned, when I say concerned because your thrust about, you sent something awhile ago way back in the summer and so on, we are concerned essentially with the movement of people.

John W. Aldridge- Let me say this with Dr. Jones and myself. As essentially the problem was not what we wanted to accomplish it was in the way that we saw this. I see it as a crisis situation that the man's certain methods that I would normally never use nor had I ever contemplated using just as many of the ministers who walked down to the mayor's office on Friday the 5<sup>th</sup> of April never intended to do anything like that but yet they felt that was necessary at that moment. Now the crisis situation demands certain things that are not normally done. Dr. Jones does not see his situation in Memphis in the way that I see. I see it as a crisis since July the 27<sup>th</sup> of last year and my sermons and my what I have said indicate this. And

everything I have done, I think I started writing a little book I never finished to save a city from destruction.

David Yellin- And this would be true of the people of your congregation they didn't know what all this fuss was about?

John W. Aldridge- Right, now I tried to tell them.

Carolyn Yellin- Uncomprehending.

John W. Aldridge- Well they eventually (muffled) this sermon I preached on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March. Someone made the comment, a theologian who read it made the comment he said, not only did you tell them, but you told them you told them. I really did. Because that was my whole thing had been upon that since way back in July.

David Yellin- Well I think if we could this is a good spot to stop and take a little rest and maybe go out and get some air because we are at the end of the tape thank you.  
(Tape End)