Interview of Kilgore, Thomas Black Leadership in Los Angeles: Thomas Kilgore, Jr.
Interviewed by Robin D.G. Kelley

Oral History Research Center
University of California, Los Angeles

Contents

Permission to Use

Table of Contents

segregation - Move to New York to pastor Friendship Baptist Church -- Church work in Harlem -- Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

- **TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (May 24, 1986)**

  The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New York in the forties and fifties -- Comparison of church congregations in the North and South -- Kilgore's family life in New York -- Attends Union Theological Seminary - Mentors at Union Theological Seminary - Relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the King family -- More on mentors at Union Theological Seminary -- Kilgore's view of the Bible -- Religious language in the pulpit and the seminary -- Fellow students at Union Theological Seminary -- More on thesis on Montgomery protest movement -- Conducts Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom - The Prayer Pilgrimage in comparison to other marches on Washington.

- **TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (June 19, 1986)**

  Role in the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom -- Labor and religious groups prove natural allies of the civil rights movement -- Kilgore's civil rights work in New York City -- 1963 March on Washington - Philosophy of nonviolence -- Fear of communists in the civil rights movement -- More on the March on Washington -- Reasons for coming to Los Angeles's Second Baptist Church -- Black leadership in Los Angeles -- Ethnic composition of the area around Second Baptist -- The Selma March --Kilgore and his family refuse to leave a segregated eating establishment -- Opposition to Kilgore's efforts to organize branches of the NAACP in the South.

- **TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (January 7, 1987)**

  Jack O'Dell leaves Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) because of his early communist connections -- The Poor People's Campaign - SCLC's role in Los Angeles -- Impact of King's assassination on Los Angeles -- Effect of King's assassination on Kilgore personally -- Kilgore becomes president of the American Baptist Convention -- Black caucus in the convention -- Black religious organizations -- James Forman's reparations proposal -- Establishment of the Fund of Renewal -- James H. Cone's theology of black power.

- **TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (February 3, 1987)**

  Aftermath of the Watts riots -- Kilgore's relationship with black militants -- Black militants use Second Baptist Church as forum - Second Baptist Church

gains reputation of being radical -- Clergy involved with Black Power movement -- Church projects in the local community - Church involvement in international missions - Work as president of the American Baptist Convention.

- **TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (February 3, 1987)**

  Traveling for the American Baptist Convention - Prominent members of American Baptist black caucus -- Kilgore's community involvement in the early 1970s -- Involvement with University of Southern California (USC) -- The Ebonic Support Group.

- **TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (February 16, 1987)**

  Second Baptist Church's ninetieth anniversary in 1975 -- Becomes involved in Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) -- Fall Forums at Second Baptist Church -- Second Baptist hosts Progressive Baptist National Convention -- Founding of the Gathering -- The Gathering pushes for restrictions on police use of handguns -- Other activities of the Gathering and its eventual decline -- Decline of the civil rights movement in the seventies - Change in ethnic composition of neighborhood around Second Baptist Church -- Future of the black colleges -- Work in the Congress of National Black Churches.

- **TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (February 16, 1987)**

  The Black Agenda participants and accomplishments -- Retirement from Second Baptist Church - Works on "Amen" television program -- Philosophy of life.

1. Transcript

1.1. Tape Number: I, Side One (May 7, 1986)

Kelley

Usually I take a chronological approach, you know, try to add any information. But, you know, it's difficult because of questions of themes that may be relevant to other things. What I wanted to do was to begin with your family background. And rather than say, "Where did your mother and father come from?" I want to find out how far can you trace your family roots exactly, I mean in the South?

Kilgore

In the tracing of family roots on my mother's side, I can go back only one generation beyond her, my grandmother. My grandmother, whom we all called Granny, was Ella Miles. In my community where I was born my maternal grandfather was the owner of the plantation on which Granny was the cook. She had three children by this plantation owner. I never knew him personally. But he did live in the community at the time that I was a boy.

Kelley

Did you know his name? [Vandy Langford]

Kilgore

That's as far back as I know. I've heard my grandmother talk about her mother, but I never knew her mother.

Kelley

And that's Woodruff, South Carolina?

Kilgore

Right. My grandmother was born about 1864, '65, just as the slavery period ended. On my father's side, I never knew my grandparents. All I know is that my grandfather was named George Kilgore, and my father's mother was named Martha Kilgore. I never knew either one of them. I cannot go back beyond those two generations.

Kelley

Both of your parents were born in Woodruff, South Carolina?

Kilgore

No, my mother [Eugenia Langston] was born in Woodruff. My father [Thomas Kilgore, Sr.] was born in Greenville, South Carolina, which is about thirty miles away.

Kelley

What did they do for a living?

Kilgore

My father was a painter, and in his early life, worked in a cotton mill. He met my mother when he came down from Greenville. A new cotton mill had been built in Woodruff. A cotton mill in those days was a place where two or three things went on: Cotton was ginned, separating the seeds from the cotton and baling it up. Then they processed those seeds and pressed oil out of them that was used by industry, and the pressed cake was edible. It was also used to feed stock-horses and cows. So, my father in his early life was a painter and a cotton mill worker.When he came to Woodruff sometime around the turn of the century, about 1901 or 1902, most likely 1901-we don't have any history on that-he met my mother. My mother was born there in Woodruff. He came in the spring of the year, and that fall she was supposed to have gone to Benedict College. She had finished all the grades offered in the little school in Woodruff. In those days, black colleges in the South had academies where they took students in at the sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade level. She met my father, who came there to work, and he liked her and they fell in love and were married. So she didn't go to college. She was married at seventeen and no longer helped her mother, who at that time had moved off of Vandy Langford's plantation, where she was a cook, into town, where she cooked for a Dr. Posey. By this time, my grandmother had married. That's where her name Miles came from.

Kelley

Now, when they moved to Woodruff, did they own some property or-?

Kilgore

No, no. My father never owned any property in Woodruff until several years before we were ready to leave there. Aunt Malissa [Woodruff], who was a sister to his mother, willed my sister [Malissa Kilgore Briley] her home and several acres of land. My sister was made trustee. That was the first property we owned. After my mother and father married and started a family, Papa then began farming. He started farming sometime around 1910, when my oldest brother [Waymon Kilgore] was about seven years old. For a few years, he was a tenant farmer on a farm owned by a white preacher, Reverend Brown. At that time on this farm were two houses, a larger house where the prime tenant lived and a smaller house where my family lived. I don't remember this because I was not born. The man that lived in the large house

was named Matthew Gist. One of my mother's sisters [Daisey Langston Gist] married one of his sons [Oscar Gist]. When Mr. Gist died, his family moved away. By this time, there were four or five children in my family, and we moved into this larger house, which is the first house I remember.With this arrangement, my father was not considered a tenant farmer, but rather a lease farmer. He leased the farmland from the white preacher and paid him what was called standard rent. The standard rent paid was for the 150 acres of land, the house and barns. He could raise anything he wanted on it, build new barns, raise his own stock, furnish his own supplies and everything else to improve the land. He paid this minister that owned the land five bales of cotton a year, which at that time amounted to about a thousand dollars a year, to rent this farm. The owner of the land paid the taxes. We kept up the place, built pastures, built barns, bought equipment, bought stock, had our own cows and hogs and chickens and everything. As the family grew, we also had new rooms built to the house. That's the house I remembered and lived in up until I was eleven years old. Then in 1924, farms went bad. My father moved off the farm, and by this time, my Aunt Malissa had passed and willed my sister the house that was in the little town, a much better house. We had been renting it out. After a couple of years, we sold out and moved to North Carolina.

Kelley

I see, so you're in Woodruff until 1920-

Kilgore

'Twenty-six.

Kelley

Nineteen twenty-six.

Kilgore

We moved into this little town in '24, stayed there two years, and then moved from that into North Carolina in '26. Sixty years ago.

Kelley

Now, you're the sixth of twelve children?

Kilgore

Yes, there were twelve children. My oldest brother was born on September 4, 1903. My youngest sister was born March 16, 1924. So in those twenty-one years, my mother bore twelve children. No twins. Nine boys and three girls.

Kelley

Could you go through each one and give me the date of birth and the name?

Kilgore

I can give you the date of birth of each one. The oldest brother, September 4, 1903-

Kelley

And his name?

Kilgore

The next brother, April 16. You don't want the names?

Kelley

Yeah, I want the names.

Kilgore

Oldest brother was Waymon.

Kelley

Okay, I got it. Okay.

Kilgore

All right, September 4, 1903. The next brother was Lamar, April 16, 1905. The next brother was Frank, November 1, 1906. The next brother was named Rockefeller, just like the Rockefeller family, who's born October 26, 1909. The next brother was Wells, born October 14, 1911. I was next, Thomas, February 20, 1913. Next brother was Harold, July 31, 1914. The next person was a sister, Malissa, August 31, 1916. The next person was a sister, Ella Mae, December 31, 1917. The next was a brother, Herman, May 16, 1920. Next was a brother, Thaddeus, February 16, 1922. And the next sister was Mamie, March 16, 1924.

Kelley

Boy, I thought I had a big family. I have five brothers and sisters.

Kilgore

And six sisters?

Kelley

Just five brothers and sisters together.

Kilgore

Oh, all together.

Kelley

All together. So I thought our family was big. I couldn't remember- If I had eleven brothers and sisters, it would kill me on birthdays, I tell you. Wow. Well, so do you have any recollections of Woodruff, South Carolina?

Kilgore

Oh, yeah. I remember it very well. I have memories back to the point where I was two or three years old. I remember two or three incidents when I was just a boy. I remember one night my mother and father had gone to a lodge meeting. They were both active in lodges. They left us all at home. It was summertime. They had what we called straw ticks, and over those we had mattresses filled with feathers, and they were very warm in the summer. So in the summer, we slept on what were called pallets on the floor, and it was much cooler. We all had gotten into bed, and we didn't have any electricity in those days. We had kerosene lamps. There was a superstition in the community that you could swallow fire. My oldest brother, after all of us were in the bed, went to turn out the lamp. Evidently when he went to blow it out, he inhaled first and the blaze came toward him. And then it went out. He thought he'd swallowed that blaze of fire. So it was always said that if you ever swallow fire, the best way to put it out is to drink wine. So he got all of us up, and that meant there were seven of us. By that time, my sisters had not been born. My brother Harold, next to me, was about a year and a half, and I was about three. And all the others, all seven of us, went down- I told you earlier about the little house we used to live in. Well, when we moved in the big

house, we had a tenant in that house. We went down to Aunt Kelley's house (I don't remember her last name) and knocked on the door. Everybody was frightened, and Waymon was just panting and all of us older brothers.She said, "What's the matter with you, boy?"He said, "I went to put out the light and I swallowed the fire."She said, "Come in here."So she got a jug of wine. [laughter] And she had him drink wine and then said, "Now go on back home. You ought to be all right." But before he got back home, he was practically drunk, see. [laughter] That's one of the first things I remember in my life.

Kelley

When did you start school?

Kilgore

I started school when I was between five and six. I was five in February of 1918, and I started school that fall in October. I remember church life even before that. I learned to read when I was about, I guess, between three and four, because my older brothers were all in school and I just was curious about what was in those books, and so I learned to read. I always was fascinated with church. Before they used instruments in the church, people used to what they call "line out" hymns. You call-say the words, and then people would sing them. I remember I liked that. When I was a little fellow about three or four years old, the preacher let me do that. He let me get up on the stage, because I had learned a lot of the hymns, and I'd line them out. But I started school when I was about between five and six. Five and a half.

Kelley

What church did you attend?

Kilgore

We grew up in a Baptist church in our community, Bethel Baptist Church. My father was a deacon, and my mother was active in the church. That's where, I guess, all of us, except the youngest ones in the family, were baptized. Let me see, we left in '26. All from, I guess, the first nine of us had been- No, just the first seven of us had been baptized then. The others were baptized once we moved to North Carolina.

Kelley

In your community, did most of the school-age children attend school or was it the-?

Kilgore

Did most do what?

Kelley

Most of the school-age children, did they attend school? Or were there some that didn't?

Kilgore

We had a dual system of schools, of course: a school for whites and a school for blacks-with gross difference in facilities. The white children went to school nine months, and the black children went about seven months. There was a difference in the time we went to school. Because many black children, while the white children went to school in the fall, had to harvest the crops of the white families, you see. But nearly everybody's children went to school. There was not much of a problem of children staying out of school, because there was a close relationship in those days and in that community, as it was in most southern communities, between the school, the church, and the home. People thought something was wrong with you if you didn't send your children to school or if you didn't go to church. So there was a kind of social pressure, unwritten sort of social custom, that you go to school and go to church.

Kelley

Now, you mentioned harvesting the crops. Was the main crop people would work cotton?

Kilgore

Yes. In my day the major crop, and the money crop, was cotton. My father did some diversification though. The next crop to cotton was corn, because we had the stock to feed. We had two mules, a horse, two or three cows, hogs, and chickens. So the next crop was corn. We tried to raise plenty of corn. Then, beyond that, we raised wheat, out of which we had flour made; out of corn, we had meal made. We raised potatoes. Papa loved potatoes, and we raised just bushels and bushels. We raised a lot of peanuts. We raised cane, out of which we made sorghum molasses by the barrel. Then, of course, many

other kind of vegetables that were canned. The farm had a lot of fruit trees on it: apples, peaches, plums, and cherries.

Kelley

How many acres did the-?

Kilgore

The farm was 150 acres.

Kelley

Hundred and fifty acres.

Kilgore

Yes, about half of it cleared land, and the rest of it was wooded land, which we used for pasture and for cutting wood out of. Our fuel was wood. The fuel for heat and the fuel for cooking was wood.

Kelley

So, would you be out there chopping cotton with everyone else?

Kilgore

Oh, yes, I used to hoe cotton. I was old enough when we lived on the farm. We didn't move off the farm until I was eleven years old. I hoed cotton, picked cotton. I was at the position in the family where I didn't do as much as my five older brothers, because my mother needed help, and I stayed home and helped her a lot, gathering vegetables in the spring and summer and cooking and preparing the meals and all. I did a lot of that. But I also did a good bit of farm work.

Kelley

Boy, that's amazing. I noticed that, you know, you mentioned that you were converted to Christianity and you said age nine on your resume. Does that mean that you were baptized at age nine or-?

Kilgore

Yes. The custom in our community church was that every year, beginning the first Sunday in August, there was a revival meeting. It went for a week, day

and night until Friday night. And those young people or others in the community who had never expressed a conversion experience would be urged during that revival to make a decision. After the preaching and the singing, the preacher would offer the invitation and ask those who were not saved or who had not made a profession of faith to come forward. And I was nine when I did that. When you came forward, you had to stand up before the congregation and tell that you believe the Lord, you believe God is your father and Jesus Christ your savior, and so on. Children usually learned pretty well what to say. But it was not an easy thing to do. And once you do that, you had to wait until the preacher came back a month later on the first Sunday in September to be baptized. I don't know how many were baptized when I was baptized, but there was usually a large group every year, some years larger than others, of course.

Kelley

And this was at Bethel? New Bethel Baptist Church?

Kilgore

Right. Now, of course, that still holds pretty true in many rural churches, that the only time that people become a member of the church and make professions of faith is at the revival time. In urban churches it's much different. We baptize all through the year. But in rural areas there would be one baptismal service a year.

Kelley

I see. Now, who was pastor of Bethel at that time?

Kilgore

At that time, a man named Reverend J. C. Goode. He was a man of some training. I think he'd been to Benedict College a little bit. I don't think he'd graduated. His wife was a public school teacher. He lived in a town about fifty miles away named Greenwood, South Carolina. He had other churches, and he would go to different churches on different Sundays. When he'd come to Bethel the first Sunday and sometime the third Sunday, he would ride the train. There was a train that went right through our town and on down through Greenwood. The train doesn't run anymore-I was down there a

couple of summers ago. He'd ride the train, and then some of the deacons would meet him at the train station in a buggy and take him to where he was going to stay. [laughter]

Kelley

Now, you were thirteen years old when you moved to Brevard [North Carolina]?

Kilgore

When I moved to Brevard, I was thirteen years old. That was in April of 1926. What had happened then, the whole economy in that section of South Carolina had gone bad, and there weren't jobs. Brevard was a growing little resort town, and my grandmother and her family had moved up there three or four years earlier. Jobs were opening up, and there were jobs for my older brothers and my father. So, we all moved up there and they started working. At that time a tannery, where leather was made, was recruiting a lot of workers out of South Carolina, and my brothers got jobs at the tannery. One of my brothers worked there until he retired, almost forty years. After this, all the rest of the family moved to Brevard. My baby sister was only two years old when we moved there. She was born 1924. Brevard is where all the younger ones of my family grew up. And I grew up there too, until time to go to college.

Kelley

Did your father also work in the leather tannery business?

Kilgore

No, he didn't. He went back to doing some of the things he did in South Carolina.

Kelley

Oh, I see. So you all lived on the farm in Brevard?

Kilgore

Not in Brevard. We lived in the town. No, we did not have a farm. In Brevard, most of the black people in that county live, oh, I guess 90 percent of them, live within that town and do various kinds of public work.

Kelley

I see. And did you own a house in Brevard?

Kilgore

Yes, we bought a house because we sold our house we had in South Carolina. That house is still there. By the way, we're just now rebuilding it. It's an eight-room house. We just signed some papers to do about $15,000 worth of work on it, putting another bathroom in and bringing it up to code in a lot of ways. We use [it] when we go there. We go there a lot in the summertime on vacations, so we stay there.

Kelley

I see.

Kilgore

A nephew of mine [William Adams] is staying in it now. He just bought his family a home though, and he's going to be moving soon.

Kelley

When did you move to Asheville [North Carolina]?

Kilgore

Now, I never moved to Asheville. In 1928, I finished the ninth grade in Brevard, and at that time that was as far as the black children could go in school in Brevard. There was a white high school there, but we couldn't go there. I wanted to go to school because I wanted to go on to college, and my mother and father went to Asheville and found a place for me to stay. My older brother [Waymon] was living in Asheville then, but he had small children and didn't have room in his house. So, I got a place to stay near the high school there. So in the fall of '28, I entered high school in Asheville. In those days, North Carolina had what they called an eight/three system, eight years of elementary school and three of high school. I finished in 1930, because I had already done the ninth grade in Brevard. But I never really lived in Asheville until after I had finished college and started working. Then I lived there for a few years.

Kelley

Oh, I see. When you were in high school, were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

Kilgore

Yes, I was. In high school, I was interested in debating. I was in what was called a forensic society, and I was a member of the honor society. I was interested also in dramatics. Those were some of the things I was involved in in high school.

Kelley

Had you any idea what you planned on doing in the future?

Kilgore

Earlier, when I was a boy, I had in mind all the time I wanted to be a minister. Then, as I grew up and got up in eighth and ninth grade, I became very much interested in mathematics. When I went to high school in Asheville and began to get intensive courses in algebra and geometry, I thought then that I wanted to go into mathematics. When I got into geometry, I thought about [being] an architect, because I liked the drawings and all that. In the middle of my senior year, I began to get the impression that I wanted to be a minister.About Christmastime in 1929 (I graduated from high school in 1930), I went back home. It was just thirty-five miles from Asheville to my home. I told my minister that I thought I wanted to preach. And the custom, of course, in the Baptist church is that if your minister is convinced that you're sincere, he gives you an opportunity to come before the congregation and preach what they call your trial sermon. So that was December when I told him that. On the last Sunday in January in 1930, I preached my first sermon. If the minister and deacons and the congregation are satisfied with your effort, then they give you a license to preach. And that's when I was licensed to preach. Fifty-six years ago in 1930.

Kelley

Do you recall the theme of your sermon?

Kilgore

Yes, the power of prayer. I don't remember where the text came from.

Kelley

It was 1930, so you were seventeen years old.

Kilgore

Seventeen years old. That's right.

Kelley

What church were you attending in Brevard?

Kilgore

Here again, the church in Brevard had the same name as the church in Woodruff, Bethel Baptist Church. While I was in Asheville going to school, I attended First Baptist Church, but I was licensed out of my home church in Brevard. When I'd come home (I'd come home about once a month from Asheville), I'd always go to my home church. But the other Sundays I went to First Baptist Church, because I lived within a block of First Baptist Church and I had a lot of friends, school friends and others, who were members of that church.

Kelley

Some of your friends in school, were they also in the same situation you were in, that they left their families to go to school?

Kilgore

Yes, but in my day not too many. However, in later days before desegregation came, there were many who left and went to school. I can remember two or three now that went: Edward Killian, who is now dead. Vernon Mills did the same thing. There's a young woman, she's a little older than I, who was a daughter of one of the teachers, a lady who taught in the Brevard school about sixty-five years, Mrs. Johnstone. She taught four generations in some families. Her daughter, when she finished the ninth grade there, had to go away and finish high school, and then onto college. She finally went on all the way and got her Ph.D. degree. When she retired about ten years ago, she was professor of English at Chaney University back in Pennsylvania. She's living in Brevard now. In fact, after she finished college, she came back to Brevard there and taught me. It's from her I got a real appreciation for literature. This

lady who earned a Ph.D. is Coragreene Johnstone. She and I may have been the first two persons to move on away and go on through and get college and other degrees. Since then, there were numbers of young people before they desegregated the schools. The Brevard schools must have desegregated about [pause] I'd say roughly 1960. They have been desegregated about twenty-five years.

Kelley

I see. What about your older brothers? Did they-?

Kilgore

I only had one older brother, the second brother, Lamar, who went to college. He was the first one in my family to go to college. He went to South Carolina State College for two years. He didn't finish. He came out and went to work. After that, there were, well, including myself, only five of us who went to college. I went; my oldest sister went to Spelman [College] and graduated from Spelman; my youngest sister went to Spelman, did not finish. One brother went to Howard [University], and he just did some work at Howard. He's not a graduate.

Kelley

I see. Did all your other brothers and sisters finish high school?

Kilgore

No, only eight of the twelve of us finished high school.

Kelley

Okay, so you graduated from the school in Asheville in 1930?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

By the way, what was the name of that school, do you remember?

Kilgore

Stephens-Lee High School.

Kelley

[In] 1930, did you immediately apply to Morehouse [College]?

Kilgore

No, in 1930 when I finished high school, the school that I knew most about then was a Baptist school in North Carolina named Shaw. It's still existing, Shaw University. It was a university, because years ago it operated not only a college, but it operated a medical school also, and I understand once a small law school. Later those two closed. Well, in my section of North Carolina, there was a convention called the Blue Ridge Educational Convention that raised funds to help young people go to college. They raised them for education. In 1930, I applied for a scholarship from the convention and they approved it. My pastor and I went by the treasurer's home to get the money so I could go the next week on down to Shaw. That was in the fall of '30. When we went there, my pastor stayed in the house a long time. [Then he] came out. He was very distraught looking, and I learned-he didn't tell then-later that the treasurer did not have the money. There was supposed to have been $12,500 and that was a lot of money in 1930-in the treasury. He [the treasurer] went into a business selling coal and sank the money in the business and lost it all. He died pretty soon after that. So that meant that I didn't go to school that fall. Okay.One of my teachers at Stephens-Lee was a Morehouse graduate, and he began to talk to me then about going to Morehouse. So I got a job working at a boardinghouse. I had worked when I was in high school at a jewelry store, very high-class jewelry store, and the man who was the bookkeeper and business manager of the store, his wife ran this very fine boardinghouse. I had told him I wanted to go to college that fall, see. But when I told him that I couldn't go, then he asked me if I wanted a job. Because they had a butler that worked for them-butler and table waiter-who'd died. I told him yes, so he sent me to see his wife. She hired me. I stayed there on the place, worked that year till the next fall, saved up some money. By that time, I had decided to go to Morehouse. I went to Morehouse.

Kelley

And you just applied and-

Kilgore

Just applied and was received. Yes.

Kelley

Now, before we talk about Morehouse, I want to just backtrack about some things that were going on in North Carolina at the time. In 1929, I know they had this big textile strike in Gastonia, I think it is.

Kilgore

Right.

Kelley

Now, I'm just curious, in your community at the time you were- Let's see, '29, you were in Asheville and back and forth to Brevard. Was that an issue in the community?

Kilgore

Not in our [community], because the center of the textile issue in North Carolina was in the south-central section of the state around Canapolis and Concord, which was about 250 miles or 300 miles from the section where I was, in the extreme west. That was not an issue in 1929. The Depression hit heavily in the west in 1929 because the banks in that area- I remember when the banks closed in Asheville. I remember there had been a big boom of building up a big area called Beaver Lake. The white people had borrowed a lot of money from this bank, and then the stock market crashed. Then the city had built an expensive city hall, far more than a city like Asheville needed. [The] county had built a sixteen-story county building, all money borrowed. Then the bust came. I remember three or four people that committed suicide who were among those bankers and others. The teachers in the school had been encouraged to put their money in this one bank, Central Bank and Trust Company. I remember the pandemonium that existed in 1929 when that happened and the disruption that took place. It was very, very tough. At the same time, I was struggling, trying to get out of high school. But the Canapolis strikes down in that area affected that section of the state but was not much of an issue in the section where we were.

Kelley

Now, how did the-we got a couple of minutes-how did the Depression affect your family personally?

Kilgore

Well, it was a real problem for our family. It meant that my oldest brother, who was married and by this time had two children living in Asheville, was in pretty good shape. He worked at the Grove Park Inn, a very fashionable hotel that somehow made it through, and he was in pretty good shape. The rest of the family were all at home. The tannery continued to operate, and therefore some income was afforded there because leather was still in demand. I had two brothers working there, and that sort of kept the family going. In the summertime, Brevard at that time was a summer resort place where there [were] a number of summer camps for wealthy white children coming up from Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia. And there were a lot of small hotels in Brevard where tourists came. It was a tourist/resort center in those days. So we would work and make some money in the summertime and sort of save up a little to tide us over. There were times when it was pretty tough with eleven of us still at home. I guess all eleven were still around home pretty closely until I left to go to college. But we were able to tide it through some way. It was tough though, tough.

1.2. Tape Number: I, Side Two (May 7, 1986)

Kelley

During this period of time, did your mother ever work?

Kilgore

My mother did not work. Shortly before we left South Carolina when we moved off the farm, we lived right in the little town, and most of our closest neighbors were whites. There was a white family that she helped out for about a year when we were living there. When we moved on to North Carolina-my baby sister was only two, and the brother above her was just about four-she had small children. She did not do any public work, but my mother was an excellent seamstress, and she used to make all kind of garments for ladies. I just wondered how in the world she did it. Sometime ten and twelve dresses a week, especially around certain seasons like Easter and

Christmas and so on. But later, after all the children had grown, and when she was in her sixties, she became a companion to two retired schoolteachers that came out of New York, upstate New York. I guess for about seven or eight years, [she] would go and spend time with them and fix one meal for them and just be there as sort of a companion. That's about the only regular work she ever did outside of the home, and this was after all of her children were grown and married.

Kelley

I see. You mentioned earlier that some of your closest neighbors in Woodruff were white. So I guess what I'm trying to get at is, in the rural areas was there less segregation than in the urban areas?

Kilgore

Wasn't any difference. Our closest neighbors when we lived on that farm were white also. Across the street, I remember the Cox family lived. Up the road from us about a quarter of a mile on the other side of the street, the Calman family lived, and they were white. It's most interesting when you look back on this to see the kind of relationship that my mother had with these people and my father too and we had with the children also. And yet, there was that strict line of demarcation. For instance, when we moved into the town in Woodruff, the family that lived closest to us was the Cox family. Here was a street coming down out of the little town, and we lived [on] a street that ran from that right out this way. The Cox family was right here on the corner, and our house was right back there. I remember he didn't have as much land as he wanted and we had about four acres of land, and then my daddy sold him some land so he could have a bigger back with a garden and all. But that family was there, and then this other family, I forget the name, that my mother worked for was just across the street from this black family here. Below us down this way were some black families.There was a white man named Johnny Ford who owned a grocery store. He had a son named John, Jr. He and Herman, my brother, played together all the time, just like two brothers. As soon as they got up in the morning, if Herman wasn't out, you could hear John, Jr., coming down the road saying, "Herman, Herman, come out, let's play." When John, Jr., was about five or six-this was 1926- Herman went out to play one day and John, Jr., said, "I can't play with you anymore."

Herman says, "Why?" [John, Jr.] says, "My daddy said we couldn't play anymore." Herman wanted to know why. He said, "We're not the same," and so on. That broke it up. It broke up. It was a tragic thing for Herman because they were so close. It was tragic for the little John, Jr., too, because he didn't understand it. But it was that in-built thing between whites and blacks, you see.My Aunt Malissa's husband [Columbus Woodruff] was a very excellent chef and cook, and he made a lot of money. He went to the big hotels in Florida in the winter and up to Saratoga Springs in New York in the summer and cooked at fashionable hotels. Aunt Malissa over the years never worked but accumulated the finest of silver, chinaware, dishes, cut glass. She willed it all to my mother when she died. Mrs. Ford knew that. Whenever Mrs. Ford would have guests, she would borrow our silverware and china to serve her guests. That kind of relationship existed. But she did more than that though. We can't prove this. But when we moved to Brevard, we had to move in two loads. We had everything packed, and the last thing Mama wanted to move was her two big barrels of this fine china and silverware and other valuables. She'd carefully packed the barrels with papers and all. When we came back for the second load, which included those barrels, those barrels were gone. We believe today that Mrs. Ford took those barrels.

Kelley

Wow. That's amazing. So was the majority of Brevard black? Was it mixed?

Kilgore

No, Brevard, when we moved there, was a town of about 3,500. It's about 6,000 now. About one, oh, about one out of six, maybe 1,000 black people in Brevard out of 5,000, 6,000. Brevard is in Transylvania County, and Transylvania County has about 22,000, and there are only about 75 or 80 black people in the county that do not live in Brevard. So the black population in that county, as well as [in] most of those extreme western North Carolina counties, is very sparse.

Kelley

What about Asheville?

Kilgore

Asheville at that time was a town of some 60,000 or 65,000 people, predominantly white. About 15,000 of them were possibly black. It's up now to about 110,000, I guess, with maybe 30,000 blacks. The people, not too progressive. The black people had some pretty good businesses and some pretty strong churches. The schools there were good. Stephens-Lee High School, where I went, at that time was considered one of the A-rated high schools in the state. The schools through the years have been rather good. Here again was, in those days, a great resort town with a lot of hotels. And the majority of black people did domestic work, either hotel work or working for the rich white families.

Kelley

It's like Pasadena. Now, moving from Brevard to Asheville, you're talking about living in a town of 3,500 to a town of 65,000. I mean, that must have been a big shift.

Kilgore

It was. When I went there- I had been to Asheville before, but I had never been anywhere hardly. I guess when I was in South Carolina I went maybe to Spartanburg, which is a county seat, and I thought it was the biggest place in the world. And then when I moved away from Brevard to go to school, to be away from that big family and staying in a family with two old ladies, and one of them was raising a little granddaughter, it was a lonesome situation. But within due time, I had made enough friends and all to take care of that. Right across the street was a good friend [William Downs]-he and I became friends. We started preaching together, and we were friends for forty-eight years until he died in '76. But it was a huge city. I had to get adjusted to it. I made the adjustment pretty fast.

Kelley

What kind of social activities were you involved in?

Kilgore

The social activities I had basically were, many of them, generated from the church there in Asheville where I was active, as I said, when I was in school. We had a group in the church called the Young People's Progressive Club that

was mostly young adults. I was the youngest one in there. But my senior year in high school, I was made president of that group. We did a lot of things. We had parties at different houses, but not the drinking, cutting-up parties. We did drama. We had a music group within that. We'd have picnics. One of the things that I used to love to do was to play cards. We'd have card games. That was one of our social activities. So those were the kind of things we did, and we went to the movies a lot. We hated to go because the movie that was in the black community, people were afraid to go because they fought in there a lot. And then we'd go downtown, and we'd have to go upstairs to the balcony. I never liked that, see, but we did that.

Kelley

So basically the balcony was set aside for black people?

Kilgore

Yes, right, right.

Kelley

Do you recall anyone ever trying to sit-?

Kilgore

Never recall anyone trying to break that. That was in '28, '29, and '30. I never recall that. Later on I do recall that happening as we got up in the forties, while there was still segregation. In fact, I used to break the segregation laws myself in the forties.

Kelley

In the twenties, that was a period when the [Ku Klux] Klan was resurrected, I think.

Kilgore

Oh, yes.

Kelley

Do you have any recollections about the Klan in North Carolina?

Kilgore

Interestingly, in the mountain section of North Carolina, we knew about the Klan, but the Klan was never activated. Funny thing about the Appalachian Mountains- That's the tip of the Appalachian mountain people. If you're northern, you are just, in a sense, another person. For instance, once I went from my town up to a little place called Cherryville, where no blacks lived at all, to help a man gather his apple crop. When I worked at places there in Brevard like the boardinghouse, and I worked at a hospital awhile when I was a teenager, I'd always have to eat, you know, separate. But when I was working for those people up there-they were all white-when dinnertime came, we all went in, sat down, and ate together. A lot of that kind of relationship existed back in those mountains, even though around the city it did not. In those days of segregation, the line was pretty strict in the little town, but not among the mountain people.The closest thing I remember to a Klan activity was a single man's activity. [It] was a real tragedy. There was a white family by the name of Cox. One of the children in that family was dark. It was generally rumored around town that a certain black man who lived near that family was the father of this child. I heard that when I was a boy. One day this white man who was the head of this family prepared himself for it. He got a gun, and this black man was walking down the street in the little town, and he jumped out of his car and shot him to death right in the street. That's right. It came to trial, and he got a token sentence, but not very much. Because I guess this man had heard it so much till he just couldn't take it anymore. And the real thing that provoked it was when the child came up to go to school. There was some trouble, question, about whether she'd go to the white school or the black school. I don't think he could take that. That's the closest thing to any kind of Klan activity. But that was an individual act and not a group act.

Kelley

Do you see any difference between, say, the mountain white people, who I'm assuming were farmers or workers or working-class kind of people, and the rich white people, who a lot of black domestics would have to cater to, in terms of race relations?

Kilgore

I think that the black people found themselves more at home dealing with the poor mountain people who made their money on farms and by making white

lightning liquor back in those mountains. You had some real close relationships between the black people and those people. I mean at every social level, much more than you did with the more wealthy white people who hired the black people to work in their homes. You were treated like servants there. For instance, let me give you an instance when I was working at a boardinghouse in Asheville. I was cleaning around in a parlor, and some of the guests were sitting around with the lady of the boardinghouse and one of the guests commented. I heard what he said. He said, "That seems to be an intelligent young fellow that's working." She says, "Yes, he's all right." [She] said, "He's different from Edward"-that's the butler that had died-"because Edward was always standing around trying to talk to the guests as if he was somebody." I never forgot that. And I said to myself, "Lady, I'm going to prove to you that I am somebody." Because I was only there for one reason: to make me some money to go to college.

Kelley

Yeah, I heard that. So now you get accepted into Morehouse in Atlanta. I mean, now that's a big move. Asheville's a big city, but Atlanta is a metropolis. Now, how did-?That was an exciting thing for me. Maybe one of the most exciting things in my early life was to apply to Morehouse and to be accepted and told when to come. A friend of mine that had finished high school the year after I did [Conrette Woodard]- We went down together on a bus, caught a bus from Asheville with a little money we had. I think it cost about three dollars from Asheville to Atlanta, which is about two hundred and something miles. It was one of the biggest things ever happened in my life.I had trouble in those days. They hazed freshmen a lot. I had trouble with the hazing, with the sophomores making me take their trunks upstairs and all like that. And calling you dogs, etc. Here I was a young preacher. I had trouble with that. One or two of them I thought I was going to hate the rest of my life, but they turned out to be good friends. But that's a part of college life.Now, you entered Morehouse-this is 1931, right?

Kilgore

Entered in '31, the fall of '31, right. I was eighteen years old. Well, I had passed my eighteenth year in February.

Kelley

So when you first started, what was your impression of the university and the work load and the social activities and things like that?

Kilgore

The main thing that impressed me as I entered Morehouse was that there was a recognition of your worth as a person. Now, I had a teacher in high school in Brevard my last year there, Mr. [Javan L.] Jones, who had gone to one of the black colleges in the South. Those of us who were in the ninth grade, he treated us as young men and would call me "Mr. Kilgore." When I got to Morehouse, I was in an environment where one was looked upon as an authentic person. Morehouse always stressed that. The teachers stressed that. They talked about segregation and that we must not become victims to it. They stressed what it meant to be a real person, that you're as good as anybody else-you can train your mind and keep your spirits straight. You can do anything you want to. That had a great impact on my life. You would hear this in classrooms. We had regular chapel services everyday. People would talk of the present conditions. They brought great speakers there to the campus, and they would talk about the same thing.There's nothing in this country that's every made-other than the black church-that's made the contribution to black life like the black colleges in the South. The young people who have missed that experience really have missed something. I was talking to a couple of girls out at Spelman last week from here. They said they wouldn't have changed their experience at Spelman for anything else in the world. Now that the big universities are getting many more black people in them, it's not as graphically different as it was in those days.But my whole life horizon just widened when I got at Morehouse. I saw the unlimited possibilities of what one could do. That was almost from the very beginning. The first person that just captivated me was during freshman week. That was Howard Thurman. You read any of Howard Thurman's work?

Kelley

Yeah, I'm familiar with it.

Kilgore

Howard Thurman was at that time teaching at Morehouse. He always participated in the orientation of freshmen. I remember my whole class came

in a room, very informal. He sat down on the floor and had all of us sitting on the floor and began to talk about life and talk about how you've got to seize every opportunity. Nobody was any more dramatic than Howard Thurman. I never forgot that night, never forgot that night. I said, "This place is really something." And then to have that kind of thing buttressed over and over by other teachers who would teach their subject matter but also would talk about manhood. Morehouse has a great reputation of making men. I don't know whether we have as many, but we've got a good many of them still there-professors who have the same kind of interest professors had back in those days.

Kelley

Who were some of your mentors?

Kilgore

My mentors there at that time were Howard Thurman; another man who taught religion, C. [Charles] D. Hubert; and another person that I did my major work under, Professor [Walter] Shivers. And then there were two other people. C. [Claude] B. Dansby, who was a mathematics teacher, was just terrific, terrific. In the early days of Morehouse, another old man, Dr. L. [Lloyd] O. Lewis taught public speaking. These were people that had a tremendous, tremendous imprint on my life-and Dr. S. [Samuel] H. Archer, who was the president at that time. They all had a tremendous impact on my life.

Kelley

How big was the school?

Kilgore

My years there, there were about 340 students.

Kelley

Total?

Kilgore

It's now a few over 2,000. That was, as you know, in the midst of the Depression, when the tuition was $40 a semester, $80 a year. Room and board and laundry was $11 a month. Student activities fee was $12 a year.

Then, of course, you had to buy your books, and if you were taking chemistry and other lab courses, you had to pay some small lab fee. But it cost then about- It cost over all about $250 to $300 a year to go to Morehouse then.

Kelley

Did you work while you were in school?

Kilgore

Yes, I had to. I had no support from home. I worked. My first year, I was a teachers' waiter. There was a section in the dining room reserved for teachers and one for students, all in the same dining room. The second year and third year, I still had less money, and I lived in the home of one of my professors, Dr. C. D. Hubert. I helped his wife to cook and clean house and drove her around for my room and board. Did that my junior year too. I had an occasion then, my senior year, to get what was called an NYA [National Youth Authority] job that had been set up by the federal government under the Roosevelt administration, a program that really a black woman suggested. Did you know that?

Kelley

Mary Mcleod Bethune.

Kilgore

Mary Mcleod Bethune, that's right. It was her program. I mean she suggested it, and it was implemented. So I had an NYA job supervising twenty of the students who did work in community agencies, a lot of them in churches. They developed dramatic clubs and took youngsters on outings and things like that. I supervised them. I moved back on the campus my senior year, and I had that job.

Kelley

I noticed you were a member of Omega Psi Phi.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Did you pledge at Morehouse?

Kilgore

Yes. One of my mentors, [who] was my ideal as a student, was a year ahead of me, a man named Haran Battle. I couldn't measure up to him because he finished Morehouse with a 4.0 average. Never made a mark under A. I couldn't measure up to that. Well, he never pledged a fraternity, and I had said that I don't think I'm going to pledge. Usually when you pledge there, you pledge in the first semester of your sophomore year. And I didn't. Near the end of my sophomore year, though, I did pledge and was initiated at the beginning, I think, of my junior year and was active in the fraternity. In fact, my senior year I was basileus. I came very near being impeached, though, by the chapter because at that time the politics at Morehouse was always Omegas and Kappa [Alpha Psi]s against Alpha [Phi Alpha]s and [Phi Beta] Sigmas for, you know, student body officers and everything.My senior year, I was also president of the student body. But when it came around to assess the people for different offices, we found, within Omega and Kappa, capable people for everything but one position. The best person on that campus-and I was convinced of this-for the editor of the Maroon Tiger, the student paper, was an Alpha.

Kelley

Well, [it] figures.

Kilgore

And I broke with the politics and supported this Alpha. They called a special meeting and started to vote to impeach me, but they never did it. Even had a professor in there who was an Omega who was ready to do the same thing. But they didn't. This fellow was elected. I supported him because I said that I have to put the school ahead of my fraternity, because this fellow was the best qualified one. He finally came out here, John Long. He died several years ago. I said, "Nobody in here can beat John in editing the Maroon Tiger for next year." But I saved- They didn't put me out.

Kelley

So Greek life is very important at Morehouse?

Kilgore

Oh, yes, it's been through the years. But before I ever got there, they had all four of the fraternities, basic fraternities. Then they created another one. I don't think it really lived though, Xi Kappa Xi. I don't know whatever happened to it. It was created during my years there. I don't think it spread across the country though. But the other four have been there, I guess, sixty years.

Kelley

Why did you choose Omega as opposed to Alpha?

Kilgore

As I looked at the chapters on the campus, there were men basically in Alpha, Kappa, and Omega that were men doing a lot of things. But the men who were mostly interested in the areas that I was interested in-because my major was sociology, which means I was in the humanities-those men were mostly Omegas. As I developed friendships within my class and the classes above me, it turned out that most of those were Omega friends, and that influenced me.

Kelley

I was just wondering, because I'm an Alpha.

Kilgore

You're an Alpha?

Kelley

I'm just curious, so of course I'm going to ask the question, you know. So what other sort of social activities were you involved in at Morehouse?

Kilgore

Well, I guess too many. I've been an organizational person a long time. I was on the intramural team, basketball team, and we won the championship two years. Intramural-you know the four classes. I was in the glee club for two years. In those days, I could sing. I can't even sing now. I've always had an interest in dramatics. I was a member of the University Players, which was made up of students of Morehouse, Spelman, and Atlanta University. I played in several productions, *Macbeth, Henry IV,* some other lighter productions-*Mr.*

Pym Passes By and some others. We traveled a little bit with some of those productions. I was president once of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] Club on the campus. In those days, the colleges used to have YMCA Clubs. As I said before, I was very much tied up in student politics. I moved from secretary of the student body to president of the student body. I was president of my classes sophomore and junior years. I was very much involved with the different activities.I did my share of going to see girls at Spelman, occasionally one or two. We used to have a problem there. The First Congregational Church there had a very enlightened man-he lives in Chicago now-named [W. John] Faulkner. Each year in the spring, early spring, he held college night and invited all the students from Morehouse, Spelman, Clark [College], Morris Brown [College]. Those were the four basic black schools there then-and Atlanta University. Not so much Atlanta then because it had become a graduate school. A lot of fellows had a girl at Spelman, and then some of them would have a girl at Clark. Every fellow was supposed to take his girl. One of the tests of whether she was your best girl was whether you took her to college night. A lot of fellows got sick on college night. [laughter] Yes, sir.

Kelley

Were you there at college night?

Kilgore

I went a couple of times. I came through pretty well.

Kelley

You know, there was a lot of activity going on in Atlanta during the early thirties, and one thing was the Angelo Herndon case. Were there students at Morehouse involved in those activities?

Kilgore

I can't remember too well. I remember another case, not the Herndon case, took place just before I got there. This man, C. D. Hubert, that I was telling you about, his nephew was lynched in Atlanta and dragged through the streets, and that had the city really upset, really upset. The Herndon case did also. I didn't know too much about the details of the Herndon case. But the Klan was

pretty active in Atlanta in the days when I was there. The segregation thing was pretty tough, it was pretty tough. And yet, those schools kept espousing liberation.I know among my other activities, I became president my senior year of the intercollegiate council, which was made up of black and white schools: Morehouse, Clark, Morris Brown, Spelman, Agnes Scott [College], Emory [University] and-not Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology]-but one or two other schools. We would have a forum every spring and bring special speakers. We met in a church downtown where we sat nonsegregated. But the white South hated Roosevelt, as you may know, particularly Mrs. Roosevelt.When I was president, we invited Mrs. Roosevelt to be our speaker, and she accepted. When we got to the church that evening, members of the police department and the American Legion were at the church and told us that we could not be seated together. Either the whites would sit upstairs-they didn't care how we separated-and the blacks downstairs, or the whites on one side of the church and the blacks on the other. But you cannot be seated together. It breaks the segregation laws of Georgia. So we put our heads together, and several of us said- I said, "No, we can't afford to. We can't afford to break our principles. We'll either just go on in there and be seated like we want to and get arrested or we will just move and go somewhere else and not have the meeting here." The group decided to take the latter course and to go somewhere else on one of the campuses and have that meeting. Black Atlanta was extremely sensitive, and there were some very brave people in those colleges that kept hammering against segregation, even back there in the early thirties.

Kelley

Do you remember who some of the other student leaders were, student activists at the time?

Kilgore

Yes. When I was there, some of them now that were just ahead of me- Ed Mazique, Eddie Mazique, who is now a very outstanding physician. Edward [C.] Mazique in Washington. He was once president of the National Medical Association, a black group. He was very active in those days. He's now a member of the Morehouse trustee board.

Kelley

So you mentioned Edward Mazique.

Kilgore

Yeah. Now, let me see if I can think of some of the others that were active. There's another person who was very active, a retired schoolteacher in Baltimore now, named Malachi Darkins. I guess I would have looked at him as my best friend when we were there. My class did not have many activists like some other classes that came along-the class of '48, for instance, that Martin Luther King [Jr.] was in. [In the class of '48] there was Lerone Bennett [Jr.] and others that were real activists.

Kelley

I see. Do you remember some of the white activists who may have been involved in the intercollegiate council?

Kilgore

Yes. I do not remember the students; I remember some of their leadership. And among the leadership was a man named Charles Jones, who was a Presbyterian preacher out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Also in that leadership was a man who was raising his voice back in those days, Will Campbell. He's writing a lot of fiction, history fiction now, that's very interesting. Then there was another fellow who headed a movement down in Georgia called the Koinonia Farms [now Koinonia Partners], Clarence Jordan. There was a white woman that was very active, Nell [B.] Morton. I think she [has] died. That experience, of course, was a good experience for me to let me know that all white people did not hate blacks, that there were some that were free and wanted to see everybody free.

Kelley

Did you ever run into a white activist by the name of Clyde Johnson?

Kilgore

Clyde Johnson, no.

Kelley

How about Don West?

Kilgore

Don West. Now, that name- I know of Don West, but I think they came along after my days. I think they were a little bit later, yes.

1.3. Tape Number: II, Side One (May 13, 1986)

Kelley

Last week when we left off, we were talking about your activities at Morehouse [College] in terms of some of the extracurricular things that you were involved in. During the early thirties in the South, there was a whole lot of activity going on, some of what you might call radical. Especially in Atlanta, where you have the Angelo Herndon case and the activities of the International Labor Defense.

Kilgore

Yes. I was conscious of some of those things. There were several things that I had some personal interest in. There were, of course, [at] that same time still lynchings going on in the South, and there was in the latter part of the thirties a prospect of war. There were some peace movements that were going on at that time. I helped to lead some peace demonstrations on the campus at Morehouse. The other movement that I spent [time in], beginning in my college years and further on, was the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which was concerned about problems of racism, segregation, and discrimination, and I became affiliated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. There was another movement in the South that I remember very well that my interest was channeled in while I was a senior at Morehouse. I kept that interest in [the] years after I left there. It was led by a man named Charles Jones, who was very active in it. Nell [B.] Morton was very active. It was one of the rather, [it was] considered then, almost a radical movement in the South, because it insisted upon interracial meetings all across the South on college campuses and in other places where the meetings were held. There were a number of conferences. Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. Fellowship of Southern Churchmen was what it was called. It was a movement that was based in the churches, which at that time were brave enough to come out against segregation. It was considered a rather radical movement. Now, many of these movements started as a reaction to the kinds of things that were taking

place, to the continued lynchings and the other things that you just mentioned a few moments ago. I found myself involved because I always had the feeling that I should be working for the elimination of segregation. I found that these were good avenues for me to put in some time and get more and more acquainted with people across racial lines.

Kelley

Who were some of the people who were involved in either the Fellowship of Reconciliation or the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen?

Kilgore

Now, the two basic people I remember in the Fellowship of the Southern Churchmen- Charles Jones, who was at that time pastor of a Presbyterian church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He lost that pastorate because he invited a Korean person and a black person to join him in communion and in serving communion at this Presbyterian church. Some of the members did not like that, and therefore they protested, and they went through the regular channels. First was the protest within the church. The church sustained him. Then, the protest of the next section in the Presbyterian church, which was a presbytery. At the presbytery, he was sustained. Then, it went from the presbytery to the center. At the center, he was not sustained. That, of course, was tantamount to saying to him he had to give up the church. He did give up the church. At that time, Dr. Frank [P.] Graham was interested in this movement also. He was the president of the University of North Carolina [at Chapel Hill] and was a member of that church. Then when this happened, Charles, of course, left the church and organized a community church in Chapel Hill with the assistance of Dr. Graham and others who wanted to have a free church where anybody who wanted to worship [could] and where those kind of restrictions would not be there. Nell Morton was also very active. Nell was very active in the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. I can't recall any of the other persons who were extremely active in that movement at that time.

Kelley

Do you remember someone named Claude Williams?

Kilgore

That name does not ring- There were other people who showed a lot of interest, men like Howard Thurman, who was a very prominent preacher, and he was, of course, a professor at Morehouse. There were some others from the various schools in that Atlanta area that were concerned and worked with the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

Kelley

Now, I remember reading that the Fellowship of Reconciliation had a connection with the Highlander Folk School.

Kilgore

Yes, there were meetings and conferences held at the Highlander folk center. Septima [P.] Clark was involved in that [and] later became extremely involved with SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. Once SCLC came along in the early sixties, she was involved.

Kelley

During that period of time, were you ever involved with Highlander?

Kilgore

No. I never was. No. And of all the different conferences I went to and different places, I never went to a conference at Highlander.

Kelley

Now, in terms of some of the rural movements, especially the Southern Tenant Farmers Union- I know they had a man, E. B. McKinney, who was a clergyman from Arkansas. Did you have any connections with him?

Kilgore

No. I knew about him and his work, and I never had any involvement at that level. My involvements were usually with groups that were to some extent based in the church. I was a part of the Student Christian Movement. I used to go to conferences up at King's Mountain, North Carolina, where there was a conference center and a secondary private school up there. [It] became King's Mountain Academy, and I used to go there to conferences. I always stayed pretty close to the church. I was president of the Atlanta-I think I told you about this-Student Christian Movement for one year. Then, of course, those

movements that were concerned with the elimination of segregation, I spent most of my time with them.

Kelley

With all these movements taking place and this being in the middle of the Depression, did this affect- looking from a student's point of view-certain conceptions of theology or how people interpreted the Bible? And were there debates?

Kilgore

Yes, there were. I was fortunate to be a student at Morehouse because at that time we had some very excellent-as we do have now-some very excellent professors who had strong convictions about the whole matter of segregation. I used to hear Dr. [Charles D.] Hubert, one of my professors of religion, Dr. C. D. Hubert, say that what really ought to be happening in the South [is that] instead of people being lynched, all the segregation laws should be lynched. That would be the proper solution for the South. When people had convictions of that sort, they instilled that in us, those of us that were students at Morehouse, so that it became our responsibility in whatever way we could to work against segregation.They also did it from a theological point of view that the whole movement of religion, if it has any meaning, must be a liberation movement. They didn't use the terms that we have now, liberation theology. But they did point out that the whole Christian ethic was centered around the intrinsic worth of a human being, and therefore, no human being should be subjected to segregation, discrimination, and all the kinds of things that were taking place in the South at that time. So the biblical and theological undergirding that we got in our classes at school and from our professors helped us to understand what our mandate was as time moved on to change this whole system. That's the reason you get a man like Martin Luther King [Jr.] and others. Even before King, some of us made strides that I'll talk about later, in my later life, when we come to it. That grew out of what happened to us at Morehouse College. When we found an opportunity as we got out in professional life, we put our lives out there even before the King movement ever started. That was happening all through the South.

Kelley

So, in a way, Morehouse, from a theological perspective at least, could be looked at as progressive or radical?

Kilgore

Yes, yes. I think more than the average school in that day. I think that was true because of the kind of leadership [of] the teachers that were there. I could point them out. I just mentioned one of them, C. D. Hubert. Teachers, not only in religion, but teachers in other classes. At that time I was there, W. E. B. Du Bois was teaching at Atlanta University. I had classes under Du Bois. Howard Thurman, who was one of the nation's greatest-the world's greatest preachers. Men of that caliber. They saw life as something that was precious, and they saw segregation and discrimination as something that was against life, so to speak. Our president, Dr. [Samuel H.] Archer-of course, I was there ahead of Dr. [Benjamin E.] Mays's time-Dr. Archer saw this. Dr. [John] Hope ahead of him. This was a part of the undergirding for the Morehouse men to go out and serve and to make a difference and to help work for change. It's amazing the number of Morehouse men that were tied up in the whole revolutionary movement under King all across the South.

Kelley

So, by 1935 you were ready, and you graduated ready to serve.

Kilgore

Yes, I graduated in June '35.

Kelley

Now, before we talk about what you did after that, you were married in 1936.

Kilgore

Nineteen thirty-six.

Kelley

Were you engaged in '35? Did you have plans to get married?

Kilgore

No. At the time that I finished, I had been at that time keeping company with a young lady from Louisiana. She was a year ahead of me. Well, I think it began

the early part of my junior year-no, since my sophomore year. We had gone pretty steady together, and we talked about marriage. She finished a year ahead of me and went back to Louisiana to teach. I visited her once during my senior year.

Kelley

You were talking about your plans to marry.

Kilgore

Yes, okay. We had talked about getting married. The year moved on, and I finished college in '35. She had finished in '34. Then, I went back to my home in North Carolina, Brevard, [and] spent the summer there, working in the church as [an] assistant to my pastor. He appointed me his assistant. Then, that June there was a convention in New Orleans, and I went back down to Louisiana and had another visit and still we talked something about marriage. The lady's name was Eleanor Frazier. Her father was the supervisor and principal of the black schools and the parish around Baton Rouge.Then, I came on back, and that fall I was appointed principal of a small school in Rutherford County in North Carolina about sixty-five or seventy miles from my home. After that appointment, we would have teachers meetings, and I met my present wife [Jeanetta Scott Kilgore] at one of those teachers meetings. We started seeing each other. Then the interest in the lady in Louisiana waned, and that was in the fall, late fall of 1935. We were both teaching in the small schools in that county. We saw each other through the next spring. Her home was in Washington. I went to visit her in Washington that next summer, the summer of '36. In December '36, we were married. I didn't marry before I communicated with this other lady and told her what had happened.

Kelley

So now what school was that where you started teaching?

Kilgore

All right. I taught in a little country school near the town called Forest City, North Carolina. It was about five miles out in the country, and the name of the school was Doggett's Grove [School]. It was a three-teacher school. I was principal. There were two other teachers: one that taught the first and second

grade, another that taught the fourth and fifth grade, and another that taught the third and fourth grade, and I taught the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade.In those days in North Carolina, they had begun some bit of consolidation, and children in that community that finished seventh grade went to the Forest City school. There were two high schools in the county for black children: one in Rutherfordton, which was the county seat for Rutherford County, and another one in Forest City, which was closest to where I taught. I taught there for all of 1935 through the whole school year in '37-38. Then, [in] the fall of '38, I switched and went to teach [at] another school near Asheville in a little town named Waynesville. Stayed there only four months.In the meantime, however, [in] the fall of '36 I was called to the first church I pastored, New Bethel Baptist Church in Asheville. I began pastoring and would commute back down to Rutherford County and Doggett's Grove School all of the spring of '37, fall of '37, and the spring of '38.As I said, [in] the fall of '38, I started in September [as the] principal of another three-teacher school in a little town called Waynesville, North Carolina, about thirty miles from Asheville. I spent most of my time in those years teaching and pastoring. I reorganized the church in Asheville, and at the end of the year of '38, I had been called to a larger church in Winston-Salem [North Carolina]. So I gave up that school in Waynesville at the middle of the year, very much to the dismay of thesuperintendent because it had been a problem school. [It] had one fellow in particular who was a real problem for all of the principals, just kept disturbance in the school. He was a bully, and somehow I was able to conquer him and tame him. I frightened him. Because I think other teachers were afraid of him. In those days you issued corporal punishment. I wasn't afraid of him. He was larger than I was, and I got him to respect me. The superintendent was so pleased and all the community that the school had been straightened out for those four months. But when I was called to the larger church, I accepted it, which meant that I gave up the church in Asheville, where I'd been for two years, since the fall of '36, and went on to Winston-Salem, where I started pastoring my second church. Between the schools that I taught and the small church I was pastoring, that's about all I did. I never got involved in much community life when I was in Asheville.

Okay, now, when you were in Asheville, that was New Bethel Baptist, and in Winston-Salem was that Friendship [Baptist Church]?

Kilgore

Friendship. Yes. Of course, at the same time, my wife and I were married in the fall of '36, too, almost simultaneously while I started pastoring for the church in Asheville in October of '36. We married in December '36.

Kelley

How far is Winston-Salem from Asheville?

Kilgore

Winston-Salem from Asheville is about 160 miles.

Kelley

So this was a major move?

Kilgore

Yes. It was a major move, a major move. It was a major move for us in more ways than one. In Asheville, because of our schedules, my wife was still teaching in Rutherford County even after I took the church in Asheville and took the other school in Waynesville. So we never really settled down to start housekeeping. We lived with a minister who was a friend of mine. I had known him since I was a boy. He and his wife, just two of them, [in] an eight-room house. And we shared that house with them for those first two years we were married, from '36 through '38. Moving to Winston, the church had a parsonage, a small house. It was only four rooms. We later had it remodeled and added two more rooms. That was a major change for us because it meant beginning to housekeep, and we had never done it before.

Kelley

Nowadays four rooms is a big house.

Kilgore

Yeah, that's right.

Kelley

So when you moved to Winston-Salem, what did your wife do for a living?

Kilgore

My wife continued to teach, and although she moved up from the small rural school-because she had taught with me in that rural school. She moved up from the rural school and came in Forest City and taught in the elementary department of the high school. It was a school that had all the grades, from elementary all the way through. She was a fifth-grade teacher there. Taught there for two more years after we had moved to Winston-Salem. Then she gave it up and came to Winston-Salem. Within maybe a year, she had gotten into the school system in Forsythe County. She never taught in Winston-Salem city schools. There were two systems; Winston-Salem was in Forsythe County. She taught in the Forsythe County school system.

Kelley

How big was your congregation at Friendship?

Kilgore

When I went to Friendship, the membership was maybe 350, and it finally built up to where it was about 550. That's about as large as it ever was. It was a small building. The church was sadly in need of another building. We went through that whole program. I went in '38, and by the spring of '42 we were in a brand-new building with classrooms. We developed a nursery school and a lot of community programs. I go back there and see it once in awhile now. Almost a miracle, because when we went through that building at the time [of] the Second World War, all kinds of materials were scarce. The major materials- Getting bricks was not [that] bad. Lumber was not bad. But when it came to plumbing and wiring, things like that were scarce. The government clamped down, and you could get [inaudible] no kinds of buildings, church or anything else. Same thing was true with wiring, and there was something else in there-three different things that we got in just before the government clamped down. And we finished the building. We started in '41, by the summer of '41. We finished the building by the late spring of '42.

Kelley

What are your recollections of the black community in Winston-Salem at the time?

Kilgore

My first interest there was-after I got adjusted to the church-was the political scene. In North Carolina at that time, to keep blacks from voting, by law you had to pass a test which required you to read and write any section of either the North Carolina constitution or the United States Constitution. You had to do this to the pleasure of the registrar, which meant that the blacks were systematically excluded. I sensed this.We had started some interesting programs at our church. One was an adult school. I had discovered that a lot of our finest people had good minds but had just not a lot of formal education. My wife and I and one or two more people organized an adult school. You'd be interested to know how many of the top leaders of that church, deacons, trustees, and church schoolteachers, came to that adult school. We had classes in English, arithmetic, reading, civics, etc. Just an informal school in which they came two nights a week, and, brother, they literally ate it up. After that adult school, we decided that we'd do some citizenship training. So we got all the materials about what you had to do to vote. We went through them. We had role playing. Somebody would serve as one of these hard-nosed registrars who didn't fear calling you a "nigger" or anything else. They'd come up there and we'd go through it, teaching them how not to lose their cool, but know what you're going to do and write out the things required.Time came then for a registration period for new voters. I took five of these people who were the best trained and went to the polls. I had already registered. I had no trouble. They gave them the test, and they did pretty well, but the registrar failed everyone. They said, "I'm sorry, but you didn't make it." I asked them to go ahead. I said, "I'm going to stay here." I told the registrar, "I'm going to stand here and watch you as everybody else comes in here. And everybody who comes in here, you're going to give that test. If anybody does any more poorly than my group and you pass them, I'm going to have you put in jail." He thought I was crazy. All right, I stood there. A white man and his wife came in, very literate. They really passed, did much better than I could have done. Then another one did. Then came another couple who, when he gave them a book to read, actually could not read. Then he asked them to write something.Then, he said, "What you mean you asked me to do all this?"[He] said, "Well, that's

the law, you have to do it.""I never- I know other folk didn't do this."[He] said, "I'm sorry, that's the law." I was standing right there. Then he turned him down.[He] said, "What the hell you mean turning me down? I want to learn."He said, "I'm sorry, you didn't pass the test."I stood there about two hours till two or three more were turned down like that. No other blacks came in. I said, "I'll be back next Saturday." Next Saturday, I can't recall how many we had, but he registered every one of them. He didn't like it. [laughter] So that was sort of a breakdown in Winston-Salem because at that time there weren't more than, I bet you, there weren't more than twenty-five blacks [registered], and the population in Winston-Salem was about fifty/fifty then.The other thing that I sensed, as I pastored and developed there, was the inequities in the pay structure in the factory. You know Winston-Salem was the home of Reynolds Tobacco Company, as was it called then. It's called Reynolds Industries now because it is diversified a lot. Then, I had talked to the people who had worked there. One of the men that I guess I had talked with before anybody else worked at one of the highest levels in the factory, which was on the cigarette-finishing machine, where they actually turned the cigarettes out and put them in a pack. That was a high-skilled job. He was a master at it. He and a white fellow worked on the same machine. They had to have two men on the machine. He made ninety cents an hour less than the white man.Well, I went after this in a different way. There was an interest about the white ministers, interdenominational ministers in Winston-Salem, having a joint meeting with the black ministers. They had never met together before. We welcomed it. I was active in both the interdenominational and the Baptist ministers' group as a young pastor. Okay, they wanted one of the black ministers to speak at that meeting. They asked me to speak. I got in a lot of trouble. I spoke and they assigned a subject, a very, very paternalistic subject: "What can the white ministers of Winston-Salem and the white churches do to help the black ministers and the black churches?" Well, when I got up I said, "I understand, and I don't want to be this discourteous, but you assigned me a subject, and I'm going to change it. I'm going to talk about what we can do to help each other." And I talked. I talked about the inequities in the factory where black people were doing the same job as white people. I talked about the segregated facilities. I talked about- In the newspaper there, they had a black man who wrote a column every day and a little column in one section called "News of Colored Folk." I talked about that. I said, "The many things

that we do in this community that are newsworthy, you segregate them in a little corner in the paper. But if a black man killed somebody, the paper puts it on the front page." I said, "I think we ought to go together and work with the *Winston-Salem Journal* and get them to change that." On Sunday, they gave the black people a whole page, always segregated. I said, "Now, if we're truly going to be Christians-and we're all Christians-if we are truly going to be Christian ministers, these are the kind of things we ought to do: the next thing we ought to do is that we ought to try to learn [about] one another." I said, "You ought to invite me and some of these other black preachers to come to your church sometime and bring our choirs, and we ought to have you to come." And I went down the line. Okay, when the meeting broke up, as we were separating-pretty cool meeting-boy, the black preachers jumped all over me. They said, "We come down here to kind of open up doors, and you just messed up everything with all your radicalism." I said, "No, I didn't. You asked me to speak and the only thing I could do is tell them the truth. That's what I did." I guess at the time I left there, we may have had some more meetings, but I don't remember them. Because I went there in '38 and I left in '47, they were still preaching segregation, you see. I talked about the segregated bus lines and all like that. It didn't take well, but changes did take place. Now, that was another area I was interested in.A third area I was interested in was the whole matter of some relief coming from the outside. I told you earlier I was with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In fact, the Fellowship of Reconciliation worked pretty closely with the labor movement. I had been reading something about a group called the Religion and Labor Council, I think it was called, and I had joined in with it. When this happened about 1943, this group got in touch with me and said that they would like to send some labor leaders there to train some people on how to organize. They came, and we held these classes in the basement of our church. Classes in labor organization and what it would mean for the people. Nothing radical about it, nothing radical. Okay, this was started.In the meantime, by this time I had another job back in schoolwork again, not teaching, but I had been made chaplain of the state teachers college [Winston-Salem Teachers College, since 1969 Winston-Salem State University] in late '41. The man who was chaplain was a schoolmate of mine from Morehouse who accepted a position to become chaplain in the armed forces and recommended me to do the chaplain's work, just a part-time job. I did it from '41 to '44.In that connection, the owners of the Reynolds Tobacco

Company sensed that the labor movement was moving South, and they had a man who gave the school a hundred thousand dollars to set up some classes in the school, evening classes for black preachers. Because the majority of the black preachers worked in the factory just- Well, not a majority of them, but a good many of them. I guess over half of us were full-time in our church. When that was done, the president [Francis L. Atkins] called me in and talked about this money that had been given and said, "Since you are here as chaplain, we want to do two things, like set up some classes and have some classes in religion, teach them New Testament, Old Testament, and maybe some classes in English." Well, I had minored in English in college, so I set up some classes in English and classes in the New Testament. I taught two classes twice a week and had about sixty people; it was moving along. They used this money that this person had given, but it was, in a sense, against the law to be teaching religious classes.One night as I was teaching, the president's brother [Jack Atkins], who was the executive secretary of the college and who was dubbed as a number one Uncle Tom in Winston-Salem among the black people, came in and said [in] class, "I'd like to see you when the class is over." I said, "All right." So I went to his office, and he said to me that the workers down in number twelve-the factories had different numbers-had struck and Mr. Whittaker, who was head of all the personnel, and I knew Mr. Whittaker very well- "Mr. Whittaker thinks that you are the preacher in town that has the most influence, and he wants you to go down there in the morning and get them to go back to work." I said, "No, I have to think about this, and I'll call you later."I went home and two things I did. I called the small group of preachers that I found to be liberal minded, just about four or five, and alerted them to what was taking place. Then, I decided I would go around and visit four or five of the ladies in our church that I knew worked in number twelve. I went. One lady lived right down the street, young lady named Annie Mae. She was an unmarried young lady. Annie Mae was a stockily built young woman. I said, "Annie Mae, I need to ask you some questions. I want you to tell me what you do in number twelve, because I've never asked you that." And she told me about the different things she did. She said the toughest thing they have to do is when they bring in these large two hundred pound [inaudible] of tobacco. You know, they have great big drying areas where they put the tobacco in these big wooden [inaudible]. Then, after it dries out for so long, they bring it into the factories and start processing [it]. She said, "When those

things are brought in here, we have to put them on dollies, these women, and roll them to the place where we sort it out, working." I said, "You don't need to tell me anymore."I went back and I called Jack Atkins-that was the president's brother-and said, "I can't do what you want me to do anymore." I said, "I've gotten information that I just- My conscience won't let me do it. I'm afraid now-" By the way, remember I'd been having these classes at my church. I hadn't told anybody about it. I said, "I think the deliverance now is coming from the outside." I meant by that the lady angel is coming in. I would have been a fool if I had gone out there.The next morning, not only did number twelve strike, but all of the factories-black and white-struck. "Now I do have a role," I said to myself the next morning. Then, I called the other four preachers, and I said, "We have to go downtown and work with the people and organize them, because they've never had a strike before." We went downtown, organized them into groups, not leaders, and schooled them into what they were to do: Follow your picket procedures. Don't block the street, but start singing Negro spirituals, church songs. For six weeks, that's what they did. It felt like a big revival down there. Every day we'd go down there. We'd go down and see them, and finally they sat down at the table and bargained and won a contract from the industry. That's right.

Kelley

This is like 1943.

Kilgore

It happened the latter part, middle of '43. We got castigated for it. In the meantime, the company quickly put together an in-house association. That association- The company didn't do it. [It was] that association [which] came out with a whole half-page in the daily-it might have been a page-branding us preachers as hirelings of the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, saying that we had abandoned our pulpits [and] were out in the streets, stirring up trouble when we ought to be preaching the gospel. Pulled my five people together, sat down, and man, we carefully worded an answer, very carefully. "You're hirelings of the CIO. You ought to be serving the Lord." All that. We went to the paper and said, "Now we, not demand, but we feel that in all fairness you ought to give our article the same prominence in the paper that you gave to this association, company association." And they did. We

answered and simply said that we answered to no one but God. That we had been called to preach. We were prophets. When we saw injustice, we had to speak. There's injustice in Winston-Salem. There is inequity in the South, discrimination, and we are no hirelings of the CIO. We are hirelings of God. He is the essence of justice, fairness, and all that. They came back with another big rebuttal. Fellow said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "Nothing." I said, "We have said what we're about. Let's just keep doing that." So it died down.

Kelley

This tape's about to run out. One last question though, real briefly. When you were involved in the voter registration activity, what year was that?

Kilgore

I went to Winston-Salem in '38. That had to be 1940.

Kelley

Nineteen forty.

Kilgore

Nineteen forty. That's right.

1.4. Tape Number: III, Side One (May 24, 1986)

Kelley

When we left off last week, I was really interested in your activities organizing the tobacco workers. To recapitulate, you mentioned that there was a lot of opposition to your activities, and that they claimed that you were working for the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. Now, were there any trade union organizers, official trade union organizers in the vicinity?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. At that time, the CIO was working pretty aggressively in the South in the organization of workers, not only in the tobacco industry but in other industries as well. This was in the (as I stated before) early forties. They had come because Reynolds Tobacco Company was such an important industry in the South at that time and, I guess, one of the strongest ones within North Carolina. They felt that this was a good target. Therefore, they sought out

people in the community whom they thought were interested, who were in leadership positions and whom they thought would be interested in improving the condition of the working people. I was interested because I was concerned that the wages at that time were just too low, but I was more concerned about the disparity in the wages between white and black. That is, [as] I stated before, that black people would be doing the same kind of work and getting anywhere from ninety cents to eighty [cents], depending on the job-40 percent less per hour than white workers. I thought that that was unfair and unjust. I guess it is for that reason that they sought me out to collaborate within the matter of organization. As I stated, we had these classes in labor organization in our church basement. The prevailing [feeling], of course, about labor unions then and about the CIO was on the part of industry a very strong opposition, basically because there had been rumors across the country that the CIO was communistically inspired and that whole facet of the labor movement was dominated by Marxists and communists. This, of course, across the South was the scare tactic that was used over and over when labor unions came in. That was not so.Unfortunately, though, about a year or a little more after the organization took place- The tobacco workers in Winston-Salem were organizing and bargained and got a contract. This was, as you may remember, a McCarthy era in which Joseph McCarthy, the senator from Wisconsin, saw communists everywhere. They did finally identify in that organizing group in Winston-Salem some people that they (whether it was actually true or not) branded as communists, and got enough evidence to go before the National Labor Relations Board, and they finally invalidated that contract. That was, I guess, a year or two after the organization.

Kelley

Do you recall some of the names of the organizers?

Kilgore

I do not remember. I cannot remember any of the names of those organizers. I would think that somewhere in my files, which I have not dug back into-the Winston-Salem and New York files-I may have some names there, but I do not remember any names.

Kelley

Were they all black?

Kilgore

No. They were black and white. Black and white. This is the other thing that, of course, always frightened the Southerners in that day, when black and white people came in working together. Then they were always considered as outsiders and, therefore, had no business in the communities.

Kelley

Now, I wonder how did the white workers respond to demands for basically equal wages?

Kilgore

The white workers seemed to have joined in because they felt that they themselves were being discriminated against, not so much in wages but in other kinds of workers' rights. Therefore, when the time came for the organization of a union, they participated along with blacks in the bargaining process.

Kelley

So after 1944, '43, was that when the unionization was basically-?

Kilgore

During that particular period of '40, I guess it started, late '42, '43, and into '44.

Kelley

I see. So after that period of time, what did you do? Did you just-?

Kilgore

Well, what happened is that in January 1944, I made a decision that I should go back and do some further study. I had finished college and had started pastoring and for nine years-from '35 to '44-had been, as I said earlier, [a] public school teacher and a pastor with a bachelor's degree. I decided at that time that I should go and get my divinity degree.The nearest school that I found was the Howard University Divinity School, which was 300 miles away. Now, there were closer schools. There was the Duke University Divinity

School, which was nearer to me, just about a little over maybe 100 miles. But at that time, they did not receive black students. There was the Wake Forest Divinity School, run by Southern Baptists. It was about 150 miles. They did not take black students in '44. So the nearest accredited divinity school to me was Howard University in Washington [D.C.]. So I made arrangement with the church officers in the church in Winston-Salem to bring in a full-time assistant, and I would go and study until I got my degree. I would come back to the church every two weeks. I'd drive to Washington, spend two weeks there, and come back. This full-time assistant carried on the work. It went very well. Did that for the spring quarter of 1944, and came home for the summer. I went back and did the third quarter's work in the fall of '44.After Christmas, I went back and registered for my fourth quarter, starting my what you call a "middler year" in the seminary. At that time I was tabbed by the general Baptist state convention of North Carolina [North Carolina Baptist State Convention], whose executive secretary had resigned to become a pastor of a church in Norfolk. They sent a group up to Washington and persuaded me to come out of school and to take that position. After some conferences with my teachers and all, I decided to do that. This was in mid-January. I had just gotten started. I came back and made arrangements with the church again to bring in the service of a full-time assistant, and I took this job with the state convention and never gave up the pastorate of the church-I would come back every four, six weeks. But this was an enormous job. It was covering a whole state that had about 1,700 churches, many of them rural churches.The program of that state convention- That was the black state convention, about 375,000 parishioners in these churches across the state. The program was to support a black Baptist college, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina; to support a foreign mission convention, the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention; to assist in the supporting of a black orphanage in Oxford, North Carolina; and, of course, to develop a teaching program across the state for church workers. I did this all of '45 and '46, into the end of '47, during which time there was a great development. They had a staff of about five people, and we pushed the work, and it increased to a staff of twelve people, full-time people who were working for the state convention.There were a lot of very interesting experiences in that the state was divided into fifty-five associations, clusters of churches. We dealt through the leaders of those associations, called moderators. We had conferences in different sections,

annual meetings of women and ushers, etc. It was a very, very interesting experience for me. We developed it into the best organized black Baptist body in the country. Interestingly, it is still that today. There is no predominantly black Baptist body in the country as well organized as the North Carolina general Baptist state convention. That includes the national Baptist conventions of the black people. Because it has continued to have good leadership. The man that succeeded me was on my staff, and he became the general secretary, and he stayed there thirty years. He retired ten years ago, and the man who is there now has been there for ten years.

Kelley

Approximately how many black Baptist churches were there in North Carolina at the time?

Kilgore

We did a census and found 1,711 pastored by 1,247 pastors. You say, "How do you do that?" In the rural areas, many pastors had four churches. I remember one distinctly that had five. He pastored five churches at the same time. He'd go to one church every Sunday, and then on one Sunday he would go to two churches. There was service in the morning and one in the afternoon. So in that way the 1,711 churches were pastored by 1,247 pastors.

Kelley

So, 1,711 churches. I know this is a difficult question, but approximately how large do you think the black Baptist congregation was statewide?

Kilgore

All right. Now, those churches-the 1,711 churches-ranged from churches of 25 to 30 members to the largest churches- I would think [that in] the largest churches in North Carolina the membership would not have been more than 1,800, maybe a few that had as many as 2,000 members. The average size church of those churches of North Carolina was a membership of about 275. That's the average size.

Kelley

So [it] seems like I guess the Baptists were predominant.

Kilgore

Yes. In North Carolina-which is true across the South, beginning with Virginia on down through the South: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Virginia. The largest denomination in any one of those states is Baptist. When you get to Louisiana, I guess the second largest would be Catholic. Then, the second largest Protestant denomination in any of those states would be Methodist, the different brands of Methodist: black Methodists, and then the United Methodists. But Baptist would be the largest in any one of those states. That's still true today.

Kelley

Turning back to Howard University- When you arrived, who were some of your mentors that you worked with?

Kilgore

When I arrived there, the person who was dean of the School of Divinity was Dr. William Stewart Nelson, who had earlier been the president of Shaw University, the school that's in North Carolina, black Baptist [school]. Dr. Nelson had succeeded Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, who was a person responsible for getting the Howard University school of religion accredited. By this time, Dr. Mays had gone to the presidency of Morehouse College. Among those teachers that I had, I guess there was Dr. [James] Farmer, who was my New Testament teacher. He was a great scholar. He was one of the-maybe the second or third black person to get a Ph.D. degree from Boston University. He was a great New Testament and Greek scholar. Of course, at that time, the president of Howard was a person whom I knew from my work at the North Carolina church, Dr. Mordecai [W.] Johnson, who was one of the great statesmen and preachers of his era. The dean of the chapel when I went there was Dr. Howard Thurman, who was, by all odds, one of the most outstanding preachers this country has ever developed. Interestingly, both Howard Thurman and Dr. Mordecai Johnson were graduates of Morehouse College. Dr. Mordecai Johnson in 1911 [and] Dr. Thurman in 1923. Those were some of the people there that were mentors of mine. I remember also Dr. [William E.] Keene, who was a professor in the area of theology. He was good. I remember also a very poor professor, Dr. Nichols in church history, who was just one of the worst teachers I ever had. He wouldn't like for me to say that. A very

bright young teacher was named Keene, William Keene, who had just gotten his degree, I guess his Ph.D degree, and was teaching Old Testament at that time. A very bright young fellow.

Kelley

Who were some of your peers and fellow students?

Kilgore

There are two or three that I still keep in touch with. One was Jerry Drayton. Jerry Drayton had finished Morehouse- You must remember, by this time in '44 when I went there, I'd been out of Morehouse nine years. So I was nine years ahead of him. Jerry Drayton had just come up there from Morehouse. Jerry Drayton is now pastoring one of the largest churches in North Carolina in Winston-Salem, by the way, because I introduced him to that church when I was driving backward and forward. The church's pastor was ill, and they asked me, "You [are] up there in that school where all these young preachers are. Get someone to come down and preach for us." So I asked Jerry one day if he wanted to go. He answered very enthusiastically, "Yeah, man." [laughter] He came down and preached. They liked him. The minister progressively became worse and died, and they called him. He was very fortunate. That was one of the largest churches in the state. He came right out of the seminary with no experience as a pastor to the largest church in the state and is still there. He graduated in 1947. He's been there just about forty years now. Jerry Drayton was one.Another person was Kelly Miller Smith [Sr.]. Kelly Miller Smith just died two years ago and for years was pastor of First Baptist Capitol Hill in Nashville, Tennessee, and was assistant dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt [University]. Another of these was Jim [James A.] Eaton. I don't know what's happened to him. Jim Eaton did finally turn up to be my assistant when I pastored in New York between 1947 and 1963. Those were some of my peers.

Kelley

Now, while you were at Howard for that brief time, did you have the same types of discussions concerning theology and social reality, the kind of things that you discussed when you were at Morehouse?

Kilgore

Yes, yes. One of the things that interested me about the Howard [Divinity] School is that it's very liberal. Therefore, I got involved in some of the liberal movements. Particularly, there was an organization known as the Religion and Labor Council that I became very concerned with, and I renewed my acquaintance with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. We got into deep-seated discussions, and I guess my concern about the relating of our religious principles to social problems was greatly heightened during the time that I was there. You must consider [by] going back to seminary nine years older than the average student there, I got into some things. I was elected student representative to the faculty/student committee that made basic decisions for the whole school basically because of the experience I had had and a little more maturity than the average student. But coming back to your question, yes. My understanding and my facility for relating religion to social and economic issues, labor issues and all, was greatly heightened by my experiences at Howard, although I was there just for really one school year, starting into the second one when they pulled me out.

Kelley

I see. So when you left Howard, about how much more did you have to go to finish your M.A.?

Kilgore

Well, it meant that I really-because the week or two that I had in my fourth quarter didn't count-I really had two more full years. I didn't get back to those until 1951 after I moved to New York to pastor.

Kelley

To get a master's in divinity would you have to write a thesis?

Kilgore

Yes, you had to write a thesis. My thesis was on the theological implications of the Montgomery protest movement.

Kelley

Oh, wow. Have you ever considered having it published?

Kilgore

No. I had thought about it. It is in my files over here on the other side. I've got to dig it up. It's a 117-page thesis in which I analyzed the Montgomery protest movement, what I thought caused it, what brought it about (the social conditions and economic conditions that brought it about), how effectively it was carried out, and I projected in there what it would mean to future human relations in this country. I guess that will come later on when I'll talk about that because I don't want to get the story ahead of itself. But I'll tell you later how I came to do that.

Kelley

I'm just curious because I know people who are doing the work in that field. To have access to your thesis would be really helpful. But anyway, after you left Howard, you came back to-

Kilgore

I went back to work for that state convention for the rest of '45, all of '46, and until November '47.

Kelley

There was a major movement in the South at the time in the late forties, the Southern Conference on Human Welfare.

Kilgore

That's right.

Kelley

Were you involved in that at all?

Kilgore

Only in a tangential way. Other movements that I was a part of, like the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, they had connections with the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. We'd send representatives. I don't ever remember being a messenger or a delegate to any of those meetings. I kept up with the movement because I was always interested in any kind of liberation movement that was attacking the scourge of segregation. I was just always concerned about it.I had experiences during the time- You may remember, '45, '46, '47 were crucial times for a lot of different things, gasoline

and all. My job with this state convention required me to travel a great deal. Quite often you had to have stamps for gasoline. It was rationed, and sometimes it would run out, and I'd have to ride the bus. No, I had to [ride the] train from time to time. I had two experiences, one in '46 and one in '47.In '46 I had gone from Raleigh [North Carolina], where my headquarters were, back to Winston-Salem for a weekend. I was leaving Winston-Salem on a Sunday afternoon to ride a train back to Raleigh. I had to change in Greensboro and catch another train. The train was loaded. Many people were riding the trains then because gasoline was hard to get. There was always the segregation, and the black coach was always right behind the engine where you got most of the smoke. When I got in the coach, it was crowded. Every seat was taken. Some ladies were sitting on their luggage in the aisles. I just took a stroll back to the next coach where the white folk were. There was the whole big coach with about nineteen people in it, and I guess the coach would seat about fifty or more. I went to the conductor and I said, "This is bad." I said, "Up in that coach where the black people are-" We weren't using the term "black" then. "Where the Negroes are." "Colored" I may have said. I said, "People are crowded. Ladies don't have seats, and there's plenty of room back here. Why can't the people come back here?"He says, "You can't. It's against the law."I said, "Why can't you switch then? Let these few people go up there and be seated and let the people come back here.""I can't do it."Okay. So he went on. Then he came around taking up tickets, and he came to me and he said, "Ticket, please."I said, "I can't give you my ticket."He said, "Why?"I said, "I don't have a seat. I paid for a seat like everybody else and I don't have a seat. Then you're not treating these people right."He went on and collected his tickets all right. He came back again and said, "Ticket."I said, "I'm sorry. I'm not going to give you my ticket. You give me a seat, and I'll give you my ticket."So he said, "When we get in Greensboro, I'm going to have you put in jail."I said, "I'll be right here waiting for you." But he was so upset. He was an old man. He was almost trembling because I guess he never had that experience before. Got in Greensboro and- These conductors always carried little bags. He finished up his work and got off the train, and he left that station so fast. I saw him walking. He was so glad to get away from there. So I got on off and changed my train and got on the next train going onto Raleigh.The next year I was coming from Raleigh up into Greensboro on a trip, because I had to meet these different conventions and conferences and all

and rode a bus. I got on the bus and [it was] crowded. The only seat I saw was about four seats from the front; there was a white person sitting there, and I sat down. The bus driver came around and said, "You're colored, aren't you?"I said, "I'm a man and I'm an American. I'm a citizen of North Carolina."He said, "But the colored have to sit in the back."I said, "There are no seats in the back, and I paid like everybody else, and I took this seat."He said, "You can't sit up here."I said, "You'll have to put me off. I'm not going to move."He didn't attempt to put me off. He too said, "When I get to Greensboro, I'm going to have you arrested for breaking the law."I said, "I'll be sitting right here when you get to Greensboro." I got to Greensboro. He too didn't do a thing. I rode on to Greensboro like everybody else. Got off the bus and went to where I was going. Because I had gotten to the place that at that time- My first child was born '46 [Lynn Elda Kilgore] and I said, "I am tired of this system, and I'm going to break the law every time I can." I advocated to people to break the segregation laws-I mean from the pulpit-and let's focus the thing. Some people said, "That's wrong. As a preacher, you ought not to urge people." I said, "A law that is unjust should be broken."

Kelley

That's a decade before the Montgomery bus boycott.

Kilgore

That's right, that's right.

Kelley

Wow, that's amazing.

Kilgore

When I moved to New York at the end of '47 when I took the church there, I used to say to the people, "When you go down home on your vacation, break every segregation law you can. Get in jail, and I'll come down there and get you out."

Kelley

Wow. So after 1946- Let's see, '47 was when you moved to New York.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Was there any particular reason?

Kilgore

To go to New York?

Kelley

Yeah, were you sent there by the convention?

Kilgore

No. When I took the job at the convention, I said to them that I will stay for a maximum of three years, that I do not want to end my career or to make a career out of denominational executive positions because I feel that my place is in the pastorate, and therefore I will stay a maximum of three years. I held the church in Winston-Salem for those three years. My family moved to Raleigh for two and a half of those years.In the meantime, in February 1947, on my birthday, the church in New York that was pastored by an old man [John I. Mumford] that had organized the church in Winston-Salem, Friendship Baptist- He moved from Winston-Salem in '26. When he organized the church in New York in 1936, he named it, he and the congregation, Friendship [Baptist Church] for the church he pastored in Winston-Salem. I had visited in New York the spring of 1946. I had gone up to Connecticut to visit some people, and I stopped in New York and visited him. He told me, "I'm not well and I don't think I'm going to live too long, and I'd really love for you to come here and work with me and just take this church over." I said, "I can't do that." He said, "If you don't want to do that, I'm going to leave instructions before I die and ask them to call you to pastor this church because I want you to pastor this church." He died the fall of 1946, in September.Sure enough, the church did call me. They didn't call until February. That was February '47. I was still pastor of the church in Winston-Salem, and about that time, a little later than that, I had moved back to Winston-Salem. When they called-and, of course, I was still secretary of the state convention-I told them that I could not come before the end of the year, about November. They accepted that. Beginning along about July, I would go up one Sunday a month to New York. Then, I

resigned the church in Winston-Salem and told them that as of November I was going to take the church in New York. They were extremely disappointed because I had been away from them mostly for three years. They also felt that it was a little bit unfair, but I saw a greater opportunity for me to serve.To compound the situation, in the early fall-no, in the summer of 1947-a pastor of one of the largest churches in the state [Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church], in Asheville near my home, died. A church [that] since I was a young preacher I always wanted to pastor. They called me after I had accepted the church in New York. To compound it further, my mother pleaded with me and said, "Mount Zion in Asheville is such a great church, and it's close. You would be at home. You ought to take that and turn the church down in New York." But I said, "I can't. I've committed myself to go to New York, and I can't." So I had to- The church was terribly disappointed. I had to tell them, no, that I couldn't take it. So I went on to New York that fall and started to pastor, and moved my family November 1.

Kelley

Do you ever regret that decision?

Kilgore

Never regretted it. I had never pastored in a large city. Winston-Salem was the largest city, about a hundred thousand. But to go into a big place like New York, you don't know what is going to happen. The church was not a big church, about seven, eight hundred members. It developed during the sixteen years I was there. Had about a thousand members, a strong church. We did a lot of things and actually made some little dent in Harlem through some of the programs we established. We had established a community center called the House of Friendship. We had a program dealing with drug addicts. We had a mental health clinic. This House of Friendship had all kinds of activities for young people and adults. The March On Washington 1963, which I helped to organize, was organized in our facility in that House of Friendship. We turned over two floors for the organization. It was a four-story building. We were able to organize within central Harlem an association we called the Heart of Harlem Neighborhood Church Association, about ten churches of different denominations that did things together. We had one summer of vacation church school for a whole month for children in central Harlem and had 1,003

children involved in it. We had other kinds of programs we did. We had common Easter, Good Friday services, and Thanksgiving services. We really developed a little model there that the Protestant Council of New York looked at very seriously as possibly a model for the whole city, but they never did it. I got involved in a number of things while I was there. I was on the board of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], vice president of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in Harlem.

Kelley

That is a real rich area to discuss. Where was Friendship located?

Kilgore

Friendship in New York is located almost in central Harlem on 131st Street between Seventh [Avenue] and Lenox [Avenue].

Kelley

Is it still there?

Kilgore

The church is still there, and it's still a very viable church. I'm going to preach there in November. Reverend [John I.] Mumford organized it. That was a man I followed there in 1936, which means that in November '86 it will be fifty years old, and I've been invited to preach the fiftieth-anniversary sermon.

Kelley

So when you arrived in Harlem, this is 1947. This is four years after the Harlem riot of 1943. I wonder what were your impressions of the city and the black community?

Kilgore

I had mixed feelings. One, I said, "It's just too crowded." I couldn't find a house to live in, it was so crowded in Harlem at that time. We finally found an old house up in the Bronx that they had turned into a two-floor, two-family flat. The church bought it and turned it into one house, a nine-room house. That was my first impression: that it's too crowded, too many people stacked up on one another.The second impression was that the political system in New York-Tammany Hall still had a good bit of influence in politics. It was a terrible

system, a terrible system. I looked at the church situation, and I found that the church as a whole, except a very few, were just places of worship and were not really concerned about the improvement of the community. These are the things that disturbed me greatly. I found that not enough young people in Harlem seemed to be breaking through and going to college. They just [got] caught, sort of trapped. The numbers racket was just prime, and everybody practically played the numbers. I tried a little experiment at the church, and I talked about it, the way they wasted money. Then I asked them to start on a certain time, and all the money we are going to put into numbers that week, put it in an envelope and bring it to church. A few of them did it. But that was just sort of a way of life in Harlem. The drug business developed later while I was there. Particularly, the one that really caught so many young people at that time was heroin. I don't know how it is now. But those were some of the traumatic social problems that I found.I also found though that in those people who came to church, there was a real dedication if you wanted to do something. If you really wanted to improve the community, you could get some help, and people followed very well. When I left there, we had just bought seven of those row houses on the street behind the church, where we were going to build a Christian ed. [education] building on the first two floors and have four floors of first-class housing above that. It fell through after I left. They took the buildings and they've torn them down now and made a parking lot out of it. But that was one of the things. I sensed then that Harlem needed new housing and needed more places for young people to gather and all. That's the reason I wanted to have two floors of community-center-type things to do a lot of things.So I had all kind of mixed impressions about it, and said all the time that Harlem and New York City would not really make strides toward a new renaissance (there was a real renaissance in Harlem in the twenties and early thirties) until there was some decentralization. Now that has happened. Unfortunately, there's too many of those old brownstone houses still standing. There's another church there that's really gone into this. A pastor by the name of Wyatt T. Walker has made some real strides in cleaning out some of those old brownstones. He's led in building three new big housing complexes right in Harlem. There's another church there that Father Moran Weston- Saint Phillip's Church has done that same thing. But Harlem's population is maybe 15 or 20 percent smaller now than it was when I was there, which I think is good.

Kelley

Now, there were some activities- For instance, you have Reverned Adam Clayton Powell [Jr.] and other- I guess the Abyssinian [Baptist] Church was active in the community.

Kilgore

Yes, yes. Adam Clayton Powell's activities in the Harlem community reached their height before I got there. He really started about the time I was finishing college making some substantive changes. I finished college in '35, and it was along about that time that Adam led boycotts of the stores in Harlem, particularly along 125th Street and Seventh Avenue, and demanded that black clerks work. He led boycotts against the telephone company by getting massive numbers of people not to pay their telephone bills until they would begin to hire black telephone operators. Massive boycott against the subways to get black operators on the subways and all. Those were things that Adam led between, I guess, about '33 and about- Those changes had been made at least by the late thirties and early forties. As a power, he was a power in Harlem. By that time I got there, he was very active then as a congressman. Adam, I think, got through some twenty-two or twenty-four laws. He became chairman, if you remember, of the [United States House of Representatives] Labor and Education Committee. Twenty-three or twenty-four laws, particularly under Lyndon [B.] Johnson. That's made a great deal of difference. Most of these student loan things and all like that we have now, Adam's committee brought those bills forward, and he made a tremendous, tremendous contribution.

Kelley

Did you know him personally?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. I knew him personally, yes. I had preached at Abyssinian Church when he was pastoring there and exchanged services and all. They've honored him in a unique way right in the heart of Harlem at 125th [Street] and Seventh Avenue. They cleared out a whole block there from 125th to 126th [Street] and from Seventh to Lenox. It's a whole square where the state has built a state office building, a twenty-something-story building. Have you seen it?

Kelley

Yeah. I've seen it. In fact, I was there for the Harlem Week celebration.

Kilgore

Okay. The Adam Clayton Powell Building, which I think is a significant honor for him. And the Seventh Avenue up that way has been named Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard.

Kelley

Who were some of the other-? You said you were vice president of the NAACP, and I know in Harlem the NAACP was the heart, which meant that you were almost, in terms of national leadership, you know, very close.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

What were some of your activities with the NAACP, and what was your impression of the organization?

Kilgore

That time, the NAACP, when I was vice president, was led by- [I] forget his name. He's now very strong in the media. He owns several radio stations. He was once the borough president of Manhattan, Percy [E.] Sutton. Percy Sutton was the president. At that time, the NAACP was in its traditional battles against various forms of subtle segregation.

1.5. Tape Number: III, Side Two (May 24, 1986)

Kilgore

-elevating black people to positions of power in the school system, still dealing with the rapid transit system with the same thing. Even though there were plenty more of them and everything, there were not black people at the level of decision making. It was those kinds of things that the NAACP was tremendously concerned about in the forties and fifties.

Kelley

I see. So what were some of the specific activities? Do you recall?

Kilgore

Of the NAACP, the specific problems-

Kelley

And also, what years were you active?

Kilgore

Let me see if I can date that. I don't know whether I can date that or not. [pause] No, I can't. I can't. I was only active in the NAACP for maybe about three years. I cannot remember any of the specific cases that we dealt with. I just know that under Percy Sutton's leadership that- For one time we had, I remember, some very weak leadership and we didn't get much done. I just remember that he began to tackle- One of the things that we were dealing with [was] getting black superintendents. They had sub-superintendents all across New York, and it was finally worked out, and it got started back then. Well, a specific thing that we dealt with was the matter of the decentralization of the school system. That was started then. At that time, there was one monolithic school board, had one black person on it. Dr. Gardner Taylor was on that, pastor of the church in Brooklyn. That was the beginning of the pressure of the NAACP to decentralize that school system and to set up sub-districts throughout the city. This has finally happened. That is the most specific thing that I can remember. There was great pressure on the part of NAACP for that.

Kelley

Okay, turning back to your church services, did you see any substantial differences in the kind of congregations you pastored in the South versus New York?

Kilgore

Yeah, yeah, there was a difference. In the South, to a large measure, most churches, not all of them, had a community flavor. They served a certain community. That wasn't so in New York. In New York, people gravitated to the kind of church services they liked. So you got a more heterogeneous membership than you did in the South. Well, this was something positive; it

could have been negative. In the South, where you had a more homogeneous leadership, there were usually clusters of families that tried to dominate churches. If it didn't have a strong pastor, they would dominate and run the churches, you see. For generation after generation, families that had been in the churches would do that. That you did not find in New York. Most of the black people in New York when I got there had come from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and some other states. They gravitated to the church that had a form of worship service most similar to the ones that they had been used to in the South. So the leader of the church did not have the problem of having to work against family clusters who dominated them. However, in the North you did have certain people who were not along the line of family clusters who would attempt to gain power in running the churches, and it caused some real conflicts in some of the churches.Worshipwise, the churches in New York were to some extent behind the churches in the South. Let me tell you why. In the South from Virginia on down to Mississippi, every state has some two, three, four, five, six colleges where black young people go to college. Those colleges have some influence on raising the level of even the worship services. In the North that isn't so. The young people grow up after the first generation, and there are not as many, percentage-wise, that go to college. There, when they finished high school, they could get jobs then. Can't do it now. So that made a difference in the quality of the worship services in the North. And my wife [Jeanetta Scott Kilgore] and I found that distinctively when we went there. We had to do a lot of revamping of the quality of worship. I think that difference would not be as great now as it was forty years ago.

Kelley

How did your family fare in New York? I mean, your children were about to go to school, I believe.

Kilgore

When I moved to New York, our oldest child was thirteen months old. Her sister [Jini Medina Kilgore] was born three months later. To begin with, we, as I told you, lived in the Bronx, in the South Bronx. At that time, the Puerto Rican in-migration to New York was fifty thousand a year. One of the areas that they flooded was the South Bronx. I remember the house next to us. For a

while there may have been thirty people living in that house, same size as ours. This meant that the schools, beginning at the kindergarten level, were terribly slowed because they had to give the Puerto Rican children time to learn the English language. So we began by sending our children to a private school at the kindergarten level, and we kept them in a private school.One of the decisions that made us start looking for a house- I had been used to a private house everywhere I lived in the South-unattached. Here we lived in this two-story house where you could see out of the front and out of the back. I couldn't take it. I began to get claustrophobia. I said, "I've got to find a house somewhere where I've got some land around it and where it's unattached." So I had a friend of mine that kept looking until he found the house out on Long Island in a little place called East Elmhurst. We went to see it, and we liked it. I asked the church to buy it.Then, when we moved out there, of course, our children went into public schools. My wife was a former public school teacher in North Carolina, and she got a job in one of the schools that my children went [to]. In that way, we kept them in the private kindergarten until we were able to move. Then they went into public school and remained in public school until their last two years of high school, both of them. We sent them to what was at that time a very excellent finishing school down in North Carolina run by a black lady, who with the help of a lot of rich Bostonians developed-her name was Charlotte Hawkins Brown-developed one of the finest prep schools in the country called Palmer Memorial Institute. Our daughters, both of them, went there for their junior and senior high school years. That's where each of them graduated from.

Kelley

So by the early 1950s, is that when you decided to-? Well, two things were happening. I guess you decided to go back to school?

Kilgore

Yeah, after I was in New York. I went there in '47, and I decided in '51. I'd gotten the church well organized and everything. It was moving along very well, and I decided that I could have enough time to study. I discussed it with the church. So I entered Union Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in New York in the fall of '51, just doing maybe two classes. I did that along through '51, '52, right on up to '53, '54, '55, '56. In '56 I took a whole semester off

because that's the time I had to write my thesis, and then I graduated in the spring of '57. To do that two years' work, I took six years to do it, just doing one or two classes a semester, until one semester I did a full load when I wrote my thesis.

Kelley

Now, Union Theological Seminary is famous internationally.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

I mean, it's a giant school, and I know they had a lot of major figures who came out of that. Who were some of your mentors?

Kilgore

There were three major ones when I was there. Reinhold Niebuhr, who was one of my favorite teachers because of his whole outlook on what the gospels are all about. He was one of my favorites, and I knew him personally. I worked with him in projects outside of the school. Paul Sheara, who was my teacher in homiletics, preaching teacher, outstanding pulpiter. Paul [J.] Tillich was there at the same time and a great theologian. I have his three-volume book now on systematic theology. I never had a class under Paul Tillich. I heard him speak more than once. I had several classes under Reinhold Niebuhr. Pit Von Duesen was a teacher in theology also who was the president at that time. At that time, there was no black professor at Union, and many think that Von Duesen was responsible for not having any. (Von Duesen, by the way, ended up tragically just several years ago. He and his wife became almost invalids, and they made a pact, and they did a double suicide. That's right, just about five years ago, a double suicide.) Coming into Union at that time were many great speakers, of course, from all over the world. It was a good experience even though, as I said, I took a few classes at a time. I did come to know a lot of people, students and teachers.It was during my last year when I wrote my thesis that I went down to Montgomery to get a firsthand look in late January 1956. Another preacher and I had raised five or six thousand dollars to help with the movement, since I had known [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] all of his life

and I was tremendously moved by what was happening in Montgomery, it was getting such attention. So, we raised the money and got a plane and went to Montgomery and stayed down there a few days and looked at the movement, studied it and got a lot of details about it. And then when I came back, I was asked by one of my professors in a course called Religion and Community to lecture. I lectured for about, oh, I guess, the three different class periods on what was happening in Montgomery. When I got ready to write my thesis, I chose to write about the Montgomery protest movement.

Kelley

I see. I would like to backtrack just a bit. Now, you mentioned you'd known King just about all his-When did you meet him?

Kilgore

I met King in the fall of 1931, met the King family. That's the year I went to Morehouse College as a freshman. Two seniors, one named Milton King Curry, who later became president of Bishop College, and another named Jordan-I don't remember Jordan's first name-invited me the very first week I was there to come and go with them to church. I met these two people, and I liked them very much. The church they went to was Ebenezer [Baptist Church]. I liked the service. I met Dr. [Martin Luther] King, Sr. He had just become the pastor. His father-in-law had died in the spring. The Reverend Dr. A. [Adam] D. Williams had died in the spring. He [Martin Luther King, Sr.] had been assisting his father-in-law and they had called him to the pastorate of the church. He was just getting started as pastor. Then, I also met, of course, the whole family, Mrs. [Alberta Williams] King and Mrs. King's mother [Jennie Williams], the widow of Dr. A. D. Williams. She liked me, just sort of took a liking to me, and one Sunday-I don't know how many Sundays I'd been-she said, "Come on and go home and have dinner with us." I said, "Oh, my goodness, is that a treat." Man, that fare they had at Morehouse at that time was such that to get an invite to a homecooked meal was like going to heaven. So I went and enjoyed it. I remember sitting out on the porch in that house-now it's been restored, King's birthplace-and playing with King (basically with him, because he was a precocious young fellow) and holding him in my lap. He was two years and nine months old. Bouncing him on the knee like he's riding a horse. I had a lot of fun with him. He could ask a lot of questions. I can't remember some of

them, but he asked. That's where I first met him. And on more than one occasion, I went to those Sunday dinners, not more than two or three times, I would think. So I established a friendship with the whole King family that lasted all through the years.I attended every one of those funerals. Of course [Martin Luther] King [Jr.]'s funeral, I participated in King's funeral. Then later the tragic service of his brother [A. D. King], which was about a year and a half later. I went back and I participated in that service. And then the terrible tragedy. I had just gone to Hawaii in 1974, just for a few days rest over there at a friend's who let me use an apartment, a condominium out from Honolulu. I wanted to do some reading and all. Got there on Saturday, and then Sunday, my wife called me and told me about having gotten a message about Mrs. [Alberta Williams] King being killed. I caught a plane the next day and came back and went on to Atlanta, and I participated in Mrs. King's funeral. It was just a tragedy. I, of course, attended Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Sr.]'s. I did not participate in Dr. King's funeral, but I was there for the funeral. But I followed the family through the years.

Kelley

Back at Union Theological-

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr both have been considered, you know, radical theologians. Niebuhr was supportive of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. Tillich, King wrote his dissertation on Tillich, I believe. Now, what kind of influence did they have on you in terms of-?

Kilgore

Paul Tillich not much, because Paul Tillich, of course, his whole forte was theology, and I never considered myself a great theological student. I considered myself a student of religion and life, so to speak, with certain basic theological undergirdings. Had to have that. Therefore, Niebuhr appealed to me much more and made a much more indelible impression upon me, because he was an exponent of what was called neoorthodoxy. But also, his

concept of the impact of religion upon society sometimes seemed almost contradictory. I remember his book distinctly, *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* in which he followed the thesis that as individuals we may be able to keep pretty well on the good moral path and ethical path. But as we begin to bring collections of individuals together and in a sort of societal context, something else that's hard to understand enters into the picture. It becomes much more difficult for societal structures to remain moral and ethical than it is for individuals. That is true. That always fascinated me as to how I could deal as a preacher and with some concept of theology. How I could deal with societal structures to get them to walk a more definite ethical path. [phone rings] Excuse me. [tape recorder off]

Kelley

You know what always amazed me, it's sort of a historical question, but you know when you're a preacher to a black congregation you speak the people's language. When you go to the university and you engage in theological studies, like the philosophical underpinnings of theology or simply studying the Bible from a scholar's perspective, I wonder how black pastors are able to basically be bilingual and maintain that connection with the congregation. [tape recorder off]

Kilgore

This never was a problem for me. Let me tell you why. I've tried to keep an open mind all the time. I grew up in basically a religious context that was fundamentalist. But Morehouse did something for me because of the type of professors I had there that helped me to break that fundamentalist shell. Sort of like King had the same experience. So that I was taught to think and taught to be analytical even where religion is concerned. It was accentuated as I began to do studies in theological seminaries. Therefore, I found ways-Let me give you a good example of trying to interpret to churches that I pastor what religion and the Bible are all about, that religion first is a way of life. The Bible is a record of how people dealt with and tried to understand God. Okay, take the book of Genesis that tells about how man came on earth, how woman was made, and so forth. I've interpreted everywhere I've pastored that we must understand the basic and fundamental meaning of the Bible. In the first place, if you try to look at Adam and Eve as the first man and woman, you're in

trouble to start with. And the Bible itself just tricks you to begin with, because you read a little further- If they were the only ones, then Cain and Abel were their children. Then, after Cain killed Abel, Cain left, and he went into another place and he married. Where did his wife come from if Adam and Eve were the only man and woman? So you can't see it.So you have to see the symbolism of the Bible, which has much more meaning than it does in history. Because a book of Genesis is just not, except in the early parts, a book of history. It's a book of the Hebrew people trying to interpret how things started. And so when we do that, Adam simply means mankind, and how mankind really started we don't know. But so that we could conceive it some way and get a cognitive understanding of it, the Hebrews had to put it in this way, as many other creation myths are written and as, you know, in other civilizations.I have had no problem in saying that. I've upset some fundamentalist-thinking people in that. That's just one example. Because I went through my training and was taught that you have to approach the Bible from a historical, analytical point of view and not be afraid of form criticism. Now, of course, the fundamentalists, you see, they think that I'm just all wet, that I'm a heretic. But I've had no problem in doing it. I cannot just compromise and say to people as I preach what they want to hear. I can't do it. If they disagree with me, that's all right. So I have had no problem in moving from the halls of academia into the church. I guess this is basically so because my gospel has always been socially tempered.

Kelley

What about in terms of language, in terms of-?

Kilgore

I try to pull the language down. My wife criticizes me sometime at that point, that my language may be a little too elevated at points for the people to really grasp, and I've had problems at that point. That becomes a little bit difficult sometimes, because there are certain words in the language that have to express your inner feelings. You have to try to break it down as best you can so that everybody you're talking to can pick it up. That is not so easy.

Kelley

Yeah, that is one thing that always amazed me, because I grew up in the Baptist church. It just amazed me how people could basically articulate much better than I can. I have too much education. Now I feel like you can't even talk to people.

Kilgore

I know, I know. That's a problem because language becomes your vehicle for transmitting concepts and ideas. When you, through your training, get steeped in a more sophisticated language which much more accurately expresses what you understand, and the other person is not that sophisticated, it sometimes creates a gap.

Kelley

Who were some of the other students at Union which you may have come in contact with?

Kilgore

When I was at Union, you see, going like I did, students moved through and graduated while I was still there. But one student that I remember very well was a student named- He's written a book, too, called *The Spouse Gap* and I had him in our church. He conducted a conference. He's a Chinese student named Lee. I'm trying to think-Robert Lee. Robert Lee was a student when I was there. James McKafee Brown, who is a retired theologian, was a student, a doctoral student while I was there, and I had some classes under him because he was a T.A. for awhile. A great young pastor in, not young now, in Philadelphia at White Rock Baptist Church- His name is Shaw. We graduated in the same class. Bill Shaw, [R.] William Shaw. Those are three students that I remember, I guess, more than any others at the time I was there.

Kelley

While you were there, were there any-? The group of black students that were at Union, did they pull together symposiums or conferences dealing with black folks?

Kilgore

There were so few black students when I was there that the consciousness of black caucuses had not started then. Now, of course, in nearly every seminary,

big white seminary, predominantly white, you have it. But I would imagine that there were no more than eight or ten black students in Union when I was there. And so there was no kind of gathering among blacks. I do not remember another black student, because in most classes I was in I was the only black student in them.

Kelley

When it was time to write your thesis, what led you to choose a topic?

Kilgore

I majored in church and community. I took all the basic courses in theology, New Testament, Old Testament, church history, and all, but I knew my own bent. My own bent was what will be the effect of religion on community life. Therefore, I took all the courses I could get on church and community. Therefore, majoring in church and community, I looked at the Montgomery protest movement as one of the most dynamic movements of that particular period in history that really grew out of the church in a larger measure because all the basic leaders were church people: King, [Ralph D.] Abernathy, [Fred L.] Shuttlesworth, the one that just died. Died while I was down in Alabama a few weeks ago. Gosh, what's his name? Lambert, William Lambert. These were all church people, and they were the foremost people in that movement. Here they are dealing with a community problem that is not just confined to Montgomery, but a problem that is pervasive in the whole structure of American society, and bringing to bear on that problem the kind of unique evaluation and criticism of it, showing that it belies all of our testimonies about being a free democracy. Those are the basic things that made me want to write about that. Because I was convinced that nothing was happening in America at that time that was any more fundamental than that Montgomery protest movement.

Kelley

Who was your adviser?

Kilgore

My adviser? Gosh, I keep trying to think of his name. [He] was head of that department. Robert Lee was one of them. He was a student that I knew there

who by this time had become a T.A. working on his doctorate. Robert Lee was one. He scrutinized my thesis more than the other men did. Robert was not head of the department. I can't think of the man's name [who was] head of the department. But he was the one that had me give three lectures on the Montgomery movement when I came back.

Kelley

Now, what were some of your findings and your conclusions in the thesis?

Kilgore

Basically, that here was a model that America needed to look at. That was one of the basic things. Secondly, that the church itself in America had to come alive at the point of confronting structures in America that were illegal, immoral, and unethical. Those were two of the things. I made some suggestions-I don't remember all of them now-of how we ought to go about this through our various structured organizations: the National Council of [the] Churches [of Christ in the United States of America], the various conventions and conferences, and so on. And I saw after that that more and more some of the churches began to deal with those things.

Kelley

In fact, SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] was founded 1957.

Kilgore

SCLC grew out of that movement. This movement started in the fall of '55, and SCLC was born [in] '60, I believe, '59 or '60. I'm not certain on that, so I wouldn't quote those dates.

Kelley

Now, to backtrack, it seems like the period from about 1950, '51, to the time you finished your thesis, outside of the university, outside of the theological seminary, there was this buildup of civil rights activities both in the South and the work that you were doing at the church. Now, what were some of the major trends, and how did that impact your-?

Kilgore

Well, one of the major trends that took place at that time, of course, was the school desegregation that you get the opinion being handed down in '54 *[Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas]* and the supplemental opinion on May 17, 1954. That, of course, had a great deal of impact on me. Because it had, for me, more implications than just school. We were also facing great problems then of jobs and the lack of freedom in so many sections of society.In that light, in 1957, the same year that I graduated from school, I was tabbed to conduct a movement by Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney [M.] Young [Jr.], Dorothy [I.] Height, and it seemed like Jim [James] Farmer was involved at that time, to conduct a march on Washington which was called the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. I was tabbed to conduct it. I took off six weeks from the church and had an office down in the national office [of the] NAACP and organized this pilgrimage. We got 50,000 people from all across the country. Some came [from] as far as California to the Lincoln Memorial and had this demonstration. "For Jobs and Freedom" was the theme. I had become more and more conscious that there had to be massive demonstrations of black people and other poor people who were being denied certain privileges. That is the reason they asked me to conduct that pilgrimage.In the meantime, in the summers during that same period, I became active in going through the South. I had a small group of singers in our church, a group of sisters and one aunt. It was a quintet that I would take on tours through the South and speak against segregation. Some churches wouldn't let us come in. That was following the school desegregation thing. I was conscious that we had to keep alive the thrust to break the back of segregation.

Kelley

So what year was this that you were-?

Kilgore

Now, those were the years of '55, '56, '57, and went on into '58, [I was] doing that.

Kelley

What were some of your recollections of, I mean some specific recollections, of the Prayer Pilgrimage?

Kilgore

Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. I guess the most significant recollection was- By this time, King was emerging as the predominant spokesman, sometimes to the dismay of some of the older civil rights people. There were some jealousies. My specific recollection was two things: the singing at that service of Mahalia Jackson and the speech of Martin Luther King in which he made his "I Have a Dream" speech, but this time he was pleading for the vote. I guess that's the most vivid recollection that I have of that. The other recollection is that, because it was dubbed the Prayer Pilgrimage, we had about two thousand clergymen of all races and religions who had a special seating place, and we encouraged them to wear their proper robes and regalias. It was very, very impressive. The other recollection was a litany that I wrote that I had trouble with with some of them, particularly with Roy Wilkins, because he felt that I had used Christian language in it too much. I said, "Well, I'm a Christian and I write it from the Christian point of view. If a Jew wrote it, he would do the same thing." But it went over very well, and the whole group participated in it. I think that the pilgrimage had some effect, nothing like the effect that we had later on, six years later in '63, because we had five times as many people in '63. Had over 250,000. But it had some effect in keeping alive the fact that the country needed to make changes.

Kelley

Yeah, it's amazing how- Fifty thousand people, regardless, is a lot of people for any demonstration. For being [the] late fifties, I was always curious how come it didn't get as much attention or recognition?

Kilgore

Well, at that particular time, the media attention, of course, had been centered- This was '57. This was just the spring of '57, which is just eighteen months after the Montgomery protest movement had started, you see. I guess it just had not had time for it to get the kind of media attention the March on Washington in '63 [got]. Many more things had happened in '63. The movement had accelerated. SCLC was out there in the forefront. Many more things had happened in those six years. The battles in the streets in the cities across the country, particularly in the South, had focused the media on the movement much more. In '57 there was still sort of the wake of the school

desegregation thing and not much was happening. Sort of a quiet period. But it was A. Philip Randolph's concept that we should have this pilgrimage. And it worked out, and I think it had some impact.

Kelley

I know he attempted to do the same thing in 1941, his march on Washington.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

And it's interesting because with this Prayer Pilgrimage, the emphasis on jobs in addition to freedom was different than from what I perceive, at least, from the early civil rights movement.

Kilgore

Yes. It was a little bit different because at that time A. Philip Randolph, being a labor person, understood that, I guess, better than any of us. At that time, there was a real problem for jobs among blacks across the country. There was also a real problem in the voting process. There were still few, as compared to the great number of black people, anywhere in the South that were voting. It was a proper emphasis at that time. The media then was not as enlightened, and therefore, I think purposely did not publicize that kind of thing. But as the movement continued over the next five or six years, they had to do it.

Kelley

Well, we can follow up on this.

Kilgore

Okay.

1.6. Tape Number: IV, Side One (June 19, 1986)

Kelley

Last time we talked, we left off with the Prayer Pilgrimage and some of your civil rights activities in the South during the mid-fifties. I was wondering if you

could elaborate on, first of all, your role in the Prayer Pilgrimage, and then discuss the march on Selma and other activities in the South.

Kilgore

There's of course, as you know, a gap between the Prayer Pilgrimage- Because it was in '57 and the Selma marches were in '64. So there is a gap of seven years between those two, between the Prayer Pilgrimage, which was on May 17, 1957- The other thing that came before the Selma march was the big March on Washington [1963], if we're going to keep it sort of chronological, you see. Okay, did you want me to say something about the Prayer Pilgrimage?

Kelley

Yes, definitely.

Kilgore

All right. At the time that the Prayer Pilgrimage took place, I was, of course, pastoring then at Friendship Baptist Church in New York. At a meeting of Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.], Mr. Roy Wilkins, Mr. Whitney [M.] Young [Jr.], Mr. A. Philip Randolph-these were the prime leaders at that time-Mrs. Dorothy [I.] Height with the National Council of Negro Women, and the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] representative, which was at that time John Lewis- These persons decided that the whole matter of jobs and unemployment among black people and poor people in the country was almost a national disgrace. And therefore, they thought that a demonstration in Washington might do something. Therefore- It was dubbed the "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom." We added "and Jobs." I was asked then to be the director, to organize that. I took leave from Friendship Church for six weeks and took up an office in the national office of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in New York City with the help of a secretary, and proceeded with the organization. I asked Mr. Bayard Rustin, who was active at that time in the civil rights movement, to serve as associate director of the Prayer Pilgrimage. And maybe he was the person who did more in developing the logistics for it than anybody else.What I did in making preparation, I moved around the country to several of the major cities: Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit. I guess that was as far as I went.

Since the NAACP was deeply involved in it- By that time, there were not branches of SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] in any section. [I] had the NAACP leaders to call meetings and to organize contingents in their areas to work among the civil rights people (three segments: civil rights people, union people, and church people) and set up that kind of organization. We asked ministers all across the country in major cities to form bus pools to come to Washington, and so on. As a result, on that day-May 17, 1957-we put around the Washington [Monument] what was generally thought to be about fifty thousand people. We had the usual rally of music, songs, the major speeches. One was made by Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Dr. King, with music from others. Mahalia Jackson sang, and there were many, many clergymen and others from around the country who played dominant roles in it. What impact was made, we do not know. It did get a good bit of publicity. At that time in '57, who was the president? Lyndon [B.] Johnson, I guess, yes. No, not Lyndon Johnson, because this was before [John F.] Kennedy's day. In '57-

Kelley

[Dwight D.] Eisenhower?

Kilgore

Eisenhower, '52. Yes, because he was elected '52 and went to '60, and Kennedy was elected in '60. Eisenhower was president. We did not get what we wanted as we did later with the March on Washington, six years later when the top figures did get in and have a conference with Kennedy in '63. We did not get that with Eisenhower. What impact was made on the country is pretty hard to tell.

Kelley

What themes were more dominant in terms of the balance between the question of labor and civil rights?

Kilgore

One of the things is that when the civil rights movement began developing, it considered early in the process that one of their allies would be labor, particularly the more enlightened labor movements. One of them was the

UAW [United Auto Workers]. Of course, you had Walter [P.] Reuther, who was then president of UAW, that I think was one of the most enlightened labor leaders this country's ever had. There were others within the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] that were also cooperative, both in the point of view of local unions and in the point of view of the national organization. The similarity was there because labor itself has had to wage a battle for freedom and equity and justice, and so we were waging the same battle that was being waged by black people and poor people in the country-particularly by black people, and poor people irrespective of their ethnicity. So we were saying, "Since you have been waging this battle since the days of [Samuel] Gompers and the early labor movement people, you are a natural ally for us now as we wage a battle against segregation, discrimination, no jobs, and poor pay, because you've been fighting this battle all along." So we sensed that they were natural allies. We also sensed that the religious forces were natural allies because they were the people, both the black church people and others, the Jewish people, who have raised the question all the time about the unrighteousness of injustice. So therefore, the civil rights movement led heavily toward those two entities in our society.

Kelley

When you participated in the pilgrimage, you were gone from your pastorate for about six weeks?

Kilgore

Six weeks.

Kelley

And then you returned. Were there any changes?

Kilgore

No. Having said that I took away from the church for six weeks did not mean I was away from the church every Sunday. It meant that I was not there in the day-by-day activities of the church. The assistant pastor in the church carried on those activities. So the church really had to maintain. There was no visible change in the effectiveness of the church work.

Kelley

What about in terms of its direction, civil rights issues in New York?

Kilgore

I think maybe those movements- Because New York was an original point for many of those things being organized. I think New York in some sense was usually out front, not in the sixties but even before that time. Because Adam Clayton Powell [Jr.] in the late thirties and forties had sparked the civil rights movement in New York in his advocacy of jobs on 125th Street, where all the big stores were, and his advocacy of black telephone operators and his advocacy of motormen, particularly on the subway trains. So the civil rights movement in Harlem, in a large measure, had been sparked by Adam Powell years before these activities that took place in the late fifties and early sixties.

Kelley

So what was your next major task after '57?

Kilgore

My next major task after '57 really was to concentrate on some organization right there in the Harlem community. I was active in the NAACP, a branch of the NAACP. I was on the board of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. I led in the organization of a neighborhood church association [House of Friendship] in which we dealt with many of the problems in the community. It was those kind of things that I found myself active in till we came up to the early part of 1963. I was also active in the SCLC movement before '63. I was active in establishing, under the direction of Dr. King, an office there. I think this took place about '59 on 125th Street to raise funds for the SCLC movement. By this time, the movement was accelerating in the South and growing stronger and stronger, building a staff. Therefore, funds were needed. A lot of people were getting in jail. We needed the bond money. In early '59, two other persons and I under Dr. King's instructions established an office on 125th Street, 217 West 125th Street, in which we raised funds, something over a million dollars over about a four-year period that was directed straight to the SCLC. Only one person was paid to do the day-by-day work in the office. I was director of the office. The other person was consultant. Jack O'Dell was a paid person. Stan [Stanley D.] Levison was a

volunteer. I was a volunteer, and we sent out letters, bulk letters. We put ads in the *New York Times* telling about the conditions in the South and giving pictures of the firehoses being turned on people and police dogs and all. This raised a lot of money. I remember one ad we put in the *Times* brought in $363,000. This money went directly to the office in Atlanta. We never handled any money in our office except the money that was sent to us to produce what we had to produce. That was a major thing that I did in the civil rights movement between 1957 when I directed the Prayer Pilgrimage and 1963 when we started, [the] early part of the year, organizing the March on Washington.

Kelley

Do you recall when the March on Washington idea was conceived?

Kilgore

I can't recall when it was actually conceived. That's pretty hard to do because the way this would happen is certain people- Usually, when it came to marches, A. Philip Randolph was a person that would first talk about them. His institution of marches goes way back. He had threatened a march during Eisenhower's time, but they got him to put it off because they made certain concessions. There was a certain presidential order that came out, and he did not have the march. But he was the one that usually started talking about it. The best I can say is that it was in early 1963 that there began talk about the March on Washington. I'm almost certain it came out of A. Philip Randolph's office. Then that meant that at some point pretty soon that the top people would gather those same leaders again: Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Dorothy Height, and then a few others of us who'd been working but who did not represent these large national organizations- Bayard Rustin, Stan Levison, myself. There were somewhere between nine and twelve people that did the early planning for the March on Washington.

Kelley

I see. In terms of philosophy and tactics, I know that in addition to King, Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph believed in nonviolent tactics. A lot of people attribute that to Gandhi. What were your ideas about tactics in the South? Were you in total agreement with this?

Kilgore

Yes. I was always in total agreement. I think that was true with most of the people who were in that top echelon. Whatever was done in these protest movements had to be done in the context of nonviolence. I never deviated from that. I used to listen on 125th Street to Malcolm X's tirades when he was so anti-white. I never agreed with it. In fact, I never really established a good relationship with the Muslims until I came out here, because I could not go along with their hatred tirade against white people. I felt that was always wrong. Malcolm X himself finally came around to understand that. So I followed completely the philosophical concept of nonviolence in the solution of social problems. Yes.

Kelley

In your local organizing in New York, since the Nation of Islam was almost at its height at the time, late fifties, early sixties, was there any conflict or problems?

Kilgore

I do not remember any overt participation on the part of the Nation of Islam as represented in New York at that time in any of these marches. I do not remember that. I do remember that I had warnings from time to time of people who represented the Communist Party who wanted to move in on it. We usually had advisers all the time, and I'm sure that there were some communists who got into the act because this is down their line, of course. But I do not remember Malcolm X or the people who followed him involved in any of these marches.

Kelley

I see. Was there a conflict? Did the major leadership oppose the participation of the communists in the movement?

Kilgore

There was that, yes. Because you must understand, in the fifties and sixties we produced Joe [Joseph R.] McCarthy, in the fifties and on into the sixties. There was a great sensitivity that these protest movements might be overtaken, and this is what the southern people were saying. They were saying that the

communists are behind this whole movement, all this disturbance that they're causing us here.I mentioned, and this is rather confidential, the name of Jack O'Dell, who was in that office in New York. For a time it became my duty to ask O'Dell to be relieved. This was after Kennedy became president. Dr. King received a call from the attorney general, Robert [F.] Kennedy, saying that there's a young man in your office in New York who has communist connections. Jack O'Dell had belonged to a young communist movement years before. But he had at that time relinquished any connection with the communists. King called me when he got that call and said, "I have got an unpleasant job for you, but we have got to look at it." [He] said, "I've had a call from the Kennedys, who say that our work in New York could be jeopardized if publicity got out that we have someone on the staff who has had communist leanings." I didn't know what he was going to say, because I had had a young communist group meet in our church, and I thought he was going to tell me- Robeson's son, Paul Robeson's son [Paul Robeson, Jr.], his group. I had them meet in our church once. I said, "Okay, what's going on?" He said, "I'm talking about Jack O'Dell." And he said, "I think maybe it's going to be best for us to ask O'Dell just to step aside for a while until this sort of blows over. I want you to do that." So it was no big task. O'Dell and I had a good relationship, and I called him in and told him. He moved on out for I don't know how long, but several months. Then he came back and began to work back with the movement.

Kelley

It was mainly a tactical move.

Kilgore

It was a tactical move, yes. I think it allayed anything that may have happened to have been a retarding force to our movement generally, yes.

Kelley

I see. Now, when the marches-

Kilgore

You may know that all along there were so many ways they tried to smear King as being a communist. They had pictures, posters. I guess you've seen

some of those all across the South where he was attending a meeting at the Highlander [Folk] School.

Kelley

Exactly, he sat next to Abner Berry.

Kilgore

Yeah, right, right. So he was sensitive to that, that nothing with any substance could ever come forth to say that the communists were behind the movements. Right.

Kelley

Now, what was your role in organizing the March on Washington?

Kilgore

My major role was to offer a facility first, Friendship [Baptist] Church then. [We] rented-our church faced on 131st Street-a four-story brownstone on 130th Street. [We] developed a community center there called the House of Friendship, where we did counseling, had youth programs, had a small mental health clinic in it, had some connection with drug addicts and all. So when the time came, they began to look in Harlem for a place to set up. Put all the telephone banks and everything in there we were going to need. We then leased to the March on Washington the top two floors of that brownstone. You know the brownstones in New York. The first floor is down, you know, kind of halfway basement. We kept that and the next floor. They took the third and fourth floors, or we took, because I was on the committee. They brought in all their furniture and everything, installed their phone banks. I guess [we] had a staff of maybe twelve or fifteen people working there for the whole time of the organization, which began in full sometime about April or May in '63 and built up to August 28, when the march was held. Now, that was my first role. My second role in it was to head the church relation contingent, which means that I moved across the country and spoke and wrote letters across the country urging churches to send hundreds and hundreds of people to the march on the 28th. Those were the two roles that I played, as well as an advisory role to the overall organizational structure.

Kelley

What were your impressions of the march itself?

Kilgore

It was almost overwhelming. At the march itself, on the grounds of the Washington Monument, we organized it. The march organization had a huge hospitality tent for all kind of information. I manned that tent. I got there a day or so ahead, and I manned that tent, which meant that as the march started from that point up to the Lincoln Memorial, I was not in the immediate march. I had to stay there to close up that tent and get everything done. And then I left and went on up. There were still people going, but the massive march had already gotten there.When I arrived there, I was supposed to be up on the stage. Everything was crowded. There was no way, so jammed around. There was a fence there that separated the stage area from the people. When I got there, I said, "I have to be up there." I identified myself to security and told them I was one of the organizers and so forth, and I needed to be up there. If you have ever seen the picture when Dr. King was speaking, you'll see me two or three times standing right behind him as he gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. What happened is that fence was about six feet tall. Three people picked me up on this side of the fence-it was two white fellows and a black fellow-and put me over the top of the fence, and then two other people caught me on the other side, a black fellow and a white fellow. And then I made my way up to where the podium was.But the thing that impressed me in that group of 250,000 people-they were rich, poor, black, white-[was] the kind of fellowship. That's the only way I can say it. Everybody seemed to be on the same wavelength. I didn't really understand that till the next day when I was getting ready to go back to New York. I caught a cab and- In Washington, if you're going in the same directions, cabs will stop and pick up another passenger. The driver picked up a young white woman. She was going to the airport like I was. I spoke to her and I said, "Were you here for the march yesterday?" She said, "Yes, I was." I said, "What did you think about it?" She said, "Well, I had heard all kinds of things. I heard there's going to be all kinds of problems and hundreds of arrests, and I just came to see. I got on Constitution Avenue and stood there to watch and see what was going on." But she said, "As I stood there and watched and saw those people marching, black and white, and everybody with the kind of feeling they had as if they were really participating in something with a great deal of joy, the more I

watched, the more that thing got to me." She said, "Before I knew it, I was out there in that march, marching on up to the Lincoln Memorial." Now, that to me capsuled what happened to thousands of people. The same thing. A lot of people came there expecting that there may be problems.

Kelley

Wasn't 1963 also the year you came to Los Angeles?

Kilgore

You mean-

Kelley

That you came to Los Angeles to pastor Second Baptist [Church].

Kilgore

Yes, Second Baptist I came the next year.

Kelley

The next year.

Kilgore

The march was in August of '63. I came here in October of- No, I'm sorry. I came here the same year. Two months later I was here as pastor. I had already accepted the church and everything when I participated in the march, yes. Yes.

Kelley

Why did you make the change?

Kilgore

Two reasons, maybe three reasons. One, I had been pastoring in New York sixteen years and had led a church with some development, but the work in Harlem was getting to me physically. [I] had a hard time keeping my blood pressure contained, so that I began to consider as I went to doctors and specialists and everything. Secondly, when I had come out here to visit-the church where I am had invited me out here to preach-I had been impressed with the fact that Los Angeles was still a growing city, had not reached its apex

like New York and was now declining in some sense. I felt that the remainder of my ministry-I was fifty years old then-would be better carried out in this kind of situation. I'd be more relaxed and, I also thought, more creative. Third reason was that as I saw the church here when I came before it and preached, much larger church, I gleaned that there was a great deal of potential in that church for development that the church had never reached. Therefore, I felt that my aggressiveness could be grasped and in a sense carried out much better in this context here than it was being carried out in New York. On the basis of that, I accepted a call to come out here.

Kelley

I see. What was the community like at the time in '63

Kilgore

It was still a changing community. There was still an in-migration of a large number of black people from the South. I saw many, many gaps in the life of Los Angeles, because I got involved in many movements. I saw it as a scattered community where good movements would start, and they would die out in a little while. I did not see the cohesiveness that I saw in New York. Therefore, that challenged me greatly. I felt that I had some skills that may help do something in those areas. Big city, little man coming into it, but I also felt that I had some skills to do that. So I began then to get extremely involved in a lot of different kind of movements. The civil rights movement- As I said, I started this office for King in the [National] Council of [the] Churches [of Christ in the United States of America] and a number of other things just to get involved. Because I saw it as a community that needed a lot of good positive leadership to pull it together. That's what I've spent twenty-two years here trying to do.

Kelley

So when you got here in '63, were most of your energies really directed towards the civil rights movement in the South, or did you immediately get involved with local activities?

Kilgore

Most of my energies were not directed in the civil rights movement. I was interested in church development, also. I became vice president of the

Protestant Council, got involved in my denomination. After I was here six years, I was elected president of my national denomination, the American Baptist Convention, USA. So they were divided between the civil rights thrust and my religious and denominational work.

Kelley

I see. Who were some of the first people you made liaisons with, in terms of black leadership in Los Angeles?

Kilgore

Some of the people I met first when I came here were Mr. John Lamar Hill, who's my neighbor, who's the president of Angelus Funeral Home. Dr. H. Claude Hudson, active in NAACP, just passed his hundredth birthday. Councilman Lindsay-Gilbert [W.] Lindsay-who had just become a councilman in the city. Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, who was that time raising money to help build the Music Center [of Los Angeles County] downtown, and I led Second Baptist in raising some money for that center. The Reverend Bishop H. Hartford Brookins, who was at that time a pastor, the pastor of First AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church. A former classmate of mine, the Reverend John [L.] Brannan, who has recently died, who was pastoring Saint Paul Baptist Church. [A] host of other ministers that I met, but those were some of the community leaders that I met when I came here. Judge Sherman [W.] Smith [Jr.], who is now [a] retired judge. I remember he was among my early friendships that I made after I came here.

Kelley

How would you compare local leadership in a place like New York to Los Angeles?

Kilgore

In this city, I found the most powerful leadership a bit more nonpolitical than the powerful leadership in New York, whether it was in the clergy or whatnot. And yet, I found some instances of strong political activity. As to integrity in leadership, I guess I've found not much difference in the local leadership here and in New York.

Kelley

The area surrounding your church, Second Baptist, now it's predominantly black and Chicano, I think Asian also. What was the composition of the community then?

Kilgore

When I came to Second Baptist, the surrounding community was about, I would say between 75 and 80 percent black. I could tell by the children who played in the streets everyday and all. Most of them were black. That, of course, slowly began to change. Now it's almost turned the other way. I guess it would be over fifty percent Hispanic, a few Asians, and then the rest would be black. That has changed considerably as a whole segment of South Central Los Angeles has changed.

Kelley

So in 1964 you participated in the march on Selma. What was your role?

Kilgore

Now, the major march from Selma to Montgomery I did not participate. Three weeks before that, I did participate. I went down from my office here to spend some days to be identified with it. They had a little trouble down there and a lot of publicity where Sheriff Jim [James G.] Clark was beating up on people and all. I decided to go down. I went down simply as a representative of the SCLC office on the West Coast and to be a part of it. In that visit when I was down there, there had been, as I said, an attempted march on a Sunday and they had broken it up. I left here on a Monday and we attempted it. We met at the [African] Methodist [Episcopal] Church [Brown Chapel], where we always met for those marches, and started to march. Not an organized march, but we were going to march to Montgomery. Okay, start on a Tuesday morning. We marched across to [Edmund] Pettus Bridge onto the other side. Must have been 350, 400 people. As we got to the other side of the bridge, down a hill, the highway was cordoned off by state patrolmen. Here we are marching down off of the bridge. They were all across the highway and then flanked it like this, which means that we had to march right into them.

Kelley

So they flanked on both sides.

Kilgore

On both sides. All the way across and on both sides. As we marched along and got nearer to them, Hosea [L.] Williams said, "Let's march right into them." They had their guns and bayonets. Dr. King said, "No, we don't do that. To march into them means that we strike them first, and that's against our code. We will not do that. They have the highway cornered off, and we're not going to march into them." He said, "What we'll do, we'll stop right here, and we'll have a prayer meeting," and that we did. We stopped there and had a prayer meeting. Must have stayed there on the road for an hour. Different people praying and singing and everything. Then we turned around [and] marched back to the church. Somehow, in going back to the church, the police-and I've never known why they did it-beat up on some people. A white preacher was walking with a group of black women-no, he was in a place eating with them. They pulled him out and beat him. He died two days later. He was a Unitarian preacher, Reverend [James J.] Reeb. That, of course, got national publicity.I stayed on down there maybe another day and came on back to Los Angeles. I came back then with instructions to begin to organize for a march that they were going to get the United States government to monitor. Of course, as you know it, at that time [Lyndon B.] Johnson was president. Johnson did cooperate and put marshalls on the road all the way from Selma to Montgomery. And what I did when I came back here in a two-week period-this happened two weeks later-I organized two planeloads out of our office here to go to the march. I did not go back. So I did not participate in the actual march from Selma to Montgomery.

Kelley

Now, between 1955 up to '64, had you been to the South at all over that period?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. I had been- Wait just a minute, let me take that back. No, no. My first visit to the South was Selma. I'd been in a demonstration earlier in Norfolk, Virginia, in which I was arrested for sitting in a place to eat where we were not supposed to sit, with my daughters [Lynn Elda and Jini Medina Kilgore] and some other young people. We were there attending a convention. We did it

purposely. They arrested me, arrested my two daughters and one other young person.

Kelley

Could you elaborate on that? When did that take place?

Kilgore

Yes. This must have been '61 or '62. We were in Norfolk, Virginia, just about two years before we left New York, attending a convention, the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention. These young people went downtown, and they were hungry. They went in a place to eat. They wouldn't serve them and told them to move. They wouldn't move. One of them came to the phone and called me at my hotel, where my wife [Jeanetta Scott Kilgore] and I and they were staying, and said, "Come down here. We're in a place and they won't serve us and we may get arrested." I said, "Okay." I got down there, went in, sat down myself and asked the people why they couldn't serve me. [They] said, "It's against the law." They said, "If you don't leave, we're going to have you arrested." I said, "We're not going to leave." So we stayed there. They came in and arrested all of us. The police did.On the way to the police station I said, "You know we are finally going to break all this up." I said, "I'm active in the civil rights organization, NAACP." At that time, the word "NAACP" was just a red flag. That frightened them even though they had arrested me. When we got to the jail, they released me and put the young people in jail. Well, then I had to negotiate bonds for them and got them out. We were in Norfolk two or three more days and they brought them up for a trial. We appealed it when they brought them up for a trial. Then, of course, things began to move so fast that the case finally washed out. Nothing was done about it.That was the one trip during that period that I was in the South and then was in that kind of entanglement. I never made another visit to the South until we moved out here. The next visit was when I went down to Selma and did the things I've told you about. The last visit I made was after that even, in '65 when I went to Montgomery, where they had desegregated, but we were still picketing Birmingham because they were not hiring in the county post office any black clerks. I was on that picket line when the news came over the air that the [Watts] riot had started here in Los Angeles.

Kelley

And that's '65.

Kilgore

That was '65. That was August of '65. And of course, I caught a plane and came home back to Los Angeles.

Kelley

Now, from the time you left the South in '47-I think it was to go to New York-and the time you participated in the Selma March, did you note a change in the attitude of blacks in the South?

Kilgore

Oh, yeah. I did because I'd come back to the South. I left in '47. I had come back to the South every summer to visit my people in North Carolina and between times. I did more than that. I was commissioned by the national office after 1954, the Supreme Court decision *[Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas].* I was commissioned from the national office in New York to go through the South and try to set up chapters of the NAACP, which was still a little dangerous to do.Had one interesting episode in that. What I did, I went for about two different summers doing that from about '55 and '56. Had a group of singers in our church, sisters that formed a quintet [the Utility Singers]. They were very good. I took them with me each time, and we did concerts all around in churches basically in North Carolina. Then I would speak about desegregation and what black people ought to do to accelerate and to help overcome segregation. Then where I had an opportunity, I called together people and organized NAACPs. That time you had to have fifty members. One little town tried to organize fifty members. Got up to forty-eight members, and they were going to get the other two members and proceed to organize. But one of the pastors in that town who didn't live there heard about it. He came back and spread the news from his pulpit, "Don't listen to these radicals. It's a dangerous thing. You're going to get your houses burnt down," and all like this. He broke it up. They didn't get a charter then. Now, later on they did. They have a fine charter in their town now, and a very strong NAACP. But he was afraid, and he broke it up.

Kelley

Do you recall the names of the quintet, the sisters who sang?

Kilgore

The names- Oh, yes, of course. The town was my little hometown, which is Brevard, North Carolina. The year was 1956, the summer of '56. The pastor was the Reverend S. H. Harper, who pastored the Bethel Baptist Church. Fine man, but he was afraid. They [the people] listened to him, and they [the NAACP] had to give the people their money back. So those were some of the kind of incidents you faced, you see. People were still- Some of the black leadership was still afraid to move forward. It was just that kind of climate. But as time moved on towards the sixties, after the March on Washington and the new civil rights laws, you began to see a change in the black people, more assertive and everything in the South.

1.7. Tape Number: V, Side One (January 7, 1987)

Kelley

[There are] some things I found out a little bit later after I talked to you. Your name comes up in a book about [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] *[The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis]* when you were involved [in the movement], and I was wondering if you have any recollections of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] surveillance on King during your participation in the civil rights movement, and what are some of your observations.

Kilgore

The only recollection I have there is that when I was directing an office in New York that was basically [a] fund-raising office for SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], there was a young man who worked for that office whose name was [Jack] O'Dell, and O'Dell had been branded as a communist. I received a call from Dr. King about that, because he had been pressured by the Kennedys. Therefore, he asked me to talk with O'Dell and convince him that it would be best for him just to lay off from the office for a period of time and have no connection with it, rather than have any kind of bad publicity about the office hiring a person that was a communist. He was very careful in saying that to me, because he himself did not believe that O'Dell had any relation with the Communist Party. I think it was a fact that early on when he

was a youngster there— Like was true with a lot of young blacks across the country. They did have some relationship with some youth groups that had some connection with the Communist Party. But at this particular time, O'Dell did not have. But anyway, I followed through because the assumption was that the FBI was pursuing this, you see, not so much about Dr. King, but about O'Dell. Therefore, I pursued what he told me and convinced O'Dell that he should just stay away from the office and just lay off, as a person not working there. This went on for several months. Later, however, he did come back and help us in the work in the office.

Kelley

What do you think about—? Was he a good worker, O'Dell?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. He was a very committed person. I found him tremendously concerned about the country and its failure to live up to its promises, so that all people could be free and have privileges according to their abilities. I just found him to be a dedicated person who believed in freedom and liberation of people. My relationship with him—and it was a close relationship for a while—was that he came up with no kind of doctrinaire communist thoughts, or anything of that sort. And [he] was a good worker, who I thought was a very forthright and honest young man who was concerned about people's freedom.

Kelley

When you were also involved in SCLC, were you directly involved in the Poor People's Campaign?

Kilgore

Yes. The Poor People's Campaign, as you may remember, was annunciated just a few months before Dr. King's assassination. And as you remember, it was carried out after his assassination, the summer after his assassination. My involvement with the Poor People's Campaign was not—as I was here of course at that time, living in Los Angeles—was not as close as it had been when I was in New York raising funds and going back and forth into the South during the different marches. I did two things: I was able to raise money to

send a contingent of people from Los Angeles to the Poor People's Campaign. I forget the number now, but it was a number of more than twenty-five people. I was instrumental in helping to raise the money to send them, because I was at that time directing an office here that Dr. King, I think I told you before, had come out here in 1964 to set up; I was still directing that office and raising funds for the movement. I also went back to Washington during that summer and spent about three days there in the camp where the people were living in the tents and so on. While there [I] found a lot of conditions that were not good. Some people had no lights or anything in those tents, so I bought flashlights and other things and certain equipment out of my own money to sort of ease the situation. The Poor People's Campaign was a very difficult thing to manage, and therefore, the organization of the life in the camp left something to be desired. But [it] did make its impression on the country, though.

Kelley

What do you think the weaknesses were in the campaign? How do you think it could have been strengthened?

Kilgore

My feeling is that— I think that the campaign did attract attention by getting people from all over the country—whites and blacks and Hispanics and Indians—there in that camp, in that ellipse area between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln [Memorial] I think it did that. I think the way that it was done and the hurry in which it was done prohibited the certain kind of organizational structure that it possibly could have had. And maybe, considering the whole situation, it may have been the best they could do.My own feeling, as a person who likes things organized and all, I would have done it differently. I would have divided that whole thing into little boroughs, so to speak. About twelve tents here and appointed someone over that, and we would plan and strategize: how are we going to operate it, how do we report needs, and so forth. That kind of thing hadn't been done, and I think it did reflectnegatively somewhat on the leadership of the campaign.

Kelley

Let's move back to Los Angeles. When you were director of the SCLC branch here, how strong was it in the community? Was it basically a southern civil rights support group? What role did it play?

Kilgore

I began— The office was established in the spring or early summer of 1964, and at that time it was an office to do two or three things. First, to keep alive in this area the work of Dr. King, and we did that in various ways, by bringing him out here from time to time and doing other things. It was very instrumental in developing an excellent voter registration drive just before the campaign of [Richard M.] Nixon and [Hubert H.] Humphrey. We were able to raise the money, some $16,000, I remember. We really got that from a foundation that had been set up, a King Foundation back in Chicago. This was, of course, after King's assassination, but I was still in charge of the office. We did a great deal of work in voter registration. The major work that we did, however, was to put on affairs and raise funds—that is, from '64 to '68— to raise funds for the work and send the money to Atlanta. Those are the things that we did. And we had certain programs of different kinds in the community— something similar to what SCLC is doing here now—to raise these funds by public dinners and things of that sort.

Kelley

Since we're on the subject of King, we might as well just, I guess, go in that direction. When King was assassinated, you were in Los Angeles?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

How did that affect the community, and how did that affect you personally?

Kilgore

This community here?

Kelley

Yeah. The L.A. community.

Kilgore

Let me give you a scenario on that just as I can see it happening now. On that Thursday afternoon when King was shot, my wife and I were on our way out in Lynwood to the Saint Francis Hospital to visit a member of our church staff that was in the hospital. We picked up the news on the radio that he had been shot. Then later on the news came over— We kept listening and heard that he was dead. [I] made this visit, came back—that was a Thursday evening—and two or three other persons and myself had a meeting. I think that Bishop [H. Hartford] Brookins might have been involved in this—certainly a man named James [H.] Hargett was. We got together and called together a meeting that evening, on that Thursday evening at Second Baptist Church, where I was pastor then, to strategize on what this community would do. That meeting included not only church people, it included the militant groups too, like US [Organization], that [Maulana] Ron Karenga was leading then. My assumption is that some [Black] Panthers were there and all. And we strategized that evening on how we would try to keep the community here at an even keel.The first thing that we decided on was that the next night, which was Friday night, that we'd have a community meeting at Second Baptist Church. We got it on the radio, we got word of mouth all through the community, and the church packed out. I can remember now the count there. There were 1,820 people in the church. They packed it out and were standing all around. Ron Karenga was one of the speakers, and his men served as ushers. Reverend James Hargett, who was then pastoring here at the Church of Christian Fellowship, was the other speaker, and one of the choirs of Second Baptist Church sang. It was a very good meeting in that we were saying that we must remember [that] even though Dr. King has been killed in violence, we must remember that he was a nonviolent man, and therefore, we must do nothing, must not do any kind of violence.During that Friday also, we did something else. We made contact with the county, and we got the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum tied up for a big citywide mass meeting on that Sunday afternoon. And we followed through. We didn't have a big crowd; we had about 15,000 people in the Coliseum on Sunday afternoon, which looked small in the Coliseum. But it was a very effective program. We had different elements of the community participating. We raised above the expenses, about $16,000, and SCLC kept half of that, and we gave the other half to the young black militant movements. As a result, Los Angeles was one of the large cities that had no

overt violence as a result of Dr. King's assassination. Because I think we planned it in such a way that it averted violence.

Kelley

So how did the death of King affect you personally, given your close relationship with him?

Kilgore

Me?

Kelley

Yeah.

Kilgore

I immediately made plans after that Sunday to go to Atlanta for the funeral. It was to me a great personal loss because I'd known him practically all of his life, and our relationship had been a good relationship. I knew what he had done for the country, and I knew the promise that he had, because with the Poor People's Campaign he was beginning then to deal with what I call the jugular vein of the country—its economic system. And my hope was that he was going to be able to lead us to get some justice and equity in the economic system of the country. My own belief is that this is the thing that caused his assassination. I'll never believe that James Earl Ray was the only one that knew about this. I think it was a conspiracy. Now, he was dealing with the kind of thing that the establishment did not want. And with the power that he had and the way he was able to move people, they saw him as a threat. Therefore, I just saw it personally as a great, great loss. It was a very, very sad weekend for me, because King was killed on Thursday and my mother [Eugenia Langston Kilgore] died on Saturday. My family and I went to King's funeral, which was the following Tuesday, and then that following Wednesday we went on to North Carolina for my mother's funeral. So I was deeply affected by it, because I knew what a great loss it was for King to be taken from the scene.

Kelley

Do you suppose the assassination of King affected other clergy and black leadership who were very much involved in the forefront of the struggle?

Especially the thought of the possibility [that] it could be someone else. Did that thought ever cross your mind?

Kilgore

Yeah. It affected many people just as it did me; it affected some others in another way. The assassination of King really meant the martyrdom of King, and people like to be associated with a martyr even if they don't want to be martyrs themselves. There are many people who knew Dr. King—and I guess this may have been some clergy too—and who never had a very close relationship with him, but knew him [and] who, I think, claimed after a closer relationship with him than they actually had, see. And I can understand that. That would be true of any great man like that that's going down in history. They will be remembering [him] years to come. To have had some association with him— People sometimes consider [it] to be a high honor, see.I consider my relationship with him as one of the high points of my life. It was certainly not as close a relationship as a number of other people, but I think most of the people who worked with King had not known him over the period of time that I had known him. I was older than that group that was close to him, like [Jesse L.] Jackson, [Andrew J.] Young, [Ralph D.] Abernathy, Hosea [L.] Williams, and all of those. Wyatt T. Walker. I was [older than] all of them and therefore had known him much longer. But they came to know him much better than I ever knew him because they were working with him day by day. I wasn't. I was behind the scenes. I began raising money for King in the early part of 1956, even before SCLC was developed. That was my role, basically, in the movement: to raise money and to help to finance it.

Kelley

In the mid-sixties, in fact in the early sixties, you became not only simply involved in national church organizations, but you took the leadership role in a lot of national Baptist organizations. And first of all, this happened to coincide with the struggle within these national Baptist organizations over the question of Black Power. I was wondering if you have any recollections on, well, both processes: your role in the national church organizations and the emergence of the Black Power struggles in the church movement.

Kilgore

Yes. I became president of the American Baptist Churches [then American Baptist Convention], which was at that time, and still is, predominantly white. At that time it was about a 20 percent minority; it's about a 35 percent minority now. It's an organization of some 6,500 churches and about 1.5 million constituents across this country.My election as president was a result, in a sense, of the Black Power movement. In the late sixties, beginning with about 1966 and on, there emerged within the integrated denominations black caucuses. The same thing happened in the American Baptist. A black caucus developed about '66 and began to talk about more power within the denomination, that there were few people on boards, few staff people in all. We were just in there, so to speak. This movement accelerated in '67 and in '68, so that by the time that the convention was ready to nominate a president to serve for '69 and '70, they had been convinced that it was a time for a black person to be nominated.I became that black person, I think, for two reasons. One, that I had expressed myself in that convention through one of its boards for eight years prior to that. I was not radical, but I always stood up for proper representation and for the convention to meet its social responsibilities as well as its evangelical responsibilities and stewardship responsibilties. I had been outspoken in those areas. I was pastoring a church that was the best supporting church in the convention among the black churches. I think it was for that reason that I was tapped as the first black person to be president of the convention. But that black caucus, I think, laid the groundwork for that, saying that we've got to have more power in this convention.

Kelley

Who were some of your prominent members of the black caucus?

Kilgore

The man who was most prominent at that time was a man who is up in Seattle, Washington, now—a pastor at Mount Zion Baptist Church, the Reverend Samuel B. McKinney. He was one of the powerful ones. The man here in the city, Reverend Floyd Massey, who pastors the Macedonia [Baptist] Church here in the city, was also a member of that caucus. Those two come to my mind now more than anybody else; they were powerful members of that caucus.

Kelley

So was the American Baptist, this organization, was it mainly West Coast?

Kilgore

No. The American Baptist— The larger number of churches [are] in the Midwest, when we take in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, to some extent, Ohio, somewhat Indiana— Not too much Indiana. West Virginia, a lot of small churches in West Virginia. Then your eastern states: New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, to some extent Maryland. And then you skip. You go to North and South Dakota. Then you come to the West Coast, the strong points in the West Coast in this area, what we call the Pacific Southwest area, and then the Pacific Northwest that takes in Seattle and Portland and up that way. It's a nationwide organization.

Kelley

It appears that, I guess, some of the more prominent black clergy in the black caucus were on the West Coast.

Kilgore

At that time they were, yes. Well, Massey at that time was not on the West Coast. He was still out in Minnesota. But Samuel McKinney was on the West Coast. I was on the West Coast. There were some from the East Coast too. A man named Roy Thompson on the East Coast, who's now a staff member with American Baptist. [pause] There's another man named Bill [William T.] McKee, who [has] died, who finally became head of one of the major agencies after we had this push. He became head of the Board of Educational and Publication Ministries, which is possibly the strongest agency in the convention.

Kelley

'Sixty-six, I believe it was, some black clergy had formed their own organization, a separate national organization. I think it was the National Caucus of Black Baptists or National Caucus of Black Ministers.

Kilgore

No, there was a formation in '61 of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which I worked with and later became president of in 1976. That was formed in '61. There was another ecumenical group that was formed in the sixties. It was an ecumenical group which crossed denominational lines, and I affiliated with it briefly. It was called the National Caucus of Black Churches or something similar to that.

Kelley

That's the one I was thinking about.

Kilgore

But it did not last long. That was about— I guess it was '66 or '67. There came along about '77 or '78 another group that still exists and called the Congress of National Black Churches, and it is made up predominantly of six of the seven major black denominations [African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Church of God in Christ, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist Convention]. There are three Baptist black denominations, three Methodist, and a Church of God in Christ. I can't think of the name of that other group.

Kelley

I see. Were you familiar with, I think it was James Forman?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Who, as a layperson—?

Kilgore

James Forman emerged the same year that I was elected. Oh, maybe it was late '66 when he emerged with his program of reparations. He felt that the churches in this country had a responsibility to do something about equalizing or assisting black people because they had been silent as black people, through segregation [and] discrimination, had been denied so many opportunities. Therefore, he went from one major denomination to another,

demanding from them a certain amount of money to build a fund—an educational fund, a communication fund. He was talking about a half a billion dollars, $500 million. He had it all outlined of the different things that could be done with $500 million.The very year that I was elected president of the American Baptist—and I was elected up in Seattle, Washington—a convention was meeting there in 1969. He came before the convention. In fact, he came on the scene. I hadn't expected him to come, I didn't know he was coming. The man that was president at that convention when I was elected was a man named [Culbert G.] Rutenber. He was a theological professor. Cubby Rutenber. I forget his [first name], but we called him "Cubby" Rutenber. He was frightened, he didn't know what to do when James Forman came and wanted to speak to the convention. The program was already set. He came to me almost trembling and said, "What are we going to do? Our program is set and James Forman wants to speak." I said, "You're going to let him speak if you want to have a convention, because he's got people with him, and there's going to be some disruption if you don't let him speak." So we changed the program, and he addressed the whole group. A very profound address, made a lot of sense of why he was starting this movement and so on. The people were amazed at the way that he spoke. Some people were angered, some walked out, but they were amazed. Most of them stayed there to listen to him. He demanded of us $60 million—we didn't give him $60 million.The result was that when I became president, I offered a program called the Fund of Renewal, in which our churches would participate across the American Baptist and raise funds for the minorities in the convention and start to do three things: to buttress different community center programs that minorities had and to create some new ones, to give scholarships to minorities who did not have money to higher education, and thirdly, to support the minority institutions. That was basically black colleges, because Hispanics did not have a school; there's one Indian school out in Oklahoma [Northeastern Oklahoma State University]. It was an $11 million campaign. It ended up raising only about $8 million. It made some difference, it made some difference. Our church here, I remember, since I was president and initiated it and was considered the father of the Fund of Renewal, we gave the largest amount; our church gave $90,000. Other churches gave $10,000, $20,000, $30,000, $40,000, $50,000 across the country. The white churches did not support it like it was hoped that they would. I was disappointed in that.

Kelley

So overall you generally agreed with Foreman's program?

Kilgore

I generally agreed with him. His tactics I didn't always agree with, but I generally agreed that there was some credence to his argument that the religious institutions—many of whom stood by and many of them did nothing to break up this segregation and discrimination—had some responsibility to deal with this problem of poverty and deprivation. Yes.

Kelley

Now, a number of theologians at that time were trying to interpret this massive change. James [H.] Cone is one that comes to mind. And I know that you were also interpreting some of the changes [as a result of] the rise of the Black Power movement and how it affects the theological outlook. Can you comment on, I guess, your interpretation and some of what you thought of James Cone at the time?

Kilgore

Yes. Well, my feeling is that when James Cone came out with his first book *[Black Theology and Black Power]* and was extolling the fact that black religion and black theology had to come to pass because theology grows out of the condition that people live under— Therefore, here are people who have spent their whole time in this history in a struggle for liberation. And I had no problem with it. I agreed with it. I think [on] some points he took it to the extreme. However, later he ameliorated some. Because I think he didn't give any credit to some white religionists who were straight and who themselves, though they may not have gone through this experience, in a certain way vicariously suffered with black people. I think he missed that point. But in the main, I think he was on target.It is for that reason that I accepted Jim Forman, because I looked upon Jim Forman, to some extent, as one of the Old Testament prophets. Like Amos, who came up— He was a farmer, and he just came up in the city and just began to talk to the city people and castigate them for living in their fine houses and everything, and so much poverty was all around them. I think this is what James Forman was doing. He was coming with a prophetic voice that the church in America, particularly the white

church, if it's going to live up to its claims of being Christian and therefore ministering to the poor and helping those in need, [it] had to make some changes.

Kelley

Did some of these political changes affect your teachings from the pulpit at all?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. I think it had a great deal of an effect on a lot of preachers in the pulpit. Yes, yes.

Kelley

What about you in particular?

Kilgore

Well, in my own position, I had always—sort of like Martin Luther King [Jr.]—picked up a lot of this at Morehouse [College] when I was a student at Morehouse, and right on through the seminary. It simply was something that encouraged me more to do what I was doing, and my ministry has always been that kind: a ministry of renewal, of revitalization, of liberation. Other preachers, I think, maybe got the glimpse of it then more than they'd ever had it before and began to practice.

1.8. Tape Number: VI, Side One (February 3, 1987)

Kelley

[In] one of our interviews we discussed the Watts riots and your role in quelling the rebellion. But after the Watts riots there was sort of a, from what I understand, a split in the black community. You had the emergence of these militant black organizations like US [Organization] and the [Black] Panthers, and then you had other conservative elements also involved in the Black Power movement. I was wondering how that affected your role in local politics in the L.A. community?

Kilgore

That's an interesting question. What really happened after the Watts riot- The Watts riot, or the rebellion that took place in Watts and in the southeast central Los Angeles, was centered of course in the summer (and into the fall almost) of 1965. As you know, certain things took place at that time. The [John A.] McCone Commission [Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots] was appointed to study causes, etc., and then many, many recommendations came up out of that. About three, maybe, of the most important recommendations that came up were that that whole area was so void of major health care facilities that something really needed to be done about that. Secondly, is that the housing condition was still very bad, a lot of poor housing. Well, there were four things. Thirdly, the job market was not good; hundreds and hundreds of youngsters out of work-and other people, too. And fourthly, [there were] poor schools in the area that had not been given attention and therefore were lagging far behind-a grade level, most of them.That continued to take place right straight on through, practically. Well, it's still, some of it, going on now in 1987. But there was a kind of a quietening period there on the part of many people in the community. But the greatest amount of noise made just in the wake of the Watts riot, and by that I mean the first one or two years, was by the militant black groups: the Black Panthers and US. Fortunately, I had been a part of a small group that had tried to relate to the black militants even prior to the Watts riot to some extent. Not very much. There was another minister, Reverend James [H.] Hargett, who was here at that time pastoring the Church of Christian Fellowship; Reverend H. H. [Hartford] Brookins, who's now bishop in the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church; and myself. And I remember the three of us worked pretty closely together during that period, 1965, '67, on up to about '69.

Kelley

Did you form an organization?

Kilgore

We did not form an organization as such. No, there was an organization we'll come to later in the seventies. But we did not form an organization. We simply worked with young people that we knew. We knew Angela Davis, and we knew Maulana [Ron] Karenga. I don't remember any of the persons in the Panthers that we knew. And we tried to relate to them. We saw the cleavage

between them and what they call the "establishment blacks." That really included us preachers and black business people and all like that. That group was saying that we've got to win in another way because these people, even those who are trying to do what they think is right, are at best Uncle Toms of a sort. And that was their feeling. However, we did establish relationships so that we were able to get into some of their meetings.I can remember very distinctly a meeting that was held down on Central Avenue. I don't remember what block it was in now, but I do know that Angela Davis and a lot of the young black militants were there. And the discussion that night was to determine whether or not they were going to march on Beverly Hills and maybe set some fires out there like they did down here. Because they had gotten the criticism a lot that- "Why did you burn up the black communities? Because the black people are really not much enemies, even though white people are in here running businesses. Why don't you get in the area where the enemies really are?" And that night they were going to vote on whether to do that, and do it with armed force, too; that was a part of the discussion. And we sat there in that discussion, we offered our views on it. Finally, they came to the point where they voted. We simply said to them- By that time the city had fortified itself much more for some of these, and we had understood that they even had, if they were necessary, they had army tanks and so on if any kind of uprising came. I never was able to verify that.But it finally came to a vote. And they said, "All right, everybody who wants to join into the armed struggle to go into Beverly Hills, stand on this side of the room. And all who don't want to do it, stand on this side." That's after there had been discussion and we had made our input. Bishop Brookins was there, and I was there. I'm pretty certain Jim Hargett was there, too. And they voted. And the vote came out one in the majority not to do it. Not to do it. It was the most interesting thing I'd ever seen.Well, things rocked on then through the rest of '65, '66. And if you remember in '66, there was a meeting in Newark, New Jersey, of black leaders-all militants and others in Newark, New Jersey. They promised to stay together and have annual meetings. By the early fall of '67, nothing had happened. And the young black militants around thirty and under thirty said, "We're going to do something, because these older black folk aren't going to do anything."So, I received a call-oh, it must have been around the first part of November-from a young fellow, and I never have known his name. I know he has another name [besides] Brother Crook. Brother Crook called me; he's still

here in the community. And this was twenty years ago now. He's a man almost middle-aged now. Because we had had this relationship like in that meeting on Central [Avenue] and we had done some other things, therefore two or three of us were trusted. And they called me and said, "The older black militants that met last year in black leadership that met in Newark said we're going to have another meeting, but they are not going to do anything. So we're calling a meeting of young black militants from nine states, western states. And I can't find anywhere- There [are] going be about nine hundred or a thousand. And I can't find anywhere, any building that will take us. Can you help us?" I said, "Okay, give me your number, let me call you back." And he gave me the number.I polled the trustee board of our church [Second Baptist Church]-fifteen people-and told them what it was, and told them I recommended that we open the doors of the church to them. And all but one person voted for it. Fourteen said yes. I called him back and I said, "Okay, Brother Crook, I've found a place for you." And he said, "Where?" I said, "Second Baptist Church." And it took his breath. It took him a few seconds before- He was so shocked that a church was going to let them come in. I said, "Now, you have to come and we're going to talk, and I have to outline to you the procedures by which you can use the church. You're going to use the sanctuary, and you come." He came, and they were coming in on Thanksgiving afternoon and were going to stay there through Saturday.He came, and we sat and talked. I said, "There are four conditions upon which you can come to the church (we'll open the facilities to you free of charge): (1) I will have to address the group, as I do all groups that we invite here; (2) there can be no smoking in the church except in some specified places that we set up for you; (3) that the language has to be cleaned up-you're going to meet in the sanctuary and you cannot use abusive language and curse words and so on; (4) we have white people on the staff"-because one of my assistants was a white minister-"and I'm going to assign them to be here, so there will be no rule against the white pastors on the staff." Okay, they accepted all of them. All of them. So we had our Thanksgiving service that the church has every year at ten thirty, and we got out about twelve. Then early afternoon they started coming in. And sure enough, about 800 came.That evening they had their first big public meeting. It was at that meeting that I addressed them, and there must have been a good 700 or 750 in the building. And I did like I [did] all other groups: I told them what the church was doing, what the church was all

about. Interestingly, they had asked me to take no more than ten minutes, but when I got started they sort of urged me to go on. I spoke about twenty minutes. And I read the audience carefully. There were about eight or nine in that audience that tuned me out; they went ahead writing and doing some other thing[s]. But the rest of them paid strict attention. I talked about what the church was about, and that the church was a militant organization too, but a militant organization without violence. And we were fighting for the same things in the church that they were fighting for, and the whole meaning of the church was to liberate people, and that's at the heart of Christianity. I just gave them a sermon sort of like. I got a long standing ovation when I got through. So they were off to a start.I was in and out that Friday and that Saturday. That Saturday they had- What is his name? Young militant professor who was, I think, at Cal State then. He's up in San Francisco now. Trying to think of his name. He's up at one of the universities in San Francisco. I think it's San Franciso State [University].

Kelley

It's not Nathan Hare? Dr. Nathan Hare?

Kilgore

What's his last name?

Kelley

Hare?

Kilgore

Not Hare. No. He had a short name. West? Was his last name West? [Harry Edwards] But anyway, he was the one- If you remember the next year, in 1968, the Olympics were going to be in Mexico City. He was the one that set the stage for some blacks boycotting the Olympics, the two fellows that had raised their fists in Mexico City.

Kelley

John Carlos [and Tommie Smith]

Kilgore

Right, right. Well, he set the stage for that in a speech that he made there at the church to that young group. Golly, why I can't think of his name! It just will not come to me. I got some notes on this somewhere.

Kelley

In fact, I know who he is, but I can't recall his name either.

Kilgore

Yeah. But anyway, they stayed there, met, had their workshops. About three of my assistants were there; we kept people there every day to monitor what was going on. They observed the smoking rule. Three different occasions, some of them let their language slip, and the chair, the person who presided, jumped up immediately and said, "No, you can't use words like that in here." So they followed the rules. Finished about one o'clock on Sunday morning. And the custodians had to get in and clean up for the services later that next day. That set the stage for something- I think I've told you- Have I told you about what happened? This was in '67, and you know King was killed in '68. That relationship, the church permitting them to come there, sort of broke the ice between the young black militants and the church, because they found out that the churches were not against them. And that started to cause things to thaw out.

Kelley

What was the response of other black local clergy?

Kilgore

I never was able to read that. There were some members of the church who felt that we went too far, but not many. Most of them felt it was all right, because they knew that these young people- Because I had talked about things like this. These young people had to have expression, and what better place for them to express themselves than in the context of the church, you see.My feeling is I just do not remember what the reaction of the other local black churches was, but for a long time the other churches in the city felt that Second Baptist was more radical and attempted things. Even long before I came here, back in the days when Paul Robeson was being branded as a communist, [when] he was coming to Los Angeles to speak, he couldn't get a

platform anywhere else, but the pastor invited him to speak at Second Baptist. And Second Baptist had had a reputation of being sort of radical in this way of having open forums for people to express their opinions.

Kelley

You know, I noticed when I went through all the published church annual reports that between the late sixties and the seventies, if I recall correctly, the church grew, in fact, rapidly. I remember the numbers as I went through.

Kilgore

It did.

Kelley

Do you think that a lot of the converts, the incoming membership congregation, were they drawn from the youth because of this change?

Kilgore

Some were from the youth, and I think others because they felt that was a time when there was a growing awareness of what it meant to be black and what it meant to work for freedom and liberation. And I think they saw Second Baptist as a symbol of that in the late sixties and right on up to- About the middle of the seventies it started waning off. But I think it was because in that black awareness period, because of the speakers I brought there- Not only Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.], but many other speakers. Dr. Benjamin [E.] Mays, Ralph [D.] Abernathy-had Ralph speak a week once in a revival-and [Cordy T.] Vivian, C. T. Vivian. These kinds of people that I brought there, who all had been advocates- Joe [Joseph E.] Lowery, I had him to come. I don't remember having Andrew [J.] Young there. So the church members and the community understood that here was a church that was doing a whole lot to take its stand for freedom and liberation. And this attracted a lot of people at that time, yes.

Kelley

Now, this particular group that met in your church, did they ever form an organization?

Kilgore

I do not remember any organization following that. I know that they had representatives there from nine western states, from all of the western states: California, Nevada, Arizona, Washington, far back as Denver, Colorado. I don't know whether it went any further back than that. Maybe as far as Saint Louis. They had them from the states of Missouri, Texas. I do not remember what their follow-up was following that meeting. The thing that I do know is that that meeting had the kind of impact that it sort of broke the ice, and after that the relationship between the young black militants and the established church people was a better relationship.

Kelley

Do you recall if they called the meeting anything, say the First Annual-?

Kilgore

No, I do not recall that. I think that it was simply an assembly of young black militants. Whether they had a published program or not- Now, if they did have, I have it in the [inaudible], because we kept all programs there. I do not remember whether they had a printed program or not.

Kelley

Do you recall any other, other than the ones you mentioned, clergy who were very much involved, who had this inner connection with the emerging Black Power movement?

Kilgore

Yes. I do know, as I said, that Reverend James Hargett, whose name I've given you, was very much involved in it. Reverend Brookins was involved in it. Another man at another level, Reverend A. [Arthur] A. Peters, who's dead now, who pastored Victory Baptist Church, was involved. As I look around at the other ministers who were active here at that time- Let me see, in any other denomination? Presbyterians, no one was too involved. In the AME, Bishop Brookins was the person. [I'm] trying to see among other Baptist preachers. [pause] No. Reverend E. [Edward] V. Hill, to some extent. Yes, he was involved to some extent, but more from the point of view of direct evangelizing them, you see. Our approach was not that. Our approach was to let them know that we understand them and that they were somebody as well

as anybody else. And then that way we felt we made more impression in drawing them closer to the church, see.

Kelley

I believe you're still involved in a community project out of USC [University of Southern California]? I guess community advisory board?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Did that come out of the sixties?

Kilgore

No. No, that did not start- I got involved at USC almost in the mid-seventies, in the summer of '73. I don't know whether you want me to say something about that at this time or not, or work up to that stage.

Kelley

We might as well work up to it. I just thought it might have come out of-

Kilgore

No, it did not grow out of those activities.

Kelley

I see. So by the late sixties and early seventies, I also understand-based on that annual report-that the church began to spread out beyond [the] L.A. area and in fact do international sort of missionary work.

Kilgore

That's right. What we really started [is that] the church, as you may have noticed, in 1971, '72, '73, the church did a self-study, and that self-study resulted in our moving out. But prior to that we had done other things. We had sensed that our ministry was too close to the church building. There was a lady who taught a Sunday school class in our church, and this is the interesting way that things can start. Lilly- I'll have to give you the last name to that. She lived over in the Pueblo Del Rio public housing. That's one of the first public

housing places built, about six hundred units over on the east side near Alameda, around Fifty-fifty Street on the east side.

Kelley

What was it called again?

Kilgore

Pueblo del Rio housing. It's a city development operated by the L.A. city housing commission [Los Angeles City Housing Authority]. She taught Sunday school there at the church, and she kept talking about the church ought to be involved and all that.We created a ministry there that we called the Pueblo Christian Action Center. We rented a building over there; we brought on a full-time minister and set him up over there in this building to work among those people, to do whatever he felt was necessary among the youth, and so on. And we operated in that building for several years until there was a small church. There was no church in there and we felt we wanted a Christian presence in there. So finally a church wanted to come in there, and we relinquished the building for this church to come in and we put our office in a community building there, community center building. [We] kept it there until we phased that ministry out just about four years ago. In fact, from 1967 to 1983. For sixteen years we ran that program. It finally turned out in the latter days to be a program in which the worker spent his time with youth, trying to keep them in school, getting them out of jail when they got caught up on raps with drugs and alcohol and so on. So it became really a street ministry, in the final analysis. We were getting help at that time both from the local Baptist city mission society and from the national American Baptist Convention. They both had to cut back as moneys began to get shorter in the early seventies. And the church then had to try to carry it on by itself, and we found it was too heavy a burden for us to carry on.[At] the same time we were doing that, we were accelerating other ministries for youth there in the Henderson Community Center at the church, which was a center set up by my predecessor, and we were trying to accelerate those activities in many ways. And at the same time, we entered into some ministries for senior citizens. And we dedicated the Griffith Gardens in '73, which was fourteen years ago, and we must have started developing it in about '70. [We] built nineteen units of housing by the church, basically for senior citizens, but some for families. So

we got deeply into those ministries. In '66 we realized that one of the things we ought to do was to get into a child development program, and therefore we started what is now the Second Baptist Child Development Center that's been operating almost twenty-one years. It started in 1966. We got funding from the federal government first, then from the county, and for the last ten years it's been funded by the [California] State Department of Education.Those three major ministries were started in those years between '65 and up to '70. Then we launched something wider than that, because in 1969 I was elected president of the American Baptist Convention. I was the first black president in the predominantly white convention, but it's been integrated, to some extent, ever since it first started. And I was elected in May of 1969, up in Seattle. In the meantime, from '64 to '69, I think I told you before, I had conducted an office of SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] that Dr. King came out here and established. But when I took that presidential position, I had to give it up.So that was the years that we saw a lot of growth in the expansion of the church ministry and in the reorganization of the church in gearing itself for a ministry that was just more than worshipping. And then we began to understand and interpret-and that really took fire-that we're not just a church satisfied with what we're doing: a middle-class church raising some money and giving a little for mission. But we are basically a servant church, here to serve this community and to help people to grow and develop and to be liberated. And we sold that idea to that congregation during that time.

Kelley

A lot of historians of the black church see this sort of post-1965 period as a decline in congregations, but Second Baptist reflects opposition to that whole idea.

Kilgore

Yeah.

Kelley

Was it really an exception in the L.A. community? I mean were a lot of-?

Kilgore

It was in a sense. It was. There were other churches that were growing in membership. We grew in membership up until the early part of the seventies, then we leveled off in membership. But we grew fast, though, in effectiveness in ministry. And we always emphasized that a large membership does not necessarily mean an effective ministry. We want all the people who are ready, but we were out recruiting people who were converted to the idea that you must get out there and find and help somebody else. That's what Christianity's all about.So there were other churches whose membership rose- were growing large-but whose effectiveness in the community was not so evident. And the effectiveness of Second Baptist in the community was felt by the various kinds of ministries that it rendered. Not only did we support foreign missions and education. We raised money for colleges and we supported foreign missions. We built a school in Haiti for children in Haiti and did a number of things like that. But we also supported a lot of the local movements here in the city. At one point, we were putting almost $100,000 a year into missions and benevolencies. During the seventies.

Kelley

When did you become involved in international missions? I understand that you traveled-

Kilgore

We actually became involved in the international ministries along about '77 after we had reorganized the church. We went through a church reorganization-as I said before, from '71 to '73 we did a self-study-and we redefined the whole concept of missions. Up until that time the church had had a women's missionary society. [It was] broken up into eight or nine mission circles that would meet and talk and raise a little money, and that's about all they did.In this reorganization, we disbanded the women's missionary society and organized the church into geographical units that we called STEM districts, the acronym STEM. The *ST* for "stewardship"-these are the three great missions of the church-the *E* for "evangelism," and the *M* for "missions." Those are the three great reasons that a church exists. Stewardship: to nurture one another, to take care of one another, to help the sick and those who are in need, and all. That kind of thing. That's the stewardship. To evangelize is to preach, teach the word and try to get other

people to understand what it means to be Christian. And to do missionary work is to reach out again in the community where there are projects that need to be done for the betterment of the community and put resources in those projects, and then reach around the world.That's how we got involved in Haiti, through one of our national conventions. Our church has been, since I came there, connected with two national conventions. The American Baptist [Convention], which is predominantly white, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, predominantly black. And I have served as president of both of these at two different times. Through the Progressive National Baptist Convention that had started mission work in Haiti, we asked for the privilege of building a school in a little town way up in the mountains, eight miles from any village. A little place called Ranquitte, Haiti. We raised the money, about $20,000, built the building, equipped the building, [and] later on developed a library in the building. Then, just about three years ago- Because there's no transportation going on up there, there's no road going up there except just sort of a path. The only way to get up there is either by motorcycle or jeep or horseback. We bought a jeep with the help of the Baptist state convention here. We bought a $14,000 jeep and gave it to that community. And the church is still involved in that mission. I've been to Haiti four different times, visiting and helping to do these things.

Kelley

What year was that initiated?

Kilgore

It was initiated in '77, culminated just about 1980. About a three-year project.

Kelley

I understand you also traveled to Ethiopia and West Africa?

Kilgore

Yes. In those areas, the mission work we did there was started in 1971 or '70. There again, we were very busy during that time. We had developed a group in the church that traveled together on education tours. We did about-during my pastorate-about four. In '64, right after I got there, a group of us went back to the World's Fair in New York. A few years later we took another trip-did

about a sixteen- or eighteen-day trip-all across Canada, through New England, back down through North Carolina, Atlanta, and back here. That was a trip we did in many different ways. We went from here to Seattle. We flew from Seattle to Vancouver. We went by boat from Vancouver across to eastern Canada. We flew from Montreal down to New England. We took a bus into Boston. From Boston down to Washington we took a train, and then from Washington we picked up [a] plane from there to Atlanta and on back to North Carolina, and then on back to Atlanta and home. But this group sort of stayed together, several of the same people.Then our next trip came in 1971, when we put together a big trip. Twenty-seven people decided to do a trip almost around the world: from Hawaii to Hong Kong to Taipei, Taiwan; down to Bangkok, Thailand; and from Bangkok back across to Kenya; from Kenya to Ethiopia; from Ethiopia to Greece; from Greece to Israel; from Israel to Rome; from Rome to France, to Paris; to London; back to New York and back home. Forty-two days, six whole weeks. Believe it or not, in those days we did that trip for $2,560. It would probably be about $8,000 now.But I told you that in Ethiopia, at the Hilton Hotel, we met some young people who worked there. One was a young lady that worked with the Ethiopian Airline[s], met her brother. And we ended up finally assisting, actually bringing here [counting to himself] one, two, three, four of those young people. Then finally three more came. Seven young people from Ethiopia that we helped through college and through other kinds of training. At least two of them now are back in Ethiopia. The others are still in this country because they got caught here when the Ethiopian power structure was overthrown by the communist group that's still in rule, and they were afraid to go back because one of the groups that the communists were purging was the university student group. So they are now pretty well situated here. These young people got their opportunity through Second Baptist Church. We brought them here. We provided a place for them to stay, got them in school, and just sort of nursed them through. Some of them have their master's degrees now.

Kelley

After your trips to Ethiopia and Kenya, did you ever follow up and try to establish missionaries there?

Kilgore

No. We did not do that. We only did this oneway thing of bringing them here and training them and letting them make their choice of whether to go back home or stay here and work. And two of the young people went back to Ethiopia. Two young women. Then there's Johannes, Germa, Fisseha, and two young ladies, Liah and Rahel. There are two more, Michael and Gabru. There were seven altogether that came through and were assisted by the church.

Kelley

When you were president of the American Baptist Convention, what were your major tasks, and what did you accomplish during your tenure as president?

Kilgore

Two things, I think. Well, maybe three things. One was we made some growth during my presidency in understanding that the ethnic groups in American Baptists (and there were four-blacks, American Indians, Hispanics, and Asians) were an integral part of the convention and therefore had to play their role in the whole structure of the convention. My being the president, first black president, symbolized the fact that we needed to get people in other positions. Mine, of course, was an honorary position, although it had power. I was not paid. And we needed people in other positions. So one of the things we did within the course of three or four years, we had blacks in some of the highest positions in the convention. We developed a black caucus. Well, a black caucus had already started before I became president; in fact, it had something to do with my being elected president. And that black caucus stayed active and kept pushing, getting people on boards, getting them into positions, and so forth. All right, that's one thing that was done.Secondly, we created an awareness that the American Baptist Convention had a responsibility to help meet some of the effects and the social problems of the country. Because I was considered as a social activist- In fact, some of the people, one man in the American Baptist thought I was a communist. [laughter] So the very year I was elected, you may or may have not seen or read about Jim [James] Forman, who challenged the American white denominations to come up with a half a billion dollars to finance a total new movement among blacks, including communications systems, colleges, and everything. It was a massive concept. That if the churches meant anything

at all, they ought to see to it that their members all over the country pay reparations for what they had done to the black people in slavery and right on down, and [for] keeping them down so long. That pricked the conscience of American denominations. They didn't follow Forman's idea, but it pricked their conscience. And every major denomination began to do something.I offered a program that was called Fund of Renewal. I presented it just about at the end of my tenure. What was it? Fund of Renewal was an attempt to raise $11 million through American Baptist in cooperation with the Progressive Baptist, because I was active in both. To first give support to the black Baptist colleges- the Hispanics had no college; the Asians had no college; and [there was] one Indian college out in Oklahoma [Northeastern Oklahoma State University]. Secondly, [it] was to set aside a fund to do some creative neighborhood work where there were already churches that had neighborhood centers. Where there weren't we could build some. And thirdly, to have a scholarship fund for a number of young blacks and Asians and others to go to college who couldn't go otherwise.We put the program on. It worked. We didn't raise it. We didn't raise but about $8 million, but it made a great deal of difference. But one of the things we did, though- And we spent a lot of money on this. We spent about a million and a half in developing-not that much, about $900,000-in developing literature that went into every church in the convention, 6,500 churches, and 65 percent of them white. I mean it was very exceptionally done. This was called the Reconciliation Program, and it was part of the Fund of Renewal. There's a booklet on blacks, giving the history of blacks, of [the] positive side of the greatness of black people, where they came from and all like that that some of these white folk had never seen before. There's one about Asians, there's one about Indians, there's one about Hispanics. Excellently put together, but very expensive. Now, this turned off a lot of white people. They didn't want to see that. They didn't want to see that, but they had to see it because it went in there just like their Sunday school literature and all. So I thought that that was again one of the most positive things that took place.[The] third thing that took place was that there were many churches in the South, black ones and a few white ones, who did not want to be a part of the Southern Baptist Convention because it still practiced discrimination. We had a region that we now call the southern region, and there was a black man whose name was Jim Herron-a white man, I'm sorry- who was sort of the liaison person between these churches and the national

convention. I never liked that. And I said, "If we are going to be real in ministering to the southern part of the United States, we should create a southern region." Although it's big, put all those churches in the South that want to be a part of American Baptists in a region. Set up an office, just like we do all the other regions in the states, and staff that office and cultivate it. Well, the last few months of my tenure as president we had a meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, at an integrated Baptist church and set up that southern region, and it's still operating now. It's a very viable region. Headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.Those were, I think, the most important advances that were made during my presidency.

1.9. Tape Number: VI, Side Two (February 3, 1987)

Kelley

So how long did you remain [president]? Was that just for one year?

Kilgore

One year, from May 1969 to May 1970. I went in in Seattle, Washington, came out in Cincinnati, Ohio. I gained two reputations as president (along with the things I told you that I didn't count): that I was the most traveled president that the convention ever had, and I was the most expensive president. [laughter]What happened is that I had to turn down- We had one person named Haaken Kneudsen, a Dutch person, who arranged all of my travel. And he had to turn down, I guess, more than half of the calls that I had, because I was gone. I was still maintaining my senior pastorship at the church. But I had good help, and therefore the other ministers just carried the work on, because I was gone practically 60 percent of the time. From all the way from California to New Hampshire and Vermont, Massachusetts. I never went into Maine. We only have one or two churches in Maine. All the way in the South, Pacific Northwest-Oregon, Washington. [The] central part of the state. Kansas, Nebraska, and all of those states in there. And all across New Jersey. Sometimes in one week, in two or three days, I may be up in New Hampshire and the next day down here in Southern California [or] out in Washington. It was a lot of traveling.

Kelley

Now, you mention the black caucus in the American Baptist Convention.

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Who were some of the more prominent members?

Kilgore

The more prominent members that got us started are still active in it, and one is Dr. Samuel B. McKinney, who is the pastor of the Mount Zion [Baptist] church up in Seattle. A man named Reverend Roy Thompson, who was not a staff member, who heads a department in the American Baptist Churches. Another man by the name of Floyd Massey, who pastors here now; he was at that time out in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Floyd Massey pastors Macedonia [Baptist] Church out in Watts. And another man named Bill [William T.] McKee, who died about four years ago-three or four years ago. Bill McKee was a staff member of the convention, an assistant in the retirement department, called the M and M (Ministers and Missionaries) Benefit Board. Bill was an assistant to the director, but Bill later became head of one of the four divisions. The American Baptist has, other than its overall structure, an overall general secretary and then it has four associate general secretaries: one for national ministries like [American Baptist] Home Mission [Societies]; another for internationalministries; another for the M and M Board- That M and M Board is worth just little under a billion dollars in investments. In the early years, the Rockefellers put some money into it. And the other is the education and publication ministries. This man Bill McKee was for eleven years head of this ministry where [there was] all of the literature for these churches and all the education program that dealt with the various black colleges and seminaries. And he was one of the early starters of the black caucuses. Another man named Atha Ball, who was on the staff for a long number of years, and I don't thing Atha's on the staff anymore. I was of course in the black caucus. These were some of the leaders in the black caucus.

Kelley

To bring it back to the L.A. community, from about 1970 to about the mid-seventies, what sort of community action or community involvement were you engaged in?

Kilgore

The major thing that we were doing then from '70 to mid-seventies was consolidating the church in this new structure that we created. This new structure I told you included the development of these STEM districts. We also redeveloped the governance of the church by establishing what we call a general board. Before that, the powerful board in the church was called the joint board. It was made up of only deacons and trustees. But in the reorganization, we established a general board where every entity of the church has representation on it: children, youth, senior citizens, music department, ushers-all the way over, all the way through. All involved in it. So for that period we were consolidating that and gearing up for ministry. We, of course, did not establish any new ministries there, except we did finish during that period and dedicate-about '72 or '73-the Griffith Gardens, the apartment housing complex. That was finished and dedicated during that period. The child development center was well on the way then; the Pueblo Christian Action Center was well on the way; and the Henderson Community Center was in operation. So we were just sort of expanding all of those ministries during that time without starting any new ministries at all.

Kelley

Did you ever consider going back and working with SCLC again?

Kilgore

No. When I came back, of course, I worked and cooperated with SCLC. By that time, it had changed hands. It has changed hands about three times, leadership hands, after I left it in '69. Dr. Brookins followed me, Mrs. [Marnesba Tillmon] Tackett followed him and then Mark Ridley-Thomas, who is now head, followed her. These eighteen years since I came out, those three people have given leadership to it. But I have worked very closely with it. You know, SCLC is not able to get a 501(c)(3) exemption from the government-the Congress people. Neither has the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] got it. So they cannot raise funds- You can't

give money to SCLC or straight to the NAACP and get tax exemption. So while Mrs. Tackett worked with the SCLC, she created a subsidiary corporation called the Martin Luther King Legacy Association, which does have a 501(c)(3) exemption, and therefore moneys can be given to that and you can get tax exemption for it, see.

Kelley

So it was around the mid-seventies that you got involved in the USC-

Kilgore

One other thing started- Yes, in the mid-seventies. Well, USC came first and this other thing came later. Yes.It was in 1972, and this was a new movement of the church too, not only just me. I was invited by the president of USC to deliver the baccalaureate address at USC. You may or may not know that USC is one of the large universities that still has a religious baccalaureate service prior to its commencement. They always have it on the night before the commencement, and I was invited. And the procedure then was to give an honorary degree to the speaker. I was invited, and at the commencement the next day, USC conferred on me an honorary degree, L.L.D. degree.I had been pretty close to some members who- When they went through the Hoover [Street] redevelopment over there, they followed sort of a bulldozer approach. USC was behind it, and USC had a "black eye" in the community. So I used that opportunity I had to speak to challenge USC to begin some renegotiations with the community in building some bridges. I used the subject "Toward A Soulful Community." But I was very critical-I got that address here somewhere now-very critical of what USC was not doing to build bridges and how that was adversely affecting USC in the eyes of the community.A few days later, after the commencement, President [John R.] Hubbard called me and said, "I'd like you to come over and have lunch with me." And I accepted the invitation. I went over and we had lunch, just the two of us, in his private dining room. And as we sat down and started talking, he said, "You upset me the other night in the address that you made."I said back to him, "I was trying to upset somebody."He said, "But what you said was right. And we have to do something about it."And I said, "Well, I would hope so."He said, "But I need some person."I said, "Okay, I'll help you find somebody to do it, because I think it's something that the university ought to

do, and I think it will help the university and the community."And then he looked straight at me and said, "I found the person I want."And I said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I can't."He offered me a full-time job as vice president for community affairs. And I said, "No, I could not take that." I said, "My base is in the church. The credibility I've established in this community in the ten years I've been here has been from the vantage point of Second Baptist Church. And if I break ties there now and start something new here, I lose some of that credibility.He said, "I understand that." But he said, "Would you consider coming on a consulting basis or part-time basis?"I said, "I'd give that some serious thought." And it started from that.He said, "All right."I said, "I'll need to talk with my general board of the church, and [I] even need church approval if I'm going to do something like that."So he said, "I'll take it up with the trustees." He took it up with the trustees and called me and said, "I've talked with the trustees. They approved it unanimously."I said, "I'll let you know in a couple of weeks."I'd taken it up and got approval with the church. And that's where it started. And that was the late spring in 1973. By July 1, I was on board. By myself.He said, "Now it's yours." We came to an agreement on salary. "It's yours, you do whatever you want to do. We may fall flat on our face in this, but let's try it."I said "Okay, I'm willing."Well, by December I had a staff of three people. The work was accelerating like that [snaps fingers]: calls coming in; people learning I was there. Had [a] problem with the school and then we turned out to be sort of an ombudsman, the facilitator, and an access office and every kind of thing. And it just kept growing, growing, and growing.By 1976 I sensed that a lot of black students were having trouble staying in school at USC, and I said, "We've got to do something about it." My staff and I got together, drew up some ideas, and I called in some black alumni and other people and suggested we set up a support group. And out of that grew a group that was called the Ebonics [Ebonic Support Group]; it was organized in our office. And that group now has raised, I guess, about $300,000. It distributed maybe $300,000 to black students. In the first year or two we gave money to others [other] than black[s]. We only give to blacks now because there are other groups supporting other students too.But the major experiences there have not been that. One of the other things that Dr. Hubbard told me when I went there, [he] says, "We've got two programs on the campus: El Centro Chicano, basically a Latino program, and the Community Service Center, which was a black program trying to relate the

university and the community." He said, "We are just running out of a Mellon Grant." It must have been about 1969 that Andrew [W.] Mellon gave a few schools across the country a million dollars each to do something-urban universities-to do something for their communities. That money was running out at USC by that time. I had just often prayed I had gotten there at the time when the money was, you know, just coming in. I think we could have used it better. He said, "Now you are going to need to help raise some money to help." I said, "Okay." Well, I had good rapport with the city and county, and we were still getting block grant money then. In the first three years that I was there, I raised about $400,000 to help those two programs out of block grant funds. That dried up with the [Richard M.] Nixon administration.But the other thing that we did then was to begin to get professional schools involved in different kinds of community projects. For instance, in 1975, Golden State Mutual Life [Insurance Company] was fifty years old, and they were celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. I was able to make contact with the department of history over there to get them to work with Golden State Mutual in setting up different kinds of programs and formus and so on in the celebration. And just a lot of examples like that where we pulled together professional schools and the university. Just kept doing one thing after another like that and building bridges and continuing to write proposals for expanding the office and doing more.When there was not a real commitment-There was on the part of the president, but a lot of the other people at the higher levels did not feel that much was going to be done. But I spent ten, just about eleven years doing that. Finally, I came to realize that we were spinning our wheels. We had built bridges, we created a better attitude. The time had come for USC and the community to begin to do some joint ventures together, which I discussed when I first went there, but I saw the time was not right. Now they are at that stage, because the office that I directed is now a larger office with more power, and we finally got it that way before I retired. I'm serving as senior adviser to that office now and still am adviser to the president in community affairs.

Kelley

Who were some of your staff members?

Kilgore

In the office, now?

Kelley

Right.

Kilgore

When I set it up, the first staff member, very first staff member, was Aurora- [pause] She's a young Spanish lady, died tragically. She moved up to Washington, and she and her family, except one child, were wiped out in a fire. [pause] Can't think of her last name. Second one that came on the staff was Gloria Cohen. Gloria was a Spanish young lady that married a Jewish young man. Aurora left at the end of '74 and Gloria came on. [In] '76 in December, Betty Carmichael came on the staff. She became really the associate director of the office. Gloria left in about '77, and Mary Kiroshima came on the office. Right, Mary Kiroshima. Betty Carmichael left in April of '85. Betty Carmichael stayed there about ten years. Then the other person that came on was a young Chinese woman whose name was Janice Shia. Those are the people who worked in the office. There were some other students who worked there, but those were the staff members. Two of them were still there when I gave up the directorship of the office two years ago: Mary Kiroshima and Janice Shia. And Mary and Janice both went into the new office. Mary has since resigned and gone on to another job, and Janice is still there as one of the four assistant directors of the new office.

Kelley

Who took over the directorship?

Kilgore

The director of the office now is Dr. Alvin Rudisill, who is also the chaplain of the university. He had worked closely with me from the time I went there. In fact, he's the man that recommended me to do the baccalaureate address in '72. And so he is now the director of the office. And there are seven more staff members there now in the new office.

Kelley

When you set up the Ebonics Society, I believe it's called-

Kilgore

Yeah, Ebonic Support Group.

Kelley

Ebonic Support Group. Who were some of the presidents?

Kilgore

The very first person that was president was a young [man] who has died, Attorney Thomas [L.] Griffith III. Thomas Griffith III was the very first president. Some of the other people who were involved in there at that time were a lady who has died also named Fernandra Toney and a man named William Daily. Those are some of the folk that were working in there in the early days. Another one, very active in those early days, was Dr. Verna Deautrive, who is a principal of a school. Those were some of the folks that were in the early days of the Ebonics. And of course, Mrs. Carmichael and I were very active, although we, by virtue of being staff members, could not be voting members in the organization.

1.10. Tape Number: VII, Side One (February 16, 1987)

Kelley

I guess we're going to try to take your life up to the present and get some comments on the future. I went through some of the notes of the official directory of the churches, and I sort of have it organized by years-

Kilgore

Oh, good. Good.

Kelley

-and I'll just ask you some questions about some events. In 1975, it was the ninetieth anniversary of Second Baptist Church, I believe.

Kilgore

Right.

Kelley

And you had a number of prestigious guests and events going on for that year. I was wondering if you could sort of elaborate on some of the events.

Kilgore

Yes. In 1975, we celebrated at Second Baptist Church the ninetieth anniversary. We made it a bit more elaborate than we had planned to because I was of the opinion at that time that I would have retired before we came to the centennial, and therefore we put a lot of emphasis on the ninetieth anniversary.There are about three major things we did in our ninetieth anniversary. One is that we updated the history of the church. There had been some scattered records of church history, but one major component of the ninetieth anniversary celebration was the updating of the history, from 1885 to 1975. It was done by a committee. The lady that edited it was Mrs. Ola Mae Dailey. And she did a very good job with the committee that worked with her. She was at that time, and was until she passed a few weeks ago, the chairman of the memorial and historical commission of the church. And she did the major work in updating the history of the church.The other very important thing that I think we did was to hold a ninetieth anniversary dinner in which we gave what we called decade awards. We looked at the whole city in educational institutions, publication institutions, various other churches and organizations and chose fifty persons and organizations or businesses that, in the last decade, had made a significant contribution to the life of Los Angeles. Among those that we honored were the University of Southern California [USC], the Times Mirror publications [Times Mirror Press], the *Los Angeles Sentinel,* Golden State Mutual [Life] Insurance Company, and many, many individuals were also cited. That was done in the framework of the ninetieth anniversary dinner that was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, in which we had present more than nine hundred people in that celebration. These awards were done rather uniquely. We had done a brochure of each one of the individuals and businesses or organizations that we published, so that the people had that in hand. Then we gave each one of them a medallion and a citation. We arranged for them to all stand in formation, and there was a presenter that stood by each one of them. As we read the name of that organization-the citations were already written in the booklet that we put out-they just put this medallion over their head[s] and handed them the citation. That was, I think, another one of the crowning events of the ninetieth

anniversary celebration.Another thing that we did was to have made certain mementos that people could keep of the ninetieth anniversary. There were pendants for ladies, there were cuff links for men. And money clips and a number of other things-bookends and all with the regular symbol of the ninetieth anniversary on them. We celebrated over, oh, maybe a couple of weeks, maybe a month. And those were the three major events involved in it.

Kelley

That's interesting. That same year, you were involved in- Operation PUSH [People United to Save Humanity] organized a march on the White House for jobs. When did you become involved with Operation PUSH and how successful was the march?

Kilgore

It must have been about '75 or '76 that Operation PUSH had gotten off to a start here and then it had sort of faltered, and Dr. [Jesse L.] Jackson asked me if I would try to reorganize it. I did. I pulled together several persons and formed a board and got it back in operation. It was at the time that Dr. Jackson was promoting this whole movement of- Let's see the name of it. In the schools. I'm trying to see what they called it. [pause] It was a movement-I can't think of the name of it now-but it was a movement in which he was asking parents to do several things: see that their children study at least two hours in the evening, that they cut out television, and that they would insist upon their children bringing their report cards [home] and that the parents would be relied upon to go to parent-teacher meetings. It was really- Oh, the Push for Excellence it was called. Push for Excellence. And he had gotten commitments from a number of schools and all, and our local PUSH organization gave some real direction to that. A Dr. Sewell was at that time the director who did this. He was in education. He's now in New York as a superintendent of one of the districts in the New York school system. And he gave leadership to that.We also then worked on organizing for certain rallies and so on and for the national movement that Dr. Jackson announced. More than once he called people to Washington, but I do not remember the exact date that he set the meeting for the national- Well, it wasn't really a march on Washington. It was a gathering on Washington to impress upon the Congress

and the Senate the importance of doing more for education at the local school levels. And our group really participated in that.

Kelley

When did you begin to organize the Fall Forums?

Kilgore

The Fall Formus at Second [Baptist Church]- Let's see, [C.] Eric Lincoln was the first person that came to the Fall Formus. I'd have to look at those books because I can't- I don't remember.

Kelley

Let's see, I have in '76, James [H.] Cone and J. DeOtis Roberts were speakers.

Kilgore

Oh, right. But we'd started before that.

Kelley

In the mid-seventies?

Kilgore

It must have been in the mid-seventies, about 1975. Because I remember the very first speaker in the first year was Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, who was a distinguished sociologist and theologian. He was the first speaker. And the formus continued from '75 down to- The final one was in '83, I think. For an eight-year period.

Kelley

I see.

Kilgore

We brought many distinguished people here. I think that the subjects of the forums [are] in the booklets there. And they dealt with various community issues. One year we dealt with the family. And I remember we had Marian Wright Edelman, who heads the Children's Defense Fund. She was one of the featured speakers at that time. Among other people was Jim Cone and DeOtis Roberts, and that year we were dealing with theological perspectives in the

church. Then we had also one forum dealing with politics and government. Mayor [Thomas] Bradley participated. There was one forum one year dealing with education, and Dr. John R. Hubbard, who was the president of USC, participated that year. And those were some of the people that we brought to the platform. We also brought a man who had recently done a book on black economic progress, Dr. Francis [A.] Kornegay, who for years [was] head of the [national] Urban League program in Detroit. He was one of the forum speakers.

Kelley

What sort of participation [did you draw]? Mainly the congregation?

Kilgore

No, the formus were open to the entire public. We publicized them very widely. We supported them by subscriptions. They had luncheons attached to them. Persons would subscribe for some nominal amount, I believe, and usually we had three events in the forum, which meant three luncheons. We had a subscription of twenty dollars. A person could subscribe, but people who did not subscribe were also free to come to the forum; they were not free to come to the luncheons.

Kelley

In '78, Second Baptist hosted the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Kilgore

Yes. We were the host church that year in 1978. I had been elected president of the Progressive Baptists in 1976. The tenure in that office is two years, and this was a closeout of my tenure. And this was a significant meeting for two reasons. One, prior to 1978, we had had two national meetings every year. We'd had a Christian Education Congress meeting in June, and we'd had the convention in September. Beginning that particular year, we changed the whole format and combined the convention and the Christian Education Congress into one meeting. We did it to save money because [in] the two meetings [that] met about each year, our churches and constituents were spending about, oh, somewhere between $750,000 and $1,000,000 for travel, hotel expenses, and so on. And that would be for the congress. For the

convention, maybe $2,000,000. And we figured that this was a waste of church resources, and we decided to combine them. It was not an easy thing to do. And, of course, they're still combined. For that reason, it was a very significant meeting.Another significant aspect of that meeting was that one of our featured speakers in the minister's seminar that year was Dr. Howard Thurman, who was considered one of the greatest preachers in the world. And he wasn't too well then; he died two years later. And he was the featured speaker in the minister's seminar that year, which is a part of the convention.One of the other things that happened that year, the convention became the recipient of a school campus in Washington [D.C.] known as the Nannie Helen Burroughs School. It had been organized by a pioneer black woman years before for working young women who came into Washington. Nannie Helen Burroughs was this woman. And it had come to the point where it had difficulty supporting itself. They had built a fine new administration and classroom building, and they had difficulty keeping up the payments. So they made a decision. That board-and I was on that board-decided that they wanted to turn the whole thing over to the Progressive Baptist Convention. And at that particular meeting, that transaction took place. And we still, of course, operate that school, and we have our headquarters on that campus in Washington, D.C. That property then was, in '78, valued at about, I guess, $3,500,000, $4,000,000. It's now valued about $8,000,000. Those were three of the most significant things that took place at that meeting.

Kelley

So overall, the conference was very successful.

Kilgore

It was one of the most successful meetings. I remember-it's the only one I remember-the exact number of registered messengers we had there. And we had 5,057 registered messengers at that meeting.

Kelley

That's amazing.

Kilgore

And they were housed in hotels and on the campus of USC.

Kelley

I guess it was the year after the convention the Gathering was organized?

Kilgore

'Seventy-nine.

Kelley

How did that come about, and who were some of the more-?

Kilgore

The Gathering came into existence because a few of us sensed that there needed to be a strong, socially active, ecumenical, ministerial group in the city. There was an Interdenominational [Ministerial] Alliance [IMA], which is still existing, one of the oldest ministers organizations in the city. And, therefore, sensing that, a few of us got together-and I'll give you some of the names that started it-and just sent out a letter. Sent out a letter to about 750 ministers in the city. And on March 9, 1979, 131 ministers gathered at Second Baptist Church. We had a press conference, we had a lunch, and decided to organize the Gathering. Among those early people who were in the organization at the Gathering were Bishop Ralph Houston, Reverend E. [Edward] V. Hill, Reverend James [M.] Lawson [Jr.], Reverend Edgar Edwards. Edgar's died since. Of course, I was involved. Let me get some of the other ones that were in there. [pause] Reverend J. B. Reese. Those were among the ones that I remember. There were others.

Kelley

And they elected you the first president?

Kilgore

I served as the first president.

Kelley

I see. What were some of-? Well, first of all, is the organization still in existence?

Kilgore

It has now merged with the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance.

Kelley

I see.

Kilgore

Oh, yeah, the other man-Reverend Merriweather. Can't forget Merriweather. E. R., I believe, Merriweather. [Milton M. Merriweather]

Kelley

Before it did merge with the Interdenominational-

Kilgore

All right. Let me tell you some of the things we did. It happened that at the time we organized, the celebrated Eulia Love case was hot in the news. We didn't organize to deal with that. We organized to just deal with general community problems. But we latched onto that and began to work to get some improvement in the [Los Angeles City] Police Department in dealing with people in the community, in particular in the use of handguns. Our involvement led us pretty deeply into that. Over a year's period, we went before the police commission [Los Angeles City Board of Police Commissioners]. We were able to get the commission finally to censure the police department for the way they handled the Eulia Love case, which was something that [had] not happened before in history. We also offered to, and we got the privilege, to participate in the rewriting of the part of the police manual that had to do with the use of the handgun. And we participated in that. We had numerous meetings with the police department, with the commission, and numerous public hearings on this. The result was that we noticed over the succeeding years that there was a noticeable decrease of people being shot and killed by the police. So that was one of the first things that we latched onto.We then made an application to Lilly Endowment [Inc.] for some funds to do some community projects. And Lilly Endowment gave us $25,000. And with that $25,000 we hired some staff, and we continued with our work with the police department but also began to deal with the drug problem. We had meetings with the people-the Bricks Kick Movement and other drug abuse agencies in the city-and helped to disseminate the message

among our churches about the danger of drugs and so on. Showed films and all like that. We also used that money to do some other organization for other kinds of community activities, particularly dealing with alcoholics, and just general community organization-voter registration and a number of things of that kind. Those were the major things that took place while the Gathering was in existence.And during that time we were doing these things, Stevie Wonder became interested in the Eulia Love case. And Stevie Wonder had a small concert out in Hollywood and got gifts and raised $36,000. And he said he [was] going to give us everything above expenses, and we expected half of it would be expenses. His expenses are only $4,000. He gave the Gathering $32,000, part of which he wanted given to the Eulia Love children and all, which we took care of. And we used the rest for our program.

Kelley

That's interesting. When did they eventually merge into the-?

Kilgore

The merger just came, not at a certain time. As the Gathering began to wane-After my presidency, Bishop [Ralph] Houston was president and then Reverend Cecil [L.] Murray. The attrition became very low, and then the members of the Gathering just started meeting with the IMA. Because I looked when I was at the IMA meeting last week. There were about seven men there that had been in the Gathering. And that way it just sort of merged, and it just sort of went on out of existence as an organization.

Kelley

During the early seventies, were you or any prominent members of the church ever involved in the case of Angela Davis-the case to free Angela Davis-when she was arrested?

Kilgore

I was never involved in it. I think I've said before that I was involved with Angela Davis in some meetings. But I was never involved in that case at all. We were never involved in that. No.

Kelley

When you look back at the 1970s, as opposed to the activities during the sixties, when you had a militant civil rights movement and especially a Black Power movement, was there a very substantial difference in, number one, the problems of the community [in that] you see sort of a waning of political activity, and did this affect your work at all?

Kilgore

Yes. Beginning with the seventies, there was a general cooling off across the country in the civil rights activities. And I think every community felt that. It was a sort of a holding pattern period. The late fifties and the sixties had been seething, and one thing after another had been taking place. And then things sort of started settling down. It was in the early seventies that I started to work at USC in community relations as the president's adviser. The campuses had gotten quiet, and there were not the big rallies on the campuses anymore, and all like that, about civil rights. Everything, everybody was just sort of quiet. Those were the years, from early seventies until almost the eighties, that we saw minimal activity in the civil rights movements. The groups stayed together, like SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] and the [Martin Luther] King Center [for Nonviolent Social Change] in Atlanta, and other activist groups continued to operate. But not with a great deal of speed. And it was just that sort of cooling-off period. The Vietnam War had taken such a great toll. People were really disgusted about it. [Richard M.] Nixon's administration got into all the Watergate problems and everything. And then there came his resignation in the mid-seventies. And all of these things, I think, sort of mitigated against the very forceful kind of action that we had had back in the sixties.But it did something else, also. It also gave the establishment people-the white establishment, particularly, in almost every facet-some feeling that the blacks had gotten what they wanted, and therefore, they were being satisfied, which was a terrible misconception. Terrible misconception. And, of course, the eighties have shown that that's been a misconception. But that began to prevail. And you also began to see, in the latter part of the seventies, you began to see in the schools of high[er] education more emphasis being placed on Hispanics and Asians than on blacks. I was able to see and understand this. Because, there again, it was that same feeling that the blacks had really gotten what they went out after, and they got changes in the sixties and, therefore, this is all behind us.

Kelley

I'm not exactly sure, but I believe that the neighborhood around your church also underwent a sort of a demographic shift.

Kilgore

Yes. A very definite and very noticeable demographic shift. This shift began, really began [in] the very late sixties and early seventies. I went there in '63, and the population then was about 60 to 65 percent black, a few Asians, and maybe 30 percent Hispanic people in that area. Could have been a little higher than that, but that's the way I estimate it.By 1980, that had changed where the population was just the reverse practically. And it has still changed some since then. Which meant that we then began to gear our program at the church to accommodate the new neighbors by making a very obvious effort to get children into the church, into the social program at the church. A change in staff, putting people on the staff that were bilingual. Particularly on our staff [in] the [second Baptist] Child Development Center. And we also initiated an Hispanic ministry in the church with a full-time Hispanic pastor to take care of that. That hasn't worked out so well. We still do some work in that area, but not as much as we did when we first started. The problems were that many of the people there did not want to enroll in things because they were undocumented aliens, and they did not want to put their names down. That was one of the problems. That still is a problem.

Kelley

Do you know of any other church which actually shifted their program with a shift in the community?

Kilgore

I know a lot of the Caucasian churches did. A lot of them still have Hispanic ministries. I was in a church at a wedding Saturday where they were predominantly Caucasian. There were some blacks that are members there, but they have an Hispanic ministry, and they also have a Korean ministry going on in the church. And there are few black churches that do have that. Roger Williams [Baptist] Church over on Adams Boulevard has a Korean ministry that they [let] use some facilities, and a few others do that. But those that have

tried to integrate them like we tried to do at our church, I don't know of anyone else in the community that has done that.

Kelley

Yeah, that's really interesting because I've never heard of it done anywhere else. Now I'd like to turn to something else. At the present I believe you, at least, sit on the board of trustees at Morehouse [College]?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

Are you still the chairman?

Kilgore

Yes.

Kelley

I see. When did you get involved in that?

Kilgore

I became a member of the board of trustees at the annual meeting of the board in April 1964, which will be twenty-three years in another month or so. And I was elected chairman of the board in April 1977. This coming April, I will have been chairman of the board ten years. And as a member of the board, I've been active and made the meetings regularly. The board has been reorganized since I've been chairman. We had only one active standing committee when I became chairman, and that was the finance committee. Since then we have added three other committees: a student affairs committee, an academic affairs committee, and a development committee. Those three. And we've made some significant changes in the management. We have elevated persons who are over these departments to vice president positions. Which means now we have a vice president for financial affairs, a vice president for academic affairs, a vice president of student affairs, and a vice president for for development. Those are some of the changes we've made in the time since I have been chairman of the board.

Kelley

I see. Now, serving as a trustee, I know that you notice some major changes. Given the plight of the black universities nowadays, how substantial do you think these changes are? Do you think that the black colleges will last?

Kilgore

There are a few that will. There are about a hundred. I mean, that's on record. There are about forty-one or [forty-]two that are supported by the United Negro College Fund. Three of these just recently lost their accreditation: Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Oxford College, and Ashtown College- both in Tennessee.My view is that by the turn of the century, there may not be more than twenty-five to thirty. I don't think the others are going to be able to survive two things: I don't think they're going to be able to garner enough financial help from corporations, and so forth, and enough students to justify their existence. That's one thing. And secondly, they're not going to be able to compete with the rising number of public higher educational institutions that are growing all over the country. For instance, one of these schools in Atlanta in this complex now, the Atlanta University system complex- The university itself, Atlanta University, is going through tremendous problems now, because Georgia State greatly expanded- The main branch of Georgia State University, not the University of Georgia, because they have the same system we have here. Georgia State University has taken over so many of the kind of courses that Atlanta University was giving masters and doctorates in, and the tuition is one third of what Atlanta University charges. So it's been very tough for Atlanta University. And this is going to take place more and more all over the country. And many of these schools are just not going to be able to survive.The third reason they won't be able [is] because through all the years, they have struggled to exist, and they've never been able to build up an endowment. It is utterly impossible to run a first-rate college without adequate endowment. Utterly impossible. And the only four black colleges that have anything- And all of them don't have *adequate* endowments. Four. Now, Howard University doesn't have to worry, because it's supported from the federal government. But Hampton Institute, it has over $50 million endowment; Spelman College has between $45 and $50 million; Tuskegee [Institute] may have $25 to $28 million; Morehouse comes next with $15 million. We do not have enough. We can exist and stay viable if we can hold at

that, but we really need $40 million in endowment. That's the next reason that many of these schools will not be able to make it. Because they will not be able to have the kind of library they ought to have, they'll not be able to hire the kind of faculty they ought to hire, and for that reason, the accreditation agencies are not going to accredit them. And people are not going to want to go to schools that are not accredited.Now, there's another salvation to this, and some of it is being talked [about]. In several places in the states, there are clusters of these colleges pretty close together, and they are beginning to think about merging. If that takes place, then that will save some of them. Unless there are some very good mergers [among] these private [colleges]- I'm not talking about the public black colleges; they will live because the tax moneys [of] the states will keep them going. I'm talking about the private black schools. Unless they can- Particularly those that are in small towns, Talladega College, for instance, in Alabama. Their enrollment used to be up to nearly a thousand. It's down [to] maybe four hundred now. They can't exist in these small towns. But there's a small white college in Atlanta with about seven hundred students that just goes right on, because Agnes Scott [College] has $50 million or more endowment.

Kelley

That's amazing.

Kilgore

And they can keep going. Because they've got resources enough there to hire good professors and to teach classes with two or three people in them, you see.

Kelley

Well, I'm glad you gave me that information. Not only for the historical record, but I wanted to teach at a black college. [laughter] But I'll see what happens. But I'd like, at this point, to sort of- If you can give me a narrative of some of your activities in the 1980s- That's an area that I have very little information about. And try to put everything in perspective up till now.

Kilgore

Where I'm concerned.

Kelley

Yeah, your activities.

Kilgore

All right. Two or three things that I have done in the eighties I've just gone over. Most of the things I've just told you about at Morehouse College, those things are taking place in the eighties, in the ten years-almost ten years-I've been chairman of the board of trustees.One of the other things that I've done, I've participated in the organization and the continued existence of one of the most viable ecumenical movements in the country. That's the Congress of National Black Churches. Bishop John Adams heads this. It is a congress of six basic black denominations (we tried to get the seventh in, but we couldn't get it). No, it's five: AME [American Methodist Episcopal Church], AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion [Church], the Church of God in Christ, CME [Christian Methodist Episcopal] Church-that's four. (I was right at first). The National Baptist Convention of America-that's five-and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.This movement has had three major objectives: One, theological education. We have worked with the Lilly Endowment in helping to support the four theological schools-well, there are five of them-five theological schools predominantly run by blacks. ITC in Atlanta, Interdenominational Theological Center. Payne Theological Center at Wilberforce. It's an AME school. Howard University Divinity School. Hood Theological Seminary run by the AME Zion Church in Salisbury. [pause] And the Divinity School of Virginia Union University. Now, only three of these are accredited by the National Association of Theological Seminaries, and that's ITC in Atlanta, Howard Divinity School, and Virginia Union. The other two are unaccredited. Now, that's one thing we've been working [on] with those schools, trying to help bring those up to proper accreditation, and so on. We've held conferences and done a number of things.Secondly, we've serviced two other programs in the economic area. We have worked with Aetna Life Insurance Company in developing a church insurance program for liability insurance of all kinds. And it's going to be developed to where there will be a program for automobile insurance. That has not come through yet. That is already working, and many churches are already involved in this program.The third thing we've done is we have developed a model to help rescue the black family. We held a three-day conference last March out in

Wisconsin and put together a program where we have four pilot programs going on right now where clusters of churches have a definite curriculum that we have developed that they are trying out-one up at Oakland, California, one in Philadelphia, one in Indianapolis, and one in Atlanta. When these pilot programs are finished, then we plan to go to the publishing houses of these black denominations and ask them to put out literature, just like they put out Sunday school literature. This thing of bringing children in in the afternoon and on Saturdays and dealing with children and their parents. First, dealing with their personalities-who are you and you are somebody, and all of that, see. And then dealing with their skills and how to develop their computational skills and their reading skills. This is a brand new thing that has great possibilities. And the pilot program will be completed late this spring.

Kelley

I see.

1.11. Tape Number: VII, Side Two (February 16, 1987)

Kilgore

Another thing that I've done is that I gave leadership in late '79 in organizing a group called the Black Agenda [Inc.]. The Black Agenda has three major thrusts: one, a major thrust in dealing with [the] image of black people, improving black people's image, that we are somebody, we can do things' secondly, a major thrust in encouraging black people to develop businesses and to trade with one another; thirdly, a major emphasis in building connections with the black people of Africa. And we have kept alive- We've had some projects, we've had business fairs, we've done other things in this whole emphasis. We're tied in with Tony Brown's program of "Buy Freedom." We are the official agency in this community to promote that program.

Kelley

Who are some of the participants in the Black Agenda?

Kilgore

All right. I can call those off right fast: David [S.] Cunningham; Bill [William] Elkins in the mayor's office; Ivan [J.] Houston, CEO [chief executive officer] and

chairman of the board of Golden State Mutual; Willis Dennis, the owner of Golden Bird chain of restaurants; Don Dyer, who is a partner in Cooper-Lybrand, one of the biggest auditing firms in the country; Joseph Dyer [Jr.], who is public relations man for KCBS; Mary Henry, who is the head of the Avalon Carver Center; Maulana [Ron] Karenga, who is a college professor and president [chairman] of US [Organization] and now heads the Afro-American [Cultural] Center; Grace Payne, who heads the Westminister Community Center. Those are some of the folk who are involved. There are a whole lot more-Paul Hudson, who is vice president of Broadway Federal [Savings and Loan Association].

Kelley

And it's still very active?

Kilgore

Oh, yes. Very active. We have been having a series of meetings. We're reorganizing now for some projects that are coming up. We're doing already a project, in connection with USC, called Community Initiative. That has to do with economic development and housing. And education, too.

Kelley

Well, what are some of the major accomplishments, some of the major successes?

Kilgore

I guess our major accomplishment, up to this time, has been the two business fairs that we've had. We got hundreds of people coming in with booths and demonstrating their businesses, just encouraging the people to buy. Each year, of course, we've had fund-raising luncheons and dinners. Now, the biggest thing we've gotten into is this Community Initiative thing with USC, in which we will be involved with an enterprise zone that's being developed over there near USC. We'll be involved in that. That's possibly the biggest thing we've gotten into.

Kelley

When were the two fairs held?

Kilgore

Both of them were over in the Crenshaw area, back in the parking lot of May Company there, in that section.

Kelley

Was that in '80?

Kilgore

One was this year, in '86, and the other was three years ago, in '83.

Kelley

I see. So what other sort of activities were you-

Kilgore

That's basically [all], except forums where we brought in speakers, and all that kind of thing. Workshops and so on. It's been mostly an educational process up to now, and we're now beginning to get involved in some real big, big kind of business things we're going to do. Particularly this thing with USC.

Kelley

This past- I guess it was '86 you retired from the church as being pastor?

Kilgore

I retired from Second Baptist on December 31, '85.

Kelley

Was there any particular reason or just-?

Kilgore

No, other than I felt that it was time for me to give up. I'd been pastoring for forty-nine years, and I wanted to get started doing some writing, and that's one reason I- Remember, when I first talked to you and your professor, I told [you] that I was going to be doing an autobiography and that if this material could be usable, I expect to use it. But I'm starting now on some other things that I'm writing. But that's one main reason. Also, I had a feeling all the time that when a person has been pastoring for almost fifty years and you're still

doing very well and all, that's the time to get out. And in fact, my old formula was leave before the people want you to leave. So that's what I did. And I wanted to get busy in some of these community things, particularly the Black Agenda. I'm on the board of the directors of Golden State Mutual, and then the work I do for Morehouse takes a lot of time, and I'm free to do those things now without thinking I'm cheating on the church.

Kelley

When did you begin to get involved with this program-what's the name of it?-the television program?

Kilgore

On television?

Kelley

Yeah, with Clifton [D.] Davis.

Kilgore

Oh, yes. "Amen."

Kelley

"Amen," right.

Kilgore

Before it went on the air, someone in New York recommended that there should be some preacher that has some standing in the community that would be a consultant to see that it remained an acceptable program and not a caricature of the black church. And when they asked me to do it, I said, "Yes, if you're going to listen to some of the criticisms." And so I went on as a consultant before the first episode was ever shown. They had done the first episode. I had four or five criticisms of it, but it was sort of in cement then because it was ready to be presented. After that I have read all the scripts. I've read every script. There they are, there are the scripts there. [pointing]

Kelley

Oh, I see.

Kilgore

All those are the scripts. And I read them. They send me the script before they produce them, and I send my criticisms. Some, I have very little criticism. One, they practically rewrote the whole script. Because I knew it was going to be extremely offensive to church people all across the country, particularly black church people. And I think black people possibly would look at it more than the others. I've picked up a lot of comments across the country. Very few critical of it. They've done two or three that they didn't follow all together what I wanted them to do, and they've gotten criticism on it.But in others they have dealt with very delicate issues. Like the one they showed Saturday night was [about] a girl-the show before this-where she was a choir member in the church and she became pregnant and the deacon delivered the baby. This one on Saturday night was where she came back and wanted the child christened in the church. And everybody was loving and all and wanted to christen the baby. In the meantime, there was another side issue where there was some talk about adopting children. Someone was talking about that, and the two sisters in there said they wanted to adopt somebody. And the deacon went out to find someone, and to their dismay, he brought in a seventeen-year-old young man to adopt. But they finally conceded that they would do it. He turned out to be a very positive influence, because this young fellow that didn't marry the girl earlier when she was pregnant came to the child's christening, see. And this young fellow that the sisters had adopted just asked him about it when he said how proud he was, he as a father. This young fellow said, "How proud are you?" He said, "I'm proud of my son." He said, "Well, why don't you marry his mother?" It hit him so heavy he didn't know what to do, see. [laughter] He turned around first and said, "Well, don't meddle in my business." But he said, "I'm not meddling in your business, but that child has a right to have a mother and a father." And he left and went on out. And at the end of it, at the end of that episode, he came back in where all of them were gathered, where they were having sort of a little reception after the christening, and he called the girl aside and said, "I want to marry." And that was the end, which was extremely positive. Extremely positive.

Kelley

Very much so.

Kilgore

Well, that's been my role. Just reading the scripts and criticizing them and asking them to take certain words out that are offensive and all like that. And in instances they have followed them, too.

Kelley

That's excellent.

Kilgore

And the thing started off number four or five in the second ten. You know, there is a top ten and a second ten as they rate these things. Now it's up in the first ten. I don't know how far up.

Kelley

That's good. I've watched it a few times. That's how come I noticed your name on it.

Kilgore

Right.

Kelley

Just a final question to sort of sum up everything. How would you, if you were to sort of assess your significance-I guess the whole struggle for black freedom, for human freedom, for liberation and that stuff-how would you sum up your role in this whole episode?

Kilgore

My role has been that-this may be somewhere in the title of the book I'm going to write-has been a role of servanthood. A role of servanthood. I've always felt that I had some sort of mandate-and I don't know, I guess from God-to serve people, so that I never have picked the people I've served. And I know people are in different categories-educationally, morally, and every other kind of way. But I also think that every individual has intrinsic worth. I don't care how far up or down that individual may be. Every individual has intrinsic worth. And that has been something that I have tried to go by all the time. So that I have made myself available to serve. I have served in the most

lowly capacities, and I have served in some of the highest capacities in my professional office. Simply because I've had that kind of zeal all the time to serve because I believe that all people are intrinsically worthful. That has been my philosophy of life.

Kelley

Well, thanks a lot, Dr. Kilgore.

Kilgore

Okay.

Index
