

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

REV. DOUGLAS CARPENTER  
JUNE 2, 2003

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Monday, June 2, 2003. This is an interview with Rev. Douglas Carpenter. I'm here at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama. If you would give us your name.

DOUGLAS CARPENTER: My name is Douglas M. Carpenter. I was born in 1933, May 22, in Savannah, Georgia, but we moved to Birmingham when I was only three years old. I just turned seventy last week, and have had connections with Birmingham from 1936 until this time.

WA: Great.

[TAPE IS TURNED OFF AND THEN BACK ON.]

WA: Okay. Let's continue from there when you moved to Birmingham in 1936.

DC: I moved here in 1936. My father, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter, Sr., was the rector of the Church of the Advent which is a big downtown church in Birmingham. He was thirty-six at the time. When he was thirty-eight he was elected bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama which was the whole state of Alabama. The reason he's so well known is he was the bishop of this whole state for thirty years. Although he covered the entire state and visited all the Episcopal churches in Alabama, he became quite a leader in Birmingham, partly because of his personality, partly because he was such a great guy, and partly because he was always centered in downtown Birmingham.

WA: Well, great. Tell me a little bit about growing up in Birmingham.

DC: Growing up in Birmingham was very interesting, and hard for some people to understand now. First of all it was a very dirty city in those days because everything depended on iron and coal, steel, and a real rough city. One of the things that disturbed me in my early childhood was when they began to change the light on Vulcan to red when there was a traffic death, but they didn't turn it to red for black traffic deaths, only for white traffic deaths. From a very early age I was aware that there was something really wrong in race relations.

My brother and I often rode the 19 Idlewild streetcar downtown as we got to be twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Seven cents is what it cost in those days. They had "colored" signs on the streetcars, and they were moveable. They never left enough space for the black people who, of course, were called colored

people in those days. My brother and I would often take those signs and throw them out the window. I thought that was at least some way to disagree with what was going on culturally.

When I look back on it now they were such silly things we did because Martin Luther King is just a few years older than I am. At a very early age he began to do some really significant things. But most of the children I grew up with on the south side were fairly liberal, and there's a huge contrast to what I saw later on as people became more conservative. As a child a lot of the older people were very conservative and, of course, the Ku Klux Klan was active, White Citizen's Council, but in the crowd I roamed the south side with it was a fairly liberal group of young people.

As we grew older my father, of course, became more and more involved in so many things. Although across the United States he was seen as a pretty conservative guy. I can remember from way back when I was a teenager, Ku Klux Klanners calling him at night threatening to kill him, White Citizen's Council doing the same. He never took them very seriously because he thought they were cowards and knew they wouldn't follow through. He said, "Anybody that wears a mask has to be a coward."

But when it came to the '60s he was very active in interracial things, and a big number of the interracial meetings met at his office down at the diocesan headquarters. I've talked with some of those people later when I've come back to Birmingham, and some of them say that they would have to go in sometimes one at a time so nobody would suspect a meeting was going on. A lot of the interracial meetings were there and, of course, the eight clergymen that the letter from the Birmingham jail was addressed to were heavily involved in working toward integration, and particularly getting blacks on police forces. They, I think, probably got through the law that forbade wearing masks in public which, of course, was against the Klan.

Before Milton Grafman died, Rabbi Milton Grafman who was one of those eight, I went down to talk to him. One of the things he said to me was, he said, "Your father kept this town from burning to the ground." As we talked about it he said that my dad always kept kind of contact with both sides of all the issues and could keep some kind of conversation going. Later as I've thought about that I've thought that Martin Luther King was necessary. My dad was necessary. One way I look at it now is that Martin Luther King really brought fire into this town, and my dad kept the town from burning down. I think there's a lot of truth in that.

The conflict between those two, King and my father, of course King was much younger. My dad's age is easy to remember. It's always the same as the year, so in 1963 he was sixty-three. He was aging a lot already because he had diabetes real badly. But the conflict between those two—King never came to the meetings—but the conflict was, King thought those eight men should get on into the movement and agree with civil disobedience, and my dad and some of the others knew how mean some of the white people were in this town and how it would bring bloodshed like it did in the burning of the bus, the Freedom Riders, and when the four little girls were blown up down at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

I was aware, too, of what was on my father's mind because I knew so many older white men who were so angry and bitter toward blacks. I learned that at a fairly early age, too, because a black friend of ours's house burned down, and my brother and I who were teenagers went over to see if we could help them. She said that everything was gone. We said, "Did you have insurance on the house?" She said, "Yes, but the insurance man said it was burned, and I didn't have any insurance any more." Well even at ten, or eleven, or twelve, whatever I was at that age, I knew that that was wrong, and my brother and I went on our bicycles to the insurance agency, and they told us the same thing. "Oh, no. If you're policy is burned up, you don't have a policy." Then we found out that one of the leading men in that agency was a leading Episcopalian, a white man. Of course when my dad went down they said the insurance was good, and her house was paid for.

Years later after I'd finished being in college, and the army, and graduate school, and came back for my first job down in Brewton, Alabama, in 1960 I went to my first diocesan convention, and that same white man who had refused the insurance was the lead layman in one of the Episcopal churches. He was angry, so furious with my father, and kept calling him a communist, and kept shouting at him. I'd never seen anything really like that in a meeting. I found out that in those days, in the early '60s, the angry white males would claim that people were communists rather than say that they were for integration. Already they were beginning to see that it wasn't really the thing to be against integration, but you were a communist if you had any kind of liberal streaks in you. Part of that was over the fact that my father was supporting the National Council of Churches which so many people thought were too liberal. This man, who I won't mention by name, I thought he was going to go out and try to beat up my dad, except my father was so big. At that time he was only sixty years old so it would have been no contest.

I could understand why my dad was slow in moving toward integration because he knew that black people come up against people like that man and, of course, we already knew that they were capable of dynamiting homes because a lot of dynamiting had already gone on. Death was a very real thing so that whereas the black people in Birmingham through years of training in the black churches had really learned about passive resistance, people like Fred Shuttlesworth. Are you familiar with Fred Shuttlesworth? Even though his house was blown up and his church, he never struck back.

If anybody doesn't understand what those black churches learned in Birmingham during those years, they need to look at Spike Lee's movie, *The Four Little Girls*. Those adults in there who are just a few years older than I am have such a deep spirituality, and none of them struck back. None of them began to hate white people. It was just an enormous moment in life of the church in Birmingham, what those black churches were able to achieve during that time.

I saw Fred Shuttlesworth about a year ago. I'd never really spoken to him before. He recognized me, and I said, "What did you think of my dad?" He said, "Oh, your dad." He said, "Well, we disagreed a little, but we loved each other." And then he just laughed. I said, "Why did you and so many of the other black Birmingham leaders leave town soon after '63?" He said, "Listen, we had offers from churches all over the United States after sixty-three, four, and five. All of us had offers to go to big churches, and a lot of us did." Of course, he went to Ohio and is still up there. But what a remarkable man he was and still is.

There was a lot more relationship between people like the eight the letter was written to and the black movement than most people realize. When I went down for the signing of *Parting the Waters* by, what's his name? Can you tell me?

WA: Taylor Branch.

DC: Taylor Branch, yes. That's been a few years back. When I was there there were blacks and whites all there, and I started talking to this black man, and he told me he was one of Martin Luther King's warm-up preachers, you know, the preachers that preach to kind of get the crowd warmed up before the main guy. I said, "Well, how about you? Did you know my dad during those years?" He said, "Oh, yeah. We all knew Bishop Carpenter. He'd call us all up to his office, and we'd go in there, and he'd say, 'Come on in here boys. Let's talk'." This fellow said, "It took us a long time to teach your father that he could call white people boys, but not black people boys." Then he laughed. I said, "What would dad say?" "After a

while he called us fellows. "Come on in here fellows, and we'll throw the ball around for a while but don't anybody try to run with it," and then he laughed and laughed. I thought so often people see the people of the movement and the white middle-of-the road leaders as opposing teams, but they all knew each other and had good associations.

Along that same line about three years ago I was talking with a retired black lawyer that I've known off and on all my life. He said, "You know, one day I was marching in front of your dad's office because we just knew he was dragging his feet too much and needed to get on with this. While I was marching it suddenly dawned on me that your dad had paid for my college education and my law school education, and I figured I just couldn't march in front of his office any more," and he laughed, so there was a lot of that that went on during those days that showed people a little better related than it seemed to the outside world, I think.

By the way, while we're talking let me mention to you that Roswell Falkenberry lives across the street, Roswell Falkenberry. He was editor of the Selma newspaper during all of this. He's still very alert and would be happy for you to just drop in on him. That's an assisted living unit over there. He's missing one leg now, but his mind seems real clear to me. He was considered, of course, in Selma as a very liberal newspaper man. He had contact with a lot of the people who came to Selma in '65 to march to Montgomery.

Jonathan Daniel, who's become quite a hero, was an Episcopal seminary student who was killed in the county just to the east of Selma. I'll think of the name of it in just a second. Lowndes County. He has become quite a hero. He was killed there. Falkenberry says he used to come into his office a good bit in Selma, and he would say, "Look, if you go down there, Jonathan, into the county, they'll kill you. It won't be just because you're for voter registration, but you don't dress like those people down there, and they'll know you're a Yankee, and so you better not go down there." Of course he did, and of course he was killed. Was that good or bad? Who knows. Faulkenberry could tell you about some of those incidents which are really interesting. He wouldn't mind it if you just walk in on him over there.

WA: Okay, great.

DC: During 1963, which was such an enormous year here, I started that year in Brewton, Alabama. Brewton, the place where I went in 1960. They gave me the wrong papers when I went to

register to vote, and it was an exam that was so hard that no one could possibly pass it. It was the exam they'd give to black people. So there were no black voters in Brewton. Three years later it hadn't gotten much better there.

Then I moved to Huntsville to start a new congregation because the space program was bringing so many people into Huntsville. It was like going to a different part of the world because everybody was working. Blacks and whites got along well together. The government paid for most of it because it was NASA and the space program. It was really hard for us in Huntsville to really take much part in what was going on in Birmingham. It seemed so far away. I feel badly now sometimes about the fact that we didn't take more part in what was happening in Birmingham and then Selma.

When George Wallace tried to prevent the schools in Huntsville from integrating, people would just hit the national guard, and push them aside, and took their kids on into school anyway, and the national guard didn't do anything because they knew they were so outnumbered in Huntsville. That was so different than some other parts of Alabama. I was there from '63 to '69. So many of the laws were passed in '64-5 in Washington that probably were triggered by what happened in Birmingham.

Speaking of my father, by about 1965 he had aged tremendously. I'm older now than he ever was old, and yet from pictures like—let's see if I've got a picture of him as an older man up here somewhere.

WA: Is that one?

DC: Yeah, here he is. He's sixty-nine here. He started to use a cane. People thought he was old. People often thought that the civil rights movement had caused him to age so much, and it probably did to some degree, but mostly it was just bad diabetes. Even as recently as that a person with diabetes would age about two years for one year because they didn't know as much as they do today. So he retired in December of '68 and died six months later.

George Murray who's the fellow just on this side of him was the second person addressed in the letter from the Birmingham jail. He was the assistant bishop, the Bishop Coadjutor. George Murray is still healthy and living in Baldwin County just across the bay from Mobile, Alabama, and has a wealth of knowledge, but he and several other that were so involved in this just quit talking about it because they were so misquoted and misunderstood.

WA: Oh, really?



DC: It would be hard to interview him now because he's very deaf. His wife can hear well. They wouldn't mind you calling them if you wanted to. It's George M. Murray. He may be the only one still living that was addressed in that letter. He's a wonderful guy. He was younger. You can almost tell from the age of those eight that the younger they were, the more liberal they were, and the more quickly they wanted it to happen.

One of the reasons that Fred Shuttlesworth disagreed with my dad was that in a conversation my father said, "No, Fred, what you want to happen in one year is going to take at least fifty years," which probably is true because we've already been forty, and we've still got a long way to go. But it didn't sound good to them then because the movement was on fire. They were going to get things done quickly, but that was one of the things that was remembered that my dad said, "Any cultural change like this is going to take a long time, and we just have to realize that." Even though true, it may not have been a good thing to say to them at the time. But Fred has forgiven him, and says that they loved each other.

I think Taylor Branch's treatment of the subject is good, and I think the professor over at Samford that has just written *The Peacemakers*—have you read *The Peacemakers*?

WA: Yes.

DC: Johnathan Bass. He probably would be interviewable.

WA: Okay.

DC: I was on a panel with him about a month ago in which he gave kind of the history of the letter. I gave how it affected people personally. There were a couple of others on the panel as well. The letter itself, I found out on that panel with the people in the audience, most people think there was a letter. Did you know there was not a letter? There as no letter.

WA: No, I didn't.

DC: The people it was addressed to never saw it until it came out in the newspaper, and this was a little bit later on.

WA: Ah.

DC: When I came back to Birmingham in 1973 people were getting very interested. It had been ten years since the letter, and called and said, "You've got something very valuable if you've got some of your father's papers. You've got the letter from the Birmingham jail." So I started digging around looking

for it. Couldn't find it, and I called George Murray. He said, "No, there was never a letter." He said, "We didn't know anything about it until it came out in the newspapers." It was not a personal thing because King didn't know any of them, but he knew that it would have a big effect if it was addressed to specific people who were kind of middle-of-the-road, but not willing to get into the movement as far as civil disobedience. Johnathan Bass's study into how that letter was put together is fascinating. It's not like it just happened all of a sudden. There was a lot of planning for all of this, of course.

Birmingham was obviously targeted as a great place to have it happen because Bull Connor was going to respond like he did with violence. All the fire hoses and dogs are probably not as violent as some things could have been. And the Klan was here, and the White Citizen's Council, and it all played right into the hands of the movement.

I think that particularly King thought that my dad, and George Murray, and Milton Grafman, and the Roman Catholic Bishop, and the Methodist Bishops, and the Baptist minister at the largest Baptist Church here, and the downtown Presbyterian should have been marching, but when you think back on it, it was much more effective nationally that it ended up the children marching. That's what really caught the attention. If a couple of old bishops and rabbis had been marching, it probably wouldn't have caught that much attention. So who knows, even on hindsight it's hard to know how it could have been done better.

Another reason that I was aware as a child of the violence in this town is there were so many knife fights and that type of thing, particularly among the people that worked in the coal mines and the steel industry, and the houses were so close together and, of course, no air conditioning. It was so hot here in the summertime that tempers flared very easily throughout Birmingham. And then you had people like George Wallace who was so feisty and really enjoyed fighting, and Bull Connor who was then Police Chief. They chose the right spot but, of course, everybody from the Kennedys on down asked King to hold off because Birmingham was moving into a new system of city government. Progress was being made. But who's to know if Birmingham had been left on its own? Even today it's in so many ways a segregated city.

What's gone on in the churches has been interesting to study. So many of the white, conservative Southerners had an idea that all these black people would want to suddenly come into the white churches. Well, none of them showed up. The white people didn't even think of integrating the black churches. I think probably today both black and white realize that people kind of look for people that are similar to



them in church, and churches that are rainbow or have such a variety are the exception, and those congregations are so proud of what they've done. But housing is not that integrated, and if housing is not integrated the churches probably will not be.

We've come a long way. Our children don't now see signs "colored" and "white" over all the water fountains. People can use facilities together. Traveling for black people when I was young was very difficult because there was no place they could use a restroom. There just wasn't any place. For us to have come that far in fifty years, or whatever it is, is better than in some places, I suppose. What else do you want to know?

WA: You said that you spoke a little bit about the personal reactions to the "Letter." Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

DC: I think people expected that the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" really affected the lives of those it was written to. In some cases it did. In talking with Rabbi Grafman, and this must have been twenty-five years after, he said that still liberal Jews of New York, he used that as an example, were writing him, not exactly hate mail, but just mail about how bad he was because they thought anybody that Martin Luther King would have written to must have been very conservative. I know from talking with him that the rest of his life he had people who disliked him, whereas the Jewish community were real leaders in the civil rights movement in Birmingham. It was their stores where the sit-ins finally took place at the lunch counters, and so forth, in Pizitz's, and Lovemann's, and places like that. I think Jewish people are often at the forefront of civil rights because they know the opposite of it. So I know he felt it the rest of his life.

I don't know, my father was so involved with so much, and had been for so long already, that I don't think the letter really affected him personally that much. People knew him well. They knew what he stood for and where he was. He was such a well put together guy. What he said to George Murray, several of the writers on this have quoted this. He called George Murray into his office when he first saw this in the newspaper, the letter from the jail, and they read it together. Then he said, "Now, George, no matter what we do we're going to get hit from both sides." I think he had already come to know that because even within the Episcopal church lots of the northern bishops were calling him an apartheid-type bishop, and yet in Birmingham he was getting threats from the Ku Klux Klan. It's just something he really did learn to live with, I think.

Probably the thing that irritated him the most in all of this was when other Episcopal leaders would come into Alabama, and not let him know they were here, and begin trying to take leadership roles. There's actually a rule among the bishops that you never come in and function officially in another diocese without being in touch with the bishop there. But lots of them did, and lots of non-clergy wore clerical collars in those days just so they would be more visible. Who was to know? They were from out-of-town.

Things that were kind of moving along slowly within the diocese and within the community were much too slow for the movement. They probably were too slow, but a lot of people did get caught in the middle of that, but I think some of us need to be in the middle. If everybody was at the extremes we wouldn't have any chance of working any of these things through, I believe. He was certainly very much someone in the middle.

Peggy Rupp, who was very involved in the whole thing and was the director of youth ministry, among other things, for the diocese during these years. She's still very much alive in Birmingham. Like George Murray for a long time she wouldn't speak about this because she was always misquoted. She may be willing to talk now. She said that one of the things that she was so aware of, working out of the same office building that my father did, is that he was bishop to people of all kind of persuasions. They all needed him. It wasn't like he could just leave one group for another, so even people he disagreed with he still had to minister to. He had to confirm them, and visit their churches, and had such a broad spectrum of people that were kind of his children in a sense. This is sometimes overlooked. It's like you can't totally desert most of your people to be with some of your people, and maybe sometime you have to do that, but if you don't keep the church functioning throughout, and if it falls all apart, you don't have much left to work with. We've seen that in several generations probably, so that issue that seems so simple to everybody now, I don't know of anybody that speaks against integration any more, seemed so difficult for Southerners at that time.

Of course the issue that now seems so difficult for some is how to give full family rights to all gay and lesbian people. To some of us it seems like a fairly simple thing, but to others it is very complicated, and it may take even longer to work through. Each generation kind of has something to work on.

WA: So when you came back to Birmingham in 1973, did you see change in the city?

DC: Let me tell you about that because it was just so amazing. I grew up here with it full of smoke, and dust, and dirt, and people would think it was healthy to have all that because it meant good economy. I basically left here when I went off to high school, so I left here at about age fifteen and came back at age forty. When I came back it was a clean town. There was a lot of banking, and engineering, and medicine. This is a huge center for medicine and banking now, a great variety of opportunities. The economy in Birmingham stays pretty steady because it's so varied. It was an entirely different place than when I grew up here, economically. Of course the mayor was black. We had a black mayor fairly soon after all this commotion that went on. People seemed to roll with that pretty well.

The thing that probably is still the worst here and places like Memphis is the public school system in the City of Birmingham, which is fairly small. Out of the million people in the area it's probably about 280,000, something like that. But the whole school system just fell apart. It's a constant concern for people. There are little cities all around Birmingham with excellent school systems, Mountain Brook, Homewood, Pelham, Hoover, just lots of little towns. But in the city, just like in downtown Memphis, there's just almost no good public school system for an average person. Now the School of Fine Arts which is part of the Birmingham public school system is about the fourth best public school in the whole country, but you have to be very smart to get into it. Of course, we have private schools but not as many as some other Southern towns, probably because the flight to the smaller towns did the same thing that in places like Memphis, which has such big city limits, they couldn't really flee that far to get into a better school system. That's still something that's really difficult.

My son, Stephen, now is in Memphis. I think somewhere over here is a picture of a bunch of his school children. He started three private schools in downtown Memphis—that's some of them right there—for the black kids in downtown Memphis because the business leaders kept saying, "We can't hire black people because they can't speak, they can't add, they can't write, and the school systems are so bad." So some of them went together, and he started three private schools for the downtown kids that live in the projects, and they're doing great. They're just getting to be so smart.

A bunch of them were down here this past week to go the Civil Rights Museum and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. That night I'd asked them what they'd learned. The thing that I think was most on their mind was those four little girls. They just had to talk about that a lot. I told them that when I was their

age I didn't think that there were any bad black people because I'd never seen any black person do anything bad, but I'd seen plenty of white people do things bad, but now I've found out that there are bad black people as well as bad white people, and they all nodded their heads because of that crowd there, there's hardly one that has two parents. Downtown Memphis is scarred pretty badly by all of this, I think more so than Birmingham. The thing I didn't see happening was good education in the City of Birmingham. Otherwise it seems like things have done very well.

WA: Do you remember the '77 Chambliss trial, the Sixteenth Street bombing trial?

DC: Yeah. Of course the thing that I think crossed most of our minds then was, "Who was able to stop investigation in that crime? Why did that not move on?" I really don't know the answer to all that, of course, the more recent trial all these years afterwards. What was it that slowed that down? Was it in Birmingham, or beyond, or where, or what? I don't understand it yet.

WA: I don't have a good answer. There are people who have said various things. Bill Baxley, who prosecuted it in '77, said that the FBI had closed the case after five years when their statute of limitations ran out because they didn't think they could get a conviction in Birmingham at the time.

DC: Oh, my gosh.

WA: But, I've heard other people say, "I lived in Birmingham at that time, and I think an all white jury would have convicted."

DC: Oh, I think so. I haven't finished reading Diane McWhorter's book yet. She may get into some of that in there. Her father, who's such a central focus in that book, I knew growing up pretty well, Martin McWhorter. I don't know why I haven't called him to talk to him about her book. He lives somewhere outside of Birmingham, I think in a trailer. He would be about three or four years older than I am. His brother, Hobart, is a lawyer in town.

Diane did tremendous research on that, but there are some areas that she's a little off. For example, just a specific. She thought that my dad was the minister of the Church of the Advent during the '60s when he had been a bishop for twenty years already, and thought that George Murray was an assistant minister there when he was the Bishop Coadjutor. There are little things like that, and she probably over does the Mountain Brook Country Club as being the focus and center of planning some of these things, but

it's a good book so far. I haven't finished it yet. Hobart would be an interesting guy to talk to. Have you talked with him?

WA: No.

DC: Or even more, Martin McWhorter.

WA: Um-hum.

DC: It seems to me in that book she's alluding, or assuming that her dad was a member of the Klan or had something to do with the bombings, or something like that. I don't know how she gets away with that, or how she still relates with him, or what that's all about. She lives in New York, I think.

WA: Yeah. I'm not sure. That does come around at the end of the book, so I won't spoil it for you, but that is a major part of the book, her kind of thinking about that and wondering what he might have been doing at that time.

DC: Yeah. What else can I say? Of course, I grew up in a totally segregated world as a child. I went to high school at Phillips High School for a while which was totally white. Now it's totally black. Integration there didn't help much. It just switched it from being white to being black. Fred Shuttlesworth got beat up pretty badly when he took one of his children to be a student there in the early days. I was probably already in high school by that time. I can't remember. No, I couldn't have been. Probably off in school, or in the army, or something.

When Birmingham ceased being a city that needed a lot of cheap labor, my observation was that the black women did pretty well because they knew how to be nurses, and housekeepers, and teachers, whereas the men had not had a chance really to do things before other than manual work. The reason that leadership came mostly out of clergy and funeral directors was they were the only black men that got paid by black people, when you think about it. Of course there were some big exceptions to that, but most of them were funeral directors and clergy. Of course that's changed a lot now, but to begin with it was very hard for the black people to get work, the black men, because they had no training in anything. Schools weren't good, and of course the poverty was pretty big.

Have you seen some of those old shotgun houses that the steel workers used to live in?

WA: I haven't. I've seen pictures.

DC: A lot of them were down where the University of Alabama Medical School is now. I used to ride through there on my bicycle on my way to Phillips High School. They were very narrow, and there usually would be three rooms just one after the other. I guess that's why they were called shotgun. You could just shoot straight through the house. They were very poorly put together and must have been unbearably hot. I assume that white people lived in those as well.

Out here, this was way out in the county where we're sitting right now. There was a lot of coal mining in this area, Cahaba Heights, and the leftover people from coal mining were still here in 1973 when I started this parish. A lot of them lived right across the street here in little shacks. There was no running water out here in '73. The street right across from you had about seven or eight of the old shacks on it. They called this area Slabtown because the lumber mill would give away the slab end of the lumber with the bark on it, and people would make shacks out of it and live in it. Of course they were very segregated, too, these poor people. There were little black communities. There's still a black community called the Overton Community out here.

When I started this church we had a free medical clinic. I found out that the very poor people out here, you still couldn't get blacks and whites in the same room together. That was in '73. The wealthier people, like we are that have automobiles and that sort of thing, didn't have much trouble with it by '73. But the economy has done such now that almost all these poor people out here have jobs now, and they're doing a lot better and are kind of in the middle of suburbia.

This was one of the mining areas that almost nothing's written about because there was child labor out here. One man that lives across the street here told me he started mining coal at age six. He didn't see anything wrong with it. He was in his eighties. He didn't get black lung or anything. He lived in a little shack over there, and when he needed something he'd go out and shoot his gun up in the air, and one of us would go over and see what he needed. There were a lot of kind of primitive areas all around Birmingham. There's no telling what went on out in these places. The bad things that went on in places like Bessemer are well documented as far as child labor and that type of thing, but the other areas are not so much. You hear more about downtown Birmingham or that area.

WA: You talked about how different it was living in Huntsville and integration of the schools there versus looking at Birmingham. Do you see Birmingham as being exceptional?



DC: I think Birmingham is exceptional in the fact that it has made such enormous progress in those years. I don't see any other place in the country that has made as much progress, and I've been all over. I don't see that black people and white people work any better together in other parts of the country, and we came so far in that, and it was such a heavy population to be dealing with. Yeah, I think Birmingham is really exceptional.

Since I started this as a new congregation out here, a lot of the members here were newcomers to Birmingham. They all expected to find some bad sort of place here. Every one of them was just amazed at how wonderful it is, and the tremendous medical community. Of course HealthSouth hasn't helped that image lately, but the doctors are performing just as well, and the hospitals, and clinics. It's just the administrative part of that. But it's been a surprise to find what a good place Birmingham really is as compared to other places. Of course, you have a long way to go.

WA: Is there anything else? What haven't I asked you about?

DC: Let's see. I think another thing I could say, and I've got to stop at four and it's ten minutes to four, but another thing I can say which contributed to the way Birmingham was, I believe, say in the '50s and '60s—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WA: Go ahead. Sorry.

DC: Many of my friends whose parents could afford to send us up East both to high school and college, and the majority stayed away. They didn't come back, so there was enormous loss of potential leadership in Birmingham that went on. I started going to New Jersey to school when I was fifteen in 1948, and the huge terminal train station, which has since been torn down, would just be packed with teenagers going off to school. They went up to Virginia, and North Carolina, and New Jersey, and Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, a big number of us. Since so many ended up going on to graduate school in the East, and then working in the East like my brother who's now in Rhode Island, who's just a really competent doctor still at seventy-two, research, works in infectious disease, would have been such an asset to Birmingham. But so many of that generation were educated and didn't come back, they called it a "brain drain." I expect we would have had more leadership in Birmingham if that hadn't taken place.

As a consequence of that a group called Leadership Birmingham started in 1984. There'd been one to model after in Nashville, because a number of the people in Birmingham realized that if we had a crisis again we didn't want to be with as little leadership as we had earlier. So that's been going on now since '84, and it's been a real good program and, I think, managed really well. People are coming back to Birmingham, and more and more people are getting their education closer to town I think now than was happening. I think that was probably a significant part of things.

I do know that among black people in particular when they had a chance to go off to school, very few of them came back because the jobs were so scarce for educated blacks. We probably lost a lot more of our black leadership than we did white leadership during that time, of the ones that went off. By that time Princeton, and Yale, and Harvard, and Penn, and places like that were beginning to be integrated and almost that early were actually courting blacks to come into higher education. But what would a highly educated black man have come to in those days? They really wouldn't have fit into the black churches. They'd be looking for higher salaries. It just was a practical sort of thing.

I do remember that one of my father's real concerns was getting black clergy into Alabama. It was just almost impossible. He had a favorite saying that, "We don't have problems in Alabama. We have opportunities." But one time he got up in front of the convention and said, "Gentlemen, this time we have a problem. We can't get black leaders to come back to Alabama," and it was pretty obvious why you couldn't.

And of the few black clergy that they had in the Episcopal Church, they had some hesitation about bringing black people into the Episcopal Church, and having them confirmed, and so forth, because if they moved to another town there probably wouldn't be a black Episcopal Church, and they probably wouldn't have been welcomed in a white Episcopal Church. I don't think we would have any Episcopal Church in Alabama now that would not be delighted to have black members. But it's still the same old story. The white people are not going to the black churches. Why don't they do that instead of wondering why the black people don't come to the white churches? Now the Church of the Advent in downtown Birmingham is somewhat integrated because they've got that wonderful school down there, that public school really was a help with that. So that's about all I can think of.

WA: Okay.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED BY SHARON CAUGHILL, AUGUST, 2003