

INTERVIEW WITH JOHNNY GODAIR, 4-13-99

ANGELA HORNSBY: My name is Angela Hornsby, and I am speaking with the Reverend Johnny Godair at his office at the United Pentecostal Church in Durham, North Carolina. The date is April 13, 1999, and we're here as part of the Southern Oral History Program's New Immigrants project. If you could just state your full name for me.

JOHNNY GODAIR: Johnny Philip Godair.

AH: When and where were you born?

JG: 7-14, 1940, in Portageville, Missouri.

AH: Were you named after someone in your family?

JG: I think one of my relatives was John, one of my uncles, so they named me Johnny. That's probably the closest.

AH: I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your family history, your grandparents, your parents.

JG: All came from the state of Missouri, all of them. My father's mother and dad lived in Missouri many years. Finally moved to California in the later years of their life. My mother's mother is still living, she's 94. My grandfather on my mother's side has been dead for several years. That was pretty well their background all the way back to the turn of the last century, in Missouri.

AH: Can you give me a sense of what they did?

JG: A lot of them were involved, in my growing-up years, in farming. Mostly farming. They were living on the farm as farmers.

AH: Were any of them involved in the ministry?

JG: No, not any in my past, they weren't. Now, presently, in the immediate family now, my brother is pastor in Burlington, I have a nephew that pastors in Salisbury, North Carolina. I have some other relatives. But not my grandparents or uncles or so on. My father is still pastor of a church in Missouri. He's 79 years old, still pastors a church.

AH: Can you give me a sense of your upbringing, what that was like?

JG: Just being raised on a farm, basic upbringing in a farm home, working on the farm, household chores, and attending a country school. That was my basic--.

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AH: Was religion important in your family?

JG: Yes, it was.

AH: Can you describe that a little?

JG: My father became a minister when I was about eight or nine years old, and so we constantly were involved in church and the work of the church and so on from the time I was about eight or nine.

AH: Do you have any siblings?

JG: I have two children.

AH: Any brothers or sisters?

JG: Oh, my brothers and sisters are siblings, I'm sorry. Yes, I have three brothers. I have no sisters. One brother is three years older than me, one is ten years younger than me, and one is about fifteen years younger than me. So it's four boys stretched out over several years.

AH: Are they also involved in the ministry?

JG: I have one brother that is a pastor in Burlington.

AH: I was wondering if you could now tell me when and under what circumstances did you come to North Carolina.

JG: I came to North Carolina 26 years ago. In fact, I came here to start this local church. There wasn't a United Pentecostal church in Durham, so I came here to start it.

AH: Could you describe a little bit--did you come here expressly for the purpose of--?

JG: That's what I came for. That and that only.

AH: Did you know anyone here when you came?

JG: No, I didn't know one person in Durham.

AH: Why Durham?

JG: Because I felt led to the Lord in prayer to pick Durham. It was strictly the leading of the Lord.

AH: Even though you had no relatives here?

JG: Not at all. Not in the whole state.

AH: Interesting.

JG: I have no relatives in the whole state. I have a brother that's come, and some relatives that have come since then, but I had no relatives. I didn't know anybody in Durham, and I really didn't know but a few people in the whole state of North Carolina.

AH: How old were you when you came to Durham?

JG: 32.

AH: And do you remember what year that was?

JG: 1973.

AH: Backtracking a little bit, can you give me a sense of your school experience?

JG: I went to Portageville, Missouri, which is a small school, and I graduated from Portageville High School in 1958. Then I have some, not secular education, but strictly Bible school, through Texas Bible College. But no college or university degrees. Strictly ministerial.

AH: So before starting the church here, had you been involved in any other churches?

JG: Yes. We started two churches in Missouri, over a period of eleven years.

AH: Could you describe the ethnic makeup of those churches?

JG: I was in a small town that was predominantly white. We were the first church in that city that, way back in the sixties, became integrated. We had blacks, mainly blacks. There wasn't many Spanish there, and there wasn't many other people there. Small town. It was mainly either white population or black population. We were the first church []. It was a small town of only six thousand people.

AH: What year was this?

JG: It started in 1962. We stayed till '73. So we were there eleven years.

AH: Could you give me a sense of, in terms of your perception of race relations, what was the situation like growing up, for example? Did you interact with a lot of people of different races back then?

JG: No, not a lot, because like I say on the farm there it was basically just the white and black

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folk. That was basically it. There wasn't really any other. In that farm area, it wasn't like a city or a big town or something. That was basically it. There wasn't people from other countries or nationalities or so on. It wasn't there.

AH: So was it then here in Durham that you first encountered Latino—?

JG: Yes. In Durham, it became more of an outreach into every aspect of the community. We have black folk in our church, we have Spanish folks, we have a Spanish service every week strictly for the Spanish. On a recent Sunday morning, we had nine different countries represented in our church. So we are an ethnic church. We are a church where I think everybody feels comfortable.

AH: Going back to the church in the small town, was it important for you to have an integrated ministry? What benefits did you see coming from that?

JG: My main benefit was not from a social standpoint. My main thrust has always been that everybody's equal, everybody's the same. I preach the Gospel to everybody. So that's my thrust, to just love people and preach the Gospel. It wasn't with any other motivation. It wasn't a social situation. It was strictly that I view everybody the same, and I'm going to preach the Gospel to anybody that'll let me preach the Gospel.

AH: I was wondering if you could describe for me a little bit about the Latino service. When did that start?

JG: It started about four or five years ago. We started it on Thursday night, which was a night when we did not have a regular scheduled service. And we started out with just a few, and now we have about a hundred.

AH: So there are a hundred Latino—?

JG: Spanish. They are from Mexico, they are from El Salvador, they are from Nicaragua, they are from Panama. They're from mainly Mexico and Central America. That's basically where a lot of them are from.

AH: And you also have African-American members as well.

JG: Oh, yes. I have a young African-American pastor here who works with me. Our African-American people are in the choir, ushers. They're involved. The point that we make is that there's no difference. We just try to treat everyone the same. So whoever we can reach, we witness to, we talk to. Anybody that comes, we preach the Gospel to them. We love them just the same. It doesn't make a difference.

AH: How would you characterize race relations in Durham, in the twenty-six years that you've been here?

JG: I've seen the good and bad.

AH: Could you give me a little sense of that?

JG: I haven't been involved that much in any problem areas, but I've observed. I've been in Durham, it's got its racial problems, I think. In the church, I really haven't had any problems. I wouldn't let it be a problem. If we have people that are prejudiced, they usually will change their viewpoint or go somewhere else, because we're going to reach out into every area of the community, and we're not going to regard a person's skin or their language or whatever. And if people don't feel comfortable with that, they wouldn't feel comfortable in our church.

AH: How would you assess relationships between your Hispanic members and your African-American members?

JG: No problem whatsoever. We are starting, in fact, this week, a class of teaching Spanish to the English and teaching English to the Spanish. So we're starting a class. We have about 60 enrolled in one class, about twenty-something in another class. So I think the feeling is good. There's really no problem. I haven't viewed it—I haven't seen a problem.

AH: In talking with other church people in other congregations, they've talked about this mistrust that's still there between African-Americans and Latino Americans. Do you get a sense of that at all? I know you spoke of some...

JG: In the community, I've seen some problems. I've never seen it in the church that I'm pastor of. I've never seen any problems.

AH: What type of problems in the community have you seen?

JG: You observe racial feelings from time to time. I think everybody sees that. If we'll be honest, I think we all see some of that. But it really hasn't been a problem in the church I'm pastor of. I've never really had a problem with it.

AH: Could you give me one specific example in the community where you've seen that?

JG: Well, as far as what I have seen, I mean, I don't like to name a specific thing, but I've seen several cases through the years where I thought there were racial feelings that should not have been there. In talking to people, in communicating with people, listening to conversations, what they have to say, the gist of the conversation, you can pick up feelings.

AH: Has this taken the form of stereotypes, would you say? Specific stereotypes of one race?

JG: To be honest, I've seen racial prejudice in the white community; I've also seen it in the black community. And I have many wonderful black folk that are members of our church, and they tell

me from time to time that they see that. Some of them have told me that some of their own black friends do not like the fact that they come to a church where there's a black pastor. And then I would encounter white folks that didn't want to go to church with anyone black. My feeling is, that's what we're going to do here, and if this doesn't suit you, if you don't feel comfortable with this, you'd be better off somewhere else.

AH: Do you feel that these classes which are going to start up soon, and the Spanish church service, has helped in some way to forge better cultural understanding between Latinos, whites, and African-Americans?

JG: I think so, yes. It has given us all a better understanding of each other. I think it's been good for us.

AH: Can you give me an example?

JG: Not really where I can just say, but in the constant flow of our church and people and the interaction of the members, I think it has definitely given us all, all of our church members, a better understanding of the other person, whoever they may be.

AH: You mentioned the service having started four or five years ago. Is that the starting point where you noticed ethnic changes, in terms of Latinos?

JG: No, that's just when we felt the need because there were so many coming into this area that we needed to put forth a concerted effort. Quite a few of them cannot speak English, so consequently we felt the need to have a service in Spanish, where they could relate to. Every service in our church is interpreted for the Spanish. They use headsets, and somebody's in the balcony relating everything that's said and done for them. But they do like it better when you don't have to go through an interpreter. It's not right. And I understand that.

AH: In your opinion, what constitutes a strong community?

JG: A strong community? It's where everybody gains mutual respect and understanding for each other. I think that constitutes a strong community.

AH: And what kind of community would you like future generations, your grandchildren, to live in?

JG: I think just a community where everybody learns that even though we are not the same, and we may have cultural differences and backgrounds that are different, yet we learn to value and to appreciate each other better for who we are and what we are. And I think in that type of climate, everybody can get along, and we can understand that we don't have to be the same language to care for each other. We don't have to read the same [], we don't have to have the same background.

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AH: Do you think that's a lesson that the wider, outside of these church walls, could learn to appreciate?

JG: Definitely, definitely.

AH: Do you think that's going to take time?

JG: It will take time, as I view it. I think there is progress being made, I think there's progress being made. But I think it's going to take more time, I really do, to really bring to fruition what you'd like to see. It'll take time. I don't think there's any substitute for time. It's not going to happen just overnight. It's going to take time. And educating people. I think it'll take time and educating people of how to get along with each other and how to appreciate each other, and how to feel toward each other even though we're not exactly the same. We don't have to be the same. We don't have to be the same color, the same language, the same personality, the same backgrounds, you know, and this is what we preach in this church, is that we all come from varied backgrounds, but we learn to get along with each other. Some have very little, some have more. That doesn't make us some kind of a special individual in the sight of God, if we have a little more or perhaps we're a different color skin. God loves us all the same.

AH: I think that's a very important point.

JG: To me, it is very important.

AH: Coming to a close here, since I know your time is short--

JG: It's all right, I'm OK.

AH: Thanks. Do you get a sense that--we talked about appreciating differences between different races, but do you have a sense that Latinos, I mean Spanish, whatever term is applicable, and African-Americans share certain commonalities?

JG: I think they do probably in the sense that the white race has been the larger and predominant race in America, populationwise, though it's my understanding now that it's come into place that the white race will not be the majority. There will be enough other groups that--for example, right now, I was preaching in California recently, and they said the whites are not the majority in California. It's maybe 48 or 49 percent of the entire state is white. So I think we're coming to a broader sense of understanding in the world we live in, that we didn't have ten years ago, thirty years ago, fifty years ago. I think the world's getting smaller, in the sense that we're understanding that it's not just one race or just one group of people. In the Old South, you know, the things I hear and the things I read, the things I understand about it, you just stayed with your people and that was about it. But in today's world, I think we're getting the understanding that that's not going to be the case. It will never revert back to the way it was. And I think that's good.

AH: What impact, beyond this church, have you seen that the Latino population has created for Durham? What changes?

JG: I think most of them that come here that we're in contact with--and we've got some that are common laborers, farm laborers; we've got some with doctorate degrees, in our church--I think they face a difficulty. People looking at them and not really, how would I say this?, not really understanding their past and their background as Spanish-speaking people, and maybe some of them do []. For example, we've got a lady who comes to the church that has a degree and came from a very well-educated family and pretty high in social standing in Guatemala. When they get here--they had to leave the country, there were some problems, there was some internal fighting a few years ago--they came here. It's almost like starting all over. That's what I've observed. Good education, good understanding, smart people, but coming here--she started all over, cleaning houses and doing menial tasks. But now that she's learned to speak English and so on, she has a good position. So things are good. But coming here is starting all over. And the way I view it, she's highly educated, and I have some in the church that are not educated hardly any. They're common laborers, they do carpentry work, they do field work, they do farm work, this kind of thing. But all of them, as I observe it, in a sense, have a sense of starting over.

AH: Is there any particular area where you've noticed that Spanish families have congregated? Have you found that a lot of families tend to live in the same areas?

JG: Yes. We bring quite a few to church out here by South Square, out behind Darryl's there. There's hundreds of them in apartments out there. And we've had open-air services out there. We checked with the apartment owners and the police and they have endorsed us to do that, and we have had services. In that one place, there's almost 2000 Spanish people. They do congregate in certain areas. And then we bring several Spanish from up in the northern part of Durham, towards Roxboro. There's quite a few of them who congregate there. So I think they have a tendency to do so. And that's when they feel more comfortable, in the sense of being around their own people that speak their own language. They get out here among some like me who don't speak Spanish, they have a hard time relating. They have a hard time relating. And some that I preach to every week, if it wasn't for an interpreter, they wouldn't know a thing I'm saying. We'd have problems. So that's why, as a pastor, I'm interested in learning the Spanish language, at least to where I can get by. I'm going to attend the classes also, because I've never learned the Spanish language, but I want to. Enough to communicate, at least. I may never become real proficient in speaking the Spanish language, but I will learn enough that I can communicate, and that's what I want.

AH: Do you get a sense that other churches in this area have been as responsive as this has been?

JG: I think there's a few. I don't think all of them are. I think some are just kind of set in their ways and they go ahead and do what they've always done. But there are some that I've heard of that are opening up to various cultures and backgrounds and races, and to the Spanish in particular. Yes, I've heard of some that do. But not all. I don't think it's the majority. I think the majority do not. But more and more.

AH: How do you feel about that?

JG: It's good, it's good. It's very good. I like to see it.

AH: What future challenges do you see in the future in regards to Latino immigration in this area? As regards your church; as regards Durham?

JG: I think more and more of the people need to be educated on the background of the Spanish people, some of their cultural background. The more we know about them, the better we're going to be able to relate to them, and assimilate them into the community to become a vital part of the community, not just someone that you look upon as, 'Those are Spanish people and they're from somewhere else'. But as we understand them better and communicate with them more, I think it's very important that they learn the English language, and that we learn their language. I think that's very important. Otherwise, if you don't do that, you're always going to have them into a segregated position, where they only will be able to relate to the ones that speak their language. Naturally, if I go up to you and I start speaking and you don't understand a thing I'm saying, we've got to []. So I think it's very important that they learn the English language, but secondly I think it's important that we learn their language. And then a lot of our—of course, it's being taught at a lot of our schools, our high schools and colleges, and more and more people are learning it. And that's good.

AH: Are there any other needs in the Latino community—fostering better communication is important; are there any other needs that you see in the Spanish community that you can address as a church body?

JG: As a church body, I think we can help them languagewise; we can help them socially, we can assimilate them into our churches, make them a part of our people. And a lot of our people have really accepted that as a challenge. Many of our folk have helped them to get jobs. Some of our people who own small businesses have hired them. And all of this, I think, perpetuates a better feeling and better understanding.

AH: Yours seems to be a model that other churches and even communities in Durham could emulate. Have there been opportunities for this sort of exchange? A type of dialogue, either with other churches, or—?

JG: We've had some churches talk to us that do as much as we have. We've been a racially mixed church, not divided but mixed, from the very beginning. I think the first Sunday I was here we had seven, my family of four and three more people, and on about the fourth Sunday we had four blacks to attend, and from that point on we have been a racially mixed church. And a lot of the churches then, as well as some even now, were not. I've had several pastors talk to me about how does it work, how do you assimilate them in. I've given them a good positive report. It really hasn't been a problem here. And I think if you look at it as anticipating problems, that's what you'll have.

AH: That's a good point.

JG: Jesus taught us that as man thinketh in his heart, so is he. If you look for problems, you'll find them. But if you look for good positive and creative ways to get along and mix together, you'll have that. And so consequently we have blacks in our choir, we have a black minister, black staff, we have blacks as ushers, we have black Sunday School teachers teaching white children, and I don't hear of any problems whatsoever. But from time to time we address these things in the pulpit, that we are—that the love of God would cause us to love everybody the same, and we would never judge somebody because of the language they speak or the color of their skin. And that is the message we try to get across constantly. And even with the Spanish-speaking people, from the very beginning, we've tried to reach out to them, and now having classes to learn more of the language, and not only the English, but to learn more about them as people.

AH: Well, this is an extremely optimistic message, and it seems like you've done a lot to try to foster more cultural understanding.

JG: I'd say every week we probably have 300 blacks in our service. We probably have over 100 Spanish, as well as—we've got a few people from Russia, we've got some from other European countries, we've got some from some of the nations in Africa that have recently come to Durham. So we minister every week to about 12- to 1400 people. I'm going to guess 300 blacks, 100 Spanish, probably 700-800 white folk, and the others are some mixture of some other countries and nationalities.

AH: And your black congregants, are they from around this area?

JG: Most of them are. We do get some that have come to the area, that have come here to college from the African nations and so on. Recently we had a couple start coming from Nigeria, they were not too long removed from Nigeria. We have several Egyptian families that come to our church, and they are from Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt. And they do speak English, and they have been in the country for a while. They came to New York and Florida, and then they finally migrated to Durham. Some of them are in business, some of them own restaurants. We have about fifteen to twenty from the nation of Egypt that come here every week. They're part of our church.

AH: These black congregants, are they long-time Durham residents?

JG: Mostly long-time Durham residents.

AH: Again, though, you've seen no difficulty in their assimilation to their new neighbors.

JG: We haven't really had a problem. If there's been one, I haven't heard of it. So far as I know, it's flowed smoothly. But I think a lot of that is in the attitude of our people. That is the key, the

attitude of the church.

AH: How do you foster that attitude? Is it just through the Biblical teachings, --?

JG: Teaching, and preaching, and individual classes, and then just in conversation. We foster that kind of spirit. We teach them that the love of God is colorblind. That is, to me, very important. And we taught that from the very beginning. And like I say, there have been some. We had some almost in the very beginning, when we only had 30 people, we had some that didn't like it because we had some black folk coming.

AH: Are these white?

JG: Oh, yeah. And I just told them in a nice way that if you don't feel comfortable with that, then you'd probably be more comfortable to go somewhere else to church. I mean, my job is not to run people off, my job is to bring people in; however, you cannot allow attitudes and spirits to come in to the church that is going to in effect defeat the purpose of what you are trying to do. So if they're going to have that attitude, and they're going to talk that among the people, that is going to be a disruptive situation in your church, which you really don't need. A church doesn't need disruption; it needs cohesiveness and unity. Brotherhood.

AH: I think this is a wonderful attitude that you have concerning race.

JG: That's always been my attitude. Like I say, the church that I pastored in Missouri was in a small town; where Durham has a lot of churches, there were only thirty-something churches in that town, and we were the very first ones that had black folk []. And by the time I left--and by the way, that church is still going strong, and some of the people that became members when I was there are still members today. I preached back there, in the church we started thirty-seven years ago, I preached there four months ago, and there's a black man named Floyd Higgs who became a member when I was there--he is now one of the trustees of that church. So it just started something that still flows to this day. There's no problem.

AH: This wonderful attitude that you have, did you get that from growing up?

JG: Not really. I was brought up in a climate where white and black folk really didn't mix. I really was. In my childhood, in the '40s, early '50s, I was brought up in that kind of climate. But []...I went to high school, there wasn't one black person in my high school. There wasn't one Spanish. I mean, it was the federal [] all-white high school, back in the '50s. But I began to realize that this was not the will of God. So I felt a call to go into the ministry in the late '50s. My entire attitude had a transformation. I began to realize that this was not the will of God, that churches should segregate themselves into their own cliques and groups and colors.

AH: Wonderful. Is there anything that we haven't touched upon that you would like to add about anything that we've discussed?

JG: I just think that we need to educate people, both publicly and privately, in classes and so on, about other people and so on. Because the world is getting smaller every day. Communication is tremendous, a lot of aspects of that. But the fact we need to educate people in all of our churches about the generation that we're living in now and about future generations. I have four grandchildren, and they'll be raised up in a different climate than I was. And I think that's good, and both of my son-in-laws are pastors now, one in Reedsville and one in Asheville. And they already have blacks, they have Spanish in their churches. My daughter is personally taking a van and picking up fifteen people every week in Asheville from the Ukraine, from over in the old Russian republics of the USSR, from the Ukraine. And on the Sunday before Easter, she had twenty-something that she personally went to get from the Ukraine. So they already have—in the young churches, the smaller churches, they have Spanish, they have a mixed congregation. So it really isn't a problem. But it's in the way you view it. It's in your attitude.

AH: OK, one last question. Do you think that churches are the key to fostering better—?

JG: I think that's part of it. I really do. I think that churches can really have a positive influence, if they'll view it that way. I'm not suggesting it's the only thing that can, but it can really make a difference in the community, the churches can.

AH: Well, I want to thank you very much. I know you have a really busy schedule, but this has been very insightful, and I appreciate your thoughts.

JG: Thank you. It's been good to visit with you and talk with you, and I hope that we can all, as our lives progress, live to see the day that there are good and mutual feelings among us all.

AH: Thank you.

[End of interview]