

Reverend Lorenzo Woods - 3/11/76

This interview is for the Russell Library Oral History Project. Being interviewed is Reverend Lorenzo Woods from the Wesleyan University Campus at the Malcolm X House. Today's date is 3/11/76.

Q: Reverend Woods, can you tell us about the first time you came to Middletown, what year it was and your first impressions of the city?

A: I came here from Brooklyn, New York, in 1947 and at that time I was in high school and I came directly to Portland which is one mile from Middletown and separates Middletown and Portland by the bridge. I only spent one day in the Portland school system because the curriculum was not conducive that I could pursue my studies that I had in Brooklyn, New York, so I only spent one day in Portland High School and I transferred immediately to Middletown High School. Well, conditions at that time were very, very, very tough for black people. In one incident I got almost kicked out of school because I protested. Because in my senior year, upon graduation, the classes were to go to Washington and I was told then that if I went, and I was gonna go, I graduated in the top half of my class and I had spent all those years in high school, and I was told that if I went I could not stay in the same hotel as the whites so that when we went to Assembly and they stood up and they said the Pledge to Allegiance I ended with the part when you say, "with liberty and justice for all", I ended with, "with liberty and justice for all but ME. And at that point I was expelled from school. So I didn't get a chance to go to Washington. It might be said that I wasn't gonna go because why should I have gone through high school with all these people and at the end, then I was going to be segregated. I wasn't segregated in class so why should I then go to Washington, the nation's capitol that makes the laws, and be segregated? So I demanded that I wasn't going to go and I asked the class not to go, but they went anyway. So that was my first confrontation. I never had any confrontation with segregation until I came here to Middletown because, I guess, I always grew up with Jews and, you know, they were oppressed people too so we were all in the same bag together. So I never experienced, until I came here to Middletown--of course, this is a very small, you know, community. You would find it in these little small communities. That was the first confrontation I had with--and it was a GRAVE one. We had a (revolution from the moon?) where that's concerned. My mother called in and in a black paper from Hartford they covered the story. The Middletown Press did not touch that because it was too touchy, you know. It would disturb some of the elites here in the City so it wasn't carried at all. But I was expelled from school because of this unpatriotic type of response.

Q: Were there many black students in the school system at that time for any particular high school?

A: Not that many. There were about, as far as I can remember, in the graduating class there were about five of us and, incidentally, I see them theoretically now not as often as I'd like to because they've since moved away and got their own positions, etc. But there is one that I am very chummy with, (Mordale) Moody who is still in this area, and none of us went as a result of what they did to me.

Q: After graduation from high school, what type of plans did you have for the future and how did you go about pursuing those goals?

A: Well, when I graduated, upon graduating, you see, in our Year Book, I finally got into that, my ambition was to attend Wesleyan and, of course, I got all the brochures and, of course, I found out later that Wesleyan was not admitting any blacks at that point. Of course, others, I've read, since then have gotten in, but they were so close to whites that they, you know, cross the line, per se. But naturally, you know, I can't pass anywhere. I'm obvious, you see, so that when I sent my picture in, I never heard and so I wasn't accepted. So then, before I came from New York I used to take organ and voice and things like that. So then I altered my education and I went to Julius Hartt School of Music in Hartford and there I studied for four years; and I was determined to graduate from Wesleyan. That was a fire that burned within me. It wasn't a matter of how long I did it, how long it took me to do it. I thought it was a good thing for me to do; so that when Community College came into this town, that was almost fifteen to twenty years after I had applied, and I still had that thought--I lived here, I had a right to go here and so I pursued it. So that when my oldest child flew out to Hiram Scott College in Nebraska I then applied at Community College, and I finished Community College, and I finished at a 3.5 average, and they HAD to let me in. So that they did. At that time blacks were here but--

Q: About what year was that?

A: That was in 1970--oh, Lord, 1970--excuse me for the dates but I'm very shallow where dates are concerned.

Q: That's O.K.

A: But it was around 1969-1970 I finally got here. Now that I was the old man, I waited. You know, I always tell my children, "Whatever you want you pursue it and you alter your situation. If you--psychology tells us that if we pursue something gets in our way then you find another avenue by which to get to your goal". So I did and I got here and I took some courses and I was accepted in the Department of Religion and I got that degree. And when I did, when Colin gave me that degree, I smiled right in his face and in my heart I said, "Well, I made it!" And I did.

Q: Reverend Woods, can you tell us about your community involvement in terms of how you became associated with Shiloh Baptist Church and the types of things you've seen in the black community in that position?

A: Well, our church started out with twelve members and I got the calling to the ministry and I was a member of the church and, in turn, they were looking for a minister when our older minister resigned. And, consequently, being there and knowing the congregation and knowing the things that went on, they just secured my services. Well, in that time, you know, housing was a problem. Employment was a problem and, naturally, the black church is geared in helping black people to survive, you see, in any aspect. You just can't say, "Well, the black church is interested in this". It has to be interested in the whole gamut of the human being, see, in which other churches, white churches, don't have to be that involved because they've got money, you know, and they've got ahead of us in education. So there are a lot of things they don't need, but we need ALL of it, and a black minister had to be in a position to, although some people think that he is a man of (the cloth?), he isn't. He has to serve all aspects that involve the lives of black people so that

when I got into my ministry I saw in this community where housing was concerned, I saw a lot of our people moving from the area because there was no housing open for our black people. They were going out of the city for housing and they were going out of the city for jobs and all kinds of opportunities that were available to other people. And I sat back and I saw my church dwindling, you know. I saw people moving away and I said to myself, "Well, I can't have a license to go out here; I have to--people love the church but in loving the church if they can't find things that would help them to survive, they're going to move where things, you know, where these things are offered". So then I got involved in housing. And at that point, it was around the 60's, you know, when we had the trouble with Martin Luther King. Wesleyan got into the aspect of a revolving fund which was a million dollars that they said, "Listen, Middletown Community, we want to do something". And at that point I was hired by the Chamber of Commerce in the position of HOC, Housing Opportunity Counseling. And this gave me an opportunity in my church to supply a part of a down payment-- not the down payment. If these individuals had any money at all we could add to their money that they had for a down payment and purchase a house. Which gives us prestige--it gives us some kind of insight as to where we're going because these people were paying exorbitant rents and they lived in the worst neighborhoods in the community. So it was up to me to go out and find housing to give these people some kind of hope, you see. So that's when I got about forty-some-odd families in the church housing in this community. Now, we were very careful not to put them all in the same area. We disbursed them here and there and everywhere. We had some problems wherein a lot of the whites got panicked and they started moving out and it was my job to try, you know, we have to teach them that there isn't anything to be afraid of but fear itself and what you don't know, that thing you're afraid of. And some of those little things these whites would be disturbed with that the blacks would leave their laundry on the line over the weekend. Now that's picayune; but that's the thing they could find to pick on, you see. Or, your children are running all over the grass. All right, those are little picayune things. We have to teach them, you know, that isn't your business. As long as the person is keeping up the house, keeping up the property, then these little picayune things which you're finding all kinds of excuses why you should be disturbed because they're THERE. You see, the main purpose is that you're trying to look over the reason these blacks are there is to LIVE. So I got into that. Then we got into the avenue of employment and I tried to get involved in that area by getting into the service organizations and knowing people and having all the banks to know me, and so forth, and so and so. I was president of the Clergy Association in the city and then I was elected to--I was the first black to be elected to what used to be the Middletown Savings Bank, which is now known as the Liberty Saving Bank of Middletown. But I was also voted as Corporator of Middletown of that bank, Corporator of Middlesex Hospital. I was elected to the Board of Big Brothers and elected to the Board of Boy Scouts and I was the chaplain for the Kiwanis. So that gave me an avenue by which I could know all these people, you know, who could have ways by which I could tap into things that I would need in this city. So those were the things I got involved in to help black people.

Q: During this time in the community, did you notice a particular type of image or impact that Wesleyan had on the black community? Perhaps you could deal with the image first, how it was perceived by the blacks in the community.

A: Well, prior to all of this we felt, and I concur, we felt that where Wesleyan was the traditional--it had an image of perpetuating the white WASP image, you know, the Anglo-Saxon white WASPS, the elite, you know, up on the Hill. And it was perceived as a city within a city wherein if you saw them downtown you could basically point them out. They had this image, you know; all of them looked alike, and so forth and so on. And they NEVER gave the idea that they were in the town to do the town or any of the minority people any good, so that we were afraid of them. Naturally, the common people which did not have degrees would be afraid and I think at some point some of those people still have those same ideas that because I don't have a degree I'm afraid of them. But, oh, you know, that isn't so! My mother has always told me that if you want a big fool, a good fool, you get an educated one. He can be the biggest fool in the world. And I always maintained that it is not the, per se, the ignorant person, and I've always questioned this idea of ignorance because at some point, you see, everybody knows something that another person does not know. I don't care how educated you are, how ignorant somebody thinks you are, you know something that other person doesn't know. So where is the point of brilliance; where is the point of being, per se, ignorant? What is that, you see, how do you define that? So I'm saying this, "A lot of you say, well, the black church caters to the ignorant and the poor and I don't see being that because right now as educated as I think I am, my mama who only went to third grade can beat me counting any day". So, you see, where is the point of being educated and how can you say a person is educated or dumb, or so forth, or so on? So, Wesleyan was looked upon as being the elite and educated people and we have nothing to do with those types of people. But recently it has changed.

Q: I'm also curious, as the student population began to have more black students, does that make any difference positively or negatively?

A: Well, there again, the students that come here, and I've seen this happen, the students that come here, I don't know where they come from because we don't ever see them. And I'm just hoping that the black students who come to Wesleyan are not being whitewashed wherein they get a different perspective, wherein they get so polished that you can't, you don't know whether or not if you're black or if you can talk. And I've heard many people say this, that some of them here are so polished that you can't tell them from whites, and this is a bad thing, you know. We should not forget where we've COME from and that's what a lot of these students are doing; and I can say because I spent two and one-half years here and that's what I've seen. I've sat in classes, although you know no one speaks perfect English ALL the time--no one! Well, some of these kids, you wonder. And they don't get in the community; you don't see them in the community. You don't see them visiting the black churches or--they're here. And so the same way that the blacks think about the whites they're thinking about these newer blacks who are coming through.

Q: (?)?

A: Well, there are. My church is one of the largest black churches in this community and it was an association of about sixty churches, about sixty churches, the Catholic, you

know, the Protestant and the Catholic people. And once a month we would meet and talk over problems, you know, where we could best serve, and general format for holidays that would come up that we could all come together and be as one. And I was the vice president of that association.

Q: I was wondering before about how much involvement there was between the whites?

A: Well, at the inception of it there wasn't too much involvement but as the blacks became visible, you see, just like the idea when the horse and buggy was invented, the horse was afraid to pull it; but then when they got him used to it, he pulled it, you see. So that when we first got involved with this thing, naturally, anything from the inception of anything, you know, it's very clumsily gotten off. But as we got integrated with one another and became familiar in knowing one another, then they visited. And even today I can have something in my church a lot of white people come, a lot of white people. And, indeed, my church is sort of integrated because of marriage, inter-marriages, and so forth.

Q: This is going to be a really broad question. I just want to know, like, a general history of Shiloh because I don't have anything written and I just wanted your reflections on when the church was started.

A: Well, I was in the origin of the church. The church was organized in 19--if I can get the date correct. I'm very shallow on dates, I'll tell you. I'm getting old now. The church started in 1958. It was started in my mother's living room and so it grew. And at that time there were not many black people in this area. You see, it's like the extended family. They come North where jobs are in the offering and then, you know, in the summertime they go in and buy that big car and go home and say, "Honey, look what I've got!" And then the cousins, you know, they come up and then from that point it started growing. And so, you know, and naturally the bulk of the black people from the South were Baptist or Methodist and then later on years you have the Holiness Churches, and so forth. But our church is the second oldest black church in this vicinity and, as I say, I have been with them for eighteen of those twenty, I think twenty-five to twenty-six years, and we are going to celebrate our anniversary the first week in April.

Q: When you first started, how did you all finance the first building? Did you have, like, a building fund, or anything?

A: Well, now, that was a problem because at that point, you know, blacks were not considered to be stable and no bank would give them any finance. I had an awful time. As a matter of fact, when we purchased that first church, and it wasn't a new church, it was an old dilapidated one, we just couldn't find anything around and our people did not have the money to, per se, shovel it out of their pockets, so we went to the bank and the bank wouldn't give us any money. So then when we thought we wouldn't be able to get this, we went up here on Liberty and High Street and at that point these people were in the process of building a new church around here on Washington Street, the Lutheran Church. They told us we could have that church for \$25,000.00. We didn't have \$5.00 of that, and the parsonage went with the church. And I said to the minister, "You keep the parsonage; just give us the church". So he gave us the church for \$18,000.00 and he said that if I'd give him half of the money down, oh, no, we'd have to pay him three-quarters

of the money down. Oh, I didn't have a quarter of the money so that I went to the bank again to see if they could help. No, they wouldn't help us out at all. So then I went back to them again and he says, "All right, if you give me", what did he say? "\$3,000.00 then you pay the rest every six months". Well, now with a handful of members that meant it was very difficult. So what I did, he wrote the contract; I gave him the \$3,000.00. We had a contract to pay, what was it, \$2,000 every six months, plus taking on our current expenses, our ongoing expenses and--I didn't take a dime from those people, helping them to buy that church. And then what I did, I went into the community and I ran a campaign every six months; and every six months we had that \$2,000.00 until we paid it off. So, I think we, we had three years to pay for it. We paid for it in two and one-half years. And that's how we got THAT church. So then we stayed there. We stayed there until it burned down and, being as old as it was, we didn't get but \$35,000.00 from the building because it was too old.

Q: In terms of your new church, how was it financed?

A: Well, the new church cost us over \$250,000.00. We only got \$35,000.00 from the old church. Well, since I had been in the program of getting black people housing from Wesleyan's revolving fund, I asked them would they, since I attended Wesleyan, I graduated from Wesleyan and they said that I was a great asset to the community, then why not, then, help, you know? So I asked Colin Campbell and he says, he said to me, "Good, we will help you". And they loaned us \$115,000.00 with one per cent interest. Well, now the loan matured December 31st and we owed him, with the interest, \$116,000.00. So I had gone back to Colin and said, "Well, we only raised \$25,000.00 on that \$116,000.00. Well, now, you see it's an impossibility for us to take a mortgage of some \$90,000.00". So I'm confronting them with this problem now, see, and if they want to further help then they would have to, you know, see what they could do.

Q: I was wondering, when a church moves and sometimes you lose some of your members, and I know that Shiloh moved, you know, pretty far out. I was wondering, how did the membership--were most people in favor of that move?

A: Well, they had to because, first of all, the State, you see, I was also connected with Bow Lane, and since their--one day I was passing and I said, "Well, now, gracious, this is State property!" I was kind of reluctant about seeing about that property because I know State-involved property. At the time Governor Meskill was the Governor and I called his office and he called me back and said that he was going to send two men down. There were three pieces of property I looked at. He said to see which piece of property we wanted and we chose the one on Butternut Street. The State turned it over to us on a lease of one hundred years at \$100.00 per year. Now, that's almost a gift and I'm working on some of the aspects of turning the property over to us completely because in the lease they said that it would never be used for anything. So if it isn't going to be used for anything, why not do some GOOD toward black people for once in their life? So, now I'm working on that, to get that turned over. Where black people are concerned, all of them got cars anyway because the jobs are not next door to their homes. So if they used to come a mile here they can come a mile and a-half there. Now I have not seen, because I worked so fast that, you know, we had the church up in a year or so. Because if you don't, as you said, they will start drifting. So I had to work relatively fast. So I got the

church up. We had some problems because the builder put things in there that I had not authorized. The congregation had not authorized him to put these things in the building and it ran over \$45,000.00. So we have been in a litigation with him because we're almost (dissolved?). And so we're just about coming out of that situation, but we got the church up. It is costing us money but what can you have unless you have to pay for it? So I have not seen a decline in, as a matter of fact, we have gotten, we have baptized, since we've been in that church, we've baptized some twenty to thirty people. And because, you know, a new broom sweeps clean, you know, a new church, everybody wants to belong to the biggest and the best and the most beautiful church. How long it will last, I don't know.

Q: I know in the black community, especially in Middletown, but I think it's true everywhere, employment is always a big question and I'm curious about the influx of blacks from the South and cities that are a little bit closer to Middletown. What types of problems or successes do they encounter in finding employment and also, in terms of Wesleyan, since this is one of the biggest institutions? Does this seem to be a problem, or was it an exception to the rule?

A: That Wesleyan would employ a lot of the black people?

Q: Just in terms of the general employment picture.

A: Well, in this area you're talking about the ordinary lay person. Are you talking about the person with degrees that would be in the high echelon?

Q: I'm talking just in general.

A: Just in general.

Q: Just in general.

A: All right. Well, basically, black people in this area usually work three--one of three places: either the hospital, Middlesex Memorial Hospital, or the Connecticut Valley Hospital. And then another big employer would be Pratt & Whitney where they get on all different shifts, the first, second or third shifts. And Pratt & Whitney has drawn people even from Hartford to this area. I have gotten people, I have gotten members--indeed, when I was working for HOC I got involved with employment. People come down from Hartford asking me were there places to rent and, in turn, moving here. I was successful in getting new members, two or three members. Now where Wesleyan is concerned, I have one of my Deacons who works in the housing department here and a lot of my members who work at the housing on that level; but on the higher echelon, I don't know if there are any--I'm not familiar with the jobs that are being offered. In the menial, let's call it the menial, jobs, how many are there to be offered, you see? So, I do know some of my people but of the other ethnic people, I don't know how many would be around here.

Q: When I asked the question, I guess I was thinking in terms of that there was an influx of black populace and how this might have affected the institutions that were present in the city who weren't accustomed to having jobs open to this segment, you know.

A: Well, again, being within themselves, I don't think racism would have, unless somebody would pressure them to get into that type of situation--they got into the situation because there were a group of white and black women who came and asked them, "Since you've got holdings in South Africa, can't you do something here in Middletown?" So they were pressured, you see, to get into this housing, yes, into this housing type thing. Now, unless another group would come in and find a good way that they could do it, I don't know if they would get into this employment type of thing other than what they do right here on campus.

Q: In terms of community-sponsored-- [Note: The rest of this side of the tape is lost.]

A: I can say, well, if you can get a job, now you want to know a specific year?

Q: Yeah. Well, not year, but, like, was it in the 50's or was it as late as the 60's?

A: It must have been the great influx came about '59 or '60. That's when the influx came about. That's when Pratt & Whitney opened up. And, naturally, they had to be an equal opportunity employer and that's when the telephone started ringing, "Honey, come on, you can get a job". And that's when everybody came. Well, then it posed a problem because, you see, you got jobs, you know what it is. Well, then the blacks would have to crowd up, you know, and live with Aunt Nellie, and that crowded her because she was already crowded, you see.

t: 5/17/96

/msk

DK~