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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH  
REVEREND JYMMIE McCLINTON  
BLACK WOMAN METHODIST MINISTER  
MAY 26, 1977

Transcribed by:

R. Herman

March 12, 1978

Interview with: Reverend Jymmie McClinton

Wilmington, Delaware

May 25, 1977

Interviewer: Yetta Chaiken

C = Yetta Chaiken

M = Reverend Jymmie McClinton

C: This is Yetta Chaiken taping Reverend Jymmie McClinton on May 25, 1977. Reverend McClinton, can you tell us when and where you were born?

M: I was born in Durham, North Carolina, October 5, 1920.

C: Where did you spend most of your childhood?

M: Most of my childhood was spent here in Wilmington, Delaware, due to the fact that my parents left North Carolina in order that their children would receive a better education.

C: What was wrong with the education in Durham?

M: Well, in Durham my mother wasn't too pleased with the system for some reason. She was brought up in the country and she wanted her three children to receive a better education than she received. She went to the sixth grade.

C: Was it because you were black that your mother felt her children wouldn't get a good education?

M: It was because being black. Schools were segregated and my mother just thought that she wanted something better for her children that she had received and the books had to be bought or they were used books that was handed down from white schools being torn so my mother moved away from there.

C: And when you came to Wilmington where did you live?

M: When we arrived in Wilmington we lived with an uncle at 212

Delmar Place, Thomas Baker and then my mother enrolled my brother and me at Number Twenty One School, Fifth and Scott Streets.

C: Did your father come with you?

M: Not at first, he stayed behind because not sure of a job moving away in those years, in the twenties when we moved here.

C: It was hard to find work.

M: Very hard

C: So he remained behind.

M: Yes

C: And what...how far did you go (the rest is unintelligible)

M: Well, I went to the...when I got in the eleventh grade, then I had a cousin who was in Gastonia, North Carolina, in a town where there were colleges and so I asked my mother could I go to Gastonia to complete my high school, finish my high school and she let me return to Gastonia, North Carolina, and there I completed high school in Holland High School.

C: And did you have any other education other than(unintelligible)

M: Oh yes, I attended Lincoln Academy and this academy was college preparatory school and this was in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and then there I met my husband. It wasn't my husband at this time. I met James McClinton and I was only in school for about eight months and we married secretly and when I came home I told my mother about it and so, she was sort of disappointed but she said that I could still continue to go to school. Then we came on back to Wilmington, my husband and me and I enrolled in Bible School which I was very interested in then, Bible School. As I became older, I became more religiously inclined.

C: Was your husband also interested in religion?

M: No, my husband was not but he was a lovely person and he worked hard and gave me my monies that I needed to continue my education and this is how I could continue. I went to several Bible Colleges and it was due to the fact that my husband was interested in pushing me because he had only gone to the ninth grade.

C: What kind of religious education did you have formally?

M: Well, I was raised in a home that my parents were devout Methodists and they sheltered their youngsters and I grew up in a small church on Delmar Place, St. Daniel's <sup>AME</sup> ~~Amy~~ Zion Church. We often had religious programs and I was always a participant in the programs due to the fact even at an early age I wanted to become a minister but my mother had encouraged me to become a teacher but I thought there were so many teachers and probably I should stretch out into a field a woman hadn't ventured into and of course my mother wasn't too pleased with the fact that I said I want to become a minister but anyway they went along with me. I was determined to do what I wanted and the things that would make me happy and so I was fortunate enough to have my mother and my husband on my side helping and pushing me onward. So, I came from a very religious family. Sometimes I think they...at least my grandmother, was overly religious because she wouldn't even let us play jacks on Sunday. (laughter)

C: Where did your education lead you?

M: Alright, I decided...at that time you see I'm...I consider myself as a pioneer. I decided I would go into some Bible College and there was a college up in New Era that I attended with Reverend Brown. He was the pastor of Mother A.U. Church. I left the small

church that I was in and I joined the A.U.M.P. conference in the fifties and Reverend Brown and I would go up to New Era and then I decided I wasn't getting too much from New Era but I would accept that and in town here there was...

C: You mean Wilmington?

M: Yeah, in Wilmington here there was a college up on Ninth and Broom Street, John Knox Bible College, so I attended this college and...for two years and just before graduating from this college, this college was dissolved because of money matters. Well, that didn't deter me and then I got in touch with Mr. Reynolds and I started going up to the church around Faulk Road up in that area. They were having Wilmington Bible studies up there and we could receive our marks coming down from the Philadelphia College. Our marks would be transferred up there. Our transcripts and all would be transferred up to the Philadelphia College.

C: What was the Philadelphia College?

M: The Philadelphia Bible College. So, I attended this college for about a year-and-a-half and then my husband...

C: Was that a Methodist?

M: Yes, it was Methodist. Yes, most of these colleges were Methodist. And, of course our school...I mean our conference rather have a school also but I think I had gone there long enough and so I wanted to...I was always reaching out for more and when I felt like I wasn't receiving what I wanted then I would keep reaching out for more. I received a scholarship to go up to Miller's College up in Philadelphia, in fact my conference gave it to me. It came through Bishop R.C. Scott and I attended up there but I only went about a year-and-a-half there and...but I've had several years in Bible

College. But Miller's did give me an honorary doctor's degree. I was presented with an honorary doctor's degree because I got myself involved. See, I was older now. I had two sons that I had to care for but still I would attend night school and when I could I attended day school at John Knox because it was right here in town and...

C: What did the studies...

M: Consist of?

C: concentrate on. Was it study of the Bible or...

M: It was Bible. It was theology.

C: Did you have any language...Greek or Hebrew?

M: Up to John Knox we had from Dr. Randolph we had Hebrew and then at Miller's University we had a little Greek but not too much. But most was reaching out for like theology and redemption and salvation you know, the doctrines on that and so that was the studies that I was involved in.

C: Then you've been active in the church itself. What ...

M: Yes, yes pastor.

C: Where have you been pastor?

M: Well, I started off at as small church with very few members down at Second and Poplar Street. It was known as Saint Jame's Memorial. After joining the A.U.M.P. conference and my desires was I heard that Peter Spencer back in 1813 had pulled out and started an all black conference to consist of blacks and he erected a church down at Ninth and French and this man had accomplished so much under the circumstances and during that time it was slavery and he was allowed to have like one day a year and that would be the last Sunday in August that the people would get together and come up and celebrate

what they would call "August Courtly." And this really...as I was growing up I would hear the Elders in the church talking about Peter Spencer and what he had accomplished and so I decided well, I think I'd go somewhere I want to help. So, I joined the A.U.M.P. conference and my first pastorage was Second and Poplar Street and I was so enthused to be in that area because it did something for me. I received more out of it I believe that I gave due to the fact I was sort of overly protected growing up out here on the hill as we called it at that time but down there it was...in what you would really call the ghettos, people were very, very poor and the kids were hardly attending school. They didn't have food to eat and so this really inspired to do something, to reach out and start an outreach program to help people.

C: So, in that way religion has had a great influence on how you spent the rest of your life.

M: Yes, religion has had this influence.

C: What churches have you been working in since that time?

M: Well, after leaving Saint James Memorial...

C: When did you leave there?

M: Oh, I left Saint James Memorial 'round about in 19...let me see, I went there in '58. I stayed there about three years and then I went to Saint Paul's. At this time Saint Paul's was over on Spruce Street and I stayed there a couple of years. Then, I was moved down to Reeds, northeast Maryland, and I was there seven years and this church had no restrooms, no water, no central heating system and no kitchen. Well, I felt like if we're people of God and we state that God have everything, that we should get in there and erect these things. Well, when I got there I found out all my



membership, they were older women in their seventies and eighties. So, this made me work rather hard. I was told it would cost ten thousand dollars to put the water in. I said, "Well, go ahead." And I got friends of mine to come down and help me out and with about seven members in the early sixties, we did ten thousand dollars worth of work which was a lot of money at that time with older women living on fixed incomes. And after leaving Reed's I was moved to Star of Bethlehem. Star of Bethlehem was in great financial difficulties and God blessed there and we purchased Mother of Mercy Church for eighty thousand dollars up at 1203 Newport Gap Pike and I was grateful to the Lord because it's the first time a woman in our conference had accomplished anything like this. And here we had the church which was a beautiful edifice and also the parsonage...we call it ~~parsonage~~ and some people call it the manse. We have a parking lot that you can park at least a hundred and some cars on it and so this was a great accomplishment but it was a hard struggle and being a woman minister, it has been an upward journey. And during this time in the fifties and sixties it has been very difficult because you just did not get the help that a male would receive at that time but none of this deterred me because I was determined it could be done and I knew by the help of God it would be accomplished and everything that I started out to do I felt that I accomplished because I felt that Peter Spencer was under greater circumstances than I and if he could have done this back there when there was slavery I couldn't see why things were better now that I couldn't accomplish some of these things.

C: You mentioned the fact that being a woman was a handicap. Did men

object to coming to your church?

M: Men not only objected to coming to my church but if someone would ask me during that time to preach for them and I would...there was many times I've showed up and the minister wouldn't even allow me in his pulpit.

C: Because you were...

M: Because I was a woman. This didn't deter me either.

C: Well, obviously we need more people such as yourself. Where is your church now?

M: My church is Saint Mark down at Elkneck and these are mostly widow women also and I like it because it's small and I'm tired of the rat race. I just want to work with people and get things accomplished but I just don't like the rat race in life anymore. So, I have two ladies in the church, they're the only two that's married. The rest of them are widow women and their husbands have all deceased.

C: And so only two men come to your services.

M: Two men right.

C: And the rest are women.

M: Yes.

C: Do you travel there every Sunday or every weekend?

M: I travel every Sunday and I travel on my board meeting nights and like if I plan a service, a week's service, I will travel down you know. It's about forty minutes drive and I don't mind the travel.

C: You've been very involved with prisoners in your life. Can you tell us why you became interested in the first place?

M: I became interested...as I said I was brought up and I was very sheltered and I went into the neighborhood...I don't know whether

this is coincident or just what...My mother never allowed us to go to Second and Poplar but that's my first charge in the A.U.M.P. conference , Second and Poplar. I would see little fellows running along when the hucksters were going down the street taking off fruit or anything that was edible, putting it down where the other little ones could run out and pick it up so they could have something to eat and this touched me greatly and I decided I was going to get around into that neighborhood. Yet, I was afraid at first but then I said I must do this because they needed help because they were headed for trouble and I decided that I'd start visiting the homes and I did. I made myself known and I invited the children to come to church and I came in contact with so many women who had sons that was incarcerated and they hadn't even gone to see them. They received letters from them but they would never go see them. So, I made up my mind I was going to start going to visit the institutions and I took this as my pet project that I was going to be a minister that would visit the institutions where these sons was incarcerated and in doing this I had a difficult time at first being a woman. They said I had no right going in because I was a woman. Well, I told them I'd come back every day until I got in. Well this is what happened. I kept on trying to advance myself and eventually I became secretary of the Council of Churches for the Board of Directors and I brought up my problem to them and I told them I must get in and I wanted them to help intercede so I could get in if they would just help me. So, they did, the doors was opened so I went in and by going in I started working with young man, guess he was about in his twenties. He had committed a murder and then he would tell me

about other friends who were less fortunate and I would visit them also. And this aroused my interest. Well, when I would find a person there incarcerated and maybe on like a petty crime something like probably prowler, I'd call a petty crime or something like maybe a charge of driving without license, I would take my husband's money, hire a lawyer, my husband didn't know it though, and get those people out and the ones that were in on murder charge, I would get the transcript, go to a lawyer and plead and beg of him to take the case because public defenders only give so much of their time and this is the way that we got this young man out. By going to this lawyer and I kept after him until he took the case and sure enough he was released from down there. He was put on parole and so I thought that was a great accomplishment and then I got to the place by being out there so many of the men know me and then they would call for me and I'd go and do all that I could. I was almost like a go between family and men that was incarcerated. Some families sever their relationship when a man has been incarcerated. The family seems to not want anything to do with him. So, I thought it was my place, now I should go out here and try to get the family together and this is what I would do.

C: Did you bring them food?

M: Oh yes, yes. Many men, they had what you call bag day. I think it was about five times a year, something like Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving and a couple more holidays and there were many men that would send me letters and say they didn't get anything for these bag days. Alright, I got to the place...I started out with five bags, well, I could afford then it began to grow so I would approach churches and ask churches and then it began to just really

snowball and now I had everyone. I was taking a bag out there to everyone when I could not have done it unless it was for the help of churches, Marion Owens and Lois and they were very instrumental and especially Harry McSloy and Jim Hailey and those men, they were instrumental in helping me get the food together. I was at the University of Delaware and taking up a course and I saw Mary Vannicola and I told her I'm due for dinner and all my people have disappointed me and I said and I'm going to cross over and Mary belonged to a church, it was a Catholic church out at Sherwood Park and I told her I said we need food and we need about two hundred bags and I didn't even have twenty bags so Mary went back to her priest and so this became an ecumenical thing. I began to call around to the Baptist, the Methodist, Presbyterian and everybody began to respond and we would go down and sit down and feed the men and then we would sort of communicate with them. We could talk to them and they could relieve themselves of some of the pressures that they were under and they...and have people to help contact their loved ones and so that really grewed and we had everyone involved. There was a man here I think from China and he was incarcerated and he couldn't speak English. We even had a bag made up for him and everybody...it was just wonderful.

C: And so you became a liaison between the home and the prisoner.

M: Right, yes I did.

C: Do you still work in prisons?

M: Yes I do. I really do. I go down and I bring up men from the prison and I go down and what I do is interview them and see what can be done. If I should go down there and one's in the hole or wherever he is and I've been fortunate enough to get over the

prison, completely over the prison so I still work with them but I used to be there like on a Thursday all day long but I've got myself involved in some more committees now so I don't spend that much time but I do go down and work with them.

C: What about foster children?

M: Oh boy, I've had about twenty of them. I've tried a little bit of everything. I had about twenty foster children and my husband loved children. We had two sons. Alright, I didn't have any daughters so I knew exactly how to solve the problem. So, I told them I wanted girls and so we were fortunate enough to get more girls than we did boys and we had one child that was grossly retarded but the rest of them, they were very fine kids and we just loved it and my husband and I just looked forward to those children and little feet running through the house and lovable and mommy and daddying and it was just wonderful taking care of kids.

C: Have you ever kept in contact with any of these children?

M: Oh yes, yes. Ann graduated from high school last year and Terry, he's in Chester but the rest of them, they were adopted when they were about a couple of years old or less maybe. They were like adopted from one year to three. We didn't keep them too long.

C: Did you adopt anyone?

M: Well, I said that Ann is my adopted daughter because I had her until she was sixteen years old and she still stays in touch with me and she's called me and told me she's planning on getting married now and she's due up this weekend.

C: You've also worked with the elderly.

M: Yes, I have here, we call her grandmother. Her only daughter that she had passed last year and the granddaughter, her granddaughter

lives in Philadelphia so I don't know, she probably heard about me. She brought her over here and asked me would I see the grandmother and the first time I saw grandmother when she brought her here last year, November the 8th and I've been taking care of grandmother ever since.

C: You personally take care of her?

M: Yes, yes I take care of grandmother.

C: And have you taken care of any other?

M: Yes, well, it's a lady upstairs. She's white. She's blind and so I take care of her, Sash. But she remains up in her room.

C: Because she can't see?

M: She can't see and she's hard of hearing. But she'll come down for her meals.

C: She comes down here...

M: For her meals she'll come down. I can't get her to go on the porch. I don't know, I guess maybe she's nervous or something.

C: You've been cited for many contributions that you've made to the community. Would you like to tell us about some of your honors?

M: I'll tell you about them. I'm not much for talking about myself but I received awards from Narconnon and also the News-Journal award I received and I received an award from the Children's Bureau and also I have an award here from NAACP and then I have some other citations from the Chapel of the Four Chaplins I received awards and I have several more upstairs. I forget just what it's about. To me I wonder, and I don't see where I've done so much and I wonder about these awards you know and because it seems to me there's other people out there working so hard and this is something that I wanted to do and like to do because I love people.

C: What advice do you think that your parents gave you that might have made you want to help people?

M: I lived next door to a man that was blind and he had three children and during the summer being blind, he couldn't make as much money at that time. He had three children and the two girls would have to go to the seashore during the summer. Well, the son would have to go out and try to pick up little jobs cutting grass. So, my mother, she didn't ask me, she made me, be responsible for this blind man and I would have to take him where he'd tend furnaces and there was times that he would go where there were circuses, when the circus came to town. I wouldn't be embarrassed. All the kids would be going in and I'd be standing there with him while he was begging but then I decided well maybe I should do something like this as I began to get older. But this blind man was my responsibility. Then, there was another woman down the street and she was old and my mother made me responsible for her. I used to have to go down and go to the store for her and run her errands and do little things for this lady because she was an old lady. She never married. So, my mother it seemed to me went around the neighborhood to see what she could find for me to do and it sort of rubbed off.

C: How do you feel about young people today? Do you think they are as responsible as you were when you were young?

M: Well, you know, I see some good young people today. They're assuming their responsibilities and then there's others. I find out... being around I find out then there's others that's not because I take for granted now living here when I was a youngster, everybody seemed to be doing something trying to help out but now I notice a lot of youngsters spend a lot of time on the corners but I think



they have too much time on their hands and that's why so many of them are prone to trouble.

C: And what kind of advice would you give?

M: Let them do something and I was down in Washington and when the President said that there would be jobs for everyone, this is what we need to do, give them something to do. Why have them sitting around idle when they can be out working and assuming their responsibilities then they'll know what to do when they become men and women. They can take up their roles.

C: You've traveled a great deal.

M: Oh yes.

C: Would you like to travel more?

M: Well, I'd be delighted to. I've traveled to about twenty six countries and in my travels I've really enjoyed it and I've read about Rome and I have had a chance to go to Rome twice but the favorite country that I went to that I liked very much was Israel. I guess due to the religious background because it's the cradle of all three religions. So, in '73 when I was in Beirut, I was traveling to Israel. I was aboard Su . Su was detonated in the Mediterranean and we lost everything but our lives. But, that didn't deter me because the next year I was right back on a plane heading for Israel again. So, I got a chance to get back in there a second time and I just loved Israel and it makes me think about our Lord and to travel over the dusty roads and all and Switzerland, I loved that because I like to see the people, you know, hear the mooing with the cattles and it's just beautiful and clean. It seems to me every country is clean except ours. I don't know what has happened here to the U.S., papers all in the street and

all. But I enjoyed my travels and in Oberammergau I was fortunate enough to see the Passion play and this would make you really...

Here the first side of the McClinton tape runs out. The interview is continued on the second side.

C: You were talking about seeing the Passion play.

M: Yes, I saw the Passion play in Oberammergau and it sort of makes you feel like you were right there when Jesus was walking the dusty roads in Jerusalem and I don't know it sort of gives you incentive to go back to your drawing board and start doing something for people and doing something good. It just left me with a wonderful feeling and yet it would really make you find yourself and see yourself and face yourself to let you know that you too are capable of doing and walking in the footsteps of our Lord and Savior. And, Germany was a beautiful place and I enjoyed Germany, Austria and many other countries. I love to travel because I love people and I want to see what's going on and I always inquire to find out how they're doing when it comes to their penal system because I don't know, maybe I'm soft hearted. I don't like to see people punished because I think somewhere or other that we all have been guilty of doing some wrong and with a little kindness I think you can get the worst person there is to react to it and that's a pet project of mine. I came in contact with this man who didn't have any visitation, didn't have anyone to write him and he was very bitter and Warden Anderson asked me if I would work with this man and I did and you know he was released and sent home and went

on back to Virginia where he came from and he was a wonderful person. So, this is one reason I like to travel. I want to know what's going on religiously wise and also the people who are always in trouble or who's incarcerated. So I believe our system is coming around some now. They're sort of having a heart now.

C: You have hope in our government now?

M: I really do. I have hope in our government. I don't care what you say, I don't think there's no place like America and I would never turn against America even though I came up during an era when there were a lot of you know prejudices and people...we lived on the west side of town but we had to foot it all the way across town to Howard School, passing white schools but after all, thank God that there is a change. The things that I had to do, well, my sons, they were fortunate. They could go to the same schools I had to by-pass. So, I have great hope for America. I have great hope for the nation.

C: You have no bitterness?

M: No bitterness whatsoever because I think this has helped them like me. I really do. I feel like that I have advanced more than my mother and my father, not to leave him out and certainly much more than my grandmother who was illiterate and she wouldn't know her name if it was as large as this house and I really think that I have been fortunate because now I can say that I've had a formal education. I finished high school and married, had two children and I have a home and a car and I just think it's wonderful and there's other countries that cannot have these things.

C: Do you work? Do you have a job besides being a pastor?

M: No, no, no that's a full time job being a pastor because you have to go to hospitals if they're ill. Then, if they pass, you have to

do the eulogies and the're babies you have to baptize them and it keeps you very busy so...

C: Is there any kind of Sunday school or religious training?

M: Well, yes and now in our conference I'm grateful for the last past several years we have the convention. We have teachers that's trained that will come in and teach our youngsters in Sunday school and now these youngsters are stretching out. They're going to college and so they can be prepared to teach our youngsters. But I'm sorry to say where I am now I don't have any Sunday school because it's in an area when these youngsters grow up and they marry they move to Wilmington or Baltimore or some other town.

C: You said you wanted to tell me about a bishop.

M: Oh, Bishop Scott. Bishop R.C. Scott...I'm certainly grateful to him because he has encouraged me in many areas when things were pretty rough for me as a woman and as a woman pastor. I came into the A.U.M.P. conference under Bishop Scott.

C: What is the A.U.M.P.?

M: African Union Methodist Protestant and it was founded by the Peter Spencer back in 1813. He came out of Asberry Church, Third and Walnut Street, due to the fact they could not...they wouldn't allow them to commune, have communion around the altar with the whites. All the blacks would have to go up in the balcony and after the white had communion, the ones that could read would come down and read the discipline and administer communion to the people that come up or slave people that come up from out of other areas to go to church. So, Peter Spencer, he was tired of this and in 1813 he pulled out and he started the A.U.M.P. churches. And Peter noted that they needed schools because our people didn't have the monies

I guess it took to go to school so with every church he would erect a schoolhouse. Alright, I was raised Amy Zion but I liked that idea and I thought well, I'd get in so I can attribute something also to help the Spencer church. Well, Bishop Scott, he encouraged me and going was pretty rough and there would be times I'd go to him and say, oh, I've got to give up and he said no and then he would put me in various offices and I would go ahead and function in these offices and he would be proud of it and call and encourage and he had me doing more than my share I suppose because I was willing to do and I willing to find out. So, I joined this conference in the early fifties up at West Chester because he was our bishop and something happened to the minister. I believe he became ill so Bishop Scott was pastoring at that time and I came in under him. I wouldn't come in under anyone else, not here in town. So, from thereonin I've been working with very closely with him. But Bishop is kind of up in age now so we have a younger bishop, Bishop Robert F. Walters. But I would like the world to know that Bishop R.C. Scott has been a great inspiration to me.

C: Is there anything in your life that you wanted or planned to do that you haven't been able to do?

M: Well, I had planned to go to Africa but I won't get to go there this year but I'm going to be looking forward to going to Africa and it's not pertaining to Roots because I believe that I associate my identity over nineteen hundred years ago when Jesus died and then he was resurrected and truly I believe that I'm a child of God and so everybody's upset about Roots but not me. I'm not looking forward to look for anybody that's in the family tree. All I want to do is go there because I've heard so much about it and I've read so

much about it and I just want to make a better life for myself and my fellow man and I think it's here. I think the day is here.

C: Well, I think it's a noble aspiration and thank you very much for speaking.

M: Thank you.