Bishop McKinney, welcome!

BISHOP GEORGE McKinney: Thank you, Gloria. It’s a pleasure to be here.

GR: I’m going to ask a series of questions, but feel free to just talk and I’ll get back with something if there’s something I want to be outlined or highlighted.

First, I’d like for you to give an introduction of who you are, and what you do, and we’ll start from there.

GM: I’m George Dallas McKinney, and I am the founding and senior pastor at St. Stephen’s Church of God in Christ. And since 1985 I’ve served as the bishop for that denomination in southern California here in San Diego. I’m also a husband and a father. I was married for forty-seven years to Jean. She graduated to glory in 2004. Four years later, I had the good fortune of marrying Barbara Jo Warren, who’s with me here today. We will be celebrating two years of marriage on August 9.

GR: Congratulations.

GM: Thank you. Barbara Jo has a son who is a senior at Hampton University. Jean and my five sons’ ages range from forty to fifty-one. George, the eldest, is the executive pastor at St. Stephen’s. The second son, Grant, is a student at a seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. The third son is a minister of music at the church.
The fourth son is a seminarian at the historically black college, Shaw University School of Theology. Glenn, the youngest son, is the minister of youth at the church. So between family and church and the community, I try to make an impact upon improving the quality of life for the people of this area.

GR: Fantastic. Okay, I’m going to go back into history with you, some basic background information. When and where were you born, and can you tell me a little bit about your parents, family background, and anything about race relations growing up that you remember—childhood memories that stand out.

First, were you born in San Diego?

GM: No, I was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, August 9, 1932. My mother was Rosie Thompson McKinney. And my father had the same name as mine, George Dallas. Mama was a housewife. She was the mother of fourteen children, so that kept her pretty busy, caring for the children.

GR: Yes!

GM: My dad, we called him Papa, was by vocation a preacher, who earned money to support his family by being a shoe cobbler and a sharecropper.

GR: Okay. And what did sharecroppers do?

GM: Sharecroppers involved their families in planting and harvesting the crops for landowners, and they simply got paid by getting a share of the productivity. For example, maybe a landlord would say to the sharecropper, “You plant the cotton, hoe it, chop it, and then harvest it, and you’ll get a percentage. When the cotton is sold, you will get a percentage of it.”

GR: Did the sharecropper own any part of the land?
GM: The sharecropper did not own anything. And the sharecropper was really just kind of a glorified extension of slavery.

GR: Okay, so it was like bartering: “For you to do this, I’m going to give you just a little bit of the product.”

GM: Yeah. And usually the landowner was not fair in what he distributed to the sharecroppers, because the landowner not only paid all the bills, he weighed the cotton, for example, and took it to the gin, and he sold it. So the sharecropper really didn’t know how much he sold it for. Frequently the landlord would say to the sharecropper at the end of the season, “I’m very sorry, but this year we didn’t make any money, you won’t get anything.” And there was no recourse. There was no examining of the books, there was no way of determining. It was just the landlord said “we didn’t make any money.” And the cotton fields may have been producing two or three bales of cotton per acre.

GR: And this was an annual…?

GM: Some sharecroppers would work for fifteen or twenty years, and were told every year, “I’m sorry, we didn’t make anything this year.”

GR: That is amazing.

GM: It was a form of slavery. And of course the other hook there was that the landlord knew that he needed the labor. That was before we had mechanical cotton pickers and corn pullers. And so they needed the labor. So they had another bait that was—the message would be “there has been no profit.” You got to eat between the end of the harvest and the next harvest, so the landlord established grocery stores and let you eat out of the grocery store, but he kept records.
GR: Running tab of what he owed.

GM: Running tab of it. And of course you had to pay that too.

GR: So that was actually a need to have two or three jobs on the side if you were doing this.

GM: Yes. So that’s the kind of memory. But that was the way of life before the great migration of blacks from the South, following World War I and II. Most black people were involved in agriculture. Now, there were some blacks who owned land, and who did well. But my background, we were very, very poor.

GR: Now, out of the fourteen children, did they all help Papa in the sharecropping?

GM: We all were involved in the sharecropping. We’d start work when we were big enough to pick cotton. I got started when I was probably seven or eight.

GR: Did you attend school?

GM: Five or six months a year we attended school. From the time we began harvesting the crop in August…. We would register for school the first day of school. We didn’t have to work on the farms that first day. We’d go register. And then they would know that they would not probably see us again until November—except on days that it was raining or snowing, we could go to school, because you couldn’t work in the fields in the inclement weather. And then from late November to the first of April we were able to go to school full time. But the school operated on a regular nine-month basis, and we were expected to redeem the time and catch up. I still finished high school valedictorian.

GR: Wow! Congratulations!

GM: In spite of having only been going to school about five, six months a year.
GR: So how was the school—was it first grade through eighth grade, or first grade through twelfth grade?

GM: First grade through twelfth grade. It was a public school, but the black people built it.

GR: It wasn’t part of a Rosenwall [phonetic] school?

GM: I don’t remember.

GR: So all black teachers, all black students?

GM: That’s correct.

GR: About how many students? It was like a neighborhood school?

GM: Jonesboro at that time was a small town. It was only about 15,000-20,000 people, so it had a small black population, probably less than 10-15% black. So my high school class, for example, there were only six graduated in my class. From first through the twelfth grade at that school. There were not more than 250 students.

GR: Okay. That’s what I was thinking. So after you graduated from high school, what did you do?

GM: I went directly to college.

GR: At home?

GM: I went to University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff. It was called AM&N College then. It was the segregated state-supported college. That was the only state-supported college for blacks in Arkansas. There were other church-related black colleges like Philander Smith.

GR: Philander?

GM: P-H-I …
GR: … L-A-N-D-E-R?

GM: Yeah, Philander Smith, which is a Methodist school. And Arkansas Baptist College. And then there were business colleges for blacks and so forth. But the lines were drawn very clearly that blacks did not attend the state universities and colleges that were reserved for white people. So education was….

GR: Was this considered a historically black college at that time?

GM: It was, yes. It was established in the late sixties, early seventies. It was one of what they call the land grant colleges.

GR: Right. Okay. So what were your impressions of the school as far as the curriculum, segregation, teachers, diversity—there was probably no diversity—race relations, or things of that sort?

GM: The society was strictly segregated. You’re talking about an era when the law, and those who were involved in government, and any agency that controlled the lives of people, there was an understanding that blacks were inferior and they had no rights that white folks had to respect. And so it was a very ungodly situation. Segregation resulted in the warping of personalities, and the building and the maintaining of fear that continues to affect people. I feel affected by some of that today, after all these years, because there was an atmosphere of intimidation and fear.

GR: Fear from whites?

GM: From white police officers, or sheriffs, or judges, or young hoodlums. They could, at random….
GR: So people in authority and without any authority, other than being the color of their skin.

GM: Yes. And you had no recourse.

GR: I want to go back to something. What, or who, allowed you to go to school? Was that education from home? Did your parents instill the importance of an education?

GM: Yeah.

GR: Because back in the day, that’s not something that a lot of people really fulfilled.

GM: I like to tell a story regarding my parents. I think I should say it more often. A lot of people historically moved from one community or one state to another, looking for work, looking for employment opportunities. My parents moved from one place to another, looking for a good school to enroll their children. They were married in a little hick town, Rondo, Arkansas.

GR: What’s the name of it?

GM: Rondo. R-O-N-D-O, I guess it is. And there was no school there for blacks, so after they had one or two children, they moved to Jonesboro, where there was a K-12 program for blacks, a school that has been built by the blacks but it was tax supported. And then when my siblings and I finished high school at Jonesboro, my parents moved to Pine Bluff to be near the college, so we could go to college. So of the twelve children that survived, all of us had some college training. But out of that group, there’s been an interesting testimony, for example, there: two lawyers, a dentist, three pastors, a college administrator, educators, and so forth. It’s just been amazing.
GR: That is wonderful!

GM: But my dad had a third-grade education. But they told us that to get out of this poverty and this unjust society, if you want to live productively and be able to exercise your rights as a human being, as a child of God, as a citizen, you need two things: One is good religion, and good education. And they instilled that.

GR: That’s very true.

GM: They instilled that to us.

GR: That’s remarkable.

GM: And of course we were motivated by some of the negative stuff that we experienced.

GR: Right. You knew you wanted to do better.

GM: Yes. When I was in high school they had a county-wide contest for high school students to write an essay about the importance of doing research on the subject of cancer. Cancer was really not as widely suffered as we’re seeing it now, not as widely experienced. And I did a paper, and I….

GR: And this was in what year?

GM: This was in the late forties. And of course I didn’t have my picture with the paper, I just sent the paper in, and they didn’t know…. And so my paper was selected to be awarded the second prize. And it was sponsored by the Red Cross. They notified me that I had been selected. When they discovered that it was from a black person, they cancelled the prize, I couldn’t get the prize. I don’t think it was but fifty dollars, but fifty dollars….
GR: That was a lot then! And plus it was just the recognition. So they didn’t recognize you at all?

GM: That was it.

GR: So that could have one of two effects. Either it would motivate you to [say], “Okay, I’m going to somehow spend a great portion of my time righting the wrongs that have been laid upon me because of my color, and making sure I can make a difference.” And I think, I know, you’ve done that.

GM: Well thank you. The other thing that I think I must give to my parents’ credit, I’ve seen the sheriff come out to the house and try to evict us for no reason whatever. I’ve been in the field with my father during the summertime, when we were without food at home, going to the field to get corn, so we’d have something to eat. I was there with him when the landlord came and put a shotgun on him and said, “Leave that food here.” And we’d planted the food, and had harvested it. It was our food, we were sharecroppers. We ought to eat from it. And he had to, in the presence of his sons, drop the food and go home empty handed. These things you don’t forget.

GR: How were your friends—the friends and teachers? I know back when I was in North Carolina attending school, the teachers were…. They were everything. And they had so much respect. You saw them in your grocery stores, you saw them at the churches, the family knew the teachers, and it was just truly a village. Was it like that?
GM: It was like that. And there was a whole different attitude that prevailed then. I think the rearing of the children was in fact a joint venture between the home, the school, and the church.

GR: Absolutely.

GM: And they all agreed that you ought to obey your parents. They all agreed that you shouldn’t lie. They all agreed that you should go to school and you should behave yourself in the classroom and on the playground. That was the agreement. And drug addiction and alcoholism was not a real big problem, because you had the values of honesty and good citizenship reinforced by the major social institutions of family, the home, the church.

GR: And what I remember, there was never a question. If the teacher would walk over, or saw you in the store and told your parents, “Well Gloria did this, this, and this, and I had to spank her…. (laughs) I wasn’t like that, I was a real good student.

GM: I’m sure you were.

GR: But you know, it was never like the teacher had to explain, or there was a chance that the family didn’t believe the teacher.

GM: No. There was trust.

GR: Yeah, it was trust. And you knew it was for the betterment of your child, and that person was building character and all those good qualities that you would want your child to possess.

GM: And that had a positive effect upon the child.

GR: Yes it did.
GM: Now, children are very smart and manipulative.

GR: Yes they are.

GM: If they know they can play one authority figure against the other, he can go scot-free.

GR: I know!

GM: And they’re doing it now.

GR: And it’s not good. So when you were at Pine Bluff, the college, what did you major in?

GM: Sociology.

GR: And what did you do with that degree?

GM: And minored in history.

GR: And did you graduate?

GM: I finished summa [cum laude], 3.90 [grade point average].

GR: Wow.

GM: I want to tell you, I had gone to the state university at the wise counsel of my high school principal. I had acknowledged a call to the ministry at fifteen, and I had planned to go directly from high school to Bible college. But my principal, Mr. Branch, heard those were my plans, and he called me to his office one day and said, “I hear you want to go to Bible college.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well son, you need to really go to a four-year liberal arts college first, get a solid foundation in the liberal arts and philosophy and sociology, and then go to seminary and get the training at the graduate level, and you’ll be able to be more
effective in your field.” And he made it very plain. Nobody had taken that kind of time to explain to me. And it made sense even at seventeen.

GR: Sounds like a very wise man.

GM: He was. And so I went to Arkansas. The decision to study sociology has been very helpful. Later on I studied social work at the University of Michigan briefly. I didn’t get a degree there, but all of this prepared me for serving the church in the urban communities wherever I’ve lived.

GR: So when you finished school….

GM: 1954.

GR: And then you went to seminary—or Bible college? Was it the same?

GM: I went to seminary, the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin, Ohio.

GR: Okay.

GM: And there I majored in the philosophy of Christianity, or sometimes it’s called Christian theology. But it really was a degree in the philosophy of Christianity. It’s right out of Cleveland, near Cleveland, Ohio.

GR: Okay, Oberlin, near Cleveland.

GM: Uh-huh. And I selected Oberlin because in the early fifties we were getting involved in the civil rights movement, and Dr. King was gearing up to do his thing in Alabama and around the nation. And I felt that church ought to be at the cutting edge, advocating for justice, for change, for peace, for fairness. And so I applied to several seminaries: Johnson C. Smith, a Presbyterian seminary; I applied to Boston University at the Methodist seminary; and Oberlin. But I chose
Oberlin because Oberlin had a long history in civil rights. It was the first college in America to admit women, and that made a powerful statement.

GR: Yes it was.

GM: Back in 1833 or so. It was also one of the first major colleges to admit blacks. They had blacks graduating with degrees before the Civil War. John Langston, who Langston University’s named for, was a graduate of Oberlin in 1845, I think. So that, and in addition to that history, Oberlin was a station on the underground railroad. So that history fascinated me. So I went there, and there was able to study with some of the great scholars, the philosophers and theologians of that era. I studied with Walter Marshall Horton and Thomas Kepler [phonetic] and Gordon Mayes [phonetic]. These are some giants in theology, and they were recognized worldwide. So I studied with them.

GR: Just how involved were the students in the civil rights activities during that time?

GM: It was just beginning to gain momentum. For example, we were concerned, there were small protest movements but we didn’t have the kind of involvement that later developed in the early sixties and the seventies.

GR: But there was an awareness among….

GM: There was an awareness, and little things like housing, the dormitory for the seminarians was integrated. We didn’t have white and black housing. In some schools that was done, blacks stayed together and whites together. But I had a white roommate.

GR: How was that experience?
GM: It was fine. The thing that really stood out—my parents, although we experienced a lot of humiliation and hurt, and we saw a lot of suffering, they taught us never to hate those who are evil, wicked.

GR: My grandmother was the same way.

GM: Don’t hate ’em.

GR: Yeah. There was never any…. Don’t show animosity, or don’t, you know…. It was always taking the higher road, I would say.

GM: Yeah. Vengeance belongs to God, and we don’t do very well evening up scores.

GR: That’s true—even today.

GM: That’s a good rule to live by.

GR: So you were at Oberlin how many years?

GM: Two years.

GR: And you graduated with a degree in…?

GM: Systematic theology.

GR: And from there, what?

GM: Staying with the educational piece, I did one year at Michigan in social work.

GR: And this is after Oberlin?

GM: After Oberlin.

GR: And why social work?

GM: After graduating from the school of theology, I took a job to feed myself. I was still single, but I needed to eat … for some reason.

GR: That’s an important thing!
GM: So I took a job first as a director of a settlement house in the Chagrin Falls Park area of Cleveland. That’s in the ghetto.

GR: What’s a settlement house?

GM: It’s kind of like Maplewood House used to be. You remember that movement, settlement house, where people who were transferring from the South, came?

GR: Oh! So it’s like a way station before they…..

GM: They come and they provide services, adult education and recreational activities, and tutoring for children, and recreational activities for the families. It was a very exciting project. I worked there for, oh, I guess about six months. That was an eye-opener. I’d been acquainted with suffering that related to poverty in the South. But it’s a whole different story to see the kind of suffering that people experienced in the concrete jungles of the city. And so that was a sensitizing experience, and to see the hopelessness and the violence.

GR: I was going to say, what were some of the issues that you encountered in this place, that was kind of different from the South?

GM: The preponderance of drug addiction.

GR: Even in that time?

GM: Yeah. Drug addiction. Young people being absolutely ruthless and confused, and therefore resorting to gang and violent activities. Employment was a big problem in that community. Housing was a big problem. If you don’t have adequate employment, you can’t provide adequate housing for your family.

GR: That’s true.
GM: And so a lot of the kids in the community came to that center because it was there they would have a respite from some of the pressure that they experienced moment to moment in their homes.

GR: Was it a residential [area], the settlement house?

GM: Yeah, residential area—people lived all around it.

GR: Okay, but people would come in, it was like the Boys and Girls Club of today? They’d stop by?

GM: That’s right. And it was sponsored….

GR: Probably one of the only positive influences in their life at that time frame.

GM: That’s correct. Sponsored by some white people of good will. They put their money up for it. Some of the settlement houses had that kind of background. Some of the people that had accumulated wealth, said, “I’m going to support this kind of a project,” and they did. But that was a good experience, Chagrin Falls Park.

And from there I went to Toledo, accepted the job as the Protestant chaplain at the Toledo State Hospital.

GR: Okay. Protestant chaplain. It was just a regular hospital?

GM: Mental hospital, 3,000 patients.

GR: Wow.

GM: Uh-huh. And of course as the Protestant chaplain, I lived on the grounds. It was like a huge college campus. But it wasn’t. (laughs)

GR: I can imagine! And how long were you there?

GM: I was there for about one year.
GR: I was going to say what was the highlight and the lowlight? What was one thing that just really….

GM: It was a challenge. I was a young theologian—very young—and here my congregation were all mentally ill. And that’s a challenge.

GR: Right.

GM: At that time, there was a movement to make the clergy a part of the therapeutic team at the hospital, so I had the privilege of sitting in on staff meetings.

GR: That’s a good thing, right—wouldn’t you think?

GM: Very good thing. And as a part of the interview, I would interview the patients when they came in. Would also conduct worship and funerals and so forth. One of the things I always remember, there would be people at that time committed to the hospital, and the families would forget about them.

GR: I was going to ask you about that.

GM: It was kind of sad to go to a funeral that nobody showed up, because they didn’t own the person any longer, how they were.

GR: There was such a stigma back in the day about mental illness.

GM: That’s right. They were still doing the lobotomies, surgeries removing a portion of the brain. As a member of the therapeutic team I was invited to observe that surgery, but I never went in to watch it. But I did observe the electroshock treatment, and that was a horrendous thing.

GR: Experimenting with animals.

GM: Yeah.
GR: Do you think they were really trying to find a cure or to help them, or, “Let’s just try this and see what happens”?

GM: I think that’s probably….

GR: So sad.

GM: You can’t rule out all the other, that some people who just have no regard for the sacredness of life. There are some people who have no regard for the sacredness of life, and that’s why there’s need to have persons who have ethics and spiritual consciousness involved.

GR: That is true. Were they all African Americans?

GM: Oh no. It was well mixed.

GR: And you were there in the fifties?

GM: That’s in the fifties, that’s right.

GR: For a year?

GM: Yeah. Uh-huh.

GR: You’ve had a very diverse life!

GM: Yes.

GR: But each thing has prepared you—and this is God working—prepared you for what was to come next.

GM: That’s right.

GR: Even now, I’m sure you can reach back and pull out some things.

GM: I don’t know what’s going to be next, but it’s been good! After that, of course, I continued to—in the ministry I volunteered to do ministry at a Church of God in Christ in Toledo. The pastor was ninety years old and he needed a younger man
to help him, and I volunteered as his associate pastor, and I was there for about two years.

GR: So this is like a pastor-in-training?

GM: That’s right. Free. By this time I was married, so I had to take a job as well, as a probation officer with the juvenile probation department in Toledo. Did that for two years.

GR: And how long were you in Toledo working as a pastor and probation [officer]?

GM: A total of about three years in Toledo. Let’s see … yeah.

GR: And from there?

GM: That’s when I came to California.

GR: People often ask me, “You’re from North Carolina. How did you get to California?!” So how did you get to California?

GM: You want me to tell you how I got here?

GR: I do! Military?

GM: No. And I don’t mean to be real spiritual, but I must tell you what happened.

GR: Oh, be spiritual. I’m okay with that. Yes sir, absolutely!

GM: Well, what happened, I had really become fascinated by the possibility of working in a historically black college. My philosophy professor in undergraduate, Arkansas, we formed a good bond. And he had scheduled a course for incoming freshmen during the summer, but he could not fulfill it because of something that happened. And he got approval from the administration that his student, George McKinney, would teach his class in philosophy to the incoming freshmen, the
summer after my graduation. So I stayed on to teach, and I loved it. I think that’s probably my ego.

GR: Ego can be good!

GM: So I really liked teaching. And I felt that after the Oberlin experience, I could probably serve well as a chaplain and a teacher in the religion department in some of the historically black schools; sent out a number of resumes, and nobody hired me!

GR: All this experience in education!

GM: Yeah. Then I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll just go to Africa as a missionary, and do some work with orphans and people in Liberia or the Congo or someplace. No mission board would hire me. So here I was, about ready to graduate from school, with no real concrete offers. But one day in my prayer time, alone in my dormitory room, I had this sudden knowing and awareness, a consciousness, that “your work will be in California,” period. No handwriting on the wall.

GR: This was when you were in Arkansas, or when you were in….

GM: Oberlin.

GR: Oberlin. Okay.

GM: And I understood that….

GR: You didn’t know anyone, no contact with anyone in California?

GM: Had never been to California, didn’t have no intentions of coming here. But I said that experience was so clear, that I never doubted that it was the leading of the Lord—in our tradition. We believe that people can be led of God in their major decisions, and that’s what I’d been conditioned to believe, and I sensed that
voice that “your work will be in California.” And so from that moment on, I began thinking in terms of transitioning. It took from ’56 to ’59 to implement it, but when the time came…..

GR: That wasn’t long. You weren’t forty years…. (laughs)

GM: No, that makes a difference! Three years, that’s not too bad.

GR: Not too bad at all.

GM: So that’s how we got…. And what I believe was a leading of God to come. And it has been, I think, a very exciting journey.

GR: So you [just realized], “Okay, this is where God is leading me”?  

GM: Yeah.

GR: And you just followed that voice.

GM: Yes. I knew that I had some experience as a counselor with probation, so I wrote to the probation department here and said, “I’d like to come and work for you.” They looked at my resume and said, “Come on.” Got here on a Saturday, went to work Monday.

GR: Oh, that is just a wonderful testimony. That is great! And it was San Diego?

GM: Yes.

GR: So how long did you work for the probation, and then how was….  

GM: I worked for them from ’59 until ’64.

GR: So somewhere in here you had some children?

GM: Oh yes. I got married in 1957, and our first child was born in December of ’58. And then for the next ten years we had a total of five children.

GR: Every other year?
GM: Yes—then we discovered what was causing it. (laughter)

GR: And from probation, what was San Diego like in the fifties? It was actually ’59, ’60, early sixties. I know that time frame was at the height of the civil rights movement in the South, but what were race relations like in San Diego at that time, and as a probation officer? You were someone with a relatively high profile job, I would think.

GM: The probation department….

GR: Was it social work, or police department?

GM: No, it’s a separate….

GR: A separate entity.

GM: … from the justice. But probation had broken the ice and hired a black woman as a probation officer, just a few years before I got here. Her name was Ruth Green. She was still working.

GR: What was her name?

GM: Ruth Green. She was the first black probation officer in San Diego County.

GR: And a female! Wow.

GM: And a female. The sheriff’s department had never hired a black, other than janitors and that, but nobody as a uniformed officer. Leon Williams was hired by the sheriff’s department as the first professional black, and I was here when that happened. There were no black judges. The black physicians, you could count them on one hand. Very few black lawyers. Very few black bankers—probably none.

GR: And we’re talking about ’59 through….
GM: Fifty-nine through ’63 or ’64. No black principals at any of the schools. The schools in the black neighborhoods were all led by white or Hispanic administrators. No black principals. So it was, then as now, a beautiful city. The weather is unmatched. The scenery is breathtaking. But socially and educationally and culturally there were some real serious challenges. So what about race relations? As long as black people stayed in their place, they were okay.

GR: Unseen and unheard sort of?

GM: Yeah. It was real. Shortly after I arrived [unclear] job at probation, there was an opening for a chaplain with one of the other county correctional agencies, and they advertised for a person who had a bachelor’s degree and some experience in counseling. I applied for that job and was told that I was the best candidate and should be hired for it. But when I made my appearance to claim my job, they said, “No, we made a mistake, and we’ll have to reopen this and rewrite the job description.”

GR: And they told you like that?!

GM: Yeah.

GR: Wow.

GM: And so racism was very…. And housing, when I got here we wanted to know where could we—my wife and nine-month-old son—where do we find a place to live? They said, “Well coloreds live off of 47th and Market, off of Guyman [phonetic], the Glenn Cliff Apartments. That’s where the coloreds live.”

GR: That’s what they told you?
GM: “That’s where the coloreds....”

GR: So in other words, “That’s where you’re gonna be, if you’re gonna stay here.”

GM: So I went out and found me a little apartment. And of course there was an Urban League director named Percy Steele. He was very helpful, and he knew the ropes, and he gave us what the options were. There were some areas that blacks could not live. And for a while there were some areas where Jews couldn’t live, because of restrictive covenants.

GR: Right. And that was all legal.

GM: That’s right. The police department was primarily—there were a few blacks in it. Johnny Williams—we attended his funeral the other day—was the first black detective, and we were friends. I was working at probation at the same time that he was with the police department. But in spite of the segregation and the racism, Gloria, there were those people of good will—black, white, brown, Chinese, Filipino, whatever—who knew that this old system of segregation, and the oppression of any group on the basis of race, that that was unacceptable, that that was anti-American, that it was wrong. There’ve always been people who stood up and said, “It has to be better than this, and we must change it!” And so in spite of all the stuff that was going on, there were voices crying out for justice and for righteousness and for fair play.

GR: So when did that organized attempt to level the playing field take place? And what group was kind of at the forefront of saying, “You know, this is not right, and we can no longer sit back and allow this to happen. We have to make our voices heard to make this better for all people”? 
GM: Yeah. I think there were many groups, but really, the role of the church has been key. And we’ve had some powerful pastors and leaders in the local churches that have been at the cutting edge of social change. Also, I think the Urban League and the Neighborhood House Association, and certain social groups—I can’t think of their names now—but there have been social groups that included women and men, and those blacks who came here who had been a part of fraternities or sororities in the historically black colleges, they continued to kind of band together and use their influence, the Links [phonetic, maybe Lynx? LINCs?], and groups like that, have been involved in the fight. When the civil rights movement really came to San Diego under King, the community was ripe for that involvement. I remember attending King’s first speech here in San Diego on June 15, 1960.

GR: Wow, Dr. Martin Luther King was here speaking?

GM: Yeah, at Calvary Baptist Church. That church probably seats 1,500-2,000. It was packed. And King was dynamic.

GR: Why was he asked to come here? Or did he come just to….

GM: The ministers invited him, because the ministers felt that we wanted to be a part of the movement.

GR: So they were an organized group.

GM: That’s right. And so we organized here to have marches and to boycott. We walked the boycott line at the Bank of America because they wouldn’t hire black folk except as janitors—to tellers, no vice-presidents, no secretaries.

GR: Was that the only bank that would not hire?
GM: It was the biggest one. (laughter) Go for the big boy!

GR: That is right, yeah!

GM: Bank of America and Woolworth’s was the store that would not hire blacks. That was a lunch counter at Woolworth’s. And there were other institutions that we boycotted, picketed. (recording turned off and on)

The ministers were at the cutting edge of the movement to really press forward in the fight for justice and equity and helping people to realize that the promises that were made in the constitution and our history should not be abandoned. And the city, although there were real serious pockets of segregation and negativists, there were still persons in the city government, or in leadership in the city, who wanted a better life for all of the citizens. And I think it was a significant thing when the city organized the Group for Racial Reconciliation and Integration, and hired Carroll Wayman [phonetic] to come to direct it. and Carroll Wayman was a spark plug in the movement. He came here with fire and with training.

GR: I’ve spoken to him about some of the things, yeah.

GM: And he used to conduct town….

GR: They actually sent for him to do this?

GM: I think they did. I don’t think he was here before. Wayman, and of course you had people like Harold Brown with the Congress for Racial Equality; George Walker Smith, the Presbyterian Church; E. Major Shavers of the Congregational Church.

GR: Who was this?
GM: E. Major Shavers.

GR: Is he living?

GM: No, he’s deceased. J. Blake of the Church of God in Christ.

GR: Is he related to the Blake at West Los Angeles?

GM: That’s his father. And he is the pastor I came and trained under here for the first two years when I got to California. S.M. Lockridge, the pastor of Calvary Baptist. Dr. Charles Hampton at Bethel Baptist. Dr. Washington, also a Baptist pastor. And Chaney Johnson at Trinity Baptist, I believe. It was quite a lineup of committed clergymen, most of them from the South, who had fire in their bones for change.

GR: Was there a name for the group, or [unclear]?

GM: The ministers were the Southeast Ministerial Association. But the group that Carroll Wayman led was…. I’m trying to think of the name of it.

GR: I know I have it in my notes. I can’t….

GM: It has to do with some kind of congress for….

GR: It escapes me right now. Yeah.

GM: It was a timely organization. It came into being at the right time and had the right leader. It was good. Carroll brought passion, intelligence, excellent training, and he was able to talk the language of both the in and the out, and the down and the out.

GR: That’s wonderful, to be able to do that. That was a really good thing. And what was one of the major things, or what was one thing that happened as a result of this group that made the living conditions better for people of color?
GM: I think the pressure from the boycotts and the picketing of those institutions where they refused to hire or even to serve black people, whatever. I think they eventually changed because we became part of a nationwide movement.

GR: And then any time you dip into someone’s pocket financially, or lack of that, then that causes them to kind of look at things a little differently.

GM: Absolutely. And of course there were some political things that took place regarding the housing situation. We had a law passed that would no longer allow restrictive covenants to be effective. You couldn’t say that a person would be denied purchasing a house because of their ethnic affiliation or religion.

GR: So there were legal barriers that….

GM: That were removed.

GR: Right. How about, what were your perceptions of the police or law enforcement at this time? Did you have any encounters with them?

GM: As a probation officer I had frequent encounters with them regarding cases.

GR: But as community, with them being in the community, what was the relationship like amongst blacks and police officers or law enforcement?

GM: On the positive side, the police department early on organized a community relations department. The first sergeant in charge of that later became the police chief and the sheriff here. Oh gosh, I guess my age…. I’ll think of his name in a minute. But he just retired.

GR: Bill Collander? [phonetic]

GM: Bill Collander. And Bill brought a perspective from his religion and his background.
GR: I’ve heard some really nice things about him.

GM: Bill Collander believed in justice, he believed in fair play, and he was a force for good in the department. Of course that being said, there were those who were front-line officers who had come here from Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas, Texas, and they were able to pass the exam and they were given a badge and a gun, and they often reflected their prejudices in their administration of justice. So there have been a number of situations where blacks have been murdered by police, but always it was claimed to be justifiable homicide. We know that there have been some cases that I’ve been involved in because family members were at the church where I served. And there were instances where there was absolute disregard for the sacredness of life or the reality of the law.

GR: Now where in this time frame was St. Stephen’s established?

GM: St. Stephen’s was established in 1962, so we got started pretty early. I spent from ’59 to ’62 as the intern at Bishop J. Blake’s church, and he was over at 38th and Oceanview. Bishop Charles Blake, the current presiding bishop, was in college and seminary when I came here. And I stayed there with Bishop Blake until I got started at St. Stephen’s in ’62—late 1959 to ’62.

GR: Okay. Why did you feel the need…. Or there was a call to start your own church?

GM: Yeah, I came here to find my place of ministry and service. I knew that when I came I would spend time learning the area, being mentored by a master churchman, and getting acquainted with what is required in ministry. So I spent two years there. But I knew all the time, and when the time came, I discussed it
with Bishop J. Blake, that I was about ready to go out and to begin my life’s work. He said, “Fine, you’ve been faithful here, you’ve been dependable.” I saw him do something I’d never seen done before. On a Sunday morning he announced to the people that I was leaving, and said, “George McKinney has been very helpful to me in this ministry, and he’s going out to plant a church. If any of the members here would like to go and help him, feel free to do so.”

GR: Oh wow. That is unheard of. That’s amazing. That is really amazing. How many people did you start with?

GM: About ten.

GR: And now how many are there?

GM: There are about twenty churches have been established.

GR: Under…?

GM: Under, uh-huh. Some of them have as many as 5,000 members, and some as little as 50.

GR: Were these church plants?

GM: Yeah, some of them were. And some were persons who received their training, and then went to seminary. We encouraged them to go to seminary, and many of them have just continued the work of the Lord. A lot of the churches here trace their history to St. Stephen’s.

GR: What are some of the major accomplishments under St. Stephen’s leadership and headship that you would like to highlight? I know you’ve done many, many, many things in the community.
GM: Uh-huh. Let me just mention that we have been attempting to fulfill a vision that indicated that there are a lot of people in the urban community, and in the city generally, who are experiencing emptiness, loneliness, frustration, meaningfulness, and all of that. And so the church must have a clear message of a proclamation of the kingdom of God. That’s what we’ve tried to proclaim, that the rule of God is now, not pie in the sky, but right now God wants us to experience kingdom living. So that’s a proclamation. And then that’s the preaching.

Secondly, we’ve attempted to maintain consistent teaching to equip people for living abundantly. I think people will do better when they know better.

GR: Yes, one should hope so.

GM: Yes. So the teaching involved from the cradle to the grave, we are just constantly trying to teach what it means to live, teaching management, how to treat labor, and wives and husbands, parents and children, neighbors—teaching the values that really separate us from the beasts. Teaching health issues and the importance of marriage and fidelity. And we believe in the kingdom there is the very real possibility of experiencing substantial healing. I know we’re all going to die with something—the death rate is one out of one [1:1]. But while we’re here, we can experience healing. We believe that the doctor is an agent of God, because if any healing takes place, we believe God is responsible for it, whether it’s through western traditional medicine, or alternative medicine, or acupuncture, whatever means is used. So we’ve focused upon preaching, teaching, and healing. Now in terms of practical accomplishments, we believe that the activities that have made
the greatest impact have been when we have organized institutions and staffed it with committed, passionate people competent to implement. For example, we were the first church in the community to sponsor a halfway house for delinquent boys, operated for ten years. I was a probation officer, but I also was the house father. We had several hundred teenage boys who were placed there by the courts, by the youth department, for rehabilitation. We operated from ’64 to ’74. But when the wave of violence hit the community, it was difficult to deal with—I personally couldn’t deal with…. One of the young men shot and killed another one in the house. You agonize about that. And so after that, we closed it. Couldn’t prevent it. But I still see young men who were placed with me in ’62, ’63. As a matter of fact, I’ve got a young—well, not a young man now—one of the first residents of that group home contacted me about four or five months ago by letter and said, “I’m Arthur Rankin. I’m in prison, I’m being released from prison.” He’s sixty-two years old. And he wanted to know, “Can you help me now?” He stayed in my house for I guess about a year, eighteen months, back in the sixties. And now he’s sixty-two. He looks older than I am.

GR: He’s had a rough life.

GM: A rough life. But I remember him. He’d been in fifteen foster homes. Didn’t know his father. His mother was mentally ill.

GR: So he just didn’t have that foundation.

GM: Didn’t have it.

GR: And that is so important.
GM: But he remembered me, and now, you know what? We said, “C’mon, we’ll help you, son.” We’ve got a transition house, and for about three months now he’s been a resident there. Goin’ to church. Bought him some clothes.

GR: Wonderful! That is great!

GM: Yeah.

GR: And hopefully, prayerfully, this is that turning point he needs, someone to….

GM: Maybe he can do it now. Also we feel that it was impactful to sponsor the Christian school, K-12. Of course the childcare center, but that’s another story. But the Christian school, I’ll tell you how that really evolved. In the sixties, we were involved in a lawsuit here in San Diego, the Carlin case. You may have heard of it.

GR: Right. Yes, we have the papers from the Carlin case in the library.

GM: Well, during that season, the attitude at the board of education and with the superintendent was that there should be no effort to provide quality education to the black kids, because we were really inferior and limited. So a group of us met with the then superintendent because we were concerned about the rapid turnover of the teachers at the schools in our neighborhood, because teachers would come in, and as soon as they could get a foothold and could move to a “better” location with less troublesome students, they would do it. So it was a rapid turnover in the classroom. A student may have six or eight different teachers in the course of a year. And that was not good.

GR: Oh. No.
GM: And there was also problems regarding the quality of the counseling. I remember there was a young lady at one of the high schools that was predominantly black at that time. She was second in the graduating class, and her counselor, a white counselor, said, “You’d be wasting your time to go to college. You should just get you a job.” She happened to be at St. Stephen’s, and she told me what had happened. And I assisted her to get an application in to get a scholarship to UCSD, and they accepted her. It was not that she couldn’t go to college—that was the mentality of the counselor.

GR: And it’s so sad that those same things are happening now to our kids.

GM: You think it’s still happening?

GR: I do. I still think there are people who are telling students who can do, that they can’t do—or minimizing the level of where they could go next in life.

GM: And that should not be the counselor’s role. You’re supposed to be enabling, inspiring, lifting up. And so when the principal responded to us—and he didn’t probably understand how gross it was, what he was saying—but he said, “How can we reward our excellent teachers when we discover them down there, except promote them and transfer them to a better neighborhood? We don’t want our best teachers to be stuck down there.” That was insulting to me. It made me angry.

GR: Right. So our students don’t deserve the best?!

GM: That was what he was saying. I understood that. So we got a committee together down there at the church and we organized an educational foundation and rented some portable classrooms and started a school. I went around the country and
recruited teachers, educational missionaries. I got them here from Harvard, Yale, Stanford. Some came from San Diego State, Santa Barbara. And it was a small school, about 250 students, but K-12. And we had people there who wanted to work. And we did a fantastic job. That had impact. Still. I was at UCSD yesterday, honoring Jackie Edwards, who is retiring as the director of benefits for the university. She and her husband had three sons. They were students at St. Stephen’s, and they are all now college graduates, MBAs.

GR: Oh, that is so wonderful.

GM: But they got their training at St. Stephen’s. This is very pleasing. Our graduates have done well.

GR: Do you track them?

GM: They’ve got Facebook pages, so we’re going to begin to do a better job of tracking them.

GR: That would be nice, to just see visual, for people who come into the church, to see, “This is our product. They had their beginning at St. Stephen’s. See how….” I think students take a lot from that sort of thing. “If they did this, they started here, I can do this.” Even have a peer mentoring.

GM: Yeah.

GR: So that would be good.

GM: Yeah, I’ve made a note here! Can I mention the other institutions?

GR: Oh yes, yes.

GM: From 1964 to ’74-'75, we had the St. Stephen’s Group Home, which was a halfway house. We operated a daycare center, and it was a tremendous service to
the community, because there were very few licensed childcare centers in southeast San Diego. There was only one at the time we started.

GR: What year was that exactly?

GM: In 1963. And then of course we had the counseling center that’s been operating since the late seventies. (aside about recording equipment) Back in the eighties, too, we started a federally chartered credit union.

GR: Oh really?!

GM: Yeah. Sonrise.

GR: Now that’s really unusual. A lot of churches try, but very few….

GM: Yeah, we got the charter. I mentioned the counseling center. We’ve been able to have psychiatrists, psychologists, and pastoral counselors providing crisis intervention, mentoring, tutoring, and all the rest of that.

In ’79, we organized the St. Stephen’s Retirement Center, Inc., and began planning for building facilities to house seniors. And we got our first HUD grant of $3½ million in 1987 or ’88, to build the retirement center, sixty units.

GR: I remember. I visited there. They are so nice.

GM: I took you there, that’s right.

GR: Yeah. Beautiful.

GM: In 2005 we built the second facility, the Jean McKinney Manor. I want to mention to you again that the architect for the $7 million facility went to nursery school at St. Stephen’s.

GR: What?! Now you’re talkin’ about comin’ full circle!

GM: That’s amazing. Nursery school.
GR: Nursery school.

GM: Yeah. A black architect.

GR: Female?

GM: That’s right. Yes.

GR: Oh wow! That sent chills through me. That is wonderful! Oh wow. So what’s next on the horizon?

GM: I don’t know if you’ve heard the news that we have been attempting to acquire four and a half acres of land across the street from the church, for about twelve, fourteen years. We have met with great opposition from city and some community resources. There was a concern that whoever developed that land should make sure that the city would benefit from a stream of tax revenue. And we felt that we would be able to meet that requirement, but the powers that be didn’t think that we could.

GR: So they wanted to ensure that there were businesses and things of that sort on the property?

GM: That’s right. And I understand that. But it seemed that it would be appropriate for us, since we’ve been in the community for fifty years, to have the opportunity to demonstrate what we could do. After having several failed attempts, releasing, giving contracts to different entities, and the latest one was in 2008 to a company out of Beverly Hills, Pacific Developers Corporation.

GR: Yes, I read something about that.

GM: And it was discovered that that was corruption. So we put pressure, and they had to reopen the bid process, send out an RFP [request for proposal] again. And we
submitted *again*. This was about the third or fourth time that we’ve tried. But *this* time, we were awarded the right to enter into exclusive negotiations for the contract. And so that starts right away.

GR: So the land is your land?

GM: It will be our land as soon as we get through these negotiations. We have a business partner, a financial partner, that has come to stand along with us, whose records have been examined by the city, and it is verified that this partner has the capability of delivering. He’s promised to bring $30 million to the table to enable us to build retail community space, a comprehensive health clinic, drugstore, Fresh & Easy Grocery Store, a restaurant.

GR: Oh wonderful! Oh, that’s so needed in that area.

GM: Library. A mediation center so that we can revitalize that old counseling center, make it also a mediation center. My wife is a certified mediator, served as a judge in Texas as well.

GR: Wonderful. I’ll help you with the library!

GM: Will you really?

GR: Yes! Put it down. It’s on [the recording].

GM: And we’ve got one witness here. My wife witnesses it.

GR: Absolutely. Oh, that is so wonderful.

GM: So that will keep us busy for the next five years. And in the meantime, we are seeing….

GR: What are you looking at, as a date to…. What is this, 2010? Something like 2015?
GM: Actually between two and two and a half years we should be able to finish it. That, probably with permits and zoning and all of that. But I think if we can move quickly, in two and a half years—two and a half, three years, we should be able to see a big change there.

I think it was also an important thing that in 1970, after having been involved in ministry for a number of years, I thought it was wise to go back to school and do a doctorate degree, and have kind of a midcourse evaluation. And so I did enroll at the California Graduate School of Theology for the Ph.D., and was able to complete that work in two years.

GR: Oh, that’s great.

GM: In 1985….

GR: So it was an earned Ph.D.

GM: Yes, Ph.D. The focus was the study of the church, ecclesiology. And I have some honorary degrees as well, as you may know, from Geneva College back in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. I have a doctorate from them, and from a couple of other schools.

In 1985, I was selected to serve as the bishop for the San Diego Diocese. Prior to being made bishop, I’d served for a number of years on the board for our seminary in Atlanta. It’s the Mason Seminary. It is a part of the Interdenominational Theological Center of Atlanta. I had seen women who came to the seminary, took the same course that men take, graduated with the same degrees, same passion and commitment to serve the Lord, but because of the culture and the history of our church, they had not been allowed to be ordained as
pastors. There would be an occasional special ordination allowing the woman to serve as a chaplain in a hospital or in the military, but not to go back to her home and pastor a church where she may have a passion. I felt that was unjust, I felt that was not right. I know the history has been that it’s been a man’s world. So when I became a bishop and had the authority to ordain—I became a bishop in ’85—in 1989 I ordained twelve women, and all hell broke loose. (chuckles)

GR: So how did you handle it?

GM: It was very difficult, because what I knew to be was revealed…. 

GR: Were you ostracized within your…?

GM: Oh yeah. And I was told that my future was over in the church. But that didn’t happen. I’m a member of the general board now. I’m part of the twelve. At the last election, there were…. 

GR: I see you several times on TV at different…. “I know him!!”

GM: It was a very traumatic experience for me, though, because people whom I love and work with and respect, somehow had been infected by this false notion that God is selective in whom he calls, on the basis of gender. And of course I argued then, and I had to appear before a special committee that I had violated the rules. 

GR: You’re in the same—I don’t know what you call it—denomination?—as the late Bishop Gilbert Patterson?

GM: Oh yeah, he was my dear friend.

GR: So what happened with that? They didn’t split the…. 

GM: Oh no, they just told me not to do it anymore, and I had to appear before a special investigative committee, and was questioned and reprimanded. Of course the
amazing thing, after that happened—after the inquisition and the reprimand—the chairman of the general assembly, which is the law-making body of our church, said the Lord spoke to him and told him to establish a special committee to study the issue of women in ministry, their ordination. And he said the Lord told him to appoint McKinney to chair that committee. (laughter)

GR: God is good! All the time!

GM: So for two years I served on that committee. That was an excellent report. I’d like for you to see it sometime.

GR: Okay! I would like to.

GM: So we don’t know what they’re going to do, but it’s gonna happen.

GR: That could have been really, really bad.

GM: It could have been, because it was divisive.

GR: But at least they stepped back and said, “Let’s look at this.”

GM: The attitude about women…. Yeah. There were those who said, “I would rather have an undelivered drug addict, or a practicing homosexual—I’d rather have anybody pastor me, other than a woman.”

GR: When I go home, you see actually more women than men in the pulpits in the Baptist Church there.

GM: It’s happening. What are you gonna do?

GR: Right, that’s it.

GM: How can you be true to your faith and indicate to a person who loves God, who has received the training, and has demonstrated faithfulness, how can you tell that person that “God can’t use you”? 
GR: Hm. One of the questions [was about] challenge. I see this as definitely one of your challenges.

GM: It was a big challenge. But I went through it, and I never stopped.

GR: What made you stand firm? You really believed in it, huh?

GM: Yeah, I’m kinda crazy like that. (chuckles)

GR: (laughs) I don’t call it crazy! You stand firm on your beliefs.

GM: When you believe something…. There was inspiration from Martin Luther—do you remember?—when he posted those statements at the little church in Wittenberg. He said, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” I think if you really believe God—for some people religion is just a game, it doesn’t mean anything, God is dead, and they simply go along with certain religious things in order to benefit from the niceties. But if you believe that God is the creator and the father of all mankind, and the sustainer of every good and perfect gift, and of life itself…. If you believe that spirituality is the most real, is the greatest reality, if you believe that, then you come to some spiritual knowledge or understanding. You’re bound to respect that, obey it. Even if you fail, you know that you failed and you repented. But it’s not a game.

GR: No, it’s not. Nope, it really is not.

GM: So when I had a chance to do something about it, then I couldn’t be an innocent bystander.

GR: Right. Who would you say is your biggest influence or role model?

GM: Hm. (pause) In the ministry?

GR: Uh-huh. It could be in the ministry, or just…. And why?
GM: My father had a great influence on me, because of his demonstrated love and devotion to God, and his love for his family. And he took time, when he found out that I was going to enter the ministry, he took time with me to talk with me about the Bible, about the church history, and spiritual realities—spent quality time with me. I can never forget that.

GR: That is [unclear].

GM: And I had an old mentor in Toledo. After graduating from seminary, I went to Toledo and we called him Dad Hawkins. He was about ninety years of age. He lived to be about ninety-four, ninety-five, and pastored up until his death. And I used to just go by his house to sit in the same room with him. You didn’t have to say anything, just wanted to be with him and soak up that atmosphere.

GR: Right. I’ve been there. I know how….

GM: You know. He was a wonderful man. When he would open his mouth, there would be wisdom. So Dad Hawkins and my dad. And of course my wife Jean and my wife Barbara. They are tremendous influences. I’m extremely fortunate to have Barbara at this stage of my life, injecting new life, new interests, new perspectives.

GR: Just takes you to a different level, huh?

GM: That’s right, that’s right.

GR: That’s wonderful, that’s really great. I appreciate you sharing that.

GM: I told you about why I went back to get the Ph.D., because I felt I wanted to refresh and to come back. And it really helped me.

GR: You never stop learning.
GM: Yeah, it really helped me. Five sons, and I’m one of the few pastors that can praise God for all five sons and their wives and their children being believers.

GR: That is remarkable.

GM: And all five sons are ordained ministers. Three of them in seminary now. (pause) This is a Fathers Day article. Have you seen that?

GR: No, I haven’t. I haven’t seen this one. Oh, this is wonderful! This is great.

GM: In 2008 I was a candidate for general board, and of the twenty-three candidates, I came in Number 4.

GR: Wow, that’s great.

GM: I need to go out here again. (recording paused)

GR: So is there anything else you would like…. Or anyone else you’d like to acknowledge, who’s been an influence or paved the way for you, before you got here?

GM: Yes. There have been some unsung heroes, and others have had some notoriety. But they were persons who were unselfish and committed to make San Diego and the nation a better place. I think that I, along with everybody else here, enjoy the beauty of San Diego and some definite improvement in race relations here. We owe a debt to people like Percy Steele and the pastors that I’ve mentioned earlier. Special note should be made of our debt to George Walker Smith, who served as one of the early black elected officials, served on the board of education, and as chairman of the local board of education, and was instrumental in helping to steer the board in the direction toward equity in education. We’re indebted to people
like George Stevens [phonetic], who served as a city councilman, after having been involved as a radical protestors in the sixties.

GR: I saw a picture of him walking with Dr. King.

GM: Yeah, he was part of that. Carroll Wayman, with his work with the Citizens Interracial Committee. Howard Carey [phonetic], who led the Neighborhood House for many years, and was trained in social work at Atlanta University. Johnny Johnson, John Johnson, who had a tremendous influence on the social, political, and educational life of this community as an organizer, and as an able administrator. The list goes on and on. But there are some women that ought to be noted as well. There was a black woman who headed the Neighborhood House in the early sixties when it was subjected to strike and protest from the Hispanic community, and there was some real tension, but we worked through that. I think that Dion Williams [phonetic] has to be acknowledged because of his pioneering work, both on the city council and the sheriff’s department, and of course with the board of supervisors.

The black physicians have been a noteworthy group. And the black lawyers. I remember Alfa Montgomery [phonetic], and Judge Gilliam [phonetic] and others. These were my friends. I can’t name them all, but they were my friends, and they were instrumental in shaping San Diego, making it a better place.

GR: Thank you so much for sharing that. That’s great.

If you could go back [unclear], is there anything you regret doing, or wish you had done better?
GM: Uh-huh.

GR: You do? Do you want to share it?

GM: Yeah, I don’t mind. If I had it to do over again, I would be more careful to spend more quality time with my family. They were very patient and understanding with me, because my schedule has been, as you can probably see, starting up all of these institutions, and working at the church, it meant that my wife and children sacrificed a great deal. So I would try to live a more balanced life. I would have taken the time to try to learn to play golf.

GR: Wow! It’s never too late. (laughter) I like that.

GM: Yes. Also, if I had the chance to do it over, I would have sought out early a good financial counselor who would have mentored me in making proper investments. I made some bad investments, but I didn’t have the kind of counsel that I needed.

GR: Right. Because that was something that wasn’t on our radar.

GM: No.

GR: And it’s just actually getting there now. People are saying, “I can own, and I can do, and I can be.” But it wasn’t something our parents ever talked to us about or anything.

GM: They didn’t know anything about the stock market.

GR: Absolutely. Yeah.

GM: And I would want to correct that. At this point in my life I should have considerable wealth, but we’ve given it all away. Much of it has been devoted to social, economic, educational programs. I don’t regret investing millions of dollars in education for the children of our community. I don’t regret that. I don’t
regret investing millions of dollars for housing and services to the seniors. I could have done all of these things and still had some investments for my own children and my future.

GR: Yeah, that’s very true. That’s for all of us.

What would you say is the biggest change that you’ve witnessed in San Diego, since you’ve been here?

GM: Fifty years. In the area of race relations, the opportunities for service, for involvement, are much greater now—much greater now than fifty years ago.

Fifty years ago the opportunities for employment were very limited—service jobs.

But now it’s not uncommon to have presidents and vice-presidents of banks, and principals of schools, and all of that.

GR: That’s right. Superintendents.

GM: Superintendents, that’s right.

GR: And now we’re everywhere, as far as housing.

GM: Absolutely.

GR: So that’s a difference I’ve seen, definitely.

GM: That’s a big difference. And another thing I think is that when there are those who want to maintain the status quo, or revert to the old behavior—racists, segregationists, wickedness—we have a greater opportunity now to go before the law and get justice than we had at one time. I remember when you just didn’t have access to justice, because the deck was stacked. I’ve had some cases early on that were just downright blood curdling, but you couldn’t do anything about it. I remember one case where a young man was arrested—a black boy—was
arrested and charged with murder. It was true that he had been a delinquent kid, but he didn’t commit that murder. He was at church. He’d gotten saved, and he was in church that Sunday. Two of the ministers went to court with me to testify that the young man is saved now, and he was in church, and he did not commit this murder. And the judge said, “Well, these Negroes, these blacks, they’ll tell a lie for one another.” And so they convicted that boy and sent him to prison. About a year and a half, two years later, the actual murderer came forward and confessed. Here this young man that we were working with…. And to say that black folk will lie—well anybody will lie, but sometimes some people tell the truth!

GR: That’s exactly right. Wow. So if that person hadn’t come forward, he would have been in prison longer for something he didn’t do.

GM: Probably for his life, yeah.

GR: No such thing as DNA then. But yeah, that’s what was happening.

GM: And the district attorneys…. When the boy came home, we said, “Let’s have a reception for him and welcome him home. And so I called the district attorneys and probation department, parole, and invited them all to come, because we were gonna do it at the church. And I got the word from the district attorney’s office, “Well, I’m not coming to no celebration [unclear]. He’s the kind of guy capable of committing a murder.”

GR: Just wasn’t gonna sway him. He’d already put it in his mind, he was gonna be negative toward…. That’s really sad.
Bishop McKinney, thank you so much. I do want to ask two more questions. One is, what do you think are some of the major issues still facing minorities in San Diego today?

GM: The major issues facing minorities in San Diego today are…. For the youth, it’s hopelessness. And that hopelessness has to do, I think, with a number of realities. Some of it has to do with the kind of attitude that prevails regarding the meaning of life, so that life is cheap. It affects one’s behavior when there is the feeling that life has no meaning, it’s worthless. There’s also a problem, I think, with the changes taking place in the economy, and the social structure, that’s very unsettling. The young people are asking the question—and I am too—what’s going on?

GR: Right! Yes.

GM: And until there’s some clarity about what’s going on….

GR: It’s almost scary, it’s so fluid.

GM: Yes. The other thing, I think, economically we’re in a very desperate time. Many young people, sons and daughters of middle-class blacks will not have the quality of life their parents had. And so that’s frustrating. We wanted to do better than our parents.

GR: Right. Why won’t they have it? Because of the economy and the recession?

GM: And their own loss of creativity. Because you can make it if you want to. There are still people who want it, who can make it. So at the bottom of it all is the spiritual problem, and that is areas, as the philosopher said, there’s a God-shaped vacuum in every man’s heart, and only God can fill it. Until God is
acknowledged and truth is embraced, [man] will continue to be empty, destructive, and violent.

GR: Hm. Okay. That’s a good message, not only to youth but everybody.

GM: Yeah.

GR: Yeah, that’s really good.

GM: We try to make it without God, and it’s not working now, never has.

GR: Yeah. So I thank you. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

GM: I think my wife might have some [unclear].

GR: Would you like, First Lady Barbara?

BARBARA JO McKinney: [unclear]

GR: I would appreciate it.

GM: Would you do that, include Sister Barbara?

GR: Absolutely. Yes sir.

GM: Now, she’s a genius.

GR: I always welcome the voice.

BJM: Well….

GR: Having listened to Bishop McKinney, your husband, give his life story. What is your overall view of San Diego and the place that he holds now and will forever hold, in my opinion, as a beacon light in this community? And also, was there anything that surprised you, or that you heard that you didn’t know? Is there something that makes you really proud, like the mothers and daughters who you see them graduate, you were so proud you could just pop.
BJM: Yes. I’ve heard many of the stories before, and in talking about being proud of someone, I listened to his history and the kinds of things he’s had to go through, and to come out with this position of forgiveness, his feelings of love to everybody, regardless of what has happened with him down through the years, the sensitivity that he has when it comes to all people—sometimes I’m just in awe when I listen to him on a Sunday morning, because he’s such a tremendous man of God. And you hear about men of God, and you know that they’re supposed to be a certain way in their lifestyle. But he is such a true man of God, because he’s that way in the pulpit, and he’s that way also at home.

GR: So he’s walking the walk, and talking the talk.

BJM: Yes. I am very proud of him, and I am just so happy that I am a part of his life, and we’re walking the rest of his journey together, and it’s been very exciting. It’s been probably the best part of my life, just to know someone like him, just to know him, and then to know that he is my partner in life is awesome. And it’s kind of an awesome responsibility because I want to be the best that I can be because of him, so that we together can accomplish some of the things that he’s planning to do. He is still out there, as he’s shared with you, doing all kinds of things, and I am excited about it. And I just want to be what he needs at this time in his life, to help him reach those ultimate goals.

GR: Okay. Beautiful. Thank you so much.

BJM: Thank you.

GM: And by the way, that was very kind of you to say all those nice things!

BJM: Yeah. (laughs)
GR: And Barbara McKinney?

BJM: Yes, I’m Barbara Jo McKinney.

GR: Thank you both again. I really appreciate it. Our community will have an opportunity to hear how you have been just an inspiration to a lot of people, and the many wonderful things, Bishop McKinney, you have been a part of in this great community. And I thank you for your lifelong efforts to do it better.

GM: There’s some things I left out. I didn’t tell her some of the bad stories.

[END OF INTERVIEW]