

Kenyon C. Burke Oral History, Interview Two, in Two Parts: Transcript

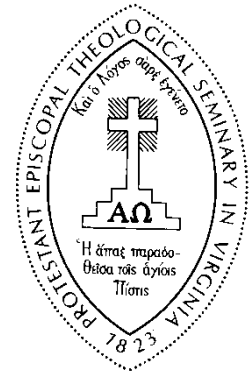


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Narrator: Dr. Kenyon C. Burke

Interviewer: The Rev. Dr. Tyrone S. Pitts

Location: Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia

Date of Interview: May 3, 2016

Length of Recorded Interview: Approximately 1 hour 46 minutes

Abstract:

In this interview, Dr. Kenyon C. Burke discusses growing up Episcopalian and his lifelong commitment to social justice movements, particularly his tenure as the head of the social justice unit of the National Council of Churches.

Transcriptionist:

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Key:

[] = Note or addition of transcriber, narrator, or interviewer

Time stamps are noted in red and bold for ease of identification and citation.

Processing and Content Notes:

After the interview, the recording was sent to a professional transcriptionist who transcribed the conversation using a “light edit” method. This entails the omission of most verbal pauses and false starts. The initial transcript was then sent to the narrator who suggested further revisions, including minor deletions, additions, and substitutions (e.g., giving an individual’s full name and title), for the sake of clarity and accuracy. This transcript is thus an acceptable rendition of the recorded interview. However, the audio, as well as the written edits of the narrator, are also available to researchers. The written edits are kept in the collection control file.

Finding Aid: There is a thorough finding aid that includes information about all of the individual interviews in the Kenyon C. Burke Oral History, RG A68. It may be found on this page: <https://www.vts.edu/page/Resources/African-American-Episcopal-Historical-Collection/Collections>.

Access Points:

Burke, Kenyon C, 1930-
African American Episcopalians
Black Episcopalians
Blacks -- History
Blacks -- Religion
Episcopal Church
Episcopalians -- Biography
National Council of Churches
Social Justice
Pitts, Tyrone S.

TRANSCRIPT

[Part One]

[00:00:00]

Dr. Kenyon Burke: Thank you for clearing our questions about the suffragan bishop.

Dr. Tyrone Pitts: [Laughter] I told him about it.

Burke: Our guess was right. He asked me that question last night, and I said I never met a white

suffragan bishop. I have been around the church all my life, but boy I will tell you that is an institution of racism or something.

Pitts: We are going to have a little conversation about that too as we go in. I think it would be helpful.

Burke: Then I got ready to spell it the other day and I did not know how to spell it. The [00:01:00] modern dictionaries do not even carry it.

Unidentified Male: Right now I have the cross in the picture. That is all that is in the picture. Introduce yourself. Say as the voice, this is who we are. I am going to pull back and you will see the two of them.

Dr. Joseph Thompson: Oh okay.

Unidentified Male: I guess they are the introductions you talked about beforehand.

Thompson: Okay, I will do that and Dr. Pitts will not need to do it. Okay.

Unidentified Male: Who is here today?

Thompson: So you are ready?

Unidentified Male: Yeah, we are ready.

Thompson: This is Joseph Thompson at Virginia Theological Seminary. We are conducting an interview today – May 3, 2016 – on the premises of the seminary with Dr. Kenyon Burke. He is being interviewed by Dr. Tyrone Pitts.

Pitts: Thank you Dr. Thompson. The life and times of Kenyon C. Burke, [00:02:00] an Episcopal ecumenist and social justice advocate for all seasons. Kenyon, it is just a delight for me to be with you here today. As you know we have traveled a long road together. Again, without you I do not think I would be doing what I am doing in social justice today. I want to focus this particular section, because this is the second set of interviews. I would like to focus this set of interviews on your life as an Episcopalian, and how the Episcopal Church has impacted what you do and how you do it. I will also start by having a conversation with you about your family. I would like to know first of all: how in the world did you become Episcopalian in Cleveland, Ohio? How did your family engage in the Episcopal Church?

[00:03:00]

Burke: I said a few things about that in our first interview. It was just accidental to me that we were Episcopalians. My family, my paternal grandparents belonged to the Congregational Church in Cleveland. Their parents were active in the Methodist and the AME churches. We were kind of a mixture then of internal ecumenism. My uncle and my father were enrolled in Sunday school at a Congregational Church in Cleveland, the Congregational Church for Black People. One Sunday they [00:04:00] went to Sunday school and they were handing out oranges. When they got to my father and my uncle, there were no oranges. My grandmother was so enraged at this, because they came home crying, she pulled them out of that school and out of the church, and they joined the Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Ohio. This was right after the turn of the century. We became

Episcopalians. Then when my mother married my father, she became an Episcopalian. Then she was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, and I was raised in the Episcopal Church.

I have to say to you that my experience was ecumenical from the beginning because I also went to Sunday school at St. James AME Church in Cleveland. [00:05:00] We would go from one service to another service. The Sunday school had a lot more people in it at the AME Church, and it was a lot of social life, so I enjoyed that. But there was a mixture because when I was thinking about it last night, we were talking, that my great-grandparents were going to St. John's AME Church. That was I think one of the oldest buildings in Cleveland, Ohio. They were very prestigious. They even had a tennis court. I am telling you, it was like that. That is how we became Episcopalians. I enjoyed Episcopal Church. One of the things that I liked about it, was it had a sense of orderliness. I could tell what was going to come next. [00:06:00] I could depend on that. I could relate to that. Of course the pageantry of the Episcopal Church was impressive to me. It was like a Roman Church. They just were speaking English instead of Latin. That is how we got to be Episcopalians. I want to say the Methodists had the Black Methodists plus the AME, which was a Black denomination. Also the Presbyterians had a black Presbyterian Church. We were not integrated into those denominations until sometime around World War II or right after that. The tradition of the Black church was present in all of those denominations and congregations. They had the name [00:07:00] of the denomination. But a lot of the tradition of the Black church was there. The preaching was there. Sometimes it was very intellectual, but the preaching was there. That is how I got to be an Episcopalian.

Pitts: Yeah. Kenyon you talked about the pomp and circumstance. I recall that at one point you were telling me that of the history of the vestry and some of the exciting things that happened to you as you focused on the vestry. Tell us about your father and the vestry.

Burke: Yeah, that is kind of a family story, too. When I showed up and enrolled as an acolyte, which is an altar boy, I went into the wardrobe room which was a dressing room where all the vestments were. I went in. I opened the wardrobe and there was a vestment hanging there [00:08:00], a black vestment. In the collar my grandmother had embroidered my father's name. It was about this big, as wide as the collar. It was just hanging there. No other vestment was there. I opened it up and it was like my father was there with me, which he was not. It was there. We talked and some of the people in my family thought that that represented that they did not clean out the vestibule. It was funny, and it was there. I do not remember wearing it. I just remember seeing it. I do not remember wearing it. It was probably too big for me at that time, but that was it. Also I have a picture that I am going to give to the seminary here of the groundbreaking for St. Andrews in Cleveland sometime around 1915. My father is standing there as an acolyte [00:09:00] with his vestment on. The bishop of Ohio was there, and all the dignitaries. They had the shovel. There was my father standing there looking very innocent. Somehow some friends of the family gave me this picture a few years ago, so I am going to try to find it and share it with them.

Pitts: What about your own role as an acolyte? Tell us about what you did and some of the people that you met.

Burke: Since it was very much the high church, we had several acolytes participating in the service. I started out as what was called a boat boy. The tradition was, and still is I believe, that the boat boy, which was a boy, interestingly enough, in those days, [00:10:00] had a little silver container. He had the incense in it. The thurifer swung this. He put the coals on, put the incense on, and then swung this. He led the procession. Of course because I was out front, I enjoyed being out front, I became a server. I looked forward to it because I felt like I was doing something with the church

and in the church. I enjoyed swinging it and smoking up the church. There are certain kinds of motions you could make if you really got ahold of that thing. You could swing it up here and make it look like this. I enjoyed it. That was my first real leadership in the Episcopal Church, yeah. Let me explain [00:11:00] all those people that were acolytes. That is what I was trying to get to. When we had the service, there were 12 people on the altar. There might have been more than that. At one time I thought there were about 17. There were 17. There were 17 people on the altar. I can count most of them. There was of course the priest. Then there was the first and second server. They faced right at the cross. Then there were the third and fourth servers on the end. Then behind them just in front of the communion rail, inside, they had eight tapers. Four were on this side and four on this side. When you had all these people and all this [00:12:00] motion, you had to have somebody that was in charge. There was a title called master of ceremonies. This person was like a traffic cop, and he directed all of the genuflecting, the up and down, and when you hit the sanctuary bell. This guy was really in charge. This guy, by the way, when I was a boy, was a guy by the name of Irving Mason, who later became a bishop. He was ahead of me in school about three years. We went to the same high school. He taught me a lot about the service, about the church, and about how he got to be a priest, which was an interesting journey in and of itself in those days for a black American to be a priest in a church [00:13:00] in the United States. I enjoyed that. One of the things I enjoyed about it was it had a sense of order. You were supposed to do this. You were supposed to do this. You were supposed to do this. It was like a teamwork thing that went on, but it was masterful. I thought that when I would see this. Of course, Episcopalians, I think, they have the corner on pageantry in Protestantism. That is what it was like.

Pitts: You mentioned being Black and Episcopalian, and being a priest was unusual. What about the priests? Where do they come from? I know there had to be some black priests in the Episcopal Church.

Burke: They came mostly from two sources. They came from black [00:14:00] seminaries. There were a few black seminaries. One we talked about last night. It was in North Carolina. I was trying to think of the name. It was Raleigh. It was in Raleigh. Most of them went to a seminary some place in the country. There were not a whole lot of black seminaries. So they obviously had to go, some of them went, to white seminaries. That is the way they came, but you had to have an undergraduate degree and then you had to be a graduate of a seminary. You had to go. They were trained very thoroughly. You could tell that just by some of the sermons they gave, and some of their papers show that they were not only very articulate in the pulpit, but also they wrote well. They had a command of the English language. It was very impressive. [00:15:00] The other thing is, they had a command of Greek and Latin. Bishop Denby, who I mentioned earlier, one of the suffragan bishops of the Episcopal Church, he wrote his sermon in Latin, then converted to Greek, and then gave it in English. I think it was in that order, but he did both of them. I remember that. They were intellectually well trained. The other group came from the islands. They came there. They came to the United States and they were trained in Episcopal seminaries in the United States. They got all the bells and whistles. They got the whole thing. The only reason the compact was made between the Episcopal Church in the United States [00:16:00] and the Episcopal Church in the islands, was that they would send the priests here to get trained, but they said we do not want them back here. We do not want them in the islands, because that would interfere with the ascension of people into the priesthood—the white priesthood is what they really were talking about. So they came here. The West Indians that were trained came here and stayed here. They could not go back home. They could only practice here. When they arrived they instantly became competitors with the resident trained black clergy. That was because I believe they spoke with a British accent very clear and very distinctive. Even their

speech pattern was very much English. [00:17:00] Of course those that were southern blacks that were raised here spoke like southern blacks did. Those West Indians were viewed as being more intellectual and superior to those that were trained here in the United States. I could remember at least three priests that we had in the course of my life that were West Indian trained. They were well organized. I mean they were_____ [17:32] the British model.

Pitts: Kenyon, a mutual acquaintance once said that suffragan bishops should thank American racism for their positions.

Burke: Oh yes.

Pitts: Say a little bit about that. What is a suffragan bishop?

Burke: The leadership of the Episcopal Church in the United States decided that they needed to have [00:18:00] a special category for people who service the black churches, black people who service the black churches. They created a position called suffragan bishop, which was to me the difference between a Lieutenant Colonel and a Colonel. However, I do not ever remember meeting any white suffragan bishops. I know they started out with three, and one of them was at the seminary that is there in – I just mentioned it.

Pitts: Raleigh.

Burke: Raleigh. Another one was Bishop Denby, whose title was something like Bishop Denby, Suffragan Bishop of Southern Arkansas for Colored Work. It is very close. You really want to get the exact thing, Harold Lewis had the definition very clearly down [00:19:00] in his recent book, *Yet With A Steady Beat*. Even when Barbara Harris became the first woman to be ordained as a bishop, she happened to be black. She also was consecrated as a suffragan bishop. Do not ask me what kind of logic went into that other than it was a continuation of racism. We were so happy to have Barbara be consecrated and be the first that nobody really raised, too much, at that time, any question about it. Some time somebody had later on thought about some of the infinite wisdom that went into that. It was followed on a racist model that the Episcopal Church had.

Pitts: You actually did something at her installation. What did you do?

Burke: It was at her consecration.

Pitts: It was the consecration.

Burke: At her consecration [00:20:00] as a bishop, which was a big celebratory event. She had asked me to read scripture at her consecration. I found that a great honor, and I was scared to death reading it, I will tell you that. It was just a high moment in our lives and the lives of the church.

Pitts: You were with the National Council of Churches at the time.

Burke: I was with the National Council of Churches then. I knew her because when I was in the National Council of Churches I had a lot of contact with her. She was in Philadelphia, at the very famous black Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. We would meet at ecumenical groups and so forth, at conferences and so forth. I knew her well. I was very glad that she was the one, because she had the guts to fight the racism, and the things that came with her [00:21:00] coming first.

Pitts: Let us go back to Bishop Mason. Tell us about him and his relationship with your church.

Burke: Yeah, it was interesting. He came from a large family who were all Episcopalians. They were a very artistic family as I recall. All of them played three or four instruments. They wrote music. I think they were from the islands too. I am not sure. He kind of took me under his wing at times and told me that I need to remember that I am of God and everything. He kind of strengthened my faith, in a way that showed me I could have some fun and still be a serious worshiper. I remember when I was going through my [00:22:00] adolescent times, he mentioned to me that this was how he handled certain situations with people involved in conflict and assault on him. He was a very bright guy and he was tough. They knew that they could not come by him with any foolishness. He was a nice guy, but do not mess with him.

Pitts: Did he pastor your church?

Burke: Yes. No, he came back to the church. When he came back he could not come there. He had to go because the resident pastor at that time was the one that recruited him. He went to Akron and he had a black Episcopal Church in Akron. Then later on he became the Bishop of Michigan. I used to visit him after I had some of these national jobs. When I would get to Detroit I would stop in and see him. It was nice to see him. [00:23:00] He kind of marveled at some of the things I was doing. He was a good man. He was a good man and a great leader in the church. He stood up to that whole racist thing, but he did it in a very professional way. He was multilingual. He was very well organized. He called racism as he saw it all the time.

Pitts: What about Bishop Thomas Denby?

Burke: Bishop Denby was the suffragan bishop I knew. He had retired to Cleveland. In fact he lived about ten houses from the high school I went to. After he retired he filled in a lot when we did not have a priest assigned to St. Andrews. I was thinking this morning that [00:24:00] the Episcopal Church that I belonged to was not always wealthy. This Episcopal Church in Cleveland has a sizeable endowment, which is another story—why we have it. The thing that impressed me was—I am old enough to remember the Depression—the model I saw early in my life of the responsibility you had as a parishioner to support your church. I can remember when we did not have coal to heat the church. This was the early Depression. There was a man named Mr. Bolding [ph]. I remember him. He would buy coal and give it to the church.

Pitts: Wow.

Burke: A lot of people just had enough money [00:25:00] to get car fare to get to the church. He had money and he gave it to the church. He made sure we had coal. When he did not give it, I do not know who else gave it, but I remember him. I remember he was on the vestry. That is when I found out what vestry people do: they lead the church, and they support the church. Of course when World War II came along, a lot of things changed in this country. Money flowed to the black community also, because a lot of people worked in the war plants. They had jobs that were related to it, to the—they used to call it something else, but I cannot remember. There was money, so more people began to be able to give to the church. But it was really rough. Some of those folks had a tough time in the Depression. I do not know. We were [00:26:00] fortunate. We did not have a tough time. We did not miss any meals. We had middle class values that we were living with. Yeah, that was very instructive to me. I did not know what a vestry person was. I just knew there were old

folks walking around the church. You know as a kid, you look at this stuff, you look at power people differently.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: I had a great respect for him. There were other people like that. Later on we had a church leader by the name of Austin Cooper. Austin Cooper was a well-organized priest. I know he was a leader of the NAACP in Cleveland.

Pitts: Oh okay.

Burke: That meant he ran with the big dogs, you know. He [00:27:00] decided that that church should be independent and should not depend upon a diocese.

Pitts: Wow.

Burke: That we have a church, it is our church, and we should support it. He created an endowment in such a way that nobody could get to it.

Pitts: Wow.

Burke: The bishops could not. Nobody could get to it. Several attempts have been made over the years, but they have not got it yet. They are independent. In fact, right now they are probably the only independent Episcopal Church in that diocese of Cleveland. Anyway, that was an interesting thing to me because the people did not have the experience. The congregation did not have the experience in investment and financial matters on that scale, but that foundation is still there. It is still there. Austin Cooper. His son is an Episcopal priest now, Austin Jr. [00:28:00]

Pitts: Wow, that is wonderful Kenyon. Can you tell us a little bit about your role in the Episcopal Church and some of the things you did while you were at the National Council of Churches? What did you do in relationship to the Episcopal Church first? Then I will ask another question about some other things. What was your relationship with the Episcopal Church?

Burke: You do not want me to tell you about who I upset.

Pitts: Yeah, I want you to tell us. We want to hear all of it.

Burke: Well, when I became Associate General Secretary for the National Council of Churches in charge of church and society. That is what it was called at first. By being in that position, I was the highest ranking senior staff person at the National Council of Churches [00:29:00] who was Episcopalian, which gave me entrée to the presiding Bishop at will. Also, because I was Episcopalian, of course the Episcopalians at the leadership in New York were very glad that I was there because they did not have that kind of representation. The job was usually taken by the United Methodists or the Presbyterians, Northern Presbyterians or the Southern Presbyterians. Occasionally there were the Congregational Churches, like the United Church of Christ. I was welcomed by that Episcopal Church. There was no question they were very proud. The structure of the National Council of Churches was such that when the governing board met, which were about 250 people as you probably remember, representing those 32 denominations

[00:30:00] —when they met, the night before all the denominations met separately, and they would go over the agenda, that was coming up the next day, of the resolutions, all the recommendations for policy statements, and all that kind of thing. The denominations would meet the night before. They would have a dinner. They would caucus. The Methodists would be here, the Episcopalians were there, the Peace Churches were here, the Quakers and so forth. During that they would go over the agenda. I was the one from the National Council of Churches that went to that dinner. I was invited to that dinner. I was the only one from the staff, the whole staff of the council, which generated some jealousy, but that is all right.

I had the ear of two presiding Bishops [00:31:00] from 1970-something to 1984, I think it was, Bishop Allen and then Bishop Browning. At that dinner meeting I would sit either next to the Bishop or right across from him, and he would turn to me and say, “Kenyon, what is coming up on the agenda. What should we be looking at?” I had the privilege of giving him my ideas of what I thought should be. I had some backing, so I would say we should support this. I would look at this. I would be careful about this. This is a right-wing effort to defame what we are doing. Bishop Allan heard me but he did not do anything about it. Bishop Browning responded in a positive way. Many of the issues that we [00:32:00] supported as Episcopalians and the Episcopal Church came through our unit anyway because we had the longest agenda always at the meetings. That was a unique opportunity.

When he needed my opinion, he would ask for it. I would give it freely and he sought it. He had his aides seek it too. That was unique. I respected that and I valued that experience. It really put the social justice agenda high on the agenda of the National Episcopal Leadership. Only because, we are not in charge, God put us there at that time. That [00:33:00] was why I think the things that we did and what later became the Prophetic Justice Unit was supported by the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church began to take leadership in social justice issues like freeing South Africa, the racism thing, and there was the environmental thing. All of these were on my portfolio or the unit’s portfolio. The Episcopal Church really took a bigger and more active role politically and financially, which was after I got there.

Pitts: You know you talk about the other staff. You were the highest ranking staff person in the National Council of Churches that was Episcopalian.

Burke: That is right.

Pitts: What about the other staff people?

Burke: The [00:34:00] person who was in charge of environmental justice, Chris Coop [ph], she was Episcopalian. The only other one was Margaret, my administrative assistant. She was Episcopalian. Everybody else was either a Methodist. Most of them were Methodist and Presbyterians. A few Congregations. I do not remember who was Congregational, but I know we did a lot of work with the United Church of Christ. That was the staff. I would have to ask you. Can you think of any others?

Pitts: No, not in the unit. There were other people like Willis Logan and Bob Powell.

Burke: By all means, let us not forget that fortunately, at a crucial time in the development of the Free South Africa movement, there were three black Episcopalians on staff, professionals. One [00:35:00] was the late Bob Powell. He chaired the Africa desk at the Church World Service, which was part of the National Council of Churches at that time. Willis Logan was his assistant. In fact, it was Bob Powell who was the person responsible for me going to Africa for the first time. We went

to the conference of all African churches. I was thinking about that last night when we talked about Kenya. It was in Nairobi. I remember that very clearly. I was there at the council. Then there were these two other people at the council working on this issue. Then we had Earl Neal, who was a priest. At that time when I came he was on the [00:36:00] Unit Committee, as a member of the Unit Committee. Then after that, Harold Lewis took over the black desk at the Episcopal Church. He was on our Racial Justice Working group. Harold made a great contribution to that working group. I remember you could not play with him. I think we were very fortunate.

Of course, at the same time there was Bishop Tutu who was the Bishop of South Africa. All of that confluence came together. You did the hard work on this thing. I would say we organized the largest demonstration of Protestant leadership who got arrested [00:37:00] in Washington DC at the South African embassy doorstep. I know it still rubs you that I would not let you get arrested.

Pitts: That is right, Kenyon. I will never forgive you for that.

Burke: I wanted somebody on the outside. I never trusted the police. I never did. I never did. I never did. I did not know what they were up to. We were supposed to be there overnight. It was supposed to be kind of a jovial thing, but it was a serious thing. We had the Bishops, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, and the President of the United Church of Christ, and all of these folks. There were Quakers and everybody. The black churches, who were very supportive of this. [00:38:00] In fact that helped also for the Council to be able to move on the South African issue. A lot of people in our national government were opposed to this. They were opposed to our—they would say that is their business and we should not be meddling and all of that. You know I think what happened here actually freed or facilitated the freedom of the people in South Africa, the blacks in South Africa. They did not do all the work. They did not take all the punishment. But the power of this United States to do that, and to campaign to defund companies that participated in commerce with the government of South Africa.

I remember when the World Council of Churches met in [00:39:00] Vancouver. One of the persons who was on the agenda for the program was me. I gave a lecture on the government of South Africa and how it behaved, the brutality, and how they marginalized everybody, and they defamed people of all kinds of their rights. It was just an amazing thing. It was so well organized. Of course if it was well organized, you know that would impress me anyway. I think I have a copy on the lecture I gave. I described it in detail—the behavior of the police at all levels of government. It was systematic oppression. It was so open and obscene. But because the [00:40:00] National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches came together in their effort, it really was responsible for that to happen.

Pitts: Yeah. Kenyon, one of the things that I have been so excited about is your ability not to take credit for things that happened. The reality is that you were the mover and shaker who really helped the denominational leadership to engage in the Free South Africa movement. If it were not for you during that period of history from 1979 to 1992 or '93, then the churches in the United States would have not been engaged. You also did not only engage churches in the Free South Africa movement, you engaged them in dealing with the election of Jesse Jackson, you engaged them in dealing with the Martin Luther King holiday in 1983. I just would like you to [00:41:00] reflect a little bit on it. I know it is getting kind of late, but I would like you to reflect a little bit on what you see as your contribution during that time and your reflections on the National Council of Churches as it engaged with civil society, which was something that it did during this period more so than any other period in its history.

Burke: I might not be doing it in order as I think about it reflectively. Let us understand that where

we were quartered was at 475 Riverside Drive. That was the headquarters for most of the denominations – Protestant denominations in this country. It was like the citadel. Jesse Jackson decided that he was going to run for President. [00:42:00] This was 1984 or '83.

Pitts: It was '84.

Burke: It was '84. He came to New York obviously. I arranged for him to speak to the leadership at this building, which were Presbyterians—the leadership group. Of course my boss, Claire Randall, was the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, told me I should not do this. She gave me all kinds of reasons why I should not do this. I did it anyway, because I thought it was a historic move, a historic time, and it had to be done. Somebody had to do this, just like Shirley Chisholm had to be the first black woman in the Congress. Do you know what I mean? Somebody had to be the frontrunner. Jesse came to the Council and he spoke to these people. They were scared to death. They did not know what he was going to do. You know Jesse. Jesse is very [00:43:00] full of surprises. That was something. I never will forget that. Jesse was trying to leave the building before he spoke, and I had organized all these folks around the table. I remember that my administrative assistant told him you cannot leave. She just told him you cannot leave. She let me know that is what he was about to do. He wanted to run downtown to the network headquarters and get on TV. I knew what he wanted.

He came and he spoke well. It was a historic moment. Every time when you are on the cutting edge of change, you make a lot of enemies and you scare a lot of people half to death in institutions. Especially these kinds of radical changes in our society, [00:44:00] recommending radical change, which they became. I remember that very clearly. She said you should not do this. He should not be here. He is going to cause a riot and all kinds of crazy stuff. They were like the same kinds of things they said before the march on Washington. People said there are going to be riots, burning of buildings, and all kinds of foolishness. That march was like going to a church picnic.

Then I guess that stuck in my mind. I remember, Tyrone, on many occasions the General Secretary asked me to fire you. I remember that very clearly. That was because you were doing your job. You were addressing racial justice wherever you found it, especially in institutions. [00:45:00] In that institution it rustled a lot of feathers. But I told him, “No, I am not going to fire him. You have to come by me.” See, I could say that then because I had the backing of a group you want me to talk about. That was what was then the minority caucus. We can talk about that later if you want to. Do you want me to talk about it now or do you want a break? What do you want?

Pitts: Yeah, let us break now. Let us move into that. Before we break I just want to say this to you, Kenyon. Because you did not fire me, as you know, you became the target of the General Secretary.

Burke: Oh, no question.

Pitts: I remember on many occasions that because of the things that I did you really just took the brunt of it. I remember one time, as a leader within the council and as a mentor to me, you came to me and you said, “Tyrone I do not care what you do, because you are doing your job. Make [00:46:00] sure you tell me before you do it so I do not get in trouble and not know what you are doing.” That was the relationship that you had with all of your staff. I just wanted to thank you for your support of the efforts for social justice and your leadership in this area.

Burke: You were doing your job and I was doing mine.

Pitts: Yeah. You were protecting your staff. Thank you.

Thompson: That was very good, gentlemen.

Burke: It was much better than—

[Part Two]

[00:00:00]

Pitts: What is your management style?

Burke: Oh, my management style.

Pitts: Yeah.

Unidentified Male: So once again, I am going to ask about that. He will ask the question. Look here for a minute. Then look up here. It says look here.

Burke: Okay, I got it.

Unidentified Male: The other thing you need to do is keep your head up.

Burke: Head up, okay.

Unidentified Male: Sit back. Sit back.

Burke: Yeah, okay. Okay.

Pitts: This is the second phase of the interview, which is on the third of May at Virginia Theological Seminary. I am here with Dr. Kenyon Clinton Burke. We are now going to focus on some personal things related to his life. Kenyon, I have been fascinated with how you protect your staff, how you also have been behind the scenes as you deal with issues. I remember one time you told me that [00:01:00] in a management system you need to always be clear about where you are and who you are dealing with. You said something about when you come to a meeting sometimes they change the rules. You have an analogy about that. Can you tell us a little bit about that analogy? Also talk about why you chose not to be up front all the time, but why you chose to really be a supportive manager.

Burke: There are several parts of this. One of the parts is I believe to manage people you are an enabler. You enable them to do their job. But you also have a responsibility to protect them so they can do their job. It is a highly competitive world. The social justice arena is no different than the marketplace. It is highly competitive. So you have a lot of competitors, [00:02:00] and I say oftentimes enemies that you do not even know about.

I always wanted competent people to do their job. I felt I had to create an environment where they could do it. Any interference with them I would take care of. Their goals were stated and laid out in the mission of the unit. They had charge to be the operatives. They did not need me telling them how to go around the corner and hold a meeting. They did not need me for that. They needed me to provide them leadership. Leadership is enabling people to do things. That is the rule. Of course I said to the staff, especially since we are in this business [00:03:00] of change, and recommending change, that we have to be very careful that we are clear about what our responsibilities are. We also have to give me the help and respect of, if they are doing something that is really going to be

disruptive and is going to cause a problem, then let me know about it. I mean you are doing your job. We created this place, this safe place really, for you to do your job where you do not have to worry about those people criticizing you. If you are doing your job, you are doing your job and then you are being responsible. That is what we expect.

That is why I used to say, “Just let me know.” A lot of things pop up that you have no control over. But what you have control over, if you have a plan to go out and stick somebody [00:04:00] up in the corner, let me know. Let me know why you are doing it, and what you are doing. I have been in meetings, sitting at that top level of staff, where most of the people around the table were my enemies. I remember once when they brought in somebody we know as a consultant to look at racism in the National Council of Churches. They went around the table. The tables was like this. Well no, it was a long table. They went around the table and they asked the question to everybody. Where do you go when you get into a problem? This is senior staff. They went around. When they got to me, do you know what I said? I said I do not go here. I do not go here. The General Secretary and all of them: [00:05:00] “Huh?” I said, “Because then it would become jump on Burke week. I understand that, so I do not go here.” That did not win more friends, but it was true. You have to— Leadership is getting out in front and running interference. That is what I saw. It worked out with us because the moral was let everybody do their job. There was no confusion. We would have planning sessions. We would say by this time we are going to have this. We are going to have this. These are our goals. These are our objectives here. We are addressing this. The overall mission is this. We are going to do this, this, and this at this time. This is the way we are going to do it. Now, if that is not clear, then you are going to have a lot of problems not only in management, but just surviving. That was my style. [00:06:00] You saw it. But I remember that. You should have seen the blood drain from those folks’ faces when I said, “I will not come here.”

Another time they did that. I said, “You know something? Another reason that I act the way that I do at these meetings is because you have already had the meeting. I know you have already had the meeting. Let us cut the drama short and move on.” Because they had had the meeting. I had the meeting before I came before them. I mean they did not want to admit that that happened. It was all like that. A lot of times I would go to the General Secretary and I would say, “Listen: this is what is coming up. What kind of support do you need? That is it. What do you want to come out of this?” He said, “We do not know. We are just going to see how it works out.” I said, “No. No. [00:07:00] No, do not tell me that stuff. You know what you want to come out. What do you want?” “Well, Kenyon, we are leaving it.” I said, “Okay.” I will tell you one thing. One of them that they fired, before they fired him, he came into my office and said he would try to get rid of me.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: He said, “Kenyon, I have to say I never realized how powerful you were, politically.” He told me. Arie Brouwer. Then they fired him. He was always doing something and trying. He would send his little minions out to stir up stuff, distract the staff, throw up barriers, and all kinds of things. That is my motto.

Pitts: Why is it that you just stayed behind the scenes in all of this stuff? What was your reason for not being visible? You are very humble. Your whole life has been a pattern of humility. [00:08:00] Why is it that your management style is really behind the scenes?

Burke: One thing contributing to it was my concern about my family’s personal safety. When you are out here making changes, threatening people’s security, and threatening the lifestyle and the benefits that they are enjoying, they do some crazy things. Since I was traveling a lot, I was very concerned that nobody would harm my family. The people I would meet would just know very little

about what I did. They knew who I worked for, but they did not know what I did. That was all right with me, because I did not want my family, my son, my two sons, and my wife to be subject to a lot of harassment, people throwing paint up on the side of the house, and all that kind [00:09:00] of stuff. I was not in the business—I did not want to run for an elected official. I spent my strength and attention on relationships with people. You know if I said I was going to do something I would do it. If I said, “No, that does not work here,” it really does not work. There is no gray area on that kind of stuff.

I just did it that way. I did not want these boys, and my wife, especially—so that is one of the reasons. I have spent enough energy in managing this stuff, because there was a whole lot happening at once. Life is not linear. When you talk about racism, you talk about inequality in the economic area. You talk about health. It is the same thing. You cannot talk about one intelligently unless you speak about the other. [00:10:00] When you speak about race you have to speak about class. If you leave the class out, you have not had a comprehensive and I would say intelligent conversation. You are just pushing one button. There is more, and it is going on a lot. I found out my goal was to do the job. I was more excited about the job than I was about the headlines. If you want a headline, fine you can have it. I do not care.

Pitts: Kenyon, your history has been tremendous. A lot of people do not realize all of the stuff that you have done. The Free South Africa movement—we talked about that. The march on Washington in 1983, where we were pushing for the Martin Luther King holiday. Your relationship with Coretta Scott King, with Daddy King, [00:11:00] and with Harry Belafonte, and with some of those leaders within the movement. You have locked arms and walked with some of our heroes and sheroes more than anyone that I know. Can you say a little bit about that? Even being at that level, you still have been humble, and not even lifting that up.

Burke: Those luminaries are very important. They were very important to the movement. It was also important for them to get a lot of exposure. That was a tool that they used. They would do things that would attract attention. They wanted attention. I was not after attention. I have no hunger for that kind of attention. I have a loving family and close friends that are very important. I just did not have that need. It was not [00:12:00]—I never pursued it. I never did. What I was doing worked all right. We never missed a paycheck. When I stop working, four people stop eating, during those early days. It was true. I used to try to push you to get the credit because people would take the same things you were doing and take credit for it. You have the same trait. You did not. A lot of people have no idea what you have done and what you are even doing now. I know some of it. I do not know all of it. You do what is important. You only have a certain amount of time to do these things. I think you are given a gift of the opportunity. You make hay while the sun shines. I do not come off the farm. I just know some of those.

Pitts: I knew you were from Cleveland, so I was wondering about this hay and sunshine. [00:13:00] One of the other exciting things about you and what was done is—maybe you can just reflect on some of these. I am going to throw out a list of stuff and then you can kind of reflect on it. I do remember the attacks that came from the religious Right, *Reader's Digest*, and 60 Minutes. You were right in the center of it, and you were able to deflect a lot of that. That really dissolved the council in a real sense—those attacks. Maybe you ought to just reflect a little bit on those attacks. Because this was in the 1980s, Reagan had just been engaged, and you got the council to come up with a document called *The Remaking of America*, which criticized all of the Reagan policies at a time when the denominations were under attack. Talk a little bit about that.

Burke: What we did with that was that was a heavy blow, that *Reader's Digest*. [00:14:00] The *Reader's Digest* and the 60 Minutes called us communists, because we were attacking institutional racism internationally and nationally. What I just decided: I reframed the issue. The issue was about justice. It was not about black and white, yellow, or all of that. It was about justice. What is faith? I put a whole lot under the justice umbrella. We had a desk called Racial Justice, a desk called Justice for Women, a desk called Economic Justice, a desk called Child and Family Justice. All of them were under the justice umbrella, because I often recited Isaiah. I would go to [00:15:00] that, and that gave me the grounding, but also gave us the cover. It gave us the cover. That is why I published this document called *The Common Roots of Justice*. This was for the National Council of Churches. It came out of our unit. It gave cover for what we were doing. We were not trying to be communist or overthrow the government. We were trying to make a change. That is all I saw. We are talking about social change. Now the term is used, 'social change.' Have you noticed? It was not then.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: They wanted to talk about discrimination and prejudice. No, we need social justice. It is broader. It is much deeper. That was the way I handled it.

Pitts: You also dealt with the issue of Christian Identity Movement. [00:16:00] I remember a book that came out called *We All Don't Wear Sheets, Or They All Don't Wear Sheets*.

Burke: Yeah.

Pitts: It was really looking at the Ku Klux Klan and the new face of the Ku Klux Klan in the three-piece suits with vests.

Burke: We had a guy who we knew, Lenny Zeskind, who was a researcher on just these issues. He came to me with this and we talked about it. We gave him the cover by publishing his findings of the new Right, and we titled it *They Don't All Wear Sheets* because they did not. Now they were not just wearing sheets. They were wearing button down collars. They were being well-funded. They were growing. The Southern [00:17:00] Leadership—not the Southern Leadership groups, the—you know the group that—

Pitts: Southern Poverty Law Center.

Burke: Pardon?

Pitts: It was the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Burke: Yeah, it was the Southern Poverty Law Center. They were reporting us these ugly statistics about the rise of America First things. All this had, these issues they named, and they used a lot of code language. It was just like one of the present seekers of the presidency here in the upcoming election. He says we want to take America back. Take it back for whom? We are Americans. That is just an anti-racism thing. That is a racist statement. We want [00:18:00] to get our country back. Who are we? We all get in the bathtub the same way. Who are we? You have to be careful with the language because people beat you up with language. You have to redefine what it is, and that is what I did.

Pitts: You also dealt with black church burnings during that period.

Burke: Oh God, yes.

Pitts: We just recently had some. Do you want to talk a little bit about what was going on during that period?

Burke The black churches were attacked by many of the racist groups because they were vulnerable. In the south if you burned down a black church, what is going to happen to you? They were very vulnerable, and they did not have the protection that they needed. They surely did not have the law enforcement officials' protection. There was a campaign to burn down black churches because that was where the black folks met. [00:19:00] If they did not have a meeting place maybe they would not meet. They did not know we met down by the river. We always figure out a place to meet, but that was their target. It was sad. Now most of them were arson. There were some that were not arson. Some of them, I mean, were arson, but they were burned down for a different reason. Some people burned down buildings to collect insurance. But most of it was organized, and very few of it I thought was just individual acts. I had a conspiracy theory down. To have all these things happen at once, there is a reason. It is not just by accident that they were going after black churches. Black churches were the most vulnerable, and that is why. Black churches always served a place for getting together and convening, thinking about, [00:20:00] and talking about what is affecting their lives. That is our history. I remember that. We published that document and we got a lot of praise from that. We said some things that nobody wanted to hear. We saw a lot of racism institutionally.

Pitts: Yeah. Let me ask you another question. I want to go back to the issue of the National Council of Churches. You talked about your work with the Episcopal Church in the evenings before the governing board met.

Burke: Yeah.

Pitts: What about the Minority Caucus? You also were the leader in the Minority Caucus and transformed that organization.

Burke: Yeah. One of the things that happened was when I arrived at the Council I inherited a lot of things. My predecessor, Reverend Lucius Walker had created a group he called the Minority Caucus. [00:21:00] It was the black people that came to the governing board meetings. No matter what their rank in the church was they came to the meeting. Like other caucuses, they would meet after the denominational meeting. When I inherited this group, I found out that it was not fulfilling what it could do in the area of social justice. Anyway, I came to the first meeting and what it was was a lot of booze, a lot of drinking, a lot of telling lies, jokes, and all of that. Then the next day they go to the meeting and most of them would be half asleep if they showed up at all. Well, you know I saw this as an opportunity to develop a support group because I needed some support [00:22:00] some place besides my denomination. I needed some support. They had a leadership. They had a guy in leadership. I do not remember his name, but I remember he was an attorney and he did not know how to hold a meeting, prepare for one, or conduct one. This was just nothing. It was a party. I asked Bishop Cousins out of the AME Church. He was a friend of mine and Senior Bishop of the church. I said would you please come over here and help me with this. I want to appoint you to be Chair of the Minority Caucus. We called it that, but actually at that time it was a black caucus. Because of his rank people listened to him. I knew they would. [00:23:00] I did not cut off the alcohol. I just postponed it.

I said first this is our agenda. This is why you came here. These are the issues that are coming up the next day on the board. You each have an assignment to support this. When they bring this up you stand up and you say this. When they bring this up you stand up and you say. Do not go to the bathroom. Do not go to sleep. When you see what is coming up on the agenda you be in the room. That is your target. With that change of venue, that whole change of operation, we developed I think the strongest political group in the Council of Churches. We did. The black folks, if they started acting up on the floor of the convention, and did it in [00:24:00] a way that showed that they were knowledgeable about the issue, they would be listened to. That is what we did. That is why we had a racial justice policy. That is why you had the thing about all the issues and things we accomplished. Most, if not all of it, most of it came through that process. In an institution like the National Council of Churches, once you get to the policy, you get to that level of power where you can impact policy, you can do a whole lot of change in a short period of time. That became actually a threat to the General Secretaries, but they could not shut it down. One General Secretary decided to have a meeting with the leadership of the different [00:25:00] caucuses. It was not about them. It was about us. I knew what it was. They asked, "Is there anything coming up that we should know about?" I said, "Oh, you know, what is on the agenda." I would not tell them what we were going to do. That is just good sound political sense. That worked. I will never forget that model. That worked, but it was because they had a structure and a purpose. They knew what their assignment was. They knew they would have been embarrassed if they did not follow it. They followed the leadership of the major black churches in this country.

Pitts: And Phil Cousins became the first American-African president of the National Council of Churches.

Burke: That is very true.

Pitts: As a result of that effort.

Burke: It didn't happen by accident.

Pitts: Yeah, it was a very interesting process. The other thing I wanted to just ask you about is when you left the [00:26:00] Council you became a major consultant to a lot of folks. You were a consultant to the Progressive National Baptist Convention in many ways.

Burke: For many years.

Pitts: For many years. You were a consultant. Tell us about your consultantships. Tell us what you did. Even working for the Episcopal Church, a lot of people do not even know. Enlighten us.

Burke: When Reverend Harold Lewis retired, or I should say separated himself from the National Office of the Episcopal Church, the person in charge of all programs at the Episcopal Church, Diane Pollard, asked me if I would take over the black desk while he was gone. You have to remember at the Episcopal Church they had the black desk, the Asian desk, and the Native American desk. I guess those were the only ones, yeah. [00:27:00] There was a women's desk. That is right, there was a women's desk.

Pitts: Yes.

Burke: I said okay, so I did it. I covered the desk and I worked as Harold did and his predecessors in that position. I went out to several black churches in the Episcopal Church. I was a consultant on how to do planning, strategic planning, and how to put together the agenda, how to organize politically, how to do community organization at the base level, and at the local level, but also at the regional and national levels. I taught them how to do that. That is what I did for a while until they found a replacement. That was quite an experience for me because I had never envisioned working for the national church. I worked with them so much. I [00:28:00] did that. Then I also did training. I would say I guess it was called training and strengthening the witness in the black Episcopal Churches by planning retreats for vestries. Vestry being the leadership group of the congregation. They had to learn when I came to town I taught them how to do strategic planning. For strategic planning, first you have to agree on a mission. Then you have to agree on some goals. Then you have to figure out some objectives. That means how are you going to do it, operate an agenda, how you are going to fund it, and all of this stuff. Churches did not normally work that way. Black churches did not normally work that way. Their power was in a different dynamic. I did that in several black churches around the country. Not only here, but I did it in— [00:29:00] I knew when there was a problem with a pastor out in the Midwest—I do not want to say the name of the city. They called the national office. They had a problem with a priest and a vestry. Some of the vestry people would not even meet with the priest. It was really a mess. This person was not fully trained in community development and community organization. She had been a policeman. She had an autocratic style of talking to people. It was just a mess. The diocese out there in that state asked me if I would come out and help them. I went out there and did the best I could with what I had. When they had a problem they would call. Some of that was because they knew me from working the black desk. But some of it was because they knew me from other organizations I had worked in. I had been [00:30:00] in the NAACP, and I had been in Planned Parenthood at the national level—all of these at the national level, some of them local. They knew me in some way in that way. They would call. They knew they could trust me because if they told me something I would not go around the corner and whisper it in somebody else's ear. I saw a lot of America that way and made some money. I was also open to organizations. I did anti-racist training for the Cancer Society and several other health organizations like that. Because I had these skills I knew how to do it. They would pay for it. When you have a business you want to go and make some money. I never lost the sense of social justice. I never did. I never did. I did not like unfairness when I was a kid. [00:31:00] It was not only if it was against me, but if it was against somebody else. It just did not make sense. That is all.

Pitts: You have done an excellent job, even being a consultant at Riverside Church and some of the other churches. I do not know if you want to talk about that, but that has been a real thing.

Burke: Do you want me to tell you about that?

Pitts: Yeah, tell us about it. Tell us about Riverside Church—the cathedral for Protestantism.

Burke: It is white Protestants, okay. Riverside Church is like a cathedral. It is right across the street from 475 where I work. It is a combination. The congregation is a combination of United Church of Christ and the American Baptist churches. They hired, after much ado, a friend of ours [00:32:00] who happened to be over at the seminary. He was on the faculty of the seminary. He was the first black pastor in that church. That is a white church. That pulpit belongs to white Protestants. From the time he got there he had a fight. Not only did he have a fight because he was black, he had a

fight because he came out of a Pentecostal tradition. His father was a Pentecostal preacher. He himself was trained in homiletics. That is the art of preaching.

He got there, and of course they went to war on him because his style was different. Some [00:33:00] of the people expected him to print out his sermon ahead of time or immediately after. It was just a different style. They had not been subject to that. They looked for a way to get rid of him. Well, thanks to yours truly, he came over and said can you help me with this. They were after him. This group had tried to defang him of any power in the organization other than just getting in the pulpit. They had tried. It was not to defang, but castrate him. We saw it. I went over there to see him. For several months or almost a year—I guess it was about a year—I was a consultant. I would go over and tell him, “Well, here is what you do now.” Because they were coming at him from several different ways. He was afraid to go on a vacation. [00:34:00] I remember, because he was afraid when he came back he would not have a job. It was that desperate. I remember when he went away one time, he wanted me to cover that. This was right after I retired, and I had just come out of the warzone. I said no. I told him who. I gave him the guy who was his mentor, which was Shelby Rooks [ph] from the United Church of Christ.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: He came out to the house and asked me, begged me almost, to do this. I was not physically up to it. I had to lick up my wounds. We set up a strategy that allowed him to remain and get all of the things that were coming at him in that position, which included him becoming a member of the Union Club, which is the most prestigious private [00:35:00] club in this country. It is probably the oldest one. There were tickets to the theatre, boardships, and all kinds of stuff. He had a fellow that was chair of the board that I think was a struggling dentist. He was a struggling guy. He was not very successful with what he was. But this was the first time he had any power. That area had this well-trained intellectual Pentecostal in this environment. He had gathered up enough votes for himself to get elected to the board. He proceeded to go to work on our guy. It was kind of sad. It was racism showing itself in a different way, and the class thing was there. We helped him along, and I still consider him a close friend. [00:36:00] He is mine too. I do not see him anymore. It was an interesting experience too. The history of that church was so different. This meant that the church belonged to some other people too. This was opening up the tent, and that is always a rough road. I thought it was a good experience, but that is all I am going to say. I cannot tell you any more of that.

Pitts: Yeah, well one good thing about it Kenyon is that he retired successfully. Then they hired somebody else and then they called him back as interim.

Burke: Yeah.

Pitts: That is due to your support and your strategy in terms of getting him to where he needed to be. The final thing I want to do, Kenyon, in this section is to ask you [00:37:00] about your reflections on what is going on now in the political process. What do you see? Where do you see us going? Where do you see our country going, and the churches going? We have now an American-African Bishop of the Episcopal Church – presiding Bishop. This is the first time in the history of the Episcopal Church. He is a friend of yours. We have so many things. There is the first American-African president. So many things are looking bright at one place, but the reality is that they might not be as bright in other places. What is your reflection on the church?

Burke: Well, it is not 1960.

Pitts: Oh, it is not? [Laughter]

Burke: It is not 1960. It is not 1980 either.

Pitts: Oh, it is not? Okay.

Burke: Yeah. First of all, I think that we will survive. But survival is not enough. [00:38:00] You have to achieve, and you have to achieve. If you have achieved power, you have to defend it. You have to make sure it is not taken away from you. Now, what I would say is it is for us to realize that we are going to survive this period. This is not Armageddon. We are going to survive it. We as a people have survived much worse than what is going on now right now in the political field. People do not know the history. A lot of people do not know their history, so they do not understand what I am saying. We have survived lynchings, not only church burnings but house burnings, and all kinds of stuff. We will survive. The country will survive. This institution will survive. Its institutions are being threatened now and people are scared. A lot of people are scared. [00:39:00]

A lot of people feel marginalized. A lot of people feel that now that they have a black president, their jobs are no longer safe. They put all of this on this black man. It is on him. Now I think that what we need to do is to first bring ourselves together and focus on most of the social justice issues I talked about. That includes education. We have to train people in the teacher training institutions to be knowledgeable about civics, civil affairs, and government, and what governing means. Define it. Governance is different than running a reality show, or a campaign. It is different. It is a whole different [00:40:00] set of skills and a whole different set of values. It is different. We need to make sure that we get out and vote right now, because the Trump people have already collared the bigot vote. I call it the bigot vote, because he says things that are outlandish against all kinds of people who are marginalized people or who have a marginalized history. All black people are not marginalized economically.

I think we need to get the vote out, but we also have to show people what governance means. This Tea Party group does not understand what governance is. They have no idea. They just do not understand what you do when you govern. You make decisions. You compromise. You want this, so I will trade you all for this. We will do that. Maybe you cannot get all the pie [00:41:00] you want this time around, but you get something. The Tea Party, and this whole thing about the party of "No," that is bad public policy. It does not allow the government to do its job. We have a very complex society. It is multi-racial, and multi-national. It is all different kinds of face and hair. We come from different streams, religiously, and in a private sector. It is no simple thing to run this country, to govern this country, because it is what it is. I think we need to get back to that.

The term "get back to basics" is such a cliché that it has lost all its meaning. I would say we need to rename it [00:42:00] and say, "Prepare us for the diverse and beloved kingdom the King talked about." The beloved kingdom opens up the tent to everybody. I think we need to do that. It has been opened in so many ways in my lifetime that most people in my age would never have predicted it. They would never have predicted it. That is at the national level and at the local level. I was amazed this morning. I was not amazed, but thoughtful this morning when I saw the manager of the local hotel at the Hilton. We talked with him last night. This man is a black man. He came from Kenya. He is the manager of this hotel. You know Tyrone, when I was coming along, the only jobs we had in a hotel was waiting tables [00:43:00] in some, scrubbing the floors in some, not all, cleaning out toilets, and that kind of thing. It is not to degrade those positions. I am just saying that is all that was open.

We need to get back to doing that and making our government work. The Republicans are in

terrible trouble. They are in terrible trouble because they winked at all the abuse that was going on for different groups—workers and everybody. They just sat back and made money. They just let a lot of things pass. Now these things have been brought to the surface by so many different interest groups. We all need to get together and understand that to survive and achieve, [00:44:00] we have to be able to give and take. But include the item of respect. The item of respect is very important. I am not saying you have to love. The Bible says love your neighbor. I am just saying respect, because everybody does not go by our Bible, or our series of different kinds of bibles that address the same thing in so many different ways.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: That is what I think we need to do. People have different interests at this point that they did not have earlier in the generation. But you have to stay ahead of it. You have to stay ahead. What you gain today you do not want to lose tomorrow. When I was most active in my career, the labor movement was very strong. The labor movement was really the third wheel, [00:45:00] or the third leg, in getting the Civil Rights Movement legislation passed. They were on the ground organizing locally and nationally. Those are the tools of a democracy, and those are the tools that we have to make sure that people understand what they are. Like I said, a lot of folks do not know it because they do not teach it in school anymore. They do not teach civics, governance, and all of that. They teach it in the better schools. But in the vast majority of public schools in this country they do not teach it. You get in some states and they have taken it out. They do not even barely mention the Civil Rights Movement, or the changes that happened because of it. I am talking about gender. I am talking about just jobs opening up. Those kinds of things I think are something we have to face. Now there is going to be a calamity at the National [00:46:00] Republican Convention. There is going to be a calamity.

Pitts: Okay.

Burke: Trump might get enough votes going into it, but it is still going to be challenged. It is going to be disorder of the highest order. But democracy is not neat. It is not neat. Democracy is probably, as Churchill said, something about: “It is the worst government around, but it is the best one we have.” That was his quote, and that is true. You just have to let it play itself out. But you have to be involved at the local level and the national level in the policy. Policy is the rule. One of the reasons I moved into policy was that I just figured out I [00:47:00] could help one person get a job. I could pound on the door to the employer to get the job. I could catch the employer with all the tricks they were using to keep people out, which I did for a while. Once I started working with the national folk I began to realize I could affect the lives of many more people if I got the policy right and if I had somebody in the room when this stuff was being written or proposed. You have to have somebody in there as a watchdog. You have to value that, because much of our lives are governed by bureaucrats who are not interested in policy development or change. They have an investment in the current. That would be my thinking.

I think the Democratic thing is going to be interesting. I do not think it is going to be calamitous. The [00:48:00] Republicans are used to being neat, or giving that model. They are enjoying what I call internal warfare, or tribal warfare. That is what they are. It is tribal warfare over there. They are gentlemen of the old school, but they are experienced. The Democrats—I believe Hillary is going to be the candidate. I believe that. The question will come how much has Bernie Sanders helped her or hurt her. She is going to be the candidate. We better get behind her because it is like I do not want to think of the alternative. That is why I am celebrating living with you right now. This Trump fellow could do a lot of damage in a short period of time. He could do a lot of damage. [00:49:00]

We have made it this far. If he gets in there with his meat axe, it will be a long time recovery operation for all of the folks who have been marginalized. So, that is my thinking.

Pitts: Let me ask you a follow up question. We have now a presiding bishop who is of African descent. We came from the suffragan colored bishop. Now we have an American-African bishop of the whole Episcopal Church. Tell us about your feelings about that. What do you see as the future of the Episcopal Church if you want to tell us?

Burke: My crystal ball says that the Episcopal Church will be around a long time after this. The person who is the first [00:50:00] will catch a lot of barbs and a lot of arrows. They will experience efforts to de-legitimize his power—not his position but his power. He will have a rough go. But the Episcopal Church will survive. Regrettably, we do not have an ecumenical agency like we did when you and I were working on policy. What I think is, slowly there is going to be a reformation of that kind of thing. It will not have the same model, but it should be a place where the denominations can come together and fight the fight. That was what it was supposed to do when they founded it in 1950 in Cleveland. Times [00:51:00] have changed. Funding arrangements have changed. All kinds of things have changed like that. I just have hope, and that is another thing that has been with us since the first time in 1619 when those first black feet got on the shores of North America. I just know that. I just have faith. I have faith. Sometimes it is stretched, but I have faith. But we will—Martin used to say this thing about “we are not what we should be, and we are not what we...” I got—I used to use that.

Pitts: Or what we ought to be.

Burke: Or what we ought to be. “But thank God we are not what we were.”

Pitts: Right.

Burke: That is the way I feel about social justice. [00:52:00] That is the way I feel about opening up the tent for everybody so everybody gets a shot at it. Everybody can have a place at the table and an opportunity at the table. Not a place, but an opportunity to get to the table. That is my feeling. I am concerned about this election because it has let loose and legitimized a lot of bigotry. But the genie is out of the bottle, so let us move on. Move on. Let us not think about how badly they treated Obama. Well sure they treated him badly. They knew. It was predictable, but not to the extent and not the way they did it. But it was rude and it was abusive. Here is this guy with all these skills and experience and training. [00:53:00] But he was black, and you cannot get around that. The Secret Service has received more threats on the lives of him and his family than any president in the history of this country.

Pitts: That is right.

Burke: All of these things are there, but we know how to shut down the hate groups. We did not know. We felt our way through that period, but we know how to shut them down now. We can shut them down with the law. The law was not there to protect us, especially after 1896. I have great hope. And that is where I am.

Pitts: Since you have so much hope, Kenyon, why don't you tell us about this thing that you wrote for your ancestors? You wrote a piece for your ancestors. Share that with us.

Burke: Oh okay. This is entitled [00:54:00] *Salute to Ancestors*. “I am eternally grateful for those family members whose sense of social justice and strong faith commitment was instilled in me early in my formative years—their love, patience, wisdom, and support, along with their unique understanding of the value of not only reading the gospel but also doing the gospel. Indeed they took Christian witness seriously. They also knew the value of education and performing at one’s maximum potential in the struggle to make this a better place than they found it. Their faith commitment included Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, and African-Methodist Episcopal Churches. It is upon the shoulders [00:55:00] of my parents, Kenyon Tucker Burke and Parthenia Clinton Burke, for whom it made possible for me to be here. I am blessed, loved, and endowed by having and knowing two sets of grandparents—the Burkes and the Clintons – along with uncles and aunts. I am therefore prayerfully thankful of them for enriching my life and making my social justice ministry possible. Will the people of God say amen? Amen, amen.”

Pitts: Amen. Now before the last amen, because we have another amen coming—you have two wonderful sons. And you have a wonderful, wonderful grandson.

Burke: No question.

Pitts: What is the message that you want to just say to them since we have been through all of this process? You know, your whole ecumenical life, your witness. You just read about the ancestors and what they meant to you. [00:56:00] What is it that you want them to think about and to indulge in as you celebrate this moment in your life?

Burke: I want them to know that they, as the old folks used to say, “come from something.” Which, translated into modern language, means that life was here before they came. People dealt with those issues the way they could. Life was there. Learn from your history. Learn not to make the mistakes. Mistakes were made and they were feeling their way. And you are going to be feeling your way. The world is evolving. It is constantly changing. Pericles [00:57:00] once said nothing is more permanent than change. That was one Greek philosopher I quote a lot. Because change often threatens people, but change is inevitable. When I was a boy there were a lot of people—my father told me about when the automobile came people were concerned about what was going to happen to all the blacksmith shops. What was going to happen to them? They would not be able to have a trade. They would not be able to feed their family because they would now have gasoline stations. Those fear mongers did not understand that somebody had to manage and own the gasoline stations. Somebody had to manage. Somebody had to do the work. Somebody had to buy the supplies.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: They did not see that. That [00:58:00] goes back historically. What happened? What happened to all the blacksmiths? Do you know what happened to them? I do not know either. You know something? Their families found a way to make a living in the modern age.

Pitts: Right.

Burke: That is what you have to keep in mind. It is not easy and everybody out there is not your friend. Understand, everybody that smiles in your face is not your friend. You can be civil. You do not have to be a hoodlum. You do not have to see this as the end of the road when you come into a problem. Look forward. Look forward. This will evolve, and you will make it. You come from a strong line of people who are achievers, who know the value of education, have demonstrated,

[00:59:00] and who have a sense of fairness. Understand that they are not always right, but sometimes they do not think they were wrong. In all sincerity, that is life. I think that the Episcopal Church has been very helpful to me. It gave me some structure and surely crystallized my faith commitment. If I had been born in Hawaii or someplace else, I would have a faith system or religious system that would work for me. But I would always believe in a greater being. That is all right on a stomach that is pretty close to lunch.

Pitts: That is the last amen, Kenyon. Thank you, Kenyon. Thank you for your time, and for your candid advice, and for being candid about your life. [01:00:00] For me you have always been like a father, as you know. You have helped me throughout many trials and tribulations, as they would say, within my tradition. I just appreciate you so much. I just want to thank you for this time. I want to thank you, Dr. Thomas, for allowing this to happen. I think this is a moment in history for us and for our families that is going to live forever. We just appreciate you and the Episcopal Church so much for what you are doing in this regard. Thank you.

Burke: Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir.